



Government Online

Assessing the utility of online
tools for public participation in
broad policy decisions

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The following research assesses the utility of online engagement methods for public participation in broad policy decisions at the Ministry of Forests and Range (MOFR). MOFR is currently reviewing the Ministry's public engagement strategy by updating the Ministry's Policy Manual to include a chapter outlining the process and principles of public participation; carrying out an evaluation of public participation practices in natural resource and forestry ministries in a number of other jurisdictions; and examining the risks, benefits and costs associated with online public participation practices to assess whether it is a viable option in broad policy decisions at MOFR.

More academics and organizations are accepting online participation as the future of public engagement, including the BC public service. Overall, BC public servants who have used online participation techniques showed overwhelming support for the use of online tools to engage the public. Public servants felt that in practice, according to their experience, online participation processes can be successfully implemented in BC government public engagement strategies.

Moving forward with implementing online participation processes at MOFR will positively impact policy makers throughout the Ministry considering broad policy decision that will affect the general public. Using online participation to engage the general public will make it easier and more efficient for policy makers to reach a greater number of people about broad policy decisions.

BC government case studies reveal that many ministries, including MOFR, are already successfully engaging the broad public through online means. Some online public participation processes already completed or underway at MOFR include: the FRPA Discussion Paper (2002), the GRM Challenge Dialogue (2007) and the Forest Practices Branch's Silviculture Discussion Paper (2009).

Using online participation as a tool for engaging the broad public in policy decisions is a viable option for the Ministry of Forests and Range. The evidence presented by ministries across the BC public service suggests that pursuing online participation is a low cost, low risk option for engagement. When the choice is made to engage with the public, online participation presents a feasible method to consider in conjunction with other consultation methods, or in some cases on its own. A variety of factors influence what type of public participation is appropriate for which situations, whether offline or online, fixed menu or active participation. A firm understanding of the benefits and risks associated with every method allows decision makers to make informed decisions in every situation.

Difficult issues such as climate change and training and skills development require governments, stakeholders and the broad public to work together to find a solution. This trend is going to continue to drive governments across Canada towards more participatory models of decision making. There is an opportunity for MOFR to increase the efficiency of their broad public participation processes by insightful planning and development around potential benefits and risks and being aware of smart online participation practices already in practice. By learning from other processes and practices in the BC government, MOFR can potentially improve their business operations by taking advantage of the benefits of new technology. Pursuing online participation is an opportunity for MOFR and the BC Government to come out as a leader in a new and exciting engagement medium with minimal projected costs and risks.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH

“THERE IS A CONNECTION WAITING TO BE MADE BETWEEN THE DECLINE IN DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION AND THE EXPLOSION OF NEW WAYS OF COMMUNICATING. WE NEED NOT ACCEPT THE PARADOX THAT GIVES US MORE WAYS THAN EVER TO SPEAK, AND LEAVES THE PUBLIC WITH A WIDER FEELING THAN EVER BEFORE THAT THEIR VOICES ARE NOT BEING HEARD.”

THE RIGHT HONORABLE ROBIN COOK
SPEECH BEFORE THE YOUNGOV CONFERENCE
LONDON, APRIL 2002

1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

Growing public concerns over social, economic, and sustainability issues coupled with multiple demands for resource use have put increasing pressure on the government to inform and involve the public in the policy discussion surrounding important decisions. Engaging the public is identified as a strategy to increase public involvement and credibility in government given high levels of public apathy and mistrust as well as a way to introduce higher levels of accountability and transparency. Although the Ministry of Forests and Range (MOFR) exhibits strength in engaging the public in operational forest management decisions, there is relatively limited public participation on broad high level policy decision making (MOFR, November 2008, p. 2).

A recent review by the Auditor General of British Columbia (July 2008), on the removal of private land from Tree Farm Licenses (TFL) 6, 19 and 25, drew attention to MOFR’s public participation practices. Among its findings, this

report expressed concern about the public engagement processes of the Ministry on broad policy decisions.

In the opinion of the Office of the Auditor General (OAG), MOFR did not sufficiently engage the public prior to authorizing the removal of private land from TFL 6, 19, and 25. Specifically, the OAG expected that given the magnitude of the decision, MOFR would contact and meaningfully consult with a wide range of stakeholder groups such as the Capital Regional District (CRD), local municipalities, associated industries, other ministries, and special interest groups. In addition, the OAG felt that the communication of the final decision was not sufficiently transparent to adequately inform the public about the reasons behind this decision.

MOFR has begun to look at the concerns brought forward by the OAG through a number of avenues. First, MOFR is updating the Ministry's Policy Manual to include a chapter outlining the process and principles of public participation within MOFR to ensure that the Ministry's policy decisions are fully informed by all affected parties (see Appendix A).

Second, MOFR carried out an internal evaluation of public participation practices in natural resource and forestry ministries in other jurisdictions at the international, national and provincial levels. The jurisdictional scan revealed a wide range of public participation processes ranging from highly developed and well promoted policies, to ad hoc engagement initiatives with little information provided about the organization's principles or guidelines. Jurisdictions were ranked based on the accessibility of public consultation policy and/or public consultation information and the level of complexity of their public engagement policy or guidelines (MOFR, 2008, p. 4). Public participation practices in broad policy decisions at MOFR were ranked as ad hoc with limited accessibility.

Third, the jurisdictional scan revealed that it may be possible for MOFR to realize highly accessible ad hoc public participation processes through online participation methods. Given this potential area of opportunity, MOFR has requested this business case to examine the risks, benefits and costs associated with online public participation practices.

1.2 OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

The aim of this research is to provide MOFR's Executive with a business case for or against establishing an internal policy that outlines online technology as a medium for public participation on forest and range policy decisions. The purpose of this business case is to provide a structured case for decision makers that justifies whether the proposal to pursue online participation in policy decisions should go forward or not.

The business case includes an evaluation of the opportunities, benefits, costs and risks of online participation processes. This evaluation was conducted from the perspective of MOFR. The evaluation was performed by the researcher whose judgments were based primarily on a review of current literature and a series of expert interviews.

1.3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The following exploratory research project is designed to assess current online consultation models, within the literature and available examples in the BC public service, to gain a better understanding of the associated options, risks, benefits and costs to implementation in a government organization, specifically the Ministry of Forests and Range.

TYPE OF RESEARCH

Research for this project was conducted between February and May 2009 at the Ministry of Forests and Range by the principal investigator, MPA candidate, Kristin Smith.

This research project examined a wide range of data sources in its literature scan, including: academic and government documents, government and publicly available reports. The second component to the research comprised interviews with BC public servants across the government who have experience with online participation processes as well as surveys and a discussion group comprised of public servants from MOFR who have mixed or no previous exposure to online participation processes. These interviews were then used to inform a series of case studies.

The interviews, survey and discussion group were used to further inform current literature in the area of online participation. The strength of these combined techniques was that they provided in-depth information on the subject of online participation in the BC government. Research was limited to the BC context due to: client demands; available research and resources; and time.

SAMPLE

In order to determine who was conducting online participation strategies to engage the public in policy decisions twenty BC government ministries, three crown corporations and one central agency were contacted via email.¹ Of the

¹ Participants were only chosen for interviews from the BC government for two reasons. First, the experience of public servants from the BC government was most relevant to MOFR because of the

twenty-four ministries and organizations contacted, six ministries (Children and Family Development, Environment, Finance, Forests and Range, Health and Transportation and Infrastructure) and one central agency (Intergovernmental Relations Secretariat) responded with nine separate initiatives, all of which were pursued by the researcher. The remaining contacts either did or respond or did not provide any cases.

Interview participants were selected based on their involvement with these initiatives and their professional background in online participation in the BC government.² These participants were able to inform the present research on online consultation with information that is not documented in the existing literature.

Group 1: Public servants in the BC government who have done strategic policy work by incorporating online participation methods.

Group 2: Public servants in MOFR who deal with forest policy decisions across the Ministry and may or may not have had direct experience with online participation methods.

MOFR staff were selected for the group discussion and survey based on their experience with forest policy decisions at the Ministry. Although not all participants were familiar with online participation, their preconceived perspectives on online participation were able to clarify MOFR's organizational culture surrounding online technology and public participation.

METHOD OF EXECUTION

Group 1: Eleven participants were chosen and interviewed on the subject of online participation. Participants were identified and selected based on their affiliation with a number of high profile online participation processes throughout the BC government; processes included:

- **Intergovernmental Secretariat:** *Province wide discussion on BC Francophone Priorities*

similar realities of different Ministries within the same government. Second, time constraints did not allow for an in depth analysis of more than one jurisdiction.

² The strength of selecting interview candidates this way is that direct and concrete examples of online participation in the BC government were available. Limitations of selecting interview candidates this way include the fact that it is possible that not everyone pursuing online participation was contacted by the general inquiries departments that received the emails for each ministry and organization; therefore other public participation strategies most likely exist in the BC government. As there is no public record of present online participation processes being conducted in the BC government this is the closest population estimate available, therefore the sample may or may not be representative of the entire population.

- **Ministry of Children and Family Development:** *Child and Youth Mental Health Review*
- **Ministry of Environment:** *Open Burning Smoke Control Review Process*
- **Ministry of Finance:** *Budget Consultation*
- **Ministry of Forests and Range:** *Forest Tree Genetic Resource Conservation and Management (GRM) Challenge Dialogue*
- **Ministry of Forests and Range:** *Forest and Range Practices Act (FRPA) Discussion Paper*
- **Ministry of Forests and Range:** *Silviculture Discussion Paper*
- **Ministry of Health:** *Conversation on Health*
- **Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure:** *Port Mann/Highway 1 Gateway Project*

Participants were recruited initially by email and follow-up recruitment was done by telephone. Contact information for participants was obtained through the BC Government Directory, through internet searches of publicly available contact details and from MOFR staff recommendations.

The researcher made initial contact with participants to arrange interviews either in person or by telephone at the participant's convenience. The interviews took approximately 20-40 minutes. Interviews were conducted in the form of an informal conversation with a set of questions to guide the discussion.³ Group 1 was asked all the same questions. Participants did not have to answer any questions they did not feel comfortable answering. The interview questions are attached in Appendix B.

Group 2: 24 members of MOFR's Policy Secretariat participated in an informal discussion on online participation at the Policy Secretariat's quarterly meeting in March 2009. After listening to a 20 minute presentation and group discussion on online participation literature, Policy Secretariat members were then given the opportunity to fill out a brief survey⁴ (see Appendix C). The entire Policy Secretariat, consisting of 31 members across MOFR, were then given the chance to fill out the same survey online through an online survey tool. A link to the survey was emailed to the Policy Secretariat and members were given two weeks to complete it if they chose to participate.

ETHICAL CONSTRAINTS

³ Not all interview questions were asked at every interview. The interview questions were used to keep the flow of discussion and not every question was always necessary.

