

# Civility in Online Discussion: The Case of the Foreign Policy Dialogue

A. Christie Hurrell  
*University of British Columbia*

*Abstract:* This paper focuses on Web-based discussion in an online policy consultation and examines specific discourse features to evaluate how the concept of civility served to shape public discourse in a moderated, rule-based forum. The study results reveal that citizen participants in the case study under consideration developed, maintained, and enforced norms of civil discourse, and that these norms helped to promote understanding and consensus-building. The study also cautions that civil dialogue alone cannot ensure effective communication between governments and citizens. Civil dialogue can be used to marginalize some participants, and it does not necessarily allow dialogue participants to effectively transmit their opinions to government decision-makers.

*Resumé :* Cet article porte sur une discussion Web effectuée dans le contexte d'une évaluation de politiques en ligne. Il examine certains aspects de cette discussion afin d'évaluer comment le concept de courtoisie a influencé le discours public lors d'un forum dirigé. Les résultats de cette recherche révèlent que les citoyens participant à cette étude de cas ont élaboré, maintenu et renforcé des normes de discours civique, et que ces normes ont promu une bonne entente et l'obtention d'un consensus. L'étude démontre cependant que le dialogue civique seul ne peut pas assurer une communication efficace entre les citoyens et leurs gouvernements. Ainsi, on peut utiliser un dialogue civique pour marginaliser certains participants. D'autre part, un tel dialogue ne permet pas forcément aux participants de communiquer leurs avis aux décideurs gouvernementaux.

*Keywords:* Electronic culture, Discourse analysis, Citizen engagement

## Introduction

In recent decades, studies have shown that Canadian citizens are becoming less engaged with traditional political institutions. Declines in voter turnout, less participation in political parties, and mistrust in government are all signs of Canadians' dissatisfaction with political life (Gidengil, Blais, Nevitte, & Nadeau, 2004; Nevitte, 1996). To try to combat this dissatisfaction, governments at all levels are using new and non-traditional methods to try to re-engage Canadians. Internet-based policy consultations are becoming a more common method for

---

Christie Hurrell is the Communications and Outreach Manager at the Centre for Health and Environment Research, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC. E-mail: hurrell@interchange.ubc.ca.

**Canadian Journal of Communication, Vol 30 (2005) 633-648**  
©2005 Canadian Journal of Communication Corporation

governments to attempt to consult with citizens on policy issues and to facilitate more sustained and meaningful processes of engagement (Phillips & Orsini, 2002). But while the Internet is increasingly being used as a tool for gathering citizen input during the policymaking process, much debate exists among theorists and practitioners about the possibility of democratic deliberation in online forums. Proponents of the Internet's ability to re-engage citizens in the political process argue that civil society and public debate are being revitalized, partly through new technologies such as the Internet (Mitra, 2001). Critics, however, point to the anarchic and balkanized nature of much online discourse, which can be fragmented and confrontational (Hague & Loader, 1999; Wilhelm, 2004). If online consultations descend into ad hominem attacks and splintered debates, participants are unlikely to find the exercise gratifying and do not have much hope of making a meaningful impact on public-policy decisions. Some observers of online consultations have advocated establishing a set of guidelines to inform online participation and using moderators to enforce these guidelines (Coleman & Gøetze, 2001; Edwards, 2004). This paper takes the case of a specific online consultation and examines how it was designed and operated using a set of "civil rules" as the benchmark by which online discussion was judged. I will examine how the concept of civility served to shape the debate in this online forum, and I will explore how it both enabled and limited discussion in a public dialogue online.

#### **Citizen engagement and public consultation in Canada**

Canadian experiments with qualitative consultation methods in general, and with online consultations in particular, have been spurred on by a citizenry that is increasingly knowledgeable about public-policy issues, but is uninvolved with traditional political actions such as voting or party membership (Institute on Governance, 1998). Canadian citizens are concerned about many policy issues, but they are sceptical of politicians and traditional political parties (Nevitte, 1996). This trend is reflected in a recent national study, which shows that while over a quarter of Canadians had signed a petition or had searched for information on a political issue, only one-in-eight Canadians had expressed their views on an issue by contacting a newspaper or a politician (Statistics Canada, 2004). Governments are using public-policy consultations in an attempt to engage citizens in the policy-making process. These consultations can take numerous forms, including face-to-face round tables, online "workbooks" where citizens are asked to work through a set of questions posed by the government, or relatively free-form online discussion forums where citizens discuss policy issues with one another. Recent examples of Canadian policy consultations that used the Internet in conjunction with offline methods of engagement include:

- the Romanow Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada, which ran from 2001 to 2002. The Commission established a website with detailed resources and materials related to its public hearings. The website also invited visitors to fill in a consultation workbook and to respond to e-surveys on

health issues. Over 16,000 people filled in the online workbooks (Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada, 2002);

