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Online Consultation and Political Communication in the Era of Obama: An Introduction

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A Utopian Scenario

Picture, if you will, the imaginary nation of Agora. All permanent residents have affordable access to high-speed Internet connections whenever and wherever they need them. High levels of text and visual literacy are universal. Agorans are skilled producers of online communications and discerning interpreters of the messages they receive. They use email lists and community networks to deepen their personal connections to family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, and fellow Agorans who share their interests and concerns.

The government of Agora posts virtually all public records online. It makes available a large volume of social data about Agora that local governments, businesses, journalists, and the citizenry in general can put to whatever legal uses they see fit. The government posts for online public comment all draft legislation, as well as proposed regulations for the implementation of enacted law. It is easy for Agorans to track their representatives' platforms and voting records, as well as the government's budget and record of expenditures. They can watch legislative sessions, administrative meetings, and judicial hearings online.

In Agora, a large volume of accurate, relevant, and timely national, local, and even hyperlocal news and analysis is produced by networks of semiprofessional citizen journalists. Their work is edited and organized by small but highly skilled and productive teams of full-timers. The reporters' work is amplified by the analyses of a thriving blogosphere. Both government and nongovernment agencies sponsor various forms of online "deliberative polling,"[1] which helps leaders understand how representative groups of Agorans might decide public issues after they become educated about them. From time to time, parliament convenes online videoconferences that allow randomly chosen groups of Agorans,

dispersed throughout the country, to come together online and deliberate on issues of common concern.

Not surprisingly, in this environment, the Internet is a powerful tool of political mobilization. (Whether the political culture has produced the social commitment to digital innovation or vice versa is an open issue.) Civil society groups are adept at using the Internet to raise funds, coordinate messages, and organize their members in support of various causes. If no group exists to support an Agoran's personal cause, establishing a new group is a relatively straightforward proposition. As a consequence of all this activity, few pastimes are as widely enjoyed in Agora as talk and debate. In schools, cafés, houses of worship, and public parks—typically furnished with civic information kiosks or digital walls displaying news headlines, art, and community announcements of all kinds—a sort of general will of the community messily but recognizably percolates up out of the seemingly endless web of inclusive discussion and deliberation.

All of the technology that Agora would need to achieve this picture is available now. Digital networks around the world are daily fostering innovative social practices and powerful new technologies of human connection that could sustain a democratic renaissance. Used in tandem with the many enduring legacy tools of personal and mass communication, the information and communication technologies (ICTs) of the digital age can promote knowledge and the exchange of ideas to a degree never before imagined. The ordinary citizen of postindustrial society, equipped with the right tools and a good broadband connection, can access more information through a desktop computer or a mobile device than has inhabited most national libraries from time immemorial. If technology were the key to democratic success, then we would now be living in an age in which we all, without regard to class or social status, would have unprecedented opportunities to achieve our personal aspirations and to shape the collective lives of the communities in which we live.

The Ambiguous Reality of Online Consultations

Even though the global explosion of online activity is steadily transforming the relationship of governments to their publics, no one yet lives in Agora. In the first wave of online government change—*e-government*—the Internet was used to improve management and service delivery. Suddenly, you could register your car, pay your parking tickets, or

license your pet online. In short order, e-government was accompanied by some degree of *e-democracy*. E-democracy (sometimes called *digital democracy* or *cyberdemocracy*) involves the design and use of digital information and communication technologies to enhance democratic practice. Governments and civic activists began to innovate in the hope that the Internet might foster a new and inclusive form of many-to-many public dialog. As in the fictional land of Agora, the virtual public sphere would link government officials anew to the citizens they serve. The Internet might provide a technological basis for "a more deliberative view of active citizenship," in which "[n]ew forms of governance" could emerge that would be "increasingly consultative and alive to experiential evidence" (Blumler and Coleman 2001, 6–7). New technologies would step in to facilitate the robust public deliberation that was conspicuously lacking in twentieth-century representative democracies.