⁴ Seven Policy Secretariat Members completed the survey for a response rate of 29%.

There were no known or foreseeable risks for participants in this research and participation was completely voluntary. The identity of participants in this research was not kept anonymous in order to ensure the credibility of responses and maintain a certain level of expertise among participants. This research was approved by the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board for research from April 2009 to March 2010 (see Appendix D).

METHOD OF ANALYSIS

The overall project approach is a literature review and business case analysis of online participation for the Ministry of Forests and Range. The project begins with a background study of the underlying principles of online consultation in government, followed by an in-depth review of the current world-wide literature relating to online consultation. The literature review and interviews with BC public servants who have experience with online participation processes were then used to inform the development of a series of smart practices⁵ as well as the business case. The business case lays out key considerations establishing when online participation is beneficial or risky and what methods work best in which situations in the BC government environment.

DISSEMINATION OF RESULTS

The Ministry's desired outcome for this project was a business case outlining recommendations for or against establishing an internal policy that outlines online technology as a medium for public consultation on forest and range policy decisions. The results of this study will be shared with the Ministry of Forests and Range, specifically the Strategic Policy and Planning Branch and the Executive, as well as with the School of Public Administration at the University of Victoria.

1.4 STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

⁵ Eugene Bardach (2005, p.20), the originator of the concept of smart practices, defines the term as a: "strategy that attempts to take advantage of some qualitative opportunity to create valued change at relatively low cost and/or risk."

Introduction to the Research: This chapter has outlined the background to the research, the objectives of the research, the scope of the research and the research methodology. The research methodology applied to this project considers the type of research, sample frame, method of execution, ethical constraints, method of analysis and dissemination of results.

Background: The second section of this report provides an overview and context for the research, including sub-sections on term definition, public participation methods and finally the rationale for exploring online participation in the context of a BC government ministry.

Literature Review of Online Participation: Section three looks at current literature examining online participation methods. Major themes considered include: accessibility, fairness and accountability, transparency, timeliness and flexibility. It ends with a discussion on lessons learned from the literature.

Case Studies of BC Government Ministries: Examines the risks, benefits and cost associated with eleven high profile online participation process undertaken by BC public servants within the BC government from 2002 to 2009. This section also provides a series of smart practices to follow in the advent of using online participation processes.

Business Case for Online Participation at MOFR: The penultimate section of this report deals with situating findings from the literature and results from the expert interviews into a business case for or against online participation at the Ministry of Forests and Range.

Conclusions: The final section of this paper provides some conclusions on online participation and pulls together some of the major ideas and themes discussed throughout the report.

CHAPTER 2

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION: DEFINITIONS, METHODS AND CONTEXT

"THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA HAS RECOGNIZED THAT THE LEGITIMACY OF PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS, THE QUALITY OF PUBLIC POLICY, AND THE RESPONSIVENESS OF PUBLIC SERVICES WILL REQUIRE NEW AND BETTER MECHANISMS FOR ENGAGING CITIZENS AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN GOVERNANCE. A CHALLENGE OF ALL GOVERNMENTS IS TO FIND A WAY TO FIND INNOVATIVE WAYS TO PUT CITIZENS AT THE CENTRE OF THE GOVERNING PROCESS, TO ENGAGE YOUTH IN PUBLIC ENTERPRISE, AND TO GIVE VOICE TO THOSE WHO FIND THEMSELVES ON THE MARGINS."

THE RIGHT HONORABLE JEAN CHRÉTIEN,
SPEECH BEFORE THE PROGRESSIVE GOVERNANCE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY
CONFERENCE,
BERLIN, JUNE 2000

2.1 SCOPE

Public participation is a broad topic covering a number of complex themes and issues. This section aims to lay out the framework surrounding the scope of this research. First of all, this research assumes the decision to engage the public has already been made, it does not evaluate whether public involvement should be pursued or not. Second, the research focuses on evaluating the use of online participation methods, not all participation methods. The decision to focus on online participation practices was made based on an assumption, identified in MOFR's jurisdictional scan, that a more efficient opportunity to engage the public exists in online methods. However, some overlap does exist between online and traditional methods when assessing the risks and benefits.

Third, this research focuses on engaging the broad public not MOFR’s specific stakeholders. For the purposes of this research, the term stakeholder captures a specific range of interested parties including: communities, municipalities, special interest groups, related industries or businesses, other departments or ministries within the government and First Nations groups. The term public is broadly defined to include the public at large. Lastly, for the purposes of this research, public participation refers to a particular engagement process rather than ongoing public participation strategies.

2.2 DEFINITION OF TERMS

To begin with, it is important to understand the term public participation, the definition of which is continually changing with the advent of new methods, techniques and technologies and which is routinely modified to meet varying organizational needs. Given this complex context, it is not surprising that there is often confusion around the term public participation (Cabinet Office, October 2002, p. 7). Therefore, this section attempts to clearly define the terms used in the remainder of this report, including: public participation and online participation.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Public participation, which can also be referred to as public engagement, public involvement and public consultation, denotes a range of public involvement from simple information measures to full decision making authority. For the purpose of this research, the following broad definition of public participation, adapted from Health Canada’s Population and Public Health Branch (September 2003, p. 34), will be used:

Public Participation is a framework of policies, principles and processes which ensure that the public – individuals, groups and organizations – have the opportunity to participate in relevant policy decisions in a meaningful way.

This definition corresponds with MOFR’s public participation framework, which provides the underlying principles for public involvement within the Ministry (see Appendix A).

ONLINE PARTICIPATION

Online participation, also known as e-participation, includes a wide range of specific individual techniques. In a broad sense, and for the purposes of this

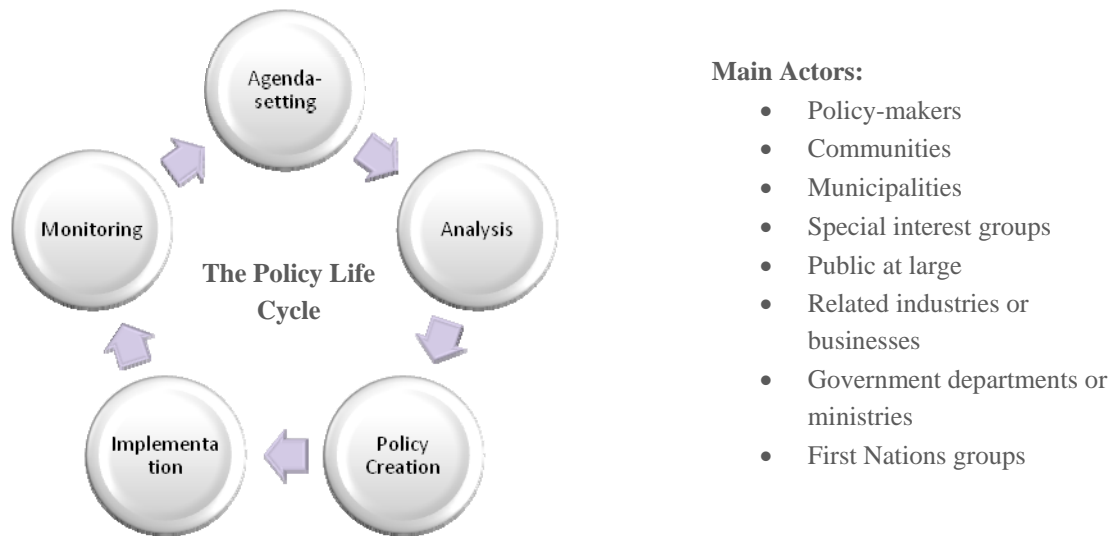
report, online participation is defined (Improvement and Development Agency, 2009) as follows:

Online participation is a collection of online methods used to support public participation in decision making.

2.3 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION METHODS

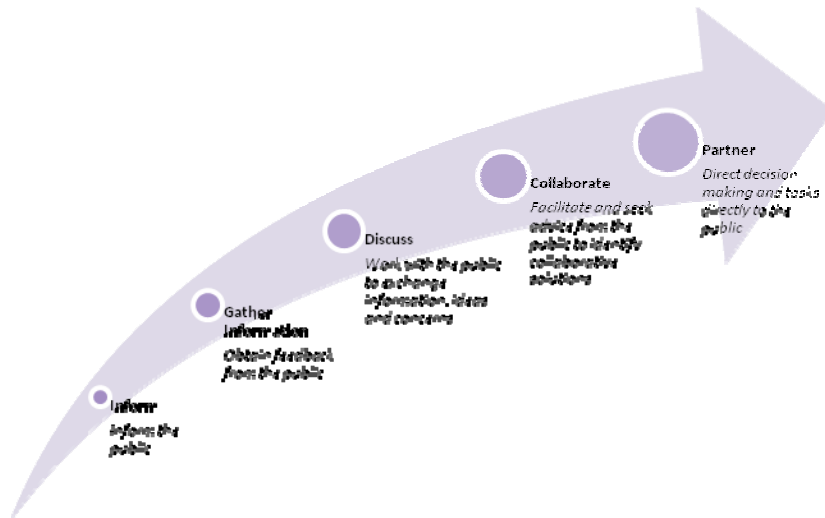
Public participation methods can be used at any stage in the policy process and implemented at varying levels of the public participation continuum. Figure 2.1 represents the policy process along with the major actors that have the ability to affect the process. These main actors can provide input at any level of the public participation continuum from being informed to providing input in the context of the public participation process.

FIGURE 2.1: THE MAIN STEPS AND MAIN ACTORS OF THE POLICY LIFE CYCLE (Caddy & Verge, 2003, p. 88)



Public participation methods range across six levels of public participation categories spanning from informative measures to full decision making authority, forming a continuum based on the level of public involvement (see Figure 2.2).

FIGURE 2.2: THE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION CONTINUUM (OAG, 2008, p. 29; MOFR, 2008, p. 2)



Each of these levels of participation meets different goals and objectives associated with different types of decisions. As participation practices progress from left to right, an increasing amount of time, staff, financial and other resources is required to achieve each step. As a general principle, the more significant the impact of the decision, the greater the need for a more sophisticated approach for involving the public.

TRADITIONAL METHODS

Traditional methods of public participation available to government to engage with the public range from informative measure such as posting notifications of change in newspapers to giving citizens decision making authority through partnerships. A list of traditional methods of public participation is presented in column two of Table 2.1. Each method corresponds to a distinct level of public involvement moving from low to high involvement in the first column.

