

Why not an electronic Hansard of public opinion?

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Here's an idea to make the National Conversation more national, transparent and effective.

The term National Conversation conjures up an expectation that everyone will be involved in this conversation. All past methods of getting citizens to participate in public consultations had severe limits and outcomes were sub-optimal. Part of the reason was that we didn't have the means to engage every willing person in such consultations. We do now.

New communication technologies make possible the most comprehensive attempt to collect and process public opinion: The government can set up a web-wall on which anyone and everyone can post messages -- their ideas, views, comments. It would facilitate the greatest diversity of participation: experts and lay persons; old and young; rich and poor.

The posting can be done directly by going to the website. Or by using Twitter, Facebook, by SMS or even a simple phone call or snailmail. Whatever the medium of communication, the web-wall will record their input. There are technologies to transport messages from any medium to the web wall.

Thus the promise of "national" will be fulfilled by making it easy for anyone and everyone to send their messages. It will be a vast improvement over previous attempts to collect public opinion. Besides, most countries in the world just cannot attempt such a national conversation. Singapore can, because of its compact size and dense connectivity.

Second, by keeping the web-wall open and un-tampered, there will be complete transparency. Everyone will know what everyone else has said. This has not been the case in any previous attempt at gathering public opinion. The openness is the most important aspect of this proposal. Anyone can check if his or her idea has been recorded and anyone can see what everyone else has said regardless of sensitivity or acceptability to the government. Such transparency will go a long way to pacify the widespread perception that the government is selective in its hearing and self-serving in its sharing. After decades of careful orchestration of what the public says or hears in public, the completely transparent modus operandi on the part of the government will be refreshing and reassuring. Both as a repository and an open record of what the public said, the web-wall will stand as testimony to the government's transparency and inclusiveness.

Third, to make the process really effective, a few more measures have to be taken. Some reorganisation and summarisation of ideas and views on the wall would be necessary. Obviously, a wall with a million postings on multitudinous subjects, with an update every second, is not the best way to present people's ideas or to encourage conversations among them. However, after the posting period is over, there should be a summary of all ideas under clusters of subjects -- much as what the government is going to do anyway with its numerous townhall meetings, feedback sessions and surveys. It is imperative that the selection and summarisation is as fair

and inclusive as possible and provides a good sense of the range and depth of ideas, views and comments. From the summaries, the government can then select, say, 20 to 25 ideas based on relevance, salience and popularity (though popularity is not the most important criterion) for further public discussions before reaching some conclusions and policy recommendations. Again, this is very much like what the government will do in its conventional mode of public consultations.

In addition, there could be indications of the most popular subjects, keywords, trends, etc – each serving as a hook to attract greater participation from the public. Most important of all, there should be a Forum section in which the public can have its own conversation, and not just with the government. This facility for a nation to talk to itself will be a critical improvement over previous approaches.

Thus, the very large number of participants, the multiple communication channels and the combination of the vertical conversation between the government and the citizen and the horizontal conversations among citizens would together make this exercise a far more productive engagement than did past exercises.

It should be noted here that the web-wall is not a substitute for the communication channels such as Facebook, Twitter, and townhall meetings that the government has already announced. This is a supplement -- an aggregator and an open public record of all those communications. In effect, an electronic Hansard of a parliament in which every citizen is a member and whose words will be on record for everyone to see.

There are, obviously, a number of difficulties and disadvantages in this approach. But they are not insurmountable.

First, postings can be vulgar or incendiary. Moderation measures need to be in place to pre-empt or eliminate what is unacceptable.

Second, there may be so many posts – millions, possibly – and so jumbled up that it would make it very difficult for anyone to make sense of the postings. Indeed. That is why the second stage of the web-wall development will be aimed at sense making. The summaries will provide a handle for the public. However, the primary purpose of the web-wall is to be an open and comprehensive record of public opinion.

Third, in selecting those 25 to 30 ideas (whatever the number), the government may be accused of deliberately ignoring other ideas but that is inevitable whatever the modus operandi. The saving grace in this MO is that all ideas are there for everyone to see in the first place.

Fourth, perhaps the most difficult to handle, would be the expectation this approach will engender. For instance, some ideas may be extremely popular and yet unviable from the government's point of view. But the public expectation will be for the government to accept them on the basis of popularity. Another example is the exact reverse: When an idea is mentioned by only one or just a few and yet a highly viable one from government's point of view, the government may be accused of favouring only those it likes. The previous methods created a "black box" effect – not everyone knew what went in but only what came out – and the government was shielded to a large extent. The proposed approach opens up the black box. If the government explains its rationale for selecting only certain ideas for further consideration clearly and carefully, the fallout should be manageable.

Here's an opportunity to make the National Conversation truly "national" and, for the first time, transparent. And to create an electronic Hansard of public opinion. Technology is offering this opportunity.

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