

Shaping Policy Discourse in the Public Sphere: Evaluating Civil Speech in an Online Consultation

Christie Hurrell

Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada

churrell@sympatico.ca

Abstract: The ability of the Internet to function as a public sphere, where citizens can come to public agreement and make recommendations that affect government decisions, has recently come under question. The aggressive style of discourse so prevalent in online discussion has been cited as a significant barrier to the deliberative and open discussion necessary for an effective public sphere. This paper focuses on web-based discussion in an online policy consultation called the Canadian Foreign Policy Dialogue, and examines specific discourse features to evaluate whether the moderated online policy discussion was civil, and whether that civility promoted meaningful interaction among citizens, and between citizens and government. The study results revealed that citizen participants in the dialogue were successful at developing, maintaining, and enforcing norms of civil discourse, and that these norms helped to promote understanding, tolerance, and consensus building. The study also cautions that civil dialogue alone cannot ensure effective communication between governments and citizens.

Keywords: Electronic government, public sphere, civility, online discussion, and electronic democracy

1. Introduction

This paper analyzes the discussion forums of an online, moderated policy consultation called The Foreign Policy Dialogue (Dialogue) in order to evaluate the civility of online citizen discourse. While the Internet is increasingly being used as a tool for gathering citizen input during the policy-making process, much debate exists among theorists and practitioners about the possibility of democratic deliberation in online fora. While proponents of the Internet's ability to re-engage cynical citizens argue that civil society and the public sphere are being revitalized partly through this new technology (Mitra 2001), critics point to the anarchic nature of much Internet discourse, which tends to be aggressive, fragmented and confrontational (Margolis and Resnick 2000). A central question of this study asks whether participants in an online policy consultation develop, maintain, and enforce civil speech. In contemporary public spheres like online discussion fora, the concept of civility, which encompasses an attitude of respect and understanding towards one's co-discussants (Kingwell 1995), emerges as a useful tool for evaluating discussion. This study also examines the practice of moderating online discussion through a rule-based framework, and asks whether civil, moderated discussion in an online public sphere can yield public opinions that have a meaningful impact on public policy decisions. The Dialogue, which ran from January to April 2002, was one stream in a national consultation process that also included town halls, expert roundtables, a youth forum, and off-line written contributions. The online component that is the subject of this study was a joint effort between the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, the Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy

Development, and the by Design eLab, a Toronto-based civil society organization.

2. Citizen engagement and public consultation in Canada

Experiments with qualitative consultation methods in general, and with online consultations in particular, have been spurred on by a citizenry that is increasingly knowledgeable about public policy issues, but is uninvolved with traditional political actions such as voting or party membership (Institute on Governance 1998). Canadian citizens are deeply concerned about many policy issues, but are skeptical of politicians and traditional parties (Nevitte 1996). Governments are using public policy consultations in an attempt to engage these cynical citizens with the policymaking process. It is hoped that consultation will not only give legitimacy to the decisions of the government, but will yield more engaged citizens and better policy.

These new tools of consultation and citizen engagement attempt to move beyond traditional advisory boards or opinion polls to more directly engage with and consult a broad range of citizens. However, citizen engagement processes are not without their critics (Institute on Governance 1998). Many politicians and policymakers are concerned about how citizen engagement and consultation may affect their professional roles, and they are also wary of tampering with tried and tested methods of policy development (Canadian Policy Research Network 2000, Institute on Governance 1998). In addition, implementing consultative processes, especially web-based ones, can be challenging for hierarchical government departments that find it difficult to cope with the horizontal, networked structure of

the Internet (Canadian Policy Research Network). Online consultations in Canada remain in an experimental phase, partly because of these issues, and also because not all Canadians have access to the Internet. Currently, online consultations are generally used to compliment face-to-face or print-based consultation processes, and are considered experimental by government departments.