TABLE 2.1: THE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION CONTINUUM AND THE CORRESPONDING TRADITIONAL AND ONLINE METHODS OF PARTICIPATION
(Health Canada, 2003, pp.36-37; Macintosh, 2008, pp. 85-102; MOFR, 2008, p.2)

	Traditional Methods	Online Methods		
Increasing Participation ↙ ↘ ↙ ↘ ↙ ↘	Inform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Publications - Advertizing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Alerts/Mailing lists - FAQ - Webcasts 	Fixed Menu Methods
	Gather Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Written consultation exercises - Questionnaires - Deliberative polls - Surveys - Interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Online Poll - Survey - Online participation documents 	
	Discuss	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Public Meetings - Open House - Focus Groups - Re-convening groups - Public panels - Public juries - Workshops - Issue Forums 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discussion Boards - Blog - Chat Interview - Social Network⁶ 	
	Collaborate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consensus conferences - Working groups - Visioning exercises - Advisory committee/task force - Bilateral Meetings 		
	Partner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Co-management - Partnership - Formal Agreements 		

ONLINE METHODS

Numerous online participations methods are available for government to use in order to engage with the public. Each method has a distinctive function and use depending on the specific needs of the decision maker (see Appendix E ⁷). A list of online methods of public participation is presented in column three of Table 2.1. Each method corresponds to a distinct level of public involvement moving from low to high involvement in the first column. These online methods can be subdivided into two unique categories: fixed menu and active participation methods. Fixed menu methods use specific questions to guide input taken in the form of surveys or electronic written submissions. Active participation methods use online discussion boards and forums to gather input that is generated and directed by the public themselves. The various methods available are examined in greater detail below. Many of these methods are currently in use throughout the BC government; their utility in the BC government context will be examined in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

FIXED MENU METHODS

⁶ Social Networks are a very interesting and challenging online participation method. However, no examples of this method were found in the BC government and therefore they were not examined in this report. Further research in this area is recommended.

⁷ Macintosh, Coleman & Lalljee, 2005, pp.16-29.

Alerts and internet mailing lists are some of the most straightforward and established technologies used for online participation, able to deliver millions of messages to millions of users daily. *ListServ* is one of the most commonly used mailing list products (Coleman & Gotze, 2001, p. 25).

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) are collections of questions and answers available to the public, pertaining to specific topics. FAQ's help keep citizens informed, while keeping track of their needs and questions. However, maintaining up to date information requires some effort (Caddy & Vergez, 2003, p. 49).

Online polls and surveys vary depending on the needs of the decision maker. Depending on the decision maker's needs around anonymity, timeframe and the amount of information provided to the public, the online questionnaire or survey can take on a variety of forms. In general, a questionnaire or survey is subject to the same advantages and disadvantages as the corresponding paper methods (Dialogue by Design, 2008, p. 105).

Online participation documents enable the public to participate in a structured online environment. The approach allows the public, or a selected group, to respond to specific questions brought out in a policy document (Dialogue by Design, 2008, pp. 105-106). The decision maker can then analyze the results of hundreds or thousands of responses using one of many readily available data analysis tools.

ACTIVE PARTICIPATION METHODS

Discussion boards are forums where a topic or series of topics are introduced, allowing participants to comment on or respond to other peoples responses. A forum can be structured in a variety of different ways, depending on the needs of the decision maker. The forum can be:

- Accessible to the general public through the internet or available by invitation only;
- Moderated or un-moderated; and
- Fixed in length and time or open ended.

Blogs are a variation on forums and allow an organization or individuals to write a regular information piece and encourage the public to provide feedback (Dialogue by Design, 2008, p. 104). Emerging online technology in this area includes *Twitter*, a free social messaging utility for staying connected to other users in real-time.

CHAPTER 3

THEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW OF ONLINE PARTICIPATION

“THE OLD DICHOTOMY BETWEEN EXPERTS AND THE PUBLIC IS FALSE AND STERILE. CONSIDERABLE EXPERTISE RESIDES WITHIN THE PUBLIC (WHICH IS MADE UP, AFTER ALL, OF DOCTORS, NURSES, ENTREPRENEURS, POLICE OFFICERS, SOCIAL WORKERS, VICTIMS OF CRIME, TEACHERS, ELDERS) AND THE TRICK IS TO FIND INNOVATIVE WAYS OF DRAWING OUT THE EXPERTISE AND FEEDING IT INTO THE HITHERTO BUREAUCRATISED DECISION-MAKING PROCESS.”

STEPHEN COLEMAN AND JOHN GØTZE
BOWLING TOGETHER: ONLINE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN POLICY
DELIBERATION.
LONDON, 2001

The following literature review does not aim to be a comprehensive review of all online participation literature, but instead aims to capture the overarching themes presented in online participation literature over the past 10 years to give context to the rest of the research. Online participation has been the subject of a number of studies that have addressed multiple concerns including both the benefits and problems of online participation. Academics studying online participation employ a number of themes, approaches and perspectives in their research, making clarity and consensus difficult to obtain (Gronlund, 2005); while some authors publicize the potential positive impacts, others remain skeptical. The themes below were chosen based on MOFR’s draft principles of public participation and help to assess how online participation practices help to achieve MOFR’s guiding principles on public participation. Although some arguments have been chosen to support certain principles, the information presented below can actually be used to support multiple principles.

3.1 ACCESSIBILITY

MOFR's guiding principle on accessibility states: "all parties who are affected or interested in the issue have an opportunity to participate voluntarily" (MOFR, 2009). This section looks at the appropriateness of online participation practices to facilitate ease of access by the general public to government information and participation processes online.

Online participation practices meet MOFR's guiding principle on accessibility, primarily by effectively reducing long distances in public participation processes. Online participation gives the public an opportunity to take part in the process without travelling, allowing the decision maker to reach potential contributors over vast geographical areas and in a short amount of time (Coleman, 2004, p. 9; Kangas, 2003, pp. 91, 98).

Some authors argue that online participation practices fall short of providing full accessibility to the public because of the gap that exists between internet users due to socioeconomic factors such as education, income, gender, age and location. Furthermore, not only is internet access unevenly distributed throughout the population due to these factors, but so are computer skills (Coleman, 2008, p. 10).

Dr. Jyrki Kangas of the Finnish Forest Research Institute (2003, p. 100), argues that all people should have access to the internet before it is accepted as the only communication channel in public participation processes. This is because "those who are most excluded from the political process and most in need of government services [are] most likely to be digitally excluded" (Coleman, 2008, p. 10).

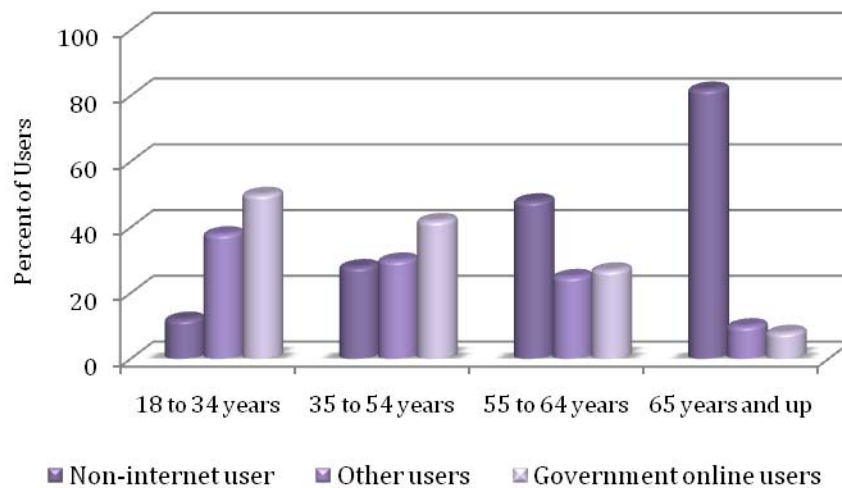
Some authors also add that socioeconomic issues are not the only limiting factor, and point to the restrictive role of adverse sociopersonal factors. Anthony Wilhelm, an American expert on communications policy (2000), argues that factors such as public awareness, interest and understanding play an important role in access to online participation processes. Some authors argue that while online participation processes will mobilize the technically savvy, those with less technical expertise could become increasingly disenfranchised (Carter & Belanger, 2005, p. 5).

However, other authors argue that the solution to the digital divide is not to abandon the Internet as a tool for public participation entirely (Coleman & Gotze, 2001, pp. 6, 16). Despite concerns, online technology provides a suitable

mechanism for public access to public information and issues (Holzer, Hu & Song, 2004, 313).

For example, the use of mainstream technologies such as the Internet and email, among Canadian firms and individuals, is becoming more prevalent in Canada. According to Statistics Canada (June 2008), almost three-quarters of Canadians, 16 years old and older, went online between October 2006 and November 2007. In that same year, approximately 85 percent of private Canadian firms used a broadband Internet connection and private and public sector online sales rose to \$49.9 billion (Statistics Canada, April 2007). In 2005, online interactions with the Government of Canada reached almost 1.1 billion (Statistics Canada, November 2005, p. 5). Given the increasing prevalence of Internet use in Canada, concerns such as the significance of a digital divide become less of an issue (Underhill & Ladds, November 2005, p. 6).

FIGURE 3.1: TYPE OF GOVERNMENT ONLINE USER BY AGE GROUP, 2005



Source: Underhill, C. & Ladds, C. (November 2005). *Connecting with Canadians: Assessing the use of Government Online*. Retrieved from Statistics Canada, March 6, 2009, from: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/56f0004m/56f0004m2007015-eng.pdf>.

Note: GOL users are those who reported using the Internet from home to search for government information, or to communicate with government in the 12 months before this survey. Other users are those who reported using the Internet from home but not to search for government information, or to communicate with government in the 12 months before this survey. None Internet users are those who did not use the Internet in the 12 months before the survey. Estimates between GOL users and other users in the '55 to 64 years' category are not significantly different (Statistics Canada, November 2005, pp. 7-8).

Figure 3.1 from Statistics Canada (Underhill & Ladds, November 2005, p. 8) shows the type of government online user by age group, divided into non-Internet users, Internet users and users accessing government information. Within the 18 to 34 age range and within the 35 to 54 age range nearly 50 percent and 45 percent of respondents, respectively, reported using the Internet to search for government information or to communicate with the government. Non-Internet users made up a relatively small percentage in these two categories. However, the proportion of non-Internet users increased significantly in relation to Internet

users and government online users in the 55 to 64 years range and the 65 years and over range.

These findings suggest that the social acceptability of interaction online between government and the public is rising, especially within the younger demographic range. However, Internet access and use does not necessarily amount to successful online interaction with the government.

3.2 FAIRNESS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

MOFR's guiding principle on fairness and accountability states: "all views offered are considered. The process is fair, objective and carried out in a respectful and accountable manner" (MOFR, 2009). This section looks at the suitability of online participation practices to support fairness and accountability in the Ministry's public participation strategies.

FAIRNESS

Online participation practices support the guiding principles of fairness and accountability in public participation in a number of different ways. In terms of fairness, online participation is more accessible than some traditional methods of participation for people with disabilities, including those who are blind, deaf or physically disabled (Information for Development Program, 2008). This increased accessibility translates to greater fairness among all citizens, regardless of physical ability.