One intriguing development on the road to e-democracy is the focus of this book. We use the term *online consultations* to refer to Internet-based discussion forums that represent government-run or at least government-endorsed solicitations of public input with regard to policy making. Such solicitations (like the 2009 U.S. consultation on declassification policy involving the Public Interest Declassification Board) may focus public attention on a specific policy question (Public Interest Declassification Board, 2009). On other occasions, governments may post a consultation document that raises a range of issues within a broad subject on which public input would be welcome (such as a municipal solicitation of reaction to an action plan for revamping important sites throughout the city) (Konga and Proudlock 2010). Although not yet a routine feature of all Western democracies, online consultations are no longer an exotic experience either. They are a relatively routine feature of governance at the level of the European Union and appear episodically in connection with government policy making, both local and national, throughout the developed world.

After more than fifteen years of such consultations, there are at least two reasons to suspect that their democratic potential is nowhere near to being realized. One is that despite the widespread availability of online forums for political expression, few are tied in any ascertainable, accountable way to actual governmental policy making. That is, a citizen participating in most online forums has no assurance that his or her effort will have any effect on the government's decision making process or on the actual policy that emanates from that process.

The second reason—related to the first—is that most exercises in online deliberation attract relatively small numbers of participants. It is not obvious how significant new numbers of citizens could be attracted to the political process by ICT-enabled forums that cannot be shown to affect the lives of those who participate. In short, if the quality of democracy is to be measured by the inclusiveness and deliberativeness of the interactions between government and citizen, the incremental effect of online consultations so far appears to be minimal.

There is a third reason that, so far, the real world and Agora differ. Our imaginary Agora enjoys a substantial level of equality in citizens' access to digital tools and in their capacity to use them, as both producers and consumers of information—a level of equality that cannot be taken for granted in most societies.

In part for these reasons, it is unsurprising that utopian projections like those of Agora now contend in both scholarly and popular literature with a more dystopian view. Although many people today have virtually infinite access to communication tools to serve their every desire, individuals without those advantages risk finding themselves relegated to a new kind of second-class citizenship on the other side of an ever-growing informational chasm. Networks of empowerment stand potentially to become networks of surveillance. For many citizens, the Internet's information riches are more overwhelming than enabling, and they struggle to sort out what is credible, accurate, and well motivated from what is distorted, propagandistic, and malicious. It is so easy to launch online niche information services that society is allegedly in danger of being less, not more unified as we all repair to our respective virtual echo chambers (Sunstein 2007). Members of any geographically defined community might find themselves deriving daily information through such different channels and different media that any common understanding could become all but impossible with regard to the problems and possibilities that confront them as fellow citizens. In such a polarized, information-drenched, but dialogue-deprived world, the authentic distance between the general public and its government institutions might actually seem greater, not smaller.

On the other hand, there is a case to be made for viewing online consultations—and, indeed, the entire turn to e-democracy—in a broader, at least tentatively more hopeful frame. A polity at any level, from the local to the national, lives within a communication ecology, including a set of information flows, that identifies and helps frame the polity as a political community. That communication ecology circulates information

that members of the polity, both individually and collectively, engage with in a variety of ways. A measure of optimism for the democratic potential of the Internet seems warranted not only because of the availability of new tools but also because large numbers of people are adopting new media habits that are genuinely participatory and thus engaging in the public sphere in a way that could breed a more deeply democratic culture. The American University Center for Social Media has catalogued five of these habits:

Choice Citizens are actively seeking out and comparing media on important issues through search engines, recommendations, video on demand, interactive program guides, news feeds, and niche sites.

Conversation Comment and discussion boards have become common across a range of sites and platforms, with varying levels of civility in evidence. Users are leveraging conversation tools to share interests and mobilize around issues. Distributed conversations across online services . . . are managed via shared tags. Tools for ranking and banning comments give site hosts and audiences some leverage for controlling the tenor of exchanges.

Curation Users are aggregating, sharing, ranking, tagging, reposting, juxtaposing, and critiquing content on a variety of platforms—from personal blogs to open video-sharing sites to social network profile pages. Reviews and media critique are popular genres for online contributors, displacing or augmenting genres, such as consumer reports and travel writing, and feeding a widespread culture of critical assessment.

