

# Research Note: Sounds of silence: Using online spaces to connect citizens and experts

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*This essay presents an account of the particular experiences with using online spaces for connecting citizens and experts by two scholars who were amateurs in online interaction. The set-up of an online platform for public participation in river management, and an online discussion between citizens and experts in medical genomics research serve to reflect on some general assumptions about participation and the internet. Three conclusions are drawn. First, the implicit assumption that going online would enable the involvement of 'the silent majority' was not confirmed. Second, the role of experts presented an additional challenge to public engagement. Third, experiments with online communication between citizens and experts require more knowledge about virtual environments and online social networks by researchers and others who set up such experiments. The account calls for awareness among experts in online communication about perhaps unexpected needs for their expertise, and encourages translation and collaboration.*

*Keywords: public participation, online dialogue, expert engagement*

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## Introduction

It was not long after its public explosion in the nineties that the internet was discovered as an environment and tool to engage citizens with politics and policy-making (Carpini et al. 2004, 334 ff.; White 1997). Meanwhile, online discussions and consultations have become part and

parcel of tool boxes in use to connect citizens, consumers or users with experts, and engaging them in decision-making in all kinds of areas (see e.g. Andersson & Casey 2007, Dahlgren 2005, Macintosh & Whyte 2008). More democratic decision-making, legitimization of certain decisions or learning from a larger va-

riety of societal expertise: there are various reasons to engage publics in decision-making processes (cf. Fiorino 1989; Stirling 2008).<sup>1</sup> Like many others, public engagement professionals have come to cherish an image of the World Wide Web as accessible, transparent and democratic (cf. Poster 2001). Web-based participation, for instance, promises to complement real-life participation exercises. Its flexibility and accessibility could allow for the participation of people who are hard to reach, by off-line means of engagement. Online, one could reach beyond the realm of directly involved stakeholders and interest groups who are the 'usual suspects' in participatory exercises.

Such promises about the internet not only gave rise to a body of new academic and professional practices in the field of online participation, but also appealed to many other professionals, scholars and scientists. In this discussion paper, we present the particular experiences with using online spaces for connecting citizens and experts by two of such amateurs - ourselves. One concerns the set-up of an online platform as part of an interdisciplinary project on participatory river management. The second experience is taken from an interactive communication programme, including online discussions between citizens and experts in genomics.<sup>2</sup> Despite their differences, the two projects were alike in their assumption that

going online would contribute to the involvement of 'unusual suspects' in the interactions with experts in policy or techno-science. This group is often referred to as the 'silent majority' (Lezaun and Soneryd, 2007, 280). In the river management project, a space for online discussion was created with the aim to involve more citizens in the production of a knowledge base for decision-making. That process had so far been limited to real-life interactions among directly involved stakeholders and experts. In the other project, genomics experts were introduced to existing discussion boards frequented by potentially interested citizens who were not expected to regularly engage in interactions with scientists. An underlying assumption of both projects was that an online environment would allow the organizers to engage more and other participants in the desired interactions than they would be able to reach in real life. We employed a broad notion of 'participation' as interaction between citizens and decision-makers in policy or science.

It is important to note that what we present are not professionally designed exercises in participatory policy-making, and even less in online participation. Neither of the projects were setup and organized according to a fixed design or method. Trained as cultural anthropologists and working in a science faculty, our principals merely wanted to do 'something participatory online' as

a side-track to our research and communication projects at the time. Without any professional experience in either the organization of participatory processes or online interactions, we just started doing it. Our position was presumably not unlike that of many professionals in policy or research today. That is why we present it here: to invite colleagues who are experts in online interaction and participation to relate their expertise to the experiences of those who may be in need of it.

The lessons that we draw from our experiences do not concern specific methods, tools or approaches in either offline or online participatory policy-making or public engagement. We use our experiences as amateurs in the organization of online interactions to reflect on some common assumptions about participation and the internet among scientists and policy-makers interested in public participation.

First, we experienced that in online participation one encounters the same 'problem' as in many of its real-life forms: those who populate online spaces and discussions are often people who have an interest or stake in the issue under discussion whereas the 'silent majority' is not engaged. Second, we learned that the role of decision-makers and experts in online discussion spaces is not at all self-evident and can be problematic. Our online experiences made us realize that engagement exercises are usually focused

on the question how to reach the public, while the question how to engage policy and science experts and decision-makers remains rather unexplored in research in this area. And finally, we have learned that the internet is not a tool, but an environment. For the sensible realization of its potential to connect citizens and experts, we should learn from the explorations and experiments by social scientists in virtual environments and online social networks.