- the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities' consultation on the Canada Pension Plan Disability program. This consultation ran between 2002 and 2003; it invited people to respond to a series of polls and to share their own experiences with the CPP. During its run, this consultation received over 15,000 visits (Canada, Standing Committee on Human Resources Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities, 2003);
- Indian and Northern Affairs' consultation on First Nations governance. This consultation, which ran from 2001 to 2003, included an online component in the form of an interactive website (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2002). (Longford & Hurrell, in press)

These new tools of consultation and citizen engagement attempt to move beyond traditional advisory boards or opinion polls to more directly engage with and consult a broad range of citizens. It is hoped that these consultative exercises will not only give legitimacy to the decisions of the government, but will yield more engaged citizens and better policy. The Internet is seen to offer some advantages over face-to-face consultations, including its potential to engage rural and youth populations and its convenience for busy Canadians unlikely to attend time-consuming public meetings (Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2004). However, citizen-engagement processes are not without their critics (Institute on Governance, 1998). Many politicians and policymakers are concerned about how citizen engagement and consultation may affect their professional roles, and they are also wary of tampering with tried and tested methods of policy development (Canadian Policy Research Networks, 2000; Institute on Governance, 1998). In addition, implementing consultative processes, especially Web-based ones, can be challenging for hierarchical government departments, which find it difficult to cope with the horizontal, networked structure of the Internet (Canadian Policy Research Networks, 2000). Online consultations in Canada remain in an experimental phase, partly because of these issues, and also because not all Canadians have access to the Internet (Statistics Canada, 2003). Currently, online consultations are generally used to complement face-to-face or print-based consultation processes, and they are considered pilot projects or experiments by government departments (Cook, 2003).

#### **The Foreign Policy Dialogue**

The Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) initiated a Foreign Policy Dialogue/Dialogue sur la politique étrangère (Dialogue) with Canadian citizens from January 22 to May 1, 2003, which included a significant online component, in addition to town halls, expert round tables, a youth forum, and other offline events. The goal of the Dialogue was to gather citizen opinion on Canada's role in the world. In comparison with most other Canadian online consultations, the Dialogue received a high number of participants and

offered a high level of interactivity. The online component of the Dialogue was a partnership between DFAIT and the by Design eLab, a Toronto-based civil-society media-development and facilitation unit. This partnership, which is notable in the history of Canadian consultations, was reflected in the visual presence of the website, which featured the logos of both organizations on all pages. Visually, the Dialogue site resembled other official government websites. The civil-society partner was responsible for the design and maintenance of the site, as well as for screening all posts to the site to make sure they adhered to a set of “civil rules.” The civil rules were developed by the civil-society partners through past experience hosting online discussion spaces; the rules required participants to agree to take responsibility for their messages, to stay on topic, to refrain from posting advertisements, and to respect the judgments of the civil-society moderators. They also made clear that the purpose of the site was to facilitate discussion for people interested in the topic of Canada’s foreign policy. All participants had to agree to abide by the civil rules by clicking an “I agree” box as they registered to participate in the Dialogue, and each post to the site was reviewed by moderators before appearing on the public site. The Dialogue site provided resources and question-and-answer sections about the moderation process, in order to make it as transparent as possible. The website alluded to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in its description of how the moderators were committed to ensuring the rights of the group while at the same time respecting individual free speech: “this website space is a civil public space where citizens with diverse opinions and communication skills feel welcome to engage in these important deliberations within the reasonable limits of expression of a free and democratic society (as captured in the civil rules)” (Foreign Policy Dialogue, 2003).

The bilingual Dialogue website ([www.foreign-policy-dialogue.ca](http://www.foreign-policy-dialogue.ca)) consisted of two main sections: in one, citizens were invited to respond to a set of questions posed by DFAIT; in the other, a discussion section, citizens could participate in a less-structured set of forums, where they debated foreign-policy issues with one another. Both sections were organized to allow participants to respond to a policy paper developed by DFAIT. The question-and-answer section laid out a series of questions around five topics relating to foreign policy, and citizen responses to these questions appeared beneath each question. The discussion section was organized around the same five themes of “The Three Pillars,” “Security,” “Prosperity,” “Values and Culture,” and “Conclusion: The World We Want.” Beyond this broad thematic breakdown, however, each discussion forum was completely free-form, and the content was driven by participants. Any participant could initiate a new “thread” or topic of discussion, and messages were displayed in chronological order, grouped by topic. Each forum was bilingual, and participants posted their comments in the language of their choice. The forums were dominated by English-language participants.

Besides the two interactive sections, the Dialogue website also contained extensive background information about the website partners and the consultation process, as well as a number of resources on Canadian foreign policy. The Dia-

logue site received almost 1.5 million hits and was visited by more than 62,000 unique users. Over 2,000 messages were posted to the discussion forum, and the discussion paper was downloaded over 28,000 times (Jeffrey, 2003). However, the forum section of the site came to be dominated by a small group of frequent visitors. Although visitors to the website were required to register in order to participate in the Dialogue, the provision of personal information such as gender, place of residence, age, and educational level was voluntary. Most participants did not provide this information, so demographic information about Dialogue participants was not readily available.

