Transparency and Teledemocracy: Issues from an 'E-consultation'

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Transparency is a term common to distributed computing, communications studies and other fields that information science draws upon. It's everyday uses and connotations are carried over into these domains, coalescing around some common issues relevant to knowledge management. Transparency is also a common term in political theory and practice, and one that has been associated with teledemocracy; the application of information and communication technology (ICT) to support democratic processes. For example, 'greater transparency' is commonly used to justify the use of ICT by governments to consult with the governed, the topic of the work in progress reported here.

Transparency is an abstract benefit, perhaps more so than 'knowledge management' itself. It promises gain for all, but risks being lost between expectations first raised by political and managerial 'spin' and then deflated by the same corporate forgetting it is meant to address. The paper explores some of this dangerous territory, reflecting on how everyday notions of 'transparency' relate to two current issues in knowledge management and social informatics. Firstly, the design of systems to promote shared awareness of activity and identity, and secondly the study of ICTs to illuminate the invisibility of the 'social infrastructure' they depend upon.

The paper briefly reviews uses of the term 'transparency', drawing on literature from the fields mentioned above. The aim is to delineate dimensions of transparency that may help designers, policy makers or citizens to evaluate what can or should be made transparent in the interplay between technology and due political process. Ethnographic methods were used to document outcomes of an "electronic consultation" project that contributed to a government consultation of 11-18 year-olds in Scotland. A website "*e-consultant*" was developed, and its usage monitored on-line and off-line, including in events leading up to a "Scottish Youth Summit". Using brief extracts from field notes, the web site itself, and audio and video transcripts of the site in use, the paper will show how those participating in the consultation collaboratively shared and managed awareness of their activities and identities. Reflecting on what was made visible through the e-consultant site, and what was hidden by it, we will discuss the realised and potential "transparency-enhancing" effects of this and similar prototypes. The discussion focuses on the roles of intermediaries and social infrastructure in the project, illustrating the trade-offs between transparently simple design, and transparency of information on the collaboration between consultants (those doing the consulting) and consultees (those consulted). Finally, indications are given of the direction of our ongoing research.

1. Introduction

Terminological confusion is bread and butter to legal theorists and practitioners, as well as a prime concern of information scientists and knowledge managers. So while the focus of this paper is on information and communication technologies (ICTs) designed to enhance the transparency of public consultation practices, it is worth beginning with a cautionary note. Should we expect transparency in governance to be defined unambiguously in the domain of constitutional law we would soon be disappointed. Curtin [1] for example discusses it in general terms of "access to information held by public authorities by both individuals and

legislative assemblies", admitting that "it is a notoriously imprecise term and is to be understood more as the expression of a political objective than anything else" [ibid.].

Transparency as a political project typically expresses aims "to enable effective *participation* in the policy process itself by means of effective access to the deliberative process and voice within it" [ibid. emphasis in original]. This fits neatly with what many see as the potential of Internet-based technologies to enhance political transparency. We will briefly review in the first half of this paper some of the literature articulating this potential. In the second half of the paper we describe and critically reflect on our application of an internet-based "e-consultation", part of a government consultation with young people aged 11 to 18 years in Scotland. Our aims in this were in keeping with the objective of using technology to provide effective access to the deliberative process and voice within it.

Should we look on this as a technical or a political objective, then, or both? It seems safe to say 'both'. But does that imply evaluating technical means against their political or their technical ends, and on what basis would we tell the difference anyway? The problem of 'enhancing tranparency' is framed politically and so must be answered by referring at least to political practice, if not theory. Conversely though, to regard the outcomes of technology implementation solely in terms of political *ends* would miss both the political and technical nature of design deliberations as the means to those ends. Attending to these deliberations would also give voice to the parts played by particular technologies in the orchestration of policy-making practice. To summarise these issues: What forms of work produce techno-political objects that 'enhance transparency', what do we mean by that, in what circumstances can it be said to happen, and in whose interests?

This multi-part question can be approached from various domain-specific and theoretically-informed directions, all pointing across the famous divide between the social and technical disciplines. There is no lack of socio-technical bridges available, but (to begin to answer the question) viewing teledemocracy research as enquiry into 'techno-political' objects implies saying that these objects are at least socio-technical, if not something qualitatively more complex. But having said that, our problem is that we come across *paradoxes* that differ depending on which direction we move from the social to the technical. In this paper we will first look at one paradox, then argue that it is more productive to view it from a different angle, even though this brings a different paradox into view.

The first (apparent) paradox is that in the social sphere the term 'transparency' seems to be used for completely different ends than in the technical sphere. In political and everyday discourse 'transparency' is a quality associated with openness, understanding, accountability and, perhaps most of all, *seeing through* whatever barriers restrict our action or disguise that of others. But in the discourse of distributed computing, on the conceptual basis of internetworking, 'transparency' refers to the *maintenance of an illusion* – that of "cyberspace", a world famously without boundaries – or at least only virtual ones.