### **WaalWeelde: an online platform as part of a new approach in river management**

In the project WaalWeelde local riparian governments have taken a new approach to river management. As a result of expected higher discharge volumes due to climate change, the Dutch river management paradigm has changed from the traditional confinement of rivers between constantly raised and strengthened dykes, to 'room for rivers' giving rivers more space to drain excess waters (Van Stokkom et al., 2005; Wiering and Arts, 2006). The new approach involves a broad range of options, including economic drivers to alleviate government budget constraints, such as (flood-adapted) housing along (possibly relocated) dykes.

The initial design of Waalweelde has been strongly focused on participatory decision-making strategies. Besides direct stakeholders, the project aimed to incorporate the

wider public in the riparian communities in the process. In order to facilitate the intended process of broad participation, an interactive website was created. Based on the assumption that often only a small segment of the general public is willing to invest time and energy in participative decision-making, the website was set up as an easily accessible and quick to use medium which would also invite the 'silent majority' to get involved in the process. The site offered a platform for proposing plans and ideas, discussing proposals and gathering information. People who were not interested in discussion got the opportunity to express support for a certain proposal by voting in the several polls that were available on the site.

Sixteen months after the site was launched, its results were disappointing. Out of 78 registered participants, 47 had actually posted a message on the forum. Of these 47 posts, 37 were made by members of the participating riparian administrations (government officials or civil servants), or people working on the WaalWeelde project. Four messages were posted by well-known experts on water management issues in the region. The remaining six messages were either announcements of local water-related activities - such as an initiative to display art in the riverbed - or plans for individual enterprises in water recreation.

The 37 posts coming from the

riparian administrations received marginal or no visible attention from the broader public. Even the most controversial plans such as the renewal and expansion of an industrial area in the river bed (no reactions), or the plans for the construction of water-adapted houses in a floodplain (a maximum of 5 written reactions and 3 votes in a poll), evoked no significant reaction or discussion on the website. Yet both cases have resulted in the establishment of local pressure groups that apparently used other ways to ventilate their viewpoints. At the same time the majority of the public that were targeted, remained silent.

The interactive website experiment was expected to bypass the problems of minority groups frustrating the decision-making process by creating a more representative image of different opinions through the consultation of the silent majority. Nevertheless, the initiative received little or no support from the local decision-makers participating in the project. The frequently heard explanation for this was a lack of administrative capacity and budget to perform the task of promoting the website and mobilizing the larger public. The internet experiment was initiated by the WaalWeelde project team, assuming that the local governments would promote the project in their own communities.

Lack of money might not be the only explanation. Through a combination of participant observation

and interviews with local decision-makers we learned about another reason. They explained that they were strongly occupied with defining their role in the newly established structures of cooperation in both inter-municipal and public-private arrangements. Having the public involved in such an early stage of the process was considered too much of a burden. It was feared that a public forum like the online experiment would be hijacked by minority groups and individual stakeholders campaigning for their personal agendas.

In retrospect we can conclude that the efforts in the WaalWeelde experiment were solely focused on involving the larger public whereas the question of how to involve the decision-makers in a two way interaction between experts and larger publics remained a blind spot. These results can be related to our experiences in a second experiment with online public participation. Comparable to the first case, the second experiment highlights the role of decision-makers in the instigation, modeling and practical implementation of public participation through the internet.

### **The DNA Dialogues: online public discussions with citizens and genomics experts**

The DNA Dialogues was a research and communication project initiated by the Centre for Society

and Genomics (CSG).<sup>3</sup> The project aimed to improve interaction between the general public, scientists and policy makers on current developments and applications in the life sciences commonly referred to as 'genomics'. The DNA-Dialogues included real life and online meetings between those (potentially) affected by genomics (i.e. publics rather than the general public) and those who make decisions regarding genomics knowledge and applications (i.e. scientists, policy makers and professionals in medical, agricultural, industrial or other practices). Such meetings were hosted by representatives of various publics, e.g. patient organizations, media or women's groups. The CSG stimulated and facilitated the organization of such discussions and acted as a moderator.