There were fifteen moderators who worked on the Dialogue project. They were volunteers, drawn mainly from the university-student community. There was also a smaller number of paid staff who performed moderation duties along with specialized technical and administrative roles. The moderators were identified as members of the general public in the "Frequently Asked Questions" section of the website, and it was emphasized that they did not speak for the Minister or the Department of Foreign Affairs. The moderators were not personally identified on the website. All moderators were given training on how to use the Dialogue's Web-based interface to approve or reject posts based on the criteria outlined in the civil rules. This training was also intended to increase intermoderator reliability, so that moderators were making consistent decisions. When moderators were unsure whether a post violated the civil rules, they were instructed to hold the post and to alert the Project Director, who then used her discretion to determine which posts were accepted. I volunteered as a moderator, and my interest in the concept of civility in online discussion arises from my personal experiences moderating messages posted to the Dialogue website.

### **Engaging the public**

Many theorists have, in recent years, examined the Internet's ability to provide a medium for public discussion and a conduit from a periphery of citizens to central decision-making bodies. An important concern with regard to the nature of public discussion online is the predominance of aggressive and/or fragmented rhetoric. The disjointed and aggressive nature of some online discussion has been noted in consultations taking place in France, the U.K., and the U.S. (Coleman & Gøetze, 2001; Docter & Dutton, 1998). Some have shown how this rhetoric can destroy attempts at purposive and deliberative discussion (Benson, 1996; Connery, 1997), while others have argued that it is natural and even cathartic (Coate, 1997; Millard, 1997). Discourse features and norms of online interaction are important factors that affect the Internet's ability to function as a space of public discussion. When language is freed from the conventions of face-to-face conversation, the lack of common meanings and practices can destabilize online interaction and preclude deliberative discussion (Salter, 2003).

A number of theorists have found that in the absence of common discourse conventions, the concept of civility can be useful for evaluating modern public discussion (Hauser, 1999; Keane, 2003; Kingwell, 1995). "Civility" has been defined as a commitment by a group of people with certain commonalities to

adhere to some norms of behaviour. This commitment is pragmatic and situational, and it is bounded up in the notion of civility, an “orientation toward understanding, not agreement; [which] makes for a political conversation in which we try to sharpen our self-interpretation as common citizens of a society in need of justification” (Kingwell, 1995, p. 230). Civility is a norm that governs discussion outside of the private sphere. Unlike the concept of respect, it brings “a clear public perception to awareness” (Arnett & Arneson, 1999, p. 286). Civility is also distinct from politeness, a quality associated with etiquette and formality. Although politeness and civility are related, a focus on politeness may exclude discussion that is robust, lively, or informal, but still oriented toward understanding:

It is challenging to establish politeness standards that all public discussion can measure up to, without sacrificing some of the irascibility of discussion. This highlights the reason why civility should be redefined as a construct that encompasses, but also goes beyond, politeness. (Papacharissi, 2004, p. 266)

Keane (2003) describes civility as a perpetual negotiation between differences that is “morally ambivalent,” requiring constant co-operation and discussion. Although Keane’s concept of civility is impossible to define in terms of etiquette or discursive rules, he does offer some examples of how civility is manifested: “civil are those individuals and groups who use such techniques as indirection, face-saving, and self-restraint to demonstrate their commitment, in tactful speech and action and bodily manners, to the worldly principle of a peaceful plurality of morals” (p. 199). Thus, civility is in part a rhetorical concept, emerging from voices who may not share values or ends, but who are committed to finding mutually acceptable outcomes to common problems (Hauser, 1999).

The next section of this paper will examine how the concept of civility was explored by those who participated in the Foreign Policy Dialogue. I will look at the discourse norms that developed in this particular consultation and probe how the civil rules, and the moderators who enforced them, affected the type of dialogue that was able to develop.

### **Exploring public discussion**

This paper focuses on the discussion forum section of the Dialogue website, since it allowed participants to communicate directly with one another. The data set that is the focus of this paper contains 364 posts from 23 discussion threads and represents a time period beginning on January 22, 2003 and ending on the last day of the consultation, April 29, 2003.<sup>1</sup> The data set contains only those posts that were deemed by the moderators to comply with the civil rules.<sup>2</sup> I coded the data set using discourse analysis, which examines both the intention of speakers, inferred through speech evidence, and the interaction between participants (Herring, 2004). The goal of this analysis is to identify discourse characteristics that are persistently and demonstrably present in the sample, and to do this, I chose to analyze threads of discussion. A thread can be defined as a series of exchanges between two or more people, all on the same topic. Because my research addresses inter-

personal exchanges as well as specific discourse characteristics, I have coded individual messages both for their content and for their contribution to the discussion. Since the concept of civility is somewhat abstract and context-dependent, I wanted to devise coding structures that were based on phenomena I observed in the data, instead of trying to fit the data into preconceived categories. Through my role as a moderator on the Dialogue website, I developed a high level of familiarity with the content of the discussion forums, and I began to notice some persistent conventions and norms arising in the discussions. Some of these discourse norms seemed to relate to the notion of civility as a quality that helps negotiate conversations among individuals who share a common goal but who may not share beliefs or morals. Some of the specific speech acts that I observed in the data included providing evidence or personal information in order to substantiate an opinion, quoting other participants to demonstrate one's attentiveness, using negotiation techniques, and showing restraint. In addition, there were a number of techniques used by site moderators to enforce the civil rules or encourage civil and purposive speech more generally. All of these techniques have been recognized by other theorists as contributing to a civil space that is responsive to difference and committed to purposive discussion (Coleman & Götze, 2001; Donath, 1999; Rouner, 2000).