It would be easy to dismiss this paradox by arguing that if virtual spaces and boundaries are 'just an illusion' then so what? They can be very useful ones, and is 'enhancing political transparency' not a matter of negotiating which virtual boundaries to open up and which to maintain or even create? That is a shortcut to the conclusions drawn here, but not a very useful one because it says nothing about how to get there. The route taken in this paper involves dismissing the idea that 'transparency' is essentially a different quality when viewed from technical and social perspectives. It follows that enhancing transparency with technology is not work that can be evaluated by looking at *separate* technical and social factors, but at varied socio-technical working practices that differ in what kinds of work they make visible and when. Our (second) paradox is that enhancing the transparency of some forms of work diminishes others.

To demonstrate this requires first of all a brief description of how social and technical research domains are inter-related in terms of the methods used here. We will then briefly review the usage of 'transparency' in the teledemocracy literature to introduce our first paradox – apparently irreconcilable difference between uses of 'transparency' as terms in politics and computing. Then, using online and offline records of participation in the consultation project mentioned above, the discussion will examine what was made transparent by it.

2. Methodology

The approach taken in the work reported here can de described as a hybrid combining systems design and social research methods on the one hand, alongside interests in particular forms of technology and in aspects of political practice. Hybrids of this kind have been increasingly argued for and practised in the field of Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW) [2, 3]. The form portrayed in Figure 1 below is adapted from Suchman and Trigg [4].

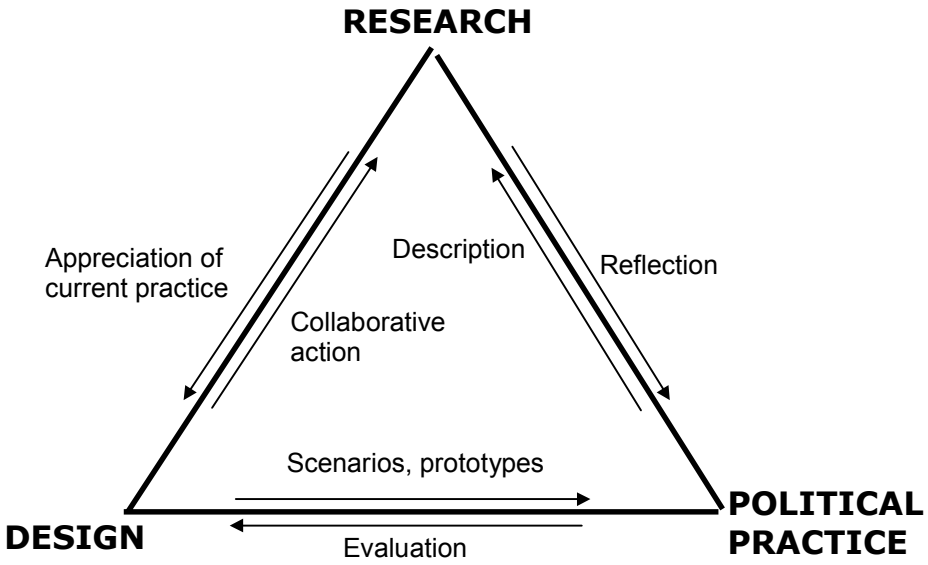

Figure 1. Teledemocracy research from three perspectives

Figure 1 describes three perspectives from which to view the work of the author and colleagues in the International Teledemocracy Centre. In terms of *political practice* we are concerned with practices that are recognisably part of 'the democratic process' in an everyday (Western) sense, rather than viewed from any particular ideological or political-theoretic framework. We are currently developing an internet-based 'e-democracy toolkit' that aims to support each of these practices and will describe one element of this, "e-consultant", and its deployment shortly. The toolkit is intended to support:-

- Practices of *voting* and communication between, and about, would-be representatives and their constituencies.
- Practices of *petitioning* and lobbying more generally, by which individuals and interest groups seek to influence policy-making and its outcomes.
- Practices by which public administrations *consult* with their public on proposed policy actions and revise the proposals accordingly (or not);

So in talking about our concern with political practice we are talking about those aspects of (in this case) consultation practice that we have access to: - as researchers working with policy-makers and those that they seek to consult, occasionally as members of the consulted public ourselves, and as designers seeking to improve on current practice. From a research perspective, viewing *transparency* as an aspect of consultation practice involves describing how it is expressed in related policy statements, and describing whatever is involved in consultation that may be seen as relating to the political objective of greater transparency.