Furthermore, online participation is fair and objective by considering all views submitted. By ensuring that the public receives feedback on their input after engaging with the government the process remains fair to everyone who participated. Appropriate and consistent communication between the government and the public during participation contributes to the general "transparency, accountability and openness of government" (Caddy & Vergez, 2003, p. 69). However, a lack of communication can lead to cynicism among the public; "...lack of timely and appropriate feedback could give rise to disillusionment about consultation even before governments have effectively harnessed technology to enable e-consultation..." (Caddy & Vergez, pp. 69-70).

ACCOUNTABILITY

Online participation processes address the issue of accountability from the perspective of both the public and the government. From the public's perspective the government is accountable for ensuring an appropriate level of security surrounding the public's personal information and input. Because there is evidence that a significant segment of the population does not trust the government to collect, store and use personal data, protecting the public's privacy during online participation processes is essential in order to take advantage of the benefits of online participation methods (Coleman, 2008, p. 9). Priscilla M. Regan, Professor in the Department of Public and International Affairs and Associate Chair Undergrad Studies at George Mason University (2008, p. 127), writes: "If individuals do not believe that their privacy will be protected, they will not be able to use available e-government features."

To resolve the issue of security in online participation processes, Coleman and Gotze (2001, p. 27) suggest that setting up clear rules well in advance of the process help the public in deciding whether to participate or not. It should also be noted that, security should not be viewed as any more of a barrier to online participation than they are to traditional government participation processes (Regan, 2008, p. 136). However, it may be more difficult to build trust in an online setting where there is no direct interaction among peers like in a face-to-face meeting.

From the government's perspective the public is accountable for the input they provide to the public discussion. The level of accountability is determined by the amount of identifiable information an individual is required or requested to provide in order to access the online participation process. The more private information an individual is required to provide, the more accountable the public becomes for their input (Splichal, 1999, p.66; Coleman & Gotze, 2001, p. 12; Holzer, Hu & Song, 2004, pp. 312-313).

3.3 TRANSPARENCY

MOFR's guiding principle on transparency states: "results of the public's input are clearly demonstrated, and the public understands how public participation affects the decision or outcome" (MOFR, 2009). This section looks at the importance of transparency in online participation practices in the Ministry's public participation strategy.

Online participation practices allow for transparency by systematically keeping the public informed of the results of the exercise. The public should be aware of how their contributions will be used including how their views will be heard by government and how they will eventually influence government policy (Bevacqua et al., 2006, p. 50; Coleman & Gotze, 2001, p. 27; Luhrs et al., 2003, p. 83).

In order to maintain this level of transparency it is important for the decision maker to do two things. First, it is important for decision makers to manage the large amount of data being collected as well as make a commitment to receive, document, manage and respond to all that data in order to ensure the public view point is recognized in the final product⁸ (Caddy and Vergez, 2003, p. 64; Coleman and Gotze, 2001, pp. 17-19, 29).

Second, in order for a process to be truly transparent it is important for online participation processes to be straightforward and easy to use in order to reduce as many barriers as possible to engagement. The process and the online methods themselves must be efficient, intuitive, supportive and engaging to ensure participation (Kangas, 2003, p. 91; Coleman and Gotze, 2001, p. 26; Luhrs, Albrecht, Lubcke & Hohberg, 2003, p. 83).

3.4 TIMELINESS

MOFR's guiding principle on timeliness states: "the process is conducted in a timely and efficient manner, allowing enough time for the public to participate in a meaningful way" (MOFR, 2009). This section looks at the importance of timeliness in online participation practices in the Ministry's public participation strategy.

Online participation processes address the issue of timeliness from both the public and the government's perspectives by providing sufficient time for both groups to review and comment during the process. From the public's perspective online participation is, in most instances, less of a time commitment than equivalent traditional participation methods, when factors such as travel time are taken into account (Coleman, March 2004, p. 9; Kangas, 2003, pp. 91, 98). From the government's perspective, decision makers are able to listen to dialogue collected over a certain period of time without a huge time commitment (Coleman, March 2004, p. 12). However, online participation does still signal a certain degree of time commitment for decision makers who may have to balance between online and traditional methods of consultation (Coleman, March 2004, pp.17-18). It is also important to ensure information pertaining to online participation processes that is posted online is always kept current and removed in a timely manner when the process is finished (Coleman & Gotze, 2001, p. 27; Bevacqua et al., 2006, p. 53).

⁸ There have been some moves by certain jurisdictions to write back to the public to show them how their input was incorporated. It is up to the decision maker whether to pursue this method and whether to expend the large amount of time and resources needed to achieve this method successfully. This report will not examine this method in any detail, however it is a potential area of research for MOFR in the future.

3.5 FLEXIBILITY

MOFR's guiding principle on flexibility states: "the process recognizes inherent limits in time and resources, allowing the level of public participation to be reflective of the nature of the content, the significance of the issue and the requirements of the participants" (MOFR, 2009). This section looks at the importance of flexibility in online participation practices in the Ministry's public participation strategy.

Online participation processes meet the principle of flexibility, first, by meeting the diverse requirements of participants by creating and catering to communities of interest which may not reside in the same geographic location (Coleman, 2004, p. 9; Kangas, 2003, pp. 91, 98). Second, online participation processes have the ability to provide the choice of multiple methods of interaction with the public, providing a flexible framework in which to use the appropriate methods for each unique experience (Caddy & Vergez, 2003, p. 77).

Third, online participation works flexibly within the boundaries of limited time and resource requirements. The costs and resource used for online participation are generally predictable with low running costs and higher initial infrastructure costs (Bevacqua et al., 2006, p. 53; Improvement and Development Agency, March 2009).

3.6 SUMMARY

Table 3.1, below, identifies the level of risk associated with online participation in relation to each of MOFR's guiding principles on public participation. The level of risk was determined based on the various corresponding benefits and

risks documented in the literature.⁹ The table starts with the guiding principle anticipated to present the lowest risk and ends with the guiding principle anticipated to present the highest risk. The guiding principles in between are ranked accordingly somewhere in between.

TABLE 3.1: LEVEL OF RISK OF ONLINE PARTICIPATION ASSOCIATED WITH EACH OF MOFR’S GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION¹⁰

Guiding Principle	Level of Risk
Transparency	Low risk
Flexibility	Low risk
Timeliness	Moderate risk
Fairness and Accountability	Moderate risk
Accessibility	Moderate risk

In order to obtain a more in depth assessment of the level of risk associated with pursuing online participation a series of case studies were done across a number of BC government ministries and are presented in the following section.

CHAPTER 4

⁹ Although no specific criterion was used against which to calculate the level of risk, the researcher assessed the level of risk based on two factors: first, on the prevalence of either positive or negative information present in the literature and second, on the degree to which the guiding principle would effect MOFR’s operations.

¹⁰ The level of risk in this table refers to the level of risk associated with not meeting MOFR’s guiding principles on public participation.

CASE STUDIES OF BC GOVERNMENT MINISTRIES

Although the preceding literature review provides a broad academic assessment of online participation, there are few real world examples to draw upon in the literature to assess the actual benefits and risks associated with online participation. In order to fully evaluate online participation practices, there is a need to examine the execution of these practices from systems design to implementation in the context of British Columbia's provincial government.

The following section examines online public participation strategies within the BC public service, assessing the benefits, risks, costs and resources, and feasibility of pursuing online public participation within the context of the province of British Columbia. Strategies examined include the:

- **Ministry of Forests and Range, Forest and Range Practices Act (FRPA) Discussion Paper (2002):** used both online and traditional methods of engagement, but was centered primarily on the online components. The process ran for 60 days and generated 400 responses; 75 percent were gathered through online response forms and emails. The process was conducted in house and cost approximately \$50.00 without the cost of staff.
- **Ministry of Transportation, Port Mann/Highway 1 Pre-Design consultation (2006):** used both online and traditional methods of engagement. The process ran for 90 days and generated 2,300 responses, 61 percent were gathered through online response forms and emails. The process was conducted in house and the online component was of minimal cost to the Ministry (Gateway Program, 2006, pp. 1-6).
- **Ministry of Health, Conversation on Health (2006):** used both online and traditional methods of engagement, but was centered primarily on the online components. The process ran for 365 days and generated 12,000 submissions, 49 percent were gathered through electronic written submissions, online discussion boards and web polls. The process made use of an outside consultant and cost between \$7 and 10 million. The online participation process accounted for approximately 1 percent of the total cost (Ministry of Health, n.d.).

- **Forest Tree Genetic Resource Conservation and Management (GRM) Challenge Dialogue (2007):** used online and traditional methods of engagement. The process ran for approximately 2 ½ years and generated 151 responses, 72 percent were gathered through electronic dialogue. The process was conducted by a consultant and cost approximately \$75,000 (for both the online and offline components) without the cost of staff.
- **Ministry of Children and Family Development, Child and Youth Mental Health Review (2008):** used online methods of engagement exclusively. The process ran for 14 days and generated 56 responses, 100 percent were gathered through an online survey. The process was conducted in house and the online component cost approximately \$20.00 without the cost of staff (A. Berland Inc., October 2008, p. 4).
- **Ministry of Environment, Open Burning Smoke Control Review Process (2008):** used both online and traditional methods of engagement, but was centered almost exclusively on the online components. The process ran for 75 days and generated approximately 100 responses, most of which were gathered online through online response forms and email. The process made use of an outside consultant and was of moderate cost to the Ministry.
- **Intergovernmental Relations Secretariat, Discussion on BC Francophone Priorities (2008):** used both online and traditional methods of engagement, but was centered primarily on the online components. The process ran for 35 days and generated 109 responses, 63 percent were gathered through online response forms and emails. The process was conducted in house and the online component was of minimal cost to the Ministry (Intergovernmental Relations Secretariat, n.d).
- **Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services, Budget Consultations (2008, annually):** used both online and traditional methods of engagement. The process ran for 45 days and generated 2,900 responses, 61 percent were gathered through online response forms. The process was conducted in house and the online component was of minimal cost to the Ministry (Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services, November 2008, pp. iv-3).
- **Ministry of Forests and Range, Forest Practices Branch, Silviculture Discussion Paper (2009):** used both online and traditional methods of engagement, but was centered primarily on the online components. The process is currently running and will be available for 180 days. The process is being hosted by BC Stats and cost approximately \$5,000 dollars without the cost of staff.

A summary of the findings from BC public servant interviews with key players in these online public participation strategies is provided below (see Table 4.1). A more detailed analysis of the results is grouped below into: projected benefits, risks, costs and organization feasibility. This section serves to provide information to develop a business case for the Ministry of Forests and Range. Thirteen smart practices came out of discussions with BC government online participation practitioners. These smart practices are presented in Table 4.4 (p.34) and set out a series of key smart practices to consider when using online tools to engage the public.

TABLE 4.1: SUMMARY OF SAMPLE ONLINE PARTICIPATION MODELS IN THE BC GOVERNMENT

Organization	Communication Channels	Length of Engagement	Number of Responses	Cost ¹¹
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¹¹ Attempts to compare costing data systematically were not definitive because of a lack of comparable data from expert interviews.