Creation Users are creating a range of multimedia content (audio, video, text, photos, animation, etc.) from scratch and remixing existing content for purposes of satire, commentary, or self-expression—breaking through the stalemate of mass media talking points. Professional media makers are now tapping user-generated content as raw material for their own productions, and outlets are navigating various fair use issues as they wrestle with promoting and protecting their brands.

Collaboration Users are adopting a variety of new roles along the chain of media creation and distribution—from providing targeted funds for production or investigation, to posting widgets that showcase content on their own sites, to organizing online and offline events related to media projects, to mobilizing around related issues through online tools, such as petitions and letters to policymakers. "Crowdsourced" journalism projects now invite audience participation as investigators, tipsters, and editors—so far, a trial-and-error process. (Clark and Aufderheide 2009, 21)

These behaviors are really happening, and taken together, these habits suggest that the prospects for a more engaged and inclusive public sphere—routine participation in the creation of cultural products, at least among the information-savvy avant-garde—could make people more interested, more critical, and less passive.

Even so, a cyberrealist must acknowledge that serious gaps persist, at least in the United States, and limit the representativeness of the avant-garde (Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy 2009, 42-44). The first is a broadband gap. As of mid-2009, roughly one third of rural communities in the United States could not subscribe to broadband Internet services at any price. Three quarters of U.S. households with annual incomes below $20,000 lack a broadband connection (Peha 2008; Horrigan 2008).

The second is a literacy gap. This is not just a gap in digital literacy (that is, a gap in the skills relevant to the successful use of digital media) but a gap in simple prose competence. One 2003 survey estimated that 43 percent of U.S. adults fell short of an intermediate standard for literacy and that over four in ten adults would have trouble "consulting reference materials to determine which foods contain a particular vitamin" (National Center for Education Statistics 2005, 3–4). Only 13 percent of adults in that study were deemed sufficiently competent to compare accurately the competing viewpoints in two different editorials (ibid.). With high school graduation rates of barely 50 percent in many U.S. cities (Swanson 2009), these facts also point to a substantial hurdle in realizing the democratizing potential of the Internet.

The third is what media scholar Henry Jenkins has labeled the "participation gap"—that is, a gap "in social experiences between [young people] who have a high degree of access to new media technologies at home and those who do not" (Jenkins 2006). As Jenkins argues:

> There's a huge gap between what you can do when you've got unlimited access to broadband in your home and what you can do when your only access is through the public library, where there are often time limits on how long you can work, when there are already federally mandated filters blocking access to certain sites, when there are limits on your ability to store and upload material, and so forth. (Ibid.)

If you are on the wrong side of this gap, new technologies empower you less than they do your more connected peers.

The democratic potential of the Internet also confronts an institutional crisis in the world of information intermediaries. For all the anticipation of online disintermediation, the digital age has witnessed less the disappearance of intermediaries than a proliferation of new types of intermediation—some embedded in opaque technologies (Mayer-Schönberger and Lazer 2007, 290). The need for intermediaries currently is greater than ever because of the unprecedented deluge of information confronting all Internet users. People cannot amass from their personal

experiences or firsthand investigations all of the information they need to accomplish their individual objectives. No one can generate, in his or her own head, all of the analysis, debate, context, and interpretation necessary to turn raw information into useful knowledge. We all rely on credible intermediaries, both formal and informal, to enable us to engage with information effectively (Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy 2009, 13).

But these are challenging times for many well-established intermediaries. In the United States, for example, traditional news organizations are under tremendous stress. Local newspapers—which provide the bulk of original, verified reporting in most communities—are under economic strain and shrinking their newsrooms accordingly (Downie and Schudson 2009; Starr 2009). Overexpansion (and the burden of debt) from the 1990s, plus creative destruction in the traditional advertising model that supported newspapers, have left many metropolitan dailies in serious straits (Free Press 2009). At the same time, universities and libraries are underfunded, even as demands on their capacities are growing. Although new technologies make exciting forms of collaborative news and information production feasible, it is also possible (as a journalist friend wrote to me) that "we are entering a digital Dark Age in which those who shout the loudest, who make the most damning accusations, who appeal to the basest instincts, will command ever-larger audiences and, perforce, larger cultural and political influence."