3. The public sphere

The public sphere, defined by Habermas (2002) as “a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed” (p. 202) has proven to be a very productive model through which to study public discussion and democratic decision-making among groups of citizens. Significant criticisms and revisions of Habermas’ bourgeois model (Calhoun 1992, Fraser 1993, Hauser 1999) have focused on the public sphere’s exclusivity and its dependence on a culturally-specific set of discourse practices that made it, although open in theory, an arena for a small, privileged part of the public. These contributions to the understanding of the public sphere are useful in the context of a contemporary Internet-based public sphere where a less homogenous group of citizens debates issues of mutual importance with the goal of producing policy-relevant advice for government decision-makers. Many theorists have, in recent years, examined the Internet’s ability to perform the public sphere’s role as a conduit from a periphery of citizens to central decision-making bodies. An important concern with regards to discussion in the online public sphere is the predominance of aggressive and inflammatory rhetoric. Some have shown how this rhetoric can destroy attempts at purposive and deliberative discussion (Benson 1996, Connery 1997), while others have argued that it is natural and even cathartic (Coate 1997, Millard 1997). Discourse features and norms of online interaction are important factors that affect the Internet’s ability to function as a public sphere. When language is freed from the conventions of face to face conversation in a bourgeois public sphere, the lack of common meanings and practices can destabilize the online public sphere and preclude civil and deliberative discussion (Salter 2003).

4. Civility in online discussion

A number of theorists have found the concept of civility to be useful for evaluating discussion in the public sphere (Hauser 1999, Keane 2003). In an online context, Habermas’ (1996) emphasis on reasoned discussion and decision-making in the public sphere no longer provides a suitable means for evaluating discussion and dialogue in a

pluralistic democracy, where diverse and divergent groups all contribute to the formation of public opinion (Dahl, 1961). Normative standards like reason are less effective in today’s mediated public spheres than communicatively achieved understandings of group norms and common goals (Habermas 1996). The concept of civility used in this study goes beyond mere etiquette; it is an orientation towards understanding and a pragmatic commitment to support the public sphere as an open site for debate among all citizens (Kingwell 1995). Thus, a commitment to civil discourse helps achieve the shared meanings that are essential to deliberative discussions. Civility is not an end-state, it is a behaviour expressed through discourse features. It is constantly being negotiated amongst members of the public sphere as they identify their common interests and goals (Keane 2003). Civility allows people interacting in the public sphere to speak across lines of difference, instead of merely interacting “as if” they were equals (Fraser 1993). It is especially important in an online context where physical bodies are absent, and words become the only communication tools available.

5. Civility and the foreign policy dialogue

The designers of the Foreign Policy Dialogue took two significant steps to promote civil dialogue on the consultation website. First, participants were required to agree to abide by a set of “civil rules.” These rules ask participants to stay on the topic of foreign policy, take responsibility for their utterances, and refrain from posting advertising or spam to the site. The rules binding the site are in line with Canada’s *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, which allows for the rights of the individual to be curtailed in order to protect the group (Department of Justice Canada 1982). The second step taken to ensure civility was to employ civil society moderators to screen each post to the website. The moderators’ presence is explained in the civil rules, where participants are told that moderators have the right to refuse to accept “any message that may be construed or interpreted as discriminatory, promulgating hatred or obscenity, or defamation of any kind” (Foreign Policy Dialogue 2002).

The fifteen moderators who worked on the Foreign Policy Dialogue project were primarily volunteers, drawn from academic and research communities. Besides screening posts to the site, moderators periodically took an active role in the discussion, either warning participants that their contributions were becoming border-line acceptable or off-topic, or encouraging

participants to provide feedback on a certain issue or topic.

Of the 2,116 posts submitted to the discussion forum portion of the Dialogue, which is the subject of this study, only 60 were rejected. Some of the rejected posts were tests submitted by site administrators or programmers, while others were rejected because they were off-topic, rude or libelous, or were spam mail. The low percentage of rejected posts can be seen to suggest that the civil rules and presence of the moderators were effective in establishing guidelines to maintain civil speech.

6. Methods and sources

The online portion of the Foreign Policy Dialogue has two main components: a set of twelve questions posed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs to Canadians, and a set of discussion forums. Both components address issues raised in a discussion paper compiled by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which is available in numerous forms on the Dialogue website (www.foreign-policy-dialogue.ca). The discussion forums, which contain over 2,000 messages, are the focus of this study. I chose to focus on the forums because they allow participants to communicate with one another, and thus provide an opportunity to examine the individual and group behaviours that affect civility. Before posts appeared on the “live” site, they underwent the moderation process described above. As such, the Dialogue was asynchronous: users did not communicate in real time.