As researchers we have various theoretical and practical interests in carrying out this descriptive task. Firstly (corresponding to the right-hand side of the triangle in Figure 1) we are interested in documenting the methods used by practitioners themselves as 'consultees' or 'consultants', to perform consultations and to account for their outcomes. This involves ethnographic interviewing and observation in those sites where consultation takes place and e-consultation is anticipated to take place – a form of 'virtual ethnography' [5]. Although carried out with an academic interest in the mutual shaping of social and technical objects *per se* [6, 7], the ethnography is necessarily 'quick and dirty' [8], constrained by the practical interests and the time-scales of our partners.

Our second *research* interest (corresponding to the left-hand side of the triangle) is in aligning these descriptions with methods for rendering them into systems requirements. This invariably involves collaboration with public bodies that have an interest in applying technology in particular projects with defined deliverables and/or a more general interest in exploring the implications of novel ICTs for their policy frameworks. Scoping this work involves a form of action research that draws particularly on Soft Systems Methodology [9, 10]. Its outcome is an accommodation between 'the problem' as framed by the 'client', and candidate technical solutions that are available to us and our commercial partners[1]. The outcome is often (as in this case) expressed in terms of a framework for the design of an e-democracy toolkit application.

The third aspect of our work, the bottom of the triangle in Figure 1, is the communication of the design framework in the form of (e.g.) storyboards, which are used to focus the requirements analysis. The e-consultant application reported here was implemented using standard Internet applications development software. Each application is deployed and evaluated, again with the client or project partners and whichever members of the public they aim to involve in their consultation process. The outcome of this is an understanding of the range of 'user' views on how the tools affect policy consultation practice, and of patterns of prototype usage. These patterns may be derived from web server logfile analysis, but also from observation of the tools being used 'in the field', which takes us back round to the descriptive right-hand side of figure 1. Reflection on the social and political nature of our intervention, in managing the process of design and deployment, involves another shift in perspective, bringing us round figure 1 once more to take an action research perspective.

This approach can be seen then as a spiral model of systems development and socio-technical research, with the triangle at its centre. This is however work-in-progress rather than a methodology for e-democracy research and development. The outline of it has glossed recognised tensions between the perspectives of cultural research and systems engineering (see e.g. [11, 12]), not to mention the issues that arise in applying organisationally-focussed design methods for systems that are intended to be used by 'the general public', often in public or semi-public places, and developed with governments and public institutions as clients. These are touched on here but the main concern of this paper are with the beginning of the spiral, in notions of 'transparency', and with its ends –patterns of usage in our first e-consultation, and the extent to which this system 'gave voice' within the deliberative process.

[1] BT Scotland is the main commercial partner in the International Teledemocracy Centre and was active in implementing the e-consultant application.

3. Teledemocracy and Paradoxes of Transparency

To address how greater transparency as a political objective gets shaped out of politics, into technology, and back again, we need to question whether it has different incommensurate meanings used to different effects at either end of the political – technical spectrum. In everyday use, transparency is a quality associated with *visibility* or, more specifically perhaps, the capacity to *see through* barriers. It carries connotations of *awareness*, the capacity to see who and what is around us, and consequentially of *accountability*. Many of the ethnographic studies of collaboration influential in CSCW have focussed on just how this accountability is maintained as a trusted and taken-for-granted or 'tacit' background to membership of communities of practice. These studies are more often than not used to inform technology development at the level of project, policy or design theory [13].

From a methodological concern to be 'where the action is' rather than from theory-driven choice, ethnographic descriptions of accountability-in-action have (in the CSCW literature) been conducted largely in workplaces [14]. That focus on the detail of practice, shared with systems design methodologies, contrasts with the broader sense of administrative accountability in-the-large that is more frequently used to describe transparency as a political objective. In these terms transparent accountability is a corrective to the 'democratic deficit', the problem of lack of public participation in governance often cited by commentators in the U.S. and Europe. This concern was expressed for example in the report setting the framework for consultative practice in the devolved Scottish Parliament, as the basis for the 'key principle' that " In its day to day business, the Parliament should be transparent, modern and adopt simple working practices..." [15].

Greater transparency features as part of hoped-for solutions to political disengagement in terms of developments in ICT policy and the ideology of community networking, framed in a variety of ways usefully summarised by Bryan *et al* [16]. These include:-

1. An emphasis on easy and equitable access to government information;
2. Enabling those likely to be affected by the outcomes of policy proposals to take part in deliberative discussions on them;
3. Enhanced organisational possibilities for political movements to develop more 'horizontal' structures and for citizens engaged in peer-to-peer communication to contest 'received wisdom';
4. An emphasis on direct access to decision-making, with technology removing the need for intermediaries such as broadcast media and political parties to act as the 'middleman';
5. Managerial perspectives of more efficient services geared to the citizen as a consumer;
6. Technology as a means for more efficient and effective implementation of polling approaches (such as proportional representation) that are themselves intended to make representative bodies more representative.