Democratic Prospects: An Early View of the Obama Administration

These competing considerations might lead people to question whether online consultations hold genuine potential to deepen the legitimacy of representative democracy. The term *legitimacy* is used here to signify the moral relationship of a government to its citizens—in particular, the features of that relationship that morally entitle a relatively few persons to make laws and issue commands that bind others. The legitimacy of any government rests in significant part on its respect for and protection of fundamental human rights. In Western societies, however, such legitimacy rests also on the dedication of the government to the meaningful realization of two fundamental ideals—political freedom and political equality. People are politically free if they are able to share in acts of collective self-determination and experience themselves as meaningful actors in public life to the extent they choose to participate. People enjoy political equality to the extent that government decision making takes

into serious account the interests of everyone affected by those decisions. This is not to say that all decisions are made by consensus or that anyone is guaranteed equal happiness with the outcome of every community decision. Western democracy, however, is founded on the premise of the moral equality of all human beings. The moral equality of all human beings implies a community obligation to take seriously the interests and concerns of all (Shane 2004, 67).

Genuinely inclusive, deliberative, and efficacious online consultations can buttress legitimacy in both these ways. Such consultations can add to the store of government information about the ways in which proposed actions might affect different segments of the community and render decision making more transparent. Participation can become a meaningful form of political agency, assisting in the evolution of a democratic citizenship identity within the community that is oriented toward the public interest. Consultation thus can serve the ends of both freedom and equality, especially if conjoined with other, less formal, less demanding, but nonetheless helpful ways of acquiring collective knowledge and including citizens in a genuinely inclusive and effective public sphere.

Whether such potential is likely to be realized, however, depends very much on conditions of power. To amplify voices that are currently underrepresented means reducing the influence of others in deciding on collective outcomes. Deepening the experience of self-determination for members of the public who are subject to some form of domination means undermining some of the forces that constrain these citizens' life prospects. Whether online consultations can help destabilize power relations that currently limit the reach of democracy is a question that can be answered only historically by looking at the social, political, and economic forces in a society as they are arrayed at particular moments.

As this book is being written, the United States is in an intriguing democratic moment. President Barack Obama swept into office in November 2008 in large part on the promise of a dramatic turn toward increased government openness and transparency. On his first full day in office, a presidential memorandum to all executive branch agencies declared a commitment "to creating an unprecedented level of openness in Government." President Obama promised that his administration would "work together to ensure the public trust and establish a system of transparency, public participation, and collaboration."[2] A look at the Obama campaign and the Obama administration's early moves toward online consultation and related citizen-engagement initiatives reveals

some of the potential but also some of the challenges entailed in this vision.

The Obama campaign was famously successful in its online creativity. It used the Web to raise money, mobilize local campaign activities, fight attacks by opponents, get out the vote, and measure voter attitudes. Online video also played a major role in the campaign. By one count, 104,454 videos about Obama were uploaded during the campaign, and these were viewed about 889 million times. This record compares with 64,092 videos about McCain that were viewed 554 million times (Aun 2008). There seems little doubt that the superior Obama video presence was a significant help with younger voters.

The Obama team continued to innovate in the deployment of online engagement opportunities after the election. Between the November 2008 election and the inauguration on January 20, 2009, the Obama-Biden Transition Project created a Web site, http://change.gov, as a portal to elicit public dialogue. Participants were offered a number of consultation options. A special form was provided for public input on health care policy. An "Open for Questions" feature allowed people to pose and vote on potential questions to be answered online by the transition (later White House) press secretary, Robert Gibbs. A feature called "Your Seat at the Table" allowed the public to track meetings between the transition team and interest groups and to view and comment on documents provided to the transition team by such groups. Perhaps most prominently, anyone could contribute proposals or vote on the proposals suggested by others for inclusion in a "Citizens Briefing Book" which contained ideas and recommendations for the new administration. According to Michael Strautmanis, director of public liaison and intergovernmental affairs for the transition, "over 70,000 people participated," and the project elicited "half a million votes, and tens of thousands of wonderful ideas" (McSwain 2009).

As early indicators of the Obama administration's potential online engagement initiatives, these projects seemed something of a mixed blessing. On one hand, they offered some degree of openness, affording a window of at least indirect access to the President's thinking on policy issues and some transparency with regard to the Transition Project's contacts with interest groups. Furthermore, the consultation options seemed well calculated to help cement supporters' sense of personal involvement with and connection to the new President.