There were five discussion forums on the Dialogue site, organized under broad foreign policy-related themes recognized as priorities by the Ministry. The topics of these forums were fixed, but any participant could initiate discussion by creating a new thread on a related sub-topic. The subset of threads chosen as the object of this study contains posts from a minimum of two and a maximum of nine participants, and the majority of threads are dominated by a small group of heavy users. The data set contains 364 posts from 23 discussion threads, and represents a time period beginning on January 22, 2003 and ending on the last day of the consultation, April 29, 2003. The data set was limited to make the analysis task more manageable, and a software program called Qualrus aided with data management and coding.

In this study, civil speech is analyzed through discourse analysis, which examines both the intention of speakers, which can be inferred through speech evidence, and looks at the interaction between participants (Herring 2004).

The goal of this analysis is to identify discourse characteristics that are persistently and demonstrably present in the sample, and to do this, I chose to analyze threads of discussion. A thread can be defined as a series of exchanges between two or more people, all on the same topic. Because my research addresses interpersonal exchanges as well as specific discourse characteristics, I have coded individual messages both for their content and for their contribution to the civility of the discussion. Since the concept of civility is somewhat abstract and context-dependent, I wanted to devise coding structures that were based on phenomena I observed in the data, instead of trying to fit the data into preconceived categories.

The goal of civil speech is to ensure an environment of mutual respect and understanding. Some of the specific speech acts that promoted this goal include providing evidence or personal information in order to substantiate an opinion, quoting other participants to demonstrate one’s attentiveness, using negotiation techniques, and showing restraint. In addition, there were a number of techniques used by site moderators to enforce or encourage civil speech. All of these techniques have been recognized by other theorists as contributing towards a civil space that is responsive to difference and committed to purposive discussion (Coleman and Gøtze 2001, Donath 1999, Rouner 2000). Most of the coding categories employed in this research are semantic phenomena; that is, they are exhibited in speech acts. There are also some structural categories, such as quoting and providing references, which can be identified more or less objectively (Bauer 2000).

7. Discussion and analysis of results

The results of this study show that, in addition to the fact that most posts submitted to the discussion forums satisfied the conditions laid out in the civil rules, the majority of participants worked to develop, enforce, and maintain specific discourse norms that encourage civil dialogue. The discourse characteristics that had the most significant impact on civility lie in three different areas: developing trust and online reputation, negotiation techniques, and interaction with moderators.

7.1 Participant-driven norms that promote civil speech

A central research question to this study asks whether civil speech is established and maintained by site participants. Analysis of the sample indicates that participants do work to develop and enforce civil norms. Participants

developed group norms centering around two main areas: developing trust and an online reputation, and negotiation techniques. Discourse characteristics associated with the first area include providing evidence to back up claims made, quoting other participants to maintain clarity and focus, and providing personal evidence to prove one's expertise on the subject matter at hand. Discourse characteristics associated with the second area include inventing options for mutual gain, simultaneously confirming and disconfirming another's position, and showing restraint.

Establishing a trustworthy online reputation in the context of the Foreign Policy Dialogue involved consistently performing speech acts that added to one's perceived trustworthiness and reliability. In online environments where strangers attempt to discuss important issues without any prior knowledge of each other and without social cues present in face-to-face debate, an online reputation acts as a necessary condition for participants to give each other the benefit of the doubt, and to work through the diversity of evidence, experience, and interactional styles that meet on the Internet. As Dean (2001) states:

The political norms at stake in the information age have less to do with truth ... than with a credibility that is never secured. Such an unstable credibility, moreover, makes alliance particularly problematic: how might opposing constituencies (not to mention the individuals within them) trust one another under these conditions? Clearly, particular subject positions (those attempting to warrant themselves with reference to a specific authority or experience, say) and claims will have to work to earn and retain credibility. (p. 263)

Dialogue participants undertake this "work" of establishing their online identities by providing evidence to substantiate their comments, and quoting other participants. A trustworthy online identity was an important precondition for participants to accept at face value each other's remarks and to debate opinions in a civil way. The evidence that participants provided in order to back up claims made in the forums included links to media and informational websites, quotations from foreign policy experts, and personal experience and expertise. Participants revealed private information about themselves, such as their profession or their political affiliations, in order to provide credence to their professed expertise on a certain issue, or to demonstrate that their personal life choices coincided with their political views. When participants consistently made statements without providing evidence, they

were almost always criticized and discredited by others. However, although backing up claims made on the consultation website garnered respect from one's opponents, it did not always orient the discussion toward agreement or even understanding, for opposing experiences and media perspectives could always be found and pitted against one another.