One way of comparing these is on the extent to which 'the citizen' is seen as a more or less active participant, in terms of deciding policy outcomes, technology design decisions, or both. Although many advocates of teledemocracy adopt an ethos of maximum participation or 'strong democracy' [17, 18], public *consultation* on the nature and implementation of policy proposals is often considered to occupy a 'middle rung' on a metaphorical ladder of participation [19]. Technology-centred intervention in the consultation process may then be generalised as a matter of applying one or other of the above perspectives to push or pull the citizen up this ladder.

Our concern at this point however is not with the validity of any of the perspectives listed above as claims for the democratising potential of technology-centred interventions, but with what 'transparency' is taken to mean and its place in the grounds of teledemocracy policy arguments. In the interests of brevity we will focus on one pertinent example, the view that teledemocracy provides direct access to the deliberative process, by removing the need for intermediaries.

The transparency-enhancing effects claimed for ICTs are often based on claims that certain social categories of 'intermediary' generally contribute to a *lack* of transparency. Nixon and Johansson [20], for example, draw attention to the role of *political parties* as a basis for the selection of representatives. Traditionally predicated on geographical organisation and active membership, party structures have, they argue, evolved more diverse structures based on personal identity (e.g. age and gender) and membership as a means to endorse "a certain value set". This development, itself enabled by communication technology, has allowed internet communication between would-be representatives and the represented to become driven by centralised control, with "political parties regaining control over messages previously broadcast by traditional media". [ibid.] Conversely, ICTs developed to "foster discursive democracy" can enhance transparency since "representatives roles could be adapted to be information presenters to the public at large... disseminating complex information in an entertaining and interesting way... perhaps foremost on a local level", to serve the purpose of "aggregating values" [ibid].

Others like Coleman are more circumspect about the role of media, referring to an "implicit ethos of virtual deliberation" as "citizens watch and listen to the elite thinking aloud on behalf of the public" [21], and associating less mediation with greater transparency. "Representative institutions... will have to become more transparent and accountable.... Without editorial mediation, citizens will be freer to choose what they want to know and how much they need to know" [22]. Nevertheless, Coleman describes the "transparent spontaneity" of interaction between callers and representatives in a BBC radio election broadcast, but warns of the dangers of "the more populist trends in US talk radio" leading to disengagement, through political representatives being seen by participants as remote and best-overlooked (and vice versa).

These brief examples differ in their conception of just how ICTs can enhance the transparency of 'deliberative discourse', but there are some notable common features. They share a concern with how participants identify themselves as belonging to social categories, a concern for 'local' (as opposed to 'centralised') interaction, and a concern with the maintenance of trust between representatives and their constituents, evidenced by the 'spontaneity' of interaction as opposed to the opacity of complex information. There is little evidence of transparency being used as a term of political theory with any precise definition. On the contrary, although transparency is associated with openness and accountability 'in the large' there seems little to differentiate it from the manner in which these serve interaction in public spaces [23]. The examples imply that transparency serves to *unmask illusions*, that it entails demonstrating that people are who they say they are, that they are in the appropriate place at an appropriate time, have acted as expected, and in accordance with procedural or cultural norms, i.e. that trust has not been breached.

Nor is transparency used, in the above examples, in any specific technical sense. It is striking then that when one examines how transparency is used in the field of distributed computing one finds that it is used to a quite different end, to *maintain an illusion*. Describing the essential attributes of client-server computing required to create "the illusion of a single system image across potentially millions of hybrid client/sever machines" Orfali et al identify the following key elements [24]:-
Location transparency: "Users, services, and resources join and leave the network constantly, but they are never tied to fixed locations...
Namespace transparency: Everything on the network must appear to belong to the same namespace...
Administrative transparency: The network operating system must appear to integrate with the local operating system's management services...
Secured access transparency: security must be built on mutual distrust. Clients must prove to servers that they are who they claim to be."

The operation of the inter-networks required for the very notion of teledemocracy appears then to depend, paradoxically, on a form of transparency that masks the very attributes that political transparency is associated with: - dependent on recognisable places and social roles, grounded in local administrative control being seen to have some independence from centralised control, and on trust being honoured in the breach.

What then are developers of teledemocracy systems to make of this apparent conflict? One justifiable response is that it is simply irrelevant. Since the basic utility of the Internet depends on the above masks for its reliable operation, they can be disregarded in favour of the more general senses of transparency as a moral and political imperative. There are two main arguments against such a response.

