Community Consultation, Local Government and the Hard To Reach

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Abstract: This paper explores how local government can involve a broader range of people in service planning, without intruding on privacy or making onerous demands on residents’ time. Local councils are keen to make their decision-making processes open and representative. They are also expected to build community cohesion and involve all sections of the community in municipal activities (service planning in particular). But only a small number of residents participate. Some groups are active, others are indifferent at best and prefer not to be contacted or sent material. People may be time-poor or difficult to contact. They may be uninterested in local planning and local politics. However, they may also expect to be informed about local development, services and cultural events; they may wish to put a view. But how to contact them without harassing them? These issues are explored in a new collaborative research project, between Swinburne University and six Victorian local government authorities (Nillumbik, Port Phillip, Melbourne, Darebin, Whittlesea, Moreland, and Maribyrnong) and the Victorian Local Government Authority. The aim is to develop a more inclusive and less intrusive model of local consultation.

Framing the study

Ideals of participation are increasingly influential in social policy. Local, state and national governments have associated social well-being with active civic involvement. In turn, this is taken as evidence of social capital and trust in government (see e.g. Cox and Caldwell 2000). Where citizens are not seen to be actively engaged and participating in decision-making, it is often assumed that they are apathetic and at best indifferent to government, community concerns -- at worse, it is feared, they are hostile to public affairs and therefore unwilling to contribute to public discussion. Drawing on civic republican conceptions of citizenship, commentators urge the need to reinvent to agora and public forum, starting locally with the town hall meeting, with face to face civic conversation, and with vigorous public debate. If debate and
deliberation are passionate, engaged and tolerant, then the public square can become a civic classroom that transforms communities.

Usually, the assumption is that this conversation should happen face-to-face. Increasingly, though, online discussions are seen as virtual public forums. New communications technologies are seen as ways to link isolated individuals and groups to one another, fostering the networks, norms and trust that build social capital, and therefore promoting social well-being and civic health. Where these technologies were once seen as devices that reinforced social isolation, they are now seen as the means to reconnect citizens to their liberal democratic political life. But like the models of civic participation modelled on face to face interaction, the virtual version also proves to be more normative than descriptive. Community meetings in the town hall are still dominated by the articulate and educated, or by other vocal majorities. In the same way, online communities and virtual forums tend to be sectional. For one thing, they most likely to be accessed by those with affordable IT access and with English as a first language; more educated and younger individuals are more likely to be skilled in using online forums to advocate a position and extend the connections associated with social capital. While it is clear that niche online forums and email lists have proliferated (e.g. linking individuals and groups that share cultures, languages, a location, an interest or a health concern), it would be an exaggeration to say that these are a direct equivalent to public meetings where representatives from most groups affected by an issue are able to have an equal voice. They do extend the existing means to communicate a point of view, share and seek information; they may not however be the ideal medium for political transformation, from apathy and disconnection to engagement. The question, from our point of view, is whether we
should be more pluralistic about how citizens choose to communicate with one another and with governments, and about the means they use to do so.

The problem, to rehearse a now-standard observation from within the debate between liberal and communitarian commentators, is that our conceptions of civic participation, civic virtue and democratic deliberation are too perfectionist. As political theorists of democracy have long noted, it is dangerous for democracies to assume that the people possess universalistic civic virtues. It is easy to over-estimate citizens’ willingness and capacity to engage in civic conversations -- especially those of the civil, reciprocally respectful sort recommended by citizenship and social capital experts (Kymlicka and Norman 1994). Few individuals fit the liberal democratic ideal of the active, self-determining citizen. Many lack the ability to read, speak English or come to public forums. Many also have a legitimate wish to be left alone and to protect their privacy, free from doorknock and telephone solicitation, from ‘junk’ mail and from the pressure to go to public meetings. Others harbour a deep-seated distrust of public institutions. Such individuals may not be bad citizens or ‘disengaged’ in other domains of life. If debates on democratic participation are not become unbalanced, in their emphasis on the articulate and engaged, then we need to take a more tolerant attitude to those who assert the right not to participate.

These issues come up at all levels of political life, but they are very concrete at the level of local government (Coaffee and Healy 2003, Cook 2002, Chandler 2000). Local councils routinely encounter the limits of community consultation (Nabben 2001, Marshall and Sproats 2000). Current policy directives for local government in Australia are heavily geared towards consultation and building better, stronger communities. This is expressed in the government’s Best Value framework, the Local Government Democratic Reform Bill and the Victorian Government’s Community
Building Initiative (2001), an approach “based on listening to local experience, supporting local connections, providing responsive services and investing in the infrastructure which makes communities good places to live and work.” (Growing Victoria Together, http://www.growingvictoria.vic.gov.au/ DPCbrochure.FA.pdf)

Local councils are increasingly expected to build community cohesion and involve all sections of the community in municipal activities (see e.g. Cuthill 2002, Raysmith 2001, Marshall and Sproats 2000, Hill 2000). Many have embarked on vigorous publicity campaigns and public planning exercises. Councils have sought to contact residents using various media – mostly through advertised public meetings, but also through interactive facilities on Council websites, or through phone and email campaigns. The main focus, however, has been on face to face discussion. Town hall meetings have often been effective in persuading residents to take responsibility for their quality of life. Often, though, the same meetings are preoccupied with the problem of how to motivate the citizens who don’t show up. The assumption is that those who don’t come to public meetings are poor citizens; if they did turn up, then the process of participation itself would teach them how to look beyond self-interest to the greater good. But residents may be reluctant or unable to participate for a variety of reasons. They may be time-poor, mobility restricted, difficult to contact or feel that the issues consulted on are not relevant to them. They may be uninterested in local planning and politics. However, they may also expect to be informed about local services. They are likely to want clear, timely information and means to express their concerns, without committing themselves further.