Quoting was another method that helped participants establish an online reputation as careful readers of one another's posts. In an online environment, this practice of quoting can be seen to stand in for the physical cues that people exhibit when listening to each other: participants quote each other in order to agree or disagree with a particular aspect of a post, or to ask for clarification or evidence (Benson 1996). The use of excessive quoting to "interrupt" another participant in online debate (Herring 1999) was not used in these forums, and participants consistently quoted others' words in context and in full. As one participant wrote to another, "I am just going to quote you here just to keep our thoughts clear, don't take it as being rude or anything like that, that is not my intention at all." Participants used quotations to clarify opinions or to request more information on a certain point, and the technique was helpful in building the common body of knowledge that orients participants in a debate towards understanding and agreement.

These efforts at establishing a stable, trustworthy reputation in an online environment can be seen as surprising, since many theorists have emphasized how the Internet is perfectly suited to encourage identity play and creative misrepresentation, that "on the Internet, individuals construct their identities, doing so in relation to ongoing dialogues, and not as an act of pure consciousness" (Poster 2001). While Dialogue contributors did reveal different parts of their identities with relation to certain thread topics, their online personae were almost always perceived to represent their real life bodies and subject positions. Only one significantly prolific contributor to the forums did exhibit the kind of playfulness that Poster describes. His/her fellow participants roundly ignored this participant, who preferred to submit posts in the form of satirical rhyming poetry, and never gave any hints as to his/her motivations or goals. Perhaps, as Dean (2001) notes, this participant's behaviour threatened the others, who had come to rely on each other's online reputation as the only basis for trust in an online public sphere. In addition, the hesitation among participants to play with different identities may be a factor of the Dialogue's nature as an official, government-sponsored forum. The

site's position as an official venue for citizens to communicate their concerns to a government ministry likely caused people to perceive it very differently from other online political spaces not connected to government, such as the forums connected with news sites.

8. Negotiation techniques

A trustworthy and consistent online presence was not a sufficient condition to ensure civil speech in the Dialogue forums. In addition, participants maintained civil dialogue by employing a number of negotiation techniques, which are commonly employed in all kinds of political discourse, whether online or face-to-face (Barret 1991, Smith 2002). A commitment to negotiation is one of the ways that participants encouraged discussion in a diverse, changing forum populated by participants with disparate opinions and interests. Negotiation demands that participants look beyond their own position and work within a model of public discourse that is created amongst the people involved. It is central to civility because it recognizes that meaning is open to negotiation, and it remains committed to avoiding domination and exclusion, and to respectful listening and additive change. Some of the negotiation techniques employed by Dialogue participants include inventing options for mutual gain, simultaneously confirming and disconfirming an opponent's position, and showing restraint.

Many of the Dialogue's most successful interactions, when success is defined as finding common ground with respect to a mutual problem, occur when participants are able to see beyond what they perceive to be the falsehoods or inconsistencies in another's position, and to combine parts of their own position with that of their opponent's, to create a mutually satisfactory option. Inventing options for mutual gain requires participants to look for the value or substance in what others say, even if it appears that their post contains no significant or agreeable ideas. For example, two participants debating Canada's position on joining the war on Iraq are able to agree on the necessity of fighting terrorists, even though they disagree on the main issue at hand. Identifying this shared belief allows the two discussants to debate the merits of the "war on terror" in a civil way instead of merely bickering over whether Canada should go to war. In this example, one of two discussants was able to create an opportunity for mutual gain, but often, a third viewpoint was required to identify a shared opinion. Having a third person step into an increasingly uncivil debate often served to bring the discussion back to more substantive issues,

and consistently reminded participants to treat each other in a civil manner. As one participant wrote: "our differences need to be used to enrich our solutions. Let's not try to defeat those who differ. Let's see them for what they truly are: an invaluable resource for expanding our own (o so very limited) experiential base."