#### **Discussion and analysis of results**

The results of this study show that the majority of participants worked to develop, enforce, and maintain specific discourse norms that encourage civil dialogue. The discourse characteristics that had the most significant impact on civility lie in three different areas: development of trust and online reputation, use of negotiation techniques, and interaction with moderators.

Analysis of the sample indicates that participants actively worked to develop and enforce civil norms. Participants developed group norms around two main areas: developing trust and an online reputation, and using negotiation techniques. Discourse characteristics associated with the first area include providing evidence to back up claims made, quoting other participants to maintain clarity and focus, and providing personal evidence to prove one's expertise on the subject matter at hand. Discourse characteristics associated with the second area include inventing options for mutual gain, simultaneously confirming and disconfirming another's position, and showing restraint.

Establishing a trustworthy online reputation in the context of the Foreign Policy Dialogue involved consistently performing speech acts that added to one's perceived trustworthiness and reliability. In online environments where strangers attempt to discuss important issues without any prior knowledge of each other and without the social cues present in face-to-face debate, an online reputation can act as a necessary condition for participants to give each other the benefit of the doubt and to work through the diversity of evidence, experience, and interactional styles that meet on the Internet. As Dean (2001) states:

The political norms at stake in the information age have less to do with truth . . . than with a credibility that is never secured. Such an unstable credibility, moreover, makes alliance particularly problematic: how might opposing constituencies (not to mention the individuals within them) trust one another under these conditions? Clearly, particular subject positions (those attempting to warrant themselves with reference to a specific authority or experience, say) and claims will have to work to earn and retain credibility. (p. 263)

Dialogue participants undertook this “work” of establishing their online credentials by providing evidence to substantiate their comments and by quoting other participants. A trustworthy set of credentials was an important precondition for participants to accept at face value each other’s remarks and to debate opinions in a civil way. The evidence that participants provided to back up claims made in the forums included links to media and informational websites, quotations from foreign-policy experts, and personal experience and expertise. Participants revealed private information about themselves, such as their profession or their political affiliation, in order to provide credence to their professed expertise on a certain issue or to demonstrate that their personal life choices coincided with their political views. When participants consistently made statements without providing evidence, they were almost always criticized and discredited by others. As one participant chastised another, “You might also remind yourself that you also have the responsibility to research and present your own ideas and proofs . . . we’re on the Internet after all” (“Vox,” 2003). However, although backing up claims made on the consultation website garnered respect from one’s opponents, it did not always orient the discussion toward agreement or even understanding, for opposing experiences and media perspectives could always be found and pitted against one another.

Quoting was another method that helped participants establish an online reputation as careful readers of one another’s posts. In an online environment, this practice of quoting can be seen to stand in for the physical cues that people exhibit when listening to each other: people quote each other in order to agree or disagree with a particular aspect of a post, or to ask for clarification or evidence (Benson, 1996). The use of excessive quoting to “interrupt” other participants in online debate (Herring, 1999) was not used in these forums, and participants consistently quoted others’ words in context and in full. As one participant wrote to another, “I am just going to quote you here just to keep our thoughts clear, don’t take it as being rude or anything like that, that is not my intention at all” (“Barrettm82”, 2003). Participants used quotations to clarify opinions or to request more information on a certain point, and the technique was helpful in building the common body of knowledge that orients participants in a debate toward understanding and agreement.

These efforts at establishing a stable, trustworthy reputation in an online environment can be seen as surprising, since many theorists have emphasized how the Internet is perfectly suited to encourage identity play and creative misrepresentation, that “on the Internet, individuals construct their identities, doing so in relation to ongoing dialogues, and not as an act of pure consciousness” (Poster, 2001).

While Dialogue contributors did reveal different parts of their identities with relation to certain thread topics, their online personae were almost always perceived to represent their real-life bodies and subject positions. Only one significantly prolific contributor to the forums did exhibit the kind of playfulness that Poster describes. This participant, who preferred to submit posts in the form of satirical rhyming poetry and never gave any hints as to his/her motivations or goals, was roundly ignored by his/her fellow participants. Perhaps, as Dean (2001) notes, this participant's behaviour threatened the others, who had come to rely on each other's online reputation as the only basis for trust in an online public space. In addition, the hesitation among participants to play with different identities may have been a result of the Dialogue's nature as an official, government-sponsored forum. The site's position as an official venue for citizens to communicate their concerns to a government ministry likely caused people to perceive it very differently from other online political spaces not connected to government, such as the forums connected with news sites or communities of interest.

