

Political Participation in the Age of the Internet: an Analysis of the Online
Forum as Legitimation Mechanism

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on a nascent form of political participation – e-participation – and adopts an interdisciplinary approach to its study which draws on communications-scientific insights as well as a case study analysis. The theoretical part of the thesis is concerned with reconstructing relevant contributions to the interdisciplinary field of communication science, notably the work and intellectual debate of Jürgen Habermas and Niklas Luhmann. Underpinned by a discussion of the concept of legitimacy, it explores the (theoretical and practical) challenges posed by mediated social communication in democracies (exclusion, representation and contingencies in public opinion), and defends a conception of political legitimacy which is able to combine both a functionalist and normative dimension.

The case study then operationalises a multi-layered methodological framework to explore the interrelations between the medium, online interface and forms of talk found in the e-participation initiative run as part of the British government's 2002 e-democracy consultation. To generate these different levels of data for analysis, the framework draws on the qualitative ethnographic tools of medium theory and ethnography of communication. The ensuing discussion re-evaluates the data critically against the backdrop of theoretical and practical implications of using e-participation initiatives as legitimisation mechanisms in policy-making processes in the UK.

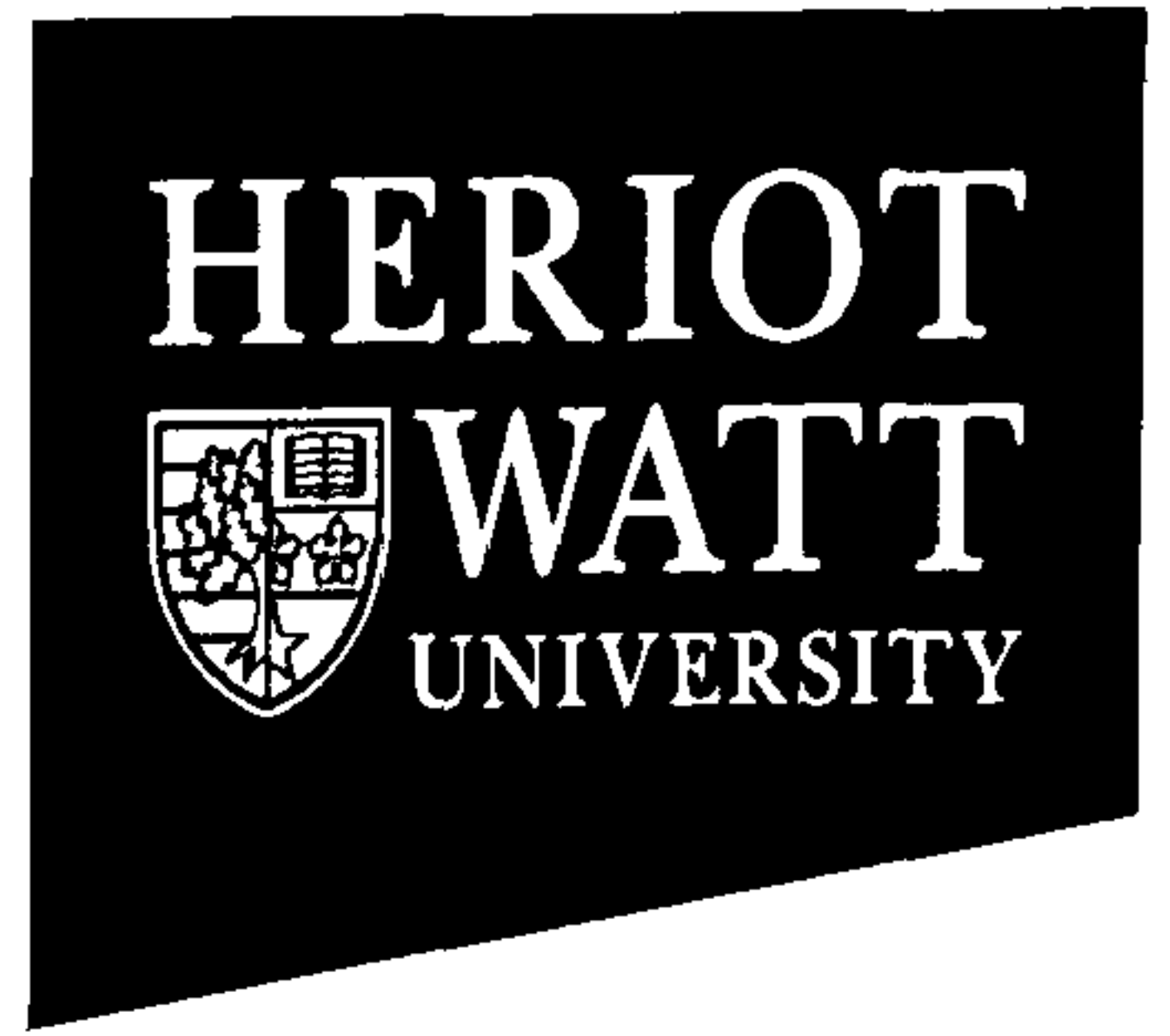
Dedication

To Pete. Thank you for all your support, your patience, and your many words of encouragement.

Acknowledgements

This project grew out of the work I completed on the Internet and the public sphere which culminated in the submission of my mémoire for the award of Diplôme d'Etudes Approfondies en Sciences de la Communication et des Médias, at the University of Geneva, Switzerland. For the guidance and support they provided in this important early stage of my study of the Internet and politics, I should like to thank Professor Jean Mouchon (Université Paris X), Professor Daniel Dayan (CNRS), Doctor Ursula Ganz-Blättler (University of Geneva), and Professor William Ossipow (University of Geneva). I would like to thank Professor Ian Mason of Heriot-Watt University for the helpful comments and suggestions he provided on early drafts of this thesis, particularly on the case study methodology section. Finally, I should like to extend my thanks to Professor Colin Grant to whom I am much indebted for the support, guidance, encouragement and invaluable feedback he has provided over the last few years in supervising my work on this thesis.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

This study has been inspired by three shifts in social communication patterns which touch on the issue of political legitimacy: firstly, a growing concern regarding the apparent trend towards ‘managerial’ governance in Western democracies; secondly, a renewed concern for civic participation in politics and, finally, the growth of the Internet as a vector of political communication, and its potential for mitigating the first trend and accelerating the second.

A shift towards ‘managerialism’ has been noted in the literature (Chadwick and May, 2003). This trend has also been highlighted in the British media, for example, through the criticism of the increased involvement of ‘spin doctors’ in the management of government communications. Furthermore, a number of scandals exposing government attempts to manage communications have considerably dented trust in, as well as tarnished the image of, the New Labour government, such as the leaked memo of October 2001 sent by Jo Moore, the adviser of then transport secretary Stephen Byers, which recommended that the day following the September 11th disaster was “a good day to bury bad news” (Harper, 2001 [online version]). More recently, there has been the government handling of the events surrounding the death of weapons expert David Kelly and the subsequent Hutton Enquiry started in August 2003.

Such events appear to have given credence to the observation that modern-day democracy now has less to do with government responsiveness to public opinion, and more to do with managing public opinion in relation to decisions which have already been made and finding a suitable time to present these to the public. As Mouchon (1998: 88) notes, putting the media at the service of politics leads inexorably to political marketing. Chadwick and May (2003) refer to this as a ‘managerial’ approach to governance. Their basic premise is that the managerial model is the dominant mode of interaction in the UK, the USA and the EU, highlighted by a pre-occupation in policy statements with ‘efficiency gains’ and ‘service delivery’ over more deliberative and consultative approaches to policy-making which stress the importance of two-way, collaborative exchanges between citizens and government.

The second key shift in social communication patterns which provides a context for the current study is the marked shift in voting habits and civic participation. Voter turnout in the UK is extremely poor, and has been falling in recent years. The turnout at the 2001 general election was just 59% (Office of the e-Envoy, 2002b: 5), which was 12% down on the 1997 general election and the poorest turnout since 1918. Furthermore, and somewhat alarmingly, 60% of the 18-24 age group did not vote at all. Against the backdrop of these statistics, there is a wide-ranging consensus – to which the government also subscribes – that poor participation levels in election voting are by no means representative of a lack of interest in political issues in general, but rather a lack of interest in the traditional channels of expression of political opinion, such as political parties, the ballot box etc. (Office of the e-Envoy, 2002b: 5).

Although some citizens are choosing to express their dissatisfaction with the status quo by abstaining from any form of political participation, many others are expressing their political choices increasingly through other channels, such as single-issue groups and grassroots activities. The government itself (Cabinet Office, 2000b) is amongst those to note that such changes to the political landscape highlight a need to modify democratic processes to encompass new forms of, and channels for, participation between elections; indeed, this is the very premise of the 2002 consultation paper published on e-democracy. Herein lies the significance of the third important trend in social communication for this study: the interest which the Internet has generated as a medium for promoting wider participation in politics.

In the 1990s, use of the Internet spread rapidly along with the new mode of communication it facilitated – many-to-many communication. Since then, numerous governments have shown an interest in exploring whether this mode of communication can be successfully replicated through government channels. Given the impressive take up of the Internet in the UK (according to the Office for National Statistics (2004) over 50% of households had access to the Internet at home at the end of 2004 compared with just 10% at the end of 1998), considerable hope has been invested in the possibility of using the medium to stimulate democratic participation, particularly among those younger age groups of the population whose Internet usage is high and political

participation low. Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest interest in such an initiative: in a 2001 survey conducted for the Hansard Society (Coleman and Götze, 2001: 22), opportunities for the public to participate in policy-making via the Internet was the preferred use of the medium in the political arena¹.

Initiatives testing how the government might put the Internet at the service of democracy are in their initial phases, and the implications on the legitimation of policy-making processes largely unexplored. Yet, clearly, a process of study and scrutiny is essential in the light of the government's pledged commitment to the use of the Internet to enhance democracy; if we are to comprehend fully the implications of building online interaction systems into policy and decision-making processes, the various initiatives must be studied and their effectiveness scrutinised. This sentiment, echoed by Dutton, is a key premise for this current study:

Digital government can erode or enhance democratic processes – [but] the outcome will be determined by the interaction of policy choices, management strategies and cultural responses – not by advanced technology alone. The debate over appropriate policies for guiding the application of ICTs in politics and governance needs to begin in earnest (Dutton, 1999: 193).

The government's own White Paper (e-Envoy, 2002b: 14) on e-democracy also highlights the risk of an ill-conceived policy, remarking that “a policy for e-democracy and a strategy for its delivery are vital to ensure that participation is enhanced rather than diminished by new technology”. Entitled *In the service of democracy*, the paper was the first attempt to initiate a serious debate on the future role and impact of ‘electronic democracy’ on policy-making processes in the UK; seen in this context, the

¹ Opportunities to participate in politics was selected as the top reason by 37% of respondents. In second place came Internet voting (30%), followed by online surgeries for MPs (18%). The poll consisted of 20 questions which were put to a panel of 5,883 frequent Internet users (see Coleman and Götze, 2001: 22).

importance of the e-democracy consultation forum (e-DCF) as an experimental part of the government's consultation on the topic is clear.

This study adds to a small, but growing, body of literature which examines online public participation in policy-making processes. In this it is different from many academic studies which focus instead on the broadcast function of the Internet, and how this has been exploited by political parties and election candidates (see, for example, Margolis and Resnick, 2000 and Axford and Huggins, 2001). Instead of focusing on top-down political communication, this study explores how the interactional opportunities created by the Internet can be used to encourage public participation in policy and decision-making processes. The work conducted for this study has been influenced by that of Blumler and Coleman (2002) on the notion of a virtual commons, Coleman and Gøtze (2001) on e-consultations and participation, and Hacker and van Dijk (2000) on e-democracy theory and practice. It has also been inspired by the excellent theoretically-grounded account of the use of online fora in a political context of Dutton (1996)², as well as by a number of empirical stakeholder reports which provide considerable insight into e-democracy from a more practice-based perspective: the work of Acland (2003a; 2003b), the Audit Commission (2003) and GOL (2001) are important in terms of their detailed case study analyses of online fora, and the best practice lessons they derive from the running of these initiatives.

Chapter 2 begins with a discussion of the communicative turn in the social sciences. This brief exposition serves to contextualise the importance of the work of Jürgen Habermas and Niklas Luhmann for the current study, and to present their two different approaches to social communication. The discussion goes on to look specifically at their accounts of political communication, before the central concept of the thesis – that of legitimacy – is examined in detail. The chapter then explores the literature on democracy, reviewing different models, the theoretical and practical challenges they face, as well as the role of public deliberation. Problematising the concept of 'public opinion' as output of public deliberation in each and the 'public sphere' as its locus,

² This does not look specifically at government-organised fora.

leads to a discussion of the ideal of inclusion, a credible commitment to which it is argued, must be demonstrated by policy- and decision-makers when public participation is assigned a legitimating role within political communication processes. Finally, by introducing the concept of e-democracy, the chapter recasts the key theoretical questions which underpin the thesis in the context of Internet age politics, tying together the theoretical framework of concepts upon which the case study analysis builds.

In order to operationalise this framework for the examination of the case study data from the e-DCF, a multi-faceted methodological approach is necessary. Chapter 3 presents the considerations influencing the choice of methodologies, and clarifies how the appropriate framework can be brought together. A combination of ethnographic tools is required to enable the study of the Internet as medium, the online forum interface as genre³, and the types of communication found in the online forum. The study of the medium and genre draws on the tools of medium theory, inspired by the work of Meyrowitz (1985), to examine the scope and boundaries of the medium (Internet) and the genre (forum). The ethnography of communication of Hymes (1972b) then serves as the basis for the study of the forum structure and the linguistic forms and social uses found in this setting.

Chapter 4 applies these methodological tools to the study of the UK government's 2002 e-democracy consultation forum to derive a rich body of data for analysis. The discussion and critique in Chapter 5 uses this to explore the wider implications of the medium, the genre and the forms of talk found in the e-democracy consultation forum for the credibility of e-participation initiatives as legitimation mechanisms in policy-making processes. The findings reveal that the consultation interface tended to polarise different user groups within the forum, generating mutually excluding 'keys', 'codes' and 'genres' (Hymes, 1972b) of communication for each group. Furthermore, the limited use (availability) of database functionality in the e-democracy consultation

³ Here the online interface is also referred to as the forum 'genre'. The interface provides the platform through which participants can view and participate in the forum. It is created through functional, software and design choices.

forum made it difficult for the moderator to maintain the focus of the discussion on the consultation topic, and thus on issues which were most likely to be of relevance to the policy-makers. As a result, the credibility of the experiment as a legitimation mechanism was considerably undermined.

By means of conclusion, Chapter 6 aims to highlight some of the overarching issues which need to be considered in the four stages of an e-participation initiative (the design and set up, the recruitment and briefing of participants, the running of the forum, and the evaluation and output of the exercise) in order for it to be both inclusive and effective. It is argued that at the very least basic conditions of equality must be met; at a basic level this implies promoting wider access to the Internet for all citizens who desire it. It also implies creating an e-participation interface which promotes inclusion (if not mitigates opportunities for exclusion), enables unbiased moderation and facilitation. To this must be added the requirement for a procedure which can produce robust results and be reviewed and evaluated in an accountable manner. Finally, it demands government awareness of, and commitment to, conditions which foster consistency from one exercise to the next such that benchmarking, evaluation and best practice standards can be established and applied to e-participation initiatives on an ongoing basis. If these conditions are met, there is a strong possibility that e-participation initiatives will come to be credible legitimation mechanisms within policy-making procedures.

Chapter 2 Democracy, Virtuality and Legitimation: a Communications-Scientific Approach to the Debate

This chapter undertakes a critical review of key theoretical contributions to the interdisciplinary field of communication sciences which will enable a conceptual framing of the debate which underpins this thesis: the theoretical and practical implications of the use of e-participation initiatives as credible legitimation mechanisms within policy and decision-making processes. It examines specifically how politics is affected by changes in social communication patterns, and how these in turn have been affected by the advent of the Internet.

The work undertaken in this chapter involves the critical reconstruction of a number of important communicative concepts which touch on the actual and ideal organisation of political relations, as well as exploring the interrelations between these. Notably, it examines important texts on legitimacy, (e-)democracy and inclusion. The chapter begins by examining the communicative turn in social theory, before reviewing literature from the principal paradigms of social communication – interactionism and observationism – which give rise to competing conceptions of political communication.

2.1 Theories of social communication

The work of Jürgen Habermas and Niklas Luhmann on social communication is of considerable importance for the current study. Their differing understandings of communication and how it impacts upon the structural relations of society, added a new, and profoundly influential, dimension to social theory in the 1970s. This chapter begins by reconstructing the link between social communication theory and social theory, by examining briefly the work of Max Weber and his influence on the methodological and intellectual approaches of Habermas and Luhmann to social communication theory.

Luhmann's and Habermas' perspectives of communication differ fundamentally: Luhmann adopts an 'observationist' perspective, Habermas an 'interactionist' one. The difference is explained by Luhmann (1992: 154) who describes *observationist* approaches as premised on the notion that "only communication can

communicate and [...] only within such a network of communication is what we understand as action created". Accordingly, society is seen as the totality of all communications, which means that it constitutes much more than the brief encounters which define social interaction in interactionist models (Ossipow, 1994: 299). The project of *observationist* social communications theory is to describe society from the perspective of systems of social communication⁴.

On the other hand, 'interactionist' approaches to social communication theory focus on social interaction and communication as it takes place between human beings or, in other words, on communication "in terms of action and thus [...] the process of communication as a successful or unsuccessful transmission of messages, information, or understanding expectations" (Luhmann, 1992: 251). Traditionally, *interactionist* social communications theory has developed through the current of critical theory (and most notably through the work of the Frankfurt School with which Habermas was affiliated in the early years of his career), and through the formal pragmatic work of G.H. Mead and more recent work of Jürgen Habermas⁵.

The work of Max Weber is fundamental in the communicative turn in social theory. Different readings of his work have also been a source of debate between Habermas and Luhmann: whereas Luhmann focuses on developing the empirical dimension of Weber's work, Habermas concentrates on reconceptualising the Weberian notion of 'rational authority' to extract the critical potential of the concept. He then uses this to develop his *Theory of Communicative Action* which attempts to locate the genesis of 'power' in rational communication in the social world.

Weber's key contribution to social theory was his *Theory of Social and Economic Organisation* ([1922], 1947). This provides a pivotal system of classifications and detailed topographical descriptions of social and political structures. His previous work,

⁴ This is explored in section 2.2.1.

⁵ This work is examined in some detail in section 2.2.2.

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (Weber [1904], 1957) was also influential, and is often taken as a bourgeois alternative to Marx's reading of the rise of capitalism (Marshall, 1994: 700). In that work Weber provided an account of the development of the modern capitalist economy and modern state from a process of rationalisation which took hold at the time of the Enlightenment, driven by the protestant values which underpinned the 'spirit' of capitalism. The culmination of this process is the starting point for the current discussion of the work of Luhmann and Habermas: the creation of "subsystems of purposive-rational action in which Occidental rationalism develop[ed] at a societal level" (Habermas, 1984: 144).

Weber believed that means-end rationality had become the defining logic in the social sub-systems of politics and the economy, and that this would lead to the increasing bureaucratisation of human life-activity which, in turn, would trap individuals in an 'iron cage' of rule-based, rational control. The following section on political communication examines Weber's prognosis further and uses it as a starting-point for a detailed discussion of Luhmann's and Habermas' understanding of political communication.

2.2 Political communication

In simplified terms, theorisations regarding political communication revolve around the notions of 'authority', 'power' and 'control' and how these can and, in normative accounts, *should* be harnessed institutionally. The discussion here focuses on the opposing conceptions of political communication in advanced capitalism of Jürgen Habermas and Niklas Luhmann, whose *communications*-scientific debate, as noted, has arguably placed communication at the very forefront in social-theoretical literature in recent years. Indeed, both theorists stress the importance of communication in mediating power and harnessing it socially, although each has a different view of how these processes occur and how 'legitimacy' is secured through political communication in each. A brief exposition of Max Weber's important political concepts, including that

of ‘rational authority’, will provide a useful starting-point for the discussion of the work of Luhmann and Habermas on political communication.

Weber’s sociology is based on the assumption that social analysis is made possible by the fact that human beings act rationally some of the time; thus, its task is to describe the causal explanations of social actions in their particular historical contexts (Marshall, 1994: 700). Weber’s *Theory of Social and Economic Organisation* (1947) is based on the elaboration of ‘ideal types’, a heuristic classification which he uses to give an interpretive account of probable social scenaria. He proceeds by sketching out different typologies of social groups and orders, of which his work on political groups and concepts are of relevance to this study. In particular, four key terms – ‘imperative control’, ‘power’, ‘authority’ and ‘state’, are crucial to his understanding of political organisation.

Firstly, imperative control (*Herrschaft*) is understood as the probability that a command with a specific content will be obeyed by a given group of persons (Weber, 1947: 152). Secondly, power (*Macht*) is a more abstract construct, which Weber uses to denote the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests (Weber, 1947: 153). Thirdly, Weber (1947: 153) takes authority (*Autorität*) to mean “the legitimate exercise of imperative control”.

Imperative control becomes political when jurisdiction is territorial and the power-holder has a monopoly on recourse to the physical enforcement of an order. Thus, ‘an imperatively co-ordinated corporate group’ can be referred to as political if, and in so far as, “the enforcement of its order is carried out continually within a given territorial area by the application and threat of physical force on the part of the administrative staff” (Weber, 1947: 154). On the other hand, a system of social action within which such a group operates, can be called ‘politically oriented’ to the extent that it seeks to “exert influence on the directing authorities of a corporate political group; especially at the appropriation, expropriation, redistribution or allocation of the powers of

government” (Weber, 1947: 154). Put simply, authorities use the threat of violence to assert their power, but this power can be taken from them and transferred to another group when the appropriate social and organisational structures are in place.

Finally, Weber introduces the concept of the ‘state’ to refer to more permanent political corporate groups; *states* have an administrative staff which has a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force in the enforcement of its order. However, although the emphasis here appears to be on the use of physical sanctions, Weber notes that the threat of sanctions rather than their actual use is what defines a state as *political*. The use of violence is a last resort to be called upon only when all other attempts to ensure the enforcement of an order have failed:

It goes without saying that the use of physical force is neither the sole, nor even the most usual, method of administration of political corporate groups. On the contrary, their heads have employed all conceivable means to bring about their ends. But at the same time, the threat of force, and in case of need its actual use, is the method which is specific to political association and it always the last resort when others have failed (Weber, 1947: 328).

Weber highlights here the importance of the fact that political authorities have at their disposal a wide variety of techniques to enforce orders, of which violence is only one. However, it is not the most frequent, nor even necessarily the most effective. Moreover, Weber believed that actors engaging in actions within a social framework were often oriented towards a belief in the existence of a ‘legitimate order’ (Weber, 1947: 124); in other words, this belief in a legitimate order would be largely sufficient to encourage individuals to accept the orders of a political corporate group. Weber (1947: 328) identified three pure types of ‘legitimate authority’, which can be defined in relation to the basis upon which their claims to legitimacy are based. These are:

1. Rational grounds – resting on a belief in the *legality* of patterns of normative rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands (legal authority).

2. Traditional grounds – resting on an established belief in the sanctity of tradition and the legitimacy of the status of those exercising authority on those grounds (traditional authority); or finally,
3. Charismatic grounds – resting on devotion to the sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual, and of the normative patterns or social order which this person promotes (charismatic authority).

Legitimate authority built upon rational grounds is the *ideal type* which Weber aligns most closely with the modern state. In this form of social organisation he identifies a process of ‘rationalisation’, during which rational action substitutes “the unthinking acceptance of ancient custom” (Weber, 1947: 123).

Weber (1958) argues that the development of rationalism in the West was set in motion largely by the Protestant ethic of conviction. In his *Protestant Ethic*, he identifies the ‘rationalisation’ of social organisation as having become instrumental with the institutionalisation of the capitalist State. According to Weber’s understanding of this process, ‘instrumental’ or ‘purposive-rational action’ (*Zweckrationalität*⁶), assumed a normative function (*Normierung*) which caused the structures of purposive (instrumental) rationality to become anchored in the personality system and in the system of institutions (e.g. civil law).

Thus Weber came to question the Enlightenment faith in reason. He concluded that the social rationalisation process could result in three outcomes, two of which were not necessarily desirable; firstly, in a positive development towards “the conscious rationalisation of ultimate values”; secondly, in a negative process which would bring rationalisation “at the expense of not only custom, but also emotional values”; and finally, a development in favour “of a morally sceptical type of rationality, at the expense of any belief in absolute values” (Weber, 1947: 123). Weber’s own view was

⁶ Even in translated versions of Weber’s work, ‘Zweck’, and the contrasting term of ‘Wert’ or ‘value’, rationality is often left in German. For a discussion of translation considerations associated with these terms, see footnote 38 in Weber (1947: 115).

that ‘Zweckrationalität’, or means-end rationality, had led to individualised self-interest rather than social values driving social development; Weber analyses this destructive developmental cycle as the “frozen dialectic of Enlightenment” (Habermas, 2001: 139).

However, as noted, differing interpretations of Weber’s concept of *rational authority* have led to diverging accounts and prognoses in relation to the role of political communication; here these differences are discussed through the work of Niklas Luhmann⁷ and Jürgen Habermas. The following section explores their accounts in greater detail.

2.2.1 Observationist political communication

According to Luhmann, society can be understood and examined as a system. He calls this theory of society ‘social systems theory’. His theory is observer-dependent, meaning that there is no external observer observing reality; therefore, social systems theory does not share the subject-object dualism as action theories whereby the acting subject observes passive objects. Instead, social systems theory focuses on the distinction between identity (*system identity*) and difference (*vis-à-vis an environment*).

The basic premise of Luhmann’s social systems theory is that there are systems, and that these systems have the ability to establish relations with themselves and to differentiate these relations from relations with their environment (Luhmann, 1995: 13). The existence of a boundary between the system and the environment allows the system to distinguish itself from its environment and therefore to establish these internal and external relations. Thus, boundary maintenance is necessary for system maintenance. In the sense that systems develop into stable social configurations by distinguishing themselves from their environment, social systems theory embodies the “order from

⁷ Luhmann tends to explore Weber through Parsons. However, here the reconstruction is limited to Weber, Luhmann and Habermas.

noise” principle (Luhmann, 1995: xlvix). In other words, the environment represents the ‘noise’ and the system creates an identity for itself (‘order’) by distinguishing itself from its environment. As Luhmann notes “difference holds what is differentiated together; it is different and not indifferent” (Luhmann, 1995: 18).

Systems are composed of elements and of sub-systems. To explain this, Luhmann uses the imagery of a house, where the system’s sub-systems are ‘rooms’, and ‘elements’ and their ‘relations’ are like beams and nails. The elements in a system are not ontological or pre-given; elements are only elements for the system that employs them as units, and they are such only through this system (Luhmann, 1995: 22). Difference also makes it possible for systems to make selections, for example, between elements, and thus to create hierarchies and to evolve in contradistinction to their environments.

In social systems theory, action is created not by (human) subjects, but through communication. However, Luhmann makes it clear that “only communication can communicate and (...) only within such a network of communication is what we understand as action created” (Luhmann, 1992: 251). In Luhmann’s model, communication is the synthesis of three selections: information, utterance and understanding (Luhmann, 1995: xlvix). Selections are not carried out by a subject, but as operations triggered by the establishing of difference (Luhmann, 1995: 32).

All systems are defined by three main features: ‘autopoiesis’, ‘self-referentiality’ and ‘closure’. *Autopoiesis*, a concept Luhmann draws from the work of Chilean biologist Humberto Maturana, implies that the system is self-producing and self-maintaining. According to Luhmann (1995: 37), self-observation is the operative factor in autopoiesis since “for elements to be reproduced, it must be guaranteed that they are reproduced as elements of the system and not as anything else”. Systems develop by means of an internal process of functional differentiation; this means “nothing more than the repetition of systems formation within systems” (Luhmann, 1995: 18).

The process of functional differentiation results in the increasing complexity of systems. Complexity arises when constraints to the connective capacity between elements mean that it is no longer possible for every element to be connected with every other element:

The fact that elements must already be constituted as complex in order to function as a unity for higher levels of system formation limits their connective capacity and thus reproduces complexity as an unavoidable condition on every higher level of system formation (Luhmann, 1995: 24).

The result, according to Luhmann, is that the self-reference of complexity internalises as the self-reference of systems. *Self-reference* is a concept used by Luhmann to designate the unity that an element, a process, or system is for 'itself'. Systems are considered *self-referential* in that they function in relation to their own internal rules:

One can call a system self-referential if it itself constitutes the elements that compose it as functional unities and runs reference to this self-continuation through all the relation among these elements, continuously reproducing its self-continuation in this way (Luhmann, 1995: 33).

As such, self-referential systems are operationally *closed* because they allow no other forms of processing in their self-determination. At the same time they are *structurally* open, since their relationship with their environment is clearly necessary for any distinction to exist. Thus a degree of porosity exists between system and environment (Grant, 2000a: 65).

Since modern societies are complex, a number of smaller sub-systems have differentiated themselves functionally to take on specific and increasingly complex roles within society. Luhmann identifies four basic social sub-systems as law, economy, science and politics. These systems are guided by their own steering media, which Luhmann refers to as 'semantic' devices; these define the scope of the system and ensure the coordination of actions. They also have a binary code, which defines the

system identity in relation to this medium (positive/negative etc.). The basic framework of the four social sub-systems is represented below:

SUB-SYSTEM	MEDIUM	BINARY CODE (+/-)
Law	Law	Legal/Illegal
Science	Truth	True/False
Politics	Power	Government/Opposition
Economy	Money/Property	Profitable/Non-Profitable

Figure 1: Luhmann's social sub-systems (adapted from Ossipow, 1994: 302).

As can be seen from Figure 1, in the case of the political system the binary code is represented by the binary code of government and opposition, and the medium of power ensures the co-ordination of actions. However, the binary code system has no moral value: although it defines the basic oppositions upon which the functioning of the system is based (government/opposition etc.), it offers no definitive solutions for deciding whether a piece of information or an event comes under positive or negative evaluation (Ossipow, 1994: 303). This last feature of the system has profound implications for the possibility of moral factors impacting on systems' development⁸.

Much of Luhmann's description of the political system is concerned with the concept of 'power'. Power as a medium is *delocalised* from authority and its role is to absorb the uncertainties of the political system (Luhmann, 2000a). Similarly to Foucault's conception of power, according to which power is seen as a nexus of practices and procedures which designate power and knowledge routines (Fraser, 1989: 20), Luhmann also sees power as diffuse. This is advantageous in the political system since the fact that it cannot be traced to one sole locus or institution enables its mystification.

⁸ This will be discussed in the following section 2.2.2 on Habermas' action-theoretical conception of political communication.

As with Weber's understanding of power as being associated with the threat of violent sanctions, Luhmann (2000a: 47) sees power as reinforced with this threat and cemented by its non-use; the existence of a threat is sufficient to ensure that people make the decision to limit their own choices and conform. Indeed, in *Die Politik der Gesellschaft* (2000a: 47), Luhmann argues that power sets out a simultaneous structure of normal preferences, with one preferred state and a less desirable set which it can have recourse to if required (in which case the consequences would be less desirable still for the subjects). Power is only conceivable when these two aspects exist in tandem to each other; it works on the basis of a fiction which is dictated by the "presence of the absent" (Bernhard Willms quoted in Luhmann, 2000a: 47). The mystification of the medium (power) must be understood in these terms since it is very rarely that it is actually tested through provocation.

Luhmann sees the challenge for the political system as follows: to manage the medium power through the binary code of government/opposition by calling on different strategies to ensure that the claim of the power-holder for domination continues to achieve acceptance by his subjects. For example, one such strategy for the power-holder is to ensure that his power maintains functionality by making decision-making transparent, even if not all concessions are *bona fide*. However, as Grant (2000: 69) notes "even a simulated transparency in the interest of power must be sufficiently plausible to achieve the desired effect".

It is clear from this brief discussion of Luhmann's systems-theoretic model that there is little place for human-directed action. Indeed, Luhmann's theory tends to be premised on the characteristically functionalist assumption that "what does exist, should continue to exist in order for society to continue functioning" (Perrolle, 1998). This can, however, lead to a sense of fatalism which can obfuscate attempts to account for social change. On this critique, the discussion will now turn to Habermas' theory of political communication.

2.2.2 Action-theoretical political communication

In response to observationist understandings of society, Jürgen Habermas has developed an interactionist account of political communication. This project began with his 1976 work *Legitimation Crisis*, in which he sets out the grounds for his contention with Luhmann's work: "Should we rationally desire that social identity be formed through the minds of socially-related individuals or sacrificed for the problem – real or imagined – of complexity?" (Habermas, 1976: 142).

Instead Habermas sketches (1976: 142) out two alternative theoretical routes: firstly, to adopt a normative approach (such as he sought to achieve with the historiographic reconstruction which he conducted in his 1962 *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*), and secondly, to adopt an approach, to which Habermas now subscribes, which seeks to apply social-scientific systems theory but in such a way that it is dependent on a social evolution theory. The present discussion will now focus on the latter approach, and return to the former in section 2.5 on the 'public sphere'.

Habermas' project begins with a critique of Weber in the first volume of *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Habermas, 1984) since it is in the interpretations of Weber's social categorisations that he locates the underlying difference in orientation between the observationist and action-theoretical conceptions of political communication. His argument proceeds as follows: Weber understands social modernisation as the institutionalisation of instrumental-rational action, above all in the two core areas of the State and the economy, and from this he developed his argument of an affinity between Protestantism and the spirit of capitalism to explain the motivational basis of the elites who supported these new institutions. Thus, he sought to clarify the cultural conditions under which the transition to capitalism could be accomplished, by identifying a process of social rationalisation in the genesis of differentiated subsystems of purposive-rational action. Habermas' contention with this is that: "[Weber] is solely interested [...] in the ideas that make it possible to anchor purposive-rational action in the system of social

labour in a value-rational way, that is, to institutionalise it and to provide a motivational basis for it” (Habermas, 1984: 198).

According to Habermas, this historical starting point sets in motion a destructive developmental cycle, which, as noted above, Weber analyses as a frozen dialectic of Enlightenment: rational-purposive action has prevailed at the expense of the completion of the project of Enlightenment (Habermas, 2001: 138-40). This leads Weber to a conclusion which is not far removed from that of Marx: that the growing complexity of independent action systems has resulted in the broad transformation of freedoms into disciplines. Habermas (2001: 140) notes that “in the light of the disciplinary compulsion of bureaucratisation and juridification, [Weber] paints a dark picture of an administered society”.

Habermas’ project can be briefly described as follows: it attempts to account for a type of social rationality which is not instrumental – that of ‘communicative rationality’ – in order to bridge the gap between systemic views of society (such as that of Luhmann), and interpretivist views which are concerned instead with human behaviour and social phenomena (such as Husserl’s hermeneutics). The concept of the ‘lifeworld’ is central to his argument: this consists in a common store of cultural knowledge, socialisation patterns, values and norms (Habermas, 2001: 152). The ‘lifeworld’ has been impinged upon by the rationalisation process which has marked society since the Enlightenment, yet Habermas refutes Luckmann’s and Berger’s (1966) fatalistic reading of this trend, believing in the communicative regenerativity of the ‘lifeworld’, a possibility which he locates in ‘communicative action’.

Habermas’ conception of the ‘lifeworld’ is a reconstruction of three important variations of the concept in the literature: the phenomenological conception of Husserl and Schutz; the functionalist understandings of Durkheim and Parsons; and the symbolic interactionism of Mead (Habermas, 1984: xxv-xxix). Habermas aims to overcome what he identifies as the shortcomings of each of the three visions: that Husserl and Schutz overemphasised cultural knowledge and traditions at the expense of group memberships

and personal identities; that Durkheim's and Parsons' theories had too much of an institutionalistic bias which over-emphasised social integration; that Mead examined socialisation from the perspective of symbolic interaction alone.

Through his reconstruction, Habermas aims to demonstrate that it is possible to construe rationalisation primarily as a transformation of implicitly known, taken-for-granted structures of the 'lifeworld' rather than of explicitly known, conscious orientations of action (Habermas, 1984: xxv). Thus, whereas social theories tend to emphasise the importance of instrumental action in directing individual action, and of strategic action in directing social action, Habermas argues that the importance of *communication*, and its role is orienting social action towards mutual understanding has been largely overlooked in the social theoretical literature. *Communication* is, however, at the very heart of Habermas' own project: in *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1984; 1987), Habermas offers an account of how social reality is created and reproduced in the lifeworld through communicative action which is itself oriented towards understanding rather than success.

Habermas locates 'communicative action' in the social world, one of the three different realms of interpersonal communication and action he identifies. The reasoning behind this is that whereas actors make claims of veracity in relation to states of affairs in the objective world, and make claims to sincerity in relation to experiences in the subjective world, in the social world (not to be confused with the 'lifeworld') they make claims of appropriateness in relation to interpersonal relationships in social groups. The positioning of communicative action within the social world means that social meaning can be generated in the 'lifeworld' where it is protected from systemic imperatives (money, power etc.) and rational-purposive action. He refers to this enterprise as using "the pragmatic turn for a neoclassical reconceptualisation of modernity" (Habermas, 2001: 149).

The 'neo-classical' element in Habermas' understanding of communication can be traced back to his reading of Hannah Arendt and her study of the philosophy of the

Ancients (Arendt, 1958). Arendt referred to the distinction between violence (*Gewalt*) and power (*Macht*) (in the Latin sense of *potestas*, where it is related to a public position), and argued that ‘violence’ tended to be used by authorities precisely when their ‘power’ was in question:

Every decrease in power is an open invitation to violence – if only because those who hold power and feel it slipping from their hands [...] have always found it difficult to resist the temptation to substitute violence for it (Arendt, 1969: 87).

Based on this distinction, Arendt located power in understanding achieved through communication (Luhmann, 2000a: 52). Habermas develops this notion by exploring the possibilities in language and communication in his attempt to break Weber’s ‘frozen dialectic of Enlightenment’.

Habermas believes that normative validity claims establish a reciprocal dependence between language and the social world which does not exist between language and the objective world (Habermas, 1990: 61). This implies that while the objective world exists independent of observers, the subjective world exists because of and through its observers. Since social reality cannot be secured objectively, understandings of the truth can only be negotiated by subjects (i.e. ‘intersubjectively’), and then be thematised as social truths. Habermas seeks to avoid the trap of moral relativism by finding a basis which can ensure universalism in the social realm; he undertakes therefore to establish a basis for the validity of norms to be tested ‘intersubjectively’ by drawing on the theory of moral argumentation.

Habermas believes that if one tries to justify an invoked norm, one must do so with recourse to good reasons. In this way, the use of norms becomes a rational practice. A significant part of Habermas’ project in *The Theory of Communicative Action* consists in the development of his theory of moral argumentation. This is grounded in Austin’s speech act theory (Austin, 1962): Habermas takes up Austin’s contrast between

declarative propositions, found in observational speech acts⁹, and which make claims to veracity in relation to facts and states of affairs, and normative propositions, found in regulative speech acts¹⁰, which are not subject to claims to veracity as such, but to claims to appropriateness (although social actors may take them on and thematise them as social ‘truths’). It is the illocutionary force in regulative speech acts which Habermas uses to develop his concept of communicative action. He notes:

The illocutionary forces constitute the knots in the network of communicative sociation: the illocutionary lexicon is, as it were, the sectional plane in which the language and the institutional order of society interpenetrate. This societal infrastructure of language is itself in flux; it varies in dependence on institutions and forms of life. But these variations also embody an innovative mastery of unforeseen situations (Habermas, 1984: 326).

In other words, Habermas argues here that pragmatics or, more specifically, the study of illocutionary speech acts, is essential for the legitimising of normative propositions.

Using an amended version of Kant’s categorical imperative, Habermas seeks to ensure that discussions regarding the validity of norms are conducted under fair conditions. Thus, any person who invokes a norm is forced to consider whether all others would invoke the same norm in the same situation to justify an action.

The impartiality of judgement is expressed in a principle that constrains *all* affected to adopt the perspectives of *all others* in the balancing of interests.

⁹ Observational Speech acts: offer a conjectural interpretation which do not contradict utterances taken to be true in any given situation.

¹⁰ Regulative Speech acts: 1) Obligations/Orders (Implicate mainly listener); 2) Promises and declarations (implicate mainly speaker); 3) Conventions and contracts (implicate both parties symmetrically); 4) Recommendations and warnings (implicate both parties asymmetrically).

The principle of universalisation is intended to compel the universal exchange of roles that G.H. Mead called ‘ideal role taking’ or ‘universal discourse’ (Habermas, 1990: 65).

In this way, universal discourse offers a criterion which allows the ‘universalisability’ or social ‘truth’ of a moral norm to be judged.

Here it is worth reiterating the goal of Habermas’ project: to bridge the gap between systemic views of society and interpretivist views. This requires him to integrate the ‘lifeworld’ and ‘system’ paradigms. He approaches this by examining the lifeworld as a boundary-maintaining system which is coupled to other social systems (Habermas, 1987: 348-49). The function of the lifeworld is to ensure social integration by anchoring (‘institutionalising’) systemic mechanisms in sociation processes (Habermas, 1984, xxix). The relationship between the lifeworld and communicative reason is one of mutual dependency, which Habermas describes as follows:

The lifeworld can be thought of as the source of enabling conditions for communicative action, through whose medium, in turn, the lifeworld itself must be reproduced. But the symbolic structures of the lifeworld present an internal relation to communicative reason, which actors in their everyday practices must lay claim to as they raise criticisable validity claims and respond to them with a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’ (Habermas, 2001: 152).

In other words, the lifeworld is a necessary precondition for the achievement of communicative action, but it is also through communicative action that it is itself achieved.

However, Habermas identifies in the lifeworld a process of rationalisation which has occurred alongside social modernisation. This rationalisation of the lifeworld is very different to the rationalisation of the social and economic spheres, in that it encompasses the three components of cultural traditions, socialisation of individuals, and social integration. Cultural traditions are affected to the extent that their taken-for-

granted validity is opened up to criticisms. Socialisation processes are encompassed to the extent that they are now taught and acquired through the education system; finally, processes of social integration are implicated in the sense that these processes rather than established tradition are involved in generating general moral principles.

The consequences of the rationalisation of the lifeworld which Habermas identifies are of considerable relevance for the current study: as procedures have replaced inherited values and norms at the level of institutions, the political regulation of collective life has become “increasingly dependent on the deliberative bodies of constitutional states, as well as the communicative processes of civil society and political public spheres” (Habermas, 2001: 152). This explains why Habermas believes that *communication* has an important role to play in protecting the lifeworld from systemic interference.

The rationalisation of the lifeworld means that Habermas is forced to approach the paradox of rationalisation with which Weber before him was faced: i.e. “the rationalisation of the lifeworld makes possible a kind of systemic integration that enters into competition with the integrating principle of reaching understanding and, under certain conditions, has a disintegrative effect on the lifeworld” (Habermas, 1984: 342). This is why Habermas is keen to focus his own project on developing the concept of ‘communicative action’, which implies securing ‘rationality’ in the lifeworld in a way which is untainted by rational-purposive action and systemic imperatives. Habermas believes that by creating institutions and procedures within which communicative action can be achieved, his own conception succeeds in accounting for a process of societal rationalisation which does not reify purposive-rational action. Although this notion is problematic, raised as a counter-factual ideal it can perhaps inform debates on legitimacy, for example, through deliberative models of democracy. This point will be explored in greater detail in the following sections on legitimacy and democracy (2.3-2.4).

2.3 Legitimacy

In spite of their different conceptions of communication, both Luhmann's systems-theoretical and Habermas' interactionist models draw on the notion of legitimation to explain how a 'rational authority' succeeds in sustaining itself as a stable social order. Their respective readings of Weber's concept define the very different understandings they have of how and why the legitimation process occurs. The following section explores their debate by examining the challenges to authority which Habermas and Luhmann each identify, and their accounts of how these are dealt with in the political system.

As noted, Weber (1947: 130) describes four bases of legitimacy of an order. These are: tradition, emotion, rational belief and legality. A belief in the legitimacy of the status quo enables tradition to serve as the first base of legitimacy, reinforced also by psychological inhibitions to change. Legitimacy can also be derived through emotional or affectual motives, for example when an authority makes an appeal to citizens to its legitimacy on the basis of its desirability. A rational belief in the values which underpin the order – either through a conviction of the value of natural or positive law – can also act as a third base of legitimacy. Finally, legitimacy can originate in the recognition of an order because of the simple fact of its legality.

2.3.1 Procedural conceptions of legitimacy

The fourth base of legitimacy – legality – is the most common base in modern-day Western democracies (Weber, 1947: 131). Thus, an order is accepted as legitimate when it has been established by means of an accepted legal method (constitution, elections etc.). By extension, decisions made in this order are considered legitimate inasmuch as they have been made subject to an agreed procedure (e.g. majority rule and representation).

The Weberian base of legality is the base with which Luhmann's conception of legitimacy can be most closely aligned; for Luhmann, an authority is legitimate if the normative order is established positively, and those legally associated with it believe in its legality. Luhmann believes that legitimacy can be secured if political decision-making occurs in accordance with a procedure which is recognised as legal. Moreover, in Luhmann's model legitimacy is an empirical phenomenon with no relationship to 'truth' (Habermas, 1976: 99); Luhmann believes that it is no longer possible to rely on the understanding of the truth attached with natural law as a base for legitimacy, instead must be generated by strict methodological conditions which are tied to decision-making procedures¹¹. As a result, Luhmann sees Weber's 'bases' of legitimacy as of psychological import only, and their motivational function alone as worthy of study.

The issue of legitimacy has been a preoccupation within the field of political philosophy since the rule of Ancient Greeks, used to refer to the rightfulness of a power holder or system of rule (Beetham, 2000:479). The term "legitimation" is used, by extension, to refer to the process by means of which legitimacy is achieved: according to the Oxford Dictionary of Sociology, it refers to "the process by which power is not only institutionalised but more importantly is given moral grounding" (Marshall, 1998). While Luhmann recognises that concerns over legitimacy are rooted in historical developments which have accompanied the democratic institutionalisation of power in Europe, he believes that these historical semantics are no longer insightful in understanding the political system today (Luhmann, 2000a: 33). Moreover, he is not concerned with the moral grounding of power, and thus with the normative dimension of legitimation.

Instead, according to Luhmann (1993: 20), the process of legitimation should be construed as a system. As such, it consists of a relatively autonomous role structure in which communication has the goal of producing decisions which are oriented towards the 'truth', rightness (in the sense of justness/fairness) and lawfulness. However, in

¹¹ These legitimation procedures are discussed in detail below.

Luhmann's procedural conception 'truth' is seen not as a value, but as a semantic code which defines the scope and function of a procedure. In this sense, Luhmann's understanding of 'truth' is stripped of any metaphysical quality; it is a semantic medium whose function within political procedures is to reduce social complexity.

What is interesting about this conception – and problematic for interactionists – is that it dispenses with the link between truth and universalism. Indeed, the procedure of legitimation has a relatively limited scope as a decision-making mechanism; it serves only to eliminate possibilities from the process. As a system it is oriented towards the 'truth' (the semantic code) since if it were oriented towards solving all problems it could not at the same time guarantee that all the decisions taken would be just; functional orientation to one excludes the other. Moreover, Luhmann (1993: 21-22) makes it clear the procedure does not actually justify each decision, but grounds a presumption in terms of the rightness (legality) of its content. In this sense, there is no guarantee that all, or even any, decisions reached in accordance with the procedure will be acceptable to all those they affect.

Luhmann believes this is an acceptable solution, since it crucially enables social complexity to be reduced; he argues that in order to be able to comprehend the world each person needs to adopt selection processes to lead his life and to orient himself meaningfully. Formal and informal procedures use various social mechanisms or procedures. It is therefore in this sense that the orientation of procedure to the truth should be understood, that is, in the sense of reduced complexity in social relations Luhmann (1993: 23). In analysing the function of truth in this way, Luhmann ties it to other functionally equivalent mechanisms which help to reduce complexity in the political sub-system – notably to the medium of power.

In Luhmann's model power is a mechanism for transferring selection needs, which are brought about through decisions (Luhmann, 2000a: 283). Thus selection mechanisms deal with social complexity through decision-making, and legitimacy, in turn, is a generalised willingness to take on decisions, the actual content of which is still

undefined, within certain tolerance limits. This willingness to accept the actual processes which lead to and guarantee the acceptance of state decisions is described by Luhmann as diffuse psychological motives, participation, multiple social mechanisms or complex and heterogeneous constellations of motives (Luhmann, 2000a: 28). In the final analysis, this leads Luhmann to conclude, quoting from Bourricaud “that a power is legitimate in so much as it accepts or institutionalises its own legitimation process” (Luhmann, 2000a: 43 [my translation]).

Luhmann’s understanding of politics – as a self-referential system which secures its own legitimacy through an internal procedure which aims to reduce the complexity of decision-making (including on issues relating to the economic and legal systems) – offers a convincing explanation of the procedures through which state decisions come to be accepted by citizens. However, his account of legitimation does not sufficiently problematise the psychological motives of citizens within the legitimation process, and as a result Luhmann’s account does not fully explore the extent to which the legitimacy of the whole system of authority – in addition to state decision-making – must be secured. It is from this perspective that the Habermasian view of legitimacy is worthy of study.

2.3.2 Normative conceptions of legitimacy

The grounds for Habermas’ debate with Luhmann on the issue of legitimacy are set out in *Legitimation Crisis* (Habermas, 1976: 97-102). There Habermas argues that a purely procedural vision of legitimation is insufficient, tracing back this shortcoming to Luhmann’s acceptance of Weber’s belief in legality providing a sufficient motivational basis for an order to be accepted as legitimate. Contrary to Luhmann, Habermas’ understanding of legitimacy is rooted in the historical developments which have accompanied the democratic institutionalisation of power in Europe. Furthermore, Habermas (1976: 52) even describes this process from a sociological perspective, although not without recourse to systems-theoretical notions. He does this with a view

to uncovering what he sees as the pathologies of the modern capitalist state. His argument develops as follows.