Another negotiating technique successfully employed by Dialogue participants is the simultaneous confirmation and disconfirmation of an opponent's statement. This technique promotes civil speech because it allows the critical participant to suggest a new option in the discussion, while allowing the criticized participant to save face. Responses that begin with statements like "I understand your position, but I must respond..." or "I agree with your basic argument, although I see faults in some of your examples ..." tended to be much more favorably received in the Dialogue than posts that only attacked and disconfirmed the content of another's statements. This technique demonstrates that quality of restraint, which is associated with civility by many theorists (Kingwell 1995, Smith 2002). Restraint was an important quality that helped maintain the civility of the discussion. When one participant exhibited a lack of restraint, for example by criticizing others' spelling mistakes or malapropisms, then others followed suit, and the discussion would descend into name-calling and *ad hominem* attacks, sometimes so much so that a moderator would have to intervene.

The use of restraint and other negotiation techniques familiar to most political discussions significantly enhanced civil speech in the Foreign Policy Dialogue. A commitment towards understanding requires participants to realize that meanings are open to negotiation, and negotiation techniques become central to discovering common goals and interests in the midst of seemingly opposing opinions. Like the technique of developing an online reputation, using negotiation techniques became one of the norms that participants developed in order to encourage civil speech. These two groups of strategies became the most important participant-driven norms on the Foreign Policy Dialogue, and they were for the most part effective in maintaining civility.

9. Interaction with moderators

The second research question of this study asks whether the moderators and the civil rules have an impact on the civility of online discourse. To answer this question, I coded instances where the moderators entered the dialogue, as well as

occasions where participants made specific reference to the moderators or the civil rules. The aim of the Dialogue's design and administration team was to make the presence of the moderators felt in a clear, yet unimposing and transparent fashion. As previously discussed, participants were required to agree to abide by the civil rules before they could participate in the Dialogue. The civil rules make the presence of the moderators clear, so all participants should know that posts to the Dialogue are read and approved by civil society moderators. The website's Frequently Asked Questions page also explains the moderators' status as civil society members, not government or private sector employees. Participants' recognition of and positive attitude towards the moderators supports the notion that citizens feel comfortable participating in a rule-bound framework of discussion. In fact, the only time that the moderators were criticized by participants was when they were perceived as not enforcing the civil rules rigorously enough. There is a whole thread in the discussion forum protesting that moderators were accepting posts that were either off-topic or not serious.

Because the discussion forums very rarely contained uncivil content, the moderators did not have to reject many posts or intervene in many borderline uncivil discussions. However, when they did engage in the latter act, participants were not resentful of their presence. In fact, participants welcomed the moderators' interventions, and when the consultation closed, many frequent participants logged on to thank the moderators for their hard work and dedication. These thank you messages often made a distinction between the government partners and the civil society partners, indicating that they realized and appreciated the distinction.

Although it is evident that most participants felt the moderator's presence very clearly, it is difficult to prove whether or not the moderators and the civil rules had a major influence on the development of discourse norms in the Foreign Policy Dialogue. The civil rules themselves do not require civil speech that is oriented towards understanding and consensus building; however, they do make some basic provisions for civility and respect. Participants knew that their words would be moderated, and therefore that to attempt to post uncivil comments would be a waste of time. Generally, though, the qualities I have described above, including reputation-building, negotiation techniques, and building trust, emerged amongst the participants themselves, without facilitation from moderators. Whether these qualities would have emerged in a free form, unmoderated forum

is debatable. However, the experience of most e-consultation facilitators suggests that unmoderated forums are very negatively impacted by flame wars, rude comments, and the marginalization of participants who are not comfortable with an aggressive, libertarian discourse style (Benson 1996, Coleman and Gøtze 2001, Docter and Dutton 1998). The presence of the moderators and the civil rules provide feedback, sources of information, and structure around the conversation. These features, while not ensuring civility, do provide an important cultural-democratic function that facilitates the connection between citizens, and between citizens and government. If the Dialogue had not been moderated, norms of civil discourse may have been present, but it is possible that they would be overwhelmed by aggressive and inflammatory discourse.

