

# *Structuring Engagement for e-Participation*

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# *E-petitions*



- Much in the news in UK currently
- Downing Street (UK Prime Minister) have launched a site
  - Also Scottish parliament
- Well over 1,000,000 signatures against Road pricing
- Stock e-mail sent in reply
- Seen as a step forward for e-participation

# *Recent Petitions*



10 DOWNING STREET

- We, the undersigned, petition the Prime Minister to...
  - Scrap the planned vehicle tracking and road pricing policy (1414686 signatures)
  - ensure that inheritance tax is scrapped in this year's Budget (62366 signatures)
  - repeal the Hunting Act 2004. (26432 signatures)
  - scrap the proposed introduction of ID cards (25855 signatures)
  - reduce the classified period for census data from 100 years to 70 years (19772 signatures)

*Tom Steinberg (the site's creator) says:*



- "When people sign the petition the government can write back to these people. That's never been possible before with a paper petition. This is all about change and evolution to a more deliberative democracy ... when you compare it to the fuel protests of 2000, they are signing on in a form of structured engagement rather than barricading fuel depots."

# Really New?



- Pressure groups have always issued postcards for people to send to their MP or the Prime Minister
  - They get a stock letter back
- There have always been paper petitions
  - Mainly numbers and publicity
- So what's new?
  - A threaded bulletin board

Is the engagement really structured?

# *Text of Road Pricing Petition*

- The idea of tracking every vehicle at all times is sinister and wrong. Road pricing is already here with the high level of taxation on fuel. The more you travel - the more tax you pay. It will be an unfair tax on those who live apart from families and poorer people who will not be able to afford the high monthly costs. Please Mr Blair - forget about road pricing and concentrate on improving our roads to reduce congestion.

# *Why Are People Signing?*



- Dr Samuel Johnson:

- The petition is then handed from town to town, and from house to house; and, wherever it comes, the inhabitants flock together, that they may see that which must be sent to the king. Names are easily collected. One man signs, because he hates the papists; another, because he has vowed destruction to the turnpikes; one, because it will vex the parson; another, because he owes his landlord nothing; one, because he is rich; another, because he is poor; one, to show that he is not afraid; and another, to show that he can write.

# *Confuses a number of issues:*

- *More Roads Will Ease Congestion* every vehicle at all times Road pricing is already

here with the high level of taxation on fuel.

The more you travel - the more you pay.

It will be an unfair tax on the poor.

from families and poorer people.

cannot afford the high monthly costs.

Don't forget about road pricing

contribute to improving road conditions.

*Fuel Tax Does the Same*

*Civil Liberties*

*Unfair*

*All of These?  
Any of These?*

# *A Stock Reply*



- Will address all these issues
- Much will be irrelevant
- *Not really structured engagement*
  - *no real communication*
- *Exchange of arguments*
  - *not opinions - is what is needed*
- *Explanation of policy to inform public opinion*

# *How Argumentation Techniques Can Help*

- **Structured Explanation**
  - E.g. My work using Toulmin's Scheme
- **Tailoring to an Audience**
  - E.g. Grasso's work on Health Advice
- **Argumentative Debate**
  - E.g, Moore and Yuan
- **Graphical Presentation**
  - E.g. Zeno, Arucaria,

# Structured Explanation



- The idea here is to use the structure provided by argumentation to organise an explanatory dialogue
- Main advantage: users explore the areas of their concern - irrelevant information is not presented
- Dialogue is more conducive to understanding than monolithic text
- Disadvantages: requires knowledge representation, fixed areas of discussion, no new issues

# *Tailored Explanation*

- In order to persuade, arguments need to cohere with the values of the audience
- Grasso's work on health care, diet advice must take into account motivations, aspirations, peer attitudes
- Advantage: more acceptable arguments
- Disadvantages: again considerable modelling, need to discover audience values



# *Argumentative Debate*



- Used in educational contexts to enable people to debate controversial issues
- Based on a Dialogue Game (Mackenzie's DC), used a fixed set of arguments (avoids NL problems, ensures appropriate response)
- Point of the system is to deploy arguments, confront counter arguments
- Advantage: Highly participate, forces consideration of issues
- Disadvantages: modelling, fixed set of arguments

# Graphical Presentation



- Presents arguments in a graphical form, (typically a tree of claims and supporting premises, counter arguments and exceptions).
- Boxes contain free text, allowing introduction of new points and issues
- Advantages: considerable freedom and explores structure and relations between claims
- Disadvantages: may not be common understanding of semantics - too much freedom?

# *Usability Issues*

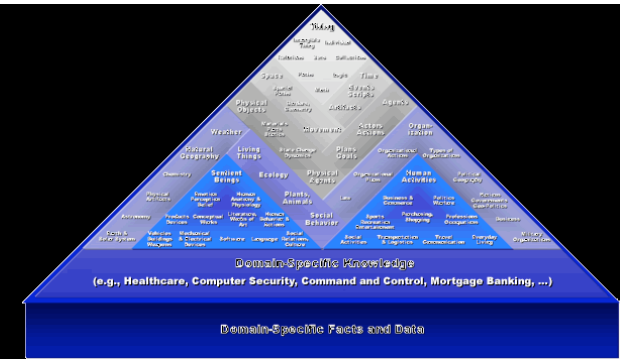


- All of these techniques can improve quality of communication, but at the cost of modelling effort
- Moreover, more sophistication means tools are harder to use
  - Ashley's work in legal education: CATO and Largo showed that teaching law students to argue, and to use argumentation support tools is not a simple matter - it requires training and support

# *Need for Ongoing Engagement*

- One shot, anyone can use them systems will be correspondingly limited in what they can achieve
- What is needed is continuous engagement which
  - Allows for user profiles to be built up
  - Allows for growing familiarity with the tools
  - Makes some investment in learning the tools worthwhile
- May limit participation, but improves quality

# Summary



- Current participation activities attract interest and publicity, but offer a very low grade interaction
- The demand is there, but more needs to be delivered
- Need to exchange arguments not opinions
- Techniques exist, but there are drawbacks
- Improvement will require habitual interaction