By the seventeenth century states had begun to develop with advanced steering capacities which made their sovereign rule over their territory more effective than that of the ancient empires and city states before them. These new states had a functionally specialised administration which generated revenues from the taxation system, making them dependent on the capitalist economy. By the nineteenth century the Nation-State had established itself as prime model of political organisation on a worldwide level, and the capitalist model had adapted to assume a social welfare function: however, this role became progressively difficult as it sought to regulate the national economy without compromising its own need for self-regulation.

Habermas develops his analysis of legitimation crises further through his sociological study of the 'legitimation system' (Habermas, 1976). In this he seeks to offer an explanation of how legitimation occurs in late capitalist models, as well as why and when it is likely to fail in such models. One of his main premises is that the functional weaknesses in the market and the dysfunctional side effects of its steering mechanism (i.e. the administration with its planning function) caused the basic bourgeois ideology of fair exchange (in the economic system) to collapse (Habermas, 1976: 36-7).

Faced with this collapse, he argues, the late capitalist model seeks to avert crisis by recoupling the economic system to the political one. However, this creates an increased need for legitimation, since the State apparatus is actively engaged in the general conditions of production (rather than simply ensuring the prerequisites for its continued existence, as is the case in liberal capitalism). Moreover, with the universal value systems of bourgeois ideology (e.g. civil rights and legitimation) tied to the mechanisms of elections, a formal system of democracy is necessary to legitimate the State apparatus, and to compensate for the erosion of Weber's first base of legitimation – tradition (Habermas, 1976: 36-7).

However, a problem arises in the fact that the role now accorded to participation is insufficient; Habermas notes that the current organisation of formal democratic institutions and procedures enables administrative decisions for the most part to be made independently from the specific motives of the citizens. This is because the legitimation system elicits diffuse mass loyalty, as Luhmann also identifies, rather than invoking participation. Indeed, many citizens now tend to express themselves democratically only by withholding their approbation. This has, according to Habermas, resulted in institutions and procedures which are democratic in form, but lack the substantive support of citizens; thus genuine participation would ultimately only serve to destabilise the system further by thematising the contradiction between “administratively socialised production” and “the continued private appropriation and use of surplus value” (Habermas, 1976: 36).

In this setting, legitimation is reduced to two residual requirements in the late capitalist model: firstly, the legitimation of civic ‘privatism’ (which Habermas characterises as political abstinence coupled with an individual orientation to career, leisure and consumption); secondly, the legitimation of structural depoliticisation (or, in other terms, the process during which government by a democratic or technocratic elite is made to seem reasonable and just to all citizens). As noted, the political system requires diffuse mass loyalty as an input; its output, on the other hand, consists in sovereignly executed administrative decisions (Habermas, 1976: 46-48). The system can be forced to deal with either input or output crises which undermine its legitimacy.

Habermas describes *output* crises as *rationality crises* whereby the administrative system does not manage to reconcile and fulfil the imperatives received from the economic system. Habermas describes this as a systemic crisis when legitimation is withdrawn through the disorganisation of the State apparatus. It is a risk which is inherent in the capitalist state, which can be avoided by successful regulation of the economy by government (e.g. through the welfare state and taxation). Output crises (as rationality crises) can be conceived in two ways: firstly, in terms of the contradiction inherent in attempts to reconcile the anarchic tendencies of commodity production and

the need for administrative planning to promote the growth of capital whilst limited, at the same time, by the necessity for the State to minimise its own intervention in this process. Secondly, it can be conceived in terms of the State compensating for problems in the economic system and its orientation to capital growth which force it to introduce foreign elements to the system to enable it to sustain its own reproduction. Put differently, the administration must introduce additional complexity to the economic system in its attempts to control this domain of activity.

Input crises, on the other hand, are *legitimation crises*. Habermas explains these as occurring when the appropriate level of mass loyalty is not achieved in the process of implementing the steering imperatives brought over from the economic system:

The legitimation crisis [...] is directly an identity crisis. It does not proceed by way of endangering system integration, but results from the fact that the fulfilment of governmental planning tasks places in question the structure of the depoliticised public realm and, thereby, the formally democratic securing of the private autonomous disposition of the means of production (Habermas, 1976: 46).

In other words, a legitimation crisis is an identity crisis because it undermines the whole system of authority by thematising the tension between the lack of public participation in decision-making and its formal democratic control of the means of production. It is in this respect, therefore, that Habermas' rejection of a purely legalist conception of democracy becomes clear: a legitimation crisis can occur even when the legitimacy of the whole system of authority is called into question, even when a procedure is place. Habermas suggest that this occurs when it is not possible through administrative means to maintain or develop the necessary normative structures to ensure legitimacy.

The particular problem which is presupposed by the late capitalist model results from the fact that the political system begins not only to shift its boundaries vis-à-vis the economic system, but also to *colonise* the socio-cultural system. According to Habermas, the redefining of the boundaries between the cultural and the political has

additional consequences; it implies on the one hand, administrative interference in cultural matters, as well as the social acceptance of traditionally unproblematic meanings and norms; on the other hand, it implies the redefining informal public participation¹². With the encroachment of the political realm into the cultural (i.e. its growing concern with cultural questions as well as questions of justice), traditions are slowly eroded and undermined. However, once removed, these traditions cannot be regenerated administratively.

Habermas is led to conclude that the appeal to a state's monopoly on the creation and application of laws is not sufficient; the procedure itself requires legitimation. This view is, in part, based on the assumption that the legalist view (as represented, for example, by Luhmann) is a distortion of Weber's conception of 'legal authority' which instead should be taken to refer to a value-oriented rational statutory authority rather than a simple legalist reading (see section 2.2). Habermas believes that procedure can only serve to legitimate partially; the whole system of authority itself must be legitimised though as a 'normatively-generated shared worldview'. He explains this as follows:

If binding decisions are legitimate i.e. can be made independently of the concrete exercise of force and of the manifest threat of sanctions, and can be regularly implemented even against the interests of those affected, then they must be considered as the fulfilment of recognised norms. This unconstrained normative validity is based on the supposition that the norm could, if necessary, be justified and defended against critique. And this support is itself not automatic. It is the consequence of an interpretation which admits of consensus and which has a justificatory function, in other words, of a world-view which legitimises authority (Habermas and Luhmann, *Sozialtechnologie*: 243 quoted in Habermas, 1976: 101).

¹² This point will be discussed in section (2.5).

Here Habermas convincingly argues that normative validity is necessary to ensure that the system of authority as a whole is accepted as legitimate by citizens. It is a view which by no means undermines the procedural understanding of Luhmann; it serves rather to explain why citizens accept so readily the authority of the State, not just the legality of its decision-making. In other words, the processes of socialisation and the reinforcement of social norms also help to ensure the legitimacy of authority on an ongoing basis, in addition to that secured by the minimal participation opportunities offered during and between political elections. The following sections will explore further the notion of public participation in politics by examining models of democracy and theories of participation and public opinion.

2.4 Models of democracy

In basic terms, ‘democracy’ has come to English from the Greek *demokratia* via Late Latin and French. The Greek term is composed of ‘demos’ (*the people*) and ‘kratia’ meaning *power* or *rule*. Thus, democracy means rule by the people, rather than rule by an individual (*autocracy*) or a group (*oligarchy*). It implies a system of decision-making in which all those who are concerned by a decision effectively or potentially have the option of participating – on equal terms – in making it (Harrison, 2000: 199). This requirement has historically been interpreted and institutionalised in very different ways. For example, in Ancient Greece the ‘demos’ comprised only male homeowner and slave keepers making it a rather narrowly construed version of democracy. Furthermore, the incremental introduction of ‘universal’ suffrage in the 19th Century in many Western European countries, taken by many as marking the beginning of democratic rule on the continent, did not begin to apply to women until much later at the beginning of the 20th Century.

Most agree that rule by all is preferable to its historic alternatives; yet there is still much debate even today about what institutional form rule by all should take. Certainly, the basic principles of inclusion (i.e. ensuring that all those concerned by the debate can participate in it), and political equality (i.e. ensuring that all can participate on equal

terms) are widely seen as prerequisites for effective democracy (Young, 2000: 23), yet deciding how these ideals should be embodied and enforced is not without difficulties. As Poster (1995 [online version]) points out, the concept of democracy “may yet contain critical potentials since existing forms [...] surely do not fulfil the promise of freedom and equality”.

In modern societies, democracy normally requires a basic framework of institutions and rights: the rule of law, freedom of speech, assembly and association, and decision-making by voting when consensus is not possible (Young, 2001: 18). Beyond this there are a wide variety of models which seek to describe the ideal organisation of relations between State and citizens under democratic rule. Such conceptions tend to derive from either empirical accounts or normative modelling; the former has long been a concern for political sociology, and the latter a concern of political philosophy. The discussion in this section proceeds via a brief presentation of ideal type models of democracy, highlighting the key conceptual philosophical distinctions which underpin them, as well as the different role which communication and public participation plays within each. This will enable a thematisation of some of the key issues in the debate and a discussion of the positioning of Habermas and Luhmann in relation to these: notably, the section will explore democracy as critical and heuristic ideal on the one hand (Habermas), and as a vestige of history, and a problematic system, on the other (Luhmann).

2.4.1 ‘Ideal types’ of democracy

Held (1987) provides a useful overview of models of democracy using a Weberian ideal type analysis. From Held’s taxonomy, Hacker and van Dijk (2000) derive six models which remain valid in the Age of the Internet. These are: the legalist, competitive, plebiscitary, pluralist, participatory and libertarian models¹³. These six models merit further consideration.

¹³ Hacker and van Dijk add the libertarian model to Held’s taxonomy.

The legalist model is based on the classical Western conception of democracy which emerged after the decline of absolutist states. Historically, legalist democracy has been defended by Locke (1690) and Montesquieu (1748) in the literature, as well as, more recently, Luhmann. These conceptions of democracy tend to be procedural, with representation (rather than direct participation) defining citizen input into policy- and decision-making. Furthermore, fundamental rights are guaranteed through a constitution and the separation of powers. The public administration has an important role to play in this model; it must be large enough to solve complex collective problems. Democracy, on the other hand, has a lesser role; it is seen as a means of safeguarding citizens against authoritarian rule, but is not an end in itself.

Democracy also has a supporting role in the competitive model; this is again a procedural conception, but it is the bureaucracy, political parties and leaders with authority which have the central role. This model, which has featured notably in the work of Weber (1921) and Schumpeter (1942), sees politics as an ongoing competition between parties and their leaders for public support. Thus, the election of representatives is the key operation in the model, although this creates the risk of populist strategies being used by those competing for public approbation.

The plebiscitary democracy model, advocated by Becker (1981) and Barber (1984), differs from these previous models in that it places importance on the use of direct methods (such as plebiscites and referenda) where possible. Consequently, these models advocate giving the citizenry a stronger voice in policy- and decision-making than the previous models.

The pluralist model of democracy, (see De Tocqueville, 1864; Dahl, 1956), also places a bigger importance on public participation. In this model, democracy is defined by a shifting coalition of minorities rather than the sovereignty of the majority. As a network conception of politics, attention is focused on civil society rather than on the State and political representation; the model advocates that society should have many centres of

power and administration, and the role of the State is to act as arbiter between the different groups.

Rousseau (1762) is a well-known proponent of the participatory model of democracy. Similar to pluralist democracy, the model places emphasis on citizens rather than organisations. Since this model sees the will of the people as different from an aggregation of individual interests, the process of opinion formation is more important than that of opinion polling. As a result, an informed citizenry is crucial for the success of the model; through this it aims to make centres of power more accessible to citizen.

Finally, Hacker and van Dijk add the libertarian democracy model to Held's taxonomy. They argue that the model, advocated notably by theorists such as Katz (1997a) and Kelly (1994), has come to the fore again with the advent of the Internet. Libertarian democracy, which can vary from classical anarchism and left-wing socialism to libertarianism, sees political institutions as obsolete, overly bureaucratic and centralised. The model favours horizontal communications (e.g. between citizens) rather than 'top-down' communication from government, hence the reason why the Internet has been seized upon by its proponents as a medium capable encouraging its realisation¹⁴.

The two key conceptual distinctions which underpin these six models of democracy are the level of representation and the ultimate goal of the model. The six models of democracy and their orientation to these two dimensions are presented below in Figure 2.

¹⁴ The contextual section of the case study (section 4.1.1) examines horizontal and networked communication in greater detail in relation to political uses of the Internet.

Primary goal/ Primary means	Opinion formation	Decision-making
Representative democracy		Legalist
		Competitive
	Pluralist	
	Participatory	
	Libertarian	
Direct democracy		Plebiscitary

Figure 2: Six models in two dimensions of political democracy (adapted from Hacker and van Dijk, 2000: 39).

The first distinction, the level of representation which the model promotes, defines the level of citizen participation. Accordingly, the plebiscitary model foresees the highest level of participation in democratic processes, followed by the libertarian, participatory, pluralist and competitive models. The legalist model foresees the lowest levels of participation since democracy is only intended as a safeguard against excesses of power.

The second distinction relates to the ultimate goal of participation in the model, and thus to how (citizens') preferences are measured, quantified and actioned. Although it is clear that public participation feeds more or less directly into the decision-making process in each of these six models, the models which are most oriented towards decision-making are the legalist, competitive, and plebiscitary models. The libertarian, and particularly the pluralist and participatory models of democracy, are oriented more towards opinion formation; participation is conceived as a process which enables citizens to inform themselves through public discussion which, in turn, enables more informed policy- and decision-making. Thus, opinion formation is understood as

participation in deliberation, not just the expression of ‘public opinion’ or its thematisation in the media.

2.4.2 The practical and philosophical challenges posed by public participation in democracies

The discussion so far has highlighted the differences between the six models of democracy in terms of the scope for actual involvement in political processes, as well as possibilities for exerting real influence through formal or informal participation. The discussion now turns to the philosophical and practical challenges posed by placing public participation at the heart of democracy. Thus it explores the merits and disadvantages of plebiscites and representation, introducing the concepts of the ‘public sphere’, ‘public opinion’ and ‘inclusion’ which are taken forward in the following sections.

In the literature, references to the plebiscitary model mostly concern the Athenian ‘agora’ model. The model is arguably best known in modern political philosophy through the account of one of its modern proponents, Hannah Arendt. Arendt (1958) developed a strong preference for the model of the Ancients as a result of her years of studying totalitarianism. This led to her to adopt the standpoint that “the only way to avoid totalitarianism was to establish a well-ordered political community that encourages public participation and institutionalised political freedom” (quoted by Parekh in Routledge, 2000: 46).

What Arendt identified as appealing in the Greek model was the dynamic sphere for public participation where lively debating could occur¹⁵. Indeed, in ancient Greece, members of the *polis* participated in the ‘public’ life which evolved at the market place or *agora*. However, public life was not entirely dependent on this location; the ‘sphere’ was something of an abstract notion, based on a dialogue (*lexis*) which took place as a tribunal or public consultation (Habermas, 1989:3). The *polis* was formed of propertied males and slave-keepers, and thus did not extend to poor male Athenians or women. Active participation, good debating skills and civic virtue, expounded famously by Aristotle, were virtues revered amongst its members.

Arendt contrasts lively debating and active participation of the Athenian agora with the lack of public space under modernity. She perceives this as having been brought about by the institutional differentiation of modern societies into a narrow political realm and a more predominant economic and family realm. However, implicit in her argument is the somewhat questionable assumption that consensus was made possible in Ancient Greece thanks to the homogeneity of the public which took part in political activities, (i.e. male homeowner and slave keepers). On this Benhabib notes:

It can also be asked that if the agonistic political space of the Greek polis was only possible because large groups of human beings – like women, slaves, children, labourers, non-citizen residents, and all non-Greeks – were excluded from it [...] then is the critique of the rise of the social, which was accompanied by the emancipation of these groups from the “shadowy interior of the household,” and their entry into public life, also a critique of political universalism as such? (Benhabib, 1993: 75).

¹⁵ Arendt’s model is considered ‘agonistic’ since it relies on the competition of ideas rather than consensus. As such, it has been subject to critique by Habermas and other supporters of consensus and deliberative democracy models. See Habermas (1996a; 1996b), Benhabib (1993; 1996) and Young (2000).

In other words, Benhabib is critical of the desirability of active participation in models of democracy if this can only be secured through the exclusion of vast swathes of the public.

In this quotation Benhabib also raises the question of whether the plebiscitary model is at all possible on a large scale. Certainly, the Swiss model (which is one of the rare examples of the model in practice) exists as something of a historical anomaly, brought about as a result of the unique confederal structure. Swiss *direct democracy* allows citizens to call a national referendum on a topic after collecting 100,000 signatures, and as a result citizens vote as often as four times a year in local, cantonal and national referenda. Representatives of different parties operate in tandem at the various different levels, and actively take a stance on all referenda initiatives. In the Swiss model, the act of *participation* is nevertheless seen as fundamental, even if this is construed essentially in the somewhat narrow terms of casting one's vote in referenda.

The fact that even this simple act is seen by many citizens as onerous – at 43.2% election participation levels in Switzerland are extremely low (Nationmaster, 2005) – exemplifies rather well the dilemma of participation and directness of participation in democracy: whilst increased participation may on the surface appear to equate with better democracy, it requires commitment, which is onerous from the perspective of administrative logistics, as well as from that of the citizen. These doubts over efficiency and effectiveness almost certainly act as a brake (or perhaps smokescreen) for governments considering ways and means of increasing public participation in policy- and decision-making. Indeed, how willing will governments be to cede power to the people, if there is little evidence of public interest and commitment, let alone of proven effectiveness in other countries?

Luhmann would arguably point out that participation can increase the complexity of operations in the political system (albeit within the tolerance limits established by the system), which presents risks if the system is unable to deal with these effectively; increasing levels of participation could result first and foremost in increased levels of

frustration. It is worth noting, in this context, that Luhmann (1999: 177) regards democracy as “highly improbable, and yet still a reality”, and comments that “it is surprising that this system even manages to function...and for how much longer?”

For Luhmann, democracy is possible because political parties enjoy an identity which is distinct from the State; whereas the State is caught up in technically complex legal, financial and bureaucratic imperatives which require a degree of continuity to resolve, parties are organisations which ostensibly represent public preferences, and allow for the premises of state decision-making to be altered (Luhmann, 2000b: 31). Therefore, if a party in power is unsuccessful, it can be ejected without fundamentally undermining the role of government as a whole. Luhmann’s alternative to deeper democracy through increased public participation consists in comprehensive, non-participatory planning, whereby the autonomous administration has the general competency to deal with all steering (i.e. selection) problems that remain unsettled (Luhmann, 1972: 224). He develops this model in some detail in his later work, such as *Die Politik der Gesellschaft* (Luhmann, 2000a).

Habermas (1976: 124), however, argues that this is a *retrograde development* in democratic theory. He aligns this conception with the emergence of ‘elite’ theories of domination, according to which elites are an inevitable and desirable ruling class in society (here Habermas is referring to the work of Mosca (1939), Pareto (1968) and Michels (1915)). These ‘elite’ theories of domination, which emerged to dispel what they perceived as the idealistic participatory models of democracy defended by the likes of Rousseau, were then developed into a theory of mass democracy by Schumpeter and Weber. Thus, according to Habermas, this led to the adoption of a vision of democracy which focused on the election of leaders rather than the representation of the ‘generalisable’ interests of all individuals.

As noted, Luhmann’s model follows this tradition: it is focused above all on maintaining the stability of the political system, and therefore on managing the binary code of government and opposition, and on the elimination of possible policy choices

from the decision-making process. Accordingly, participation is no more or less than the necessary concession of power to secure the legitimacy of the system; unlike in Habermas' model where it is a cornerstone, and a precondition of the fulfilment of the ideal of inclusion.

Yet Luhmann is correct to highlight the practical difficulties associated with increasing public participation in the political system: there is a need to reconcile the ideal of participation with logistical feasibility since the participation of all citizens in every decision which affects them is simply not feasible. However, even if one accepts representation as necessary or desirable, it raises a further set of questions relating to the *communicative* processes through which public participation and representation are channelled, as well as how opinions are measured and how they are acted upon. The following section examines these issues in greater detail by exploring how the issue of representation is dealt with practically and conceptually in the six models.

2.4.3 Representation and decision-making in models of democracy

Hacker and van Dijk argue that all models of democracy can be classified in terms of their perceived goal; this tends to be either decision-making or opinion formation, as presented in Figure 2 above (Hacker and van Dijk, 2000: 39).

The legalist and competitive models favour both decision-making and representation and thus accord the least scope for individual citizens to influence directly decision-making through their formal political participation. In the pluralist and participatory models, scope for direct participation is possible, although representatives are still an integral part of the model so that any decision-making is ultimately mediated through them. In these models the emphasis is on participation with a view to opinion formation, based on the assumption that an informed and active electorate and strengthened links between citizens and decision-makers can bring about more effective representation.

In the libertarian and plebiscitary models, representation is to be avoided and direct civic action is preferred. The focus of these models is on creating mechanisms through which the somewhat nebulous entity of 'public opinion' can be registered, rather than on creating opportunities for deliberation to be encouraged; this is particularly true in the plebiscitary model, with its principal focus on decision-making through referenda and polls. The libertarian model also draws on these mechanisms to measure public opinion, but political activity is on the whole directed away from the traditional political sphere (with its focus on government, parliament and the media). As a result of this networked (as opposed to top-down) view of communication, the State has a less preponderant role within the model, and a broader distribution of power is favoured.

In practical terms the debate as to the desired output of public participation can be broadly simplified by the polarisation between opinion formation and decision-making, as discussed in the six models of democracy highlighted by Hacker and van Dijk (2001). In the vocabulary of political philosophy, it can be framed in terms of deliberative democracy versus aggregative democracy.

2.4.4 Aggregative versus deliberative democracy

Aggregative models favour decision-making in that they perceive democracy as a process of aggregating the preferences of citizens, whether that is in response to a specific policy issue or at the crucial moment of the election of officials. The goal of democracy in this type of model is to satisfy the preferences of the largest number of people; political parties and their representatives attempt to do this through their policy platforms. The legalist, competitive and plebiscitary models mentioned above can all be classified as aggregative. The plebiscitary model relies on direct methods, such as polls and referenda, in which citizens themselves choose between a number of policy options. In the competitive and legalist models, which rely on representation, parties vie for the support of 'public opinion' on policy issues and secure this mostly through election-time voting, although the use of polls and the media allow them also to claim public backing for policies between election times.

In their ideal form, all aggregative models conceive politics as a competitive process where people campaign strategically (in an open and fair manner) for preferred policy outcomes and the strongest or most widely held view wins. Thus democratic processes are conceived of as a *marketplace of ideas* with individuals, groups and parties putting forward their competing ideas with the hope of gaining the most public support. Since different strategies can be used to gain support (lobbying, tactics, coalitions), this model relies on what Weber would classify as rational-purposive or instrumental action. According to the model, therefore, the outcome of elections or legislative ballots is seen as representing the aggregation of the most widely held preferences of citizens (Young, 2001: 19).

Deliberative models place a much greater importance on the communicative process of opinion-formation through public participation in politics. This must be ongoing through engagement in deliberation and participatory events between elections, in addition to the simple act of casting one's vote every few years. A key premise of the model is that increased participation will enable citizens to become better informed about public affairs, and will increase representatives' responsiveness to 'public opinion'. The pluralist and participatory models in Hacker and van Dijk's taxonomy can thus be seen as deliberative. In political theoretical terms, deliberative models are arguably best known through the 'discursive democracy' of Habermas (1996a; 1996b; 1998).

Deliberative models, including Habermas' discursive democracy, have developed in response to a number of perceived shortcomings of aggregative models. Young (2000: 20) identifies three principal problems: firstly, in aggregative models individual preferences are taken as given. This means that it is assumed that each individual knows from the outset of a discussion what his preferences are. Deliberative models, on the contrary, tend to see preferences as emerging as a result of deliberation. Secondly, the aggregative model does not rank preferences according to value or motives. All preferences are seen as formally valid regardless of the motivations behind them, and reasons and motivation are in any case considered largely irrelevant since their number

rather than their value is of importance. Thirdly, since the model is based on individual preference, there is no guarantee that the aggregation process will produce rational outcomes at a communal level. These weaknesses in the aggregative model can be traced to the fact that the model has difficulty accounting for how opinions and preferences are actually formed and expressed socially. Indeed, the notion of deliberation is not adequately thematised in aggregative accounts.

The problems which result from this shortfall can be understood from the study of John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* (1971), one of the most prominent aggregative accounts of democracy in the 20th century literature. To ensure basic conditions of justice in the aggregation of opinions in a discussion, Rawls is forced to make recourse to a counterfactual model: inspired by Rousseau's notion of the 'social contract', Rawls requires participants in the 'original position' to don a veil of ignorance to allow them to come to a consensus which maximises the position of the least advantaged and ensures basic liberal rights for all.

Rawls' argument, which is based on rationally-assured self-interest, departs from the premise that "free persons, equally situated and ignorant of their historical circumstances, would rationally agree [...] in order to secure their equal status and independence, and to pursue freely their conceptions of the good" (Routledge, 2000: 743). In other words, if we suppressed our particularisms in public discourse we would be able to come to an agreement with other people. In fact, the model only succeeds in accounting for this by means of a strict separation between the public and private spheres: participants may discuss 'public' issues which relate to social justice, but cannot discuss 'private' issues which relate to conceptions of the good life (i.e. ethics, customs and private preferences).

This notion of a possible separation between public and private is a traditionally liberal view of politics¹⁶ with its roots in the Enlightenment tradition. The liberal model claims to be able to ensure that all the different groups of society have the possibility of living their lives according to their own conception of the good life, and thus seeks to secure legitimacy by envisaging the scope of politics along the lines of the legal system: the concept of ‘neutrality’ acts as the cornerstone since the legal system is preoccupied with the protection of justice, and not the prescription of moral standards. However, this distinction is questionable: in limiting the sphere of the political along the lines of juridical relations, neutrality is purchased at the expense of spontaneity and imagination since the agenda for discussion is limited from the outset to subjects upon which a consensus could be reached (i.e. ‘public’ issues of justice rather than ‘private’ issues of the good life).

Moreover, this claim to neutrality has been exposed as misleading by a number of historical cases, such as feminism, gay rights etc. It has been argued that by limiting the scope of politics in this way (i.e. through the bracketing of differences), it predetermines the agenda by pushing off items which could cause disagreement. Moreover, it presupposes that everybody knows prior to entering into a discussion which are the grounds for disagreement, and whether they are moral, religious or aesthetic (in which case they should not be raised according to the liberal model), or issues of distributive justice or public policy (in which case they should). In fact, the distinction between these two categories (public-private) is not as clearly defined as liberal theorists claim: Benhabib (1993: 82) argues, on this point, that it is difficult to define whether questions such as abortion, pornography and violence are conceptions of the good life or questions of justice.

¹⁶ In Rawls’ later work, the locus of his model shifted from justice as fairness to justice based on shared moral ideas, including citizens’ perceptions of themselves as free and equal moral persons (Routledge, 2000: 743).

One of the main vectors of feminist critique of the liberal model¹⁷ has been the contention that applying this distinction effectively attempts to set in stone the line between what can constitute public and private experience and in doing so confines women's experience largely to the private sphere (Hohendahl, 1993: 105). Arguing her case for a deliberative conception of politics, Benhabib (1993: 83) affirms that issues "cannot be decided upon with some sort of moral geometry *but* by unconstrained public dialogue", particularly as the ultimate goal of politics is to "renegotiate and challenge existing distinctions between Good and just, Moral and legal, Private and public".

Here, Benhabib highlights the importance of communication in the deliberative model; deliberation allows issues to be problematised through communication and existing boundaries to be challenged; the result is that taken-for-granted norms and conventions are subject to debate, and their ongoing acceptance depends on them being defended in discussion through recourse to good reasons. Here the affinity between Benhabib and Habermas' 'discursive democracy' is clear: communication plays a critical role in the legitimation of policy discussions. Both defend deliberative models which take a procedural view of politics with a view to promoting public participation and highlighting and removing forms of exclusion. They argue that wide and active participation will encourage more informed decision-making and ensure the long-term legitimacy of government, its representatives and its legislative output through communicative accountability.

This chapter will proceed on the basis that such a deliberative conception is desirable; a more detailed study is, however, necessary: this will examine how the processes of representation, opinion formation and expression are articulated in this model, and how political equality can be guaranteed within such a deliberative conception. The following sections (2.5-2.7) on the 'public sphere', 'public opinion' and 'democracy and the challenge of inclusion' cover these issues in some detail.

¹⁷ Amongst these, figure Haraway (1991), Benhabib (1993), Hohendahl (1993) and Fraser (1993; 1995).

2.5 The 'public sphere'

The concept of public participation is inextricably linked to the notion that private persons somehow come together if not to form, then at least to express their opinions, thus making 'public' use of their reason. This process is central to the procedurally defined and normative notion of participation which is advocated by Habermas (1996a, 1996b) and other proponents of the deliberative democracy model, such as Benhabib (1996) and Young (2000). Yet, even Luhmann's systems-theoretical model draws on the notion of participation, albeit in the form of 'mass diffuse loyalty', and he too developed a theory of public opinion (see Luhmann, 2000b) which accounts for the function of public participation within the political system.

Clearly the scope of public participation in politics varies greatly between these two conceptions of political communication; nevertheless, the processes of mediation and representation by which it occurs is tied to the abstract concept referred to as the 'public sphere'¹⁸, making it worthy of more detailed study. By exploring and reconstructing this concept, the discussion here will attempt to articulate the different ways citizens come together to form opinions publicly and thus to participate in one form or another in politics, and to examine what role this plays in legitimising State action, bearing in mind the conceptual and theoretical difficulties established above in sections 2.4.2-2.4.4.

Habermas' *Structural Transformation* (Habermas, 1989) provides a useful starting point for an understanding of the concept of the 'public sphere'. His seminal work, written in 1962 before he had embarked on his discourse ethics project, offers a normative genealogy of the notion of 'public space' from Ancient Greece to the present day,

¹⁸ Although recognising the connotations of delimited spatiality contained in the term 'sphere' as opposed to the greater level of abstraction inferred in the notion of 'space', the discussion here uses the terms public sphere and public space interchangeably, as is customary in the literature.

alongside a historical account of the developments which lead to its genesis, structural transformation and the ultimate collapse which he identifies it as having undergone in the 20th Century. *Structural Transformation* has rightly been criticised for its historical oversights, ideological bias and idealisation of the Enlightenment era (Calhoun et al, in Calhoun (ed.), 1993¹⁹).

In fact, ultimately Habermas was unconvinced by his project and its completion marked his move away from his genealogical approach to a discourse-based (and more openly normative) model for grounding society's concerns in reason. Nevertheless, the work, which was published belatedly into English in 1989, is worthy of study since it remains the key reference on the subject in the field of political communication. As such, it is crucial in the discussion of the importance of a 'public sphere' of participation for a legitimate and democratic order. This section focuses on presenting key concepts from his discussion before problematising and reconstructing them.

Habermas' genealogy begins with the notion of the 'public', which can be traced back to the time of the Ancients; the Greeks already made the distinction between the sphere of the *polis*, common (*koïné*) to free citizens and that of the *oïkos*, particular (*idia*) to each individual (Habermas, 1989: 3). This distinction lost its meaning in relation to the social structures of the feudal era when the public sphere was based on representation through rituals. It was preserved in the Roman sense of *res publica* in the definitions of Roman law; however, it was not until after the Renaissance, with the birth of the modern state, that the terms were once again established as part of the social landscape.

The *public sphere* gained importance in the 18th Century during the early days of capitalism. It was then that the bourgeoisie, principally responsible for the boom of mercantilist activity which marked this period, began to mobilise and demand a better status. The advent of printing, which allowed the large-scale reproduction of

¹⁹ A number of the most important points raised in the subsequent critique will be discussed later in this section.

pamphlets, ‘newspapers’ and books, catalysed the process (which had already started in the 17th century) by enabling the dissemination of information and ideas on a hitherto unforeseen scale. Pamphleteering spread as a means of political campaigning, with printed matter being discussed in the multitude of ‘clubs’, bars, cafés and private ‘salons’ which began to emerge at this period, allowing the bourgeoisie to become an important cultural and political force.

Indeed, in the salons, bars and cafés the big issues of the period were discussed and the bourgeois revolutionary movements founded. Habermas’ normative account identifies the emergence of an abstract realm of discussion and public will formation where (bourgeois) citizens engaged actively in political life and deliberation having developed from these informal discussion groups. In other words, the bourgeois ‘public sphere’ developed out of the private bourgeois literary sphere to assume the task of the regulation of civil society. Thus it came to establish itself as a ‘universal’ public sphere, as opposed to simply a bourgeois one (Habermas, 1989: 52). Although historically questionable, Habermas claims that the critical public debate which took place in the bourgeois public sphere gave no regard to pre-existing social and political rank, and unfolded instead in accord with universal rules. The public-private dichotomy, characteristic of liberal political philosophy, is clear in Habermas’ characterisation of the universal rules:

These rules, because they remained strictly external to the individuals as such, secured space for the development of these individuals’ interiority by literary means. These rules, because universally valid, secured a space for the individuated person; because they were objective, they secured a space for what was most subjective; because they were abstract, for what was most concrete (Habermas, 1989: 54).

However, the public sphere was not a universal sphere; although educated women could participate in the literary public sphere, they were *de facto* and legally excluded from the political public sphere, along with dependents and the lower social classes

(Habermas, 1989: 56). In fact, the sphere was the preserve of propertied bourgeois males. As Habermas notes:

The fully developed bourgeois public sphere was based on the fictitious identity of the two roles assumed by the privatised individuals who came together to form a public: the role of the property owners and the role of human beings pure and simple [...] (Habermas, 1989: 56).

In other words, the notion of the bourgeois public sphere being equivalent to a universal public sphere was based, initially at least, on a conflation between bourgeois and citizen, bourgeoisie and public.

The principle of *Öffentlichkeit*, referred to in English as publicity, is crucial to the notion of the public sphere. It adds a second, complementary, dimension to the spatial dimension of the concept. The principle of publicity developed during the 16th and 17th centuries by means of the controversy in constitutional law over the principle of absolute sovereignty (Habermas, 1989: 51). Whereas Machiavelli (1515) celebrated the notion of state secret in *The Prince*, suggesting to the Prince that the best way to keep the masses under control was to keep them uninformed, the notion of ‘publicity’ emerged during the 17th Century through the public sphere in opposition to this notion (Habermas, 1989:83), and was used to signify the increasing importance of “the public as carrier of public opinion”, and its function as “critical judge” (Habermas, 1989: 2).

Thus, on Habermas’ account, the public sphere, which was clearly demarcated from both the private domain and public authority, had become political in nature in the 18th Century as it extended beyond its bourgeois origins. In this setting, issues relating to the reproduction of social life became topics of public interest which transcended the confines of private domestic authority. Habermas (1989: 24) claims that this resulted in the zone of continuous administrative contact becoming *critical* since it “provoked the critical judgement of a public making use of its reason”. As such, the public sphere was oppositionally oriented towards public authority, informed by the press, itself growing

in power and influence at the time. It is clear, in this sense, just how important a vector communication became for social change.

The notion of a public making critical use of its reason is associated with the process of enlightenment. Habermas' reconstruction of the Enlightenment, which is both historiographic and normative, draws on Kant, and the two constitutive dimensions he ascribes to the process: a personal and a social dimension. Thus, a society or nation can become collectively enlightened just as an individual both can and should. Therefore, on the one hand, the personal dimension is used to describe the process during which a citizen assumes the full consequences of intellectual adulthood (Habermas, 1989: 104): this implies making decisions without 'tutelage', and thus acting as a rational and autonomous human being. The use of reason acquires a social dimension by means of 'publicity' which places reason in a social context (Grant, 2000a: 75).

Habermas identifies this process of enlightenment as a golden era in terms of the public use of reason. However, Habermas is so focused on the rise of reason during the Enlightenment era that he tends to overlook the fact that both religious and other cultural values continued – and continue still – to occupy a predominant place within the public sphere. Calhoun (1993: 34) notes that Habermas follows “the philosophes [sic] in imagining that religion and science must stand in a sort of hydraulic relationship to one and other”. In communitarian conceptions of the public sphere, by contrast, unity of the community and the solidarity of the collective are key, and affectual reasoning or tradition often serve as grounds for the justification of an order. Although communitarians are criticised for venerating tradition and overlooking the fact that it can act as a barrier to social progress or condone inequalities, the communitarian view of public autonomy provides a strong vector of critique of Habermas' conceptualisation of the public sphere. Indeed, communitarians reject the idea that citizens can leave behind their particularisms in the private sphere to become 'rational' subjects in the public sphere, and hold the liberal ideal of autonomy to be a myth – and an undesirable one at that:

If authentic individuals are those who have discovered and realised their own true selves, then inauthentic individuals are those who have been shaped passively by the social and cultural environment, those who have mistaken as their real selves the internalized descriptions applied to them by others (Bridges, 1994, [online edition]).

As a communitarian thinker, Bridges maintains that this conception is both elitist and discriminatory, a criticism which departs from the premise that the conception of autonomy is a source of domination in itself since it is a resource which is unequally available.

A further important critique of *Structural Transformation* relates to Habermas' treatment of interest groups within the public sphere or, in other words, the issue of 'identity politics'. In respect of this, Calhoun (1993: 34) claims that "one of the key changes in the public sphere since its 'classical' hey-day has been an increasing prominence of what may be called identity politics (though it should not be thought that this theme was ever absent)", and underlines the important role which these groups have played in opening up and widening the scope of the public sphere, noting that: "phenomena like nationalism, feminism, and gay, ethnic, our youth consciousness often involve a crucial redefinition of the issues and identities involved in political struggles".

A number of theorists have suggested that the importance of these interest groups means that it is not longer possible to think of the public sphere as one 'entity', since it would be an exclusionary construct as such. In its place, one should consider "multiple, sometimes overlapping and contending public spheres" (Calhoun, 1993: 37), a concept famously promoted by Nancy Fraser (1993: 123) as "subaltern counter-publics". Habermas, however, does not develop this idea of multiple, overlapping or opposing public spheres and, in fact, downplays the struggles of other social groups – most notably workers' movements: he considers the plebeian public sphere only as "a variant suppressed in the historical process" (Habermas, quoted in Calhoun, 1993: 38).

As Warner (1993: 383) notes, “the bourgeois public sphere has been structured from the outset by a logic of abstraction that provides privileges for unmarked identities: the male, the white, the middle class, the normal”. Therefore, the plethora of oppositional identities which have come to the fore since the Enlightenment era have played an important role in exposing the fact that the universality of the bourgeois public sphere has as much served to enforce domination (e.g. over women) as it has to remove it. In rejecting the ‘universal’ bourgeois identity, these groups have redefined and refined existing debate, categorisations and moral codes, and worked towards the construction of new social identities and the creation of a more just, tolerant and inclusive public sphere²⁰. At the same time they have, to cast the debate in Luhmann’s terms, increased complexity within the public sphere by encouraging its functional differentiation.

Habermas sees a number of historical developments as having contributed to the disintegration of the public sphere. Firstly, the impingement of the State on the public sphere and the subsequent loss of spontaneity which he believed it effected on debate within the public sphere; in this his analysis is similar to that of Arendt on the state of modern-day politics. Certainly, with the institutionalisation of public debate with parliamentary procedures in the 18th Century, there was a more stable relationship between publicity and the modern state, as well as its functions. Accordingly, publicness “became the organisational principle for the procedures of the organs of the state themselves” (Habermas, 1989: 83) and the public character of parliamentary deliberation ensured the influence of the public through the connection between delegates and voters.

However, during the 18th Century the State began to understand the importance of the press in the process of public opinion and will formation leading it to regulate them by means of heavy taxation. This regulation set in motion a process which saw the relations between State, the press and the public become increasingly institutionalised;

²⁰ Section 2.7 on Inclusion examines how this notion can be taken forward within a procedural conception of democracy.

in this Habermas identifies the beginning of the decline of the public sphere. The decline was characterised by a number of additional factors: the increased influence of the bureaucracy, political parties and interest groups, the rise of social interests within the public sphere, the advent of mass media and culture, and the rise in the use of marketing techniques.

Habermas sees the rise of the influence of the bureaucracy – as well as the increasing autonomy of the latter – as correlated to a weakening of the role of the parliament, itself dominated by the imperatives of the party political system. Thus, the bureaucracy became “a producer, dealer, and distributor” (Habermas, 1989: 197), and the State increasingly had to adapt to a new social landscape of organised interest groups. The ‘public’ became dominated by groups who vied for their interests to be accommodated by the State with its newly adopted welfare function. Although the State was able to absorb much of the strain resulting from the contradictions inherent in capitalism and ward off the risk of social crisis, this came at the expense of the public sphere: it was transformed into an arena in which a wide range of social interests competed with each other, but no longer as a ‘public’. With this transformation the public sphere lost its bridging function between morality and law. Instead it became a court in front of which public prestige is displayed rather than one in which public critical debate is conducted (Habermas, 1989: 201). In other words, there was a shift from the public influencing the State through its use of reason, to the State marketing its policies to the public(s) with a view to securing its approbation.

According to Habermas, the mass media was a key instrument in this shift: fed by the reliance of the State on public relations in addressing citizens as ‘consumers’ of policies, marketing techniques came to be used in the political realm. This resulted in “temporarily manufactured publicity” (Habermas, 1989: 218). As the public sphere of deliberation gradually disintegrated, it became a vehicle for a new mass culture; it became “an apparatus that surely represents a maximum of publicity, but very little opinion” (Brinkmann, quoted in Habermas, 1989: 195-6). Habermas argues that this has led to the modern-day confusion between ‘public opinion’, ‘public fame or

notoriety’ and ‘public judgments’. In his final analysis, Habermas identifies a weakening of the public use of reason, and ultimately a ‘refeudalisation’ of the public sphere: the public sphere now retained only a representative function, which the State attempts to manage through the use of manufactured publicity.

The publication of the English translation of *Structural Transformation* in 1989 generated a renewed interest in the theory of the public sphere, and of public political participation, and in addition it has encouraged many critical re-evaluations and alternative accounts of how the public sphere does, and should, fit within the wider framework of modern-day decision-making processes. Yet, as noted, *Structural Transformation* also generated much criticism for its shortcomings.

Most crucially, there is a structural inequality in terms of the way Habermas views the modern era in relation to the period of the Enlightenment; in adopting the approach of historical reconstruction in *Structural Transformation* Habermas undertook to review the writings of the thinkers of past centuries and to reconstitute a more faithful and less ideologically-distorted vision of history. He clearly fails on this count. Notably, he characterises the modern-day television viewer as lacking in critical capacities compared with his ‘autonomous’ Kantian forefathers – reduced to a cultural heretic and consumer of mass culture. As Calhoun (1993: 33) notes “Habermas tends to judge the eighteenth century by Locke and Kant, the nineteenth century by Marx and Mill, and the twentieth century by the typical suburban television viewer”. Habermas’ analysis would have undoubtedly benefited from the rich theoretical insights of media theory – and most notably those of medium theory – explored in the next chapter of this thesis²¹.

Importantly, Habermas himself was ultimately unconvinced by his attempt to ground reason historically in the public sphere; this explains the subsequent change of focus in his work to the normative programme of ‘communicative action’ as the locus for grounding reason in social action. Yet, Calhoun (1993: 33) argues that just as

²¹ See section 3.2.1.

Habermas initially over-idealised the Enlightenment public sphere, he also over-estimated the level of disintegration of the present day public sphere; Calhoun believes that critical potential can still be derived from the concept of public sphere by reconceptualising it more accurately in historical terms. The contributions by various theorists to Calhoun's 1993 publication have revived the discussion and contributed to this debate, most notably by conceptualising a more inclusive public sphere(s) through participative models of democracy. Section 2.7 on Democracy and the challenge of inclusion examines these in greater detail.

Although Calhoun et al provide a rich critique of Habermas' *Structural Transformation*, the perspective of Luhmann is neglected. Arguably, the theoretical challenges which he raises in respect of the 'public sphere' must be considered. In Luhmann's systems-theoretical model, public participation is something of a non-issue. Indeed, Luhmann tends to view public participation as a tokenistic concession of the system to ensure its legitimation; so long as political decision-making takes place in accordance with the established procedures, its legality and, as a corollary, functional legitimacy is assured. Thus, the public sphere does not have a privileged status within his model and public participation amounts only to the granting or withholding of mass diffuse loyalty.

However, Grant (2000b) claims that Luhmann fails to investigate the heuristic dimension of the public sphere. Certainly, although Habermas' normative account is historically questionable, it has an undeniable appeal which is missing in Luhmann's account since it fails to explore the extent to which "the functional status of the public sphere as a simulation ... is actually constitutive of democracy" (Grant, 2000b: 135). Grant argues that the public sphere has a social function which demands it to be thematised both stably and credibly in spite of its apparent fictionality. Indeed, if it is too obviously simulated alternative communication spheres will emerge to uphold 'publicness'. It is important to explore how this fiction of publicness is formed and mediated: to this end the following section will examine the concept of 'public opinion' in greater detail.

2.6 Public opinion

2.6.1 Genealogy of the concept

Luhmann (2000b) locates the emergence of public opinion theories in the second half of the 18th Century at a time when the influence of the printing press on society was becoming clear. Theories of public opinion, Luhmann argues, became to politics what invisible hand theories were to economics, i.e. theorisations about how individually motivated actions resulted in unintended and unexpected consequences at a societal level (Luhmann, 2000b: 20-21 [my translation]).

Although developments occurred earlier in the UK, in the 18th Century (at the time of the French revolution) ‘public opinion’ began to exert its influence over political bodies, and to limit political authority by making it known that it was being observed. ‘Public opinion’ came to be referred to, and written about, as though it was a political power. Edmund Burke is one thinker who was critical of this development; he viewed it with suspicion believing that it could become a source of tyranny (Burke, 1986: 111). Certainly, public opinion was used to create pressure, making the exercise of power more difficult than previously. What was sought in public opinion, Luhmann claims, were ways of limiting what was possible politically – a role that had previously been fulfilled by the monarch’s political advisers; it was hoped that by allowing controversies to be discussed publicly it would lead to understanding about sensible solutions.

However, in the first instance, this culture of publicity created dissent rather than consensus, whilst also eroding political authority. Since the problem of dissent could not in the long term be dealt with through surveillance and punishments or exclusion, a solution was found in the left/right-wing dichotomy which emerged during the French revolution. During this period, public opinion was, if not secretly sovereign, then the only body which mediated – if not *communicated* – the inevitable separation between the represented people and its representatives (Luhmann, 2000b: 21). However,

because the Assemblée Nationale failed in its attempt to claim its representativity of public opinion, thereafter the term came to be used as the expression of public will (*volonté générale*²²) assuming a diffuse role as watchdog over elected representatives.

Habermas' 1962 account of the public sphere is focused on its function as a critical authority. This was, according to Habermas, how public opinion became fundamental to the formation of social norms and, by corollary, the legal process:

[...] articulated the context of and demand for general abstract laws [...] [public opinion] ultimately came to assert itself as the legitimate source of this law. In the course of the 18th Century public opinion claimed the legislative competence for those norms whose polemical-rationalist conception it had provided to begin with (Habermas, 1989: 54).

In the sense that moral norms expressed as the general will were enacted as law, public opinion became a factor capable of bringing rule in line with reason. Public opinion was supposed to uncover the just and the right through communication, specifically through the power of the better argument, arrived at after a process of critical debate (Habermas, 1989: 54). Indeed; “public debate was supposed to transform *voluntas* into a *ratio* that in the public competition of private arguments came into being as the consensus about what was practically necessary in the interest of all” (Habermas, 1989: 82-3). Thus, the legal norm was then seen as “the accomplishment of a consciousness” (Habermas, 1989: 55). In other words, in ideal terms, law would embody public opinion.

Since legislation was conceptualised as the result of rational agreement rather than political will, public opinion did not lay claim to sovereignty, but instead to changing

²² Rousseau, 1972 (The Social Contract). According to Rousseau sovereignty is derived from citizens, who voluntarily unite to form a general will.

the very nature of domination. In the process of rational agreement, the ‘domination’ of the public was eliminated:

In accord with its own intention, public opinion wanted to be neither a check on power, nor power itself, nor even the source of all powers. Within its medium, rather, the character of executive power, domination (*Herrschaft*) itself, was supposed to change. The ‘domination’ of the public, according to its own idea, was an order in which domination itself was dissolved; *veritas non auctoritas facit legem* (Habermas, 1989: 82).

Habermas’ understanding of public opinion follows Kant in its emphasis on reason as the justifying principle of enlightenment (Habermas, 1989:114). According to this view, the universal and universalisable character of reason finds its democratic expression in public opinion, thus raising the public sphere to the privileged realm for the articulation of enlightenment thought based on the public use of reason as method and aim (Grant, 2000a: 68). The concept of reason was thus at the heart of Kant’s understanding of public opinion:

Public opinion was supposed to do justice to ‘the nature of the case’. For this reason the ‘laws’ which it now also wanted to establish for the social sphere, could also lay claim to substantive rationality besides the formal criteria of generality and abstractness. In this sense, the physiocrats declared that *opinion publique* alone had insight into and made visible the *ordre naturel* so that, in the form of general norms, the enlightened monarch could then make the latter the basis of his actions; in this way they hoped to bring rule into convergence with reason (Habermas, 1989: 54-55).

In other words, based on the outcome of rational discussion, public opinion was supposed to indicate social truth; its normative and rational qualities giving it weight. Enacted as law, it ensured the link between rule and reason.

However, as was noted in the discussion of the public sphere, Habermas sees its golden era as ending with the instrumentalisation of public opinion through manufactured publicity, itself generated through political marketing and the mass media. Public opinion had become “an object to be moulded in connection with a stage display of, and manipulative propagation of, publicity in the service of persons and institutions, consumer goods, and programs” (Habermas, 1989: 236). Furthermore, contrary to Luhmann who identifies in the developments of the 19th Century the cementing of democracy into a practicable system, Habermas sees the disintegration of a public sphere based on reason as occurring at this time. Put differently, the institutionalisation of the public sphere implied its ‘taming’ (or perhaps ‘colonisation’) by the State.