Firstly, discourse about political transparency offers little specific guidance on how to design for 'deliberative discourse'. Secondly, neither do the principles on which the Internet works, if defined in terms of protocols designed for distributed transparency. Moreover, these conflict with principles of user-centred design, around the core problem of *control*. As Rodden and Blair noted early in the development of collaborative organisational systems, the problem with the distributed transparency approach is that "presumed control decisions are embedded into the system... This is the root of the problem in supporting CSCW" [25]. They point out that, contrary to the 'black-box' approach in which the names and locations of people and things conform to one formalised model which is masked from the user, collaborative work involves dynamically varying forms of controlled access to information resources, and the explicit recognition of similarly varying group structure and organisation. Although the idea of deliberative discourse in the context of policy consultations is implicitly broader than the organisational context of CSCW systems, the need for flexibility in the naming of individuals and groups, and in operating conventions and access policies, would seem by this to be even greater.

A different response to this paradox however is that it is itself an illusion. Machines, their users, and information resources do not conform to the naming schemes and protocols of distributed computing automatically. They do so as the result of work, some of which is carried out by technical administrators and programmers, the rest already automated in software and hardware – work that is *invisible* to 'the ordinary user' but work nonetheless. The effort required is to *translate* the complex heterogeneous characteristics of real-world cultural objects into abstracted and simplified formalisms that operate to maintain an 'easy to use, anywhere, anytime' network. The effort to enhance the transparency of distributed computing has similar characteristics to that of enhancing political transparency in that it involves *simplification*.

However it is precisely this need for 'transparent simplicity' that leads to further paradox. The political rhetoric of transparency masks an old conflict between representative and direct democracy, summarised by Bankowski, "Transparency generates a paradox. For the way that we make things transparent is by simplification which at the same time masks all the information and so contributes to opacity" [26]. The point is neatly expressed in a distinction drawn by Wenger between *procedural* and *cultural* transparency. In his ethnographic study of interactions between insurance claims processors using a worksheet he concludes that "For each way in which the worksheet can be argued to be transparent, one can find a way in which it can be argued to be opaque" [27] The distinction is between self-explanatory procedures on the one hand, and on the other the opacity of the institutional arrangements, concepts and issues that provide the reasons for these procedures being the way they are in the first place. In much the same vein, Star [28] talks of transparency as an attribute of *infrastructure* - not just in the sense of technical standards, but in the sense of taken-for-granted conventions and social arrangements. The important point about these is that in the normal course of events these assumptions and complexities are treated as invisible. They are made visible only when things are seen to have failed and an explanatory account called for. Simplification carried out in the

name of increased transparency can therefore reduce accountability and contribute instead to opacity.

4. A short case-study of e-consultation

One implication of the above argument is that designing information systems to enhance political transparency involves addressing problems that are not so different from those that knowledge management seeks to address in the organisational sphere. A second implication is that the effective structuring and organisation of teledemocratic forms of deliberative discourse requires, as it does in the organisational sphere, attention to forms of 'real-world' discourse and how they are structured and organised rather than looking to supposedly inherent characteristics of the Internet. The point that enhancing transparency in both technical and political spheres involves simplification, a choice of what to render invisible that risks loss of flexibility, will be returned to later.

The case study that follows is necessarily brief. Following an outline of the background, purpose and outcomes of the e-consultation, it will focus on the organisation of on-line discourse and some of the events that gave rise to this discourse.

4.1 Background

In September 1999, the Scottish Executive, the executive arm of the newly devolved Scottish Parliament, published a strategy document "Making it Work Together – a Programme for Government" [29] in which the Minister for Children and Education stated he wished to consult widely on an action programme for youth which valued young people and reflected their own aspirations and needs. One outcome of this was that in February 2000, the Scottish Executive asked the International Teledemocracy Centre to run an electronic consultation exercise to contribute to the development of this Action Programme for Youth.

From discussions with a consortium of national and local public officials and representatives of groups in the non-govermental sector that worked with youth groups, the form and aims of an *e-consultant* website were agreed. It should assist in identifying those issues that young people considered most important to "young people in Scotland", by providing facilities to express their views on a list of identified "hot topics". It should also allow them to 'vote' for those that they considered a priority, and: -

1. be easy to access and use by a broad range of 11-18 year-olds, the 'target audience';
2. clearly identify what was being asked of users, and why they were being asked;
3. encourage users to read and respond to comments, using a 'threaded' discussion forum;
4. take account of education authority guidelines on the disclosure of personal information by school pupils, by not disclosing their full names;
5. minimise editorial control of the content, except where in breach of stated conditions of use.