It was far less clear, however, whether any of this activity was calculated to affect actual policy making or even agenda setting. The incoming

administration seemed well positioned to control the shape of whatever discursive spaces it was opening. A summary of the public suggestions on health care was fed back to the public through a video summary, but there was no way to test the representativeness of the summary—which seemed to track pretty closely the incoming administration's campaign platform on health care. Likewise, "Open for Questions" was not calculated to be a significantly revealing interrogation of the new government. The "Citizens Briefing Book" proved to be an interesting exercise, leading to a thirty-three-page summary of some of the "top ideas"—"unvarnished and unedited"—that were identified from among the 44,000 ideas that had been contributed and voted on by roughly 125,000 users (Obama-Biden Transition Project 2009). It is to the administration's credit that it was willing to acknowledge, among the most popular ideas, the legalization of marijuana. Far less clear was what the presence of that proposal in the briefing book meant either for the scope of actual popular support for the idea or for the effect its inclusion might have on the new administration's thinking. As a result, it could be asked whether the transition initiatives were harbingers of a newly participative public sphere in the United States or simply the launch of a more intense form of politics of personality around a newly elected, highly charismatic president.

In its first year, however, the Obama administration ratcheted up its commitment to e-democracy on a variety of fronts. On the transparency front, a USASpending.gov Web site was created to allow the public to track government spending with unprecedented ease. Its most innovative tool, as of mid-2009, was a new "IT Dashboard," at http://it.usaspending.gov, which provided the public "with details of Federal information technology investments and . . . the ability to track the progress of investments over time." The Obama administration also announced that it would promote democratic information flow by expanding public access to government data of all sorts. Data.Gov was launched in May 2009 to provide citizens with easy access to a wide array of government data sets, both in raw, machine-readable form and through a series of applications that allowed the data to be mined fairly easily. The site began by offering access to a limited catalogue of data sets that were apparently easy to link to a central portal, but it also allows users to make suggestions for other data sets to be added.

In terms of public collaboration, the administration's most ambitious effort involved an online consultation with the public for developing administration policy on openness and transparency in government. Fol-

lowing President Obama's first-day openness and transparency memorandum, his newly configured White House Office of Public Engagement launched a three-phase public dialogue to generate ideas for carrying the memorandum's openness and transparency principles into practice (Noveck 2009). Phase I called for the public to "brainstorm" by suggesting and voting on ideas for developing and implementing open government policy. Phase II was a discussion phase. The administration provided a summary of what it took to be the most compelling ideas from the brainstorming phase, as well as an independent analysis from the National Academy of Public Administration of all the Phase I input. Perhaps most impressive, the process of narrowing the options was relatively transparent. Beth Noveck, the deputy chief of the Technology Office for Open Government, provided a clear explanation of the criteria used to determine those Phase I proposals that were selected for further consideration. Phase III then allowed participants to use a collaborative authoring tool called MixedInk to help draft recommendations on sixteen topics.

Less celebrated but arguably even more remarkable given the sensitivity of the topic, the administration supported an effort by the congressionally created Public Interest Declassification Board to gather public ideas for the reform of federal information classification policy. The Office of Science and Technology Policy in the Executive Office of the President used its blog to host a "declassification policy forum" which aimed, in part, at reforming a presidential executive order on classification and declassification (Faga 2009). The blog, although eliciting a far smaller volume of participation than the general call for suggestions on transparency and openness in government, was designed to be a genuinely deliberative space, including a set of protocols for participation plainly aimed at sustaining a civil, transparent, and inclusive discussion.