2.6.2 The contingencies of public opinion

Walter Lippmann (1921) also shares Niklas Luhmann’s (2000b: 20-23) scepticism regarding the internal link between public opinion, reason and truth. In this they follow Hegel who claimed that universality of opinion does not equate with universality in substance; public opinion is knowledge merely as appearance (Hegel, in Habermas, 2000: 118). The work of both Lippmann and Luhmann merits further study for their critique of classical understandings of public opinion such as those mentioned above, as well as their insightful explorations of the contingencies of public opinion.

Lippmann’s 1921 treatise *Public Opinion* is a classic text on public opinion which remains relevant to this day. In this work Lippmann suggests that the starting point for any analyst of public opinion should be to recognise a triangular relationship between the scene of action, the human picture of that scene and the human response to that picture working itself out upon the scene of action (Lippmann, 1921: 11). He argues that what men do is based not on direct knowledge, but on ‘pictures’ which they build up or which are conveyed to them by others. The importance of media in conveying this knowledge and these pictures of scenes is clear, as they help to create a tension between perceptions (public opinion) and the external world.

Lippmann claims that the problem with democratic theorists is that they assume that “there exists in the hearts of men a knowledge of the world beyond their reach” (Lippmann, 1921: 19). Lippmann, however, finds an alternative explanation in the fact that for all practical purposes the limit of direct action is the power presented to a mass to say yes or no; regardless of the subtleties of their argumentation, publicly they are represented by a number of symbolic phrases (Lippmann, 1921: 147). After all, Lippmann notes (1921: 156), “all that the mass demands is that a policy as it is developed and exposed shall be, if not logically, then by analogy and association, connected with the original feeling”.

In this sense, Lippmann’s understanding is clearly removed from the 18th Century conception whereby public opinion is seen as “the accomplishment of a consciousness” (Habermas, 1989: 55) which reinforces an internal link between morality and law; instead it is seen as a feeling which inspires, but is not represented by, policy or law. Furthermore, Lippmann (and in this he echoes Luhmann’s scepticism of normative conceptions of public opinion) sees public participation as somewhat tokenistic; consultation or the effort to address popular feeling is a concession to secure the stability and popularity of the government. Furthermore, leaders will seek some sort of approbation only inasmuch that they do not think the publicity will strengthen the opposition, or that the deliberation will delay the policy process for too long.

In the final analysis, Lippmann’s reading is that political theorists have been too preoccupied with identifying the most suitable mechanism for voting and representation to represent the will of the people, itself inherently good. This has been encouraged by the false belief that if power could be originated in the right way, it would itself be good. Furthermore, since the public does not actually have an opinion on the majority of questions, much decision-making would necessarily occur on the basis of decisions taken without public knowledge. This is why Lippmann (1921: 196) advocates that the focus should instead be put on how power is exercised.

Luhmann (1999) also questions the adequacy of existing public opinion theory; he locates shortcomings in the fact that it is difficult to measure the impact of media on democracy. For this to be possible would require strict experimental conditions to enable a causal link to be established, and social complexity prevents this from being easily identified. The case study chapter of this thesis explores the issue of media impact on democracy – specifically, the issue of the use of online deliberation in consultation procedures and their credibility as legitimation mechanisms; this requires a complex methodological framework which goes beyond public opinion theory, and draws on a variety of ethnographic tools including Meyrowitz’s medium theory and Hymes’ ethnography of communication.

Luhmann locates in the organisational differentiation of State and political parties the positive consequence of a practicable concept of democracy. However, he highlights the difficulties in identifying an understanding of public opinion which can inform his conception of democracy, particularly since it is not clear how public opinion can influence day-to-day politics without raising the question of delegation. Instead Luhmann focuses on the social function of public opinion; this lies in the focusing of conflict and controversies. He claims: “Public opinion appears to be the result of a sort of process of self-organisation, which transforms the micro-diversity of personal opinions into themes, but which is not identical to them” (Luhmann, 2000b: 22). In this sense, public opinion is, above all, a social mechanism which enables opinions to become social thematisations which can then influence politics; in this context, the correspondence of public opinion with reality cedes its place to public opinion as a credible thematisation of society.

By means of example here Luhmann draws on Noelle-Neumann’s *Spiral of Silence* model, according to which the true opinions of the public are not always reflected in what is perceived to be ‘public opinion’ since certain members of society will be more likely to express their opinions, and those who express their opinions tend to believe that they are in the majority even if this is not actually the case. Conversely, those who believe they hold a minority view tend not to express it. In relation to the reformation

period, Noelle-Neumann (1984) notes that a ‘spiral of silence’ surrounded Church activity; Churchmen became afraid to express their opinions, fearing persecution. What ensued was a scenario described by de Tocqueville in *L’ancien régime et la Révolution*:

The men who still held the old beliefs joined the masses without thinking like them. Thus what was only the sentiment of part of the nation appeared to be the opinion of all, and appeared henceforth ineluctable in the eyes of those who gave it this false appearance (Tocqueville, 1967: 250 [my translation]).

Against this backdrop, public opinion crystallises as thematisations of social controversies, facilitated by what Luhmann describes as ‘schemata’. ‘Schemata’ are categories which make it possible to observe ‘something’ as ‘something’ and thus to accumulate experiences (Luhmann, 2000b: 25). The schema expression comes from memory theory in psychology and is used to explain how forgetting and remembering occur. In relation to public opinion, ‘schemata’ have no correspondence with an external reality or with social truth. In other words, for Luhmann, public opinion can also be defined as public memory. Schemata are established and perpetuated by public opinion, and used by systems as a resource to create operational possibilities; through selection, the act of remembering and forgetting, the blurring of some memories, the storing of others which can be re-used, as well as the re-evaluation of schemata according to their frequency and prominence, systems gain a flexibility over which they themselves can exercise control (Luhmann, 2000b: 26). For example, the emergence of a new political problem might be assimilated to another similar scenario (schemata) in order for it to be comprehended; a foreign policy problem may be approached and understood with reference to a similar situation in a different country.

By adopting a functionalist understanding of memory and schematisation, systems are able to utilise new operational possibilities and thus avoid the past determining their futures. For example, schemata can be utilised retrospectively to thematise public opinions and make deductions regarding the reasons for certain social facts.

Consequently, public opinion is understood as a social construct, or kind of social semantic, which enables 'sense-making' without necessarily guaranteeing the consensus sought by Habermas and other liberal theorists. Indeed, public opinion can be in contradiction with itself, and themes can be deconstructed at any time and new meaning sought. The function of public opinion lies only in the focusing of conflict and controversy; in so doing it enables participation by thematising social phenomena and making them comprehensible in spite of social complexity.

The discussion of Luhmann's theory of public opinion has demonstrated the importance of social fictions in the establishment, perpetuation and re-evaluation of public opinion. However, as Grant (2000a: 76) notes, these fictions acquire a degree of stability, and can actually shape perceptions of social reality. Furthermore, although public opinion may consist of counter-factually raised and fictitious thematisations, these have a function within the public sphere, itself actually constitutive of democracy (Grant, 2000b: 135). Yet, it is clear that as long as there remains a potential for tension between different groups of society seeking to stabilise their own thematisations as 'public opinion', there is cause for consideration of the issue of inclusion in relation to political participation. The next section will now turn to this issue.

2.7 Democracy and the challenge of inclusion

According to Young (2000: 23), democratic theory is based on the axiomatic assumption that a decision is only normatively legitimate if all who are affected by it have taken part in making it. Yet, it is clear that this simply does not occur. As Coleman and Götze argue:

In 21st century democracies the principle of virtual representation is firmly rejected, but the same cannot be said for virtual deliberation. In contemporary democracies there is a tendency for the political agenda to be set narrowly by political elites (including party managers and media editors)

and for the majority of people to be squeezed out of the national conversation about politics (Coleman and Götze, 2001: 8).

Indeed, the majority of political decisions are taken by representatives, often behind closed doors, with retrospective attempts made to mobilise public opinion in favour of these *faits accomplis*. This is what Chadwick and May (2003: 272) refer to as a ‘managerial’ approach to government²³.

In spite of this or, perhaps, in response to it, participatory models of democracy, advocated by proponents of the deliberative democracy model (described in section 2.4.2), including theorists such as Habermas (1996a; 1996b), Benhabib (1996) and Young (1996; 2000), have gained in popularity in the literature in recent years underpinned by the belief that greater public participation can allow for a more open and dynamic negotiation of political issues by citizens, and thus improve the quality and accountability of public policy debates. Whereas the aggregative model is only concerned with assessing the majority opinion without considering the reasoning behind those decisions, the deliberative model is based precisely on the discussion of those reasons and adopts a unique procedural approach to democracy of which Lippmann, who himself noted an underestimation of the importance of the machinery of decision-making, would surely approve.

The deliberative model attempts to conceptualise the possibility of participation within democratic decision-making processes in a way which not only takes account of, but also places considerable value on, the role that discussion can play in deepening democracy and reinforcing the legitimacy (both procedural and normative) of government and its decision-making. Yet, even in these participative models, the problematic of inclusion is raised by the practical difficulties of operationalising political representation and public opinion in satisfactory ways; indeed, discussions in the literature reveal that even models which put the emphasis on procedural dispositions which are intended to favour participation and promote inclusion, can fall short of their

²³ This point is explored in further detail in the following section (2.8).

desired goals. Although he is not specifically referring to political communication in the narrow sense, in *Moral Norms and Communicative Action* Habermas acknowledges such difficulties:

Discourses take place in particular social contexts and are subject to the limitations of time and space. Their participants are not Kant's intelligible character but real human beings driven by other motives in addition to the one permitted motive of the search for truth. Topics and contributions have to be organised. The opening, adjournment, and resumption of discussions must be arranged. Because of all these factors, institutional measures are needed to sufficiently neutralise empirical limitations and avoidable internal and external interference so that the idealised conditions always already presupposed by participants in argumentation can at least be adequately approximated (Habermas, 1990: 92).

Discussions exploring the institutional dispositions which should be introduced to compensate for the inevitable empirical shortcomings of democracy have contributed towards the development of inclusion theories in recent years. Notably these have examined both theoretical and empirical weaknesses which mean that some are excluded from participating in the discussion, and others from participating on equal terms.

Young (2000) is amongst recent thinkers who have dealt with the issue of 'inclusion' in the literature. Here she defines it negatively in relation to 'exclusion', itself used to refer to a myriad of problems which result in certain groups being marginalised within society. These could include problems such as racism, cultural intolerance or economic exploitation. Young (2000: 6) examines conditions of political inclusion and exclusion, such as those involving modes of communication (attending to social difference, representation, civic organisations, and the borders of political jurisdictions). The current discussion considers the issues of inclusion and exclusion broadly, before framing them within the deliberative democracy model.

The basic premise of Young's work is that some political systems claim to be democratic but are dominated by only some of those whose interests are affected by them. In such systems democracy fails to fulfil its true potential. As she explains: "if inclusion in decision-making is a core of the democratic ideal, then, to the extent that such political exclusions exist, democratic societies do not live up to their promise" (Young, 2000: 13).

Young theorises two different types of exclusion – external and internal exclusion – and proposes a number of inclusionary solutions to help overcome each. She uses the term *external exclusion* to refer to the ways in which some are excluded from participating in decision-making which affects them. *Internal exclusion* refers to exclusionary practices in how democratic debate is conducted; this implies exclusionary practices which prevent all parties in a discussion from contributing on equal terms (e.g. restrictions in terms of the language, form and style of deliberation). As such, it is particularly relevant in investigating exclusion in deliberative conceptions of democracy.

2.7.1 External exclusion

External exclusion relates to "the many ways that individuals and groups that ought to be included are purposely or inadvertently left out of fora for discussion and decision-making" (Young, 2000: 53). People tend to be kept out of the processes of discussion and decision-making by practices which impede (or at least are indifferent to) transparency, access to deliberation or accountability. Young (2000: 55) highlights a variety of practices which obstruct the transparency of decision-making; these tend to come in the form of back-door brokering or self-appointed committees, but can be countered through ongoing public regulation and civic activity focused on improving the transparency of political decisions, with associations and the media bringing any such obstacles to light.

Secondly, barriers to access can include various rules intended to establish who can vote and participate in deliberation, but which ultimately discourage some from getting involved. Here the actual practicalities of voting and participating, such as temporal or geographical factors, can serve as obstacles. For example, something as simple as a complicated process for voter registration, or the impossibility for some citizens to devote the time and to find their way to a public meeting, could constitute a barrier to access. Creating a wider variety of forms of participation, including forms which do not require always require face-to-face interaction and physical presence is one option; e-democracy is, of course, one such opportunity, which will be examined in detail in the following section and case study analysis chapter.

Finally, a lack of accountability refers to the use of money or power to bias the outcomes of democratic decision-making. This could, for example, include lobbying by powerful business groups and the use of threats or extreme political pressure to force certain policy outcomes. It can be countered, Young suggests, by finding ways to fund minority associations and political parties to level out power differences (see Young, 2000, chapter 5). Another useful strategy is to introduce additional ways for the public to comment on policies and decisions, which can encourage greater transparency and lead to accountability deficits being challenged.

2.7.2 Internal exclusion

Young claims that even once the presence of minorities and previously excluded groups in deliberative processes has been ensured, many groups still find it difficult to exert an influence upon the policy process. She refers to this problem as *internal exclusion*, which “concern(s) ways that people lack effective opportunity to influence the thinking of others even when they have access to fora and procedures of decision-making” (Young, 2000: 55). This could imply that the claims of minority groups are not taken seriously, or are ignored, dismissed or patronised. Since the rules and norms and general terms which govern discussion are crucial to their inclusiveness, these must be examined to identify and eliminate exclusion in deliberative processes.

Section 2.4.3 of this chapter developed an outline of a deliberative model of democracy, and it was suggested that deliberative democracy attempts to provide an inclusive model for public participation in policy and decision-making by establishing clear and equitable conditions for discussion. For example, Habermas' deliberative democracy model (see Habermas 1996a), based on his discourse ethics theory and theory of society (1984; 1986; 1990), sets out a series of ideal conditions under which inclusive deliberation can be ensured²⁴. The basic rules are as follows:

“1. Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse²⁵

2a. Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever.

2b. Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse.

2c. Everyone is allowed to express his attitudes, desires and needs.

3. No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down in (1) and (2)” (Habermas, 1990: 89).

Using these procedural norms of discourse, Habermas adapts Kant's categorical imperative to create what he refers to as an ‘ideal speech situation’ (Habermas 1990: 121). He reformulates it as follows:

Rather than ascribing as valid to all others any maxim that I can will to be a universal law, I must submit my maxim to all others for purposes of discursively testing its claim to universality. The emphasis shifts from what

²⁴ The concept of ‘ideal speech’ has already been discussed in section 2.2.2.

²⁵ N.b. This has been translated from ‘*Diskurs*’ in the German meaning social understanding, as distinct from the French ‘discours’ meaning discourse.

each can will without contradiction to be a general law, to what all can will in agreement to be a universal norm” (Habermas, 1990: 67).

Thus, the *ideal speech situation* allows norms to be tested *intersubjectively* and discursively under conditions which ensure that all participants respect each others’ equal status, and allow the discussion to unfold in a way which is both fair and equal.

However, Habermas’ model has been criticised²⁶ for its reliance on assumptions (such as the public/private distinction and the concept of autonomy), which have been taken forward virtually unchanged from *Structural Transformation*. Notably, Habermas’ deliberative democracy model fails to identify the differential ability of citizens to communicate within the public sphere. On this point, Warner (1993) notes that the bourgeois public sphere is based on the inverted logic that what is said in public carries weight not because of who says it but in spite of it. He notes critically:

Implicit in this principle is a utopian universality that would allow people to transcend the given realities of their bodies and their status [...] Individuals are not simply rendered bodiless by exercising reason. And it is only possible to operate discourse based on the claim to self-abstracting disinterestedness in a culture where such unmarked self-abstraction is a differential resource (Warner, 1993: 383).

In other words, discourse itself can act as a ground for exclusion since not all participants in a discussion master the dominant modes of expression with the same ease. This highlights clearly the risk of internal exclusion in public deliberation. Young (2000: 56) argues that three aspects internal to the terms of debate in deliberative models tend to create exclusionary conditions within the model. These are deliberative

²⁶ The work of Benhabib (1996), Warner (1993) and Young (2000) on this subject is insightful.

democracy's traditional focus on argument, the norm of articulateness and that of dispassionateness.

The focus on argument in traditional deliberative democracy models requires shared premises. Habermas tries to build as much flexibility as possible into his understanding of argument by means of the concept of intersubjectivity, according to which shared meaning in the lifeworld is secured, revised and reaffirmed in discussion. However, Young argues that such assumptions of shared meaning cannot be taken for granted (Young, 2000: 70-71). Furthermore, Young (2000: 34) argues that there is circularity in the model in that deliberative democracy tends to see shared premises as either the starting point or desired outcome. Certainly, this criticism is valid, and it is possible to find examples in history of groups having fundamental premises which can never be shared (e.g. governments and terrorist organisations); nevertheless, if marginal groups are brought into the discussion in time they can transform the dominant terms of discussion from within.

The focus on the norm of dispassionateness is a further vector of exclusion in deliberative models. Habermas (1979) argues that people develop morally as they mature. This assumption is based on his study of Kohlberg's (1981) model of moral development, which describes six levels of moral development from the childish moral understanding of punishment and obedience to advanced level of 'universal ethical principles'. Habermas and Kohlberg hold dispassionateness as a mark of advanced moral development, and consequently place other styles of discourse lower down the scale. Critics contest that this universalises dominant male discourses as objective social norms: for example, Warner (1993: 383) points out that "the rhetorical strategy of personal abstraction is both the utopian moment of the public sphere and a major source of domination. For the ability to abstract oneself in public discussion has always been an unequally available resource". For her part, Young claims this creates a false dichotomy of emotion versus reason and figurative versus literal, since dispassionateness does not imply objectivity, and this does not equate with universality.

Finally, Young highlights the exclusionary potential of the norm of ‘articulateness’. She argues that it implies exclusions within the deliberative democracy model on grounds of style and idiom. Cortese’s (1990) study of Chicano discourse, for example, demonstrates different styles of presentation, but argues that these should not devalue the opinions presented by the speakers. In addition, Mansbridge (1991) found in her study of representatives that in the USA, women demonstrated considerably different communication styles, which go against traditional forms of expression; they tend to ask more questions and give information, whereas male representatives tend to state opinions.

Certainly, deliberative democracy addresses some of the shortcomings in classic liberal models, not least the questionable concept of autonomy and the public-private distinction. Indeed, deliberative democracy does not rule on the scope of the agenda for discussion; it demands the full participation of all participants, each of which strives to succeed the universalisation test in an attempt to ward off the risk of monological reason. Nevertheless, early models, such as that of Habermas, still have exclusionary potential in their inability to account for the fact that not all participants in a discussion have the same ability to express themselves; to what extent are participants in Habermas’ model truly able to exteriorise, rationalise and justify their moral beliefs? Arguably, this is an enterprise which requires such a degree of abstraction that only the Kantian autonomous citizen could possibly succeed.

2.7.3 Addressing the challenge of inclusion

A key step in eradicating exclusion from democratic processes has to be increasing loci for discussion and participation and subjecting these to procedural conditions which can be evaluated in terms of their inclusiveness. Possible fora could be a wide range of consultation and participation mechanisms, ranging from written consultations to citizens’ panels and civic fora. These would not inherently undermine the current structure of the political system, but would add additional complexity in a procedurally-controlled way which would aim at reinforcing existing legitimation procedures.

The task for modern governments must be to establish institutional dispositions to ensure their legitimacy by neutralising the empirical shortcomings and avoidable internal and external influences to ensure that ‘public opinion’, or at least its stable thematisations, can be ‘approximately realised’ (Habermas, 1990: 91-2)²⁷. Furthermore, since participation which cannot be fed back into the political system will only lead to frustration, procedural links to decision-making are essential to the success of any participatory model (Luhmann, 1969: 319).

The quest for improved legitimacy in modern democracies must therefore concentrate on enabling sufficient freedom to allow a vibrant (civil) society to engage in the process of political opinion-formation, as well as on creating the institutional dispositions most capable of upholding the stability and credibility of the ‘functional fiction’ (see Schmidt, 1994) which is public opinion. The next section of this chapter will examine the ‘institutional’ measures taken to capture this ideal as we move further into the era of e-governance; it examines notably how the Internet is being used to create new fora for public participation in politics.

2.8 e-Democracy theory

As a new medium for communication and the transfer of information, the Internet has generated considerable excitement in terms of its possible impact on democracy. On its emergence, hope was invested in the Internet as potential catalyst for a new Athenian age of democracy via online agoras (Al Gore, quoted in Hamelink, 1998 [online version]). However, Chadwick and May (2003: 224) cite Barber (1997) in pointing out

²⁷ In his recent work *Between Facts and Norms*, Habermas (1998: 288) has attempted to develop a procedural model which breaks with the model of society centered on the State (and is thus a *de*-centered model), and which examines the conditions for “constitutionally domesticating” the circulation of power in complex societies through communication (Habermas, 1998: xl).

that “the trouble with the zealots of technology as an instrument of democratic liberation is not their understanding of technology but their grasp of democracy”. This section explores the interrelations between virtuality and democracy theory from a standpoint which attempts to avoid this pitfall. For as Chadwick and May suggest, enthusiasm about new possibilities offered by technology should not cloud the reality of how democracy actually functions.

Certainly, until very recently, most of the literature on the Internet and democracy has been atheoretical (Hacker and Van Dijk, 2000: 1). Furthermore, whilst there have been various attempts to account for the possible impact of the Internet, many of these have focused on the United States, centring on government presence on the Internet or the campaigning and electioneering of representatives. The underlying message of many of these oscillates between alarmist luddite claims and exaggerated technophile hyperbole without attempting to frame such claims within a broader theoretical understanding of democracy.

Recently many governments have initiated – or claim to support – policies which seek to enhance the possibilities for citizens to participate in policy and decision-making processes, often by means of new technologies. The case study presented in Chapter 4 of this thesis examines a key UK initiative which has sought to do this via the Internet. Rooted in democratic theory, this section focuses on recontextualising their understanding of participation in the online environment. However, before proceeding further, it is important to clarify some of the basic concepts and nomenclature upon which this study of the Internet and democracy draws.

2.8.1 e-Government nomenclature

Many of the early expressions used to describe futuristic visions of models in the literature and the media were heavily laden with technophile or – on the other hand, technophobe – vocabulary. This study adopts the recent trend of adding the prefix ‘e-’

before different activities or institutions, thus generating terms such as *e-government*, *e-democracy*, *e-voting* and *e-participation*. Although the ‘e-’ in these expressions refers to electronic media in general terms, and thus *strictu sensu* also to older technologies such as telephony and broadcasting, in this study it is used to refer to Internet technologies.

This approach is favoured since it tends to be also the preferred nomenclature of governments, and because the ‘e-’ prefix contains fewer of the associations which can be read into alternative prefixes such as *virtual*, *cyber-* and *tele-*: the *virtual* and *cyber* descriptions in particular evoke the idea of a type of politics which has no attachment to its bricks and mortar equivalent, and the *tele-* prefix meaning literally “democracy at a distance” (London, 1994; Hacker and van Dijk, 2000) tends to be used to refer to models which advocate a widescale use of Internet technologies, such as Internet polling, premised on the principles of direct democracy.

In this study, ‘e-government’ is used to refer to the totality of government information and services provided online; it encompasses the delivery of government services (information provision and transactional services such as tax return submission), as well as the fostering of participatory initiatives and consultations. E-government is generally seen as a parallel and complementary universe rather than a replacement for bricks and mortar operations or face-to-face dealings. With its focus on government services, e-government is distinct from e-democracy which can be used to describe a wider range of political activities and practices online, including some which are not necessarily fostered by the government. Hacker and Van Dijk offer the following explanation of e-democracy as:

attempts to practise democracy without the limits of time, space and other physical conditions using information and communication technology (ICT) or computer-mediated communication (CMC) instead, as an addition, not a replacement for traditional analogue political practices (Hacker and van Dijk, 2000: 1).

Furthermore, the origins of e-democracy are different from those of e-government since the participatory rather than service delivery strand of the project was pioneered through civil society fora and inter-networking well before platforms such as consultation sites or fora were adopted and institutionalised by government.

2.8.2 e-Democracy theory

Although there is a growing body of research on government use of the Internet, most studies tend to examine its broadcast function or capability to support government to citizen (one-to-many) broadcasting, rather than its ability to support participative or 'interactive' functions through (many-to-many) communication. Thus, they tend to focus on *e-government* rather than *e-democracy*. For example, Margolis and Resnick (2000) and Axford and Huggins (2001) focus above all on how political parties and election candidates present themselves on the Internet, and both take a very critical or dismissive view of the impact of the Internet.

A key contribution to the literature which has gone beyond this approach is the more balanced account of the Internet and politics provided by Hacker and van Dijk (2000), whose study is central to the current one for its basic definitions and topographical presentation of levels of e-government. Hacker and van Dijk cover the topic from a theoretical as well as an empirical perspective, although the focus too is principally on its broadcast rather than 'interactive' or participative functions for politics. This is, at least, tied closely to an informed analysis of democracy theory.

Hacker and Van Dijk (2000: 40) describe e-government as consisting of practices at four levels: at the level of allocution (internet broadcasting); consultation (information retrieval); registration (telepolling, voting); and conversation (email and discussion). These levels vary in degrees of interactivity: 'allocution' is also referred to 'e-communications' and involves one-way top-down communication; 'registration' is frequently termed as e-voting, and could involve election voting as well as referenda

and more informal polls; ‘consultation’ and ‘conversation’ encompass forms of e-participation, and refer to the use of “ICT to open new channels for participation in the democratic process between elections” (e-Envoy, 2002b: 15).

This present study draws on the small number of theorists who provide theoretically informed and empirical analyses of the Internet at the service of democracy. The restricted and novel nature of the field means that even the most relevant texts overlap only partially with the concerns of this current study; such as the work carried out by Dutton (1996, 1999), Blumler and Coleman, (2001), Coleman and Götze (2001), Hacker and van Dijk (2000) and Chadwick and May (2003).

Dutton, for example, has conducted some interesting studies on electronic fora, though not in a government context, including work on rules and regulation in fora (Dutton 1996). Blumler and Coleman (2001) provide an insightful exploratory paper on the feasibility and concept of a civic commons in cyberspace, and the wider possibilities and considerations of conducting deliberation online. Coleman and Götze (2001) cover similar ground in their exploration of online public engagement in policy deliberation, but strongly defend the perspective that online deliberative fora should not seek to undermine or supplant existing representative structures necessary for healthy democracy.

Finally, Chadwick and May (2003) examine governmental approaches to e-democracy. They identify three basic models of interaction between states and citizens which they claim underpin the practice of ‘e-government’. The models which they identify are ‘ideal types’ in the Weberian sense, or heuristic tools which aid the identification and classification of a set of phenomena, and facilitate further empirical analysis (Chadwick and May, 2003: 271). They refer to these three models of interaction as the ‘managerial’, ‘consultative’ and ‘participatory’ approaches.

The *managerial* approach is focused on service delivery and policy presentation. Consequently, principal mechanisms for interaction are services such as ‘one-stop shops’ for tax returns and benefit claims or the updating of personal information by public bureaucracies; government gathering and aggregation of ‘market research’ data; and government provision of information about its activities to the media and public. The *consultative* approach is centred on the principle of ‘technical accuracy’ and improved policy success rates. As a result, interaction takes place using mechanisms such as ‘e-voting’ systems at elections; opinion polling; electronic feedback from voters and interest groups to government; as well as ‘advisory’ referenda and ‘electronic town meetings’. *Participatory* models are focused on participation and enhanced democracy through the creation of additional opportunities for deliberation. The information gleaned through deliberation is used by groups to influence government. Principal mechanisms for interaction in this model comprise online technologies such as discussion lists and peer-to-peer technologies including those which are fostered and promoted by civil society groups.

Chadwick and May (2003) argue that the ‘managerial’ model is the dominant mode of interaction in the UK, the USA and the EU, and that this is highlighted by the predominance of clauses focusing on *efficiency gains* and *service delivery* in policy statements on the one hand, and the lack of mechanisms for interaction built into e-government initiatives on the other. Their model can be read in conjunction with that of Hacker and Van Dijk, with *allocution* and information flows being the key issues of *managerial* policies, *registration* and *consultation* being the focus of ‘consultative’ strategies, and *conversation* being a key element in ‘participative’ e-government policies. Above all, the consultative and participative models demonstrate a greater commitment to exploring and developing new way of communication between government, citizens and their representatives, facilitated by Internet technologies.

Clearly, e-government is still in its early stages and there is still hope that e-participation tools will gain currency and support within the wider framework of e-government policy. Certainly, some initiatives which purport to encourage consultative,

and even deliberative, functions have been launched in the UK in the last few years, and there is some cause for tentative optimism. However, as Dutton's (1999: 193) introductory quotation to this thesis suggested, technology is not a panacea, and when the problem of inclusion (both internal and external) is considered, it is clear new initiatives could either erode or enhance democratic process. Therefore, serious discussion and debate is necessary to learn from the successes and challenges encountered in the trialling of online initiatives.

It is likely that additional opportunities for public participation may require a concession of power from government to ensure their credibility, and thus functional and normative legitimacy. This may be done without fundamentally altering the structure of the political system, but too great an emphasis on maintaining the status quo may prevent innovations from being taken on. Either way, transparency of objectives, as well as of procedures, is crucial to the legitimation not only of the exercise, but also of the authority which is staging it. Furthermore, when deliberation is an integral part of the exercise, additional caution must be exercised since if exclusion is exposed it can undermine the credibility of the exercise as a whole, leading to a legitimation crisis. Similarly, if the output of the deliberation exercise is not sufficiently assimilated by the political system, this could lead to a rationality crisis which could seriously undermine the intended democratic advantages of additional participation. Thus, the success of participation exercises depends largely on their credibility in thematising public opinions expressed beyond, as well as within, their confines, and in securing citizens' belief in the willingness of the organiser to negotiate on the policy under discussion.

The case study section in this study focuses on an e-participation initiative trialled in the UK in 2002. In examining the initiative, the case study chapter of this thesis offers an empirical exploration of the issues explored here within the framework of government consultations and policy-making processes. In so doing, the goal is to build up a comprehensive picture of how certain organisational features impact on the "boundaries and limits" (Meyrowitz, 1985: viii) of communication in e-participation initiatives, and how these in turn come to impact on their inclusiveness as well as, ultimately, their

credibility as legitimation mechanisms. The following chapter thus explores different methodological approaches which can be operationalised for an evaluative ethnographic study of the e-democracy consultation initiative.

Chapter 3 Case Study Methodology

This chapter is concerned with constructing a methodological framework for the study of an emerging genre of online political communication – the consultation forum – and the forms of communication which it supports. It proceeds by examining and selecting methodologies capable of facilitating a complex and multi-layered analysis of forum communication. The framework will be operationalised in the following chapter in a case study analysis of the UK government's e-democracy consultation forum launched on 16th July 2002 in conjunction with the Government's e-democracy consultation. It is hoped that the case study will provide a rich body of data that can be drawn on in the later discussion chapter to enable an examination of both the functional and normative dimensions of legitimacy in e-participation initiatives.

The general methodological approach to the case study is qualitative and ethnographic, drawing on a number of different tools to enable a comprehensive understanding of forum communication. It comprises three layers of analysis:

- Firstly, a contextual study which draws on basic ethnographic tools to provide an understanding of how the Internet has developed as a medium for political communication in the UK in recent years.
- Secondly, a medium theory analysis, inspired by the work of Meyrowitz (1985), to examine the possibilities and limitations of the medium (Internet) and the genre (forum) in terms of the type of communication each is likely to support.
- A final level of analysis of forum communication inspired by the ethnography of communication of Hymes (1972b), which will enable the study of the linguistic forms and communicative conventions typical of this setting.

The goal of this chapter is to operationalise this framework for the exploration of e-participation initiatives. The chapter proceeds by examining the conceptual and historical orientations of different communications-scientific methodologies, justifying the selection of those most appropriate for the case study, and reconstructing the tools necessary to form a framework for the analysis of the data from the consultation forum.

3.1 Rationale and significance

The Internet is in a state of development and flux; this is partly due to its devolved structure as network of networks (Poster, 1995), and partly due to its relative novelty. As the medium continues to evolve, so too do its social uses, and these can inspire new application and software developments, just as they, in turn, can be inspired by them. Thus, the Internet is not just a medium for the transfer of information, but a platform which supports whole systems of interaction through software interfaces, themselves in a state of permanent evolution. These different factors make it difficult to provide an analysis which represents anything more than a brief 'freeze-frame' of the current situation. It is nevertheless important that the medium be constantly studied and scrutinised so that its impact on, and role in, society can be better understood. In the field of politics, and particularly in the light of the government's pledged commitment to the use of the Internet to enhance democracy, this process of study and scrutiny is all the more essential if we are to comprehend fully the implications of building online interaction systems into policy and decision-making processes.

However, as the discussion of e-democracy in the previous chapter has illustrated, the literature on e-democracy has many lacunae and the use of the online forum as a government consultation mechanism has only been explored seriously in a couple of studies. This certainly reflects the fact that such ventures are still experimental, although a number of government and stakeholder reports have begun the process of placing these under review (see, for example, GOL (2001); Audit Commission (2003); Acland (2003a); Acland (2003b)). Since the e-participation project is in the very early stages of its development, and the consultation forum is just one nascent genre to emerge alongside it, it is only by exploring the nature of deliberation which takes place in the fora, as well as the conditions under which it takes place, that the wider implications related to the use of online fora as legitimation mechanisms within policy-making processes can be adequately understood. There is the risk without such research that new initiatives could be implemented naively in the hope of increasing legitimacy, which could actually endanger or problematise it.

3.2 Conceptual areas of enquiry

Lindloff (1995: 11-12) describes the three empirical areas in the communication sciences as mass communication, interpersonal communication and organisational communication. The methodological tools most appropriate for the multi-layered approach of this case study are to be found within the first two of these key conceptual areas of enquiry: mass communication and interpersonal communication. The scope of the case study can be understood briefly in the following terms: it is concerned with *mass communication* inasmuch as it examines the medium Internet and its impact on social communication as a whole, and the genre of forum communication in particular; it is concerned with *interpersonal communication* inasmuch as it explores the different communicative forms found in the UK government's 2002 e-democracy consultation forum and attempts to catalogue these. It is not concerned with *organisational communication* since this relates to organisations and how power and domination are exercised in organisations through communication.

The current section examines the two relevant conceptual areas of enquiry in greater detail in order to develop better understanding of the range and scope of methodological tools available, and how these can provide a conceptual backdrop for the current case study.

3.2.1 *Mass communication*

Mass media communication studies have developed through two main branches: through the sociological work of critical and cultural theorists on the one hand, and through social phenomenologists and interpretative social scientists on the other (Lindloff, 1995: 11). The former branch has traditionally adopted a theoretical approach to the study of the effects and impact of different media on social behaviour and society; the latter branch has tended to focus on the effects of media content and how people receive and process media messages. Consequently this latter branch has encompassed much more empirical study, whereas the former has developed through

the textual analysis of critical theory (especially through the work of the Frankfurt School under the direction of Adorno and Horkheimer) and cultural studies (most notably through the Birmingham School under the direction of Stuart Hall). More recently, successful attempts have been made, such as Meyrowitz (1985), to combine these two perspectives, and these have resulted in theoretically and empirically rich analyses which describe how the medium itself can shape human consciousness and modify patterns of social behaviour. The current study has been inspired by both branches of mass media communication studies, as well as by recent attempts to transcend methodological boundaries between the two.

In terms of critical and cultural theorists, this study has been guided by the work of key figures such as Benedict Anderson (1991), James Carey (1992) and the early work of Jürgen Habermas ([1962], 1989), and their understandings of how media can impact on society. Anderson (1991), for example, deals with the growth of national identity in Europe during the period of the Enlightenment. He presents the ways in which print languages laid the bases for national languages by unifying regional patois, as well as by creating awareness amongst citizens of their belonging to a linguistic community. Anderson also claims that the advent of printing gave a new fixity to languages, slowing down the process of evolution which had previously made languages virtually incomprehensible to their speakers from one century to the next.

For his part, Carey (1992) examines telegraphic modes of transmission from the perspective of cultural studies and argues that “the telegraph reworked the nature of written language and finally the nature of awareness itself” (Carey, 1992: 210). This was achieved by its emphasis on the values of objectivity, precision and brevity which encouraged the elimination of regionalisms, anecdotes, humour, irony and satire, as well other forms of symbolism in language, particularly in journalism. As a result of these changes, news became a sort of commodity which could be “transported, measured, reduced, and timed” (Carey, 1992: 211).

Finally, Habermas (1989) offers a normative, and on many levels questionable, account (see Calhoun, 1993: 33-41), of the emergence and ultimate disintegration of a 'public sphere' of participation. Nevertheless, in spite of its shortcomings, his contribution is difficult to circumvent in the field of media and politics. One underlying assumption in his work is that written media, particularly mass print media, can be associated with positive societal changes such as the development of democracy; the advent of electronic media, on the other hand, has brought about an erosion of democratic politics by precipitating the disintegration of a public sphere of participation.

Habermas' premise is that the information markets, which grew from the 14th Century with the development of commercial fairs, destabilised the feudal system by supporting the development of independent capital-owning commercial networks (Habermas, 1989: 14-16). Later, the advent of printing made the large-scale reproduction of pamphlets, newspapers and books possible, facilitating the founding of the bourgeois revolutionary movements, as well as the mobilisation of this emerging class as a social and political force with 'democratic' aspirations (Habermas, 1989: 57-79). Ultimately, Habermas sees the stabilisation of the emergent political system and the institutionalisation of these new media into a 'mass media' system as two factors which can be associated with a weakening of the public use of reason and the *manufacturing* of public opinion (Habermas, 1989: 208-222). Without necessarily accepting Habermas' conclusions, it is possible to accept that changes in the way information is transmitted and communicated (i.e. through new media channels) can act as a catalyst for social change. Certainly, these sociological accounts provide thought-provoking and insightful theoretical hypotheses of how different media have impacted on society; however, their empirical content can be limited.

The post-war period saw growing disenchantment within the social scientist community with what was perceived as the negative, and often 'overly simplistic' (Mouchon, 1998: 5), understanding of the media in most post-war critical theory, most notably that emanating from the Frankfurt School, with which Habermas was associated at the time (Schultz, 2000: 206). These theories, often known as the 'magic bullet' or 'hypodermic needle' theories saw the media as responsible for the widespread manipulation of

passive audiences (Meyrowitz, 1985: 13). Many felt that this gloomy prognosis underestimated the critical capacities of the citizenry. Therefore, in response to the limits of textual analysis as a means of understanding audience reception, audience ethnography, the second branch of mass media communication studies, grew out of the discipline of ethnography to bring a more empirically-informed dimension to mass media communication studies (Lindloff, 1995: 11).

Lazarsfeld's studies of the American presidential elections of 1940 (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1948) and 1948 (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee, 1954) are seen as defining in the early history of the field of audience ethnography. Although these and other early studies tended to rely on survey work, audience ethnography draws on multiple methods of data collection and analysis to fulfil its objectives. Participant observation has become the most prevalent, and has been favoured since the 1980s when the many sociologists of the media moved away from quantitative methods (Dayan, 2001: 748). At this time, audience ethnography adopted a paradigm which focused on the relationship between text and reader by combining the insights of text analysis and empirical research, literary theory and the social sciences. This paradigm within audience ethnography, referred to as 'reception theory', has four key guiding premises:

1. The meaning of a text is not integral, therefore text analysis is not sufficient to derive meaning.
2. The knowledge of the analyst is not privileged and can be questioned.
3. The production of messages can only be understood at the moment of their reception. As such, the encoding and decoding of messages can be identical, but this is purely coincidental.
4. The reception of a text rather than the text itself must be the starting point for the analysis of 'effects' (adapted from Dayan, 2001: 748-9).

The Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, under the directorships of Paddy Waddell, Raymond Williams, and Stuart Hall is considered instrumental in increasing awareness of this approach to audience ethnography as well as in securing its

credibility. The work of Charlotte Brunson and David Morley on the possible subversion of media messages was particularly important (Brunson and Morley, 1978; Morley, 1980). In their study of the BBC television programme entitled *Nationwide*, it was argued that different readings of media texts were possible; a text could be read as was intended by its producer (i.e. a 'dominant' reading), or readings could be 'oppositional' (a subverted reading of the intended reading), or 'negotiated' (i.e. a mixture of 'dominant' and 'oppositional' readings) (Dayan, 2001: 751).

The scope of the present research is inspired by efforts to combine the two perspectives of macro-effects and audience reception, and thus combines textual and empirical analysis tools from each of the two branches of such a combined approach. The work of Meyrowitz (1985) is therefore an important influence. In *No Sense of Place* Meyrowitz takes up the question of media effects from the standpoint of the medium, rather than the emitter or receiver of the message. His prime concern is not with the reception or non-reception of individual messages, but instead with changes in social behaviour over a longer period of time. Meyrowitz's main argument is that the advent of electronic media has instituted considerable changes in social behaviour. The principal effect, he argues, has been to reduce the importance of physical presence in the experience of people and events:

One can now be an audience to a social performance without being physically present; one can communicate 'directly' with others without meeting in the same place. As a result, the physical structures that once divided our society into many distinct spatial settings for interaction have been greatly reduced in social significance (Meyrowitz, 1985: vii).

This weakening of the once strong social relationship between physical place and social place (Meyrowitz, 1985, ix) underpins all other changes in social behaviour which have resulted from the advent of electronic media. In seeking to demonstrate this point, he draws on a number of case studies which examine the merging of social spheres (public and private), the separation of social place from physical place, and a blurring of social group identities (male/female; adult/child; erosion of authority).

Although Meyrowitz believes that the advent and existence of a medium of communication can be as influential as the type of information it conveys, his analysis is by no means totalising. Indeed, his introductory chapter, entitled *Media and Behaviour: The Missing Link*, is indicative instead of his desire to open a line of enquiry in media studies which he considers to have been largely ignored. He notes:

Medium theorists do not suggest that the means of communication wholly shape culture and personality, but they argue that changes in communication patterns are one very important contributant to social change and one that has generally been overlooked (Meyrowitz, 1985: 18).

In other words, the introduction of a new media technology is just one in a series of factors which impacts upon society at any given time; therefore political and cultural factors also have a considerable role to play, and how human beings choose to use the medium is the defining factor in the analysis. Meyrowitz also assuages any fears that medium theory has totalising aspirations by suggesting that media should be considered in relation to each other as much as isolated objects of research: new media are seen as transforming culture and modes of consciousness, but this occurs in the context of new media overlapping with old. Put simply, new media add to the spectrum of communication forms, rather than destroy old means of communicating. Meyrowitz explains that:

Writing did not destroy oral discourse, but it changed the function of speech and of individual memory. Similarly, television has not eliminated reading and writing, nor has telephone eliminated letter writing. Yet, at the same time, the addition of a new medium to a culture alters the functions, significance, and effects of earlier media (Meyrowitz, 1985: 19).

Meyrowitz's 'situational' approach to the study of media effects is of crucial importance for the current study: rather than focusing on the content of their messages, Meyrowitz describes how media affect social behaviour by reorganising the settings in which people interact, and by creating new patterns of social communication. This study attempts to apply his methodology to the impact of the Internet on political deliberation and decision-making processes through an examination of how the medium (Internet)

and genre (online forum) can encourage, support and limit communication as well as define its characteristics in this field. The following chapter applies Meyrowitz's understanding of medium theory as the study of the "boundaries and limits" of the medium (Meyrowitz, 1985: viii) to the study of the Internet and the consultation forum genre it supports.

3.2.2 Interpersonal communication

The second key conceptual area within which this study falls is that of interpersonal communication. Interpersonal communication is concerned with the "rules and situated accomplishments of communication" (Lindloff, 1995: 12). Work in the field tends to be inspired by one of two directions: ethnomethodology or ethnography of communication.

The current study draws on the latter discipline rather than the former. The reason for this lies in the lesser suitability of ethnomethodology's approach of critique to the current contextual and situational methodological framework. Indeed, its experimental and non-contextual approach has given it a more radical programme than other empirical communications-scientific disciplines. Cicourel (1974:51), a key contributor to the field, describes the discipline as "the study of interpretive procedures and surface rules in everyday social practices and scientific activities", and ethnomethodological analysis proceeds by moving from the specific (i.e. the study of a particular situation), to the more general (conclusions about how social reality is stabilised via the 'interpretive procedures' found in that situation).

Inspired by critique of traditional formalist sociological approaches, ethnomethodological analysis can thus deliver insights capable of countering assumptions about how society is structured (Jaworski and Coupland, 1999: 51). Consequently, it has been an influential source of radical social relativism and constructionism theories (Jaworski and Coupland, 1999: 51). However, this approach also makes it more difficult to ground its analyses, which has left it open to criticisms of

being relativist and one-dimensional (see Duranti, 1997), which clearly puts it at odds with the contextual approach which underpins the current case study.

Ethnography of communication, the latter discipline, is better suited to the contextual approach required for the current study. As a restricted ethnographic approach within the field of interpersonal communication, it concerns rules of communication in their everyday application, and the linguistic performance of communities in relation to these. The discipline emerged in the 1960s and 1970s from Chomsky-inspired formalism (Jaworski and Coupland, 1999: 25). From this it takes the same fundamental contrast between the notion of linguistic competence (meaning the internalised knowledge of the rules of a language), and that of linguistic performance (meaning the realisation of competence in actual speech), and explores each of these elements in relation to each other. The scope of ethnography of communication is contextual: it is concerned not just with isolated sentences, but with rules of communication within communities.

Although it relies to some extent on the methodological tools of conversation analysis (CA), a tool it shares with ethnomethodology (Jaworski and Coupland, 1999: 22), it extends beyond speaking alone, and includes fields such as proxemics and kinesics, to which respectively Edward T. Hall (1966) and Ray Birdwhistell (1970) have made significant contributions. Analyses, such as Hall's 1966 study of the importance and use of space in cross-cultural settings, typically generate detailed descriptions of communication codes and functions. Thus the discipline developed as the study of the functions of language, drawing on anthropological and sociolinguistic approaches to explore social life through discourse. Much of the work in the field has been carried out by scholars from the Annenberg and Pennsylvania Schools of Communication (Lindloff, 1995: 46-49).

Dell Hymes has been one of the most influential theorists of ethnography of communication and made significant contributions in developing both its theoretical grounding as well as its methodological tools. Hymes (1972a) notably brought

Wittgenstein's concept of 'language games' into the field of ethnography of communication: Wittgenstein likened the use of language to game playing in that it is governed by a set of rules known to participants but not immediately obvious to the untrained observer. In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein comments:

One can easily imagine people amusing themselves in a field by playing with a ball so as to start various existing games, but playing many without finishing them and in between throwing the ball aimlessly into the air, chasing one another with the ball and bombarding one another for a joke and so on. And now someone says: The whole time they are playing a ball-game and following definite rules at every throw (Wittgenstein, 1963: 39).

Hymes (1972a) operationalised the notion in ethnography of communication by considering language as 'knowledge', and by focusing his study of communication on participants' communicative *competence* in relation to these 'language games'. Hymes was led to conclude that studies of the nature of language had to be multi-faceted and comprise the study of four elements: firstly, the degree of grammaticality (linguistic competence); secondly, the degree of social appropriateness; thirdly, the degree of feasibility (psycholinguistic limitations), and finally, the degree to which something is done (actual language use).

Hymes argued that these four elements can be observed in different levels of language use. He identified three basic levels: speech acts (orders, jokes etc.); speech events (conversations, lectures, political debates) and speech situations (occasions such as ceremonies and sports events which are not purely communicative and provide a wider context for speaking) (Jaworski and Coupland, 1999: 26). It is the systematic ethnographic approach which he developed for the study of speech events, represented by the mnemonic SPEAKING (Hymes, 1972b), which will be applied in this case study for the first level of analysis of forum communication²⁸.

²⁸ A full discussion of the application will be developed in the "Methodological Framework" section below.

3.3 Methodological framework

The case study is built up of three levels of analysis: a contextual study; a study of the 'communicative infrastructure' established by the 'boundaries and limits' of the medium and forum interface; and a study of forum communication. This section concentrates on assembling the methodological tools required to establish the multi-layered ethnographic architecture for these three levels of analysis.

3.3.1 Contextual research

The purpose of the contextual research is twofold: firstly, to explore the developments which led to the adoption of the Internet as a platform for political communication both in terms of the technology it grew out of, and the social uses which brought it into the domain of politics; and secondly, to build up an understanding of the social, political, technological and legislative contexts which gave rise to the emerging genre of the online forum and its incarnation in the e-democracy consultation. In particular, the contextual research will seek to elucidate the following key issues:

1. How has the Internet developed as a medium for political communication?
2. How is the Internet being used within politics in the UK and abroad? What inspired the adoption of the online forum as a consultation mechanism in the UK?
3. What purpose do consultation fora serve within policy and decision-making processes?
4. How is the forum 'genre' defined and understood by its organisers?
5. What are the aims and goals of the forum? How were these defined and by whom?

The contextual section relies on a descriptive contextual approach, with data collection conducted by means of document analysis and interviews. The brief account of the development of politics online draws principally on recent literature such as Hacker and van Dijk (2000), Margolis and Resnick (2000), Axford and Huggins (2001), and a number of shorter papers by Hamelink (1997, 1998) and Castells (2000). The

government, on the other hand, provides the main source of information on UK Online and the e-DCF itself: as part of the drive to improve ‘transparency’, much policy information has been made available by the government on the Internet. The topic of ‘e-democracy’ is covered extensively, not least through the new website www.e-democracy.gov.uk, which was set up in anticipation of the 2002 consultation with, amongst other things, information relating to the government’s e-democracy strategy. The website of the e-Envoy, www.e-envoy.gov.uk and the UK Online website (www.ukonline.gov.uk²⁹) itself also contained useful information on the topic, including links to official documents, white papers and consultation papers which served as a useful starting point for the research.

