



Electronic democracy

Information and communication technology (ICT), or Electronic democracy, offers a new opportunity to involve people in planning processes. It provides inexpensive and instant access to a wide range of information and communication for users and a potentially efficient means to gather information for planning. The different options to utilise ICT include websites, informal on-line discussions, formal consultations using on-line debates and televoting. In addition, different techniques, such as **Citizens' juries**, can be adapted to be used on-line. Electronic democracy requires careful planning of the material that will be presented and how the feedback from users will be used. It is advisable to promote the web addresses actively in order to use this medium effectively.

Resources and requirements

Skills

- Excellent computer design and programming skills are needed; consideration should be given to hiring experts.

Equipment

- Computers for generating content and servers to provide access to users.

Time

- Adequate time has to be allowed for careful planning of the websites and information gathering systems.
- Regular updating and maintenance is required for web pages and discussion lists.

Useful sources of information

Books

- Cyberdemocracy. R. Tsagarousiona et al. (1998). Routledge, London.
- Making better decisions: report of an IPPR symposium on citizens' juries and other methods of public involvement. C. Delap (1998). Institute for Public Policy Research, London.
- Participatory approach to natural resource management: a guide book. Y. M. Loikkanen (1999). Forest and Park Service, Finland.
- Public Consultation through the Internet. Institute for Environment, Philosophy & Public Policy (2003). Lancaster University, Lancaster. Available from: www.lancs.ac.uk

Level of engagement

INFORMING: ★

CONSULTING: ★★

INVOLVING: ★

PARTNERSHIP:

Strengths

- Electronic democracy is a fairly convenient way of disseminating information to large groups and obtaining feedback.
- It provides the opportunity for the right information to be available for a definite group of people.
- It creates interactive communication between planners and different stakeholder groups and individuals.

Weaknesses

- It is not accessible to everyone; only to those with access to the Internet.
- It may be difficult to assess how well different groups can be reached by the Internet.
- There is a risk of manipulation, misinformation and incivility if not carefully managed.

Web

- Building Citizen-based Electronic Democracy Efforts by Steven Clift: www.e-democracy.org
- Example of e-democracy applications: <http://itc.napier.ac.uk>
- Making the Net Work: www.makingthenetwork.org/index.htm
- Partnerships Online: www.partnerships.org.uk

Training

- The Prince's Foundation runs courses on E-Participation: tel. 020 7613 8500 or www.princes-foundation.org

Case study

- Making better decisions: report of an IPPR symposium on citizens' juries and other methods of public involvement. C. Delap (1998). Institute for Public Policy Research, London.

The screenshot shows a web-based public consultation interface. At the top, it says 'What sort of Scotland do we want to live in?' with a sub-section 'Environment'. A central text area asks: 'How can we protect our landscape and the diversity of wildlife within it? Can we 'clean up' our land, rivers and sea? Can industry, farming and fisheries grow without damaging their surroundings?'. Below this is a table of comments:

+	Would it be feasible to make Scotland a nuclear free state? The storage of nuclear waste will be a p... (read more...) (1)	Rory Brankin from Scotland 06/06/01 16:42
+	Bio-diversity and halting in the decline of the environment is the key issue. Nature is our friend... (read more...) (1)	Bill Smith from Scotland 12/06/01 13:10
+	The creation of employment to improve and clean up the environment is our best hope for the future a... (read more...) (2)	Davina Thomas from Scotland 12/06/01 13:39
	When will the Scottish Parliament and SEPA scientists admit that there is a very serious Environmen... (read more...) (0)	Sandy Young from Scotland 12/06/01 15:17
+	I was a member of the 'Environment' group of the Scottish Civic Forum's process in Inverness on 11... (read more...) (1)	Roger Doudna from Scotland 15/06/01 18:18
	Farmers should be made more responsible for the waste that they produce, it blights the environment... (read more...) (0)	William Johnston from Scotland 17/06/01 22:41
	It concerns me greatly the lack of foresight involved in the fishing industry. I have heard said tha... (read more...) (0)	andrew earnshaw from Scotland 05/07/01 12:09
	Until people learn to respect the immediate environment around them it is difficult to believe that... (read more...) (0)	Richard from Scotland 19/07/01 14:40
	Biodiversity is the key to a stable environment. Industry is still creating too much pollution of ai... (read more...) (0)	Roger Griffith from Scotland 30/07/01 11:24
	Must move to localised sustainable farming and food production. Meat especially must be reared huma... (read more...) (0)	v nix from Scotland 05/08/01 14:45

An example of a web-based public consultation.

This toolbox is designed to assist Forestry Commission staff when they are considering which tools they could use to involve the public in the forest and woodland planning process. For more information please visit the website at: www.forestry.gov.uk/toolbox