Ministry of Forests and Range, FRPA Discussion Paper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online Forum • Public hearings • Stakeholder presentations 	60 days	Total: 400 Online: 300 75% of responses collected online	In house. Approximate online cost: \$50.00 (without staff)
Ministry of Transportation, Gateway Project Port Mann/Highway 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online response form • Email • Letters • Stakeholder meetings • Open House 	90 days	Total: 2,300 Online: 1,400 61% of responses collected online	In house. Minimal cost.
Ministry of Health, Conversation on Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online discussion boards • Web polls • Email • Electronic newsletter • Public forums • Community meetings • Focus groups • Toll-free phone line 	365 days	Total: 12,000 Online: 5,875 49% of responses collected online	Consultant. Approximate online cost: \$50-100,000 (about 1% of overall costs)
Ministry of Forests, GRM Challenge Dialogue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online response form • Workshop 	Approximately 900 days	Total: 151 Online: 109 72% of responses collected online	Consultant. Approximate total cost: \$75,000
Ministry of Children and Family Development, Child and Youth Mental Health Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online Survey 	14 days	Total: 56 Online: 56 100% of responses collected online	In house. \$20.00 (without staff)
Ministry of Environment, Open Burning Smoke Control Review Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online response form • Email • Letter • Fax 	75 days	Total: Unknown Online: 100 100% of responses collected online ¹²	Consultant. Moderate Cost.
Intergovernmental Relations Secretariat, Discussion on BC Francophone Priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online response form • Email • Mail • One face-to-face consultation 	35 days	Total: 109 Online: 69 63% of responses collected online	In house. Minimal cost.
Legislative Assembly, Budget Consultation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online response form • Public Hearings • Written Submissions • Flyer Responses 	45 days	Total: 2,900 Online: 1,416 49% of responses collected online	In house. Minimal cost.
Ministry of Forests and Range, Silviculture Discussion Paper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online response form • Email • Letters • Focus groups 	180 days (Process ongoing)	Total: 82 Online: 79 ¹³ 96% of responses collected online	BC Stats. Approximate online cost: \$5,000 (without staff)

- Online Methods
- Traditional Methods

4.1 BENEFITS IDENTIFIED BY BC PUBLIC SERVANTS

¹² Approximately.

¹³ As of May 1, 2009.

The benefits of engaging the public through online processes as identified by the interviewed BC public servants ranged from focused and targeted to very broad (see Table 4.2). Most public servants had experience with two particular types of online participation, electronic written submissions (fixed menu methods) or online discussion boards and forums (active participation methods). These techniques were either used on their own or in conjunction with other more traditional types of engagement. Overall, online responses accounted for anywhere between 49 to 100 percent of total responses in any given participation process.

The most common benefit of online participation indicated by BC public servants was the capacity of online technology to reach the largest number of people in the least amount of time. Practitioners pointed to a number of reasons why online participation methods had a broader reach than traditional participation methods, including:

- The Internet is easily accessible to a large number of British Columbians including those who are physically not able to go to face-to-face meetings, those who prefer to express their opinion in a more relaxed environment than face-to-face meetings and those living in small and remote communities¹⁴.
- Online participation is not time bound, allowing individuals to express their opinion quickly or take more time to think about their responses and review background materials. Information is available to individuals 24 hours a day and 7 days a week.

Other benefits of using online participation techniques, identified by BC public servants, included the ability to keep the process transparent, by providing participants with updates on the input received and where that input would be used. Public servants recommended using e-newsletters to that effect. Those interviewed also benefited from the relatively low cost of using online methods of participation, which will be addressed in the discussion on cost. Furthermore, public servants advocated the efficiency of using online participation techniques. Public servants across government were impressed with the quick turnaround time and ease of handling and organizing data associated with their online tools. As one public servant interviewed noted “Other methods (such as mail in) take more time, effort and funding to capture the same material.”

Fixed menu methods proved to be a good way to keep people’s answers concise and on track, unlike face-to-face meetings that can move away from the agenda quickly when participants focus on their particular concerns instead of the questions at hand. “Web-based forms provided the Finance Committee with the most accurate responses...witnesses at the public hearings appeared reluctant to provide a decisive response...opting instead to make general statements about the future direction of fiscal policy” (Ryan-Lloyd et. al., 2005, pp. 47-48).

¹⁴ Residents living in small and remote communities make up a large number of BC residents and are disproportionately impacted by MOFR decisions.

Public servants associated some benefits specifically with using active participation methods, rather than fixed menu. These benefits included the ability to allow the public to set the agenda and drive the discussion through online dialogue, which tends to be seen as more transparent, generate better discussion and less negative conversation than government directed discussion. The dialogues created online can then be used to feed the face-to-face meetings. However, generally, it seems that the active participation methods generated less user content than fixed menu methods.¹⁵

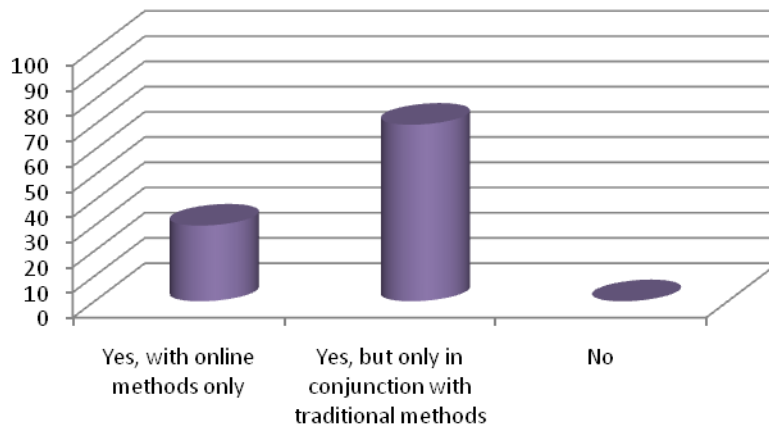
TABLE 4.2: PERCENTAGE OF BC PUBLIC SERVANTS INTERVIEWED WHO IDENTIFIED THE FOLLOWING BENEFITS OF USING ONLINE PARTICIPATION METHODS

Identified Benefit	Percentage of BC public servants who identified that benefit
Reach of online methods	91 %
Ease of handling data when using online methods	91 %
Online methods are not time bound	45 %
Transparency of online methods	36 %

In order to take full advantage of the ability of online participation techniques to reach a wide audience, public servants cautioned that the greatest number of people will be reached and the most benefits will be gained by opening all avenues of communication including, focus groups, face-to-face meetings and mail. By using every method and approach in concert with consultation, the process becomes increasingly inclusive. Figure 4.1, below, illustrates that 100 percent of BC public servants interviewed would consider using online technology again, however 70 percent of those people would only consider using it in conjunction with other methods.

FIGURE 4.1: NUMBER OF BC GOVERNMENT PUBLIC SERVANTS WHO WOULD CONSIDER USING ONLINE TECHNOLOGY TO ENGAGE THE PUBLIC

¹⁵ For example, in the Conversation on Health, online discussion generated 2,217 ideas whereas online electronic submissions and emails generated 3,258 (Ministry of Health, n.d.).



4.2 RISKS IDENTIFIED BY BC PUBLIC SERVANTS

Based on the experience of the BC public servants interviewed on online participation methods, a number of associated risks of such participation were identified (see Table 4.3). Although many of these risks pose a significant challenge, all risks can be mitigated in some way. BC public servants identified five primary risks including the potential for: abuse and batch responses, increased public expectations, lack of access, misunderstanding the purpose of consultation, and the absence of statistical rigour.

1. The number one anticipated risk, as identified by many of the BC public servants interviewed, was the possibility of receiving batch responses from interest groups as well as inviting abuse from individuals and organizations. Before embarking on an online participation method, almost all those interviewed expressed concern about receiving multiple responses from one person or engaging in a one sided conversation dominated by letter writing campaigns. In order to mitigate this risk many online processes opted to only accept legitimate responses that could be verified by requiring participants to provide personal information or by tracking participants IP addresses.¹⁶ In more technical stakeholder consultations concerns arose around how to separate responses from those with information and knowledge based experience of specific topics and those without. This concern was mitigated by asking participants to provide demographic information at the beginning of the survey to sort input easily. In a very small number of cases, gathering personal information led to a backlash from the public concerned about their privacy and not being able to access government services after participating

¹⁶ Before beginning an online participation process the decision maker should verify what information can be traced in accordance with individual privacy concerns.

in an online dialogue. In order to mitigate these challenges online processes can opt for not collecting any personal information from the public.

In response to the possibility of the public abusing the system by providing negative, biased and unconstructive input many online processes opted to monitor input closely and sort responses manually. The perception of risk from BC public servants around abuse increased in processes where no identification was necessary from the public who contributed. Potential risks associated with not requiring the public to clearly identify themselves included the possibility of the public using an anonymous forum to vent against government, post personal attacks and provide input with inappropriate language. Another risk associated with not requiring identification from the public is that it is impossible to track how many people have actually participated, because individuals could be answering more than once. Another form of abuse, more difficult to mitigate, is individuals who send their concerns directly to the Minister and skip the online public participation process entirely. Concerns sent directly to the Minister tend to receive more attention than concerns vetted through a fair engagement process.

However, in practice these concerns with online participation did not become a significant problem and were easily mitigated. According to public servants, in most cases the process attracted a high number of legitimate responses and abuse accounted for less than 10 percent of input.

2. Another risk raised by the BC public servants who were interviewed was the possibility of raising the public's expectations after seeking their involvement. Once the public identifies a problem there is an expectation that something will be accomplished to solve that problem. As one BC public servant interviewed expressed: "Once a problem is identified, there's an expectation that an answer will follow." If the public believes nothing is happening after providing government with their input, individuals can get discouraged and disengage in future engagement with government. A particular concern in online participation was the public's concern that their input would not be read, responded to or interpreted and that their input would not be reflected in the government's final analysis. In order to mitigate this challenge public servants suggested that public expectations be managed in some way. For example, all online participation processes should provide some way to let the public know that government is considering and reacting to their participation. The public should be told what is going to happen with their input before they begin the process and be informed at every stage as to what the results of their input is going to produce.
3. Another potential risk identified by some public servants who were interviewed was the fact that not all citizens of British Columbia are able to

easily access a computer with an Internet connection. Groups seen as particularly unlikely to have full access included: seniors, remote and rural residents and low income individuals. Furthermore, even those with computer and Internet access may not have adequate bandwidth to download large files. In order to mitigate this risk public servants suggested offering the public the option of participating through more than one method, such as face-to-face or mail. To address the difficulties surrounding bandwidth capabilities public servants suggested offering relevant documents in both html and pdf formats.