In addition to document analysis, an interview was requested with representatives of the e-Envoy – the forum organisers. The purpose of the interview was threefold: firstly, to gain technical information relating to the IT systems and software used and the constraints which determined their application; secondly, to gain statistical information relating to usage rates and registration levels; thirdly to gain background information on the forum from the organisers’ perspective. In particular, it was hoped that this would deliver key insights into how and why the fora were set up and how their rules were established, what was involved in their day-to-day running, administration and moderation, as well as what the perceived limitations were which led to the revamp of the UK Online site prior to the e-DCF. The option of e-mail questionnaire, telephone or face-to-face interview was offered, and an email questionnaire was completed by Steve Wood, the Customer Service and Metrics Manager at the Office of the e-Envoy.

This approach proved particularly useful in highlighting the amount of information which was immediately and publicly available on these issues, and thus in uncovering how transparent or opaque (intentionally or unintentionally so) the rationale and decision-making behind the establishment of the forum was. Furthermore, by drawing on different analytical tools, it was possible to examine the apparent intended aim and function of texts (text analysis), as well as their imputations (discourse analysis).

²⁹ Replaced by www.direct.gov.uk in 2004.

Therefore, this layered approach provided a solid initial contextual study of the forum in addition to helping assess the clarity, consistency and availability of the information given.

3.3.2 Study of forum functionality

Following Meyrowitz (1985), this part of the case study aimed to build on the contextual research by exploring the extent to which the medium and genre interface foreclose or encourage certain patterns or types of communication. With this in mind, the constraints of the medium and the interface are studied first, since this provides a structural context within which the content of the forum can be comprehended. Given the focus of Meyrowitz's medium theory on "boundaries and limits" (Meyrowitz, 1985: viii), this approach is particularly apt to yield data which can be used to assess the inclusiveness and accessibility of the forum in Chapter 5 of this thesis. Thus the discussion covers a variety of issues from actual levels of computer and Internet use, issues touching on the acquisition of the necessary skills to use them, as well as the features and functions of the medium and forum interface which are liable either to encourage or discourage potential participants from accessing the medium and using it to communicate with others. To summarise, the following broad issues are raised:

Impact of medium on social communication

1. How does many-to-many communication impact on social communication patterns?

Nature of computer-mediated communication

2. Of what importance is the fact that communication is computer-mediated?
3. What restrictions does the medium impose on communication?
4. What importance does the fact that the Internet is essentially a written medium have in establishing the conditions for participation through this medium?

Framework for communication offered by the forum interface and its impact on communication

5. What restrictions does the forum interface impose on communication?
6. Of what significance is the asynchronicity of the forum?

7. What impact does the structure of interventions (i.e. the ‘conversation’ and ‘thread’ structures) have on interaction?

To guide the application of medium theory to the current field of study, a closer examination of the methodological architecture which Meyrowitz developed in his 1985 work *No Sense of Place* is necessary. Meyrowitz proceeds by constructing a methodological framework which develops McLuhan’s notion of ‘sensory balance’ (see McLuhan, 1962; 1964), and combines it with the insights of ethnographic study in the tradition of Goffman (1959) which focuses on social roles in specific places. Meyrowitz argues that these two apparently incompatible perspectives can be combined, and in so doing, both can be enriched.

McLuhan’s main area of concern was how different technologies had affected the organisation of the human senses, and notably how this had led to a shift from oral cultures to literate cultures. Oral cultures, he claimed, were characterised by their circularity and simultaneity, and were closed societies marked by high interdependence and a lack of individuality. The advent of writing and print, however, altered the *sensory balance*, making sight more important at the expense of sound, touch and direct response. McLuhan claims that the move away from wholly oral cultures facilitated the development of abstract thought, allowing people to become more “introspective, individualistic and rational” (Meyrowitz, 1985: 17). Whilst Meyrowitz supports this general thesis, he argues that McLuhan’s study of media effects attempts to cover too much ground leaving it insufficiently theorised (Meyrowitz, 1985: 3)³⁰.

Furthermore, McLuhan’s nonlinear style of argumentation resulted in his work being discredited by many scholars, some of whom felt that his analyses mystified rather than clarified media effects. Indeed, McLuhan’s presentation tends to involve making broad

³⁰According to Meyrowitz, McLuhan has since been surpassed by numerous other medium theorists who have covered the same ground in much greater detail, such as J.C. Carothers, J. Goody and I. Watt, A.R. Luria and W. Ong (Meyrowitz, 1985: 18).

points without the development of clear, linear arguments and supporting evidence. According to Meyrowitz, it “leans heavily on aphorisms, puns, and metaphors. Indeed, many of McLuhan’s greatest insights are invisible to the uninitiated reader because McLuhan offers his own nonlinear style as evidence for the strength of oral forms of reasoning” (Meyrowitz, 1985: 21). Yet, Meyrowitz still believes that McLuhan’s analyses are the richest source of hypotheses on the effect of electronic media; they must, however, be linked to the study of the dynamics of everyday social interaction to deliver incisive analysis (Meyrowitz, 1985: 23).

Meyrowitz aims to achieve this by drawing together the perspectives of medium theorists and sociologists on the relationship between social situations and social roles. Thus, the principal question which medium theorists should seek to answer is “why and how (do) technologies that merely create new connections among people and places lead to any fundamental shift in the structure of society or in social behaviour?” (Meyrowitz, 1985: 23). Meyrowitz believes that by studying the social significance of *limitations to social situations and roles*, it is possible to adapt a method of analysis which can be used to explain the *effects of new patterns of interaction*. He summarises the objective of his study as follows:

[To] explore a common denominator that links the study of face-to-face interactions with the study of media: the structure of social situations. I suggest that the mechanism through which electronic media affect social behaviour is not a mystical sensory balance, but a very discernible rearrangement of the *social stages* on which we *play our roles* and a resulting change in our sense of ‘appropriate behaviour’. For when audiences change, so do the *social performances* (Meyrowitz, 1985: 4 [My emphasis]).

The vocabulary of *social stages*, *performances* and *role playing* highlights the influence of Erving Goffman on Meyrowitz’s attempt to find a common denominator between the study of media and face-to-face interactions. Indeed, Goffman’s analogy of interaction as theatrical performance (see Goffman, 1959) is central to Meyrowitz’s understanding of social interaction. Meyrowitz draws on Goffman’s notions of representation, part-

playing etc. in his own account of how people present themselves and their behaviour to others on “a multiplicity of social stages”: they call on unwritten and intersubjectively shared *situational* rules to guide what is considered appropriate behaviour (Meyrowitz, 1985: 28). By understanding *the definition of the situation*, which social actors learn during the process of socialisation, they are able to understand the rules which apply to them in that setting, thus shaping the range of possible and acceptable behaviours which can occur. This ties in with Goffman's concept of ‘frame analysis’ (Goffman, 1974), whereby a situation can have a primary framework (such as *fighting*) and be ‘overlaid’ with various ‘keyings’ which could be actions such as *playing at fighting* or *actor portraying a play fight* (Meyrowitz, 1985: 23-24).

Participants in a social situation tend to mobilise their energies such that they present themselves appropriately to the relevant *audience*. Thus, they must decide “[to] display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when, and where” (Goffman, 1963: 42). However, this process is not necessarily deceitful. For example, participants can adopt behaviours *backstage* in their private sphere which are quite different to those which they must adopt *onstage* for an audience. Moreover, many expressions of private behaviour are deemed unacceptable or inappropriate in professional settings. Social situations and audiences are thus what define the way a person ‘is’.

Frustrated by the fact that Goffman’s body of work, although insightful, has been able to provide few integrating theories, and his principles few new applications, Meyrowitz adapts Goffman’s insights to his own project so that they can inform his analysis of the impact of electronic media on social behaviour. He operationalises Goffman’s work on interaction by using it to develop a key premise of his own, that “any factor that restructures social stages and reorganises social audiences, therefore, would have a great impact on social behaviour” (Meyrowitz, 1985: 33). The common ground between medium theory and situational analysis makes this assumption credible; both focus (though not exclusively) on macro-level environmental changes, and are deeply concerned with the question of access. Meyrowitz reaffirms the link in the following way: “situationists suggest how our particular actions and words are shaped by our

knowledge of who has access to them, and the medium theorists suggest that new media change such patterns of access” (Meyrowitz: 1985: 33).

By using the concept of *information systems*, Meyrowitz is able to link the study of media environments to that of face-to-face situations. He suggests that a social situation can be considered as an information system or a *pattern of access to information*, with the information relating to the behaviour of other people, and the focus being on changes in behaviour and situations (Meyrowitz: 1985: 37). This makes Meyrowitz’s project “inherently a study of boundaries and limits” (Meyrowitz, 1985: viii), which is clearly evidenced in his own three thematic case studies which explore the blurring of boundaries and erosion of existing spheres. He accounts for each through changes to information systems effected by electronic media. This idea will also be brought forward into the current study which, for its part, will examine two areas: firstly, how the Internet has impacted on political communication ‘writ large’, and secondly, how the limits and boundaries of the medium (Internet) and genre (forum interface) impact upon the emerging social interaction systems identified in e-participation initiatives.

Whilst it is not the primary focus of Meyrowitz’s work, the present study will demonstrate how medium theory can be used as a starting point to explore the issue of inclusion through the discussion in Chapter 5. Meyrowitz himself does not use his analyses to offer a critique of society; his standpoint is one of observation. Yet, as a study of ‘boundaries and limits’, medium theory analyses touch on questions of inclusion and access. Therefore, it is possible to examine the implications of the social and behavioural changes which medium theory can uncover from a critical perspective. For example, a theme which Meyrowitz explores in *No Sense of Place* – the merging of social spheres – was also covered in Jürgen Habermas’ *Structural Transformation* (Habermas, 1989).

Therefore, in spite of different methodological approaches, both share common thematic ground: Habermas, for his part, explicates in some detail his view of how the advent of printing encouraged publicity and deliberation in the public sphere, and how the growth

of mass culture and media led to the ‘degeneration’ of that sphere, remarking that “the sphere generated by the mass media has taken on the traits of a secondary realm of intimacy” (Habermas, 1989: 172). This idea of a second sphere of intimacy is very close to Meyrowitz’s own analyses:

Electronic media further integrate information systems by merging formerly private situations into formerly public ones [...] the shift from print media to electronic media is a shift from formal onstage, or front region, information, to informal backstage, or back region information, a shift from abstract impersonal messages to concrete personal ones (Meyrowitz, 1985: 93).

Meyrowitz’s use of ethnographic methods rather allows him to develop a much less ideologically charged account than the normative hermeneutical approach which Habermas is often criticised for in *Structural Transformation* (see Calhoun, 1993: 24). Indeed, the reliance on ethnographic methods in Meyrowitz’s work means that his approach is descriptive in the first instance as opposed to normative. Moreover, as a situational approach, it is *contextual* rather than simply *textual* like Habermas’. This is because the focus of medium theory is on how social actors use the medium rather than on what the medium *does* to them. Thus, Meyrowitz eschews the trap of making bold assertions and value judgements on the inherent ‘goodness’ or ‘badness’ of a medium, something for which Habermas has been reproached. Medium theory is convincing because it rightfully accords media an important role in social life, but does not drift off into alarmist and totalising claims about its omnipotence, or overlook the defining role of human interaction in shaping the social importance of media.

The application of medium theory in the current case study will enable the exploration of the importance of (computer-mediated) modes of transmission of information across the Internet, and an examination of the likely influences of these on social behaviour in the e-democracy consultation forum (e-DCF). Of particular interest will be the Internet’s capacity to support synchronous and asynchronous communication, as well as communication between delocalised and ‘interactive’ users of the network. The exploration of these points will enable a better understanding of the extent to which the medium (Internet) defines the style and structure of the interface (forum), and both these

in turn impact on the forms of communication the forum interface facilitates. Taking care not to totalise these effects, the discussion chapter (Chapter 5) which follows the presentation of the case study data, will aim to draw critical insights from the medium theory analysis by exploring the implications of the ‘boundaries and limits’ of the medium and forum interface in terms of accessibility to, and the inclusiveness of, communication in the forum setting.

3.3.3 Study of forum communications

The study of the forum functionality will be followed by a study of the forms of communication which occur in the forum. The study will draw on the descriptive tools of ethnography of communication to construct a general picture of forum communication as a specific form of political subsystem, and to examine the surface rules and terms of discussion within it. The overall aim of the analysis is to develop a comprehensive picture of the characteristics of communication within the UK Online forum setting, and to yield rich data which will allow for further investigation of the issue of inclusiveness in Chapter 5.

Based on Hymes’ methodological framework for the study of speech events, as represented by the mnemonic *SPEAKING* (Hymes, 1972b), the study will examine via a systematic ethnographic model how talk occurs in the online forum. Hymes’ framework will allow for a topographic description of forum communication, and its key features and functions. It will help to explore the efficiency of the forum in relation to its goals and aims. The following concerns will underpin this part of the study:

1. What forms does communication typically take in the forum?
2. What communication codes and functions are characteristic of the forum?
3. Are there any distinctive linguistic forms which recur in the forum?
4. Are there any clear behavioural trends or communicative patterns in terms of language use and what meanings are assigned to these by participants?

Hymes developed his *SPEAKING* methodology for the analysis of ‘speech events.’ Traditionally this term has been used to describe events such as conversations, lectures or political debates, but as a communicative activity, the online forum can also be considered as one.

Hymes’ methodological framework is summed up in the mnemonic *SPEAKING* (Hymes, 1972b) set out in Figure 3 below.

S	Situation	Physical, temporal psychological setting defining the speech event
P	Participants	Speaker, addressee, audience
E	Ends	Goals and outcomes
A	Act sequence	Form and Content
K	Key	Manner or spirit of speaking
I	Instrumentalities	Channel (spoken, written) and code (dialect, registers etc.)
N	Norms of interaction	Organisation of turn-taking and norms of interpretation (i.e. conventionalised ways of drawing inferences)
G	Genres	e.g. Causal speech, commercial messages etc.

Figure 3: Hymes’ mnemonic for the analysis of speech events (adapted from: Jaworski and Coupland, 1999: 26-7).

The scope of the variables covered by the *SPEAKING* model allows for the study of communicative competence and performance in the forum setting. The ethnographic data takes the form of downloaded forum transcripts, as well as a ‘content analysis’ which pulls together some basic facts about the forum such as number of contributions, number of participants, number of contributions per participant etc. In this sense it clearly differs from more traditional ethnographic data which tends to be collected through participant observation: online it is only possible to explore what people say, rather than how they say it, and what they actually do. Aycock (1995 [online version]) notes that this type of ethnography can make it more difficult to be absolutely sure of what is actually occurring. On the other hand, however, it offers unique possibilities for

“lurking without the usual costs of time, money, discomfort, or political hassle associated with ordinary types of fieldwork” (Aycock, 1995 [online version]). Furthermore, in spite of the restrictions implied by what could be referred to as ‘disembodied ethnography’, ethnographic methods have yielded rich analyses of (computer-) mediated written communication without the co-presence of the observer; many excellent examples, detailing communicative conventions, genres and codes can be found in the papers submitted to journals on computer-mediated communication³¹.

3.4 Protocol and logistics

3.4.1 *The UK Online platform*

The focus of the case study analysis was the forum section of the UK Online website (www.ukonline.gov.uk). The website was launched in 2000 by the Office of the e-Envoy as part of the high profile UK Online campaign designed to ensure that by 2005 all citizens who wish it have “easy and affordable access to the Internet and that they have the skills, motivation and confidence to use it” (Office of the e-Envoy, 2002b: 14). The website was intended as a starting point for anyone wishing to access government information and services online.

3.4.2 *Choice of forum*

The case study topic area was chosen in late 2001. At that time Citizen Space housed a range of 21 fora under the *Your say* banner. These were themed discussion fora structured around a number of pre-determined, generic topics (e.g. crime, agriculture, economy etc.), with communication taking place on an ‘asynchronous’ basis. Messages were, however, often being posted within minutes of being submitted, and moderation was limited to the removal or censoring of messages which contravened the forum

³¹ Issue 1, Volume 2 on ‘Play and Performance in CMC’ in the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* is worthy of particular note.

rules. As a result, although the interface had not been designed for this purpose, participants were able to conduct ‘dialogues’ more or less in ‘real’ time through their posts.

It was initially planned that the case study would explore one or more of the *Your say* fora. However, changes were subsequently made to the structure of Citizen Space ahead of the consultation on e-democracy. The biggest change to the site occurred in July 2002, when the *Your say* fora were removed from the site, and were replaced by a solitary forum run in tandem with the consultation procedure on e-democracy. At this point, the title linking to the section reverted from *Your say* to *Forums*. The e-democracy forum replicated the structure and scope of the fora previously housed in the *Your say* section of the site, and users were required to follow the same set of rules as *Your say* users had previously. Three additional fora were subsequently added to the site on the topic of pensions; all of these had closed by November 2002, and the whole section was removed around Autumn 2003.

After the initial changes were made to *Your say*, it was decided that the case study should focus on the e-DCF. Two principal reasons motivated the final choice: firstly, the relevance of the subject matter to the general context of the thesis; secondly, the high profile of the forum and the importance given to it as a ‘pilot’. This second factor meant that more published information was available on the e-democracy forum than the other fora, making it easier to evaluate government policy and responses to the use of the forum in the consultation procedure.

3.4.3 Range, frequency, scope of data collected from forum

The e-democracy forum ran between 16th July and the 31st October 2002, a total of fourteen weeks and three days. During that time 427 contributions were made to a total of 73 threads or sub-topics.

3.4.4 Permissions

Permission was sought and obtained from the Office of the e-Envoy to refer to material from the UK Online site, including the forum contributions.

Chapter 4 Case Study Data Analysis

4.1 Contextual analysis

This section presents a brief overview of early political uses of the Internet and examines how these led to the Internet being used within political decision-making processes in the UK. It will then turn to the specific arrangements of the e-DCF.

4.1.1 *Online civic activity*

As early as the late seventies, the Internet was being used for grassroots political initiatives. The Berkeley Community Memory project, established in 1978, was one of the first examples of this, and saw computer terminals installed in public places, including supermarkets, giving access to notice-boards where community-related messages could be left. A second much-publicised initiative was the Public Electronic Network (PEN) established in Santa Monica, California (1989), which grew from the city government and council internal email system. Public terminals were later set up in libraries and other key locations and led to a surprising dialogue between the disenfranchised homeless and wealthier community members. This later resulted in the launch of a number of grassroots initiatives aimed at the provision of better facilities for the local homeless population.

Although the number of initiatives multiplied over the following decade, the rise of the concept of *electronic town halls* in the early 1990s was an important step in the development of online participation for political purposes. As it gained currency, awareness of the potential scope for the use of the Internet within the realm of politics grew. In 1992, the idea was championed by the then presidential candidate, Ross Perot who claimed he would:

[...] create an electronic town hall where [...] every week or so we would take a single major issue to the people. We would explain it in great detail and then we would get an answer from the owners of the country – the

people – that could be analysed by congressional district so that the Congress [...] would know what the people want” (London, 1994, [online version]).

Interestingly, Perot used the concept not only to describe computer-mediated communication, but also television and radio phone-ins. He envisaged *electronic town halls* embodying direct democracy ideals, enabling opinions to be collected and spontaneous feedback to be sought from the population on specific issues, much like traditional opinion polling in the plebiscitary model of democracy.

Other visions of the *electronic town hall* notion were based on a much wider definition of the term: it was seen as an online community rather than a plebiscite, and thus the processes of deliberation and opinion-formation which the electronic town halls were able to facilitate were accorded greater importance. A high-profile proponent of the online community vision was former Vice-President Al Gore. During a speech made at the Conference of the International Telecommunications Union held in 1994 in Buenos Aires he went so far as to claim that:

The global information infrastructure will be a metaphor for democracy itself [...] a new Athenian Age of democracy (will be) forged in the fora the global information infrastructure will create [...]. These highways – or, more accurately, networks of distributed intelligence – will allow us to share information, to connect, and to communicate as a global community (Al Gore, quoted in Hamelink, 1998 [online version]).

Whilst such a vision now seems somewhat evangelical, the Internet has nonetheless made a significant contribution to promoting civic activity which extends beyond the boundaries of the nation state. Indeed, during the nineties, issue-specific non-governmental organisations made widespread use of the Internet and information

technologies for (inter-)networking purposes. Two important examples are the international environmentalist and feminist lobbies³².

The Internet has proved a useful tool not only for large international movements, it has also proved itself to be an extremely powerful internetworking tool for smaller, local, non-governmental organisations³³. Baldi's (2000) study of NGO use of the Internet to coordinate civil disobedience campaigns during the WTO meeting in Seattle in 1999 is just one example of the power of the Internet as a tool for political activism. In addition, the campaigns of the Free Burma Coalition (www.freeburmacoalition.org), the Zapatista movement (<http://www.ezln.org/>), and the Ogoni of Nigeria, as well as the McSpotlight initiative (www.mcspotlight.org) are all notable examples of how small-scale low-budget Internet-mediated protests have succeeded in affecting global affairs by putting the different issues under the spotlight (O'Neill, 1999: 28). Such campaigns have almost certainly led the organisations concerned to rethink their operations and communications strategy to avoid a public backlash. Indeed, they have played an important role in increasing publicity and animating social change campaigns in the real world, a sort of virtual campaigning which O'Neill (1999: 19) would like to see used more widely to lobby politicians, and organise solidarity and civil disobedience campaigns.

4.1.2 Government use of the Internet

Undoubtedly inspired by the success of local community and NGO initiatives, the idea of harnessing the Internet as a tool for democratic participation was later adopted by central government. At the forefront of Internet developments in general, the USA was the first country to explore the use of Internet as a medium for political communication and participation in the early 1990s. By 1994, a large number of parties had developed sites, including a significant number of minor ones which emerged alongside the new

³² See O'Neill (1999) for a more detailed study of how these two movements made use of the Internet.

³³ This is discussed from the perspective of medium theory in section 4.3.2.

medium³⁴. Developments in Europe took longer, with the first government websites emerging in 1994 (GOL/ICA, 1997).

A 1997 report commissioned for the G7 Government on-line project (GOL) and the Council for Information Technology in Government Administration (ICA), entitled *Government use of the Internet*, revealed the principal motivations for government forays into cyberspace to be: the improvement of government services; the use and dissemination of information; an increase in transparency. The main reasons for establishing government websites found by the report are detailed below:

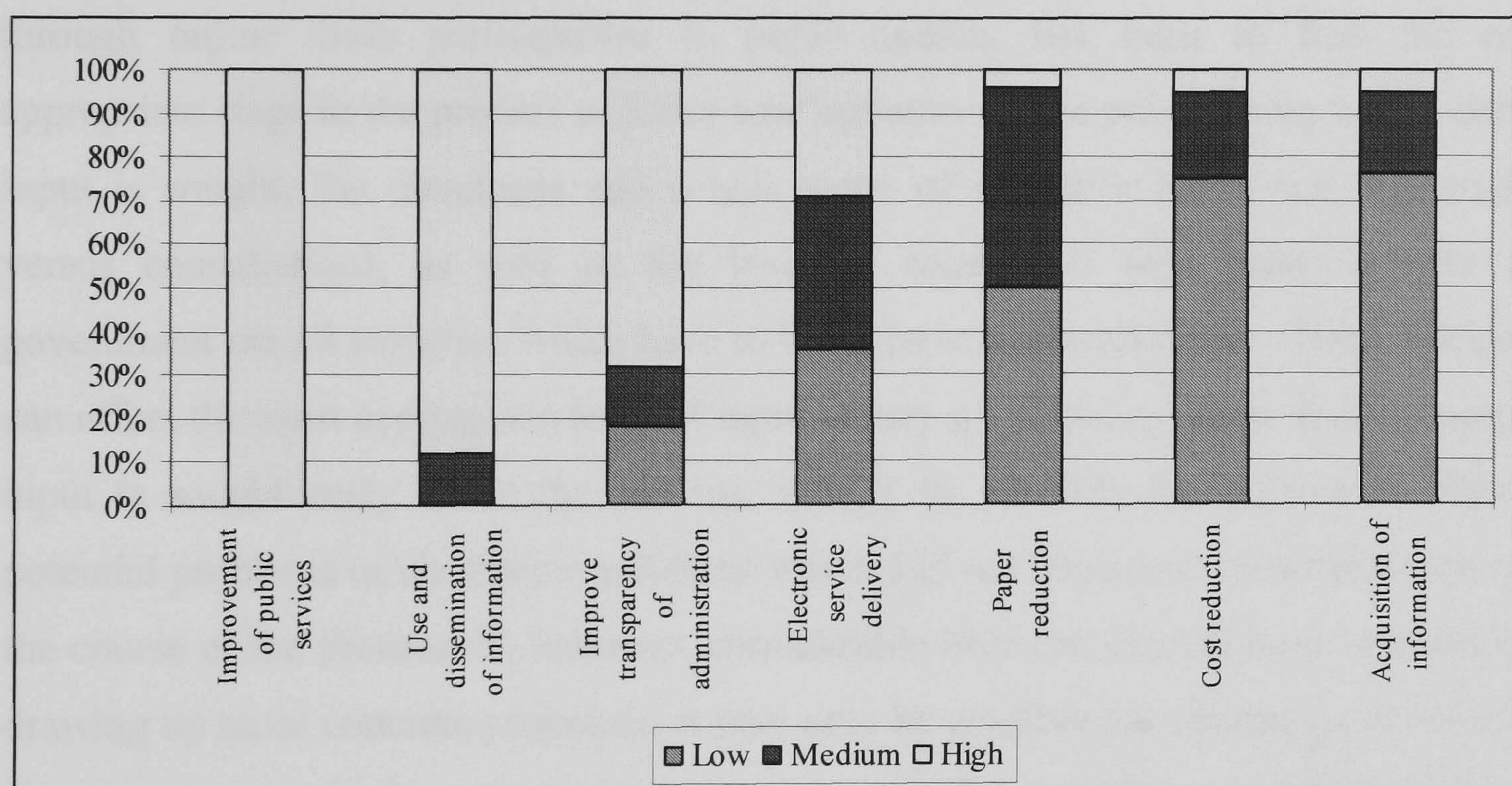


Figure 4: Reasons for establishing a government website (adapted from Figure 3 GOL/ICA, 1997).

As noted in section 2.8.2, government presence on the Internet has tended to focus around four main offerings. These are described by Hacker and van Dijk (2000: 40) as *allocation* (internet broadcasting), *consultation* (information retrieval), *registration* (telepolling, voting) and *conversation* (email and discussion). Although considerable progress has been made in expanding e-government offerings since 1997 when GOL first surveyed government use of the Internet, to this day allocation remains by far the

³⁴ Although interestingly many of these can no longer be traced (Margolis and Resnick, 2000: 54).

most important e-government offering. This, at least, is widespread, with recent research by the UN's department of Public Administration (UNPAN, 2003) revealing that 173 out of 191 member states (91%) had a website presence, compared to 143 in 2001 (75%). The UK, for its part, was ranked fifth in the UN's e-government readiness report, after the USA, Sweden, Australia and Denmark.

4.1.3 From participation to e-participation

A key issue for governments wishing to harness the possibilities of 'conversation' through online civic participation in policy-making has been to find the most appropriate stage in the process to focus new initiatives. The point during which citizen input is sought, the directness and actual scope of influence likely (i.e. referendum versus consultation), as well as the level of interaction with policy-makers and government are all variables which have to be taken into consideration. These decisions can affect the most appropriate form of input on any given policy issue: if, for example, input is sought early on in the process, it may be possible for citizens to identify potential problems or alternative solutions which had not been considered and thus alter the course of the process; if, however, considerable time has already been invested into drawing up more concrete proposals, it may only be possible for citizens contributing at that stage to approve broadly or reject the proposals or to contribute to fine-tuning some of the finer details. Similarly, if the chosen format for input draws on quantitative methods, such as surveys or polls, then it is likely that the measurability of the results will lead to the expectation of them having clear influence with government and policy-makers.

Where qualitative methods, such as focus groups or workshops are used, the results are more likely to take the form of a report containing recommendations, and thus it is less likely that this will give rise to the expectation of clear results-based changes to existing proposals. Finally, the level of interaction between citizens and policy-makers must also be considered. Generally speaking, there are clear parallels between this and the directness of influence likely, in the sense that more direct polling is less likely to be

used in dynamic and iterative consultation procedures. More specifically, the number of participants involved will affect the feasibility of certain feedback and interaction mechanisms, and thus can increase or decrease the extent to which the process itself can be both dynamic and interactive.

A comprehensive model for public participation, which sets out a topography of participation methods, their scope and stage in council or government policy- and decision-making, is set out in Figure 5 below.

Giving information	Consultation / Listening	Exploring / Innovating/ Visioning	Judging / Deciding together	Delegating/ Supporting/ Decision-making
Sign-posting	Surveys	Consultative workshops	Deliberative polls	Neighbourhood committees
Leaflets/ newsletters	Focus groups Priority search	Visioning workshops	Citizens' juries	Town/ estate plans
Community profiles	Interactive community profiles	Simulations Open space events	Negotiation workshops	Tenant management organisations
Feedback on surveys and consultation	Public meetings/ fora		Community issue groups	
Annual performance reports			Community workshops	Community Development Trust
Support/ advice	Panels	Planning for real community discovery	Consensus conferences	Partnerships/ contracts with communities
Video/ internet communication	Video boxes	Use of theatre, arts/media		Referenda/ tele-voting

Figure 5: Sue Goss' (OPM) public participation model (quoted in Coleman and Gøtze, 2001: 13).

Coleman and Gøtze (2001: 14) present a number of existing and new *online* initiatives which are used to consult citizens on policy matters; these are described below in Figure 6. The scope of participation mechanisms can be examined in relation to two spectra:

one representing the level of dialogue (i.e. two-way communication between citizens and authorities); and the second representing the level of likely influence.

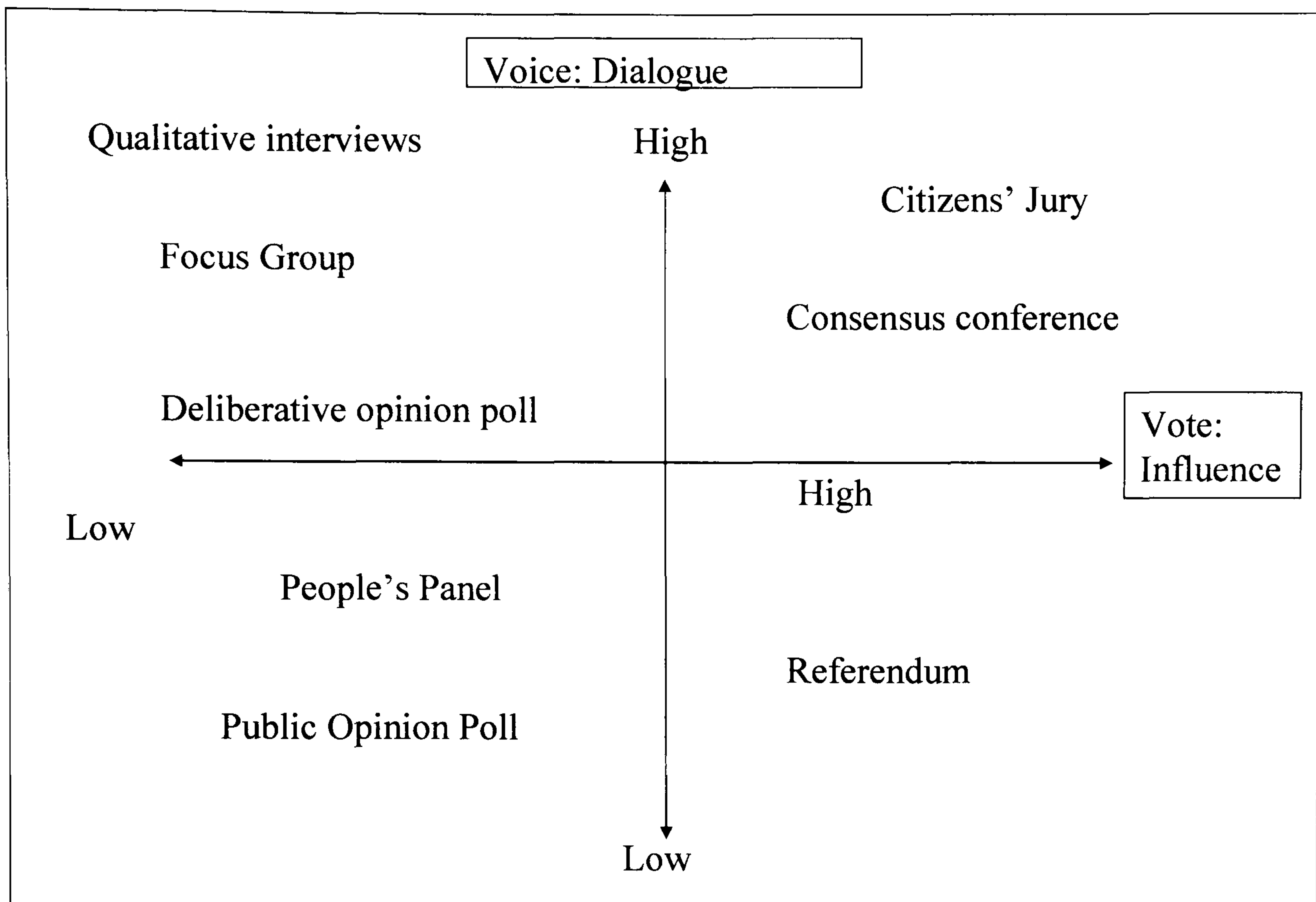


Figure 6: Public participation mechanisms (adapted from Coleman and Gøtze, 2001: 24).

It is possible to summarise from the figure that the most popular qualitative methods (e.g. focus groups and qualitative interviews) tend to imply a higher level of interactivity and dialogue, but tend to have low levels of influence. This echoes the representation versus direct participation polarisation found in the different models of democracy discussed in section 2.4.3: public participation models which favour dialogue tend to have (also) a goal of opinion-formation, while those favouring influence are more focused on the aggregation of opinions to aid decision-making.

Of the quantitative mechanisms featured above, some are called upon much more frequently than others as tried and trusted methods, not least because they are well established methods which are easy to organise logistically (e.g. opinion polls which can be bought in from pollsters such as MORI, NOP and, more recently, the online pollster YouGov). Others, such as referenda, tend to have greater influence but are

punctual feedback mechanisms rather than platforms for dialogue and deliberation: like other logistically complex (and therefore expensive) methods such as citizens' juries, consensus conferences and people's panels, they are rarely used by authorities in policy- and decision-making. It is noteworthy, therefore, that the apparent logistical and cost benefits of online participation mechanisms have contributed to government interest in online registration and participation mechanisms.

4.1.4 e-Participation in the UK and abroad

As noted, initiatives to promote civic engagement in politics are still a marginal component of e-government. Indeed, UNPAN notes "a gap between rhetoric and reality [...] in the area of engaging the citizen in public decision making", with only 8% (or 13) of the 173 countries surveyed for its 2003 *e-Government Readiness Report* even having a clear policy statement on e-participation published online (UNPAN, 2003: 55). Of all the e-participation strategies implemented, online consultations were the most common mechanism promoted by governments; however, only 14% of the countries surveyed offered such mechanisms, while only 9% percent allowed any citizen feedback to government on official policies and activities publicised on government websites. Interestingly, the UK came top in UNPAN's world ranking of e-participation readiness.

E-participation initiatives in the UK to date have encompassed three principal mechanisms: online questionnaires, e-consultations and discussion boards. In terms of the level of interactive participation possible, online questionnaires are the most restrictive since the format for participation is pre-determined (it tends to be a basic question and answer format). E-mail consultations tend to offer slightly more flexibility since they allow greater freedom to participants to choose the level of detail and style of response to the consultation issues up for discussion; they may not be able to influence the agenda of topics for discussion, but they can respond to some or all of the pre-determined issues in a way which is appropriate for them. Online fora, finally, offer the greatest level of flexibility since participants can interact with each other and with policy-makers on the issues for discussion: participants have the opportunity to launch discussion topics as well as to respond to the initial thread or any subsequent comment,

such that the discussion ‘branches’ out from the initial thread by means of several sub-threads.

Since coming to power in 1997, the British Labour government has outlined, through a number of policy statements, its aim to increase public participation in policy-making through wider and broader consultation. Most notably, the Cabinet Office Report *Professional policy-making for the twenty-first century* (Cabinet Office, 1999b) charted out practical approaches to a number of these issues, and paved the way for a new code of practice on written consultation procedures (Cabinet Office, 2000). The code, which is also applicable to online consultations, requires that contributions be analysed carefully with an ‘open mind’, that the results be made available at the end of the consultation, and that these give an account of the views expressed and the reasons for the final decisions made. The code also sets out how and why Internet consultations should be used in place of normal consultation procedures, and suggests some criteria for establishing the participants who should be invited to participate. In 2004, a revised and simplified code was brought into force (Cabinet Office, 2004).

The UK government has trialled the use of all three e-participation mechanisms; between 2000 and 2004 its efforts were focused on the CitizenSpace section of the UK Online platform³⁵. Figure 7 below shows the entry page for the section:

³⁵ The UKOnline platform is discussed in further detail below in section 4.6.1.

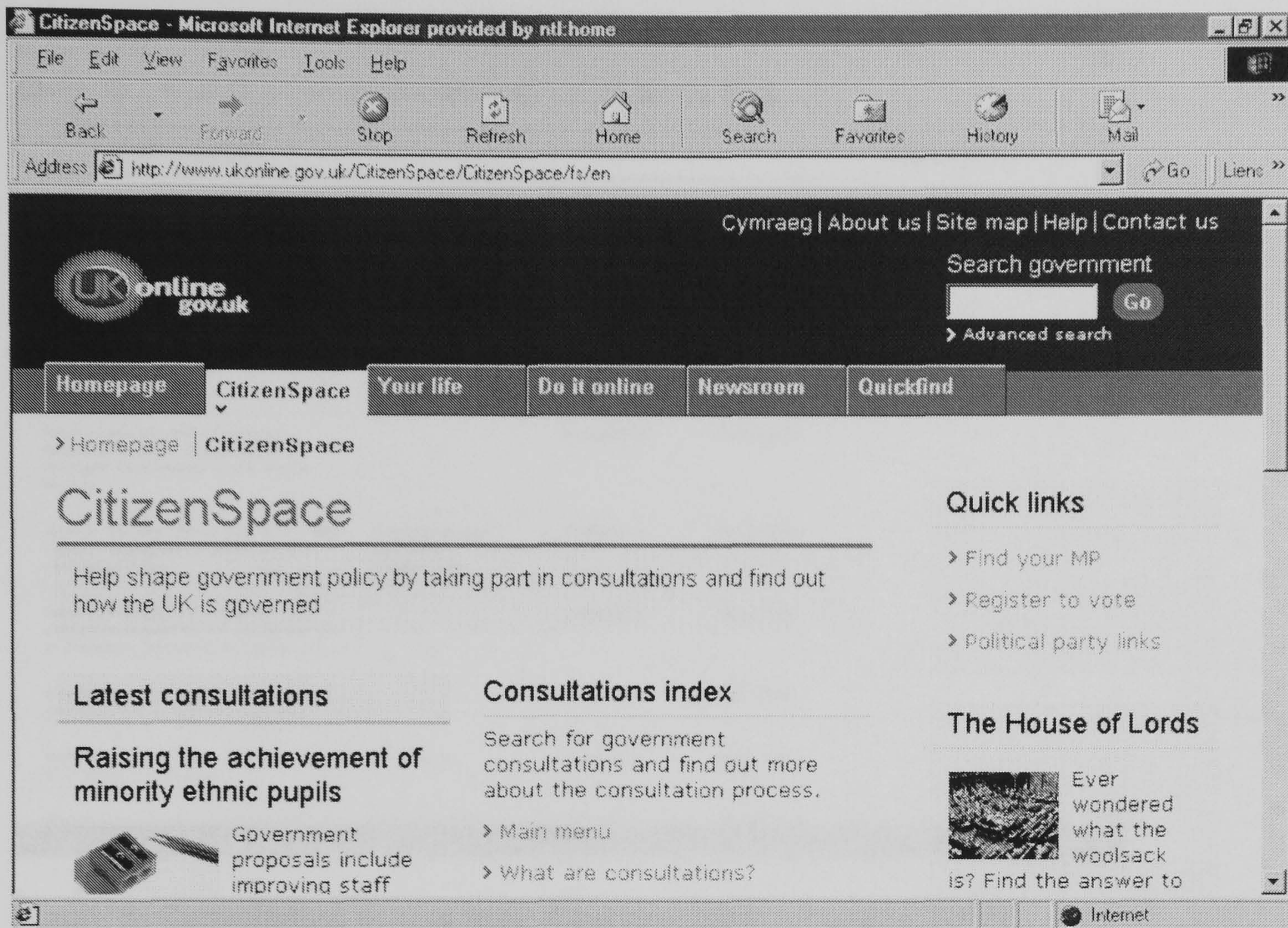


Figure 7: View of CitizenSpace entry page (Last accessed: 31 August 2003).

When UK Online was launched in 2000, CitizenSpace pioneered the use of two different types of participation mechanisms: *Consultations* and *Your say*. The CitizenSpace section of the site was popular, with over 50,000 usernames registered at one point to receive information and updates from the government.

The consultation section of the site provided a list of active government consultations, and links to information pages for each. The *Consultations* entry page can be seen below in Figure 8:

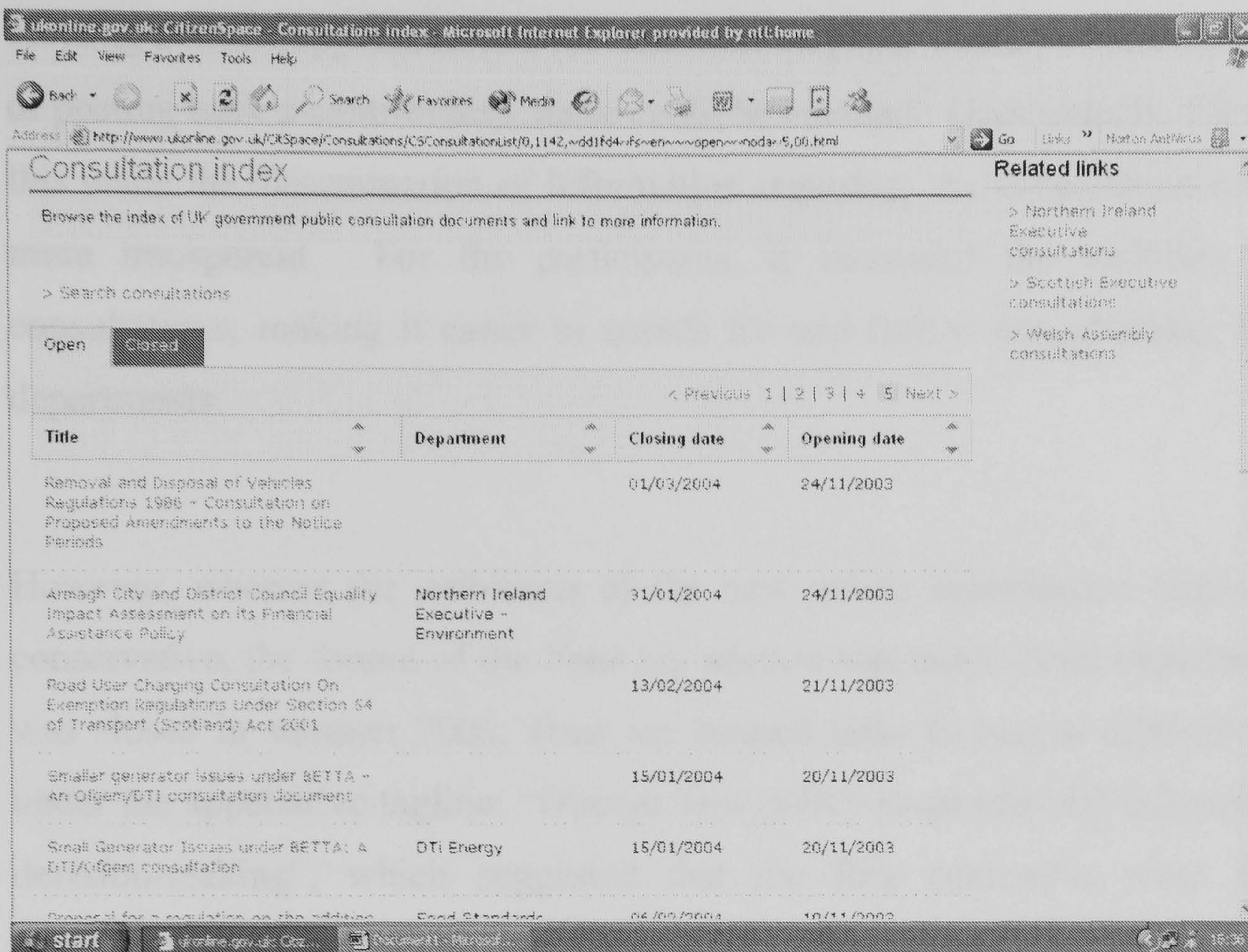


Figure 8: Consultation access page (Last accessed: 6 January 2004).

In most cases, such information pages provided a general overview of the consultation, offered the possibility of downloading the consultation document and furnished contact details for the return of submissions (sometimes by means of a specially prepared document or form).

Since 6th November 2001 online consultations have been held covering a broad range of subjects across the government's policy-making spectrum. These are normally run in the early phases of policy development, frequently in conjunction with the launch of a green or white paper. As such, they occur at the same stage in the policy-making process where a standard consultation might have previously been held; in fact, standard written consultations are often run in conjunction with the online consultation, so that stakeholders are able to contribute using the medium which is most convenient for them.

In most cases, the online consultation mechanism consisted only in a transposition of the former written postal consultation procedure to online delivery channels: instead of

viewing a hard copy document, the consultation paper could be seen online, and instead of posting back a contribution, these could be emailed. Undoubtedly, for the organisers, this made the dissemination of information regarding the consultation much easier and more transparent. For the participants, it increased the visibility of individual consultations, making it easier to search for and follow consultations by government departments.

However, whereas the ambitions of the new online consultation channels were very conservative, the format of the *Your say* section was much more experimental. Until it was closed in summer 2002, *Your say* housed links to twelve different thematic fora under the appellative tagline: “Discuss new policy proposals and influence government decision-making”, which suggested that the fora comments were listened to by decision-makers and held real sway. The fora provided a basic ‘bulletin board’ framework whereby participants could respond to each others’ comments on the different topics. The fora were pre-moderated only, and there were no fundamental temporal or topical restrictions³⁶.

Following changes to CitizenSpace at the beginning of summer 2002, the section heading was changed from *Your say* to *Forums*³⁷. This sat above the rather less empowering tagline of “Share your views with citizens and government”, thus with no promise made of influence or sway. Below the heading were two links: one guiding users to a page listing the available fora (this included the e-DCF); and a second link taking users directly to the e-democracy forum. The available fora were all tied to a specific consultation, and only four in total were run after the e-DCF: at the end of Summer 2003, the *Forums* section was removed altogether.

³⁶ Time-bound fora were introduced when the section was changed to *Forums* in summer 2002.

³⁷ Although changes have been made to the labelling of the section, the modified *Forums* section was set up with the same interface as the *Your say* section before it. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the scope and rules governing *Forums* were also identical to those which previously governed *Your say*.

At the time the changes were made no explanation was given on the site as to why the *Your say* fora had been removed, and indeed when and whether they were set to return. Nevertheless, some indication is given in the consultation paper *In the service of democracy* (e-Envoy, 2002b) that this freewheeling online discussion forum, initially established as a base from which to build the government's e-democracy strategy, was not considered a success by the government. The document states that "although a worthwhile experiment, the current structure of Citizen Space has limitations. The re-design and re-launch of the website will be a major feature of the Government's e-democracy strategy" (Envoy, 2002b: 27).

The discussion in coming sections will examine in some detail the 'limitations and boundaries' implied by the medium and choice of forum interface from the perspective of medium theory. It is nevertheless worth mentioning one key disadvantage of the *Your say* structure that was exposed during the contextual research: the interface provided no actual way to see what, if anything, was actioned as a result of the fora; although it was reported in the fora that weekly summaries were presented to the Cabinet office, a representative of the e-Envoy confirmed that this only happened initially, and that very little of interest was collected from the fora³⁸. It seems reasonable to deduce that this contributed to the decision to tie in the *Forums* section with ongoing consultations, and thus integrate the government's e-participation initiatives within a more structured policy framework.

4.2 The 2002 e-democracy consultation

A cornerstone of this process of integration was the consultation procedure on e-democracy, launched on 16th July 2002. The accompanying paper, entitled *In the service of democracy*, (Cabinet Office, 2002b) was the first attempt to initiate a serious debate on the future role and impact of electronic democracy on decision-making processes in the UK. The government's e-democracy policy brief comprised two components; *e-voting* and *e-participation*. The consultation paper defined *e-voting* as

³⁸ Wood, S (2004) per. comm., 20 January.

“the use of ICT to facilitate participation in elections or other ballots under statutory control”, and *e-participation* as the use of “ICT to open new channels for participation in the democratic process between elections” (Cabinet Office, 2002b: 15).

The consultation paper departed from the premise that “a policy for e-democracy and a strategy for its delivery are vital to ensure that participation is enhanced rather than diminished by new technology” (Cabinet Office, 2002b: 14). It stated that, through the consultation, the government hoped to “consider how the required skills, attitudes, technologies and resources should be put in place to manage increased participation” (Cabinet Office, 2002b: 20). The aim of the consultation was therefore to explore ways in which e-participation might be used to broaden, deepen and facilitate participation around four main poles of political interaction: citizens and government; citizens and representatives; political parties; and within civil society.

In addition to this, the paper set out five overarching principles to guide e-participation strategy. These were:

1. inclusion (“a voice for all”),
2. openness (“electronic provision of information”),
3. security and privacy (“a safe place”),
4. responsiveness (“listening and responding to people”), and
5. deliberation (“making the most of people’s ideas”).