This study reveals that the majority of posts submitted to the Foreign Policy Dialogue abide by the civil rules. In addition to complying with the civil rules, as they had agreed to do when registering on the site, participants developed additional norms of discourse that did contribute to civil dialogue oriented towards understanding and a respect for difference. Establishing an online reputation through evidence-based discussion, the demonstration of "listening" skills, and disclosing personal details were some of the ways that participants grew to trust and respect each other's opinions, and to accept others' posts at face value. Participants also used negotiation techniques such as inventing options for mutual gain, and showing restraint to avoid inflammatory verbal attacks and enhance cooperation and constructive criticism. Thus, the evidence from this study contradicts the claim that Internet-based discussion is necessarily rude and prone to flame wars. Most threads maintained a civil, although sometimes heated, tone. The dialogue participants placed a great deal of value on being able to engage in democratic debates and on constructing solid and well-thought-out arguments. During the debate, participants often invoked Canadian culture and principles that uphold diversity in discussion, peacekeeping, tolerance, and other democratic ideals. These principles were praised both in relation to foreign policy issues and in relation to the discussion that was underway, showing that the participants saw a link between their own discourse practices and the larger context of Canadian values and policies. While participants obviously found the experience of honing their debating skills, demonstrating their knowledge on political subjects, and interacting with others pleasurable, there was also a sense of "civic duty" expressed by some posts to the Dialogue. Frequent

participants often made reference to the responsibility they had as citizens to provide “intelligent” or “worthwhile” advice to the government, and norms of civil discourse may have emerged because of this feeling of responsibility. This sense of commitment to a larger purpose distinguishes the Foreign Policy Dialogue from other online discussion spaces that are not tied to a government policy exercise, such as UseNet groups or discussion forums associated with online news services. The feeling that their contributions to the Dialogue were part of an important national consultation may have been a factor in the participants' generally civil discourse.

9.1 Civility: Is it enough?

The designers and facilitators of the Foreign Policy Dialogue recognized civility as an important quality to require and promote within the context of an online policy consultation. Participants also worked to maintain civil dialogue through their compliance with the civil rules, and the development and maintenance of their own civil norms. The kind of dialogue exhibited in the Foreign Policy Dialogue does, for the most part, fulfill Habermas' (1996) requirement that within the public sphere, the recognition of “the better argument” rests upon a “lifeworld” of shared meaning developed through discussion. However, the meanings shared by Dialogue participants were developed in public through dialogue: participants did not come to the discussion with lifeworlds that were already shared, as they did in the bourgeois model. The shared meanings that were developed by Dialogue participants included an insistence on evidence-based discussion, a regard for stable identities and trustworthy reputations, and a commitment to negotiation within discussion.

The discourse also followed Kingwell's (1995) more pragmatic definition of civility as a context-dependent orientation towards understanding and a respect for difference. Although the civil rules made some basic provisions for civility, the practices that came to create a more nuanced dialogue framework were developed amongst the people involved, as they negotiated shared meaning and discourse conventions that the majority of participants could accept. Within the Foreign Policy Dialogue, widely divergent views were accepted and integrated into a larger debate when participants adhered to civil rules and norms. In this way, participants were able to address a wide variety of interests and concerns related to Canada's foreign policy, and begin to come up with solutions to mutual problems. Thus, civil speech appears to have allowed a plurality of participants to converse on relatively equal terms

about issues of mutual importance. However, Fraser (1993) points out that no public sphere is culturally neutral, and therefore there is a danger that “expressive norms of one cultural group” (p.17) might be privileged over others when diverse participants attempt to interact in a large public sphere. Although the scope of this paper cannot adequately address this issue, the fact that the Dialogue's registration logs are dominated by men, and the example of the participant who was marginalized because his/her discourse style did not fit the norms of the group, suggest that the goals of civility were not fully attained. Certainly, attention to issues of inclusiveness and plurality must continue to be a priority for online consultation administrators, moderators and participants.