Issues around access also arise for those who do have access to the Internet. There exists the possibility that even individuals who have computer access will get frustrated with using online technology and that a system failure could lead to some data loss. However, out of all the processes examined throughout the BC government there was no evidence that this problem had actually arisen, making it a very low risk.

4. Some public servants, who dealt with complex technical or expert subject matter in their online processes, found that complex issues are difficult to understand in an online setting. This can lead to misunderstandings and ultimately to the public and stakeholders not feeling adequately engaged in the process. This risk was easily mitigated by opening up face-to-face meetings with the public and stakeholders to clarify and discuss in more detail. It is important to note that complex issues usually involve stakeholders and not the broad public.

Further misunderstandings occurred when the government posted information, such as intentions papers, without specifying the exact purpose of the information. Sometimes, government intentions were seen as their official position and direction. In order to mitigate this risk, public servants suggested providing very clear information and instructions to ensure the public fully understands the nature of background information and the process itself. Further to that, at the end of an online participation process it is important to summarize the public's input in a concise way in order to present all the evidence gathered in the most useful way possible for both the public and government.

5. To a lesser extent public servants interviewed expressed concern about the statistical rigour of gathering public input online, especially when individuals are not identified in any way. It is difficult to know whether the input gathered is demographically representative when many individuals are self selected from the broad public. However, many public servants interviewed

recognized that anecdotal evidence can reveal some important insights for government as well.

TABLE 4.3: PERCENTAGE OF BC PUBLIC SERVANTS INTERVIEWED WHO IDENTIFIED THE FOLLOWING RISKS OF USING ONLINE PARTICIPATION METHODS

Identified Risk	Percentage of BC public servants who identified that risk
Abuse and batch responses	73 %
Accessibility	36 %
Statistical rigour	36 %
Confusion around complex issues	18 %
Raised expectations	18 %

4.3 COSTS IDENTIFIED BY BC PUBLIC SERVANTS

The cost of using online participation methods varies widely depending on the level of engagement being sought. However, one view surrounding cost that was universally held among BC public servants interviewed across government was that using online tools to engage the public was the least expensive way to achieve public engagement. Anecdotally, the cost of online participation was less than mail in questionnaires and surveys and face-to-face meetings. Public servants pointed to cost savings realized through reduced work load, reduced travel expenses and reduced meeting expenses. To put the savings in perspective, the federal government reviewed its Government Online initiatives in 2008 and found that the average cost of transactions was \$30 per interaction in person; \$20 per interaction by mail; \$10 per interaction by telephone, and \$1 or less per interaction by Internet, which is in line with the costs per transaction of other large organizations (Public Works and Government Services, August 2008).

Closer to home, in British Columbia, the total cost of pursuing online participation ranged from \$0 to approximately \$100,000¹⁷ per process, not including the cost of staffing. Public servants pointed to the following costs to take into account when considering online participation, any or all of which can be contracted out to a private consultant if budget allows.

¹⁷ The approximate cost of the online portion of the Conversation on Health was \$50,000 to \$100,000 dollars. Taking into account the fact that the overall conversation cost upwards of \$10 million (Ministry of Health, n.d.) the online portion accounted for less than 1 percent of the Ministry of Health’s total costs.

1. Cost of developing a webpage

Developing a webpage can be done in house or by an outside consultant. The initial cost of set up can be one of the highest for an online process.

2. Cost of developing a survey, questionnaire or web-base discussion

The cost of developing a survey or questionnaire is comparable to any traditional public participation process. The savings are realized in the delivery of these tools.

3. Cost of advertizing

Assigning an advertizing budget was one of the aspects of online consultation that was most often neglected and that significantly affected the public rate of engagement. It is difficult to engage a public that does not know their input is needed or desired. This cost would be comparable to the advertizing budget needed in any traditional public participation process.

4. Cost of data collection and analysis

The collection, capture and analysis of data are the most labour intensive aspects of any public participation process, online or traditional. Although the work load around the collection and capture of data using online technology is significantly reduced from that of a traditional participation process, a staff person or consultant will still need to undertake the task of transforming public input into a useable document for decision makers. Staffing costs can range from one individual working part time on the participation process to a number of individuals working full time, depending on the level of engagement being sought.

5. Cost of general staffing

If a consultant is not used for one or more parts of the online process general staffing costs will have to be taken into account. Whether one staff person will work full-time or part-time or a number of people will work part-time will need to be decided. This cost would be incurred in a traditional participation process as well.

6. Cost of a moderator

For an active participation process the cost of a moderator or webmaster may also need to be considered. A moderator can monitor discussion and ensure that nothing inappropriate or offensive is posted to the website. Whether or not abuse turns out to be a problem or not a moderator will always be needed for online dialogues to reduce risk to government.

4.4 ORGANIZATIONAL FEASIBILITY

A number of online public participation processes have been used throughout MOFR in recent years such as: the FRPA Discussion Paper (2002), the GRM Challenge Dialogue (2007) and the Forest Practices Branch’s Silviculture Discussion Paper (2009). The prevalent use of online participation processes already completed and underway in the Ministry suggests this form of participation is already an expected method of engagement.

Furthermore, interviews and discussions with MOFR staff from multiple divisions and locations across the organization revealed high support for implementing online participation practices in broad policy decisions at the Ministry. Despite some concerns, MOFR staff ultimately drew attention to the many perceived benefits of implementing online participation processes within the Ministry.

4.5 SMART PRACTICES

Table 4.4, below, outlines a series of smart practices to guide a successful online participation process. The list was prepared based on input from BC government public servants who have had moderate to extensive experience with online participation methods. Each smart practice was developed as a result of either risks or mitigation strategies brought up by a number of public servants throughout the BC government. This research suggests that the implementation of these smart practices will achieve improved levels of participation; a better experience for participants; and improved efficiency and effectiveness of process from the Ministry’s perspective.

TABLE 4.4: SMART PRACTICES FOR A SUCCESSFUL ONLINE PARTICIPATION PROCESS

1. Online participation processes should allow for enough time to gather meaningful input from participants.
2. Online participation processes should establish a well-laid out framework for gathering and incorporating online input and relaying that information back out to the public.
3. Online participation processes should be transparent. Providing consistent communication and clear messaging back to the public on the expected benefits of their participation.
4. Online participation processes should have a clear set of participation questions that will adequately inform the final decisions.
5. Online participation processes should consider using multiple tools in concert with online participation to formulate government policy in order to maintain representation and gather the views of as many interested individuals as possible.

6. Online participation processes should ensure the public is aware of certain constraints the decision maker(s) may face, such as resource restraints or their ultimate ability to change the status quo.
7. Online participation processes should ensure adequate IT staff is available to mitigate potential technical difficulties and computer glitches.
8. Online participation processes should advertize to support the uptake of engagement among the public and stakeholders, through both traditional and online methods.
9. Online participation processes should provide clear and concise background materials and information to everyone involved.
10. Active online participation processes should consider using a skilled moderator to layout and enforce the rules of discussion.
11. Online participation processes should factor in the cost of: developing a webpage; developing a survey; advertizing; data collection and analysis; mediation; and general staffing.
12. Online participation processes should acknowledge that engaging the public takes significantly more time and effort than independent decisions; to keep more people informed, educated, engaged and up-to-date.
13. Online participation practices should ensure the participation process is supported by political, executive and management levels. Assigning a champion helps build support and credibility with the broader public.

CHAPTER 5

BUSINESS CASE FOR ONLINE PARTICIPATION AT THE

MINISTRY OF FORESTS AND RANGE

5.1 OVERVIEW

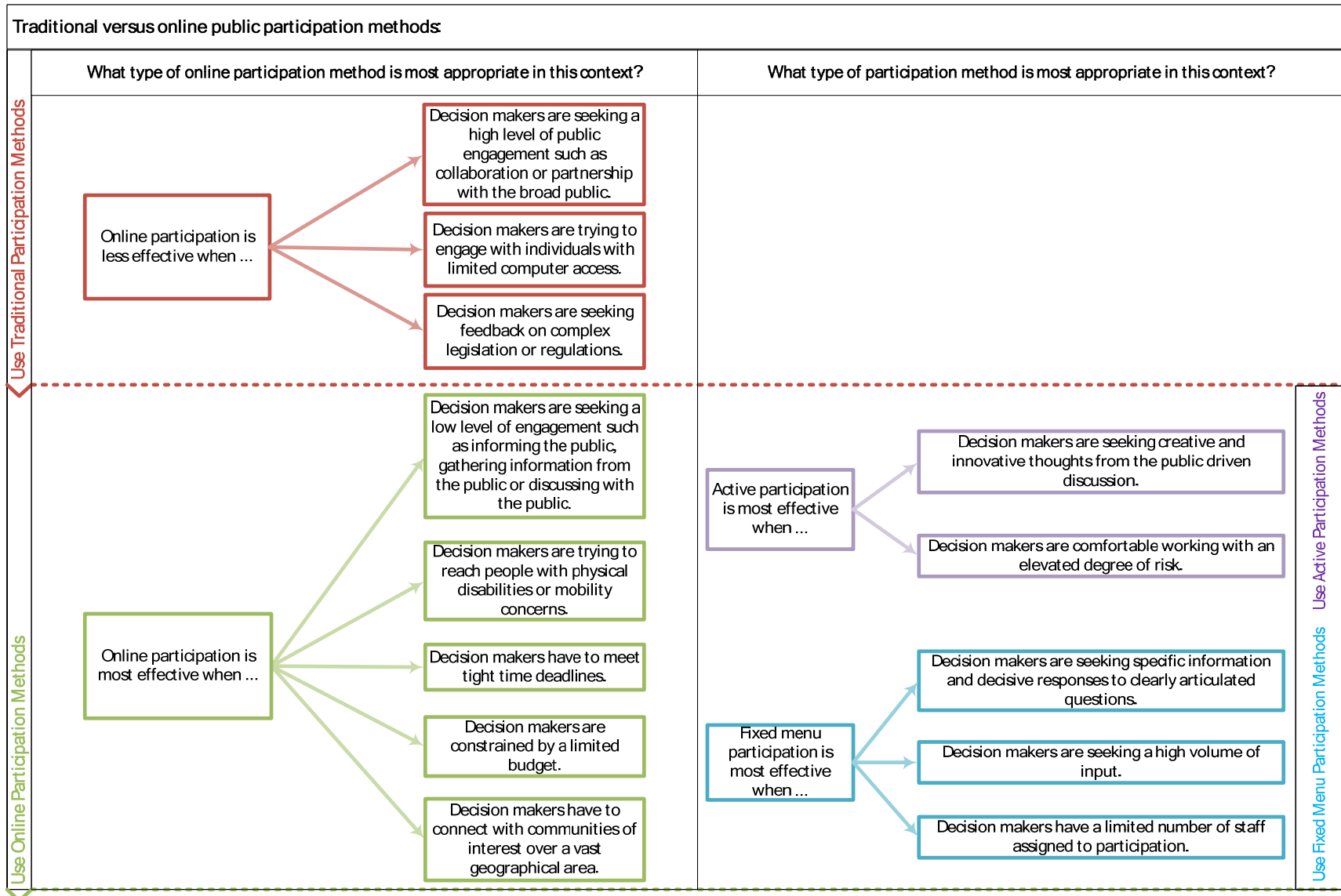
More academics and organizations are accepting online participation as the future of public engagement, including the BC public service. Overall, BC public servants who have used online participation techniques showed overwhelming support for the use of online tools to engage the public. Public servants felt that in practice, according to their experience, online participation processes can be successfully implemented in British Columbia.