Citizen input from the consultation on these points was to be used to assist the government in drawing up a charter of citizen’s rights and responsibilities, as well as to determine the changes that will be made to the Citizen Space section of the UK Online website.

The e-DCF formed just part of a wider consultation which also encompassed traditional offline paper-based consultation submissions. As with traditional consultations, the e-

democracy consultation was advertised, primarily in libraries, and invitations were also sent to organisations liable to have an interest in the outcome of the consultation. Some 2,700 information leaflets were sent to libraries, and 6,000 to different groups, in addition to the 600 leaflets and papers requested by the public (Office of the e-Envoy, 2002c: 4-5). In addition to this, the forum moderator indicated in his interventions that he had personally asked a number of organisations to participate in the online discussion³⁹.

Figure 9 below presents the number of contributors to the consultation by channel. The online questionnaire was the most popular channel with 169 contributors choosing this method (Office of the e-Envoy, 2002c: 6); the e-participation channel was the least popular.

Channel	Number of contributors
Written	140
Online questionnaire	169
Online forum	129

Figure 9: Number of contributors to the consultation by channel

4.2.1 *The e-democracy consultation forum*

The online part of the consultation was hosted on the UK Online website and accessed through the same path as the CitizenSpace fora before it. The e-DCF platform was inherited from the CitizenSpace forum experiment and implemented unchanged for the consultation (except with the introduction of moderation as well as pre-moderation).

³⁹ The moderator identifies some of these in the final summary document (Hansard Society, 2002b: 2) as: Age Concern, the Birmingham youth parliament, BBCi, votehere.net, election.com, the Electoral Reform Society and academics from Leeds, Napier and Teeside universities.

UK Online had little involvement in the running of the forum since the pre-moderation of the postings, and moderation of the forum took place off-site by the Hansard Society, “an independent, non-partisan educational charity, which exists to promote effective parliamentary democracy”⁴⁰. It was also agreed that the Hansard Society would periodically provide summaries of the discussion (see Hansard Society, 2002a) and ultimately a report as a contribution to the written consultation (Hansard Society, 2002b).

The background information regarding the forum was hosted separately from the UK Online site on the www.e-democracy.gov.uk site. This site served as an information portal for the government on the subject of e-democracy. Potential participants could come to the forum via either of the two sites. However, owing to the low visibility of the e-democracy website through search engine searches (Office of the e-Envoy, 2002c: 9), it is more probable that uninformed surfers would have clicked to the forum from the UK Online forum section rather than from the e-democracy site. Indeed, the government’s response document to the consultation (e-Envoy, 2002b: 31-2) notes that the e-democracy website could not easily be located when searched for through commonly used search engines; these tended to point surfers towards a number of other prominent e-democracy websites, such as Steven Clift’s *Democracies On-line*⁴¹.

Clearly, visibility of the forum through the UK Online platform should have been even greater. Around the time of the consultation the platform was receiving approximately 1.2 million hits per week (Hanaghan, 2002). Furthermore, in January 2003 online IT journal *The Register* estimated that half a million people were using the site each month, and that it was the fastest growing government website, with 119% growth on a month-by-month basis (Richardson, 2003). The CitizenSpace section of the site also appeared

⁴⁰ Mission statement from the organisation’s website <http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/>

⁴¹ See <http://www.e-democracy.org/> and <http://www.publicus.net/>. It is worth noting that steps had been taken to rectify this lack of visibility by August 2003, when a search run through the major search engine Google with the term “e-democracy”, restricted to UK sites produced the www.e-democracy.gov.uk site as the top option.

to be well-known; as noted, over 50,000 users were reportedly registered with the site at one point to participate in the fora and receive updates about consultations (Wood, S, 2004, per. comm., 20 January).

The fact that the e-DCF only had 129 participants in spite of the hit rates of the www.e-democracy.gov.uk and UK Online websites, would seem to indicate significant problems with appeal of the Internet as channel for public participation, or with the forum interface for this type of communication: the medium theory analysis in the following section explores these issues in some detail through its study of the ‘limits and boundaries’ of each on the one hand, and the interaction systems they foster, on the other.

4.3 Key features of the medium

When the Internet began to gain widespread popularity in the mid nineties, much was written about the possible impact that this medium would have on society in general, and social communication patterns and behaviours in particular. Al Gore’s utopian ‘electronic town hall’ vision has already been mentioned and this captures well the enthusiasm which surrounded the advent of this new medium, particularly with respect to promoting democracy. The popular belief that this new medium could be used as a force for positive change was, however, disputed by many others and much was also written from a ‘dystopian’ perspective about the Internet as symptom of an increasing individualisation and fragmentation of society and the insidiousness of technology breaking down the very fabric of society (see the discussion in Hamelink, 1997: 27).

A decade on, neither of these views has ultimately proved itself to be true. Using the methodological tools provided by medium theory, this section attempts to develop a more balanced view of the features of the Internet as medium. The basic premise of this section is that the Internet is characterised by two key features: its topology as a network (structure), and its flexibility as a social space *sui generis* (content). The discussion in the current chapter problematises each feature and explores a number of consequences and implications of each. In particular, it is argued that the network

structure lends itself to a number of social and interactional changes which can impact upon political behaviour and processes (most notably many-to-many communication), while its existence as a social space creates problems of exclusion, which impact on the future development of the space. This section will consider how the interrelation of these two features shapes the Internet's ability to support mechanisms of political legitimation online.

4.3.1 The Internet as network

The Internet has no single core or nexus of power; it owes its decentralised topology to its gradual development from network into 'network of networks' (Poster 1995 [online version]). This has had profound consequences for the control of information and communication flows. Prior to the advent of the Internet, two forms of social communication predominated. These were 'one-to-one' communication and 'one-to-many' communication. 'One-to-one' communication refers to interpersonal communication such as telephone conversations or private correspondence, and 'one-to-many' communication refers to broadcast communication, such as communication transmitted from a central source (e.g. television, radio or newspaper) to a wide audience. The Internet, however, has enabled the emergence of a new form of communication, often referred to as 'many-to-many' communication. 'Many-to-many' communication implies, quite literally, that the Internet has the ability to allow any number of people to broadcast a message to any number of other people at any one time. Thus this new type of communication supports both interpersonal and broadcast communication. As Poster (1995 [online version]) explains, the Internet allows:

[...] anyone hooked up [...] (to) initiate a call, send a message that he or she has composed, and [...] do so in the manner of the broadcast system, that is to say, [...] send a message to many receivers, and do this either in 'real time' or as stored data or both. The Internet is also decentralized at a basic

level of organisation since, as a network of networks, new networks may be added so long as they conform to certain communications protocols⁴²

Before the advent of the Internet, control of the media was held in a relatively small number of hands. Many would argue that even in Western countries with their free press and multi-channel commercial media networks, media freedom is severely limited by commercial interests and the concentration of power in the hands of a few media conglomerations. However, by propagating a new form of networked communication, the Internet has created new possibilities to circumvent or subvert traditional loci of power, or at least to visibilise (in Luhmann's sense of the transparency of knowledge, Luhmann, 2000c: 102) semi- and sub-public media too (e.g. through specialised interest/user groups and their community websites). Some theorists even go so far as to suggest that this form of communication has completely reconfigured power relations throughout society by redefining the variations of information flows possible. For example, Balle (1999) suggests that it defines:

the passage from a pyramidal society, where the message come from the top of the social structure and move out to its fringes in concentric circles, to a reticular society where the messages move, not just from the top down, but in all directions without anyone being able to predict the route that they will take (Balle, 1999: 688 [my translation]).

In other words, Balle claims that we have seen a shift from a hierarchical society to a heteroarchival one.

The notion of society as consisting of a number of networks has been made famous in recent years by Castells (1996). Arguably, such conceptions of society tend to overlook the fact that some parts of these networks still hold considerably more power than others; although they shape the organisation and structure of societies, their importance to society and politics should not be overstated. Thus, as Hacker and van Dijk (2000:

⁴² Here Poster also highlights the second key feature of Internet – synchronicity- which will be discussed in section 4.4.2.

33) stress: “contrary to McLuhan, the medium (the network) is not the message, at least not the whole message”. They argue instead that the key to understanding the impact of the medium lies instead in understanding the organisations and institutions which are using network structures, and to what effect. With this in mind, emergent uses of the Internet and emerging Internet ‘publics’ will be examined now in detail.

4.3.2 Many-to-many communication and its social uses

Since the number of sources from which communication can flow is no longer limited with ‘many-to-many communication’, any user of the Internet can play a number of different social roles at any one time, from the passive ‘spectator’ (negatively associated by Habermas with the mass media era), to the role of ‘content producer’ and even ‘editor’. These various developments have, in the eyes of some, empowered ordinary citizens: even an amateur Internet user can set up a website, and many Internet service providers (ISPs) offer free web space and customisation tools to assist them.

Nevertheless, as Hacker and Van Dijk warn, the emancipatory potential of the Internet should certainly not be exaggerated. The most popular web search engine Google (2004) claimed that by February 2004 the size of its web index exceeded 6 billion items, and this sheer volume makes it extremely difficult for a small independent website to be picked out via search machines’ ranking tools⁴³. The mere existence of a website does not guarantee its visibility or prominence, let alone guarantee a readership.

Such limitations are by no means intractable, and persistence and dedication have enabled many independent sites to gain high-level recognition and prominence on the Internet. Many of these are sites which support ‘social’ applications i.e. applications

⁴³ Such tools generally rank each page on the basis of a number of factors including the number of other pages linking to it. For a description of how Google’s PageRank system operates, see: <http://www.google.com/technology/index.html>

which enable groups of people to communicate and collaborate (Davies, 2003: 13⁴⁴). One such example is Slashdot, a news site, where articles are submitted to the site where they are reviewed and rated by peers. Operating under the tagline of *News for Nerds. Stuff that matters*, it is one of the few sites which receives attention in the academic literature (see O’Baill, 1999; Priestley, 1999). Slashdot is also interesting in that the site has been a victim of its own success; the fact it was so popular ultimately meant that its independent editors could no longer keep up with the demands and costs associated with running it. In June 1999, Slashdot announced that it was being bought over by Andover.net (Slashdot, 1999).

More recently, individuals as publishers have been enjoying a strong presence on the Internet through the emergence of ‘weblogs’. These operate on a very similar basis to the Slashdot model, but are operated by one individual who posts diary-style entries linked to articles elsewhere on the web or within the site, accompanied by commentaries, often with sarcastic or ironic undertones. Comments can be added by visitors to the site and so discussions develop. Weblog.com compares a weblog to a “kind of a continual tour, with a human guide who you get to know. There are many guides to choose from, each develops an audience, and there’s also comradeship and politics between the people who run weblogs, they point to each other, in all kinds of structures, graphs, loops, etc.⁴⁵”. Two UK members of Parliament set up weblogs in 2003, and a number of others have since launched one to keep constituents up-to-date with their activities⁴⁶.

⁴⁴ “The expressions “social capital”, used to refer to the value of social networks, and “social software”, which have gained popularity since first being coined in 2002, are also examined in Davies’ 2003 study.

⁴⁵ See the Weblog site for this and additional weblog-related definitions: <http://newhome.weblogs.com/historyOfWeblogs>

⁴⁶ Tom Watson, Labour MP for West Bromwich East (www.tom-watson.co.uk/) and Richard Allan, Liberal Democrat MP for Sheffield Hallam (<http://www.richardallan.org.uk/>).

A great deal of work is involved in keeping such sites up-to-date so as to sustain interest and keep drawing readers. This will undoubtedly mean that some consolidation will occur amongst such sites. Nevertheless, there is unlikely ever to be a dearth of sites available where users share information and exchange opinions with each other, for the most part free from the censorship of government or large media interests. In this respect, the Internet has undeniably created new opportunities for a wider variety of individuals to publish (as individuals, as well as on behalf of organisations) to a wider range of people than would previously have been possible – or at least feasible – both logistically and financially.

4.3.3 The Internet, information management and agenda-setting

The opening of mass communication networks to a wider range of people enabled a wider group of people to influence the media agenda to a greater extent than was previously possible. This marked a shift away from the media culture of ‘agenda setting’ which characterised the latter decades of the 20th century. First coined by McCoombs and Shaw (1972), ‘agenda setting’ designates the correspondence between the order of importance given to issues in the media, and the order of importance given to the same issues by the general public and politicians. This notion traditionally assumed the power to influence the media agenda was held in the hands of media and political elites.

Since the advent of the Internet a number of high profile examples (discussed in section 4.1.1) have demonstrated that ‘many-to-many’ communication has lessened the stranglehold which these elites now have on the media agenda. The increased ease with which groups can now influence the media agenda has at the same time made it more difficult to suppress certain stories or concerns from the news agenda. This is clearly an issue for all those keen to manage how their image and reputation are portrayed in the media, not least governments and political parties. Since the Internet now makes it possible for vast quantities of information to be reproduced easily and in full online where this was not previously practicable, many governments and organisations have

made the (counter-)move to publish official reports, papers and legislation on the Internet in a bid to improve the transparency of their policy procedures.

Two recent examples of this in the UK have been the dossiers of intelligence on Iraq (British Government, 2003), and the evidence produced for the Hutton Enquiry into the death of Dr David Kelly, both of which are reported to have received an extremely high level of public interest. In fact, the Hutton Enquiry website⁴⁷ emerged as the most popular political website in August 2003: the website was receiving up to 80,000 visitors each day, just over 10% of the traffic in this sector (Gibson, 2003). It is arguable whether the publishing of the information has succeeded in dispelling distrust of the government's handling of the affair. It has, however, demonstrated that the UK government recognises that the public accords greater credence to a degree of 'publicity' in decision-making, and that this now has to be heeded – or at least assuaged.

4.3.4 The Internet as social space: understanding the public of the Internet

Given that the Internet is a social space, it is by studying how the medium is used, which sites its public frequent and how they interact through its platforms that one is able to understand what the Internet actually 'is'. Poster (1995) makes this point by drawing on two different analogies of how the Internet could be perceived. He notes,

The only way to define the technological effects of the Internet is to build the Internet, to set in place a series of relations which constitute an electronic geography. Put differently the Internet is more like a social space than a thing so that its effects are more like those of Germany than those of hammers. The effects of Germany upon the people within it is to make them Germans (at least for the most part); the effects of hammers is not to make people hammers, though Heideggerians and some others might disagree, but to force metal spikes into wood. As long as we understand the

⁴⁷ <http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/>

Internet as a hammer we will fail to discern the way it is like Germany
(Poster (1995) [online version]).

In perceiving the Internet as a country it is clear that it must be understood as a social complex which can be affected by those who populate it, just as it can influence their behaviour. Given that the issue of legitimacy is one of the central concerns in this thesis, it is clear that an examination of the current make-up of the public(s) of the Internet is therefore necessary. The discussion will proceed by exploring the ‘public’ from the perspective of the “boundaries and limits” of the medium (Meyrowitz, 1985: viii), and therefore through the concepts of ‘connectivity’, ‘accessibility’ and ‘usability’.

The term *connectivity* is used to refer to the level of access to a computer, telephone connection in a given geographical area. The costs associated with adopting new technology and upgrading telecommunications systems have resulted in differing levels of connectivity within and between states. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as the ‘digital divide’. It is defined by the OECD as:

The gap between individuals, households, businesses and geographic areas at different socio-economic levels with regard both to their opportunities to access information and communication technologies (ICTs) and to their use of the Internet for a wide variety of activities (OECD, 2001: 4).

The issue has received much attention both nationally and internationally, and a large number of initiatives have been launched since the middle of the 1990s designed to increase connectivity levels; the UN has launched numerous initiatives and programmes⁴⁸, as has the EU (E-Europe Action Plans⁴⁹) and the UK Government (UK Online). In fact, the setting for the e-participation initiative examined in this case study

⁴⁸ See, for example, the website of the United Nations Development Programme <http://www.undp.org/info21/text/resource/r-un.html> or the UN Information and Communication Task Force website <http://www.unicttaskforce.org>

⁴⁹ See: “E-Europe - An information society for all” Action Plans <http://europa.eu.int/scadplus/leg/en/s21012.htm>

is the government's UK Online web portal, launched in 2000 by the Office of the e-Envoy as part of the government's high profile campaign to get citizens online.

Connectivity levels are growing fast, and Internet penetration in the UK is amongst the highest in the world; 47% of households had access to the Internet at home in April 2003, and around 95% of businesses and 98% of schools were online in 2002 (e-Envoy, 2002b: 12). Nevertheless, regional levels of connectivity vary, with Northern Ireland and Wales having the lowest levels at 35% and 37% respectively, and the East, London and the South East having the highest level of connectivity (each at over 50%) (Office for National Statistics, 2003c). Furthermore, when connectivity levels are examined by household income, it can be noted that the lowest three income groups have an average of 16% connectivity, whereas the upper three income groups have an average of 76% connectivity (Office for National Statistics, 2003d).

Many agree that although the situation is improving, the Internet is still dominated by white, middle-class males both in the UK and other developed countries, while the developed world continues to dominate the Internet globally. The potential impact of this on the possibilities for online political participation to promote participation and inclusion are self-evident. Although only a small number of studies have been conducted on online political participation in online fora, most tend to confirm that the situation here reflects the wider picture of the 'digital divide'. Among these, Dutton (1996: 274) found there to be a clear majority of male members of the Public Electronic Network (PEN) in Santa Barbara, California, while Schultz (2000: 217) found the participants in the survey he conducted on the New York Times fora to be not only predominantly male, but also educated to post-graduate level.

In order to build up a more complete picture of the Internet public(s) and to reach a better understanding of the popularity of the medium for political purposes, it is worth considering the reasons why people do not use the Internet. An omnibus survey conducted by the Office of National Statistics (2003e) provides some insight into this: 'lack of interest' emerges as the most popular reason for 50% of respondents; the next

most popular reasons were ‘no connection’ (39%), ‘lack of knowledge or confidence’ (38%) and ‘cost’ (15%). With lack of interest representing the biggest barrier to getting people online, it is reasonable to question whether connectivity rates will plateau at some point in the future, should some non-adopters remain unconvinced by the attractions of the Internet.

The contextual research section of this case study underlines the fact that take-up of political websites still remains low in relation to other uses. Indeed, the most popular reasons for accessing the Internet according to the Office for National Statistics, (2003f) are ‘finding information about goods and services’ (79%) or ‘using email’ (72%). ‘Using or accessing government or official services’ came tenth out of thirteen options with 17%, just below ‘chatrooms or sites’ at 18%. The low level of interest in government websites thus remains a considerable obstacle to the universal access goal envisaged by the UK government as it seeks to develop and expand online political communication.

This was certainly confirmed by qualitative research conducted for the government as part of the UK government’s consultation on e-participation (e-Envoy, 2002c: 19-25). The research, which included a total of nineteen focus groups with ‘unengaged’⁵⁰ members of the public, ‘engaged’⁵¹ minority and disabled participants revealed a continued scepticism and lack of interest in the Internet in general, as well as its more specific application for e-participation and government. The enormous difference in access levels and take-up across different socio-economic groups is of great significance when one considers how the public of the Internet shapes the content as well as the types and forms of communication it supports, and how these in turn encourage or discourage further inclusion within the medium’s public. The discussion will now turn

⁵⁰ For the purposes of the research, this was defined as “those who do not currently participate in the political system” (e-Envoy, 2002c: 19).

⁵¹ ‘Engaged’ respondents were those who vote at least some of the time but do not use the Internet (e-Envoy, 2002c: 19).

to the issues of ‘accessibility’ and usability’ and explore how these define the boundaries and limits of the medium.

Accessibility can be taken to mean “that a broad range of software and audiences can actually receive (your) content” (e-Envoy, 2002a: 4). This is the definition used by the e-Envoy in its guidelines for UK Government websites. It suggests a clear separation in government policy between simple connectivity, and the more recent concerns of accessibility and usability. This implies taking into consideration issues such as literacy, computer literacy and user-friendliness, which all merit a brief discussion here.

38% of respondents in the Office of National Statistics (2003e) omnibus survey claimed that “lack of knowledge or confidence” prevents them from using the Internet. It would be reasonable to conjecture that lack of knowledge or confidence could, in part at least, be related to the requirement for basic literacy to be able to make full use of the Internet. Indeed, although much audio-visual information is now available on the Internet, and this can be delivered more quickly thanks to increasing bandwidth, the Internet still is a medium which still depends heavily on written information for the navigation of sites as well as for communication between users. In this respect, it is worth bearing in mind that literacy rates are still disappointingly low, even in industrialized countries: the UK has a functional illiteracy rate of 21.8%⁵².

A number of sources indicate that the accessibility of Internet content poses a problem to a number of users. For example, a report published online by the US National Center for Family Literacy (2000) claims that “everything on the Net is for intermediate readers”, suggesting that there is some veracity in this assumption. In any case the essentially text-based presentation of complex policy issues on a government website is likely to be somewhat arduous for a portion of the population, although respect of its

⁵² The functional illiteracy rate is defined as the percentage of people aged 16-65 scoring at level 1 on the prose literacy scale of the International Adult Literacy Survey (United Nations Development Programme, 2003).

own guidelines in terms of accessibility would certainly go some way towards remedying this. It is worth noting, for example, that even the UK Online homepage did not comply with the accessibility tests advocated in the e-Envoy's guidelines.⁵³

The UK Government has introduced legislation which means that it is now mandatory for government websites to comply with the minimum level of the World Wide Web Consortium's Web Accessibility Initiative (World Wide Web Consortium, 2003). However, the *Guidelines for UK Government Websites* produced by the e-Envoy (2002a) stress that compliance with these recommendations alone will not necessarily mean that a website can meet the needs of different users, highlighting the difference between *accessibility* and *usability*. For a website to be 'usable' the interface should be "accessible, appealing, consistent, clear, simple, navigable and forgiving of user blunders" (Murray and Costanzo, 1999 [online version]). Indeed, Internet users have to contend with technical and navigational issues on top of basic literacy and comprehension.

A survey carried out by Lazarus and Mora (2000) for the American Children's Partnership Organisation pinpointed the fact that many experience great difficulties trying to navigate their way around the Internet. First of all, the survey underlined the difficulties encountered using search engines, which is hardly surprising considering the sheer volume of pages available on the Internet. It also highlighted the pressing need for the ways of presenting and organising this information in a more manageable format, a role which ISPs and Internet portals in particular are apt to fulfil. In statistical terms, the survey revealed that 80% of respondents said that they took too long to find the information they were looking for; 65% found the information difficult to understand or badly organised, 65% found it difficult to navigate around the sites. More recent work conducted by Lazar, Bessiere, Ceaparu, Robinson and Shneiderman (2003) also concurs with the finding that poorly-educated and low income users are more likely to experience difficulties in navigating the Internet, and they demonstrate that high

⁵³ The accessibility test on the Bobby website returned a number of comments for the UKOnline homepage. See: <http://bobby.watchfire.com/bobby/html/en/index.jsp>

levels of frustration and low rates of success are common when trying to complete common tasks.

The fact that information can be made available in a timely fashion and updated with minimum complications has undoubtedly led many to expect that using the Internet will save them time. Acland (2003b: 3) warns in a paper on designing online consultation processes that “people’s (often unconscious) expectation of anything electronic is that it will be easier and quicker than its non-electronic equivalent”. Certainly, many industry insiders and other commentators have noted that ease of use is tantamount to the success of a webpage, which may seem somewhat of a truism. It is hardly surprising therefore that this has led to the emergence of a new sector of consultants specialising in usability issues, with the endorsement of Andrew Pinder, the Head of the e-Envoy until mid-2004 (Light, 2003).

4.4 Key features of online communication

The previous section highlighted the challenges of accessibility and usability in relation to the Internet. Both these issues have a profound impact on inclusion in the online setting, demonstrating the need for an understanding of the problem which goes beyond simple access to a computer, and considers other obstacles such as literacy, motivation and website design. This section takes forward this discussion on inclusion through its study of emerging patterns of social interaction and communication online. The relevance of this to the current study is clear: nowhere is inclusion of greater importance than in online political communication on a government platform.

Studies looking at how computer-mediated communication has impacted upon interpersonal communication have been conducted since the late 1960s and early 1970s, when governments and businesses introduced the first electronic mail and conferencing systems (Hiltz and Turoff, 1978 quoted in Dutton, 1996: 270). CMC can take place over a wide variety of systems and platforms, ranging from email (interpersonal), blogs and listservs (one-to-many), to chat room and fora (many-to-many). The focus of this

thesis is on Internet fora, and thus on asynchronous many-to-many communication; nevertheless, all the principal features of computer-mediated communication will be examined here at least briefly. The discussion will therefore deal with the forms of communication which have emerged as a result of the disembodied nature of participants in CMC, as well those which the dual features of synchronicity and asynchronicity have encouraged.

4.4.1 *The consequences of disembodiment*

When referring to communication, the adjective ‘disembodied’ denotes the lack of physical presence of those taking part. This implies that many of the cues used to aid understanding – such as body language, tone of voice and facial expressions – are missing, making it more difficult for the reader(s) of a message to pick up on the emotions of the sender (Schweizer, Paechter and Weidenmann, 2001). In the absence of such cues, misunderstandings can occur even more easily than in face-to-face communication. To counter this, a series of symbols intended to depict emotions have been developed, often referred to as ‘emoticons’. The symbols involve using different punctuation and letter keys from the keyboard to create ‘smiling’ or ‘frowning’ faces⁵⁴. In addition to the use of emoticons, non-standard use of capital letters and punctuation marks tend to be used to depict strong emotion.

In face-to-face communication much care and attention is devoted to avoiding misunderstanding and preserving one’s own ‘face’ as well as that of the others with whom one is engaged in communication. Erving Goffman developed the notion of *face* in his 1967 work entitled *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behaviour*. He defined the term as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular social contact”, and noted that “almost all acts involving others are modified proscriptively or prescriptively, by considerations of face” (Goffman, 1967, quoted in Jaworski and Coupland (eds.), 1999:

⁵⁴ A list of the common “emoticons” can be found on the site of the following hi-tech online dictionary: <http://www.computeruser.com/resources/dictionary/emoticons.html>

306-310). Thus, the maintenance of face is a condition rather than a desired outcome of interaction, and social actors will adopt a line and build later responses upon this so as to maintain consistency. In so doing they attempt to avoid incidents which would cause face to be lost, by adopting strategies which are protective of others' face or defensive of their own⁵⁵.

Many claim that the disembodied nature of CMC results in a 'disinhibiting' effect on interaction (Dutton 1996: 270). One consequence of the depersonalisation of communication mediated by computers is the fact that in the online environment exchanges can rapidly deteriorate into forceful, even vitriolic attacks – a trend known as 'flaming'. White (2001) describes 'flaming' as sending hostile, unprovoked messages, though points out that the perception of what constitutes a 'flame' varies from group to group. She also notes that, although some may find it entertaining, it tends to drive others away from an online discussion. The risks in terms of inclusion of such techniques being used in government-organised political communication are self-evident.

Of course, the 'disinhibiting' effect of CMC can also partly be accounted for by a further consequence of disembodiment in the online environment: the fact that people can adopt pseudonyms or even aliases and in so doing conceal their true identity. Although the average person does this only to protect his privacy or with innocent intentions, it can nevertheless be done with malicious intent, with some paedophiles posing as teenagers to lure potential victims. This has caused such concern that Microsoft decided to close its unmoderated chatrooms amid fears about child safety (BBC News online, 2003).

⁵⁵ Amongst such strategies Goffman includes avoidance (e.g. tactful blindness) and corrective processes (e.g. excuses and other forms of politeness), aggressive (e.g. point-making) and cooperative processes (e.g. hinted communication and allusion).

The perception that ‘anything goes’ online has been a cause for concern and a source of consternation amongst many Internet communities. In his study of two online fora, the Public Electronic Network (PEN) in Santa Monica, California and the University of Southern California Bulletin Board System (ISCBBS), Dutton (1996) presents the results of a survey into the rights and responsibilities of users. Some 35% (twice as many as cited any other concern), expressed concern at the lack of civility and appropriate decorum in the forum.

To counter this and to foster stronger ties between those communicating, many community and discussion websites have established charters and codes of conduct. ‘Network etiquette’ or ‘netiquette’ are the common Internet terms given to such codes and charters⁵⁶. While these and self-policing are two possible options to counter such problems, the use of moderation can be the most effective way of ensuring that norms of interaction such as civility and relevance are respected. White (2004) provides a useful taxonomy of seven key moderator types that can be found in the online environment. These are presented below in Figure 10⁵⁷.

⁵⁶ Good references on netiquette can be found on the Albion reference site:
<http://www.albion.com/netiquette/>

⁵⁷ The study of the forum content will return to the issue of moderation and examine its role within the e-DCF forum.

Moderator type	Description
Social host	Here moderator acts as dinner host, making participants feel comfortable and helping to build up an inclusive discussion between them. As such, the moderator is often part of the discussion.
Project manager	This type of moderator is very task-oriented with a strong focus on deadlines and process.
Community of practice facilitator	Community of practice facilitators are community-focused attempting to build knowledge and relationships within a specific interest group.
The Cybrarian	The Cybrarian acts as an online librarian, assisting participants in finding information
Help desk facilitators	Help desk facilitators restrict their intervention primarily to issues of technical support
Referees	Referees tend not to be part of the ongoing discussion and restrict their interventions to enforcing forum rules and norms; they can be good cops or bad cops
Janitor	A janitor works in the forum ensuring order and tidiness.

Figure 10: Moderator/Facilitator types (adapted from White, 2004).

As can be seen from Figure 10 above, moderation itself can be enforced with varying degrees of vigour: the moderator can be anything from invisible and passive (by establishing the broad architecture of the discussion – for example through threads – and by pre-moderating contributions before they are posted to the site) to active (by participating in the discussion and sharing, even promoting, his or her own opinions⁵⁸). Clearly the neutrality of the role of moderator, and the extent to which hostile (or

⁵⁸ Shell's site (www.shell.com) is an interesting example: in its forum the company invites the public to give its opinions on Shell's activities, such as, for example, in Nigeria in relation to its human rights record. The forum moderators contribute actively to the forum and passionately defend Shell's position.

oppositional) opinions are ‘moderated’ out of the discussion can have a clear impact on its inclusiveness.

A frequent practice is for contributions to be pre-moderated. Generally this is not a process of selection as found with letters to the editor in the traditional press, but a basic check to ensure compliance with the forum rules and respect of the law. However, users can often perceive this differently and conspiracy theories abound in many fora. If the pre-moderation is felt to be unnecessarily disruptive to the flow of communication or biased this can lead to some consternation, and in time drive some participants away. Both the results of the studies conducted by Dutton (1996) and those conducted for this present case study confirm this.

Furthermore, there are particular difficulties associated with introducing moderators to an unmoderated forum discussion: in spite of the concerns raised about the appropriateness of many comments posted to the forum, when moderation was introduced to the PEN network studies, many frequent users of the site resented it and felt that this impinged on the unstructured nature of the discussion (Dutton, 1996: 277-278). O’Baioill (1999) and O’Neill (1999) also both deal with this question. In their case, their studies suggest that when a forum’s organisers adopt an advocacy role, the site can often be subject to a greater degree of censorship.

4.4.2 The consequences of synchronicity and asynchronicity

The dual qualities of synchronicity and asynchronicity have been of key importance in facilitating interpersonal communication via the Internet without the normal constraints of geography and time. Synchronous communication refers, of course, to communication which takes place in ‘real time’ on the Internet. Mostly this occurs through messenger services in Internet chat rooms and is more frequently used for interpersonal rather than ‘many-to-many’ communication.

Dutton (1996: 271) points out that CMC tends to be more spontaneous than other forms of written communication. This can imply the use of abbreviations, colloquialisms and non-standard syntax, as the following section in this chapter will demonstrate. This is most evident in the case of synchronous communication, such as is found, for example, in chat rooms; here speed is tantamount to keeping the flow of communication smooth. However, even in communication which is classified as asynchronous (e.g. message-boards and fora), the speed with which messages can be delivered means that even these exchanges can be rapid, even conversation-like. As such, they are prone to more errors and spelling mistakes than might be found in other forms of written communication (Dutton, 1996: 271). This would seem to suggest that participants in online communication believe that the form (grammar) is less important than the performance (communication).

Holding more than a two-way conversation online in real time poses problems in terms of the manageability of communication. Problems include, for example, typing delays and transmission lags, which can make the process laborious (Balabanovic, Oxley and Gerritsen, 2003: 9). In synchronous communication discussions are hosted in a space populated by those who are online at the same time. In an interpersonal context it is unusual for these to be stored for posterity; this tends to happen mostly when they form part of a broadcast webchat hosted by a prominent Internet content provider. In asynchronous communication, however, the storage of messages is one of the principal features which gives it its greater flexibility as a form of communication. This is also the feature which makes it particularly apt for political communication such as consultations.

However, it should be noted that there is a fine line between the type of communication which occurs in chat rooms and what occurs in unmoderated fora where messages are posted immediately. In both, messages tend to be short and structured very much like conversations. The distinguishing feature is in the storage method: synchronous messages are posted in real time without being stored, whereas forum messages are stored on the site and can be viewed and replied to at a later time. Herein lies the flexibility of asynchronous online communication; it can be conducted without all

parties needing to be online at the same time, a function of particular use to people wishing to communicate in different time zones.

Asynchronous communication is extremely flexible; information can be delivered rapidly, whilst at the same time being coupled with resource libraries of documents and articles. The BBC⁵⁹ is one organisation to take full advantage of this flexibility and it often runs a bulletin board alongside webcasts which are linked in to user polls as well as articles and information pages on the relevant topic. Market research companies and pollsters also use similar techniques to conduct online research, often across a number of different countries.

The possibility of asynchronicity, together with the transfer of information in digital codes, results in the “infinite reproducibility of information” on the Internet (Poster, 1995 [online version]). This is perhaps most evident within a news setting, as information can be updated, added to and fed into other stories, sometimes even through other media (Castells, 2000). However, it is also crucial in a political setting, precisely for purposes such as online consultations or ‘deep polling’, which require a wide variety of views to be compiled, counted and analysed⁶⁰.

The platforms supporting asynchronous communication range from the most basic bulletin boards conceived as a virtual message board for miscellaneous messages⁶¹, to complex discussion fora designed to foster complex interactive discussions. Regardless of complexity, a system for the organisation and presentation of posts is nevertheless

⁵⁹ Current fora can be found at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/talking_point/default.stm

⁶⁰ Such a methodology is being pioneered by UK research company YouGov which has built up a strong reputation for accurate polling through its online panel; its deep polling methodology is designed to add an in-depth qualitative and deliberative element to polling. See: www.yougov.com

⁶¹ Upmystreet (<http://www.upmystreet.com>) offers a bulletin board which allows people to post messages for others living in the same area.

required. With the simple bulletin board this system tends to be chronological, with messages simply listed one after the other on a webpage. This is common where the topic of the website is already quite specific and is designed for a low volume of traffic. With more complex platforms, topic-based systems are common as these allow both the users and the organisers to keep track better of the evolution of the discussion. In online fora, 'threads' are crucial to the organisation of communication.

'Threads' enable participants to respond to the initial line of enquiry or any subsequent comment, such that the discussion 'branches' out from the initial message into several sub-discussions. Participants in the discussion can choose to respond to the most recent message in a chain or any preceding message in that thread. New threads can also be created as the discussion develops to manage new topics. Different permission levels can be established to control who can start a new thread: the most basic systems, such as the UK Online forum, allow anyone to open up a new thread; more complex systems tend to restrict this function to the moderator.

More complex systems, such as that seen on the website Slashdot, even allow for a grading of postings by peers (with highly-rated contributions receiving the top rankings). This can be particularly useful when fora contain a large number of postings which participants would have to view to be able to contribute constructively to the development of the debate. Amongst the most complex forms of discussion fora are those found in a market research context, where they are often referred to as bulletin board focus groups. Here, advanced software gives the moderator even greater opportunities to guide and structure the debate⁶². These include: e-mailing reminders to participants; posting stimuli for discussion; enforcing the answering of questions, including on a sequential basis, through the use of multiple screens; probing respondents for additional information on a one-to-one basis. In addition, the 'bare bones' structure of the debate is set up prior to the session such that the thread structure is pre-determined to control the flow of the discussion. This can prove particularly useful when the objectives and timeframe of the forum are established in advance.

⁶² See for example I-Tracks: <http://www.itracks.com/>

As with moderation, more complex organisation systems can result in limiting the free-wheeling nature of a forum discussion; spontaneity and participant freedom are curbed, the more structured the forum. On the other hand, additional tools help to ensure focus and to organise the discussion so that conclusions and key themes can be extracted easily for presentation in a summary document (Acland 2003a). This issue is explored in greater detail in the analysis of the online interface below: the discussion examines the extent to which the UK Online forum interface influences the format of the discussion, and the extent to which the participants in the discussion conform to the framework provided or try to subvert it.

4.5 Features of the online interface

A number of variables can be identified in different forum models which provide a framework for the running of an e-participation initiative. These are:

1. Use of stimuli
2. Forum management tools
3. Moderation tools
4. The ‘panopticon’ effect
5. Degree of community-building possible
6. Output

Different interfaces apply these variables differently to different ends and with different effects. Acland (2003b) identifies and contrasts two different models of online consultation device, which he terms as the ‘forum’ and ‘template’ models. These represent two different ends of the spectrum in terms of the use of the variables to sculpt communication through the forum interface; they also represent tried and tested models used in e-participation initiatives in the UK. The ‘freewheeling forum model’ can be aligned with the model used for the UK Online e-democracy consultation forum which has been used elsewhere by the Hansard Society; the ‘template’ model can be aligned with the model currently being developed and used by specialist consultancy Dialogue

by Design⁶³. The discussion in this section draws on comparisons between the two models in order to thematise how decision-making on the forum interface variables can impact on the limits and boundaries of communication. The implications of the choices made in the e-DCF are then taken up and developed in some detail in Chapter 5.

The logistics of the freewheeling model have already been touched upon in section 4.1.4. The template model, on the other hand, functions as follows: the debate is presented as a series of screens, each comprising an information window, a question section, and an input box for participant comments. Participants are able to progress from one screen to the next once they have posted their contribution. Different screens could ask participants to rate options, to make or respond to suggestions. Participants can view others' responses to the same questions in a separate section of the site where these can be sorted by question, by participant and by viewpoint (as coded by the moderator). The model could also be set up so that participants are not able to see others' contributions prior to posting their own. The debate can be broken down into several 'iterations', meaning that conclusions and priorities from one can be fed into the next dynamically; not all topics are pre-decided by the moderator.

The principal difference between the two models, therefore, is in the level of freedom/control enjoyed by participants/moderator in each of the models. This is reflected in the different use of the six variables in each model. The discussion here examines the use of the six variables listed above in respect of the e-DCF genre interface, and draws on the differences between the two models where appropriate to thematise issues relevant to inclusion in the e-DCF forum.

⁶³ Dialogue by Design specialises in online stakeholder dialogue, public participation and consultation, conflict resolution and software design. See:

http://www.dialoguebydesign.net/About_Dbyd/who_we_are.htm

4.5.1 Use of stimuli

The use of stimuli relates to the ability of the interface to incorporate background documentation or other stimuli in the discussion as appropriate. The forum model does not at present allow for this, and during the e-DCF participants were directed to a separate website where background information, a library of additional sources and the government's consultation papers could be downloaded. The template interface allows for stimuli to be integrated more easily, for example, by having a split screen, with a scrollable information window at the top of the screen, and a separate section below into which participants type their response. Since the template is designed with screen size in mind, the consultation document is broken down into small thematic 'chunks' which are each presented on a screen. Acland (2003b: 4) argues that this allows for a better use of time and space online: participants can subvert their brief by posting off-topic, however this does not create the 'noise' which slows down debate in the e-DCF model.

4.5.2 Forum management tools

The analysis of the Internet as medium explored some of the ways in which asynchronous communication increases the level of flexibility in terms of how communication can take place: one example of this flexibility which is of particular relevance to e-participation initiatives, is the possibility of many more people participating in an asynchronous online discussion than would be possible for face-to-face or synchronous online communication. This is because participants can add their contributions at a time of their choosing, and the discussion can stay online over a period of time. However, this flexibility brings with it a number of issues. Most notably, it increases the number of possible exchanges in the online discussion, thus the number of opinions and views and, in turn, the amount of information generated. It therefore raises a considerable problem of manageability: a forty-page document can probably generate enough talking points to sustain numerous threads, and possibly even several active fora, over a number of months. How then should the discussion of issues be structured over time and across the range of topics to enable a sufficiently in-depth, yet manageable treatment of these?

One possible strategy to increase the manageability of topic coverage in an online forum is the introduction of punctual events throughout its course. This is a strategy advocated by Acland (2003a), and used in the template model. It would tend to involve staggering themed phases of the debate over a limited period of time (for example, phase one would run for three weeks on topic X, phase two would run for three weeks on topic Y etc.). As a result, each phase would be likely to receive a more manageable (smaller) number of contributions from participants, making it easier for the moderator and participants alike to review and comment on these.

Another interface tool is 'sequential ordering'. This is also used in the template model, and allows the moderator to set up certain 'rules' which determine the order in which participants can view the information screens and make their contributions. A rule could prevent participants from seeing material on a particular thematic area until they have given their opinions on another, a tool of particular use in gauging participants' opinions before and after a particular factor is introduced to the debate. In addition, a 'rule' could be set up which prevents participants from seeing others' opinions on a certain topic until they have given their own. This can help ensure that 'peer pressure', or what Noelle-Neumann (1984) refers to in public opinion theory⁶⁴ as the 'spiral of silence', does not come to bear on participants; if participants do not know how others are posting, they will be less likely to feel pressurised into posting 'socially acceptable' contributions which echo these. It is clear from this that problems of 'internal exclusion' in the forum are closely bound with the choice of interface variables.

4.5.3 Moderation tools

The moderator has a fundamental role in guiding the direction of any online discussion forum, as well as in ensuring that the debate takes place in an orderly and acceptable manner: whatever the interface, in a consultation setting, the moderator is responsible for ensuring that the forum is a "safe place" where users feel "keen" to participate (see the e-DCF rules), which means that his remit includes surveying the issue of internal

⁶⁴ See the discussion in section 2.6.2.

exclusion. White (2004) claims that where the moderator is not the person responsible for controlling the direction of the discussion, it can result in a loss of focus. It is clear that there is also a considerable risk of internal exclusion; where the moderation is not driving forward the debate, control is ceded to one or more participants with their own agendas, and this might not extend to ensuring that all participants are included.

The role of the moderator in the template and forum models is very different: in the template model the weight of the moderator's work falls prior to the launch of the discussion, when the 'template' or basic outline for the structure of the debate must be established and set up. During the actual running of the debate there is less call for the moderator to intervene in the discussion to keep it 'on topic' since the interface, rather than participants or the moderator, directs the flow of contributions. The moderator's role is therefore to code contributions so that participants can view them in the relevant section of the website (by question, by participant or by viewpoint, as previously mentioned), or to probe respondents individually via email if their responses are unclear.

In the forum model, the moderator's role is more labour-intensive: very little about the set up of the forum is defined prior to its launch, so the moderator must ensure *in situ* that the discussion covers the range of issues on the agenda and does not stray too far from them, as well as ensuring that participants respect the forum rules in the tone, manner and content of their contributions. In the forum model, topics are managed through the creation of new threads; both participants and the moderator can do this. As can be seen from Figure 11 below, in the e-DCF forum model the interface makes it possible to see the date the last comment was made but not the date the thread was started. The figure also shows that participants can choose any name for the threads they create; therefore, it is not always possible to see what the content of a thread is without browsing through the forum.

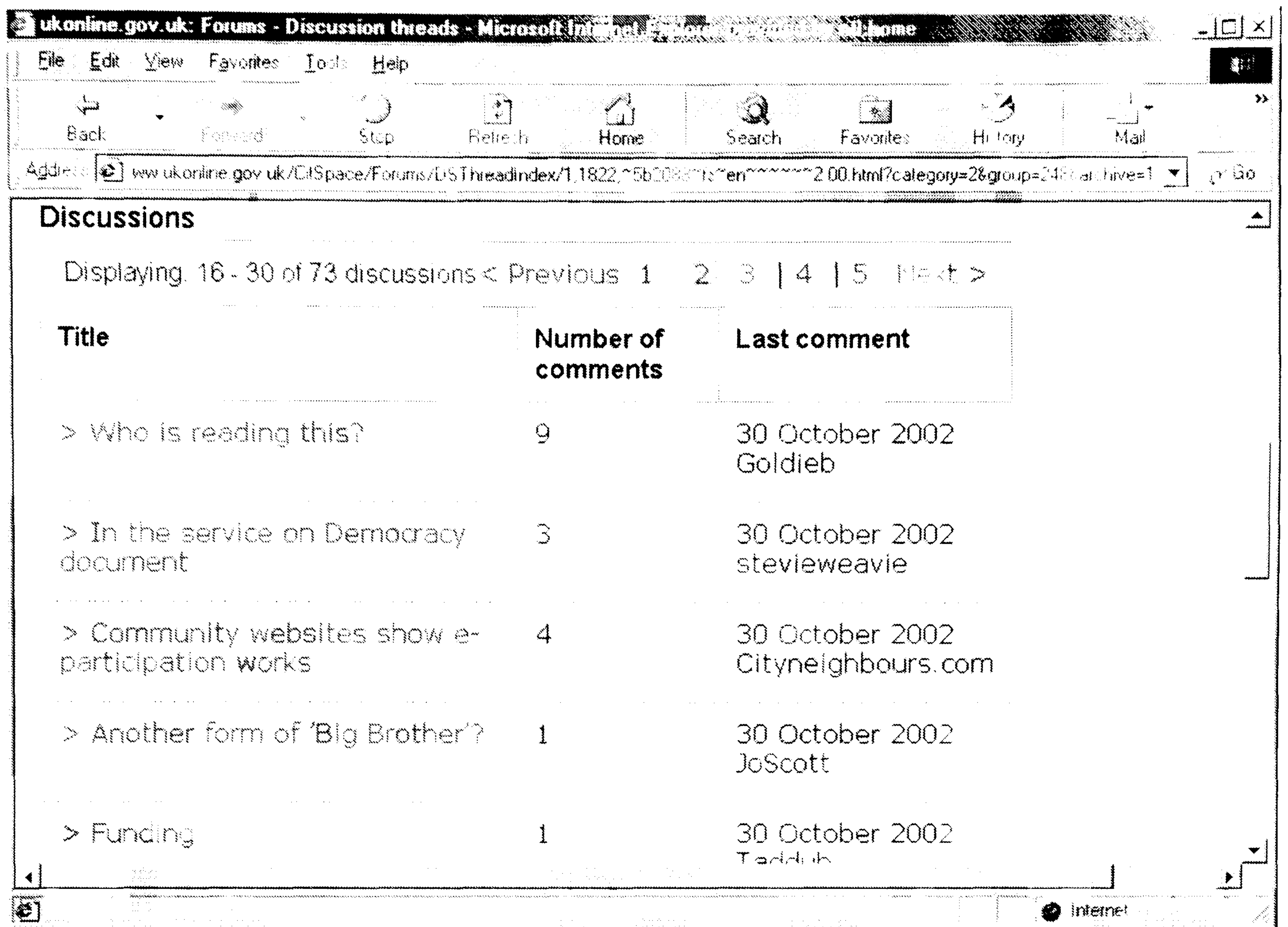


Figure 11: Screen showing threads in e-DCF (Last accessed: 4.June 2003).

The fact that both moderator and participants can start threads in the e-DCF model allows for a more interactive deliberation process, with both parties having the opportunity to put topics on the discussion agenda and structure the debate through the creation of new threads. However, new threads can be created inappropriately thus causing the focus of the discussion to be lost, for example, when discussion on a particular topic occurs in several threads simultaneously. As a result, the forum discussion splinters into several sub-groups and the 'visibilisation' of the debate on screen becomes confusing.

In addition, in the forum model the moderator does not have any specific tools at his disposal to keep the debate flowing; there is no functionality in the interface to help prevent or rectify any digressions or indiscretions, and he can only remind participants to stay 'on topic'. Moderators in both models dispose of the tools of pre-moderation and censorship, although the relative importance of these tools in the forum model is

greater. Pre-moderation is obviously unseen as it occurs prior to contributions being posted. Censorship, on the other hand, enables moderators to remove a contribution from the site after it has been posted. As a remedial, rather than preventative tool, it is less desirable. In both models, there is a clear risk that if participants perceive the forum as being over-moderated or too inflexible in its structure, they will feel that their participation is pointless, and the exercise tokenistic. This is something which clearly has implications for the credibility of e-participation exercises.

4.5.4 The 'panopticon' effect

The 'panopticon' effect relates to the visibility which the moderator has of the discussion, and how this varies from that enjoyed by participants. For example, the moderator could share basically the same interface as the participants (as is the case with the forum model) or could have additional interfaces which give him additional viewing and organisational abilities (as it the case with the template model). These additional abilities can be compared to what Foucault (1977) refers to as the 'panopticon effect'. Drawing on Bentham, he describes a prison where the authorities/prison wardens are able to survey the prisoners at all times. In simplified terms it may be said that in Foucault's model, knowledge is power, and this has a sinister importance which it need not necessarily have in the online forum; nevertheless, it does indicate a structural inequality in power.

The level of freedom afforded to participants flows from that afforded to the moderator: in the forum model the interface does not provide the moderator with tools which augment his visibility of the forum, and here the participants enjoy virtually free reign. The moderator can only guide participants by suggesting, probing and requesting, before he must turn to pre-moderation and censorship. However, participants can even circumvent censorship by creating an additional username for themselves and adopting a new pseudonym. This proved a problem in the e-DCF (Wood, S, 2004, per. comm., 20 January).

With the template model, on the other hand, a large amount of the moderator's work is focused on setting up the discussion template prior to the launch, which involves defining all the various parameters within which the discussion – and the participants – must operate. This involves defining areas where ideas are sought, where priorities should be ranked, and where opinions should be given. Therefore, participants clearly have much less margin for manoeuvre and less freedom than in the forum model. The implications are clear in terms of the sense of empowerment which participants are likely to feel within the consultation process; they will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

4.5.5 Community-building

'Community-building' implies the extent to which participants are able to 'interact' or engage with each other through the interface, i.e. the extent to which their contributions can be oriented towards each other in addition to the moderator/organiser. Therefore, the degree of community-building possible is tied to the structuring of the debate and thus to the other interface variables: greater levels of freedom enable the possibility of participants 'interacting' with each other, but offer no guarantees that this will occur. Indeed, forum communication can be agonistic and dissentious, just as it can be 'community-building'. On the other hand, it would be fair to say that a strongly pre-defined procedural structure, such as is found in the template model, is likely to reduce the opportunities for participants to interact extensively with each other and build up a group dynamic.