The e-consultant site [30] was structured around a navigation menu presenting five main options: -

Outline: a page summarising the background to the consultation, and structured in the style of frequently-asked-questions web pages;
Information: a page expanding on the background, with further detail under the headings of "who", "what and why", and "how", presented as clickable folders;
Comment: a list of 20 "issues" representing global topics, each linked to a discussion forum similar in form to a newsgroup;
Vote: the same list was presented on this page as a form allowing the user to select a maximum of 10 from the 20 listed.

Feedback: during the 6-week e-consultation period this page featured a short statement of how the results would be used. Subsequently the page presented the outcomes of the online voting and the number of comments posted under each of the 20 issue headings. Shortly afterwards two reports presented to the Scottish Executive were included, one summarising the comments received and the other an evaluation of the e-consultation process.

An online evaluation questionnaire was automatically presented to users when they selected a further Exit menu option. The questionnaire asked users to identify their age, gender, where they had used the site and their views on its ease of use and presentation style.

In total, some 227 responses were received in the online 'vote'. Immediately following the e-consultation period, summaries of the 587 comments made on the site were delivered to workshop facilitators in a Scottish Youth Summit. This event, in a large conference centre in central Scotland, was linked through videoconferencing and a second website to smaller 'satellite' events across Scotland, with around 1,000 young people attending overall. Each workshop in the main conference centre corresponded to one of the 10 priority issues identified, and was attended by the Scottish Minister whose policy remit corresponded most closely to it. The proposed Action Programme for Youth has not however so far resulted in any publicly announced policy measures that could be traced either to the e-consultation or the summit event.

Two points are worth noting before discussing this e-consultation any further. Firstly, the site had to be designed and implemented in a matter of weeks, with minimal resources, and consequently with no direct participation by the target audience. Secondly, the design, implementation and publicising of the e-consultation involved a great deal of practical sociological reasoning and 'politics' [31] in, for example, the identification of issues, their wording, and assumptions made about the literacy, computing expertise, location and other characteristics of 'young people in Scotland'. However there is little scope to discuss these in this paper. Nor is there scope to discuss the summative evaluation of the site which was on the whole positive. In terms of the methodological outline described in Figure 1, the discussion takes up the theme of transparency, focusing on reflection on the authors involvement in monitoring the online usage of the site, and ethnographic observations made in 'real-world' sites in which it was used by youth groups.

The descriptive framework provided by genre analysis is a useful starting point for discussing the mutual structuring of information artifacts and the practices they are used in [32]. Yates and Orlikowski describe genre rules as associations of "appropriate elements of form and substance with certain recurrent situations" [33]. Viewing the e-consultation "comment" pages as an adaptation of the newsgroup *genre*, and the youth consultation itself as an example of consultation as a *recurrent situation*, provides a link from the structuring of our e-consultation site to studies of how online discourse relates to 'the real world'.

4.2 Transparency of online identity

The 'audience' of the e-consultation was pre-defined for administrative convenience, i.e. as 11-18 year-olds living in Scotland, whose social well-being and governance fell within the administrative remit of the consulting agencies concerned. However a basic assumption in designing the e-consultant site was that a user registration and authentication process would not be viable. No verifiable age or identity verification process could feasibly be implemented in the time available. This would in any case be off-putting since the availability of internet access to young people was far less than universal, and so it was likely that most users would visit the site only once. As a consequence, whether or not users actually were in the target audience was estimable only from their self-identification of their age and nationality in the online evaluation

form. To the ordinary user, these attributes of other users were not available. The *only* available forms of identification were those (a) given by users in the 'from' field of the comment submission form, which requested that users only give their first name, and (b) performed by them in the language of their comments.

Some theorists approach authenticity and accountability as *inherently* more problematic in online discourse due to a lack of the 'social cues' that face-to-face interaction provides [e.g. 34]. Others view online discourse as inherently more prone to 'identity play', for the same reason [35]. Ethnographic studies of online discourse tend to reject a-priori frameworks that assume essential differences between media, in favour of investigating how such differences are performed on the players own terms. Hine, for example, in her study of newsgroups found that user's self-identification in the accounts that they gave of themselves were never challenged, but "This is not to suggest that everyone using the newsgroups has a naïve view of identity as a transparent portrayal of what a person is. It is simply that discussion goes on as if identities exist, as they do for the practical purposes of the discussion on newsgroups" [7 p.133] Similarly in the e-consultation, comments were responded to on the practical unquestioning grounds that other users views were consistent with the identities they presented.

Lack of identification, i.e. where users gave the name "anonymous", was rare and tolerated to the extent that it was taken by other users to be justifiable in the context of the issue heading or global discussion topic. That is, where anonymous accounts were given of personal experiences of bullying these were responded to with generally sympathetic comments. Under other headings anonymity was challenged or messages were simply not responded to. Age and place identifiers were however very frequently offered as part of user's identity claims, in both the comments and the 'from' fields (e.g. "Joel (16)" "Sam from lochgoilhead").