Moving forward with implementing online participation processes at MOFR will impact policy makers throughout the Ministry considering broad policy decisions that engage the general public will make it easier and more efficient for policy will affect the general public. Using online participation to makers to reach a greater number of people about broad policy decisions.

5.2 OPPORTUNITY

Given the increasing constraints on MOFR's budget, online participation methods provide an opportunity to engage with the broader public at the lowest possible cost to the Ministry. This method is already being used intermittently at MOFR on projects such as: the FRPA Discussion Paper (2002), the GRM Challenge Dialogue (2007) and the Forest Practices Branch's Silviculture Discussion Paper (2009). Ultimately these projects have proved successful for the Ministry in the past.

FIGURE 5.1: WHEN TO USE ONLINE VERSUS TRADITIONAL METHODS OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION



However, online participation methods are not the ideal tool in every engagement scenario. Online participation methods deliver the greatest benefits when (see Figure 5.1):

1. Decision makers are seeking a low level of public engagement such as informing the public, gathering information from the public or discussing with the public (see Table 5.1). Online participation methods are less useful when decision makers are seeking a high level of public engagement along the public participation continuum such as collaboration or partnership. If the Ministry is attempting to collaborate or partner with the public, traditional methods of participation are more useful.

TABLE 5.1: ONLINE TOOLS AND THEIR ONLINE PARTICIPATION FUNCTIONALITY (Macintosh, 2008, p. 93)

Increasing Participation ↓ ↓ ↓	Function			Methods
	Inform			
		Gather Information		Alerts/Mailing lists
				FAQ
				Webcasts
				Survey
				Online Poll
				Online participation documents
		Discuss		Discussion Boards
				Chat Interview
				Blog
				E-Panel
			Social Network	

2. Decision makers are trying to reach the most amounts of people in the least amount of time.
3. Decision makers are constrained by a limited budget.

Fixed menu participation should be considered as the most effective method of engagement when:

1. Decision makers are seeking specific information and decisive responses to clearly articulated questions with clearly defined parameters.
2. Decision makers are seeking a high volume of input. According to interviews with public servants, the highest volume of input was submitted through fixed menu participation methods.
3. Decision makers have a limited number of staff assigned to the participation project. Fixed menu participation methods work well in situations where a limited number of staff and resources have been allocated. This is because fixed menu participation requires less staff than processes where discussion must be monitored.

Active participation should be considered as an effective method of engagement when:

1. Decision makers are seeking creative and innovative ideas from public driven discussion.
2. Decision makers are comfortable working at an elevated level of risk. Active participation presents an increased risk to decision makers because of the decreased control over more open discussion.

5.3 BENEFITS

QUANTITATIVE¹⁸

According to the case studies, cost per interaction during online participation ranged from approximately \$0.20 (FRPA Discussion Paper) to approximately \$8.50 (Conversation on Health)¹⁹. This range accounts only for interactions where the public submitted input and not for interactions where information was simply provided to the public. The cost per interaction decreases dramatically when the number of individuals using online material to inform themselves, as well as those who submit input to the decision makers, are accounted for. For example, when the 220,000 web visits to *www.bcconversationonhealth.ca* are taken into account and not just the 5,875 individuals who submitted input, the cost per interaction drops dramatically from \$8.50 to \$0.23.²⁰ Compared to the Public Works and Government Services' (August 2008) calculation that the approximate cost of in person interactions is \$30.00, the average cost savings per interaction online versus in person can be as high as 99%.

Decision makers should expect the average cost of online participation to fluctuate somewhat depending on the type of online participation method used; the length of the participation process and who provides the framework for participation (see Table 5.2). The cost of online participation increases per interaction depending on:

- **The level of engagement desired**

¹⁸ As noted in Table 4.1, attempts to compare costing data systematically were not definitive because of a lack of comparable data from expert interviews. Because costing data was unclear these findings must be taken in context and cannot be used for an accurate cost/benefit analysis. In order to obtain a consistent cost performance measure further research is necessary in this area.

¹⁹ The cost per interaction does not account for the cost of staffing. Staffing was not included in the calculation because it is a cost that is incurred in online as well as in traditional participation processes, and very little data was available through expert interviews. However, despite the lack of concrete data, many of those interviewed estimated that staffing costs for online processes were in fact less than those for traditional processes.

²⁰ There is currently no accepted standard of measurement in the BC government for calculating the cost per interaction for online participation. Further clarification and research is needed in this area in order to accurately determine which method is more or less appropriate for calculating the cost per interaction for different processes across government.

Aiming higher on the public participation continuum will increase the cost per interaction.

- **The length of the process**
Engaging the public for a longer period of time appears to increase the total cost of online participation. However, given that the startup cost of online participation is usually the greatest cost (excluding staffing), the cost per interaction is lower the more individuals participate and the cost per day is lower the longer the process continues²¹.
- **The decision to use a consultant**
Hiring a consultant will increase the cost per interaction.

TABLE 5.2: FACTORS AFFECTING THE COST OF ONLINE PARTICIPATION IN BC GOVERNMENT ENGAGEMENT PROCESSES

Participation Method	Length of Participation	Provider	Total Cost
Online Survey Online response form Email	14-90 days	In house	Minimal cost \$0-\$50.00 (without staffing costs)
Online response form Email Online discussion boards Electronic newsletter Web polls	75-900 days	Consultant	Moderate Cost \$5,000-\$100,000 (without staffing costs)

QUALITATIVE

Key benefits of using online participation methods to engage the public over more traditional methods include:

- **High response rate**
Online responses account for between 49 and 100 percent of responses in any given public consultation process examined in the case studies.
- **Extensive geographical reach**

²¹ When deciding on the length of the process, it is important to strike a balance between providing too little and too much time to participate. With too little time, the risk is not allowing individuals enough time to meaningfully engage. With too much time, the risk becomes maintaining the momentum and sustained interest of the broader public.

Online participation processes work well in situations where decision makers want to engage with individuals across broad geographic areas; it is especially useful where communities of interest are widely dispersed.

- **Increased access, especially for people with disabilities**
Online participation appeals to individuals who are physically not able to attend face-to-face meetings.
- **Individuals can speak their mind**
Online participation allows individuals to speak their own mind and not bow to the majority's thoughts, which can happen in more traditional processes such as face-to-face meetings.
- **Not time bound**
Online participation is not time bound, allowing individuals to express their opinion quickly or take more time to think about their responses and review background materials. Background materials are available for review 24 hours a day and 7 days a week.
- **Transparent**
Online participation can be more transparent by being able to easily provide the public with updates on the input received and where that input will be used.
- **Increased ease of data handling**
Online participation allows for quick turnaround time and ease of handling and organizing collected data, including the potential to automate data handling , such as with surveys that automatically compile data for analysis.

Although the longer term benefits of online participation methods were not measured in this report, anecdotal evidence suggests that online participation methods can help decrease consultation costs by shifting participation from face-to-face meetings; reduce staff workloads by gathering information more efficiently; decrease the Ministry's environmental impact by cutting down on travel; and save government resources in the long term by making better and more informed policy decisions.

5.4 RISKS AND MITIGATIONS

There are a number of associated risks with pursuing online participation; however most risks can be removed partially or entirely in some instances with appropriate mitigation strategies. The most common risks and their mitigation

strategies are listed below and are ranked from low to moderate to high. This ranking system is used as a scale to differentiate levels of risk within online participation, however the overall risk of pursuing online participation as a process is in fact relatively low, due to the numerous mitigation strategies available.

LOW RISK

- **Abuse from individuals and organizations**

There is a low degree risk that online participation processes will be abused by individual or organizations posting inappropriate material or batch responses.

Mitigation strategy: Based on interviews with BC public servants, the idea that abuse is a real risk in online participation processes largely seemed to be a myth. **The potential for abuse in an online setting is no more substantial than the potential for abuse when engaging through traditional means.** Strategies to lower this risk to a negligible level include only accepting legitimate responses by directing individuals to identify themselves before responding and monitoring and sorting public input manually as it comes in before posting.

MODERATE RISK

- **Internet accessibility and bandwidth capacity**

There is a moderate degree of risk that online participation processes will not be accessible to the public whose input decision makers are seeking because some individuals do not have access to the Internet. Furthermore, those individuals who do have access to the Internet may not have adequate bandwidth capacity to access the posted documentation.

Mitigation strategy: Online participation methods should be supported or integrated with traditional participation methods in situations where decision makers are concerned about universal access. The process, along with all the methods available, should be widely advertized, to ensure the public knows about the process. In order to mitigate problems concerning insufficient bandwidth, all documents should be available in both html and pdf formats.

- **Raising public expectations**

There is a moderate degree of risk that online participation processes will raise the public's expectations by: introducing unrealistic expectations and goals through open discussion; or mistakenly publicizing the Ministry's intentions as their official position and direction.

Mitigation strategy: Decision makers must clearly state the intended outcome of the process and the purpose of gathering input. Once the decision is made to engage the public the decision maker should make every effort to integrate the input into the policy process and respond to the public effectively. **This risk is equally applicable to traditional participation processes.**

- **Active participation methods**

There is a moderate degree of risk associated with using active participation methods instead of fixed menu methods because they offer a higher level of involvement along the public participation continuum. Engaging in a discussion with the public instead of simply informing them will inherently increase the risk of the process.

Mitigation strategy: If MOFR decides to engage at the discussion level of participation, the most effective way to mitigate increased risks is to moderate the discussion.

HIGH RISK

- **Misunderstanding complex issues**

There is a high degree of risk that if complex policies or technical issues are presented for public input through online participation methods they will be misunderstood.

Mitigation strategy: It is always important to provide clear and succinct background materials and instructions in online participation processes. If a misunderstanding does occur, the online discussion can be clarified with traditional methods of participation such as face-to-face meetings.

The outstanding risk with pursuing online participation is that whether the decision maker is seeking a low or high level of engagement along the participation continuum, a certain level of commitment is always necessary. Decision makers should take into account that it takes more time and effort, not less, to keep more people informed, educated, engaged and up-to-date on any given topic. Furthermore, any interaction with the public presents a certain level of risk, but the Ministry must also recognize that there are risks involved with not going out to seek public input on broad policy decisions as well.