Crucially for e-participation, the decision to opt for one or other approach in the choice of interface should be defined by the goals of the exercise: is there a value in participants interacting with each other (by sharing their opinions, experiences and best practice lessons), or does this mainly bring risks (of loss of focus, internal exclusion etc.)? This issue is therefore closely related also to the forum output.

4.5.6 Output

In a political context, the purpose of most fora is broadly speaking to gain a wider understanding of citizen opinions on a given policy issue, and the most common format for forum output is a report which represents a collation of the opinions expressed, often with a brief summary or analysis. The preparation of the report can be a time-consuming activity depending on the quantity of contributions received. Even although the availability of electronic data (as opposed to hand- or typewritten data) is time-saving in itself, additional measures can be taken to order and structure contributions with database functions with a view to assisting the analysis and presentation of ideas.

As noted, the template model allows participants to view contributions by question, by participant and by viewpoint, and this latter view is made possible by the moderator's coding of contributions. To assist in this process, the moderator can set up questions which require participants to rank different options, or define text search 'filters', which enable responses to be sorted and coded automatically depending on their content. Although the moderation task is still onerous, some time is saved. Moreover, the transparency of this model can be advantageous if the final report is intended to represent the participants' opinions: by viewing the contributions through the filters available, it is possible to make a quick comparison with the final report.

This is in stark contrast with the e-DCF model. Here the report represented the moderator's view of the opinions expressed in the forum, and was thus neither 'neutral' nor transparent: the moderator was able to pick and choose the contributions he wished to feature in his thematic summary, and to contextualise these with his own commentary. The plethora of discussion threads made this process even less transparent than it might otherwise have been. Given the importance of the final report as the culmination of the discussion process, its credibility lies at the heart of the success of an e-participation initiative. The implications attached to the choice of output are worthy of further consideration; this issue is explored in further detail in Chapter 5 (see section 5.3.4).

4.6 Analysis of forum communication

4.6.1 *Setting*

The setting for the online forum is the UK Online website. It was launched in 2000 by the Office of the e-Envoy as part of the as part of the government's high profile campaign of the same name to get citizens online, and was the key portal for citizens wishing to access government information and services online until 2004⁶⁵. The UK Online website comprised six key sections:

1. Do it online

Do it online was the transactional or service-based part of the site which allowed citizens to link to government services online, such as tax return submissions, driving test applications etc.

2. Newsroom

The newsroom section gave the latest news from government departments and the devolved administrations, as well as information on current high profile parliamentary bills.

3. Quick find

The quick find section allowed users to search across government websites and to browse government websites by topic index. It contained an A to Z of central and local governments and links to local services.

4. Your life

Your life featured themed 'life episodes' designed to inform and assist citizens by offering advice and guidance on these topics (e.g. moving home, having a baby etc.).

5. CitizenSpace

CitizenSpace housed the forum and consultation sections. It also gave information on voting and elections, elected representatives and how to complain about public services.

⁶⁵ When UK Online was replaced by Direct.gov: www.direct.gov.uk

It was intended as the ‘interactive’ part of the site, offering the opportunity to citizens to engage with government through the ‘Consultations’ and ‘Forums’ sections.

As can be seen from Figure 7 (see section 4.1.2) the information under the ‘Latest Consultations’ heading was the main focus of attention on the CitizenSpace entry page at the time of the consultation, and the left-hand section of the page normally featured issues on which the government was seeking citizen input at that time. The box to the right of the heading contained a link to an index page of all the consultations which had been carried out by the government in recent years, including live and planned ones. Important details relating to each consultation were provided (i.e. department, title, start date and deadline). Users could click on the hyperlinked consultation title to be taken to the relevant mini-site on UK Online or the relevant departmental website where further information and background documents could be found and downloaded.

The ‘Forums’ heading could be found to the right-hand side of the page in a small grey box positioned below the ‘About consultations’ box. The box contained the tagline “Discuss new policy proposals and influence government decision-making”, clicking on a hyperlink took users to the Forum entry page, shown below in Figure 12:

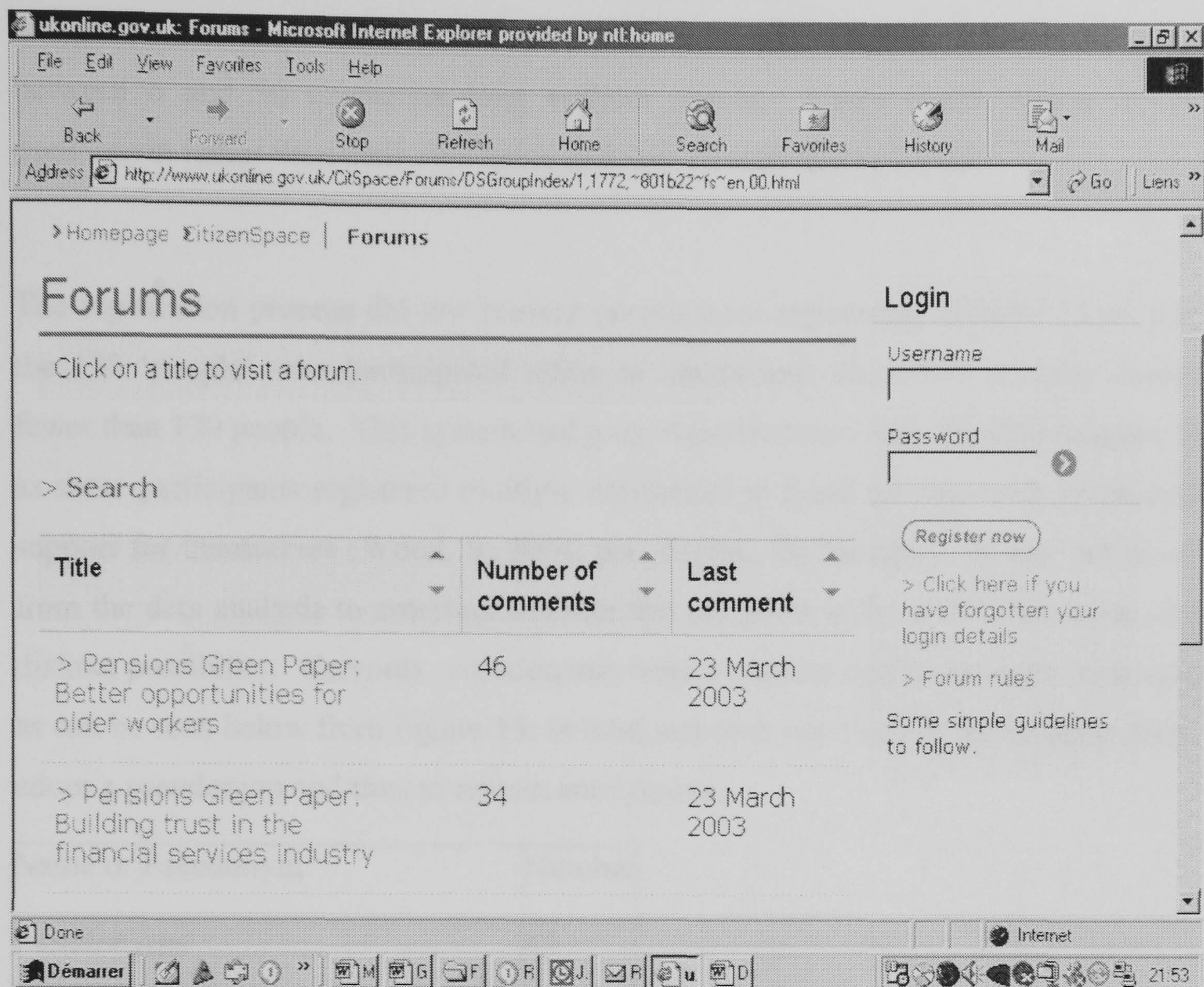


Figure 12: 'Forums' entry page (Last accessed: 4 June 2003).

In the 'Forums' section participants were able to choose between the different fora available. Four fora were listed until the site was closed mid-2004; 3 of these were on the pensions Green Paper, and one on e-democracy.

4.6.2 Participants

In total 130 'people' participated in the forum between 16th July and 31st October 2002. Thus the forum exceeded the minimum twelve week period condition set out in the government's *Code of Practice on Written Consultation* (Cabinet Office, 2004: 2). Participants were required to register before posting, although anyone could browse the content. The e-DCF allowed users to select their preferred language between English and Welsh; this was for the display of instructions only as the fora were run exclusively in English. Participants also had to agree to UK Online's Terms and Conditions at the registration stage. In addition, registration required participants to choose a username

and password and give their email address and postcode. Usernames could be anything between 6 and 30 characters long without spaces. Users could choose to use a pseudonym rather than their own name and thus remain ‘anonymous’.

The registration process did not prevent people from registering multiple identities, so the 130 ‘people’ who participated refers to usernames, and could actually comprise fewer than 130 people. This system had proved problematic with the CitizenSpace fora, as some participants registered multiple usernames to flood the fora with comments of support for themselves (Wood, S, 2004, per. comm., 20 January). It was not possible from the data analysis to ascertain whether this occurred in the e-DCF, however, it is a distinct possibility. Certainly, pseudonyms were a popular option amongst participants, as can be seen below from Figure 13: in total just over one third of participants chose to adopt a pseudonym and thus to remain anonymous.

Name or Pseudonym	Number
Pseudonyms	47
Name	54
Variations on names and others	29
Total	130

Figure 13: Use of pseudonyms by forum contributors

The Hansard Society moderators and a large number of the contributing practitioners were amongst those who chose to keep their real names enabling them to be identified more easily. A number of other participants appeared to have adopted variations on their full name as a username for the forum (e.g. ‘davenewman’).

Aside from the anonymous/named distinction, broadly speaking the forum participants can be broken down into four key groups of stakeholders in the e-democracy debate:

1. Members of the public (anonymous and named)
2. MPs, civil servants and council workers (anonymous and named)

3. Hansard society workers (moderators and staff, named)
4. Industry insiders and technical experts

These groups obviously cover a wide range of different experiences, interests and motivations in the policy debate, and this became evident in studying the different roles which participants act out in the forum.

White (2001[online version]) offers a taxonomy of typical forum member roles and types. This relates to fora where participants interact with each other through an online interface: it includes the appropriately named ‘core participants’, ‘readers/lurkers’, ‘dominators’, ‘flamers’, ‘pollinators’ and ‘spammers’. These different types of participants adopt different behaviours in the discussion, and fulfil different social roles within the online group or ‘community’ formed around the forum. However, as White points out “every community and online group is different. The purposes vary, the structures are different – and the people are different”. Through detailed study of the contributions of the 130 participants in the forum, it was possible to drill down into the four stakeholder groups to identify a taxonomy specific to the e-DCF. The groups identified were⁶⁶:

1. Contributor as citizen
2. Techie
3. Practitioner
4. Essayist
5. Point-maker
6. Point-scorer
7. Discussion feeder
8. Discussion Police
9. Moderators

⁶⁶ My taxonomy.

It should, however, be highlighted that participants can adopt different roles within the forum in different contributions. Nevertheless, these groupings offer an insight into contributor motivations for participating, their general approach to the debate, as well as the likely tone, register and style of their contributions. These issues are of interest because they can help uncover the distribution of power in the forum and therefore any potential issues of exclusion.

Contributor as citizen

This type of contributor invoked his experiences as a citizen in his posts. In fact, it is not uncommon for such contributors to make ‘calls to arms’ to other contributors and to express a strong interest in carrying out their civic duties. Contributions were often narratives relating the contributor’s own life experiences, as can be seen from the example in Appendix 1 (p.239) (“I live in the middle of a city, fortunately I have my own computer...”). In this contribution, the ‘citizen’ complains about the problem of ‘exclusion’ – a key concern for ‘citizens’ – by relating his experiences of the ‘digital divide’ in his local community.

‘Techie’

‘Techies’ tend to approach their contributions from the technical or technological perspective rather than a political or social one. Most used their contributions to present developments at the forefront of technology of relevance to the e-democracy policy debate, for example in software or applications. However, as this group often expressed quite techno-centric or specialist viewpoints, some participants may not have been able to understand the technicalities of their arguments. ‘Techies’ also had a helpful role to play in the forum by assisting other participants who were struggling with the forum technology. Appendix 2 (p.239) provides one such example: it shows a ‘techie’ trying to take a partially-sighted participant through the technical options to solve the problem of the small text size on screen. Although the contributor makes a self-effacing effort to relate to the other participant (“perhaps it is me but...”), and to keep his explanation as simple as possible, he uses an abundance of technical terms (e.g. ‘scroll’, ‘default’) which highlight his knowledge and enthusiasm for the technical side of the Internet. This example is typical of the type submitted by ‘techies’ as Internet enthusiasts.

Practitioner

'Practitioners' in the forum tended to be government or council workers, or representatives of stakeholder non-governmental organisations or companies. In most cases, practitioners clearly stated the organisation which they represented, their background and expertise in the field. This group was the most likely to table suggestions of models and frameworks in their contributions, and used the forum to seek input from other participants on these. Appendix 3 (p.240) offers an example of a 'practitioner' contribution: the participant makes reference to his practical experience in the field ("as a member of") in order to increase the credibility of his comments. He also makes his points succinctly and his criticisms diplomatically ("discussion is not directed ... and can therefore fizzle into irrelevance"; "it would be nice to start with a sense of what..."). Crucially, his approach is constructive ("I'd be delighted to feedback..."), a key feature of practitioners' contributions. In other words, the focus of these participants tended to be on best practice and experience sharing.

Essayists

This group comprises contributors who to all intents and purposes could be practitioners or 'experts', but who do not explicitly mention their profession or area of expertise in their contribution. Therefore, amongst this group there is an interesting combination of claim of expertise with no obvious proof of it (compounded also by the 'anonymity' of some). Instead, their contributions tended to command credibility through their formal tone and conceptual approach. These contributors tended to offer a meta-analysis of the e-participation question, the consultation document, forum or relevant thread, and their contributions often made use of academic conventions such as citation (from the consultation document or past contributions) and critique. An example of an essay can be found in Appendix 11 (p.244).

Point-makers

Point-makers tended to pitch in 'standalone' contributions, i.e. contributions which do not explicitly solicit comments and critique. An example of such a contribution can be found in Appendix 4 (p.240). Contributions by point-makers often appeared to be motivated by a desire to bring forward a key point or issue which had not been

(sufficiently) explored in the debate (“the cable market is a complete basket-case”): they were often peppered with statements and rhetorical questions, rather than genuine questions (“it’s a big, nasty mess”). The tone of such contributions was often journalistic, sometimes even chatty, and contributions often took a polemic – and often, but not always, anti-government-perspective (“The e-Envoy’s Office is responsible for drafting policy but they have come up zilch apart from a vague framework document”).

Point-scorers

Point-scorers are not dissimilar to point-makers. However, these participants appeared to be motivated above all by verbal jousts with fellow participants: as the name suggests this group was more interested in scoring points than making them. Appendix 5 (p.241) demonstrates the cynical tone common in point-scorers’ contributions, and posting can be littered with put-downs or sarcastic retorts (“HmMMM let me see...Prime ministers question time...MP’s ask the PM questions and the PM answers them and these questions can be on any subject...seems like an open forum to me”). It is also in such postings that the few examples of ‘flaming’⁶⁷ in the forum were found.

Discussion feeders

Discussion feeders tended to ask a series of questions and ‘throw open’ the debate to others. For example, one asks: “I would like to know what people would like to see from MP websites” (see Appendix 6, p.241). This group was crucial to the development of the forum discussion as its approach promoted interaction and discussion and sought to open the debate by keeping the discussion moving forward and by encouraging others to participate in it.

Discussion police

These contributors assume a role of moderator’s ‘helper’ and ‘police’ the forum. However, they can also ‘police’ the moderators as well as the other participants, as the example in Appendix 7 (p.242) demonstrates (“What was the original comment and

⁶⁷ This was problematised and defined in section 4.4.1 on the consequences of disembodiment for Internet communication.

why was it removed?”). This type of contributor can also be relied on to ‘alert’ the moderator to problems or issues with the forum, and is generally concerned that the forum should be a success and fulfil its goals. For example, discussion police might encourage other participants to stay ‘on topic’ and post contributions which are reasonable and within the norms of acceptability for the forum. Another example of ‘policing’ in the forum occurred when a participant expressed concern about the small number of contributions posted, and encouraged ‘lurkers’ to join in.

Moderators

There were two moderators in the e-DCF forum. The principal moderator, Stephen Coleman, played the role of ‘social host’ by opening threads and new lines of discussion, asking questions of participants, setting out his own opinions, probing participants on particular questions and following up participants’ queries with the relevant authorities⁶⁸. The second moderator, Beccy Earnshaw, was much less visible with her interventions restricted almost entirely to ‘janitorial’ functions: she opened and closed the forum and set out the forum rules (see Appendix 19, p.250).

4.6.3 Ends

The ends and outcomes of the UK Online fora in general were discussed in some detail in the contextual research section (see section 4.1.4). In this section, the focus is therefore specifically on the ends of the e-DCF, which are set out in the Hansard Society’s final summary document. There it states that there is “potential for new technologies to facilitate, broaden and deepen participation in the processes of Government and our democratic institutions” and that the online discussion was, “perceived a means of demonstrating a commitment to these principles” (Hansard Society, 2002b: 1). Thus, the discussion was a mechanism whose purpose was to gain credibility for the government’s wider initiative to promote participation in policy-making (and in the legitimation of policies).

⁶⁸ See Appendix 8, Appendix 9 (pp.242-243), Appendix 20-Appendix 24 (pp.250-251).

The goal of the e-democracy forum, as stated in the consultation paper, was to seek citizens' input on the issues raised in the paper. In his opening contribution (see Appendix 8, p.242), the principal moderator, Stephen Coleman, assures participants that their contributions will hold sway (“[The government] wants to learn from you. I’ll make absolutely sure that all key messages from this forum are brought to their attention”). As noted in this quotation, the specific output from the forum in this case was a final report summarising the key points from the discussion in the online forum (Hansard Society, 2002b). This was submitted as a contribution to the wider consultation on e-democracy by the Hansard Society. The summary document ran to nine pages, and provided some basic statistics from the forum, a short analytical overview from the moderator's perspective and a thematic breakdown of the issues raised during the discussion (the state of democracy in the UK, opportunities for e-participation and the opportunities and risks of e-voting). The implications of this choice of output will be discussed in section 5.3.4.

4.6.4 Act characteristics

Communication in the e-DCF is characterised and constrained by the framework of the UK Online website, and the forum genre available on this platform. In the broadest terms, the forum consists of computer-mediated communication conducted on an asynchronous basis, structured around a thread-based topic system which allows participants who have registered a username to start a new topic or post a response to any other individual message in the forum. The date of the last posting for each thread is displayed in the index of threads page, allowing participants to see the threads which have been responded to most recently.

The forum ran for 108 days, from 16th July to 31st October. During this time, there were a total of 427 contributions made to 73 threads. The Hansard Society's final summary of the forum notes that an additional 152 contributions were received but pre-moderated out of the forum for being in contravention of the forum rules (Hansard Society, 2002b: 1): the 427 contributions posted to the site therefore represent 73.7% of

the total number submitted. Overall this gave an average of 3.3 contributions posted per participant.

Topic coverage through threads

To help distinguish between the different types of contribution, these can be broken down into threads and posts. A 'thread' is an opening contribution to a new discussion in the forum which features in the forum index in descending chronological order. Posts are contributions made in response to a thread or another post, and can only be located by clicking on the relevant thread on the forum index.

In total, 50 participants initiated 73 threads, giving an average of 1.5 threads initiated per person. The forum moderator, Stephen Coleman was the top thread initiator with 7 threads. Other Hansard Society members, Beccy Earnshaw (co-moderator) and Irving Rappaport (participant) were also amongst the top thread initiators. Of the 73 threads initiated, a total of 10 (13.7%) were started by the forum moderators. The top 4 contributors created 19 (around a quarter) of all the threads initiated. Around three quarters – or 38 threads – were made by participants who started only one thread. This would, on the surface at least, suggest a democratic control of the development of the debate.

Posts

A total of 97 people made posts to the forum, giving an average of 3.6 posts per person. Of the 354 posts made, 47 (13.2%) were made by the moderator. Nearly 80% of the posts were made by participants who posted three or fewer messages. A further 15% contributed between four and ten posts. Again, these statistics are suggestive of a debate which unfolded without one particular speaker/group monopolising it.

However, further analysis of the forum revealed that seven of the twelve top initiators were also amongst the top posters, and that eight of the top twenty posters were also top thread initiators. This indicates clearly a number of 'core' users, even 'dominators', of the forum (White, 2001) who tirelessly made regular contributions and started new

threads throughout the whole course of the forum period. In fact the top five contributors (including the moderator, Stephen Coleman) contributed as much as 38% of all contributions. Furthermore, excluding Stephen Coleman, just over a quarter (26%) of all contributions was made by four contributors⁶⁹. This indicates that the debate was, in fact, controlled by a small minority of regular participants, which may have impacted upon the inclusiveness of the forum by intimidating non-core participants from joining in fully.

A study of the distribution of threads and contributions during the course of the consultation period on a day-to-day basis (16th July – 31st October) shows that the beginning and end of the forum were particularly busy: as many as 22 comments were posted on 17th July and 17 on the second last day of the forum (30th October). Interestingly, the vast majority of contributions were made between Monday and Friday, with only a handful being made during any of the weekends. Looking more closely at the distribution of contributions on a month-by-month basis, it can be seen from Figure 14 below that October received the most (although with only one more than August), and September received the fewest with only 66.

Month	Threads	Posts ⁷⁰	Ratio of threads to contributions	Average number of contributions/day
July	16	110	1: 6.8	6.8
August	14	125	1:8.9	4
September	10	66	1:6.6	2.2
October	33	126	1:3.8	4
Total	73	427	1:5.85	3.95

Figure 14: Threads and posts broken down by month.

⁶⁹ The top contributors were Beth Porter, Broadsword, Kestrel & JeffShepperd.

⁷⁰ Threads are included in the total contribution count.

Proportionately July received the highest number of postings (at 6.8 per day) given that the forum only ran for the second half of the month. Clearly, the high average for July represents an initial flurry of enthusiasm and excitement at the beginning of the consultation. The quietest month was September, when an average of only 2.2 contributions per day was posted. Interest in the forum had clearly flagged by this point, only to be revived again shortly before the end of the forum when a second flurry of contributions was again witnessed. It can be concluded, therefore, that the forum discussion was sustained by a core of participants, with much of the volume of contributions coming from one-off contributors who made a single post without getting involved in the wider discussion, which raises questions about the representativity of the participant sample, and the likely range of opinions expressed by the small core group of participants.

Development of the debate

The main welcome to the forum and true opening of debate comes from Stephen Coleman with his posting entitled “Welcome to the online consultation” (see Appendix 8, p.242). This message sets the agenda for discussion, clarifies how the debate will unfold, what the role of the moderator will be as well as establishing the topic of the two initial discussion threads. The second moderator, Beccy Earnshaw, then posted a message “Housekeeping”, which explained how the moderation would work and referred participants to the rules to which they would have to adhere. This message was followed by a second entitled “e-democracy consultation rules” which reiterated the Forum rules from the UK Online website⁷¹.

The Hansard Society’s summary report of the consultation forum provides an insight into how the forum unfolded from the unique viewpoint of the moderator. The report notes that the discussion was composed of three broad stages. The first of these was marked by a high number of ‘keynote’ contributors who had been invited by the

⁷¹ These are discussed in detail under Norms of interaction and integration in section 4.6.7).

Hansard society⁷². A large number of these were posted in the first week of the forum, and tended to be comparatively lengthy. This phase corresponds approximately to the period of high activity which extended from the end of July to the middle of August.

The report states that the second phase required an amount of ‘pre-moderation’ owing to the number of contributors making posts complaining about the former CitizenSpace fora having been closed down. In spite of Stephen Coleman posting a number of times in an attempt to close down this line of discussion⁷³, numerous posts on this topic were still received which, according to the summary report, “led to a number of messages being classified as off-topic and excluded from the forum” and “exacerbated a sense of cynicism and paranoia amongst these few contributors who genuinely felt that the Government was determined to ignore them” (Hansard Society, 2002b: 1). As was noted above, a total of 152 contributions were received but pre-moderated out of the forum, demonstrating the difficulties of the moderator’s role in balancing the need for access against the need for norms of interaction to be enforced and respected (Hansard Society, 2002b: 1).

The Hansard Society summary report describes the ‘third stage’ of the consultation forum as “much more fragmentary”. Certainly the thread to contribution ratio is much lower during the end phase of the forum, as can be seen from Figure 14: many of the contributions made were threads, and did not build on other participants’ contributions, or seek to engage with them. The forum concluded with two messages from the moderation team. The first was a message of thanks, and a second entitled “end of consultation” announced the closure of the forum.

⁷² Contributors included Age Concern, the Birmingham youth parliament, BBCi, votehere.net, election.com, the Electoral Reform Society and academics from Leeds, Napier and Teeside universities.

⁷³ For an example, see Appendix 9 on p.243.

4.6.5 Key

The tone of the forum was defined by the postings of both the moderators and the participants. At the very outset of the forum, the moderators' welcome messages set the tone by making reference to the forum goals, scope and rules. These contributions made it clear that the forum contributions were to be made in accordance with certain norms (the rules) and that inappropriate posts (i.e. those in contravention of the rules) would not be tolerated. Numerous participants also played a major part in establishing the tone of communication in the forum. For example, the practitioners and experts who had been invited to contribute tended to assume a formal tone, and the privileged status of these participants as invitees of the moderator would give credence to the hypothesis that a serious and reverent manner was looked upon favourably by the moderators.

As a general rule, certain types of forum participants, such as practitioners, academics and discussion police, were the most active promoters of this more formal approach to contributing: although they defended different viewpoints, the tone of such contributions was articulate and dispassionate. This is perhaps not surprising considering that many of these made their contributions on behalf of the organisation they represented, and their contributions could be perceived as a policy statement on the issue of e-democracy.

The more regular participants in the forum often opted to use a much less formal register with each other, although they could vary between this and more formal prose depending on whether a contribution was a standalone post or a reply to another participant's message. In the latter case, the tone was chatty and conversational, and sometimes even playful. Types of participants such as point-makers, techies, and discussion feeders frequently pitched their contributions at this level, demonstrating that they were at ease communicating in the forum setting.

The tone adopted by ‘citizens’ and ‘point-scorers’ was the most personalised and least formal of all the participants, with almost all opting for conversational styles of conveying their arguments. Indeed, as can be seen from the example in Appendix 10 (p.244), it was typical of contributions to be written as they might have been spoken: the participant makes use of expressions such as “And, er...” to start a question. As has been noted, ‘citizens’ tended to post narrative contributions (see Appendix 1, p.239), and most arguments they put forward attempted to evoke empathy and camaraderie rather than respect or reverence.

‘Point-scorers’ were the most distinctive in their approach, adopting at best a sarcastic or cynical tone to attack opponents’ arguments and, at worst, a tone bordering on the aggressive (see Appendix 17, p.249). Indeed, on occasion the contributions of point-scorers were less than congenial and friendly, and expressed fairly entrenched viewpoints from an uncompromising perspective. It seems reasonable to conjecture that participants using an aggressive tone in their contributions may have dissuaded others from participating. Yet, it is possible also that other tones (including more formal ones) may have been intimidating for other groups of participants in the forum; in this lies the possibility of internal exclusion in the forum. The discussion in Chapter 5⁷⁴ takes forward this discussion in some detail.

4.6.6 Instrumentalities

The channel (written CMC) and codes (dialects, registers etc.) found in the forum give a further insight into the types of participants who used the forum, as well as the types of interaction found between them. The study revealed that there is evidence of a number of styles of communication in the forum, and that these are largely influenced by the type of participant and the type of contribution being made. Therefore, although it might be more nuanced to depict the forum contributions as filling a spectrum of registers, varying from very formal standard written English to very informal written-

⁷⁴ See section 5.4.5.

as-spoken styles, broad trends in usages of grammar and syntax can be identified with each of the three following categories:

1. Argumentational strategies
2. Varying personalisation of contributions
3. Differing levels of grammaticality of contributions

Styles of argumentation

Contributions written in standard formal prose tended to come from practitioners and academics, and their contributions tended to draw on formal styles of argumentation, such as a point-by-point discussion and analysis or the conventions of dialectical argumentation (i.e. thesis, antithesis, synthesis). Furthermore, the use of citations, from the consultation document or other participants' contributions was not unusual for such participants, and this group frequently built its arguments and counter-arguments around these: intertextuality and reference were used to legitimate their argumentation (for an example, see Appendix 11, p.244).

This embedded style of contribution was also used to some extent by some point-makers, discussion police and feeders. However, these groups often opted for a more journalistic register, as opposed to a dispassionately formal one. Therefore, views were presented and defended more fervently and enthusiastically (and often with spelling mistakes); the syntax and structure of their contributions was adapted accordingly for maximum effect. A simple listing of opinions and responses was also a common device used by these groups, and to mark the lower level of formality numerals tended to be used rather than adverbial phrases (see, for example, the numbering style used in the example in Appendix 12, p.246). The least formal contributions tended only to state an opinion without necessarily providing supporting arguments. Amongst those opting for the least formal styles of argumentation, the use of retorts and sarcasm were popular

(e.g. “Well that seems right – but don’t hold your breath” in the example in Appendix 4, p.240).

Personalisation of contributions

As has been discussed, numerous members of the practitioner and academic categories adopted formal styles of argumentation; an extension of this was the tendency for these groups to present their arguments in the third person or passive voice to increase the level of abstraction of the contributor from the subject matter discussed in the contribution – in many cases the British public. Indeed, some such contributors refer to the (fictional) ‘people’ and ‘public’ in third person, as a category to be analysed and studied, setting themselves apart from this group as an independent observer. The contribution of Richard Deverell, Head of BBC News Interactive, is an excellent example of this type of depersonalised style of contribution (“*We* know from extensive research that *most people* in Britain today are profoundly disillusioned with politics and politicians. *They* feel disempowered and that politics has little relevance to *their* lives. *They* feel...” See Appendix 11, p.244).

As is to be expected given the more journalistic register of the contributions of a number of point-makers, discussion police and feeders, some personalisation of arguments occurs within these groups (e.g. “I believe”, “I disagree” etc.) This is also true of the types of contributors which favour the most informal styles of communication (techies, citizens and point-scorers), in opting overwhelmingly for personalised conversational English in their posts (e.g. “It seems to me...”; “My fear is...”; “I’m a bit worried, Beth, when you say”; “I have two main points to make”). In addition to personalising their opinions in their contributions, both these groups also tend to mark out clearly their sense of belonging to a nebulous ‘public’, ‘citizenry’ or social group or interest group. An example of such a personalised contribution is provided in Appendix 14 (p.247) which features ‘I’ nine times, ‘my’ three times, ‘we’

five times, 'myself' and 'our' once each. This makes a total of 19 personal identifiers used in five sentences and 154 words.

Grammaticality and syntax

The research conducted as part of the medium theory section presented a number of key features of computer-mediated communication conducted on an asynchronous basis which specifically relate to grammaticality and syntax (e.g. informal use of language accompanied by flouting of standard grammatical conventions, use of capitalisation and 'emoticons' to convey emotion). Certainly, there is some evidence of this type of communication within the forum setting. However, both the different levels of Internet literacy of the participants and the wide range of different interest groups they represent mean that such usages are by no means uniform, as the presentation of the case study data thus far has amply demonstrated.

Clearly, however, the 'melting pot' of styles featured in the forum underlines the wide variety of participants in the forum, and could therefore provide an indication of problems related to inclusion in the forum if some of the groups feel deterred by the dominance of others. One interesting characteristic of communication in the forum was that participants adopted language usages typical of online forum communication with different degrees of enthusiasm. For example, given the more formal register and essayistic nature of most practitioner and academic contributions, more complex sentence structures were favoured by these groups who tended to respect standard grammatical rules and syntax (see, for example, the sentence structure in Appendix 11 p.244).

The influence of emerging conventions of computer-mediated communication was however more noticeable in the contributions of most techies, citizens and point-scorers and a number of point-makers. Thus, alongside the more personalised style of contributions often employed by these groups, a number of other features common to

more informal computer-mediated communication could also be observed. The example in Appendix 15 (p.248) demonstrates how the use of grammar and syntax by a ‘point-maker’ is much more relaxed and conversational than can be found in practitioner and academic contributions. Notably, the use of syntactic strategies such as elliptical sentences and cynical tone of the rhetorical questions used to convey the contributor’s point with maximum effect, were in stark contrast to the dispassionate approach adopted by the practitioner and academic groups.

Yet, this example represented the ‘middle ground’ in terms of grammatical and syntactical correctness. Amongst the least formal groups, the extremely informal usage trends of written-as-spoken communication were found in abundance. The examples provided in Appendix 16, (p.249) show a number of common ‘shortcuts’ taken by these participants: the non-standard English use of ellipsis instead of commas and full stops; the use of lower case characters in the place of capitals, and the non-use of apostrophes. In addition, this group tended to make prolific use of capitals and punctuation marks to give maximum emphasis to certain statements (as can be seen in Appendix 17, p.249). Finally, a particular feature of CMC also found in the more informal postings in the forum was the use of emoticons (some examples of which are provided in Appendix 18, p.249).

The range of different registers, styles of argumentation, levels of personalisation and grammaticality highlights the diversity of the participants in the forum, as well as their varying communicational abilities. It suggests that, in spite of the high level of anonymity in the forum, other factors differentiated the participants in terms of their social status and level of authority; this posed a significant problem to political equality in the forum, as will be developed in the discussion of this point in Chapter 5⁷⁵.

⁷⁵ See section 5.4.6.

4.6.7 Norms of interaction and integration

The most obvious example of norms of interaction at work is in the form of the forum rules. Indeed, the forum was moderated with reference to these rules to ensure that it remained “a safe, fair and welcoming space”⁷⁶; though the success of this can be questioned in view of the high number of pre-moderated comments, the high drop-off rate in contributions and the low level of dialogue in the forum.

As has been noted, the use of the UK Online site, and more specifically, the ‘Forums’, including the e-DCF, were subject to a number of rules. The general rules governing the site were contained in the site’s Terms and Conditions; a small hyperlink to this page could be found at the bottom of each of the pages on the site. The Terms and Conditions webpage was lengthy, running to just over 4 sides of A4 including the forum rules when printed. The Terms and Conditions mostly covered guidelines on how the site could and could not be used, (“You are prohibited from...”), and what could and could not be said in postings. It also provided warnings about breaking the law and a long disclaimer about accuracy of information provided (“We...assume no responsibility or liability...” and “In no event will we be liable for...”), its fitness of purpose, the functionality of site. The register of the page was formal, and the format similar to that of a contract. It is likely that the language used could have intimidated, if not deterred, some citizens from participating in the forum.

Below the general terms and conditions for the site, the page also set out the rules for the forum. These are presented below:

Forum Rules

To ensure users feel safe and keen to participate, please avoid:

- 1) Insulting, threatening or provoking language.

⁷⁶ Contribution by Beccy Earnshaw, one of the two Hansard Society moderators.

2) Inciting hatred on the basis of race, religion, gender, nationality or sexuality or other personal characteristic.

3) Swearing, using hate-speech or making obscene or vulgar comments.

4) Breaking the law.

This includes libel, condoning illegal activity and contempt of court (comments which might affect the outcome of an approaching court case). You may post a small amount of third party material, but please help us to avoid breaching copyright by naming its author and publication. We are unable to investigate all third party material, so where possible, please provide a link instead.

5) Spamming.

Please don't add the same comment to more than one forum.

6) Advertising.

You can mention relevant, non-commercial websites as long as they support your comment.

7) Impersonating or falsely claiming to represent a person or organisation.

Please don't mislead other users by abusing our registration procedure.

8) Posting in a language other than English or Welsh.

Sorry, we cannot provide translations of comments posted in Welsh. You're welcome to ask the comment's author to post an English version.

9) Invading people's privacy.

Please don't post private addresses or phone numbers, including your own. You may post email addresses so long as you make it clear who they belong to.

10) Posting an off-topic comment.

Forums are moderated to make sure it [sic]stays friendly and welcoming as well as legal. If your comment is unacceptable, it will be returned to you by email, along with a reference to the rule you've broken. You'll be invited to re-post it once you've made the appropriate changes. If you repeatedly break these rules, you may be prevented from posting.

The forum rules were based around the principles of respect for fellow participants (1, 2, 3, 7 and 9), the law (4) and the purpose of the forum (5, 6 and 10). The rules also stated that posts must also be made in one of the two approved languages – English or Welsh (4).

The forum rules were also set out on a separate page which could be accessed through a link under the 'Forums' heading on the CitizenSpace entry page. The language used there and in the identical version of the forum rules found embedded in the Terms and Conditions page was much more accessible than the language used for the rest of the Terms and Conditions page. For example, rather than stating the rules in the imperative or performative forms (e.g. "we do not warrant" or "you agree"), the rules were posited in terms of requests ("Please do not..."). In addition, there appears to have been an attempt to present the legal obligations of users in a more accessible format, since these may confuse some users (see rule 4).

Aside from these ten rules, there were four different norms of interaction and integration which shaped communication in e-DCF. These were: pre-moderation, software restrictions, moderation techniques and specific posting styles. These norms will be presented here along with some examples from the forum, and the discussion in Chapter

5 will develop in greater detail their implications for the inclusiveness of e-participation mechanisms.

Pre-moderation

As noted, the pre-moderation of messages implies the vetting of contributions by the forum moderators – in this case the Hansard Society – prior to being posted on the site. Thus, there was a time delay between the participants submitting a contribution and it being added to the forum website (see Beccy Earnshaw’s comment on this in Appendix 19, p.250). In total, 427 messages were posted to the forum, and in addition to this, 152 contributions were received but pre-moderated out of the forum (Hansard Society, 2002b: 1). Therefore, just over a quarter of all messages posted were pre-moderated out of the forum, which indicates that a fairly high proportion of contributions posted were in contravention of the rules. The Hansard Society (2002b: 1) summary states that these contributions were deleted for one of the following reasons:

1. The message was considered ‘off topic’ (i.e. outside the parameters of the discussion).
2. Attached web links were considered unsuitable.
3. The contribution was a repeat posting.
4. The contribution contained insulting, foul or obscene language.

The report notes specifically that the decision was made to restrict repeated comments complaining about the removal of the old format CitizenSpace as it was feared that they would cause the debate to degenerate and would deter others from making contributions on the issues covered in the consultation document. Interestingly, the moderator justified the use of pre-moderation (‘external’ exclusion) as a means of preventing ‘internal’ exclusion.

Software restrictions

The forum software restricted individual contributions to a maximum of 700 words. For some of the participants this was accepted as a norm of interaction, and the majority obliged by restricting their contributions to 700 words or fewer. However, during the

course of the forum a number of participants noted that the software prevented them from typing lengthy comments and requested clarification from the moderator as to the length restriction for postings. It is interesting to note that a number of participants circumvented this problem by posting two messages consecutively on a topic. The moderator took no action to counter this; in fact he even suggested that posting several messages was the easiest way around this issue.

The flouting of rules in the forum (and the willingness of the moderator to condone this) arguably undermined the credibility of the exercise, since it showed that procedures could be circumvented without consequence. In addition, by encouraging participants to make larger contributions (monologues), this had a negative impact upon the fostering of dialogues in the forum, and again highlighted the moderator's preference for what he referred to as "serious" contributions. This raises questions about the suitability of the genre interface which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

Moderation techniques

Aside from these issues, the moderators themselves made a considerable contribution to the direction of the forum, its format, structure and development. The contributions of the principal moderator throughout the forum were made with a view to reinforcing and reasserting the forum goals and rules, and redressing any possible transgressions or digressions at an early stage. In total, Steven Coleman opened seven threads and made an additional 46 posts (13% of all posts). This brought his total number of contributions to 54, or 13% of all contributions. Overall, therefore, the moderator to participant contribution ratio in the e-DCF is one moderator contribution to seven participant contributions which indicates that a high level of interventions were required to keep the discussion progressing within the framework of the rules.

It is possible to classify moderator contributions into a number of category types⁷⁷, and thus to arrive at a better understanding of the different ways the moderator can shape and influence the forum discussion:

1. Housekeeping
2. Discussion opener/thread
3. Wrap
4. Probe
5. Moderator as messenger
6. Reaffirmation/policing
7. Defence

‘Housekeeping’ interventions can be seen in Beccy Earnshaw’s thread initiations where she sets out the rules, scope, goals and outcomes of the forum (see Appendix 19, p.250). ‘Discussion openers’ establish the scope of a particular thread and the issues which should be commented on and discussed in it. ‘Wraps’ involve the moderator closing down a line of discussion or the whole discussion at the end of the forum. For example, at one point in a thread one of the participants intervenes with a critical message questioning the utility of the forum. In response to his question as to whether anyone has found the forum “even remotely” useful, Stephen Coleman replies “Yes”, thus closing down that line of discussion.

‘Feeds’ consist of interventions where the moderator seeks to feed new elements into a particular thread, perhaps by raising issues from background documentation and reports. By doing this he hopes to stimulate discussion amongst participants and generate new posts and suggestions. ‘Probes’, as the name suggest, involve the moderator probing participants to provide additional information on their response, often by requesting clarification, additional details or an example (see Appendix 21, p.250).

⁷⁷ My taxonomy.

When the moderator acts as ‘messenger’, he conveys a message from a participant to the government or a third party or vice versa. These are interesting interventions in the sense that they underline the moderator’s own limitations; a number of participants seem to assume (wrongly) that the moderator is a representative of the government, and expect him to be able to answer questions on its behalf. However, the moderator, from the Hansard Society, is not in a position to do so (see, for example, Appendix 22, p.251). This seems to indicate that the participants expected the forum to foster two-way conversation between citizens and government rather than conversation between citizens on a government portal. As a result, the forum appeared devoid of influence to some participants, reducing its credibility as a legitimisation mechanism.

When the moderator polices participants (a ‘reaffirmation’) he reminds them of the goals and purpose of the thread or forum, or warns participants about posting off-topic messages (see Appendix 23, p.251). A ‘defence’ occurs when the moderator responds to a questions or criticism regarding the impartiality or quality of his moderation: on a number of occasions during the forum various criticisms were addressed at the moderation team. The most notable example can be found in one thread set up by a participant to question the impartiality of the moderator owing to his affiliation with the Hansard Society. As a result, each of the moderators stepped in to defend their position and argued their credibility (see Appendix 24, p.251).

Given the high proportion of un-posted (pre-moderated) messages and the relatively high moderator to contributor ratio, arguably the forum was kept well under control. However, arguably this was at the expense of full access to participation in the forum for some potential participants, which may have impacted upon the inclusiveness of the forum. However, without access to the pre-moderated contributions, it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which this might have occurred in the forum. Nevertheless, it is clear that the extensive use of pre-moderation meant that there was less scope or

requirement for other self-regulatory norms to come into play in the forum than otherwise might have been.

Participant posting styles

Although the moderator played the central role in (re-)enforcing norms of interaction, there was still an element of inter-participant norm reinforcement at play in the forum. In particular, there were two types of norms of interaction used by participants throughout the forum. These were: participant team-building and shunning.

There are a number of examples throughout the forum of the participants interacting with each other in such a way as to promote a sense of team identity and belonging. At times, this can be in the form of a ‘call to arms’, such as at one point in the forum where one of the participants calls on the others to spread the word about the forum and encourages them to contribute more actively to it (see Appendix 7, p.242). On the other hand, team-building in the forum can have potential exclusionary consequences: such as when different (groups of) participants have disagreements about the appropriate ways of contributing to the forum. The example in Appendix 18 (p.249) demonstrates an acrimonious exchange between two participants each of which felt the others’ posting style was inappropriate.

‘Shunning’ is another rather interesting strategy which was used by the forum participants: it is evidenced in the fact that there were a large number of threads in the forum to which there were no replies. Indeed, 26 of the 73 threads (i.e. just over one third, including the moderator’s opening and closing threads) did not receive any additional postings. These 26 threads were initiated by 23 participants, and for 16 out of the 23 initiators, this was the only posting they made. Just over three quarters of these ‘shunned’ threads were posted in the last ten days of the forum, suggesting that these contributions came from late-comers who chose not to familiarise themselves with the debate to locate an appropriate thread for their comment, but instead opted for the ‘quick fix’ of creating a new thread.

It has already been suggested (see section 4.6.4) that the strong initiator to poster ratio mentioned earlier should not be taken on face value as indicative of a democratic discussion. The practice of shunning in the forum is a further indication that the initiator to poster ratio is bolstered by a number of “irrelevant” or inappropriate threads which were simply ignored. Certainly, a number of the 26 threads were initiated on topics which had already been covered elsewhere in the debate, and there appears to be some level of disrespect of the established thread structure in a number of these postings. Therefore, shunning was an important technique for participants to exercise on others who did not respect the norms of interaction of the forum.

There are clearly difficulties associated with using ethnographic research as part of a methodological framework to explore the medium Internet; most notably it is difficult to know what makes an online community ‘tick’ given the loose association, remoteness and disembodied nature of the audience under study. Nevertheless, it could be extrapolated from the fact that these threads were ‘shunned’ that the trend amongst users was to punish this disrespect of forum etiquette by not responding to such posts.

4.6.8 Genres

As has already been demonstrated, online forum communication on politics is a melting pot of styles, genres and influences. It is not possible to identify one genre specific to political communication online. This is hardly surprising given the different groups of stakeholders who participate in politics online. The study of the forum contributions revealed seven discernible genres of contribution, which are presented below according to the level of formality:

1. Essay
2. Readers’ letter
3. Invitation
4. Reply
5. Comment

6. Personal Story

7. Put down/retort

The significance in the range of genres present is twofold: on the one hand it suggests a broad cross-section of participants which is positive in terms of the credibility of the forum; on the other hand, it indicates a wide variety of different motivations, approaches and social groups, which in turn highlights the possibility of discord or internal exclusion in the forum.

‘Essays’ and ‘comments’ are similar: the primary distinction between them is length. Whereas ‘comments’ tend to be short – mostly one single point or paragraph – ‘essays’ are much longer covering several points. A ‘comment’ tends to be someone ‘saying their piece’ and does not actively call for input and feedback from other participants (see, for example, Appendix 4, p.240). Comments are commonly used to start a thread. They can be linked to another message, but there are no linguistic markers (i.e. “you are right/wrong to say this” or “I agree/disagree with...”) which explicitly set out the link. As a result, comments can at times appear disjointed or off-topic from the rest of a thread: they tend to be monological in their orientation.

‘Essays’ tend to set out to cover a contributor’s opinion to the whole thread topic, and therefore often overlook or disregard other postings. There can sometimes be an element of synthesis of the debate in such postings, with contributors then going on to state their own opinion (see Appendix 11, p.244). The tone of ‘essays’ can vary along the lines of what has been discussed under the ‘Key’ and ‘Instrumentalities’ subsections of this section; a ‘journalistic’ register is most common, but ‘academic’ contributions can also be found which mimic academic styles of argumentation, and make extensive use of the third person or passive voice. High levels of formality could be seen as intimidating or unwelcoming (or simply pompous) by some participants.

A 'reader's letter' is a contribution written in the style of traditional readers' letters to a newspaper. As such, its defining feature is the sign off at the end; readers' letters are always signed off by the contributor. Even where a contributor has used a pseudonym, he or she will sign off his or her message with by giving his or her full name. Furthermore, if the contributor is representing an organisation, the affiliation is often stated, such that it is easy to understand why the contributor takes the perspective that he or she does. The reader's letter appears to be the favoured genre of representatives of organisations, and it is possible to conjecture that a large number of the organisations invited to participate in the forum by posting 'serious contributions' opted to sign off in this way.

An 'invitation' distinguishes itself from other types by its focus on bringing participants into the debate. Basically, this type of contribution could have a short statement of opinion similar to an essay or comment; however, input from other participants on this opinion is actively sought, making it a genre which is 'open' to other participants and stakeholder groups (see, for example, Appendix 6, p.241). A 'reply' is similarly open; here a participant develops points raised in a previous contribution. Therefore, the focus is on 'interactivity' and discussion and development of debate, rather than simply the presentation of one's ideas and opinions. A 'put down or retort' is also dialogical in its orientation; however, its aim is not to develop the debate, but to dominate it or end it. 'Put downs' are mostly one-liners posted in response to a comment, and it is in such contributions that examples of 'flaming' are found (see Appendix 5, p.241).

A 'personal story' will draw on the contributor's personal experiences. It is the most personalised of all the genres found in the forum, as can be seen from the example in Appendix 1 (p.239). For example, a 'personal story' could be a citizen recounting how the Internet has changed the way he or she participates in politics, or it could be a practitioner sharing experiences and best practice from an e-democracy pilot project he or she has been involved in. These contributions can help reinforce a sense of community or commonality between participants.

It is clear, therefore, that the genres identified in the forum can serve different functions in the discussion through the different devices they employ to secure empathy and to form allegiances, to persuade and win over, to expound and to probe, to weigh up and to cut down. The aim of the discussion here has not been to critique these different genres, although it is clear that the prevalence of some would lead to considerable issues of internal exclusion in the forum; the aim instead has been to achieve a deep understanding of how and why these forms of communication are used within the constraints of the medium and interface. The discussion in Chapter 5 must now turn to the implications of choices made in the design and running of the e-DCF, and to explore how these impact on the inclusiveness of the model, and thus its credibility as a legitimation mechanism.