Authenticity of identity *was* however problematic in relation to our own needs to monitor the site. The online discourse was continually monitored to ensure that 'conditions of use' were observed, and that users did not *over*-identify themselves by revealing postal or e-mail addresses, thus breaching local education authority guidelines on self-disclosure by children. In the course of this monitoring it was noticeable that, although in general terms the comments had a spontaneous uninhibited quality, this was more so in threads where groups of responses shared the same date and approximate time. In some it was apparent though not obvious that the responses were actually coming from users in the same time/place. In others it was known that this was the case, either because the response indicated this in the 'from' field (e.g. "Kate and ghazala"), or from on-site observations, which we will turn to next.

4.3 Transparency of infrastructure and the role of intermediaries

Onsite observations were carried out by the author in 2 schools and with 4 youth organisations that indicated they had in interest in the consultation and responded to our request. The aims in observing the interaction were to document the nature of collaboration between young people and any facilitating teacher or youth worker present, and find out what value they placed on 'e-consultation', and their views on the usability of the e-consultation. In both of the sessions outlined here, the e-consultant site was used in (different) 'cybercafes' that the groups' adult organisers hired for the occasion, to provide access for 6-10 young people . The sessions lasted approximately one hour and were audio or video recorded. Field notes were also recorded of conversations with the organisers before and after the sessions.

Session A involved a group of 9 Girl Guides and their group leader. From discussions with her it was apparent that the group had been existence as a group for over a year, that events such as this had to have a 'fun' element, otherwise they would not keep turning up, and that as a consequence she had said to the girls they would be "taking part in a survey on a web page". It

was only in the course of the session that she re-framed this as taking part in a government consultation. When using the e-consultant site, the girls made no reference to the 'background information' available on the site, although this was brought to their attention. During the session there was constant conversation between the girls in groups of 2 or 3, in which they would (for example) declare that they had made comments, read aloud what they had typed, ask how each other had voted, or ask for clarification about what 'voting' meant. The group leader constantly and enthusiastically announced directions ("what we're doing is…" , "you've got to go to this page"). Towards the end of session she drew the whole group's attention to call a show of hands on who had voted for which 'issue'.

Session B was with the 'Junior Board" of a charity named Children's Parliament, a newly formed group whose declared aims were consistent with those of this e-consultation, i.e. to provide young people with access to policy deliberations. Unlike session A, this group of 7 were previously informed about the nature of the event as a consultation "but with the chance to look at other web sites". The session followed a similar pattern, again with much discussion of the nature of each other's comments and online 'votes', particularly when the 'issues' could be related to a mutual experience. Again, the facilitators were active in directing page navigation, elaborating on the meaning of phrases read from the screen, and what they should expect to see. As in Session A, facilitators periodically recapped that this combined activity would lead to their views being taken up at a Youth Summit for young people. And similarly, a 'local' vote was taken on which issues to prioritise *for the group*.

Both sessions resulted in most of those present making at least one comment under the 'issue' headings. In these sessions (and others observed) participants noticeably took pleasure out of seeing their contributions appear on screen immediately after 'posting' it, drawing this to the attention of those sitting beside them. However in discussions at the end of each session, there was a unanimous view that this was a site they would associate with "Personal and Social Education" school work rather than using it 'in their own time'. That would involve making it more 'fun', drawing attention to the same kinds of issues but presenting them in the form of a computer game or other entertainment genre.

Afterwards, reviewing the comments posted in the sessions showed that in no case was there any reference in the substance of their comments to the identity or nature of the group or their co-presence and collaboration, and of course the e-consultation was not structured to request or provide this information. Similarly in neither case was the outcome of the group's voting visible on the site. This had material consequences for the second group, which aimed to go to the subsequent Youth Summit event, since the facilitators hoped that the outcome of their 'offline' vote would be taken into account in their choice of workshop (it was not).

4.4. Consequences for transparency

How typical were the sessions briefly described above? The analysis of online questionnaire told us that 80% of users did so in a school, community centre or cybercafe setting. Around half also said they had used it in the setting of a "group discussion", and the nature of the sessions themselves was (in the views of the facilitators in these sessions) consistent with youth work practice., except that where individuals views would normally be mediated through being voiced in a group setting, rephrased, summarised on a whiteboard, and re-structured into a word-processed summary of the outcomes, in this case they were entered directly on the e-consultant site.