Another discourse norm that was prevalent in the discussion forums was the use of negotiation techniques, which are commonly employed in all kinds of political discourse, whether online or face—to face (Barret, 1991; Smith, 2002). A commitment to negotiation is one of the ways that participants encouraged discussion in a forum populated by people with disparate opinions and interests. Negotiation demands that participants look beyond their own position and consider how the contributions of others can play a role in the discussion. It can contribute to civil speech because such a commitment recognizes that meaning is open to negotiation, and it encourages respectful listening and additive change. Some of the negotiation techniques employed by Dialogue participants include inventing options for mutual gain, simultaneously confirming and disconfirming an opponent's position, and showing restraint.

Many of the Dialogue's most successful interactions, when success is defined as finding common ground with respect to a mutual problem, occurred when participants were able to see beyond what they perceived to be the falsehoods or inconsistencies in another's position and combined parts of their own position with that of their opponent's to create a mutually satisfactory option. Inventing options for mutual gain required participants to look for the value or substance in what others had to say, even if it appeared that their post contained no significant or agreeable ideas. For example, two participants debating Canada's position on joining the war in Iraq were able to agree on the necessity of fighting terrorists, even though they disagreed on the main issue at hand. Identifying this shared belief allowed the two discussants to debate the merits of the "war on terror" in a civil way instead of merely bickering over whether Canada should go to war. In this example, one of two discussants was able to create an opportunity for mutual gain, but often, a third viewpoint was required to identify a shared opinion. Having a third person step into an increasingly unproductive debate often served to bring the discussion back to more substantive issues and consistently reminded participants to treat each other in a civil manner. As one participant wrote: "our

differences need to be used to enrich our solutions. Let's not try to defeat those who differ. Let's see them for what they truly are: an invaluable resource for expanding our own (oh so very limited) experiential base" ("Jibongo", 2003).

Another negotiating technique that was employed by Dialogue participants is the simultaneous confirmation and disconfirmation of an opponent's statement. This technique promotes civil speech because it allows the critical participant to suggest a new option in the discussion, while allowing the criticized participant to save face. Responses that begin with statements like "I understand your position, but I must respond . . ." or "I agree with your basic argument, although I see faults in some of your examples . . ." tended to be much more favourably received in the Dialogue than posts that only attacked and disconfirmed the content of another's statements. This technique demonstrates the quality of restraint, which is associated with civility by many theorists (Keane, 2003; Kingwell, 1995; Smith, 2002). Restraint was an important quality that helped maintain the civility of the discussion. When one participant exhibited a lack of restraint—for example, by criticizing others' spelling mistakes or malapropisms—then others followed suit, and the discussion would descend into name-calling and *ad hominem* attacks, sometimes so much so that a moderator would have to intervene.

The use of restraint and other negotiation techniques familiar to most political discussions significantly enhanced civil speech in the Foreign Policy Dialogue. A commitment to understanding requires participants to realize that meanings are open to negotiation, and negotiation techniques became central to discovering common goals and interests in the midst of seemingly opposing opinions. Like the technique of developing an online reputation, using negotiation techniques became one of the norms that participants developed in order to encourage civil speech. These two groups of strategies became the most important participant-driven norms in the Foreign Policy Dialogue, and they were for the most part effective in maintaining civility.

To understand the role that moderators played in maintaining the civil rules, I coded instances where the moderators entered the dialogue, as well as occasions where participants made specific reference to the moderators or the civil rules. The aim of the Dialogue's design and administration team was to make the presence of the moderators felt in a clear yet unimposing and transparent fashion. As previously discussed, participants were required to agree to abide by the civil rules before they could participate in the Dialogue. The civil rules made the presence of the moderators clear, so all participants should have known that posts to the Dialogue were read and approved by civil-society moderators. The website's "Frequently Asked Questions" page also explained the moderators' status as members of the general public, not government or private-sector employees. Participants' recognition of and positive attitude toward the moderators supports the notion that citizens can feel comfortable participating in a rule-bound framework of discussion. In fact, the only time that the moderators were criticized by participants was when they were perceived as not enforcing the civil rules rigorously enough.

There was a whole thread in one discussion forum protesting that moderators were accepting posts that were either off-topic or not serious.

Because the discussion forums very rarely contained content that violated the civil rules, the moderators did not have to reject many posts or intervene in many borderline-uncivil discussions. However, when they did engage in the latter act, participants were not resentful of their presence. In fact, participants welcomed the moderators' interventions, and when the consultation closed, many frequent participants logged on to thank the moderators for their hard work and dedication. These thank-you messages often made a distinction between the government partners and the civil-society partners, indicating that the participants realized and appreciated the distinction.