Councils in Victoria are aware of this problem, but they rarely have the resources to engage with it. Some struggle to provide essential services; others have begun to develop strategies for building community-based activities. The Victorian Local
Government Association has developed resources to improve consultation and participatory techniques (http://www.vlgaconsultation.org.au). However, many councils still operate in an environment of uncertainty as regards their community and service planning. Even though Councils have some information that can help them identify patterns of participation, they do not have the resources to seek out isolated residents or hard to reach groups. Too often, the community planning processes within local authorities are disconnected from the development of communication strategies, with the result that community officers are unable to make full use of the communication spectrum of local newspapers, radio, email and Websites, including those communication forums provided by the local network of clubs and associations.

Collaboration with university researchers can help LGAs to re-examine their approach to community involvement, testing out new ways to profile community groups and contact residents, making more sophisticated use of communication media. This research stemmed from an approach to the Institute for Social Research (ISR) by Nillumbik Shire Council, on the north eastern urban fringe of Melbourne. Nillumbik had already developed and run a Community Planning Think Tank (CPTT), in which local residents were involved in community health planning, building ownership of the facilities and activities planned by Council. Nillumbik was well aware, though, that only a small number of articulate residents were participating in the CPTT. The risk was that the process could be dominated by the motivated individuals who saw non-participants as poor, apathetic citizens – and who could be seen in turn as a vocal minority capturing Council decision-making. This was an opportunity to think through, at local government level, one of the standard dilemmas of liberal democratic governance. How could Council encourage a wider range of
people to be involved, even at a minimal level, without intruding on privacy or making onerous demands on residents’ time?

The problem proved to be of wider interest. Gradually, the project expanded to involve multiple partner councils (Port Phillip, Melbourne, Darebin, Whittlesea, Moreland and Maribyrnong), the Victorian Local Governance Association (VLGA) and the Department of Victorian Communities. Other councils have since sought to join the team, which has now received ARC Linkage funding. The first stage, on which we are now working, involves a comparative analysis of the consultative processes in each of the LGAs and of the public’s attitudes to consultation within the six very different municipalities. At the same time, we have begun work on social profiling in each of the local areas, focusing on multiple factors: place, social isolation, changing family patterns, work-home balance, multi-ethnicity, age, disability, connectivity and new communication uses. Each of these activities is designed to feed into the development, with the partners, of a more effective model of participation and consultation, linked to a broader understanding of communication media and options.

The study will offer a worked example of the scope and limits of strategies that depend on local agencies to make social services more responsive, by involving citizens in decision-making. Its pragmatic approach to non-participation and the hard to reach is informed by recent efforts in political theory to move beyond perfectionist conceptions of participation (Marinetto 2003, Schofield 2002, Bowring 2000). It offers a practical instance of the problems of promoting neo-liberal ‘government through community’, especially the problem of building civic capacity (Hunter and Meredyth 2000, Rose 1999, Hindess 1997). The legitimacy of government in the liberal mode depends on the free and rational choice of citizens; citizens therefore
have to be able to govern themselves and take responsibility. However, government has only a limited ability to ensure that all citizens have these capacities. The theme is well-known but has rarely been explored at the level of local government. Nor is there much empirical work on the link between neoliberal government through community, civic capacity and the actual mechanisms of consultative practices, especially those that use a broader spectrum of communication methods and media. In the rest of this paper, we briefly discuss the difficulties involved in conceptualising and planning this research.

Non-participation

There may be multiple reasons for non-participation in community consultation. Non-participants are not a homogenous group. Instead, they must be conceptualised as individuals and groups in a variety of circumstances, with divergent interests and reasons for non-participation. This is complicated by the fact that prevailing notions of participation and citizenship are based on Anglo-Australian models that rarely reflect the experience of diverse communities.

There is also uncertainty about the links between the dual goals of consultation: information gathering and community building. Most councils accept that better information about the community will lead to improved planning outcomes. However, the link between consultative processes and stronger and healthier communities is harder to identify. This can be attributed in part to the variety of consultation methods in use. Consultation strategies can be plotted on a continuum of intensity (face to face, telephone, mail survey), with varying outcomes for strengthening community ties. The more comprehensive consultation methods, like surveys, reach more community members, but have less tangible links to outcomes in terms of strengthening communities. More intense methods of consultation, such as citizens panels or
workshops, may help some residents to make stronger connections within their community, but does this benefit the community as a whole? For instance, if larger numbers of local residents are consulted on a new library facility, the social benefit does not lie in community members filling out a questionnaire; it lies in the longer-term result of a new library that is likely to suit more needs, be more widely used and provide more amenities.