What then do these site observations and the online comments imply for the 'transparency-enhancing' effects of this e-consultation? It is helpful here to refer back to Wenger's distinction between procedural and cultural transparency [27]. The transparent spontaneity of the comments was accomplished partly through simplicity of the login procedure and partly through

the lack of intermediation by each group's facilitators who would otherwise have a mediating effect on the views expressed. Their moderating and summarising work was instead re-distributed to other intermediaries – the authors. Procedural transparency, in terms of 'what to do next', was reinforced by the facilitators. Cultural transparency in terms of bringing about understanding of the reasons for the consultation, and what 'consultation' meant in this context, was entirely accomplished through the facilitators rather than through the account of these given on the site.

The role of intermediaries was in this way restructured. We point this out not because that restructuring is inherently undesirable but because the participation of the 'target group' was largely an outcome of small events like this involving young people *as* groups. This was disguised by the site, a loss of 'local control' only made transparent on other occasions where comments were addressed partially to or from implicitly co-present others (as in "us lot across the room"). The facilitator's role in making the consultation 'fun' is also relevant here as of course was their role in bringing the young people to the e-consultant site in the first place. Other individuals interest in the site was (in non-group contexts) engaged by similar work, but accomplished through banner adverts placed on entertainment websites popular with 15-17 year olds. The (publicly opaque) reason for targetting this age group in particular was tied to the 'social infrastructure' of youth group facilitation; the consultation period coincided with a period when many were on examination leave, and beyond the reach of their teachers.

There are three more general key points. Firstly, the usage of the site *differed* from that of a typical newsgroup or 'chat' interaction [e.g. 37] in that the majority of postings were not clearly worded as attempts to initiate a response from other users. Most were implicitly worded as public responses to the consultation or to politicians generally, and as 'positions' on the top-level issue ("Alcohol", "Bullying" etc.). E-consultations of this form are more transparent in that individual responses are rarely as easily accessible. Although the outcomes of public consultations are (at least in the UK) published, this is normally only in summary form. Secondly, the structuring of this e-consultation around 'issues' differs from consultations more typically structured around proposals drafted in response to some officially perceived problem in need of a policy solution. The more typical form is further removed from 'the problem' as articulated by policy-makers constituents themselves, and therefore arguably more opaque.

Finally, the focus of the short case study has been on who the e-consultation gave voice to, how their identity was made visible online, and how access to a deliberative process was accomplished with the aid of intermediaries. We have not addressed the substance of that voice, or evaluated to what extent the online discourse was deliberative. Nor did we, as intermediaries, have any more transparent access to the resulting government deliberations than the participants.

5. Conclusions

Our review of uses of transparency in the technical and policy literature has demonstrated that, although apparently used to refer to conflicting ends, they share key concerns that manifest themselves in these e-consultation design trade-offs:-

- user privacy and control over procedures for identifying characteristics of themselves or any group they belong to *versus* the consistency in scale and detail of information collected on the nature and extent of groups and individuals consulted;
- consistency and simplicity in interface design *versus* the variety in presentation styles and language needed to engage the interests of different communities;
- simplicity in the design of e-consultation procedures *versus* user and facilitator control of the depth of explanation needed to convey understanding of the reasons for those procedures.

It is self-evident that in terms of political practice the paradoxes of transparency do get worked around, but it is also apparent that there is a widely felt need to improve on current public consultation practice. So describing these workarounds, the methods of summation and translation practised by intermediaries, is grist to the mill of evaluating 'what works' and to designing ICT-focussed interventions fit for the purpose of improving them.

Our research agenda is to address each of the above points, in these ways:-

- Content analysis methods for summarising responses (qualitatively and quantitatively) in an auditable and reversible way are needed if we are to avoid paradoxical effects. i.e. the more that access is given to public participation in the deliberative process the greater the task of representatives to make sense of the myriad of voices, and the greater the onus on intermediaries to summarise and explain. Group dialogue analysis based on delphi technique [38], and conceptual modelling with ontologies [39] are potential routes that we are exploring.
- Ehnographically-informed requirements analysis and participatory design methods need further development to take account of the use of e-consultation systems in public places, and the issues of trust involved in mediating between the 'general public' and public administrations. Here scenario-based design [40] and consensus conference [41] approaches are being explored in our current work to be reported on elsewhere.

Finally, we have shown how a relatively simple teledemocracy application can make piecemeal steps towards enhancing transparency in one sense, but have paradoxical effects in other senses. A need for greater user involvement in design is apparent, but that is no guarantor of unanimously approved outcomes. It is appropriate to end with another slightly cautionary quote from Curtin on 'transparency', even though she is not referring to teledemocracy: - "The idea is that in order to influence policy public opinion needs to be aroused and channelled: the task of 'civil society' or the 'citizen association' sector is the repoliticization of issues which otherwise would be reduced to technical considerations in order to improve the prospects of bureaucratic (diplomatic) agreement" [1].

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