Although it is evident that most participants felt the moderator's presence very clearly, it is difficult to prove whether or not the moderators and the civil rules had a major influence on the development of discourse norms in the Foreign Policy Dialogue. The civil rules themselves do not require civil speech that is oriented toward understanding and consensus-building; however, they do make some basic provisions for civility and respect. Participants knew that their words would be moderated and therefore that to attempt to post uncivil comments would be a waste of time. Generally, though, the qualities I have described above, including reputation-building, negotiation techniques, and trust-building, emerged amongst the participants themselves, without active facilitation from moderators. Whether these qualities would have emerged in a free-form, unmoderated forum is debatable. It is possible that the very presence of the civil rules, and the Dialogue's status as a state-sponsored forum, discouraged certain people from participating and contributed toward an environment of self-censorship among participants. So while moderated discussions may help to encourage civil and productive dialogue, they may also promote covert forms of domination and exclusion through the power wielded by the moderators and the participants themselves.

#### **The limits of civility**

The designers and facilitators of the Foreign Policy Dialogue decided that civility was an important quality to require and promote within the context of an online policy consultation. Participants also worked to maintain civil dialogue through their compliance with the civil rules and the development and maintenance of their own civil norms. The discourse also followed Kingwell's (1995) more pragmatic definition of civility as a context-dependent orientation toward understanding and a respect for difference. Although the civil rules made some basic provisions for civility, the practices that came to create a more nuanced dialogue framework were developed amongst the people involved, as they negotiated shared meaning and discourse conventions that the majority of participants could accept. Within the Foreign Policy Dialogue, divergent views were accepted and integrated into a larger debate when participants adhered to civil rules and norms. In this way, participants were able to address a wide variety of interests and concerns related to Canada's foreign policy and begin to come up with solutions to shared problems. Thus, civil speech appears to have allowed a number of individ-

uals to converse on relatively equal terms about issues of mutual importance. However, Fraser (1993) points out that no public space is culturally neutral, and therefore there is a danger that “expressive norms of one cultural group” (p. 17) might be privileged over others when diverse participants attempt to interact in public discussion. The fact that the Dialogue’s registration logs are dominated by men and the example of the participant who was marginalized because his/her discourse style did not fit the norms of the group suggest the concept of civility did not provide a discursive space that was inclusive for all who might have been interested in participating.

Of the five participants who made their gender known in the forums, four of these were men.<sup>3</sup> Six people also identified their occupation, and the majority of those participants held professional jobs requiring postsecondary education. This information is concurrent with Internet user statistics, which reveal that young men with high levels of education are the dominant group online (Statistics Canada, 2003). Herring (1993) has shown how most online discussion and interaction differ between men and women. She found that computer-mediated conversation tends to be dominated by a masculine, agonistic style, and that women are less likely to make strong assertions, promote themselves, challenge others, or assert themselves authoritatively. They are also more prone to “lurking” in online environments, meaning that they monitor the discussion but do not make a contribution. Empirical work has been done showing that racially marginalized groups also face significant barriers to full participation online (Lekhti, 2000). As Keane (2003) notes, such barriers are not necessarily overcome by civility, which can be part of a “privileged discourse of the privileged [that] suppose[s] and require[s] the exclusion of whole categories of the world’s population because of such ‘inferior’ characteristics as skin colour, gender, religion or lack of upbringing” (p. 199). So while a discourse norm such as providing personal credentials to substantiate an argument may add authority to a participant’s argument and contribute to a productive discussion, the practice may also serve as a way for that person to dominate, exclude, and intimidate others. Certainly, attention to issues of inclusiveness and plurality must continue to be a priority for online-consultation administrators, moderators, and participants.

### **Influence on government**

Although Dialogue participants succeeded in having some productive discussions amongst themselves, they were not in an easy position to forcefully articulate their public opinions to government. Unlike lobby groups or established community organizations, the participants in the Foreign Policy Dialogue were (or appeared to be) complete strangers at the outset of the consultation. Thus, they had to go through all of the discursive steps of establishing trust and reputation, as well as finding common understandings through dialogue. This process is very important, but in the context of a time-sensitive policy consultation, is it enough? For democracy to be served, deliberative input must bear some relationship to decisions actually made and policies actually put into place. But if the net result of deliberative discussion in a forum such as the Foreign Policy Dialogue is scattered

clusters of priorities and opinions, then it is very difficult for policymakers to effectively integrate citizen input into the policymaking process. The majority of the discussion forums were concerned with negotiating meaning and developing shared priorities. Hardly any time was spent attempting to summarize and articulate those shared goals. As a result, it was difficult for the civil-society analysts, who were charged with the task of reporting the net results of the discussion forums, to simply summarize the public opinion generated in these discussion forums. The "Report to Canadians" paper that was produced by DFAIT to summarize the results of the consultation and to indicate how they would be incorporated into the policy process does mention the online discussion forums, but hardly draws upon them at all in its discussion of the policy advice given to DFAIT from citizens. Not only did the discussion forum represent a very small (and likely not a very diverse) percentage of citizen input into the Dialogue, this input was not organized in a manner that could easily be assimilated into the policymaking process.