Whether these initiatives reliably point the way to a genuinely reinvigorated public sphere is uncertain. After all, it appears from http://www.mixedink.com/opengov that the final collaborative drafting phase of the Obama openness and transparency dialogue drew contributions from only 375 contributors and a total of 2,256 ratings for the various recommendations—a dramatic dropoff from the earlier, less labor-intensive stages of the public consultation. Doubters might further suggest that even the earlier phases, which did elicit significant input, were chiefly calculated to align the public with the administration's starting points in terms of general values and policy inclinations. Note how

Director Noveck framed her summary of the results of the Phase I brainstorming:

> Today, we want to share with you a little about what we've learned from you about transparency. Transparency is of vital importance. As the President emphasized in his *Memorandum on the Freedom of Information Act*: "A democracy requires accountability, and accountability requires transparency. As Justice Louis Brandeis wrote, 'sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants.' . . . At the heart of that commitment is the idea that accountability is in the interest of the Government and the citizenry alike." (Noveck 2009)

In other words, the first outcome of brainstorming on transparency was to reaffirm what President Obama had already said about transparency.

But a comparison of the public input on both the open government directive and the President's declassification order with the actual documents promulgated by the administration supports the possibility that public input was influential. For example, the formal output on open government was a December 8, 2009, memo from the director of the Office of Management and Budget, Peter Orszag, to the heads of executive departments and agencies, which stated a general philosophy regarding openness, transparency, and public participation and imposed on the agencies a set of specific implementation requirements.[3] Not surprisingly, there is a close resonance between the public input on general principles and the more philosophical portions of the order.[4] But there are also more specific resemblances. For example, the public recommenders urged: "The CTO should promote a common data & metadata format to be used across all public data production. The format should be part of the specifications of requirements to data-producing federal programs, so that data consumers can trust APIs and bulk files to be consistent over time and across agencies."[5] Section 1(b) of the order provides:

> To the extent practicable and subject to valid restrictions, agencies should publish information online in an open format that can be retrieved, downloaded, indexed, and searched by commonly used web search applications. An open format is one that is platform independent, machine readable, and made available to the public without restrictions that would impede the re-use of that information.

It may be that the government drafters of 1(b) would have come up with the same idea even without the provocation of public input, but this example—and others like it—at least raise the possibility that public participation was meaningful.

The same is true of the Obama December 2009 executive order on classified information.[6] Participation in the online declassification forum

was fairly narrow. The forum remained open for comments through July 19, 2009, even though the Public Interest Declassification Board was committed to making its recommendations to the President the following week. This does not suggest a lengthy deliberation within the board about whatever suggestions the forum might elicit, especially in its final days.

On the other hand, it is not hard to find many fairly close resonances between a range of public suggestions and what the Obama executive order requires. For example, one public suggestion was that "Information may continue to be classified only if the need to protect such information outweighs the public interest in disclosure of the information" (National Archives 2009, 11). Section 3.1(d) of the new order actually says:

> It is presumed that information that continues to meet the classification requirements under this order requires continued protection. In some exceptional cases, however, the need to protect such information may be outweighed by the public interest in disclosure of the information, and in these cases the information should be declassified.[7]

It was likewise suggested that the Information Security Oversight Office "must not only have the authority to declassify; it must also be assigned the affirmative responsibility to seek out and correct classification errors by using its declassification powers" (National Archives 2009, 6). Under section 5.1(b)(4) of the order, the ISOO is given "authority to conduct on-site reviews of each agency's program established under this order, and to require of each agency those reports and information and other cooperation that may be necessary to fulfill [the ISOO's] responsibilities."[8] The order is so lengthy and complex and the suggestions so numerous that a detailed comparison of one or the other would itself require a substantial study. But these are not isolated examples. And although the government drafters of the President's revised order may have developed the same ideas even without public prodding, public participation may well have had a role in shaping what is now official government policy. Indeed, even if one outcome of public participation is to undergird the administration's preexisting policy commitments, it may still be deemed important. Whether the model can play out this straightforwardly on more contentious topics such as health care, tax policy, and environmental regulation remains to be seen.

It is hard to see the scope, energy, and inventiveness of these efforts as anything but positive. Predicting their potential effect on the overall system of democratic discourse in the United States nonetheless raises

difficult questions. Some are questions about the specific configurations of power in the United States; others are more generalizable. For example, can governments in power ever be expected to sustain genuine policy dialogues with a contentious public? Or might the primary effect of any regime's online initiatives rather be to solidify the identification with and allegiance to the regime by an ICT-savvy elite who feel "in on the action?" Conversely, it might be asked to what degree online government consultations should be influential. President Obama famously made a campaign promise not to sign nonemergency legislation into law until the passage of a five-day period for public comment (PolitiFact.com 2009). Given that the enactment of legislation typically reflects a long and labyrinthine process of bargaining in which the President was himself likely a significant party, it is not at all clear that the President should feel tempted to modify his views at the last minute because of online public input.