10. Influence on government

The analysis of the results of this study so far has addressed the first two research questions of this study. Civility is enforced and maintained consistently by participants in the Foreign Policy Dialogue's online discussion forums through several different discourse norms. Participants are aware of the presence of the civil rules and the moderators, and although these factors did not have a direct impact on the way that civil norms were developed and enforced, it is plausible that without them, the discourse would have been far less civil. The existence of the civil rules and the reality of moderated discussion seem to have provided an environment where civil speech could flourish. This analysis has shown the ways in which civil norms of discourse promote mutual understanding and constructive discussion between individuals with very different political views. But does this kind of civility provide for another, equally important function of a public sphere, namely its influence on government? Participants in the online Dialogue were not in an easy position to forcefully articulate their public opinions to government. Unlike lobby groups or established community organizations, the participants in the Foreign Policy Dialogue were (or appeared to be) complete strangers at the outset of the consultation. Thus, they had to go through all of the discursive steps of establishing identity, trust, and reputation, as well as finding common understandings through dialogue. This process is very important, but in the context of a time-sensitive policy consultation, is it enough? For democracy to be served, deliberative input must bear some relationship to decisions actually made and policies actually put into place. But if the net result of deliberative discussion in a forum such as the Foreign Policy Dialogue is scattered clusters of priorities and opinions, then it is very difficult for policymakers to effectively integrate

citizen input into the policymaking process. The majority of the discussion forums are concerned with negotiating meaning, developing shared priorities, and identifying common priorities. Hardly any time was spent attempting to summarize and articulate those shared goals. As a result, it was difficult for the civil society analysts, who were charged with the task of reporting the net results of the discussion forums, to simply summarize the public opinion generated on these discussion forums. The "Report to Canadians" paper that was produced by DFAIT to summarize the results of the consultation and to indicate how they would be incorporated into the policy process does mention the online discussion forums, but hardly draws upon them at all in its discussion of the policy advice given to DFAIT from citizens. Thus, it appears that while civil discourse among citizens does increase the likelihood that people will be receptive to each other's views, and will be respectful of different political opinions, civil dialogue alone does not ensure effective communication between citizens and government. In order for an online policy discussion to fulfill the public sphere's goal of a strong influence on government, the weak ties and tenuous positions taken by Dialogue participants must be strengthened and focused. This process might come about naturally over time as participants continue to deliberate, but it might also be facilitated by moderators. Their goal would not be to influence the outcome of citizen deliberation or to ensure that citizen deliberation follows government priorities, but to cultivate a critical, thoughtful deliberative political culture within citizen groups that are able to articulate their goals and priorities to government.

11. Conclusion

This study contradicts the popular belief that most political discussion online is necessarily rude or divisive. The majority of contributions to the Foreign Policy Dialogue followed the civil rules, and in addition, participants developed more nuanced norms of civil conduct that helped maintain respectful and civil discussion oriented towards understanding. They became adept at negotiation, and worked to build trust among the group. Civility became an essential component of the Foreign Policy Dialogue, because it allowed for the creation of shared meaning and understandings while still allowing for the disagreement that is inevitable in pluralistic democracies such as Canada's. These findings support the notion that the Internet can help foster the public sphere's goal to provide an inclusive and respectful site of debate on matters of public policy.

Another objective of this study was to determine whether civil dialogue in an online policy consultation allows citizens and government to interact in a meaningful way. While civil dialogue allowed citizens to communicate effectively amongst themselves, it did not facilitate a purposive and productive exchange between citizens and government. Creating the set of norms and shared understandings that allowed for civil discussion and public opinion-formation took a great deal of participants' time, and they did not focus on forcefully articulating their opinions to government. Civil society moderators are well placed to facilitate this communication process, and help make these deliberative online consultations have a more concrete impact on policymaking. However, their influence must be monitored and studied to assess its impact. Governments, too, will need to adjust the manner in which they interact with citizens in the face of these new forms of consultation. What is the mandate of civil servants, Ministers, and policymakers taking part in Internet consultations? How can coherent policies be put into place when so many people have a say in their development? How can governments effectively report back to citizens so that they know that their input has impact? As further experiments with online consultations are carried out, research into these questions will be essential. Although most citizen feedback on the Foreign Policy Dialogue was very positive, cynical citizens will not be willing to participate in future consultations if they perceive that their efforts have not been heeded.