If policy consultations are to make a contribution toward the ideal of giving citizens the power to direct and legitimate the decisions of government (Mills, 1956), continued efforts must be made to ensure that the guidelines shaping public discussion do not overtly or subtly exclude potential participants based on their experiential base or communication style. In addition, participants in a discussion must be able to articulate their negotiated positions to policymakers who are receptive to this input. In an online context, the features that allow these conditions of inclusiveness and influence to arise within policy consultations are still being developed. In the case of the Foreign Policy Dialogue, a set of civil rules and a group of civil-society moderators were used in an attempt to regulate discussion and orient it toward making some recommendations to Canada's foreign policymakers. While these guidelines did allow some citizens with divergent views to develop common priorities on some political issues, they also appear to have allowed participants to exclude and intimidate others based on their gender, educational experience, and communicative style. In addition, the broad topics under discussion in each forum did not develop into focused policy advice. As experiments with online consultations continue, their sponsors and facilitators will need to carefully consider these issues if these public discussions are to have a truly meaningful impact on public policy.

### Notes

1. The data set was limited to make the analysis task more manageable, and a software program called Qualrus aided with data management and coding. Qualrus is a qualitative analysis software program that uses an array of intelligent computational strategies to assist with coding and qualitative data analysis.
2. Of the 2,116 posts submitted to the discussion forum portion of the Dialogue, only 60 were rejected. Some of the rejected posts were tests submitted by site administrators or programmers; some were rejected because they were off-topic, profane or libellous, or "spam" mail.
3. As mentioned earlier, participants were invited, but not required, to provide demographic details about themselves. Most participants did not provide such details. My very provisional knowledge of the gender of participants is based on the first name they provided in the registration logs, a

piece of information that was required in order to participate. Based on this information, 12% of participants were female, 41% were male, and the remainder could not be positively identified as male or female, because the individual either used a nickname to register or their name did not positively indicate gender.

## References

- Arnett, Ronald, & Arneson, Pat. (1999). *Dialogic civility in a cynical age*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Barret, Harold. (1991). *Rhetoric and civility: Human development, narcissism, and the good audience*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- “Barretm82”. (2003, February 18). *USA not OK*. Message posted to Foreign Policy Dialogue Discussion Forum, archived at <http://www.foreign-policy-dialogue.ca/en/discussion/index.php?m=1469&>.
- Benson, Thomas. (1996). Rhetoric, civility, and community: Political debate on computer bulletin boards. *Communication Quarterly*, 44(3), 359-378.
- Canada. Standing Committee on Human Resources Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. (2003). Listening to Canadians: A first view of the future of the Canada Pension Plan (Disability) Program. *Report of the Standing Committee on Human Resources Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities*. URL: <http://www.parl.gc.ca/committee/CommitteePublication.aspx?COM=3269&SourceId=37532>.
- Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN). (2000). *On-line engagement—New models and implications for government departments and officials*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Policy Research Networks.
- Coate, John. (1997). Cyberspace innkeeping: Building online community. In P. E. Agre & D. Schuler (Eds.), *Reinventing technology, rediscovering community: Critical explorations of computing as a social practice* (pp. 170-172). Greenwich, CT: Ablex Publishing.
- Coleman, Stephen, & Götze, John. (2001). *Bowling together: Online public engagement in policy deliberation*. London, U.K.: Hansard Society.
- Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada. (2002). *Public input on the future of health care: Results from the consultation workbook*. URL: [http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/pdf/romanow/pdfs/Consultation\\_Workbook\\_Report\\_E.pdf](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/pdf/romanow/pdfs/Consultation_Workbook_Report_E.pdf) [October 29, 2005].
- Connery, Brian. (1997). IMHO: Authority and egalitarian rhetoric in the virtual coffeehouse. In D. Porter (Ed.), *Internet culture* (pp. 161-181). London, U.K.: Routledge.
- Cook, Debbie. (2003). What tomorrow holds: Exploring citizen engagement through e-participation. *Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat*. URL: [http://leadership.gc.ca/static/dayinthelife/e-government/what\\_tomorrow\\_holds\\_e.shtml](http://leadership.gc.ca/static/dayinthelife/e-government/what_tomorrow_holds_e.shtml) [April 20, 2004].
- Dean, Jodi. (2001). Cybersalons and civil society: Rethinking the public sphere in transnational technoculture. *Public Culture*, 13(2), 243-265.
- Docter, Sharon, & Dutton, William H. (1998). The first amendment online: Santa Monica's public electronic network. In R. Tsagarousianou, D. Tambini, & C. Bryan (Eds.), *Cyberdemocracy: Technology, cities and civic networks* (pp. 125-152). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Donath, Judith. S. (1999). Identity and deception in the virtual community. In M. A. Smith & P. Kollock (Eds.), *Communities in cyberspace* (pp. 29-59). London, U.K.: Routledge.
- Edwards, Arthur R. (2004). The moderator in government-initiated internet discussions: Facilitator or source of bias? In M. Malkia, A. Anttiroiko, & R. Savolainen (Eds.),