From the "Obama Moment" to a Larger Perspective

To address these and other significant issues, a group of nineteen authors who were physically situated in eight countries and had personal and professional ties to many others worked for over three years on a collaborative study of the phenomenon of online consultation and its relationship, both actual and potential, to democratic discourse and the building of democratic legitimacy. What we have produced, we hope, is not simply an anthology but an integrated discussion of the issues thus broached, with each chapter under the primary stewardship of its identified author or authors.

Our core argument is as follows. A useful understanding of the online consultation phenomenon has to go beyond how particular consultations might or might not affect the outcomes of individual policy making episodes. We need to consider what such consultations provide or could provide to the larger flow of political communication within a society. This also means regarding online consultations as something more than simple two-way dialogues between citizen-participants and public decision makers. Instead, they represent a kind of networked communication involving citizens (both participants and auditors), public decision makers (of both the legislative and administrative sort), bureaucrats, technicians, civil society organizations, and the media generally. Exploring the meaning of online consultations to these diverse actors requires evidence gathering through multiple methods, comparative study, and

analysis across a variety of disciplines. We have to appreciate how the experience is constructed by social, political, and legal forces, including the design of the online consultation experience itself. This approach yields an understanding that online consultation can best contribute to democratic practice by inspiring and supporting a reimagining of democratic citizenship—a robust form of citizenship that is enhanced by new forms of information and communication technology.

Both to build and to illustrate the fruits of this argument, the book is organized into three sections. In the first, "Online Consultations and the Flow of Democratic Communication," four essays situate the online consultation phenomenon in a conceptual framework that takes into account our broader media environment, the effect of technology on citizen expression, and the range of discursive practices that online social media now make possible. Chapter 2, "Democracy, Distance, and Reach: The New Media Landscape," by Stephen Coleman and Vincent Price, orients us to thinking about online consultation as an instance of communication that seeks to overcome distances between citizens and between citizen and government. In "Web 2.0: New Challenges for the Study of E-Democracy in an Era of Informational Exuberance" (chapter 3), Andrew Chadwick urges that online consultations be evaluated within a range of online discursive practices that, even if not formally deliberative, have the potential to deepen democratic life.

In chapter 4, "Online Consultations in Local Government: What Works, When, and Why?," Joachim Åström and Åke Grönlund use a case-survey method to aggregate the collective judgments of previous research regarding the effect of online consultations on local democratic practices. Three hypotheses from the literature—claiming that institutional design, democratic intentions, and quality of research are the most important factors behind the reported effectiveness of online consultations—are tested. Finally, for this section, "Neighborhood Information Systems as Intermediaries in Democratic Communities," by Steven J. Balla and Sungsoo Hwang, explores the mobilizing potential for neighborhood information systems, technology innovations that aim to enhance the awareness and participation of stakeholders in local affairs, to operate as intermediaries in democratic information communities.

The second major section of the book provides a multifaceted look at "What Online Consultations Mean to Their Participants." In "Playing Politics: The Experience of E-Participation" (chapter 6), Vincent Price explores the meaning of online consultations for citizen-participants,

while Scott Wright, in "The Participatory Journey in Online Consultations" (chapter 7), examines the barriers that inhibit citizen participation. Moving beyond a narrow definition of the digital divide based around access, Wright adopts the metaphor of a participatory journey to help explain the kinds of barriers that citizens might face and that challenge the ideal of inclusiveness.

In chapter 8, "Democratic Consultation and the E-Citizen," Stephen Coleman, Rachel Gibson, and Agnes I. Schneeberger draw on data from a 2005 nationally representative survey of UK Internet users to explore public attitudes toward political consultation, online communication, and political efficacy. Their analysis suggests that the citizen demand to be consulted online coexists with skepticism about the capacity of governing institutions to listen to and learn from the public. In "The Technological Dimension of Deliberation: A Comparison between Online and Offline Participation" (chapter 9), Laurence Monnoyer-Smith uses data from online and face-to-face consultations regarding the Paris water treatment system to argue that the technological stage on which online consultation occurs is not neutral with respect to who participates or how they express themselves. Thus, the meaning of consultation may well differ for citizen participants according to the platform they are offered for self-expression.