References

- Barret, H *Rhetoric and Civility: Human Development, Narcissism, and the Good Audience*, State University of New York Press, Albany (1991).
- Bauer, M *Classical Content Analysis: a Review In Qualitative Researching with Text, Image and Sound*(Eds, Bauer, M and Gaskell, G) Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, (2000) pp. 131-151.
- Benson, T W 'Rhetoric, civility, and community: Political debate on computer bulletin boards' *Communication Quarterly*, 44 3, (1996) pp. 359-378.
- Calhoun, C *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass (1992).
- Coate, J *Cyberspace Inkeeping: Building Online Community In Reinventing Technology, Rediscovering Community: Critical Explorations of Computing as a Social Practice*(Eds, Agre, P E and Schuler, D) Ablex Publishing, Greenwich, Conn., (1997) pp. 272.
- Coleman, S and Gøtze, J *Hansard Society*, London England,(2001) pp.

- Connery, B IMHO: Authority and Egalitarian Rhetoric in the Virtual Coffeehouse In *Internet Culture*(Ed, Porter, D) Routledge, London, (1997) pp. 161-181.
- CPRN Canadian Policy Research Networks, Ottawa,(2000) pp. 1-21.
- Dean, J 'Cybersalons and Civil Society: Rethinking the Public Sphere in Transnational Technoculture' *Public Culture*, 13 2, (2001) pp. 243-265.
- Department of Justice Canada, Vol. 2003 Government of Canada,(1982) pp.
- Docter, S and Dutton, W H The First Amendment Online: Santa Monica's Public Electronic Network In *Cyberdemocracy: technology, cities and civic networks*(Eds, Tsagarousianou, R, Tambini, D and Bryan, C) Routledge, New York, (1998) pp. 125-152.
- Donath, J S Identity and deception in the virtual community In *Communities in cyberspace*(Eds, Smith, M A and Kollock, P) Routledge, London, (1999) pp. 29-59.
- Foreign Policy Dialogue, Vol. 2004,(2002) pp.
- Fraser, N Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy In *The Phantom Public Sphere*(Ed, Robbins, B) University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, (1993) pp. 1-32.
- Habermas, J *Between Facts and Norms*, Polity Press, London (1996).
- Habermas, J The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article In *Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks*(Eds, Durham, M G and Kellner, D M) Blackwell, Oxford, (2002) pp. 103-107.
- Hauser, G *Vernacular Voices: The Rhetoric of Publics and Public Spheres*, University of South Carolina Press, Columbia, SC (1999).
- Herring, S C 'The Rhetorical Dynamics of Gender Harassment On-Line' *The Information Society*, 15 (1999) pp. 151-167.
- Herring, S C *Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis: An Approach to Researching Online Behavior* In *Designing for Virtual Communities in the Service of Learning*(Eds, Barab, S A, Kling, R and Gray, J H) Cambridge University Press, New York, (2004) pp.
- Institute on Governance Institute on Governance, Ottawa,(1998) pp. 1-27.
- Keane, J *Global Civil Society?*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Mass. (2003).
- Kingwell, M A *Civil Tongue: Justice, Dialogue and the Politics of Pluralism*, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, PA (1995).
- Margolis, M and Resnick, D *Politics as Usual: the cyberspace "revolution"*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks (2000).
- Millard, W I *Flamed Freud* In *Internet Culture*(Ed, Porter, D) Routledge, London, (1997) pp. 145-161.
- Mitra, A 'Marginal Voices in Cyberspace' *New Media and Society*, 3 1, (2001) pp. 29-48.
- Nevitte, N *The Decline of Deference: Canadian Value Change in Cross National Perspective*, Broadview, Toronto (1996).
- Poster, M *Cyber Democracy: the Internet and the Public Sphere* In *The Information Subject*(Ed, Arnowitz, S) G&B Arts, Amsterdam, (2001) pp. 95-116.
- Rouner, L *Civility*, University of Notre Dame, Boston (2000).
- Salter, L *Democracy, New Social Movements, and the Internet: A Habermasian Analysis* In *Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice*(Eds, McCaughey, M and Ayers, M D) Routledge, New York, (2003) pp. 117-145.
- Smith, P D *The Virtue of Civility in the Practice of Politics*, University Press of America, Lanham (2002).