One of the activities organized as part of The DNA-Dialogues was an online discussion on the forum of the website Ouders Online<sup>4</sup> (Parents Online).<sup>5</sup> In April 2007, Ouders Online published an editorial article titled "What should happen to the heel prick blood?" in their online magazine, written by a staff member of the Centre for Society and Genomics.<sup>6</sup> She had attended a policy workshop, where scientists and policy-makers in the field of public health had discussed the possibilities for extending the use and storage of the blood obtained in the neonatal screening program for scientific research. The participants

largely agreed upon the scientific benefits of extending the time limits for storage and the need to reconsider the rules for storage and use of the blood for research, which such an extension would imply. Since media commotion in 2000, the policy of anonymous storage in the Netherlands has been changed into one of informed consent and limited (anonymous) storage for five years.<sup>7</sup> Yet another change in the rules and practices might meet societal resistance. Public education and engagement was considered as one of the ways to anticipate and prevent such resistance by involving the general public who have largely remained silent. When the CSG staff member proposed to find out whether Ouders Online would be interested in hosting an online discussion on the topic, several workshop participants supported that idea.

A initial article in the online magazine discussed the present practice and recent history of storage and use of the collected blood for scientific research, and explained why many scientists are in favor of extending the possibilities for using blood and additional data. The article not merely presented, but also questioned the issues at hand and invited readers to voice their opinions on the topic, including the necessity of information, views on storage and anonymity, children's role in giving consent, and the role of government, medical professionals and patient organizations in dealing

with such issues.

Following a message posted by the editor of Ouders Online, mentioning the involvement of the CSG and the intended participation of scientists, a discussion ran on the message board for about two weeks and evoked relatively little response. 16 people participated, among who were 13 parents (all female) and 3 experts invited by the CSG (a leading scientist in the field of community genetics, a member of a NGO on biopolitics, and the CSG moderator herself). In sum 45 messages were posted. Initially the article and questions evoked diverse reactions: some people did not see any problem whatsoever, others emphasized the importance of complete and timely information, whereas others fiercely opposed because they feared damage to privacy, especially in relation to commercial and political interests.

Of the scientists and policy makers who had expressed their interest to participate in the discussion, only one eventually did. The expert's strategic considerations, observations and interpretations of the process were discussed in several e-mail, phone and face-to-face interactions with the CSG moderator before, during and after the online discussion. Another scientist contacted the organiser shortly after the discussion had ended, explaining why he had not participated. He had been disappointed: rather than the young parents with seri-

ous questions that he had hoped to meet, the participants had turned out to present what he considered to be an abundance of misunderstandings, unreasonable frustrations and fears. What had happened?

The one participating scientist had entered the discussion, explaining to the other participants the scientific and societal urgency of longer storage and a change of policy. Among the responses was a message by the NGO representative, explaining risks for privacy and possible commercial interests behind the use of biomaterials. Then another parent joined the discussion. For frequent visitors of the Ouders Online message boards, she was a well-known contributor, who had widely expressed her concerns about privacy issues in relation to political and commercial stakes in many earlier discussions on Ouders Online (in relation to the information policy of schools, child welfare and health care and several other topics). When this parent doubted the scientific necessity of storing all data and raised suspicions about commercial interests, the scientist replied by explaining the scientific rationale behind extended storage and use. More parents presented rather critical responses, not so much about scientists, but about possible (mis-)use by others, including the government. The first critical parent stated that the scientist was stuck in her own 'frame of thinking' and called her to listen to what citi-

zens have to say, rather than continue to repeat her own arguments. She also explicitly called the CSG to account, enquiring about their political agenda behind organizing this discussion. The CSG staff member responded by explaining the CSG's motives and ideas, stating that the CSG did not intend to act as advocate for science, yet to mediate dialogue among scientists and citizens in order for science to take societal concerns into account.

### **Discussion**

Our amateur experiments with online discussions to engage the 'silent majority' in processes of dialogue and decision-making challenged notions of publics and experts that are fairly common in public engagement and participation literature and practice. From our experiences we draw three main conclusions, which will probably not surprise experts in online interaction and participation. However, in relation to the detailed accounts of our experiences and the considerations that informed them, we hope that they allow for the connection of a body of expertise that we have only begun to explore, to the needs of well-intentioned amateurs like we have been ourselves.<sup>8</sup>

First, going online did not make it any easier to meet 'the silent majority', let alone engage them. Both the discussion on a website especially made for the occasion, as well as the discussion about an article in an existing online space, attracted only

a limited number of people. The design of both interventions did not include a mechanism to ensure that participants were representative of a more general public. It was merely assumed that it was more likely to meet the general public online than in the real-life spaces where interactions with experts usually take place. The self-selected participants often were members of specific interest groups or had strong personal agendas.<sup>9</sup>

We could conclude that the general public simply were not interested in participating in the discussions we initiated. In that case, why would we insist on bothering them? However, we might also conclude that discussions about the issues at stake already take place among colleagues on the shop floor, in bars, in sports canteens, in classrooms and in various other public spaces, including the many virtual spaces inhabited by cybernauts and netizens.<sup>10</sup> Then the problem would be that experts do not recognize such discussions or consider them relevant. Whether the majority is perceived as silent might depend on where one keeps one's ear on the ground.