Following this extended examination of the citizen experience of online consultation, chapters by Stephen Coleman and Scott Wright (chapter 10), Jeffrey S. Lubbers (chapter 11), and the team of David Lazer, Michael Neblo, and Kevin Easterling (chapter 12) examine the experiences and attitudes, respectively, of third-sector civil-society groups, government bureaucrats, and elected legislators.

The book's third major section, "The Legal Architecture of Online Consultation," reveals how law operates to create both opportunities and constraints for online consultations. This section discusses both the need for laws that empower online consultation and the ways in which law and legal process shape the democratic effects of online consultation. Two chapters by Peter L. Strauss (chapter 13) and Polona Piĉman Stefanĉiĉ (chapter 14), respectively, show how the very different structures of administrative policy making in the United States and European Union create different windows of opportunity for online consultation by administrative agencies to affect actual policy outcomes. Chapter 15, "The Legal Environment for Electronic Democracy," by Peter M. Shane and Polona Piĉman Stefanĉiĉ shows how law imposes opportunities and constraints for online discussion design, with particular attention to how

the laws of the United States and European Union delineate the rights and duties of forum sponsors and participants. Finally, in "E-Democracy, Transnational Organizations, and the Challenge of New Technointermediation" (chapter 16), Oren Perez posits that online consultation mechanisms have the potential to legitimate systems of transnational governance that currently suffer from an apparent democratic deficit but sees the underdevelopment of global administrative law as a key impediment to the advent of robust transnational systems of consultation.

The book concludes with an essay by Stephen Coleman (chapter 17) that synthesizes these threads of analysis and takes stock of their implications for the future of online consultation. He argues that the question "What form of online consultation best supports democratic citizenship?" cannot be addressed without acknowledging the contested definition of citizenship itself. For Coleman, the emergence of a more robust democratic life rests on an ideal of what he calls the "actualizing citizen" who is "a social actor characterized by multiple connections, weak ties, a reflexive approach to identity and belonging, a postdeferential attitude toward authority, and a sense that political communication is a two-way street, entailing more than a flow of top-down messages from rulers to ruled." He concludes that governments wishing to engage with this new form of social actor "need to adopt strategies and technologies that can draw on people's eagerness to define their own relationship to society and its relationship to them."

Analyzing online consultations is triply daunting because the practice is international, its implications are interdisciplinary, and the worlds of politics and technology are changing everywhere in Internet time. Whether the Obama moment marks a genuine pivot toward something like the imaginary world of Agora or just another variation on politics as usual is an inquiry that will take on a different cast as years—or perhaps only months—go by. But even as the events that capture today's attention fade into history, the contributors to this volume are hopeful that our international and interdisciplinary investigation will provide an enduring foundation for future analysis. The journey to Agora may be uncharted, but this book suggests what mapmakers should look for.

Notes

1. Deliberative polling is a form of structured deliberation pioneered by James Fishkin. Its aim is to determine what a representative sample of people would

conclude about an issue, given the opportunity to study and discuss the issue prior to registering their views (Fishkin 2009).

2. Memorandum of the President to Executive Departments and Agencies re: Transparency and Open Government, January 21, 2009, accessed September 5, 2010, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Transparency_and_Open_Government.

3. Memorandum from Peter R. Orszag, director, Office of Management and Budget, for the Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies re: Open Government Directive, December 8, 2009, accessed September 5, 2010, http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/assets/memoranda_2010/m10-06.pdf.

4. The final wiki input on general principles appears at http://mixedink.com/#/OpenGov/TransparencyDefinition (accessed September 5, 2010).

5. Available at http://mixedink.com/#/OpenGov/DataTransparency (accessed September 5, 2010).

6. Exec. Order No. 13,526, *Federal Register* vol. 75, p. 707 (2010).

7. *Federal Register* vol.75, p. 713.

8. Ibid., 724.

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