5.5 MEASURING SUCCESS

The success of implementing online participation methods at MOFR can be assessed through three distinct performance measures.²² Success can be measured in the short term by:

1. Lower costs per interaction with the general public during participation processes.
2. An increased number of online interactions with the general public during participation processes.

Success can be measured in the long term by:

3. Better policy decisions on broad policy ideas. As Stephen Coleman (March 2004, p.20) notes “the ultimate test of value for an online consultation is whether it contributes to making better policy and legislation”.

5.6 NEXT STEPS

This section of the report aimed at providing a business case for MOFR to aide in making the decision whether to pursue online participation in policy decisions. It outlined where the opportunity for online participation exists at MOFR as well as the projected benefits, risks and mitigation strategies to be aware of should MOFR move forward with online participation in policy decisions in the future.

However, before moving forward with any major online participation processes it is recommended that further research be conducted into the cost of specific online participation methods.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS

²² Although the client did not specifically ask for performance measures to be created for online participation process, some preliminary ideas came out of the research that can be used at the client’s discretion. The performance measures above provide some issues to begin to think about, however, further research is needed in the area of performance measures.

“THE MEGAPHONE IS THE METAPHORICAL MEDIUM OF DEMAGOGIC POLITICS. MEGAPHONES TRANSMIT, BUT DO NOT RECEIVE; THEY AMPLIFY THE VOICES OF THE LEADERS ABOVE THOSE OF THE LED; THEY ARE TERRITORIAL, REACHING A GEOGRAPHICALLY-DEFINED PUBLIC IN A SPECIFIC SPACE; THEY ARE AUTHORITARIAN: IT IS HARD TO HECKLE A SPEAKER WITH A MEGAPHONE.”

STEPHEN COLEMAN
NEW MEDIATION AND DIRECT REPRESENTATION:
RECONCEPTUALISING REPRESENTATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE
2005, P. 2

Using online participation as a tool for engaging the broad public in policy decisions is a viable option for the Ministry of Forests and Range. The evidence presented by ministries across the BC public service suggests that pursuing online participation is a relatively low cost, low risk option for engagement. When the choice is made to go out and consult with the public, online participation presents a feasible method to consider in conjunction with other consultation methods, or in some cases on its own (see Table 2.1, p. 12). A variety of factors influence what type of public participation is appropriate for which situations, whether offline or online. A firm understanding of the benefits and risks associated with every method allows decision makers to make informed decisions in every situation.

From reviewing the literature, it becomes apparent that although many individuals and organizations are making use of online participation methods, there is little known about why some processes are successful and other are not. Because of the number of views expressed by various academics, all with their own area of expertise, consensus on the actual benefits and risks of use are difficult to obtain from the literature. Even when assessing the findings from the literature against MOFR’s guiding principles on public participation it was difficult to definitively judge whether online participation would be a benefit or barrier to achieving the overarching principles laid out by MOFR. Ryad Titah and Henri Barki, experts in e-government systems (2008, p. 42), argue the presence of so many unknowns is due to the fact that current research has failed to speak to two key concerns:

1. The factors influencing the effective adoption of online participation processes by the public; and
2. Understanding the factors influencing the successful use of online participation processes by the government.

However, the BC government case studies reveal that many ministries, including MOFR, are already successfully engaging the broad public through online means. Examining online public participation processes in action reveals a number of smart practices that lend themselves to the successful implementation of online engagement techniques. The business case suggests that despite the risks, there is an opportunity for MOFR to increase the efficiency of broad public participation processes by insightful planning and development around the use of online participation techniques such as fixed menu and active participation methods.

Apparent gaps in the literature and case studies include the environmental impact of using online public participation methods and the effects on staff workload. The decrease in transportation and printing costs alone suggest that the environmental impact of online participation processes would be significantly less than traditional methods, however this factor did not arise out of the literature or the expert interviews. Based on the literature, it is possible that staff workloads would decrease, however it has yet to be proven in the context of the BC government. Both of these factors are significant elements in online participation and require further research in the future.

How governments are making policy is changing in the 21st century. Changing public expectations, technology and media suggest that the public is pushing for a voice in decision-making; and expertise within the public is making that voice increasingly valuable. Difficult issues such as climate change and training and skills development require governments, stakeholders and the broad public to work together to find a solution (Lenihan, 2009, p.1). This trend is going to continue to drive governments across Canada towards more participatory models of decision making. By diversifying the number of ways with which MOFR can engage with the public, the Ministry can develop a more inclusive relationship with the public, improving the Ministry's ability to make stronger decisions.

However, the research does not suggest that an opportunity exists to abandon traditional participation methods entirely and focus exclusively on online participation methods as a panacea for informing and in turn being informed by the public. MOFR is currently at a learning phase, where the Ministry should take steps towards integrating online participation as another tool to compliment traditional participation methods already in its public participation framework. Before committing completely to online participation methods there is a need for increased technical savvy within the Ministry; better insight into what the public wants to engage on; and an understanding of how to keep the public engaged.

By staying in tune with innovations from national, provincial and local governments around the world who are already moving towards online participation²³, MOFR can continue to learn from other processes and practices.

²³ For example, the Australian Government is dramatically increasing their use of online communication channels in an effort to develop citizen-centered policy and programs (Australian Government, n.d.).

By keeping informed and continuing to take steps towards online participation, MOFR and the BC Government can potentially emerge as a leader in a new and exciting engagement medium with minimal projected costs and risks.

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APPENDIX A:

MINISTRY OF FORESTS AND RANGE POLICY
MANUAL
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (VOLUME 1, CHAPTER
6)

DRAFT: MINISTRY OF FORESTS AND RANGE POLICY MANUAL PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (VOLUME 1, CHAPTER 6)

Scope

This policy covers the process and principles for public participation in the Ministry of Forests and Range's policy decisions.

It is not the intent of this policy to focus on participation mandated by regulatory or legal requirements, such as First Nations consultation. Instead, this policy aims to capture a broader array of interested groups and agencies including, communities, municipalities, special interest groups, the public at large, related industries or businesses, and other departments or ministries within the government.

Purpose

This policy is designed to ensure that the Ministry's policy decisions are fully informed by all affected parties.

Policy

It is the policy of this Ministry to build better policy solutions through public participation when determined to be appropriate.

Principles

A successful public participation strategy carefully considers both the underlying principles of public participation as well as the process.

The following key principles serve to inform successful public participation in the Ministry of Forests and Range with a common set of values.

Principles of Public Participation	
Accessible	All parties who are affected or interested in the issue have an opportunity to participate voluntarily.
Fair and Accountable	All views offered are considered. The process is fair, objective and carried out in a respectable and accountable manner.
Transparent	Results of the public's input are clearly demonstrated, and the public understands how public participation affects the decision or outcome.
Timely	The process is conducted in a timely and efficient manner, allowing enough time for the public to participate in a meaningful way.
Flexible	The process recognizes inherent limits in time and resources, allowing the level of public participation to be reflective of the nature of the content, the significance of the issue and the requirements of the participants.

Process

The following process provides guidance to help determine when public participation is desirable and how to proceed with participation, allowing for flexibility in diverse situations.

Proposing Public Participation: A Six Step Model

1. Determine *why* public participation is required.
2. Consider *what* assumptions, principles, issues, options and outcomes are involved in the decision.
3. Identify *who* will be impacted by the policy.
4. Determine *when* in the process public participation is needed.
5. Establish *where* public participation will take place.
6. Decide *how* public participation will proceed.

To determine how public participation will proceed, information must be obtained to assess:

- a. How priorities for public participation will be established?
- b. What structure and method of participation will be used?
- c. What materials will be provided to the public to consult on?
- d. If the timeline and cost is realistic?
- e. How the public's input will be used and shared?

Level

Before moving ahead, it is important to establish the level of participation required. Participation will range on a continuum from informative measures such as posting notifications of change in newspapers or on websites to giving citizens full decision making authority. The increasing levels of consultation processes progress from low to high as follows:

Inform/Educate → Gather Information → Discuss → Collaborate → Partner → Transference

As a general principle, the more significant the impact of the decision, the greater the need for a more sophisticated approach in involving the public.

APPENDIX B:

GOVERNMENT ONLINE QUESTIONNAIRE FOR BC PUBLIC SERVANTS

GOVERNMENT ONLINE: QUESTIONNAIRE FOR BC PUBLIC SERVANTS

1. For this project, what method of consultation did you use

Online only	
Online and face-to-face	
Online and other methods	
Online, face-to-face and other methods	

2. For this project, who was your target client group:

Government to government	
Government to public	
Government to stakeholders	
Client service	
Other (please specify)	

3. For this project, what method of online consultation did you use:

Electronic written submission (email)	
Online survey/questionnaire/response form	
Q&A	
Noticeboard	
Online discussion board/forum	
Web-poll	
Social networks	
Web panel	
Digital “town hall meetings”	
Other (please specify)	

4. Why did you decide on this method of consultation? What were the internal or external factors affecting your decision?

5. What was the total number of collected responses:

6. How long did you collect data for

Less than one month	
Less than 3 months	
Less than 6 months	
Over 6 months	
Ongoing	

7. What risks did you anticipate to encounter during online consultation?
8. Did you do anything to mitigate those risks?
9. Were there any risks you did not anticipate?
10. What were the direct costs of the online component of consultation?
11. What was the total cost of consultation (including face-to-face and other methods of consultation)?
12. If you were to run an online consultation process again, is there anything you would do differently?
13. What were the benefits of online consultation?
14. Based on your experience, would you ever use online consultation again:

a. Yes	
b. Yes, but only with other methods	
c. No	

APPENDIX C:

GOVERNMENT ONLINE SURVEY FOR THE POLICY SECRETARIAT

GOVERNMENT ONLINE: SURVEY
POLICY SECRETARIAT MEETING
MARCH 25, 2009

1. Have you ever considered using online technologies for involving the public in your policy work?
 - a. If so, where did/would you use it?
 - b. What barriers did you encounter? If any?
 - c. What types of innovations or successes did you experience?

2. Why would you not consider using online technology in public engagement strategies?
Where would you NEVER use this?

3. What benefits/downfalls would you see with implementing this in your work environment?

4. How feasible do you think it is to implement online technology in public engagement strategies at the Ministry of Forests and Range?

Unsure	Not Feasible	Somewhat Feasible	Feasible	Very Feasible
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5. Any additional comment?

May I contact you with further questions if necessary? If yes, please include your name and email below.

NAME:

PHONE:

EMAIL:

Further comments, questions or

Kristin Smith, MPA Candidate

concerns?

Strategic Policy and Planning Branch

Please contact:

Phone: (250) 356-7905

Email: Kristin.Smith@gov.bc.ca

APPENDIX D:

UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA HUMAN RESEARCH
ETHICS BOARD APPROVAL

APPENDIX E:

THE E-METHODS GUIDE: MATCHING TOOLS TO KEY DIMENSIONS

(Macintosh, Coleman & Lalljee, 2005,pp.16-29)