The community development workings within Council may have a clear idea of who the ‘hard to reach’ groups and individuals in their area are, and may be trying to target youth, the homeless and indigenous peoples, these are only a small proportion of non-participants. Little research exists on the problem of developing more diverse social profiles (Bradshaw 2002, Cuthill 2002, Sirgy 2000, Walsh et al 2001, Michalos and Zumbo 1999, Corrigan and Joyce 1997). Nor is there much research on how councils can contact residents who belong to council geographically, because their homes are located there, but whose social networks are located elsewhere (e.g. in the workplaces to which they commute). What we need, according to our partners, is detailed site-based research using social, demographic and communication profiles as tools for planning.

The research problem, then, is how to extend LGAs’ community planning to the hard to reach, investigating common problems while adapting to the different social profiles of each local area and to the different stages of social planning and community consultation in each municipality.

Nillumbik Council’s Community Planning Think Tank provides a pilot for the larger project. A series of focus groups have been held with Nillumbik residents. These have gauged community views about council consultation methods, discussed what level, style and medium of consultation suit residents best and established issues on which
they wish to be consulted. Building on this exercise, the team has begun to develop a preliminary model for community consultation and planning, which references social profiling. The challenge is to adapt this model to the demographic makeup of the other partner LGAs. This means identifying the different ‘publics’ and hard to reach groups in each local area and strategies for making contact with them.

Working with key personnel in each council, the research team has begun a strategic assessment of each council’s consultative practices over the past five years. We are also refining our social and demographic profiling of all the partner LGAs, correlating data on who actually participates with ABS, immigration, service provider and council data, as a means to identify unrepresented and hard to reach groups. Focus groups are being held with key stakeholders in each participating council, to establish their experience of consultative practices, their perceptions of the value of consultation and the degree to which community concerns are incorporated into planning and decision-making.

These information sources will help us to develop a profile of the issues affecting community participation in each municipality, placing residents and Councils on a spectrum according to the following issues:
Characteristics of residents

Live and work locally ↔ work locally ↔ commuters
Long-term residents ↔ recent residents ↔ new arrivals ↔ transients
Strong social networks ↔ partial networks ↔ socially isolated
Fulltime employed ↔ part time ↔ unemployed or underemployed
Home owners ↔ private renters ↔ public housing tenants ↔ homeless
Highly educated ↔ educated ↔ less educated
Accessible by mail, phone, ICTs ↔ limited access
Highly mobile ↔ mobile ↔ restricted mobility

Characteristics of community consultation within the municipality

Non-participation ↔ Over-participation
Residents display varying degrees of interest in participation depending on the issues, eg.
Planning and environment issues ↔ Social issues
New residents’ interests ↔ Established residents’ interests
Perceptions of place and space
Localised view of residents (perception) ↔ Whole of council approach to planning (actual)
Growth areas ↔ Non-growth areas
Shire wide issues ↔ Township issues

The team will then face some difficult methodological choices. Having identified hard to reach groups, we need to work out ways to ask them how they would prefer to be contacted by Council (if at all), what their minimum expectation of information from Council consists of, and what their existing spectrum of media and communication
use includes. There is of course a problem here: these individuals and groups are hard to reach for good reasons, but the reasons will vary. They may be too busy, too private, preoccupied or cranky to answer questions at the shops, to take a phone call or to respond to an email or letter. Pursuing them may be counter-productive. On the other hand, they may respond to one of those options but not to others.

Given that by this stage we will know more about the demographic composition of each local district, we should be able to identify households and groups that are more likely to respond to online contact, to be available at particular times of the day, or to be reached through an interpreter. We will also, through our Council collaborators, have entry into local clubs, associations and agencies. These networks will help us to run a series of focus groups, initially with residents who have already taken part in councils’ consultation processes.

Then we will tackle the problem of how to contact those who have not participated. This means asking open-ended questions about how much they know and want to know about local government and services, about their attitudes to public consultation and about how they would prefer to be contacted or get information (e.g. through face to face contact, by phone, by email, by advertisements in local papers, through local talkback radio and so on). Our methods will vary depending on the location. Working with Council staff and community members as co-researchers, we will approach individuals and groups, both through door-knocking and by phone and email. We will approach members of the public at cultural events, parks, club houses, schools, aged care facilities, special needs facilities and shopping centres and so on. Email discussion lists and interactive functions on Council websites will also be used. As previous studies have shown, this is demanding and intensive research, but the
insights derived from these methods can be much richer than those inferred from either focus groups or sample-study questionnaires alone.

**Conclusion**

The significance and usefulness of such a study are of course difficult to predict at this stage. Nevertheless, the enthusiasm with which our local government partners have entered into the study gives us reason to think that there is a genuine research gap in the current policy literature on local government and community consultation. In taking a more pragmatic approach to the limits of participation, we are also making the case for a more practical focus on the problem of how to maintain and adapt the infrastructure of communication between government agencies and citizens.

**References**


*American Behavioral Scientist* 43(9): 1462-1486.