- Etransformation in governance: New directions in government and politics* (pp. 150-169). London, U.K.: Idea Group.
- Foreign Policy Dialogue. (2003). *Civil rules*. URL: <http://www.foreign-policy-dialogue.ca/en/policies/civilrules.html>[July 2, 2005].
- Fraser, Nancy. (1993). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. In B. Robbins (Ed.), *The phantom public sphere* (pp. 1-32). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gidengil, Elizabeth, Blais, André, Neviite, Neil, & Nadeau, Richard. (2004). *Citizens*. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.
- Hague, Barry & Loader, Brian. (1999). *Digital democracy: Discourse and decision making in the information age*. London, U.K.: Routledge.
- Hauser, Gerard. (1999). *Vernacular voices: The rhetoric of publics and public spheres*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press.
- Herring, Susan C. (1993). Gender and democracy in computer-mediated communication. *Electronic Journal of Communication*, 3(2), 1-17.
- Herring, Susan C. (1999). The rhetorical dynamics of gender harassment on-line. *The Information Society*, 15, 151-167.
- Herring, Susan C. (2004). Computer-mediated discourse analysis: An approach to researching online behavior. In S. A. Barab, R. Kling, & J. H. Gray (Eds.), *Designing for virtual communities in the service of learning* (pp. 338-376). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. (2002). *Communities first: First Nations governance consultation report—Phase 1*. URL: [http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ps/lts/fng/prev/CRP1\\_J02\\_e.html](http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ps/lts/fng/prev/CRP1_J02_e.html) [October 29, 2005]
- Institute on Governance. (1998). *A voice for all: Engaging citizens for change*. Ottawa, ON: Institute on Governance.
- Jeffrey, L. (2003). *Dialogue on foreign policy: Report on econsultation*. Toronto: Electronic Commons.
- "Jibongo". (2003, April 24). *Biodiversity?* Message posted to foreign policy dialogue discussion forum, archived at URL: <http://www.foreign-policy-dialogue.ca/en/discussion/index.php?m=2453>.
- Keane, John. (2003). *Global civil society?* Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- Kingwell, Mark. (1995). *A civil tongue: Justice, dialogue and the politics of pluralism*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Lekhti, R. (2000). The politics of African-American online. *Democratization*, 7(1), 150-172.
- Longford, Graham & Hurrell, Christie. (In press). On-line citizen consultation and engagement in Canada. In Ari-Veikko Anttiroiko & Matti Malkia (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of digital government*. Hershey, PA: Idea Group.
- Millard, William. (1997). I flamed Freud. In D. Porter (Ed.), *Internet culture* (pp. 145-161). London, U.K.: Routledge.
- Mills, John Stuart. (1956). *The power elite*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Mitra, Ananda. (2001). Marginal voices in cyberspace. *New Media and Society*, 3(1), 29-48.
- Nevitte, Neil. (1996). *The decline of deference: Canadian value change in cross national perspective*. Toronto, ON: Broadview.
- Papacharissi, Zizi. (2004). Democracy online: Civility, politeness and the democratic potential of online political discussion groups. *New Media and Society*, 6(2), 259-263.
- Phillips, Susan & Orsini, Michael. (2002). *Mapping the links: Citizen involvement in policy processes*. CPRN discussion paper No. F/21, April 2002. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Policy Research Networks.

- Poster, Mark. (2001). Cyber democracy: The internet and the public sphere. In S. Arnowitz (Ed.), *The information subject* (pp. 95-116). Amsterdam, Netherlands: G&B Arts.
- Public Works and Government Services Canada. (2004). *Government on-line 2004: Meeting Canadians' needs and expectations*. Ottawa, ON: Public Works and Government Services Canada. URL: [http://www.gol-ged.gc.ca/rpt2004/rpt\\_e.pdf](http://www.gol-ged.gc.ca/rpt2004/rpt_e.pdf) [October 27, 2005].
- Rouner, Leroy. (2000). *Civility*. Boston, MA: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Salter, Liora. (2003). Democracy, new social movements, and the internet: A habermasian analysis. In M. McCaughey & M. D. Ayers (Eds.), *Cyberactivism: Online activism in theory and practice* (pp. 117-145). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Smith, Philip D. (2002). *The virtue of civility in the practice of politics*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Statistics Canada. (2003). *The daily: Household internet use survey*. URL: <http://www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/030918/d030918b.htm> [March 2, 2004].
- Statistics Canada. (2004). *2003 general social survey on social engagement, cycle 17: An overview of findings*. Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada.
- "Vox". (2003, February 24). *The role of memory*. Message posted to Foreign Policy Dialogue Discussion Forum, archived at <http://www.foreign-policy-dialogue.ca/en/discussion/index.php?m=1639&>.
- Wilhelm, Anthony. (2004). *Digital nation: Toward an inclusive information society*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.