Chapter 5 Discussion: Challenges in Establishing e-Participation Initiatives as Legitimation Mechanisms in Policy-Making

The present chapter takes forward the different levels of analysis presented in the case study chapter in terms of the limits and boundaries of the medium and interface, as well as the types of online communication they foster for the credibility of the online forum as legitimation mechanism. This appraisal is grounded in the insights of the theoretical reconstructions developed in the literature review. It will be argued that the four requirements for political inclusion identified by Young (2000) – access, inclusion (internal and external), accountability and transparency – are basic metrics fundamental in assessing the credibility of e-participation initiatives by providing a normative grounding for e-participation initiatives as legitimation mechanisms. In addition, the discussion will thematise efficiency, which can be guaranteed with the help of a procedural approach to legitimation, as another essential element in the credibility of e-participation initiatives.

The chapter proceeds with a critical reappraisal of the case study data. It examines the data in relation to four stages of the online consultation process found in the e-DCF: firstly, the set up and interface design; secondly, the recruitment and briefing of participants; thirdly, the running of the forum; and finally, the evaluation and feedback stage. It assesses the extent to which these phases successfully take account of the four key metrics of inclusion. Revisiting the concepts of legitimacy, legitimation, procedure, public opinion and representation, the discussion reflects upon the effectiveness and, by extension, the credibility of the UK government's 2002 e-participation experiment.

5.1 Transparency and accountability in the design and set-up of e-participation initiatives

The contextual part of the case study analysis was particularly informative in terms of understanding the set up and design phases of the e-democracy consultation, as well as in providing an insight into the transparency of the organisers' objectives, and the accountability of the exercise. The UK government's first foray into e-participation came in 2001 with the launch of the CitizenSpace initiative on the UK Online website.

Launched around the same time as similar initiatives in other countries (e.g. the www.internet.gouv.fr fora in France), these fora provided a platform where citizens could come to discuss policy matters in a ‘public space’ online, albeit one which could probably be most closely aligned with Arendt’s ‘agonistic’ understanding of the Greek agora (see Benhabib, 1993: 77-78). The ‘visibility’ of the space was also undoubtedly a draw for some citizens, who assumed that expressing their opinions on a high-profile government-branded site had the potential to influence and inform decision-making.

However, the reality was that there was no interaction between the forum organisers and the participants in the forum discussion. In fact, the forum organisers – the Office of the e-Envoy – even had relatively little involvement in the process of administering the fora and reviewing its content and even the pre-moderation and technical support were provided by external companies. Moreover, the experimental initiative was not directly linked into decision-making processes, and monthly summaries of the discussions intended for the Cabinet Office were quickly abandoned (Wood, S, 2004, per. comm., 20 January). Thus, the fora became at most a ‘tap’ for public opinion (or, more accurately, the opinions of different publics) which government and policy-makers could turn to when – and if – they desired. Enthusiasm for the experiment faltered early on – not least on the part of the organisers – and by the time the CitizenSpace fora were closed in July 2002, they had become populated mostly by irate citizens protesting about the government’s policies and style of governance; e-participation in the UK had got off to an inauspicious start.

The CitizenSpace fora re-emerged on the UK Online site later in July 2002 after a re-branding process. Accessed under the ‘Consultations’ section of the website, the fora were to be used in conjunction with time-bound consultation procedures rather than on an ongoing thematic basis. Crucially in terms of their credibility as legitimation mechanisms, the new consultation fora were positioned this time within the policy-making process, albeit at the early stages. Undoubtedly it had become clear during the CitizenSpace experiment that a channel for expression with no real possibility for influence was neither a credible form of e-participation, nor one which was likely to reinforce the legitimacy of government decision-making.

Since civil servants have no mandate vis-à-vis the public, the decision to position the consultation forum such that it fostered dialogue between the administration and citizens was questionable; it would seem to suggest that the government would rather bypass traditional democratic systems of representation and communicate directly with the 'public'. But to what end? Was the goal better political strategising and policy management (Chadwick and May's 'managerialism'), or better communication and more responsive policy-making ('consultative' or 'participative' governance)? Equally noteworthy was the fact that, at the time of the re-branding, the tagline promises for the fora were downgraded from "influence decision-making" to "share your views", which may provide some indication of the government's evaluation of the initial experiment and less ambitious vision for the new one. Certainly, the reasons for, and implications of, this could have been better articulated by government.

Moreover, since no changes were made to the CitizenSpace interface, no attempt was made to ensure that the interface was apt to facilitate or fulfil the new forum goals. Indeed, after the e-democracy consultation finished, only four further fora were run through the platform before it was scrapped altogether in February 2003. Since then a central register of consultations has been held on the UK Online site (now DirectGov) linking to the consultation information on the appropriate department's website. However, the vast majority of these have not comprised an e-participation dimension. Where e-participation exercises have been run, these have been entrusted to a third party; for example, freewheeling consultation fora have been run by the Hansard Society through its *Tell Parliament* website (see <http://www.tellparliament.net/>), and some template model initiatives by consultancy Dialogue by Design⁷⁸.

The decision to close down the platform would seem to indicate that the early forms of e-participation in the UK were not deemed a success by their initiators⁷⁹. It can only be

⁷⁸ The Dialogue by Design website has a list of current consultations in which it is currently involved. See: <http://www.dialoguebydesign.co.uk/Misc/Current.htm>

⁷⁹ These grounds were confirmed by a member of the UK Online team (Wood, S, 2004, per. comm., 20 January).

hoped, given the showpiece dimension to these early experiments that public buy-in has not been adversely affected by its disappointing outcomes, and the credibility of e-participation damaged.

5.1.1 From CitizenSpace to the e-DCF: the transparency deficit

Unfortunately, it is difficult to gain a full picture of how UK e-participation initiatives might have disappointed their organisers since very little information is available about the decision-making behind the choice of interface for the CitizenSpace fora. Therefore, it is not known why this remained unchanged for the e-democracy (and subsequent) consultation fora (although it would not be unreasonable to suggest that budgetary factors may have had a role to play). This lack of transparency is partly due to the high turnover of staff in the Office of the e-Envoy; few of those involved with the initial experiment now remain and are able to comment on planning and decision-making relating to earlier experiments (Wood, S, 2004, per. comm., 20 January).

Nevertheless, the lack of transparency is disappointing since it is evident that, to a large extent, the definition of the goals would have been established at the procurement phase; if it is not possible to comment on the initial thinking behind the design of the forum experiment, how can its success be measured against its objectives, and how can ‘best practice’ lessons be garnered and passed on for future initiatives? While it would be cynical to suggest that this lack of transparency was intentional, Luhmann (1995: 102) would surely identify it as an effect, if not function, of this type of mass media communication which appears to create transparency through visibility: ultimately, however, the non-transparency of *effects* is generated through the ‘transparency’ of knowledge. In other words, the availability of information does not always mean that the underlying structures and processes are revealed. In this sense, the visibility provided by online publishing should not be conflated with transparency of the publisher’s goals and intentions or, indeed, outcomes. The contextual part of the case study certainly demonstrated that a precedent had been set in terms of poor transparency in the set up phase of e-participation initiatives in the UK.

5.2 Participant recruitment and the challenge of accessibility

If it is not possible to evaluate the e-DCF in relation to its organisers' intentions, it is possible to compare it with the two other channels in the consultation (written consultation and online questionnaire). Of all three channels, the online forum was used by the fewest contributors (see Figure 9, p.120) demonstrating its marginal position (even) within the whole e-democracy consultation exercise, and indicating problems to be overcome in terms of accessibility and inclusion in e-participation.

It is therefore questionable whether the forum served its purpose as a mechanism for broadening participation. The emerging picture of the forum participants (see section 4.6.2) suggests a narrower group than could have been hoped for, composed principally of Internet aficionados, citizens familiar with the UK Online portal, e-democracy experts and practitioners and, finally, a small number of surfers who had most likely stumbled across the site by chance. What is more, the government's own research on inclusion, published as part of its response to the consultation, confirmed that the government was sceptical that the forum had encouraged broader participation in the policy process (Office of the e-Envoy, 2002c: 19-25); 'external exclusion' (Young, 2000) was present in the forum.

Of course, it is to be expected that the consultation webpages would generate only a limited amount of interest compared to the main access portal for UK government services; nevertheless, the low level of participation in the consultation forum is still disappointing, especially given the novel and showpiece dimensions to the exercise. Little can be done to put a positive 'spin' on the low rate of correlation between the 50,000 registered users of the former CitizenSpace site on the one hand, the 12,000 weekly hits to the e-democracy website during the consultation period on the other, and the total of 130 participants in the online forum⁸⁰; it is clear that the online consultation fell far short of what it could have achieved in terms of increasing levels of participation

⁸⁰ A correlation of less than 0.3% in the former case.

in the online consultation. These statistics appeared to point once again to problems of external exclusion (Young, 2000) in the forum.

5.2.1 Internet accessibility and the digital divide

The study of the forum interface (see section 4.5) also revealed findings relevant to the inclusiveness of e-participation. This was explored from the perspective of the features and functions of the medium and the interface. The study was able to point to specific conclusions relating to external and internal exclusion in e-participation, through the challenges of accessibility and usability respectively. In this respect, it highlighted the crucial importance of understanding the restrictions and limits imposed by the medium on the scope of an e-participation initiative at the set-up and design phase.

In respect of political participation on the Internet, two important conclusions emerged from the study of the medium and its features and functions: firstly, that despite the caveats above, the Internet has the potential to increase transparency by visibilising government processes and policies and thus to help achieve or maintain political legitimacy; secondly, that the Internet as medium is an excellent platform or network for communication, which can be used as a tool for widening and deepening political participation.

The Internet has undeniably made it cheaper and easier for information to be published, and easier for it to be accessed, and in so doing has loosened some control of information networks, opening these up to a wider 'public' or cross-section of society (see Poster, 1995; Castells, 1996; Balle, 1999). This has enabled organisations to make available more information publicly, more economically, thereby making them appear more transparent to the outside world. This holds true for government organisations also: since the advent of the Internet, unprecedented volumes of information have been made available to citizens with unprecedented speed.

Yet, although the delivery of government information online has largely been welcomed, some remain cynical about government commitment to utilising this to encourage more citizen participation in government policy and decision-making. Chadwick and May (2003: 227), for example, suggest that the UK government (as well as the US government and the EU) have policy strategies which are *managerial*, focused on ‘service delivery’ and ‘policy presentation’, which conceives citizens as passive receivers of information (Chadwick and May, 2003: 278).

Certainly, even with a ‘managerial’ approach, transparency gains can help to ensure the legitimacy of government policy-making. One can, following Luhmann, see the quest to achieve legitimacy in the ‘managerial’ approach to e-government as a strategy borne of the desire to maintain the status quo; legitimacy is secured by creating the fiction of publicness and ceding some power to make this fiction operational (Schmidt, 1994; Grant, 2000: 97). Thus, rather than actually being a genuine initiative to inform and involve the citizenry, the ‘managerial’ approach constitutes a sort of defence by attack; by publishing information about government policies online, it is able to avoid claims of lack of transparency and thus pacify the electorate without making further concessions of power.

However, this is far removed from ‘participative’ governance whereby the government must cede some control over possible outcomes in policy-making to guarantee legitimacy (including its own). Arguably, the desirability of transparency is fulfilled only in the transparency of goals, objectives and procedures, and not just the simulacrum of these. Transparency so conceived relies on two-way communication which could potentially destabilise the *status quo*, and ultimately transform the relationship between citizens, representatives and government. Such a development would go against the view of politics in the age of the Internet envisioned by Margolis and Resnick (2002) – that of ‘politics as usual’.

Thus, any legitimacy gains secured through transparency gains may be of little import if they are accompanied, on the part of the government, by a steadfast resistance to

changing ways and means of communicating with citizens. As the medium theory analysis demonstrated, there is much evidence to suggest, particularly in non-governmental organisation best practice, that the Internet can be used as a successful channel for political inter-networking; the challenge for e-participation is for governments to create or adapt a framework which can promote many-to-many communication and encourage wider participation in politics, but which is also efficient in its execution, transparent in its aims and processes, and accountable in its output and feedback channels. This means understanding the potential and limitations of political participation online, and adapting best practice lessons from elsewhere to a government context.

There are certainly lessons to be learnt from the use of the Internet by non-governmental and civil society organisations for dialogue, organisation, campaigning and fundraising. Here the Internet has been a great facilitator of inter-networking by bringing together geographically disparate people and groups, especially around a single common issue. Yet on or offline, civil society is far from homogenous and harmonious; it will always be composed of people with partisan, if not, extreme views on a topic. As a result, political participation on the Internet can generate not only dialogue, but also – more commonly – conflict. The use of the Internet by anti-globalisation campaigners is one very good example of this, demonstrating not least how the Internet can and has been used to disrupt both on- and offline by groups who feel that they cannot achieve their desired results by means of more peaceable strategies (see Baldi, 2000).

What is more, it must not be forgotten that political uses of the Internet are marginal compared with others (e.g. browsing, emailing, buying and selling, file sharing), and there is no evidence (as yet) to suggest that many of those who are involved in online political movements are not those involved anyway in such organisations outside the virtual world of the Internet. Conversely, the government's own research on inclusion conducted as part of the e-government consultation showed low levels of interest among disenfranchised social groups, and a perception amongst these that e-participation tools were not intended for "people like me" (Office of the e-Envoy, 2002: 19-25).

This online or ‘digital’ divide is understandable when one considers that not only Internet connectivity – itself demarcated along the lines of income, age and geography – but also motivation and interest, literacy levels and computer skills all have an impact on which members of the public are likely to be comfortable accessing political content online. Thus, although Internet connection levels are increasing steadily and new platforms for participation, including public Internet booths and digital television are emerging alongside individual PC Internet access, substantially wider and broader participation in mainstream politics is, as yet, an unfulfilled promise of the Internet.

A clear challenge remains for the government should it decide to push forward e-participation in the UK. If its initiatives are seen to be exclusionary, then this will undermine their credibility – not to mention that of the government itself. Therefore, experiments which are launched must heed the four metrics of inclusion which this thesis draws from Young (2000); indeed, e-participation initiatives can also create and expose potential exclusions in policy-making processes which, if left unaddressed, can undermine their own credibility as potential legitimation mechanisms.

It is clear, therefore, that addressing the connectivity challenge is not sufficient in itself. Two additional considerations also of fundamental importance are the design and set-up of e-participation platforms. Thus, if organisers of e-participation initiatives hope to ensure their credibility, they must attempt to mitigate the effects of exclusion in online communication which can be created by the medium interface. The following sections will explore these issues in greater detail.

5.3 Inclusion and the e-Democracy consultation forum interface

The challenge for e-participation is threefold: firstly it lies in the variety of platforms through which communication occurs (from email to fora, to chatrooms, bulletin boards and instant messenger discussions); secondly, in the many influences (and levels of formality) in terms of communication styles; and thirdly in how these come to impact upon communication through the forum interface. The variables which define the

interface allow for the harnessing of the strengths of the medium and forms of communication, and can help to compensate, if not for their weaknesses, then the potential problems which they can create in respect of all four metrics of inclusion – transparency, accessibility, internal and external exclusion.

Following the case study analysis which explored features and functions of the forum interface as variables in the e-DCF, this chapter will also examine these issues from the perspective of their impact on the types of interaction and communication which e-participation initiatives can foster. It is clear, however, that these variables must be decided upon at the design phase of an e-participation initiative, and it is for this reason that the conclusion (Chapter 6) will again turn to the issue of interface variables as it seeks to highlight key lessons which should be applied at the design phase of future e-participation initiatives.

The forum interface (discussed in detail in section 4.5) is the visual interface which allows contributors to type in their posts and navigate their way through those of others. Since asynchronous communication opens up multitudinous possibilities in terms of who can say what to whom and when this can occur, the whole system tends to be focused around ‘managing’ contributions such that they can be viewed and reviewed by participants and the organisers. Thus, the issue of efficiency is absolutely primordial; a successful interface must be functionally oriented towards fulfilling its overarching goals however these are defined. In so doing, it must inevitably ensure the manageability of information derived from communication/deliberation; this, it will be argued, is best approached through the proceduralisation of certain functions.

The key variables which need to be considered (as identified in section 4.5 in the contextual section of the case study analysis) are: the visual presentation of debate; the moderation role and tools; the availability of information management tools; participant mandate and freedoms; and output generation (e.g. a report). Consideration of each of these variables at the stage of interface design has an impact on the level of proceduralisation of the debate and output, and can help ensure a level of effectiveness

which is favourable to the (procedural) legitimacy of the forum (though this should not be at the expense of inclusion).

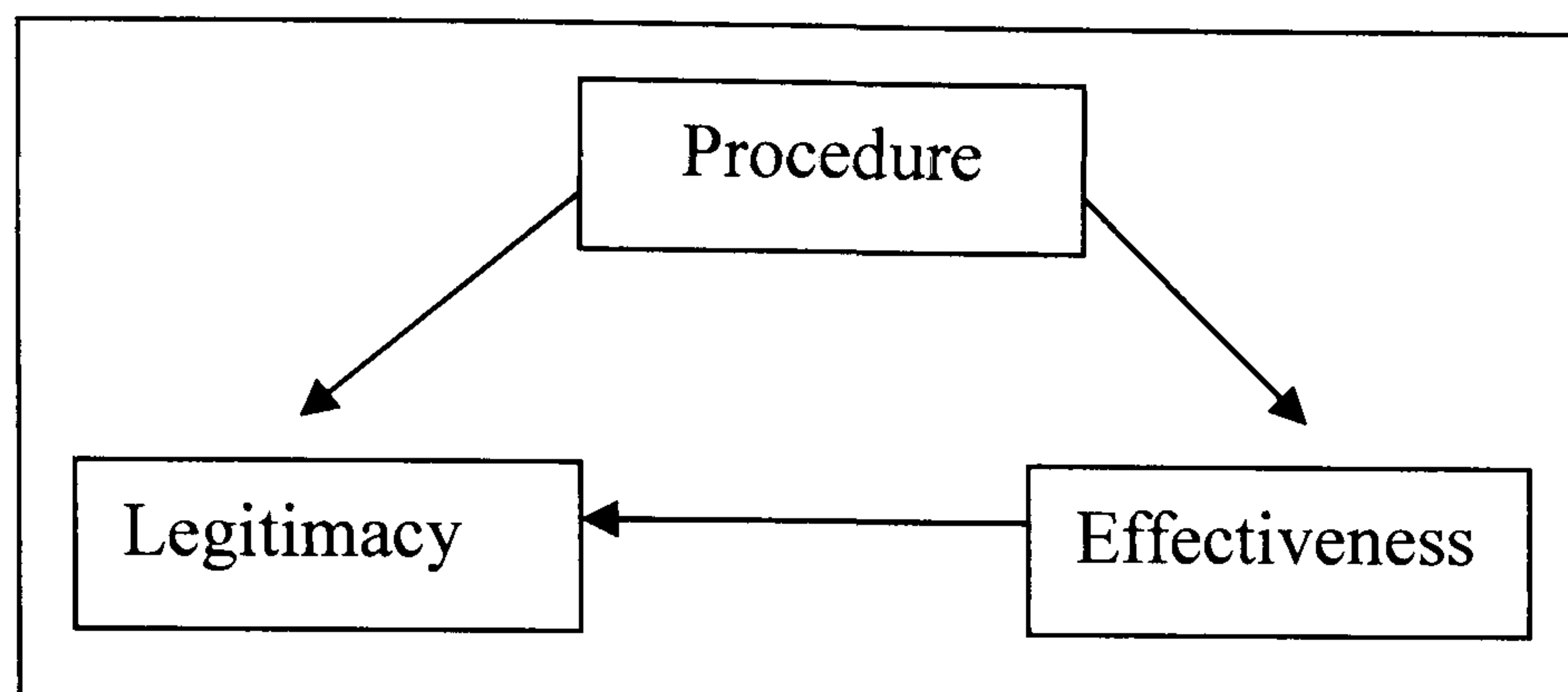


Figure 15: The importance of procedure within online consultation processes.

Before considering the implications of the use of individual interface variables for e-participation, it should be noted that the variables in the e-DCF interface were not selected specifically for the forum; thus, any reading of the critique which follows must bear this in mind. Indeed, the interface was inherited from the CitizenSpace discussion fora, and this had a clear impact on the running, and ultimate success of the forum, a point noted even by the moderator during the forum. The purpose of the following sections must therefore be to understand the likely implications of particular variables for e-participation initiatives, and thus for their credibility as legitimation mechanisms.

5.3.1 *Visual presentation of the debate*

The human-computer interface with the online forum platform occurs through the visualisation of the debate on the computer screen. Indeed, the discussion must be presented on screen in a way which is comprehensible for participants; they must be able to understand who has said what to whom in the debate, and how these interactions have developed over time.

There would seem little point in running a consultation online if no attempt was made to adapt the interface to take into account the features and functionality of the medium. In

this, the screen size, with its obvious limits, need not be a disadvantage. Certainly, the medium interface (screen) restricts the number of characters which can be presented legibly on screen without requiring the user to scroll down, yet by breaking down the debate into smaller thematic sub-pages, the on-screen presentation can be carefully designed to help visually present and represent the structure of the debate both topically and chronologically.

Visual prompts are one important tool which can be used to enrich the user experience (Acland, 2003b: 4). This could imply links to interactive presentations, pictures, graphs or other relevant documents which might inform participants about the discussion topic. The lack of such prompts was a significant weakness in the e-DCF forum. Stimuli for the forum comprised the consultation document and summaries available on a separate website⁸¹ in portable document format (pdf) and rich text format (rtf). Furthermore, the content of the documents did not form an active and integral part of the discussion; the introduction and presentation of topics in the forum by the moderator only covered the structure of the consultation document in the broadest of terms (though the e-voting and e-participation sub-headings). Had a more integrated approach been used, for example with a small passage of text and links to relevant information sources and visual prompts included at the top of the screen, this could have encouraged better awareness of the scope of the consultation, and greater focus on topic coverage during the discussion.

5.3.2 Moderation tools

Better use of visual presentation tools in the genre interface might also have facilitated the moderation of the forum. Indeed, by using an approach such as the one described above, the structuring of the debate could have reduced the need for such invasive moderation during the forum. The significance of this lies in the fact that the forum is a setting where the risk of claims of exclusion by participants is very real; thus the role of

⁸¹ www.e-democracy.gov.uk

the moderator, and the *visible* presence he/she has in the discussion, is of utmost importance in preventing and allaying such fears.

Since the moderator participated in the e-DCF discussion without any additional privileges in terms of creating and managing threads, and routing/guiding the debate, he was required to make his presence felt through numerous postings. Arguably, his visibility made his position untenable; he was open both to critical postings from participants in response to his own, and to claims of censorship when participants' postings were pre-moderated from the forum.

According to Luhmann's (2000a: 47) understanding, legitimacy is secured by the power-holder by ceding just enough power through transparency to appear credible. In e-participation initiatives, the challenge is similar: organisers should avoid ceding too much control to participants – especially where the procedures revealed in the quest for transparency may transpire to be exclusionary. In such a case, e-participation initiatives could prove to be more damaging than beneficial as legitimation mechanisms because of their ineffectiveness. Indeed, it would be undeniably counter-productive to the development of e-participation initiatives were the moderator seen as actively favouring or supporting the opinions of one or other segment of participants through his interventions.

The study of the e-DCF offered a clear demonstration of the problems associated with the politicising of the moderation role and function. With this forum being used as a showpiece for emerging government e-participation initiatives in the UK, the moderator was chosen because of his expertise, and accorded a role which went considerably beyond the behind the scenes 'policing' of the previous CitizenSpace e-participation exercise. Actively involved in the discussion and advocating his own position throughout the debate, the moderator engaged with participants, and challenged their arguments when they disagreed. This caused some degree of consternation amongst some of the participants and led to the impartiality of the moderation being questioned.

Arguably, this had a profound impact on the credibility of the forum as a potential legitimation mechanism.

The role of the moderator in the discussion should be to help safeguard the neutrality of the debate by ensuring that norms are respected and the procedure followed. If his/her role extends beyond this to become a political one (e.g. when the moderator defends a particular viewpoint), this could jeopardise the neutrality of the procedure. Indeed, the role of the procedure, as Luhmann (1993: 23) sees it, is to assist in the reduction of complexity; if this role is obstructed rather than facilitated by the moderator, legitimacy, in the sense of the effectiveness of the procedure to produce decisions is threatened (Luhmann, 1993: 20).

5.3.3 Forum management tools and participant freedoms and constraints

Given the lack of tools available to the moderator in mediating the discussion, an effective system for the management of contributions would have facilitated his role. However, the structuring and development of discussion in the forum was problematic, in particular because the interface had no controls over participant thread initiations. This led to irrelevant and duplicate threads being created, which made the ‘visibilisation’ of the discussion on screen confusing. Tighter controls on this would have made the threading system more effective in ensuring the manageability of the forum (e.g. by only allowing the moderator to create threads).

Although gains in manageability would have come at the expense of freedom, this would have arguably have helped to direct and focus the discussion. Structuring the discussion thematically over a period of time, for example, with time windows for the discussion of a particular topic is one such control which could have been introduced to direct the progression of the forum discussion. And, whilst the tighter timeframes may have prevented some participants from taking part in the debate, it would have given a greater focus to the discussion, and a sense of progression over time. Some (libertarians) might see this as undermining the ‘democratic potential’ of the online

forum; however, it is too simplistic to equate lack of structure with the potential of the online forum genre, since the gains derived by instituting a few basic organisational features can far outweigh the losses incurred through the reduction in participant freedoms.

Structuring the forum discussion over time would have had two additional advantages: firstly, it would have given the discussion a sense of momentum, generated by the goal of covering a range of topics in a given timeframe. With an unstructured discussion interest can quickly wane after an initial phase of activity, as occurred in the e-DCF, where interest levels dropped after an initial phase of activity. However, had the discussion been staggered over a number of phases during which a key theme was discussed, it may have encouraged some participants to return to view and participate in the forum again during one of the later phases.

Secondly, the use of staggered topics/discussion phases could have been used to create some sort of sense of achievement and purpose tied to the development of the debate. For example, topics could be ordered such that they run from more general issues to more specific ones, with interim summaries being presented between each phase or, as Acland (2003b: 4) suggests, participants could be given the option to rate priorities before developing these in the next stage of the discussion, thus giving the participants the opportunity to influence the choice of future discussion topics in the debate.

In so doing, the forum discussion would become more like a process (a *legitimation* process), with each phase feeding into the next, such later phases could build on (or at least not toil over) the issues discussed in previous ones. The ‘proceduralisation’ of the forum in this way and the visibilisation of these procedures make it possible to present, represent and even synthesise the discussion, just as in Luhmann’s view of legitimation through procedure (Luhmann, 1993: 48), the procedure offers a framework for the elimination of possibilities in political decision-making through which the legitimacy of policy outcomes can be secured.

As has been noted, some (most notably irate former CitizenSpace users and libertarian e-participation commentators⁸²) believe that the promise of e-participation lies in the possibility of unfettered communication between citizens. As such they may consider themselves opposed to an interface which limits to some extent the freedom of participants to interact with each other as they please. They may, for example, feel that the proceduralisation of the forum impinges upon opinion-formation and the liveliness and spontaneity of the debate.

In this they are, perhaps, correct. However, given the diversity of the participants in e-participation initiatives, the greater the level of freedom they have, the higher the risk of internal exclusion. After all, unified values or norms will not necessarily be shared by the wide variety of stakeholders in a policy debate as proponents of models of deliberative democracy highlight (see Benhabib, 1993). Furthermore, debate about the appropriacy of these can be just as fierce as the actual policy debate in the forum. As can be seen from the exchange presented in Appendix 18 (p.250), this was also a source of conflict in the e-DCF. Given the public positioning of policy-making fora, the organisers have a responsibility to safeguard their inclusiveness – and thus an important element in the normative grounding of their legitimacy – as best they can. Therefore, any tools which can be added to the interface to facilitate this process are invaluable.

The issue of the level of participant freedoms has already been touched upon in relation to the role of the moderator, and the tools at his/her disposal. Yet the participant experience is not only defined negatively in relation to the restrictions imposed by the moderator, it is also influenced by the design of the forum interface itself. As has been suggested, the interface can encourage or foreclose certain types of interaction between participants.

⁸² Such as Katz (1997a), Kelly (1994) and Kapur (1993). See the discussion of these in Hacker and van Dijk (2000: 44-45).

The spectrum of possibilities in this respect can be broadly summarised by the issues which underpin the polarisation between opinion formation and decision-making in public opinion theory, as discussed in section 2.4.3. In these theories, the formation of public opinion tends to be seen either as an end in itself (opinion formation) or as a means of facilitating decision-making (see Hacker and van Dijk, 2000: 39).

Applied to the forum setting, an exercise in ‘public’ opinion formation is best fostered by unfettered and free-wheeling discussions; over-structuring the debate could stifle this (fictional) Habermasian ‘public’ coming together as one to exercise their reason through the ‘intersubjective’ discussion of social norms in the ‘space’ which is the online forum. Consequently, breaking down the discussion into a range of pre-defined threads would remove a degree of spontaneity and make it less likely for such ‘group’ dynamics to evolve. An exercise in decision-making, on the other hand, suggests a need for tools which enable the discussion, evaluation and ultimately the selection of alternatives. While the former depends on a high level of participant freedom, the second demands an interface which can structure and channel the discussion.

Most crucially, the greater the extent to which participants are required to ‘interact’ via an interface which structures and pre-determines the scope of their contributions (e.g. through time windows and stimulus-defined topic pages), the less they are able to ‘interact’ with one another. The inverse would seem to suggest that intersubjective opinion formation in e-participation initiatives might be favoured by an interface allowing greater participant freedom. Yet, interestingly, this did not occur in the e-DCF in spite of the few controls which were in place. Indeed, the vast majority of the participants only posted one contribution⁸³, and a large number of the threads received only one posting⁸⁴.

⁸³ 49 out of 130 participants or 37.7%.

⁸⁴ 26 out of 73 threads or 35.6%.

Whilst there are many possible reasons which could have contributed to this in the e-DCF – ranging from unsuccessful recruitment, an off-putting interface, a poor threading system, to a lack of trust in the forum’s goals and outcomes – most crucially perhaps, it is worth noting the fundamental difference between online communities and e-participation initiatives. Indeed, the former tend not to be one-off time-limited single issue fora, but open-ended discussion platforms for (mostly) engaged contributors, often relying on a unifying ethos, shared values or interests in ensuring cohesion and maintaining a sense of ‘community’ online (see White, 2001); in the latter this would be a sign of its exclusiveness and, therefore, untenable. What is more, in e-participation fora, group-political status issues should not be allowed to impinge on the development of the discussion, as they inevitably do in many online communities. Indeed, this would jeopardise political equality in the forum, by raising the risk of ‘internal exclusion’ Young (2001).

There are certainly circumstances in which a community-based forum might, however, be appropriate, even within an e-participation exercise. For example, if the purpose of the exercise is to solicit the views of a particular interest group on a specific topic, particularly those groups which might feel reassured to contribute their opinions in a peer context, then a more community-based approach may be suitable. Such a forum was run for women survivors of domestic violence in conjunction with the UK Parliament All Party Domestic Violence Group in March 2000. The forum received almost 1,000 contributions in the space of a month from contributors who, it was felt, would have been unlikely to be heard through other channels. Furthermore, the forum received a vote of confidence from the participants, with 94% stating that they felt it was a worthwhile experience (e-Envoy, 2002b: 33), and led to follow-up forum being created by the participants as an online support group (Coleman and Götze, 2001: 37).

In most cases, however, it must be concluded that community building is not a viable goal of an online forum within a policy-making procedure, although it may or may not be a by-product; virtual ‘publics’ (or perhaps sub-publics since they represent only a ‘public’ of a group of Internet users and politics enthusiasts) can certainly form during the course of deliberation, but the normative value of such a development should not

take priority over the procedural dimension of legitimation. Furthermore, sensitive moderation is essential to monitor whether any ‘community building’ which does occur is liable to result in negative consequences for political equality in the forum through internal exclusion.

5.3.4 Interface design to facilitate forum goals and output

The opinion formation versus decision-making debate clearly has an impact on interface design from the perspective of information management, as well as that of moderator and participant tools, yet nowhere is it reflected more than in the possible/desired output from the forum, and nowhere is its importance greater for the success of e-participation.

The study of the forum output touches on both the first and last stages of online consultation processes of set up and design, and evaluation and feedback. Indeed, the most crucial factor for consideration when designing an interface for running an online consultation is the desired output from the deliberation. As Acland (2003b: 3) argues, this issue overarches all others, not least because it represents the visibilisation of the forum procedure, to both participants and non-participants; put simply, the fewer tools integrated within the interface to manage participant interactions and contributions, the more difficult it becomes to guide the discussion towards any sort of conclusive output without considerable additional qualitative analysis of the discussion.

The output of government consultation exercises, be they face-to-face or online, focus groups or deliberation exercises, mostly takes the form of a report submitted to the commissioning agency or department. However, if the forum is designed with the intention of allowing participants to explore their opinions in a relatively unstructured manner, there is arguably a degree of misalignment between the procedure, goals and the ultimate output – unless, of course, the culmination of the deliberative process is somehow captured as the output of the forum (e.g. through consensus or a vote). If this is not the case, generating the forum output becomes a qualitative exercise which can be neither representative nor neutral. Moreover, as an exercise in ethnography, the task of

compiling the forum report is observer-dependent; as with audience ethnography, it is contingent inasmuch as it depends on both the analyst's and reader's perspective (Dayan, 2001: 748-9). In spite of this contingency, the report must surely be seen as broadly speaking representative of the opinions expressed in the forum to be credible.

Little is known about the decision-making behind the reporting strategy of the e-DCF. The resulting report had a thematic content analysis component, as well as a short chronological discussion of the development of the discussion from the moderator's perspective, followed by a number of selected quotations ('soundbites') from the contributions made. It is not known who decided upon this format. However, it is clear that the limited organisational capabilities of the e-DCF (i.e. the largely abused threading system) will have undoubtedly resulted in an additional workload for the forum moderator who was responsible for the compilation of the final summary report.

Even if considerable time was invested in reordering and classifying, coding and analysing the contributions (as was conducted as part of the present study), it is clear in such circumstances just what a pivotal role the moderator acquires in determining how participants' opinions are (re-)presented back to the commissioning agency. The role goes beyond the stated brief of enforcing the forum rules and guiding the discussion, also to interpreting it; he or she is responsible for collating, prioritising, (re)structuring the information and contributions posted to the forum and for then (re-) presenting these to the forum organisers.

In the e-DCF this was a heavy burden of work considering how ill-adapted the freewheeling interface tools were to facilitating the aggregation and coding of the many contributions, but also a considerable responsibility given the potential for human error or bias. Had the interface comprised greater database functionality to assist in the structuring and organisation of contributions, this would have brought enormous advantages in the preparation of the forum output; it would have (at least partially) automated the way information is ordered and presented by proceduralising a number of

functions which would otherwise have to be carried out by a person, and thus helped reduce (even unintentional) bias introduced by the moderator or report writer.

Of course, it is not being inferred that the increased use of database functionality and proceduralisation of the analysis and report writing process would remove the risk of bias entirely. For one, proceduralisation can ‘institutionalise’ bias by embedding it within procedures which can normalise and legitimise the exclusion of different social groups. Furthermore, it could be argued that extensive use of database functionality ultimately amounts to an attempt to render qualitative information quantitative by attempting to make it possible to aggregate it through coding and the use of database sorting. Yet, with careful consideration of what is referred to here as Young’s ‘metrics for inclusion’, the proceduralisation of certain functions can promote the ‘transparency’ (or at least some visibility) of these functions while safeguarding the neutrality of certain core functions of output generation; this should at least reassure the most cynical of the openness and accountability of the exercise.

This last point touches on the heart of the issue of forum design and, by corollary, that of forum output; even although the technological possibilities exist to provide platforms for hundreds, or even thousands, of people to participate in online discussions, the question of manageability acts as a considerable barrier to this being realised, except through purely quantitative means (i.e. surveys or polling). For example, although only 130 participated in the e-DCF, thousands of participants could have registered for the forum. However, had this happened it would have generated so many posts and threads that it would have been virtually impossible for anyone either to follow the development of the discussion, or to produce any sort of output without the help of a sizeable moderation team. Clearly, this could have profound implications for the cost-effectiveness, not to mention logistic feasibility, of e-participation.

Under such conditions, and without using database functionality to structure and order contributions (as can be found in the template model), the discussion in the online forum would become a mere aggregation of essentially disconnected opinions, offering

few real advantages compared to quantitative research such as an online questionnaire or poll. As such, it may not even be credible as a simulacrum of democracy. This raises three important questions concerning the limits of e-participation:

1. Should representativity of opinions be sought in e-participation initiatives?
2. If so, how can the forum embody this, and what role should the discussion output play in visibilising it?
3. At what point does the use of advanced database functions turn the consultation forum into an online poll?

Arguably, e-participation must surely be seen as representing ‘something’, otherwise there would be little point in making it an integral part of policy-making procedures. What then, should such initiatives represent? If depth, rather than breadth of opinion is the key goal, then the statistical representativity of the sample is not so much of a key concern; as was the case with the Domestic Violence forum, the target group will be self-restricting. However, in most circumstances, policy-makers are likely to seek to gain a range of ideas and opinions from a selection of interested citizens and stakeholders through e-participation. Therefore, a broad cross-section of participants will need to be recruited to provide a credible selection (‘representation’) of the range of opinions on the issue.

Thus, one thing is clear; e-participation initiatives must not become mere online focus groups. Popular with the New Labour government, focus groups tend to generate ideas through a small group discussion and rely on the moderator’s analysis to interpret and present the findings. As a market research tool, they support ‘managerialism’ (Chadwick and May, 2003) by facilitating policy presentation rather than dialogue between stakeholders in the policy debate. Coleman and Gøtze (2001: 8) also see a risk of e-participation being hijacked by government as an online focus group tool, encouraging “crass impressions and half-formed opinions serving as a substitute for rational deliberation”. Under such circumstances e-participation would become a form of ‘public opinion on tap’ for government.

Avoiding this situation means establishing a procedure which can ensure that initiatives lead to an output with which citizens and stakeholders alike (be they participants or observers) can identify. Indeed, the output of the procedure may be the reduction of complexity, but a thematisation of ‘public opinion’ as a ‘functional fiction’ (Schmidt, 1994; Grant, 2000a) must be operationalised in the output to secure its credibility. In other words, normative legitimation is required. This means creating an inclusive platform which can facilitate discussion between a wide range of participants on a particular policy issue.

Therefore a balance must be struck between the desirability of spontaneity on the one hand, and the practical need to manage the number of participants in the debate and the format of their contributions, on the other. Put differently, the challenge in interface design – and it must be seen as a choice with consequences and implications – is to find the best possible trade-off in terms of freedom and functionality, dynamism and the ultimate goals of the forum. There are clear risks if this balance is not struck. For example, if too much freedom is ceded, the forum could appear to increase the level of contingency in the policy-making process beyond the control of the system, and result in a loss of focus when the discussion extends beyond its intended scope. If not enough freedom is given, the exercise could appear to be an empty gesture with no scope for influencing policy outcomes.

Although the visibilisation of citizens’ policy concerns and questions is perhaps in itself a crucial outcome of using online fora within policy-making procedures, there is still a strong case for arguing that a conclusive output should also be expected from a forum within a policy-making process. Furthermore, there are undoubtedly cheaper (and more effective) ways of collecting citizens’ ideas if there is no need to for these to be discussed, evaluated or ranked by either participants in the discussion or policy-makers. Arguably, the loss of freedom which must be accepted in channelling the discussion towards such a goal through interface functionality is a compromise which must be made if the functional effectiveness of the forum is seen as central to its credibility within policy-making procedures.

This is, of course, central to the third issue raised above; whether there are limits to the reliance of e-participation on database technologies. Database functionality and other technological tools should only be seen as facilitating tools capable of making the study and analysis of online consultation exercises more manageable than would otherwise be the case; their role is thus not to reduce the range of opinions to numbers or a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ (i.e. as would an online poll), but to make the sheer volume of information and opinions more manageable to those who ultimately are responsible for analysing it. In this sense, technology cannot and should not dispense with the need for quality moderation. Nevertheless, care and attention at the stage of interface design can considerably aid the moderator by allowing resources to be maximised and applied such that both technological capacity and human skills are utilised most efficiently. The e-democracy consultation undoubtedly fell short of the mark in this respect.

A useful tool to understand the importance and role of representation in e-participation is the four-step approach developed at by Dr David Newman of Queens University, Belfast and Peter Emerson of the De Borda Institute (see Figure 16 below). In this model, e-participation begins with a general discussion where the issues are brought to the table and the scope of the discussion is defined. This stage of the discussion can be relatively unfettered. Moving on, more structure must be introduced: the second phase involves mapping out possible options and scenaria from the ideas tabled. The discussion platform must enable these options to be ranked and prioritised in the third stage, perhaps through voting, before a plan for implementation is drawn up in the fourth stage.

Level of groupware needed to support stage	Stage of process			
	1. Open discussion	2. Structured problem-solving	3. Evaluation /choice	4. Implement
3. Shared models			Rank options and synthesize solutions	Develop into practical plan
2. Understand others		Create multiple maps from alternative options		
1. Communicate (exchange messages)	What are the issues and needs?			
	Debate		Voting	
	Consultation			
		participative design		

Figure 16: 'Preferendum model' for online consultations (adapted from Newman and Emerson, 1996).

This model might therefore foresee the possibility of a 'freewheeling' forum at stage one. At this stage, the discussion need not necessarily be held on government platforms; for example, civil society organisations and interest groups may organise fora and feed results into the governmental process at a later stage. Thus, an initiative pitched at the level of the e-DCF would best fit into stages two and three, and not stage one as was actually the case. Instead of providing a general discussion of on e-democracy policy, the forum should have comprised an element of debate, but it focused essentially on the selection, evaluation and ranking of policy opinions. This, together with some degree of representativeness, would have significantly increased the credibility of the initiative as a legitimation mechanism.

5.4 Online communication and exclusion in e-participation

The study of online communication in the e-DCF revealed findings of relevance to the problem of internal exclusion in e-participation initiatives. Internal exclusion refers to exclusionary practices in how democratic debate is conducted, such as rules and norms, or general terms of discussion which marginalise or disadvantage minorities (Young, 2000: 55).

Certainly, a number of features of the medium have some impact on the types of communication which tend to be found in online fora: the speed of information transfer (near synchronous); information storage systems (asynchronous threaded database); and the human-computer interface (screen) are crucial. Above all, these define which types of communication are practicable in the forum. More often than not, formal and structured prose gives way to more spontaneous text compatible with fast typing, encouraging a new and heterogeneous communicational environment. Indeed, the ways and means of communicating of various user groups (e.g. experts, practitioners, 'techies', citizens etc. in the e-democracy forum) are considerably different and, as such, there is a risk of forms of internal exclusion emerging if one or other group is allowed to dominate communication at the expense of others.

Moreover, these issues of exclusion are exacerbated by two additional problems which can impact on the inclusiveness of e-participation initiatives: firstly, by the lack of physical cues in online communication (discussed in sections 4.4 – 4.4.2) which can create ambiguity of tone and meaning, and in worse cases lead to 'disinhibition' and flaming. As noted, Internet users have developed emoticons, and adapted capitalisation and punctuation to compensate for the loss of physical clues. In addition, some ad-hoc online communicational/behavioural norms have evolved into 'netiquette' (Hiemstra, 1982; Dutton 1996; Schweizer, Paechter and Weidenmann, 2001). However, where guarantees of (internal) inclusion are necessary (e.g. to ensure the credibility of e-participation initiatives), it is clear that normative communication frameworks

(underpinned by strategies such as shunning, group-building etc. discussed in section 4.6.7) are insufficient.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the UK government's consultation fora have relied on a moderator to encourage/enforce preferred norms of behaviour, and discourage/censor unacceptable ones. Yet this also has profound implications for internal inclusion in e-participation initiatives; by attempting to 'tame' online communication so that it can be fed into political policy-making processes, participants and observers may perceive such interventions as a direct attempt to prevent certain (groups of) participants from expressing themselves in a way with which they feel comfortable. If due consideration is not given to this in the design and set up of e-participation initiatives, there is the risk of creating new forms of internal exclusion and re-establishing/perpetuating existing (offline) ones.

The macro-level study of the forum content inspired by Hymes' (1972b) SPEAKING model of ethnography of communication revealed some interesting and unexpected conclusions relating to the credibility of the e-democracy forum as a legitimation mechanism. It proved particularly rich in data relating to the way participants communicate online both through the forum interface, as well as with each other. The discussion of the first three variables concentrates on the former, the subsequent four on the latter.

5.4.1 Situation

The study of e-DCF highlighted two clear implications which arose from the e-participation initiative being hosted on a government platform: the setting created expectations, firstly about the importance and likely influence of the forum, and secondly, about the type of interaction which should occur.

Certainly, the government created a difficult position for itself as principal initiator of e-participation initiatives in the UK. With its centralised organisational structure and democratic mandate, many see its online presence as the natural place to drive forward participation in politics online in a way which is representative, inclusive and influential. Yet, in spite of attempts to move beyond the managerial approach Chadwick and May describe, the choice of positioning e-participation as a feedback channel between citizens and the administration is questionable. By circumventing the existing representative structures (MPs, parliament), and instituting a new feedback channel directly between citizens and civil servants, a conflict of interest is created between the participant mandate as constructive critic of government policy-making, and the government's dual position as subject of discussion and host of the discussion.

It is either bold – or naïve – of the government to expose itself to scrutiny in this manner⁸⁵. It is, after all, to be expected that an online public policy discussion on a government-supported platform will be open to scrutiny in terms of its inclusiveness, representativeness, and effectiveness. It is questionable, therefore, whether such an exercise can remain credible while limited to a very small-scale exercise in participation with an unrepresentative groups of participants. Moreover, the setting within policy-making procedures demands output and feedback channels which can offer both a credible representation and visibilisation of public debate; this makes opinion formation as an end in itself an unsuitable goal for such initiatives. Indeed, the government platform is perhaps the least suitable place for establishing an online incarnation of the Habermasian public sphere, not least given what Habermas identifies as the contestatory function of the latter vis-à-vis government/the State at large.

What is more, the setting of the e-participation initiatives within policy-making, means that they have a role to play (a function) within these. Therefore, initiatives are best conceived first and foremost in systems-theoretical terms: the role of the procedure

⁸⁵ It is interesting to note, therefore, that following the closure of the UKOnline consultation fora, the government outsourced the hosting of consultation fora to external organisations, such as Dialogue by Design and the Hansard Society.

within the system is to facilitate the selection and rejection of different policy options resulting in the ultimate elimination of alternatives and reduction of complexity (see Luhmann, 1993: 48). Conceived as such, e-participation initiatives maintain a clear (procedural) link into policy-making processes which help to ensure that they are not perceived as powerless tokenistic gestures paying lip service to participation.

5.4.2 Participants

The study of participants focuses on the second phase of the online consultation process; that of the recruitment and briefing of participants. The case study highlighted a number of issues with important implications for the future credibility of e-participation:

1. That the self-selected versus invited split was a cause of division and exclusion in the forum.
2. That the role of 'expert' contributors highlighted structural inequalities and exclusion in the forum.
3. That self-selected and invited participants may display different commitment levels.
4. That anonymous postings pose a problem in terms of the transparency of the forum.

The problems associated with a mixed recruitment strategy were clearly exposed in the e-DCF. There, participants were composed of two main groups: self-selected and invited participants. Strictly speaking, the vast majority were invited to participate in one way or another via advertising, leaflets and notices (through which the government generally publicises consultations), as well as through the e-mail alerts which would have been sent to those registered with the UK Online service; however, there is a clear difference between a general and personal invitation, and here self-selected and invited participants are distinguished along these lines.

Importantly, a number of the invited participants who joined the forum at the request of the forum moderator did not clearly identify themselves as was promised. Nevertheless,

in coding the participants as part of the case study analysis, it seemed reasonable to assume that many of the comments posted by spokespeople on behalf of specific organisations, mostly during the first phase of the discussion identified in the moderator's final summary (Hansard Society, 2002b: 2), were made by invited participants. These participants were normally industry insiders and experts (i.e. 'practitioners' or 'essayists' according to the taxonomy adopted in the case study analysis). It was also reasonable to conjecture on the basis of the moderator's and some participants' comments that a number of the self-selected participants decided to join the forum having previously used the CitizenSpace fora prior to their closure. These, and the other self-selected participants tended to be 'citizens', 'techies', as well as those participants who seemed to relish the cut and thrust of online debating ('point-makers' and 'point-scorers'). Such a split should surely be avoided in e-participation initiatives in view of the additional divisions it creates between forum participants.

Secondly, the issue of expertise must be addressed. The final summary document from the forum, prepared by the Hansard Society, describes the forum as having been "seeded with a number of serious messages" (Hansard Society, 2002b: 2). This comment raises a very important question: is there a difference in terms of the value attached to the contributions of the invited participants compared to those of self-selected ones? By attaching the label 'serious' to the expert contributions the moderator appears to assign less value to those of the other participants. If this assumption were true, it would be a very grave one, since it could indicate fundamental inequalities prevailing in the forum. Of course, that is not to deny the value of contributions from industry experts and representatives of key civil society stakeholder organisations. However, it is questionable whether "seeding the forum" with these "serious messages" (Hansard Society, 2002b: 2) would have done much to secure the credibility of the forum as an open and unbiased space for discussion. What is more, the majority of invited participants posted very few comments. In fact, many only posted one mission statement right at the start of the forum period and did not intervene to develop their ideas or use them to take forward the discussion with other participants.

Invited participants all joined the forum as named members and representatives of a particular organisation (although as it has already been noted, they did not necessarily declare themselves as ‘invited’). This was in contrast to the other participants, almost all of whom participated anonymously or at least without reference to their profession, affiliations or vested interests. Where such factors *were* mentioned explicitly by self-selected participants, they were invariably used to claim a privileged status for the participant and to add credibility to the case for which they were arguing. This occurred most notably in the case of industry ‘practitioners’ who cited their experience and expertise to give weight to their own arguments.

