
Preface

The volume you are reading is neither a proceedings nor a traditional anthology. It is the collective product of a group of nineteen researchers, most of whom have been meeting for three years—exchanging perspectives, hammering out ideas, and critiquing each other’s draft chapters of what we have envisioned as an integrated, albeit multiauthored work.

We formed the International Working Group (IWG) on Online Consultation and Public Policy Making in response to a 2006 call for proposals from Sharon Dawes, director of the Center for Technology in Government at the State University of New York (SUNY) Albany, and the late Valerie Gregg, then with the Information Sciences Institute at the University of Southern California. The U.S. National Science Foundation had awarded them a large grant to explore the viability of collaborative international and interdisciplinary research on topics related to digital government, and they decided to use a significant portion of that grant to support up to three test projects. Proposals had to include both a U.S.-based and non-U.S.-based cochair and at least three graduate students. Funded groups were required to meet face to face at least five times over a period of three years. We used the occasion of this request for proposals to recruit what was originally a team of eighteen researchers in law, communication, political science, public policy, and information science to assess the democratic effects of the online-consultation phenomenon. Our original group was based in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, France, Israel, Italy, and Slovenia but had personal and professional ties to many other countries, as well. Over time, as competing commitments left a couple of us by the wayside and we began to look for additional colleagues to shore up our collective expertise, we lost Australia but added Sweden to the mix. The result was the roster of contributors to this volume.

Beginning in March 2007, the IWG held five business meetings, usually with some additional public outreach activity attached. We met in March 2007 at Harvard University's Kennedy School, in November 2007 at the University of Leeds, in March 2008 at The Ohio State University, in November 2008 at the Aspen Institute in Washington, D.C., and in April 2009 at SciPo in Paris, France. We decided early to write this joint book and spent a significant portion of our first three meetings refining its structure. The third meeting, at Ohio State, marked something of a pivot point, as we also began to share preliminary drafts with one another. Although the two of us have borne the chief final editing duties, every chapter of this book reflects the insights and suggestions of the entire group. Much of our transatlantic work has also occurred online, although we confess that our experiences have probably made us more, not less, persuaded of the significance of face-to-face interaction for the formulation of any real intellectual consensus.

In relation to much of the work that has gone before us and to which we owe a great debt, we hope this book is distinctive in three ways. The first is its international and interdisciplinary character. Seeing the online consultation phenomenon through the prisms of different disciplines and national perspectives has been an eye-opening experience for all of us, and we hope that the book conveys the intellectual importance of this expansiveness. Second, we have tried to avoid unduly minimizing the online consultation phenomenon, which can happen when observers insist that noteworthy democracy-building public discourse should always take a particular deliberative form. By situating online consultation within a larger universe of political communications, we suggest that it can result in a variety of democratic outcomes and can deepen the deliberative character of collective decision making. Finally, we have tried to avoid the naïve optimism for online consultation that sometimes results from emphasizing technological potential without reference to the inevitable political contestation that surrounds the construction of democratic citizenship. Politics is about power, and power does not give way easily just because new technologies threaten to destabilize existing relations.

It is customary for a preface to include statements of acknowledgment. Stephen Coleman is grateful to Peter M. Shane for inviting him to cochair the IWG and taking the laboring oar in most organizational matters. Peter is grateful to Stephen for helping to recruit a distinguished international network and bringing to bear on this project his wealth of experience as both researcher and e-democracy practitioner. We are also

grateful to each other and to our IWG colleagues for the insight, candor, and good will generously displayed over our three-year collaboration. (In addition to the authors included in this volume, we extend these particular thanks to three other researchers who contributed to our group discussions—Beth Noveck, Kerrie Oakes, and Alicia Schatteman.) We thank Sharon Dawes for helping to instigate this collaboration, and we mourn the passing of Valerie Gregg, whose untimely death deprived us and digital government researchers around the globe of a dear colleague. Finally, we are grateful to Ashley Carter, Yasmine Harik, and Benjamin Wilhelm, all students at The Ohio State University’s Moritz College of Law, for helping us navigate the final rounds of proofreading and formatting.