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from the archive...

Once in a while, one comes up with a phrase or concept that seems genuinely useful. Just after the first lockdown, amid a frenzy of activity to undertake online what had previously been done in person, I wrote this and received near-record 'likes' on the LinkedIn version. Not sure if anything has fundamentally changed; the analysis holds good.

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Consultation and the *Seldom Online*

Some of the most useful concepts are very simple.

Whilst preparing the detailed Internal Guidance for Consultation Institute Associates about to deliver advice under its Consultation and Engagement RESTART service we spent time addressing the number one issue that faces many of our members. ***How to re-profile dialogue methods in the light of social distancing?***

Some years ago, it would have been an even bigger challenge. So much consultation is, rightly, face-to-face, but that is no longer possible or appropriate. Fortunately the world has gone massively digital and we have a whole range of online engagement tools that can be deployed. Where help and talent is needed is to design a Consultation or Engagement plan that optimises an organisation's ability to hear the views of relevant key target groups. And here, we concluded that it might be useful to divide potential *consultees* into three broad categories:

Always online: Obvious really – the millennial generation and most people of working age. Workstation use is declining as so much transfers to smartphones and the use of downloaded applications to play games, listen to music or communicate via email or social media. In principle, they can be reached.

Never online: Declining year on year, internet access is currently only used by 71% (males) and 64% (females) of over-65's. Clearly those who have to be reached by non-digital means.

Seldom online: Those who have access to the internet but make relatively little use of it – or maybe use it only for a very restricted range of applications.

For now, let us focus on that last category, and let us apply this simple classification not to the vast array of potential activity but to that which matters when planning a consultation or engagement exercise. <u>What is the propensity of each of the above categories to participate?</u>

By definition, those who are **Never online** cannot be reached; other means must be found.

The **Always Online** will be an interesting challenge. In theory, they are available to be targeted. There is competition – from thousands of other applications. The younger the smartphone user, the greater the number of applications will have been downloaded, and in a world where 25% of them are games, and 'news' accounts for 2% - there clearly is a bias against civic consciousness. However, people who use Facebook and other social media can definitely be reached with imaginatively-marketed messages.

The **Seldom Online** covers a multitude of scenarios , ranging from those in jobs where constant use of the internet is impossible or discouraged, through to people temperamentally less comfortable with the technology. It also includes those who only use e-mail, or maybe social media. Increasingly they may be forced to use an essential application, simply because suppliers have made it so difficult to use the traditional method. For example, the closure of High Street Banks forces people to use online banking. And the Government's *digital by default* policy does rather more than 'nudge' citizens towards using online services. In general, these are not technophobes; they are in marketing terms *'slow followers'* or, more pejoratively, *'laggards'* who will gradually overcome their reluctance. In the context of public engagement, these are people who will definitely not be first in the queue to engage with public bodies for the purposes of giving their views. In fact, they may include those who are distinctly queasy about putting forward any opinion and who may harbour a mistrust of bureaucrats and officialdom in general. Whilst they might grudgingly renew their car tax online, they are far less likely to respond to an internet survey about the Council's waste management strategy.

Unless …Unless creative *consultors* can make the issue undeniably relevant. ..*to them*?

The truth is that the pandemic – and its unprecedented interference with our lives and liberties - has alerted so many to the implications of decisions taken by politicians and public bodies. Ten years after the unsuccessful attempt to preach '*Localism'*, it may be that decisions in the post-Lockdown era will have the potential to stimulate local public engagement like never before. How many people rely on a local Facebook community page for local news? How many use *WhatsApp* or *Text messaging* to exchange local gossip and complain about the iniquities of life? In short, the **Seldom online** can be lured into dialogue, but only with skilful targeted messaging.

If, when re-setting engagement plans to co-exist with social distancing, organisations willingly accept that they can only reach the **Always Online,** they will miss an important opportunity to help less enthusiastic internet users become more civic-minded. It matters – because one of the problems of social media is that it polarises people into echo-chambers and is populated by those with firm convictions anxious to spread them. Consultations can only benefit by securing the involvement of those who are more reticent and maybe willing to engage in more deliberative discussions. Finding effective ways to reach them - and motivate them - is an exciting objective.

This crude categorisation is a simple, but useful tool of analysis that can help organisations think about the best ways to use digital engagement techniques. All three demand different approaches, and is not without cost. For a while, attention will turn to a '*new normal*' for community dialogues, and this is one more way in which we can help meet the challenge.

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