The second thing we learned was that the main issue for online interaction between publics and experts may not be how to involve citizens, but how to engage the experts. Our experiences showed that when their agendas were challenged, experts refrained from participation or with-

drew into their role as information providers. In the case of WaalWeelde, decision-makers were reluctant to stimulate and implement public participation on the website because the process of decision-making was still in a very early and exploratory stage, where clear policy goals and boundaries were not yet developed. Involvement of the public would make the process more complex and possibly difficult to manage. As a result the online experiment never really had a chance.

The Ouders Online discussion was situated in a somewhat unusual place for expert involvement. The online forum was familiar to the participating parents, but was a rather strange environment for scientists or policy makers in their expert role. They had supported the idea of using an existing discussion forum to involve not only the 'usual suspects' with personal stakes or interests, but also a wider audience of parents. However, they had not envisioned a discussion about their own agenda, and reacted by either not participating or by explaining their own position rather than responding to the concerns uttered by some of the parents. In order to make online involvement work, both citizens and experts need to engage in two-way communication. This requires frames, practices and tools for 'expert engagement' in addition to those of 'public engagement' that we are already familiar with in participatory processes



A third conclusion that we have drawn from our experiments is that we simply did not know enough about the patterns, places and specifics of online communication. Although websites, message boards, wikis, blogs or social media undoubtedly offer many possibilities to connect scientists and citizens in dialogue and decision-making, real-life problems in the engagement of non-usual suspects in participation cannot be circumvented by merely going online. We basically considered the internet as a tool, a space for the expansion of real-life activities. Yet to understand why and how people act online, we need expertise in social and cultural studies about online behavior and its connections to other spheres of life. Although we both were trained in ethnographic methods, we did not apply those in our exploration of a new world. For future efforts to connect citizens and experts, we hope to learn from colleagues who have made those connections in their studies of online environments.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> On the pluralization of 'the public' into 'publics', see e.g. Barnes et al. 2003 and Martin 2008. The notion of 'publics' reflects that citizens are affected by policy or technology in different ways and therefore cannot be addressed as a singular actor.

<sup>2</sup> Both examples are taken from projects in the Institute for Science, Innovation and Society (ISIS) at the Radboud

University in Nijmegen, the Netherlands. ISIS hosts, amongst others, the Centre for the Sustainable Management of Resources (CSMR), the home of the online platform that we describe, and the Centre for Society and Genomics (CSG), the locus of our second experience.

<sup>3</sup> CSG is part of the Netherlands Genomics Initiative (NGI).

<sup>4</sup> Ouders Online is a Dutch online magazine and community on parenting with a discussion panel receiving 30,000 new posts a month ([www.ouders.nl](http://www.ouders.nl)).

<sup>5</sup> This online discussion has also been described as one among other cases in two academic articles that have resulted from a social-scientific reflection on The DNA-Dialogues-project (Radstake et al. 2009a&b).

<sup>6</sup> This CSG staff member is one of the authors of this paper.

<sup>7</sup> Informed consent refers to an agreement to allow the blood obtained for neonatal screening to be stored and used for scientific research, made with complete knowledge of all relevant facts, such as the risks involved or any available alternatives.

<sup>8</sup> Including work that addresses methodological and other research issues in online participation and deliberation (e.g. Coleman & Blumler 2009; Rose & Oystein 2010), as well as literature on virtual ethnography (e.g. Hine 2000, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> The salience of distinguishing representative and self-selected participants

in public participatory events has also been addressed in academic literature on governance and participation (e.g. Fung 2006). The problem has also been addressed in the critical analyses of public political engagement by political scientists like Stoker (2006) and Hay (2007). At the time of our experiments, we did not question the general intuition that going online would enable the engagement of a more general public. Therefore we did not consider the exploration of methods for the involvement of non-usual suspects as have for instance been developed by professional organisations like America Speaks or ScienceWise in the UK.

<sup>10</sup> The term cybernaut or internaut is used to describe an habitual user of the internet (cf. Brill 1993). Netizen refers to a person who is actively involved in online communities (cf. Hauben & Hauben 1997).

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