Self-selected participants seem, therefore, to have been at a distinct disadvantage in the forum, since only a minority were able to invoke their status or expertise. In this sense, it is important to consider whether there is an internal link between invitation and status; with invited participants too great an importance is placed on the organisation the person is representing to the detriment of the opinions and views they are putting forward. Presumably, this problem would be resolved either if all participants contributed exclusively on their own account, or that of an organisation (although this would certainly change the scope of e-participation as it has been conceived to date).

The study of forum participants highlighted, thirdly, the need for additional research on participant commitment levels. Effective participation implies commitment, yet running a forum over a period of time means that motivation can wane for many participants. Is this likely to be more so when a participant is self-selected rather than recruited? A participant may simply have joined a forum out of curiosity, or may decide to stop participating if it is not to his liking. The act of being recruited (even after having volunteered), on the other hand, is perhaps more likely to be taken on as a responsibility. But is this responsibility cherished as privilege or assumed as a duty?

Unfortunately, the findings of the ethnographic study of the e-democracy forum were not clear-cut in this respect. The majority of those participants who appeared to have been invited made only one contribution, and did not get involved in the cut and thrust

of the debate. At the same time, a number of self-selected participants made only one contribution then vanished, perhaps an indication of their dissatisfaction with the debate or indication of an initial curiosity which soon evaporated. The lack of commitment observed in the forum made collective problem-solving or consensus building unattainable in the forum (though this was not necessarily its goal), and at times it seemed little more than a virtual message-board of unrelated comments.

Finally, the study of the forum participants revealed an absolutely fundamental challenge to the inclusiveness of e-participation – that of anonymity. Understanding of what anonymity implies in e-participation can be aided by key political-theoretical debates on ‘neutrality’ and ‘inclusion’. This was approached in section 2.7 from the standpoint of the Rawls versus Habermas debate.

For his part, Rawls (1971) sees ‘neutrality’ as crucial to political equality as participants in a discussion adopt the counter-factual ‘original position’ to mask their particularisms allowing agreement to be reached through discussion on issues of justice. In other words, Rawls’ ‘veil of ignorance’ works by enabling the strict distinction between public and private; as such, it has a function which is similar to that of computer-mediated anonymity in the forum setting. However, as noted, deliberative democracy theorists such as Benhabib (1993: 82-85; 1996: 74-77) and Habermas (1998: 83-94), are critical of attempts to establish a strict distinction from the outset between public and private issues. Both see consensus on such issues as being achieved precisely because they have been openly discussed, debated and justified through the use of reasons (albeit in a discussion which respects the procedural norms of the ideal speech situation). Indeed, in these models of deliberative democracy, participants’ identities do not need to be, or rather should not be, concealed since participants’ identities form an integral part of their argumentation, and the universal rules of discussion ensure mutual respect and the possibility of intersubjective understanding.

In the sense that computer-mediated disembodiment adds an additional dimension to anonymity, approached from the viewpoint of deliberative democracy it would be

looked upon unfavourably in the online forum. Firstly, it would remove some of the richness from the discussion, not least by removing participants' particularisms or neutralising their diversity. Furthermore, it would hide the very justificatory grounds upon which, according to deliberative democracy models, participants should be basing their argumentation. It is certainly significant that in traditional written consultations, contributors are requested to state explicitly their names and the organisations that they represent⁸⁶. Consequently, participants in written consultations make use of their professional status and public personas as appropriate in explaining their reasoning and thus making clear the validity claims they wish to have understood, discussed and appraised by other participants in the discussion.

The sentiment that the anonymity of participants detracts from the value attached to their opinions in the forum is echoed in the ranks of the e-Envoy; "How can anonymous postings on a website be considered to be representative of anything?" comments Steve Wood (2004, per. comm., 20 January), in respect of the CitizenSpace fora. Moreover, hiding the identity of the participants can actually damage the normative legitimacy of the forum by undermining its transparency: for example, some participants could suspect the moderation team of brokering back-door deals to give certain groups a more favourable representation in the forum output, although this issue could be prevented to some extent by ensuring visibility and consistency in the participant recruitment strategy.

Certainly, it is clear that the recruitment of participants for an online forum on public policy should not be left largely to chance if the forum's goals are to be successfully fulfilled. Indeed, it could damage the representativeness of the forum if the recruited sample does not cover a wide range of people of different beliefs and opinions, as well as producing results of limited scope and interest. By establishing a set of *published* criteria relating to the recruitment of participants for online discussion fora, including when more specialised groups should be consulted (e.g. in isolation), it can be ensured

⁸⁶ Although they can request for their names to be withheld from any final published report if they feel that the issues covered in their contribution are sensitive.

that initiatives have a serious and credible role in the future in government policy-making procedures. This was not undertaken in the e-DCF and the resulting mix of invited participants had a distinctly pro e-democracy flavour, which inevitably undermined the credibility of the forum. In future initiatives, the transparency of the criteria should enable potential exclusions to be addressed, and allow similar situations to be avoided.

Finally, a set of guidelines highlighting what might be hoped for in terms of commitment from participants (e.g. timing, length and frequency of posts) could help encourage consistency over a range of fora, and ensure that each issue explored is discussed by the same number of affected and interested people, with the same amount of attention, in respect of the same set of rules. This would undoubtedly help to legitimate e-participation initiatives in policy-making processes.

5.4.3 Ends

Establishing the goals and outcomes of e-participation must be done at the set-up and interface design phase of the initiative. The basic starting-point should be to make clear why citizen input is being sought and how it will be used by policy-makers. Thus, a statement about the initiative's objectives and output are essential in ensuring the transparency of organisers' intentions regarding the exercise, and in allowing the evaluation of the exercise by both organisers and participants alike. A key component of the statement of goals is the clarification of the role of the forum within the wider policy-making procedure; this would allow all parties to make their assessment of the success of the initiative in relation to its goals, as well as the quality of the output and follow-up by the organisers.

Such mission statements are fundamental in the evaluation of the success of online fora; yet they require further elaboration. Indeed, it is necessary, not only for the goals to be clarified, but also the procedure which will enable their realisation; as Habermas (1976:101) argues in his critique of Luhmann, the procedure itself also requires

normative legitimation. Here transparency is crucial in securing the credibility of e-participation initiatives as legitimation mechanisms.

Although messages stating the desired goals and outcomes of the e-DCF were published, they were dispersed in different locations in the forum and UK Online web pages, and were not detailed enough to provide guidance on anything other than the most general aims of the forum. Beyond these, no explicit statement was made in respect of how the desired forum goals might actually be successfully achieved through the forum discussion. This ambiguity had three main consequences:

Firstly, the topical scope of the forum was not stated clearly enough at the beginning of the discussion, with the result that it was not sufficiently clear how and why respecting this would help contribute to the forum output (summary document). Whilst the moderator did state in general terms the themes that ought to be discussed in the forum, particularly in his two thematic introductory threads, the key points from the consultation paper on which input was being sought were not adequately reiterated and reinforced during the discussion, perhaps for fear of over-moderating the discussion.

It was noted, for example, by a number of participants during the e-DCF that the moderation team was not allowing any of the premises of the consultation paper to be questioned. Such comments (mostly from cynical former '*Your say*' participants) were classed by the moderation team as 'off-topic' (Hansard, 2002b: 2) leading to frustration amongst these participants. Although the moderation team acknowledged this frustration in the summary report (Hansard, 2002b: 2), it tended to view the affected participants as disruptive elements, rather than the excluded citizens the participants depicted themselves to be.

Although it remains questionable whether such a forum should restrict participants from the outset to posting broadly pro-policy contributions, these frustrations could have been avoided had the scope of the forum and its goals been better defined. Moreover, the position of the moderation team could have been reaffirmed, given its clear mandate

to facilitate the forum goals. Clearly, this would have implied iterative planning and structuring to ensure that the issues under discussion were covered comprehensively, and would have facilitated a more focused discussion which required less offline synthesis and analysis by the moderator to turn it into the final output, or report.

Finally, the importance of the forum output should be clearly articulated as a goal of any e-participation exercise. In the e-DCF, it should have been made clearer how the summary document fitted in within the wider consultation exercise, which also comprised contributions submitted by post and email in response to a questionnaire on the topic. Indeed, the report compiled by the moderators was submitted by email as a contribution to the overall consultation, which would seem to indicate that all the contributions made to the online forum (some 427 of them) taken together were considered on a par with one single standard contribution by one person or organisation to the overall consultation process. In this case, the potential scope of the online exercise in influencing the actual outcome of government decision-making would seem to be minimal; not only might this be a significant deterrent to potential contributors to a future online forum, but it also raises more fundamental questions about the appropriateness of e-participation initiatives in policy-making from both a financial and logistical perspective.

According to Luhmann (1993:23), the success of a procedure in a systems-theoretical model lies in its orientation to a specific end (i.e. the reduction of complexity). This must also be the case in e-participation initiatives. To be credible these must have a clear role which cannot be confused with other consultation mechanisms; the clarity and transparency of forum goals is thus primordial for the success of e-participation as a whole.

5.4.4 Act characteristics

The remaining variables explored using Hymes' ethnography of communication relate to the way participants communicate with each other in the online forum. The act

characteristics are defined by two key factors: the tempo of the contributions, and the level of interactivity among participants. Each has clear implications for the credibility of e-participation initiatives as legitimation mechanisms.

As was discussed in section 5.3, which examined the feature and functions of the forum interface, this can promote and foreclose different types of interaction. The same applies also to the act characteristics; while the tempo of the debate can be influenced, for example, by the introduction of time windows, the level of participant-participant interactivity can be determined through the use of database functionality (to a greater extent as in the template and ‘preferendum’ models, and to a lesser extent as in the e-DCF). In addition, both in turn can be affected by the level of pre-moderation; in the e-DCF interpersonal communication was undoubtedly compromised by the high number of contributions which were pre-moderated out of the forum.

In terms of the implications for e-participation, the pre-moderation of contributions (almost a quarter of the total submitted) reduced the level of transparency in the forum. Perhaps many of these posts, inasmuch as they were neither illegal nor offensive, could have been put elsewhere in a read-only thread or section. This would have had the result of ‘*visibilising*’ the moderation work, and could have helped participants to understand better what was an acceptable post within the forum and what was ‘off-topic’ (thus improving the transparency and, possibly, the accountability of the forum). Furthermore, it would have reduced the sense of ‘paranoia’ evidenced within the forum, and noted even by the moderator in the final summary document (Hansard, 2002: 2); the pre-moderation seemed to exacerbate participants’ distrust of the moderation team and their feeling of disenfranchisement with the participation process.

Significantly for the future success of e-participation, participants are less likely to feel excluded (or, indeed, that dark forces are operating), if there is a visibilisation of the corrective processes at work; what is more, discussions regarding the agenda for discussion have historically formed an important part of struggles for inclusion within the public sphere, as Benhabib, (1993: 82-85) points out. The visibilisation of these

issues would therefore provide a more legitimate means of control in the discussion fora than the mere exclusion of ‘disruptive elements’.

5.4.5 Key

The study of key in the e-DCF revealed a diverse communicative environment where different stylistic conventions prevail. Indeed, as is to be expected from such a novel platform, a predominant characteristic register is yet to emerge which distinguishes online political forum communication from other types of communication, and political communication, on- and offline. This only proved a challenge in the forum inasmuch as the high level of freedom participants enjoyed fostered a competitive, or ‘agonistic’ environment, in the sense of Arendt (see Benhabib, 1993: 77-78), where the risk of internal exclusion was high. This is a factor which should not be overlooked in the design of future e-participation initiatives.

It was also noted in the case study analysis (see section 4.6.5), that the register of contributions in the forum was far from uniform. Nevertheless, in the e-DCF, the communicative styles adopted can be broadly aligned with the type of participant (self-selected or invited) and the participants’ stance towards e-democracy (for or against). Expert contributions (described by the moderator as ‘serious’) respected standard written English conventions instead of using the less formal language often found in CMC, but were often composed as monologues (policy statements) rather than being open and structurally engaging vis-à-vis other participants’ contributions.

Although many of the more informal and ‘interactive’ postings were also formally monological, where participants did seek to solicit opinions, views and feedback in a more spontaneous manner from fellow participants (and even when the moderator did this), they invariably adopted a less formal register and more personalised style. In so doing, participants took advantage of the possibility of near-synchronicity enabled by the forum, since messages were posted to the forum after only a very short time delay. Morgan (2000) suggests that formal registers rely on conventionalised argumentation

styles, which tend to be monological. Yet, interestingly, the study did not demonstrate the inverse to be the case; informal styles found in the forum often led to instances of flaming or less than convivial exchanges between participants with strong differences of opinion (see section 4.6.2). Therefore, the case study analysis highlighted a cautionary lesson for e-participation; that high levels of participant freedom do not guarantee interactivity, and can significantly increase the risk of internal exclusion by making the key of communication integral to argumentational strategy and status within the forum.

5.4.6 Instrumentalities

The study of instrumentalities (the channel of written CMC and the dialects and registers) revealed further polarisation between two different groups of participants within the forum (the invited ‘experts’ and the self-selected citizens) in terms of the use of the channel (written CMC) and communicational codes. Whilst the channel for communication (written electronic communication) was the same, the communication codes used by the two main participant groups within the forum varied greatly.

These differences were in evidence in three key features of language use in the forum: different styles of argumentation; varying personalisation of contributions; differing levels of grammaticality of contributions. The preference expressed by the moderator in the final summary document for the more ‘serious’ style of contribution underlines the potential implications for e-participation of this position. Indeed, the moderator’s comment in relation to the ‘serious comments’ in the forum, which referred to the more formal contributions of invited participants, has serious implications if online fora are to have any credibility as inclusive platforms for participation in policy-making processes, not least if fora are ever to be put forward as a way of enabling some of those who would not normally take part in traditional offline consultations.

5.4.7 Norms of interaction and integration

e-Participation would benefit immeasurably from a simple charter of rights and responsibilities for communicating online. Such a charter would enshrine also the government's commitment to e-participation and offer guarantees in terms of the transparency, accountability and inclusiveness of initiatives, as well as embodying key norms of interaction. Moreover, unlike the set of rules provided on the UK Online for the e-DCF, the language and wording of this charter should be accessible so as not to discourage participants. It is possible that a contributing factor to the problems in the e-DCF stemmed from the fact that two versions of the forum rules were made available on the site: firstly, a formal legal version on the general 'Terms and Conditions' page for the whole site, as well as a second more user-friendly version accessible from the forum access page.

It would have undoubtedly been better to provide one single, and more comprehensive, set of rules, written in an accessible format and posted on a single page with direct access from the forum itself. For example, many community websites have FAQ pages which set out the fundamental premises, as well as net etiquette ('netiquette'), and thus extend beyond simple legal obligations to suggest behavioural norms. This could have been set up for the online forum and been tied to a set of guidelines which clarified how the forum was to be run and what could be expected by participants during and after its completion.

Such a charter would have reduced much of the ambiguity surrounding the goals of the forum, and as a result could potentially have assisted the legitimation process in the forum by making the moderator's mandate clearer. Moreover, since e-participation initiatives sit on a government platform, they are 'tamed' public spheres whose success, in the absence of a unifying ethos or interest, depends on the host's commitment to an inclusionary mandate. The e-DCF highlighted the considerable risks of relying on self-generating norms to ensure order within an online discussion whilst attempting to

safeguard inclusion; it is therefore the forum rules which establish the appropriate norms of interaction in e-participation, and where this commitment must be embodied.

5.4.8 Genres

Some emphasis has already been given to the different registers used by participants in the e-DCF and the broad categories with which these can be associated. The discussion in section 4.6.8 further revealed a considerable mix of genres, which it was again possible to link with different types of participant. Figure 17 below schematises the emerging picture more fully.

Participant type	Affiliation/ Profession stated	Invited	Common Genre Usages
Citizens	No	No	Personal Story Comment
Techies	Yes	No	Comment
Practitioners	Yes	Yes	Essay Reader's letter
Essayists	Mostly	Mostly	Essay
Point-makers	No	No	Comment
Point-scorers	No	No	Retort/Put down
Discussion feeders	No	No	Invitation
Discussion police	No	No	Comment

Figure 17: Common combinations of participants and genres.

The significance of the study of genres for e-participation lies in the fact that, as can be seen, there is a clear demarcation along lines of anonymity, invitation and status in relation to the level of formality of the contribution and its orientation toward other contributions (mono- or dialogical). Furthermore, it should be noted that 'replies' (not

mentioned in the figure above) were not exclusive to any one group, but were used less frequently by practitioners or essayists. Although a positive reading of the mix of genres in the e-DCF would be to identify diversity and inclusion, a more realistic reading would be the prevailing confusion over the intended goals and outcomes of the forum, and above all, the level of interactivity sought in the forum; after all, a forum of 130 participants is not a particularly successful exercise in public participation.

The findings of the study in relation to the key, manner and tone of the contributions and the polarisation between types of participants lend themselves to the (facile) conclusion that had certain types of genres (e.g. more replies) been encouraged more within the forum, this would have helped to promote, if not interactivity, then at least a more general openness towards other participants' contributions. By extension, it would seem that the genres most favoured by the e-DCF moderation were those which were the most 'monological' (e.g. essays). However, the problem lies less in the appropriacy of certain types of contribution for the forum interface, and more in the appropriacy of the forum interface for the specific goals of the e-participation initiative. Ultimately, this points at the two biggest shortcomings of the e-DCF; the unsuitability of the 'freewheeling' interface for the consultation framework, and the lack of understanding on the part of organisers and the moderation team of the issue of exclusion in, not only, the design of the interface, but also the types of communication (including communication keys and genres) found within the forum.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

In their significant paper on e-participation, Coleman and Gøtze (2001: 4) highlight the worrying trend of low voter turnout, and the wider disquiet with existing mechanisms for participation and representation in British politics which underpins this trend. The tone of their paper is, however, one of tentative optimism, inspired by a number of encouraging online initiatives aiming to promote a more consultative, even participative, approach to policy-making. Yet there lies a paradox in the fact that, on the one hand, numerous theorists and commentators such as Chadwick and May (2003), identify in the Labour government a ‘managerial’ approach to governance which is characterised by the unidirectional policy-making, and the government’s claims to have consulted much more widely than previous governments on the other. This thesis has explored this paradox, both in theoretical communications-scientific and empirical terms, with a view to understanding the conditions necessary for the credible use of e-participation initiatives as legitimation mechanisms.

The government has completed over six hundred consultations each year since 2002 (Cabinet Office, 2004: 4). What is more, online delivery channels have formed an integral part of these, raising the profile and importance of e-participation in the UK. These new channels offer a number of advantages compared with more traditional offline channels: the availability of a flexible format for communication which can enable geographical and temporal restrictions to be overcome; the possibility of a wide variety of stakeholders communicating and interacting in a near-synchronous fashion; and the possibility of organising and storing contributions with great ease and convenience for later analysis are just three of the key strengths offered by an online channel for participation. This must, however, be coupled with an understanding of the potential limits and the challenges to inclusion which the channel also poses.

Therein is the challenge which lies ahead for the government: it must convince the population that these are credible initiatives which can make a tangible difference to policy outcomes, and that citizens should therefore buy into them. After all, more consultation initiatives across a wider range of platforms offer no guarantee in themselves that feedback will be taken on board, let alone acted upon. Moreover,

citizens will want assurances that e-participation has a role to play in broadening and/or deepening participation, and is not just opening another channel for the same voices to make themselves heard. Indeed, as Dutton (1999: 193) has noted, technology can either enhance or diminish democracy, and clearly its use within policy-making procedures poses a whole new set of issues relating to legitimacy and inclusion, not to mention efficiency and accountability.

The concluding chapter of the thesis briefly re-evaluates the key issues which the organisers of e-participation initiatives face in addressing these challenges, by exploring the fulfilment of the four metrics of inclusion derived from Young (2000) across all four stages of the online consultation procedure (set-up and interface design, the recruitment and briefing of participants, the running of the forum, and the evaluation and feedback mechanisms). Guided by the communications-scientific insights from the literature review as well as the analysis of the case study data, the chapter concludes by highlighting the lessons which need to be learnt from the e-DCF, and identifying the enabling conditions for e-participation to foster future initiatives which can serve as credible legitimation mechanisms within policy and decision-making processes in the UK.

The rationale which underpins this thesis is that the success of the initiatives at increasing public participation in policy-making should be evaluated in terms of their credibility as legitimation mechanisms – both in procedural and normative terms. It was argued that framing the debate in terms of legitimacy must take account of the normative dimension of the four metrics of inclusion, whilst retaining a procedural focus on effectiveness and accountability, which the policy-making framework demands. The current study has focused on legitimation mechanisms to denote the role which e-participation initiatives could fulfil as loci for inclusive and actionable public participation in policy discussions.

As the discussion in section 2.7 demonstrated, a procedural understanding of legitimation is best suited to this restricted framework for e-participation. Luhmann

(1993) provides a convincing account of legitimation: the procedure provides a code which makes it possible for the reduction of complexity and the elimination of options from the policy-making process. However, whilst Luhmann (2000a: 47) recognises that legitimacy can be secured by the power-holder expressing a willingness to negotiate, or to cede power to democratic contestation, he is aware of the potentially damaging effect of such moves being exposed as symbolic. Indeed, maintaining legitimacy is an ongoing challenge to prevent frustration by securing and reinforcing mass diffuse loyalty among the “loosely associated, multiple foci of opinion formation and dissemination” (Benhabib, 1996: 74) which constitute the ‘public’.

This is why the current study has argued that there is a normative dimension to legitimation procedures. The work of Jürgen Habermas on legitimation crises, as well as his later work on deliberative democracy (Habermas, 1996a; 1996b; 1998; 2001) which has been critically re-evaluated and sympathetically developed by Benhabib (1996) and Young (2000), provides an account of democracy which places considerable importance on normative structures. These have to be developed and maintained to ensure the fulfilment of certain conditions – or values – which the public can associate with the inclusiveness of policy-making processes and the legitimacy of decision-making procedures.

Sections 2.7.3 and 2.8 on democracy, virtuality and inclusion highlighted the four conditions which Young (2000) identifies as necessary for inclusive democratic processes – accountability, transparency, access, and (political) equality through the elimination of external and internal exclusion – as underpinning such normative structures. Clearly, these conditions, or metrics, apply just as much to offline participation channels as they do to online ones, although the specificities of online exercises raise a number of additional considerations. For example, consideration must be given to a whole range of factors which touch on the four stages of consultation procedures – set up and interface design, the recruitment and briefing of participants, the running of the forum, and the evaluation and feedback stage. Moreover, although the government has pledged its support to using the Internet to explore the possibility of new relationships between citizens and their representatives, the experimental nature of

Internet initiatives should not be used as a pretext to ignore the question of inclusiveness, as this could risk jeopardising their future credibility as legitimisation mechanisms.

6.1 Evaluating the success of the e-democracy online consultation experiment

The case study examined a pioneering UK e-participation initiative using a multi-layered methodological framework which enabled the study of the medium (Internet), genre (forum interface) and the forms of communication; this required a combination of medium theory and ethnographic tools, including the application of Hymes' (1972b) ethnography of communication. The case study analysis and subsequent discussion explored issues surrounding the four metrics of inclusion Young (2000) in some detail in an attempt to evaluate the credibility of the e-DCF as legitimisation mechanism, and found it to disappoint in relation to all four metrics identified as crucial in securing inclusive political participation.

6.1.1 Transparency

The case study analysis highlighted considerable problems in relation to the transparency of the aims and goals of the e-DCF. In other words, to ensure transparency, the forum organiser should have made the desired goals and output very clear, as well as publicising the steps in the online consultation procedure which would lead from the posting of individual contributions to the final output (from the pre-moderation and storage of contributions, through the coding, analysis and evaluation of contributions, to the final presentation of findings).

However, the forum organisers, the e-Envoy, did not provide information on these points; as a result the case study research required the retrospective uncovering of the procedure which had been followed and, through discourse and text analysis, the identification of the different rationales which appeared to underpin decision-making on the running of the forum and its output. Owing to a level of opacity of the organisers'

goals, it proved particularly difficult to ascertain what was sought from participant contributions and what conceptualisation there was in respect of their integration within the final output (as ‘sound bites’, regrouped thematic responses, a narrative report etc.). Whilst it would be unreasonable to identify a conscious effort to impede transparency, there was certainly some ignorance in relation to its consequences; could it be that the exercise, and its credibility (or lack of it), were not considered that important? Or was it simply that the organisers’ concerns were focused on the visibility of policy-making processes provided by the forum, rather the transparency of decision-making processes which lay behind them?

6.1.2 Accountability

The challenge of accountability implies a clear need for the parameters of a consultation to be clarified, not least its wider function within policy-making procedures. This again demanded a clear statement of the aims and goals of the e-DCF forum, to assist the monitoring and evaluation of the output. The significance of such clarity lies in the fact that any exercise in participation raises expectations about the possibility of bringing to bear influence and effecting change.

Luhmann (1972: 244) argues that increased participation only has the result of increasing complexity and that this undermines the system’s ability to deal with issues, as well as its internal legitimation procedure. He believes that this will lead to frustration amongst the public. Since poor accountability can breed frustration, expectation management must be the cornerstone of any online consultation exercise; without it the credibility of the exercise as a legitimation mechanism cannot be guaranteed.

The case study analysis found that participant expectations were inadequately managed by the e-democracy consultation organisers. Undoubtedly, the novelty of online platform for the initiative made this process more difficult; the experimental nature of the exercise meant that organisers’ own expectations had not necessarily been set in

relation to how the forum should be used in a policy-making context, how participants might respond to the forum, and what its outcome might be.

Nevertheless, the lack of clear goals appeared to undermine participants' confidence in respect of the accountability of the forum; indeed, when participants asked questions which concerned how their contributions were being treated, and how they would be acted upon, the moderation team were not in a position to answer them. This suggests that procedures to ensure the accountability of the exercise had not been clearly communicated even to those most involved in it if, indeed, they had actually been put in place. As noted, in respect of deeper public participation, Luhmann (1972: 224) suggests that considerable damage to legitimacy can be effected where expectations are incorrectly or inappropriately set (or not at all set) and participant hopes and expectations disappointed in relation to these. A similar risk exists with regard to the use of online consultation fora: if expectations are not realistically set, then the credibility of consultation fora as legitimisation mechanisms could be badly compromised.

6.1.3 Access

The medium theory analysis of the medium and forum interface demonstrated that both pose significant access barriers which could easily impede the inclusiveness of online consultation exercises. Literacy levels, computer skills, the user-friendliness of the interface are three main factors which could constitute forms of 'external exclusion'. Furthermore, studies of the Internet public demonstrate that although connectivity levels are increasing steadily, and new platforms, including public booths and digital television, are emerging alongside individual PC Internet access, penetration is still quite low and strongly demarcated along the lines of income, age, gender and geography making the Internet 'public' rather unrepresentative of the general public.

Political uses of the Internet remain marginal, and increasing connectivity levels will not in themselves guarantee the inclusiveness of politics online; there is little evidence

to suggest that the online channel has extended the appeal of politics to a wider cross-section of the population. This, together with the exclusive nature of the ‘Internet public(s),’ means that a clear recruitment strategy is required to counter any potential bias in the forum sample. No such recruitment strategy was in place in the e-DCF. In fact, there was much evidence to suggest that the mix of invited and self-selected groups contributed to the forum becoming a space where conflict prevailed, and internal exclusion abounded. Moreover, the government’s own study of inclusion in the forum suggested that disenfranchised groups felt that the initiative was not intended for ‘people like them’ (e-Envoy, 2002c: 19-26).

6.1.4 *Inequalities in the forum*

The study of the different forms of communication within the forum exposed instances of what Young (2000) refers to as ‘internal exclusion’. As Young points out, the formal right of all citizens to participate in politics does not imply an equality of conditions for participation (e.g. equal access to debate, ability to participate on equal terms etc.); the normative ideal of political equality may be enshrined in positive law, without being *de facto* fulfilled in deliberation.

Most notably, the study of forum communication uncovered differences of status, evidenced in certain language usages, argumentation styles and genres. These trends were most marked between anonymous and named participants which was of particular import given that different (more positive) value judgements appeared to be accorded to (named) participants with some expert status. This was highlighted in the comments made about the ‘strength’ and ‘seriousness’ of invited contributions in the moderator’s final summary report (Hansard Society, 2002b: 2). Although these comments appear to have been borne of the moderator’s frustration with a contingent of self-selected participants who consistently posted critical and, at times, off-topic comments, it nevertheless indicates that the moderator was unable to facilitate ‘netiquette’ and facilitate the discussion such that all groups could contribute co-operatively.

6.2 Learning lessons from the e-democracy online consultation experiment

Given the novelty of the medium and the exercise, as well as the fact that the interface was adopted from a previous experiment, it is not surprising that there were some problems with the e-DCF. Thus, it is crucial that lessons are learnt from the experiment to assist in the future development of e-participation exercises. There are lessons to be learnt from all four stages of the online consultation process: interface design and set-up, participant recruitment and briefing strategies, the running of the forum and, finally, its evaluation.

6.2.1 Interface design and forum set-up

In terms of the four stages of the online consultation, the design and set-up stage is consequently the most crucial since the framework chosen will enable or foreclose, facilitate or complicate particular activities and behaviours in later stages. For example, the choice of interface can modulate the extent to which dynamic, interactive (two-way) and iterative exchanges can occur between participants, moderator and policy-makers, as well as the ease with which contributions can be stored, coded, analysed and synthesised, before they are (re-) presented back to policy-makers.

Importantly, the study of the e-DCF suggested that the forum interface with its thematic, community-style approach and lack of time-bound topical focus, was unsatisfactory for the generation and development of ideas on very specific policy points. In fact, the forum ran rather too much like an online community. This approach, with its emphasis on community-building, was misaligned with the intended result as envisaged by organisers (i.e. substantive input to policy); too much time was spent (re-)enforcing norms of interaction at the expense of actual debate on the consultation issue. Indeed, the case study research appears to suggest that such a 'freewheeling' style of forum favours non goal-oriented 'interactivity' and group formation over discussion (and thus (contestatory) deliberation), and that this can result in too much time and effort being expended on group-building activities rather than addressing the core consultation

issues. However, it also demonstrates that the e-DCF was an unsuccessful online community. This was evident in the actual forms of communication which it fostered: instead of being interactive and collaborative, the discussion was fragmented and dissentious.

6.2.2 The recruitment and briefing of participants

The mixed recruitment strategy employed in the e-democracy consultation forum and the different approaches each group adopted towards their role in the forum, demonstrates the need for a clear recruitment strategy and adequate participant briefing. First of all, mixed recruitment methods, such as combining invited and self-selected participants, can lead to a forum being populated by people with very different understandings of the process, what is required of them, and what their input is likely to achieve. A uniform strategy is necessary to ensure that steps have been taken to encourage the participation of all relevant stakeholders, and to monitor that a reasonable cross-section has come forward. The lack of such a strategy is likely to have contributed to the participants becoming increasingly entrenched in different camps as the consultation progressed; there was a lot of persistent complaining from a minority of cynics (possibly aggrieved CitizenSpace fans), statements of agreement and mutual support from pro e-democracy practitioners, and stand-offs between the two groups. If nothing else, it suggests that status and power were being negotiated in and through the discussion, therefore indicating a significant risk of internal inclusion in the forum.

Of course, it is clear that the existence of entrenched camps may also be attributable to the participant briefing strategy for the forum (or distinct lack of one). It is likely that the participants' different understanding of the forum and its role in the policy-making process stemmed from the briefing they received from the organisers; the minimal information which the self-selected participants received on the one hand, and the separate invitation brief (the contents of which are unknown) received by the invited participants. One single, published brief should have been made available to all participants to reduce any ambiguity arising in relation to participants' understanding of the process.

6.2.3 *The running of the forum*

The case study analysis suggested that the high level of participant freedom which the interface can enable will not necessarily lead to better deliberation. For one, it will not ensure that participants justify their arguments with recourse to good reasons, nor that they form their opinions intersubjectively in the discussion rather than merely tabling those they bring with them. As the UK Online experiment demonstrated, it is more likely that total freedom will result in a degree of disorganisation and loss of focus, and generate a forum rife with digressions and irrelevant posts.

The problems encountered with the types of communication and interaction found in the forum also raised questions about the appropriateness of – and indeed legitimacy – of such a small exercise in opinion formation being supported if inclusiveness and representativity are not attempted, let alone guaranteed. Indeed, if online e-participation initiatives are seen as a black box out of which emerges only a report of what the consulted masses (or indeed, selected few) think(s), then the normative grounding of their legitimacy will be questioned regardless of their procedural effectiveness. It is evident that it *could* be extremely damaging to the government if such exercises did not appear credible (relevant and effective) or fair (inclusive), or appeared to favour particular types of participants or stakeholders at the expense of others.

6.2.4 *Evaluation and feedback*

The duality of roles of the government as topic of discussion and host of the discussion creates an added conflict of interest in terms of the credibility of e-participation initiatives; some will always be cynical of the government's willingness to listen to views which do not fit in with its own agenda. There is a clear need, if an e-participation initiative belongs to the government, for the procedure to be just and fair, as well as public. Indeed, the transparency of the procedure – in terms of its means as well as ends – is a pre-requisite as it allows for its improvement on an ongoing basis, and therefore its ability to maintain its credibility as a legitimation mechanism. The

lack of control and constraints exercised by organisers of freewheeling fora make this extremely difficult to guarantee. Thus, the agonistic and competitive spaces which are freewheeling fora are best left outside the government domain, where the requirement of inclusiveness is not so pressing.

Government platforms, on the other hand, should support more structured frameworks, which can allow for careful pre-planning to ensure their inclusiveness, as well as their functional efficiency. Consultation models, such as Emerson and Newman's 'preferendum' model (see section 5.3) give credence to the argument defended here that the further along the stage of process or spectrum initiatives are, and the more implicated in decision-making processes they are, the more pressing the need for transparency and accountability to ensure normative legitimacy. Furthermore, their advanced functionality would encourage greater structure and purpose as well as visibility, giving the system the publicness it requires for its own legitimation (Grant, 2000a: 69).

Finally, the role of the moderator must be clearly defined to ensure that it does not undermine the legitimacy of the system; the role should only be to ensure that the procedure is respected, and thus must not extend to sharing his own opinions, as this undermines the neutrality of the role.

6.3 The future of e-participation

The challenge faced by theorists and practitioners of e-participation is to achieve a successful design for e-participation which can carve out a valuable place for itself among other participation channels including online plebiscites, online focus groups and discussion boards. Fulfilling this challenge demands that basic conditions of equality of access and inclusion must be met, and thus implies at the very least an interface design which promotes equality (if not removes inequalities). It is here rather than in 'community-building' or inter-participant 'interactivity' that the focus of government e-participation initiatives should lie.

The interface must also enable unbiased moderation and facilitation, produce tangible results which can be followed up upon, as well as conditions which foster consistency from one exercise to the next, and allow for the establishing of benchmarking, evaluation and best practice standards. Furthermore, by setting expectations in relation to the different stages of the procedure, the procedure would have a degree of transparency which would increase its credibility as a legitimation mechanism. Accountability could be further guaranteed by electing a (citizens) panel to evaluate the success of each exercise and to ensure the implementation of agreed objectives within the agreed timescales.

Clearly, the e-democracy forum was an experiment, and even at the time of its launch its weaknesses were recognised by the moderation team. Therefore, its shortcomings, which certainly detracted from its credibility as a legitimation mechanism, cannot be laid at the door of the organisers who inherited the format from previous experiments. Nor should these teething problems necessarily imply (or need to imply) that the credibility of e-participation in itself should be damaged. Nevertheless, as this thesis has attempted to demonstrate, it is necessary that lessons are learnt from the experiment. Most crucially, when these best practice lessons are derived from the e-DCF, and a new genre platform is devised for future experiments, user testing – on whatever scale is financially or logistically possible – should be undertaken to ensure compliance with the key metrics for inclusion, not to mention ‘usability’, prior to the interface ‘going live’.

It is an unfortunate reality with government IT projects that budgetary factors and procurement protocol will play a significant, even fundamental, role in shaping the communication infrastructure chosen, if not the future direction of e-democracy in the UK. It is all the more important, therefore, that due consideration be given to the form and structure prior to purchasing decisions, otherwise future e-participation initiatives could also be damned to failure before they are even underway. With the promise of e-participation being judged on the basis of each experiment, badly planned and executed initiatives are to be avoided, since they could have a wide-reaching impact on the future of e-participation as a whole.

The aim of this thesis has been, by developing a robust, interdisciplinary theoretical reflection on political communication in the age of the Internet, and by delivering a multi-layered analysis of case study data from an important e-participation initiative in the UK, to explore and critically assess some of the key considerations which could enable and foreclose the possibility of future initiatives becoming credible legitimisation mechanisms in UK policy-making. Since the work on this thesis began, there have been a number of developments in the field of e-participation which it has not been possible to examine in any detail as part of the current study. This includes online consultations run for the government by external organisations and consultancies, as well as e-participation initiatives run abroad. Therefore, there is considerable scope for developing the current research to examine other interfaces, for example through comparative studies. Through such studies it should be possible in time to establish a model of best practice for e-participation procedures which takes into consideration the limits and boundaries of the medium, genre and forms of talk, as well as the challenge of inclusion in respect of all three.

Appendices⁸⁷

Appendix 1

Alpine: 23 July 2002

I live in the middle of a city, fortunately I have my own computer, but for anyone who hasn't it means a £1.50 round trip bus ride to access the nearest one. I have made inquiries into the possibilities of having a small community centre in my immediate area, but I was told that as we were not in a deprived area that it would not be considered. My area consists of rented accommodation and home ownership, employed and unemployed, young and old, some people own their own computers, but most don't. It seems unfair to me that we have been asked to discuss e-democracy and e-voting when a huge section of society is excluded.

Appendix 2

Broadsword: 26 August 2002

Hi Jeff, perhaps it is me but I cannot understand why you are unable to scroll through the various text sizes. On any web page, with text large and small there are 5 options of display to view which will magnify or minimize the contents of the screen. If I scroll to largest on this site the text is dark and bold with letters half a cm high.

I guess you mean if the default was half a cm high to start with, by scrolling you could set the size of each letter even bigger.

The only other thing I can suggest to Windows users is to click Start> Programs> Accessories>Accessibility>Magnifier.

⁸⁷ All citations and excerpts are presented such as they are in the forum, with spelling and grammar errors unaltered. The original hyperlinks to the contributions are provided although these are no longer active.

Appendix 3

tim.saward: 24 October 2002 (excerpt)

As a member of a few online communities, and someone who is setting one up for a semi-gov organisation (The British Library), this forum is something of a salutary lesson for me. I think part of the problem here is that discussion is not directed (or at least “chaired” by anybody) and can therefore quickly fizzle into irrelevance. I’d be delighted to feedback to the government on any number of things, but it would be nice to start with a sense of what specific questions they need views on.

Appendix 4

JustDirk: 24 October 2002

Well that seems right – but don’t hold your breath.

The e-Envoy’s Office is responsible for drafting policy but they have come up zilch apart from a vague framework document. This could be for several reasons. The cable market is a complete basket-case – no-one knows who will survive. Secondly, different DTV operators use different technology standards. Third, internet and DTV technologies are quite different - a lot of the interactivity you get on a PC can’t be accessed through a TV at the moment. It’s a big, nasty mess’

Appendix 5

Jeffshepherd: 11 October 2002

Hmmmm let me see...Prime ministers question time...MP's ask the PM questions and the PM answers them and these questions can be on any subject...seems like an open forum to me.

as for my other comment i think you have miss read it, i am agreeing with Stephen that yes most countries governments dont run public forums but that Britain doesnt have to follow their lead and not run a public forum.

Appendix 6

nRiehle:25 July 2002

I would like to know what people would like to see from MP websites. I have just done a study of Canadian MP website prevalence and usage and found that less than 60% of MPs have a functioning website and that very few of them are using these sites and new technologies to engage their constituents. Do you feel that strong MP websites (e.g., MPs who poll site visitors on timely issues) are necessary for e-democracy goals such as strengthened representation and consultation? Also, do you think politicians are missing the so-call "web revolution"?

Appendix 7

Goldieb 13 September 2002

????

What was the original comment and why was it removed? I did not get the opportunity to read it - but the replies it got have attracted some interest from me.

I can understand the need to vet contributions to this forum - but why removed them after they have been posted?

(If the original sender can email what the the original message said I would be grateful - I have ticked "recieve replies by Email")

Appendix 8

StephenColeman 16 July 2002

My name is Stephen Coleman. I am Director of the Hansard Society's e-democracy programme. At the request of the Cabinet Office, I shall be moderating this online discussion over the next three months.

If ever there was a policy issue that ought to be debated online, this is it. The objective of the forum is to provide high-quality input to the Government's consultation on its e-democracy policy. Two key points should be made clear at the outset:

It is not my job to defend the Government or its e-democracy policy. I'm here to ensure that the debate is fair, informed and productive. Whilst the policy paper provides the initial stimulus to debate, it is now up to you how the arguments develop.

Appendices

This online consultation, and the wider public consultation of which it is a part, are intended to help the Government better understand where to go with this policy. It wants to learn from you. I'll make absolutely sure that all key messages from this forum are brought to their attention in progress reports as we go along, and in a summary I have been asked to put together at the end.

Please use this forum to float, exchange and discuss ideas, as well as simply stating what you think. Contributions supported by reference to experience supported by experience (including of non-electronic consultations) are especially welcome. As moderator, I shall from time to time invite individuals to intervene in the debate, expressing their views in a way I feel might help move the discussion forward. I will make it clear when such contributions are being posted. The views will always be those of the contributors themselves

To begin the debate, I'd like contributors to stick to two agenda threads: e-participation and e-voting. Of course, as the forum evolves new threads can be added, but it seems sensible to start out by addressing the two main strands of the policy document. The paper itself, and a lot of links to background reading, are available at www.edemocracy.gov.uk Please bookmark that site and let others know about it.

The forum will remain open until the end of October. I look forward to hearing from you.

Relevant website: <http://www.edemocracy.gov.uk>

Appendix 9

StephenColeman: 25 August 2002

As I've pointed out before, this forum is for the discussion of the Government's e-democracy policy. Please keep to the topic.

Appendix 10

Kestrel: 22 July 2002

I'm a bit worried, Beth, when you say "the very generation which needs to be beckoned into the process". Which generation would that be, exactly ? Don't we want everyone from 18 upwards to participate in e-democracy ?

And, er, "online games as a paradigm for participation"? Could you give an example of what you intended by this?

Appendix 11

RichardDeverell: 17 July 2002

eDemocracy: A Hot Prospect or Hot Air? Why should we be interested in eDemocracy?

We know from extensive research that most people in Britain today are profoundly disillusioned with politics and politicians. They feel disempowered and that politics has little relevance to their lives. They feel their concerns are not being addressed in national or regional parliaments, nor in local authorities. The rise of the consumer culture of the '80's and 90's has fuelled their appetite for outcomes and solutions but they feel these are rarely served up by politicians.

However, we also know that people feel passionately about issues. These are often issues of direct relevance to their lives such as the quality of the local schools or concerns about transport infrastructure. Many are also deeply concerned about global issues: should the UK back Bush in a war against Iraq? Should I be worried about immigration? What's the truth on global warming?

The challenge is for all of us to help to make the connection between individual concerns and the national or regional political process. If we can succeed we will help to revitalise the democratic processes by ensuring that citizens are active participants in it. This, in turn, should result in legislation which is better considered and which reflects more directly the aspirations and concerns of the electorate.

What is the role for interactive media in helping to meet this challenge?

I believe there are four areas where interactive media can help facilitate eDemocracy. It can:

1. Provide access to accurate, impartial and convenient information;
2. Facilitate direct communication between the elected and the electorate;
3. Build networks of individuals who share concerns, exchange advice and ideas and who build power through realising their collective influence;
4. Enable the expression and aggregation of opinion – whether polling, emailed comments or bulletin-board discussions.

It can do all of these things at a very granular level, so people can really focus in on their interests. And it does them on a permanent basis – so that opportunities to participate are available whenever people want to use them, not simply at certain set-piece moments.

The potential value of interactive media in stimulating eDemocracy will be realised only if politicians, the media and the public are all prepared to engage, change and contribute.

To succeed I believe we need all of the following to happen:

1. National Government, regional assemblies and local authorities must have a genuine desire to make this succeed.

2. There must be an appropriate commitment of resources. To succeed eDemocracy will need engagement, direction and outcomes. People need to feel their contributions can make a difference. Otherwise, they will rapidly lose interest and eDemocracy will come to nothing.

3. The media need to contribute to this world – not just by providing information but also by offering stimulating and rewarding interactivity for their users.

4. People need to be encouraged to re-engage and participate in public life and, ideally, to do so in a way which stretches them beyond purely a consumerist or narrow self-interest.

My question is whether the Government's new policy on eDemocracy conveys an appetite to take up these challenges? If it does not, I fear eDemocracy may end up being largely hot air.

Richard Deverell

Head of BBC News Interactive

Appendix 12

Euronyourown?: 08 September 2002

You raise some interesting questions concerning inclusion.

In answer to your contentious questions, here are my 20 cents:

1) If you want to be participate in govt policy-making and use your vote online, then you should be prepared to fulfil your civic duty by being eligible for Jury Service and a registered voter.

Public debates and online transactions that enable more citizens to know their rights and claim their benefits are another matter, in my view, and should be open to all.

Appendices

2 & 3) Absolutely. One of the cornerstones of European Government Policy is 'subsidiarity', aka 'pushing the decision-making process as far down towards local level as possible'. If depressed regions of the UK are going to take full advantage of EU spending, and spend money on the things that are right for their region, then it is logical that they should understand more about their local govt and influence their spending by being heard.

Definatley a possibility for reviving 'Town Hall' debate in a far more effective way.

Appendix 13

Oliver_Tebilly: 05 August 2002

You cant really expect a minister to contribute to a general discussion though can you? Talking shops are all very well but why should we pay for a forum so that a group of political anoraks can just chew the fat? At least these are focused. (Well they were, i'll shut up now!)

Appendix 14

Traceyg: 17 July 2002

My name is Tracey, because i have problems with my eyesight i can only use this website with the help of a friend. specifically i need text to be at the largest setting but because the text used on the majority of this web site and in these forums is small i cannot increase the size of it to the size i need. i have emailed the editor of UK Online , the e-Envoy, the e-minister, and the DTI minister to complain and i have just been fobbed off. will the text on these forums and the web site as a whole be increased to medium (allowing myself and others to change our browser setting to the largest text size) so that i and many other people with poor eyesight participate in e-democracy

Appendices

effectively or will we be excluded as we largely currently are? also to help the text needs to be made darker.

Appendix 15

Oliver_Tebilly: 25 September 2002

If I knew you weren't going to vote I could go into the polling station, claim to be you and get away with it. They dont require ID, or a polling card.

Thats not very safe is it?

If, as a local govt. employee, I was counting votes I could choose to be more picky about how spoilt some papers were than others.

Thats not very safe is it?

I could use my credit card on the web 50 times and never have a problem. I could then go to my local restaurant and get my card details copied by the waiter.

Thats not very safe either is it?

Nothing is perfect. But thats no reason to do nothing.

Appendices

Appendix 16

dowcha_boy 18 October 2002

thats quite true.

as well would there be the possability to vote numerous times by using e-vote?

could people-which im sure theyre are-crack the the voting site and have multiple votes?

Appendix 17

CharlesSimon: 19 July 2002 (excerpt)

You're all off-message with this one, gentlemen.

The public can ignore a computer exactly as they ignore a polling station.

It's YOU that is the root cause of the problem.

WE DON'T WANT TO VOTE FOR YOU.

Can it be any clearer??

When the turnout at the next election is 20%, will the message get through..?

Appendix 18

BethPorter: 22 July 2002

Oh yeah, that's the way to register complex views. Voting for Big Brother housemates is NOT politics! :0)

Appendix 19

BeccyEarnshaw: 16 July 2002 (excerpt)

Hi, I'm Beccy Earnshaw and along with Stephen and the rest of the Hansard Society e-Democracy team I will be moderating the e-DCF. The forum is pre-moderated, meaning there will be a delay between when you post a message and it appearing on the forum. Moderators will be checking messages regularly throughout the day, but if you post a message after 11pm at night then it will not appear until 7am the next morning...

Appendix 20

StephenColeman: 19 July 2002

I agree. And, as you will have seen from the e-democracy consultation paper, there is a proposal to draw up an E-Democracy Charter. What do you think it should say to ensure that citizens don't feel they are wasting their time talking to Government online?

Appendix 21

StephenColeman: 19 July 2002

Let's explore this one further. How do you think a direct democracy would work? Isn't it the case that we elect representatives because we don't want to examine the pros and cons of every single issue? Isn't there a danger of push-button votes occurring in a populist fashion, with people making decisions without thinking through the arguments or consequences? Isn't it more effective to use ICT to strengthen representation, so that representatives are in closer touch with those they represent? [...]

Appendices

Appendix 22

StephenColeman: 05 August 2002

You are raising an important point and I will do my best to get some further answers.

Appendix 23

StephenColeman: 25 August 2002

As I've pointed out before, this forum is for the discussion of the Government's e-democracy policy. Please keep to the topic.

Appendix 24

StephenColeman: 24 July 2002

Yes, I am the Director of the Hansard e-democracy programme. As such, I am interested in ensuring that there is a serious public debate about e-democracy and that the Government hears what is said, both from supporters and critics of the policy.

Appendix 25

BethPorter: 07 September 2002

One of the key criteria underpinning some of these very useful suggestions for form and content would have to be a few preliminary statements.

Appendices

1. That the ideas mooted became collective property of the contributors.
2. Some indication of how such a citizenspace will be used/indeed, some indication that it would be used. This would differentiate it from Stephen Shakespeare's assertion, for example, that yougov has no call on how its data is used. It would also serve to counter fears that the whole initiative wouldn't become an electronic Hyde Park Corner, all too readily ignored.
3. Parallel indication of any follow-through by local/national government and/or ngo's that policies had indeed been influenced, even amended, because of such targeted discussions. And [I'm probably asking for too many moons here] perhaps that there even be some public acknowledgment of the input.
4. Perhaps the most important: sufficient funding for a proper dissemination mechanism so that the entire exercise doesn't become participants talking only to each other.

Cheers,

Beth

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