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**Participation Through Communication: An Investigation Of  
Communication Tools Used By Stakeholders When Participating In Local  
Democracy.**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree  
of Master of Business Studies  
in Communication Management  
at Massey University, Palmerston North

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2004

## **ABSTRACT**

In the face of declining interest in democratic matters, calls for greater participation have resulted in the global implementation of varying degrees of teledemocracy. The changing face of telecommunications, a tool of teledemocracy, has also resulted in a hope that participation will be encouraged among groups, such as youth, who traditionally have not participated in democratic matters.

A total of 383 stakeholders from four lower North Island districts, who had made submissions to their local council regarding its 2004 Long Term Council Community Plan (LTCCP), participated in a survey. Additionally, three prominent community members from Palmerston North, three Palmerston North City Councillors, one Horizons Regional Councillor, and four council staff from Auckland City Council, Tararua District Council, Rangitikei District Council, and Wanganui District Council participated in qualitative in-depth interviews. The Auckland City Council also piloted a project for receiving text message submissions. This was later abandoned because of public and political pressure.

The purpose of this research is to investigate which communication tools are considered the most convenient and effective to use when participating in the submission process. Opinions regarding the communication tools currently offered by councils were gathered and compared. Key informants also commented on their attitude to consultation and the effectiveness of communication tools used in making submissions. Further, public and political opinions towards the possible introduction of text messaging to the submission process were also explored.

The results indicate that the communication methods used to make submissions can influence how the submissions are judged, with some tools being regarded by most participants in the research as being more effective. Submitters who were surveyed were positive regarding the current communication tools provided by councils for making submissions. However, the majority also showed high levels of prejudice against the use of text messaging, which is often considered a 'young' communication tool. Submission receivers interviewed showed a clear preference for formally written and oral submissions, demonstrating that some submissions are automatically attributed more value than others according to how they are presented.

Consistent with previous research, political participants who took part in the survey

were not representative of the wider community. This research showed current participants were more likely to be older, have had tertiary education, and to be either in full-time employment or retired. Despite the widespread call by researchers and academics for greater participation in local democracy, it appeared that the majority of current political participants, as represented by those taking part in the research, are not willing to relinquish their perceived power in the consultation and decision-making process to 'minority' participants, particularly young people

The findings of this research indicate although each communication tool or method has its own inherent access barriers, the variety of tools available for use allows current stakeholders to choose one or more that best suits their needs. However, the bias in favour of written submissions supported by an oral presentation means that some submissions are automatically given more weight in the decision-making process than others.

One conclusion that may be drawn from this finding is that it is not the communication tools themselves that act as a barrier to wider participation. It is, however, the attitudes of existing stakeholders and politicians, as revealed in the research, that form a barrier to wider participation by discouraging the involvement of younger citizens and those less able or willing to write formal submissions and present them orally in the traditional manner.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

First and foremost, a heartfelt thanks goes out to everyone who participated in the research, whether it was by returning surveys, making potential participant contact details available, and/or taking the time to talk to me. Without them this thesis would be very thin.

Specifically, a huge thank you to my primary supervisor, Dr Margie Comrie, for her time, random literature snippets, compulsive editing, and advice throughout the research. Thanks also to David Mundell for his part-time supervision. Additionally, a big thanks to Christine Morrison and Lyn Tan, in the Communication and Journalism Department, for providing much needed administration support during the research period.

A special thanks goes to Paula Allen whose invaluable insight, proof reading skills, and input (particularly Chapters One and Two) led to a much higher quality thesis.

Most importantly, my deepest appreciation and respect goes to my partner, Jackie Leigh Jordan, who has patiently lived with this course of study for what seemed like a very long time.

The research contained in this thesis was undertaken with the approval of the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (PN Application 04/93).

## CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
Abstract	(ii)
Acknowledgements	(iv)
List of Figures and Tables	(xi)
List of Abbreviations	(xii)
Authors Note	(xii)
 Chapter One: Introduction	 1
 Chapter Two: Literature Review	
2.1    Introduction	6
2.2    Public Participation	6
2.2.1    Participation in Theory	8
2.2.2    Benefits of Public Participation	10
2.2.3    Criticism of Public Participation	11
2.2.4    Barriers to Participation	13
2.2.5    Does Public Participation Work?	14
2.3    Communication and Local Government Decision Making	15
2.3.1    Historical Communication Models	16
2.3.2    The Two-way Communication Model	17
2.3.3    Trust and Ethics in Communication	18
2.3.4    Monologic versus Dialogic Communication	18
2.3.5    Communication in Consultation	20
2.4    Consultation and Local Government	21
2.4.1    The Political 'Ivory Tower'	22
2.4.2    1989 Local Government Reforms	23
2.4.3    Local Government Act (LGA) 2002	24
2.5    Telecommunication Technology	26
2.5.1    Technology Adoption	28
2.5.2    Internet and Text Statistics	29
2.5.3    Who is Using Text and Internet?	31
2.5.4    The Future of Telecommunications	32
2.6    Teledemocracy	33
2.6.1    Teledemocracy in Principle	33
2.6.2    Forms of Teledemocracy	36
2.6.3    Benefits of Teledemocracy	36
2.6.4    Disadvantages of Teledemocracy	38
2.6.5    Teledemocracy in Local Democracy	39
2.7    Conclusion	40

Chapter Three: Research Methodology	<i>Page</i>
3.1 Introduction	42
3.2 Research Questions	43
3.3 Justification of Methodologies Used	44
3.4 Survey	45
3.4.1 Choosing Survey Delivery	46
3.4.2 Mail Survey	46
3.4.3 Telephone Surveys	46
3.4.4 Web-based Surveys	47
3.4.5 Sampling and Response Rates	48
3.4.6 Types of Populations	50
3.4.7 Length of Time for Data Collection	51
3.4.8 Question Form	51
3.4.9 Palmerston North Questionnaire	51
3.4.10 Tararua, Wanganui, and Rangitikei Questionnaire	52
3.4.11 Survey Limitations	52
3.5 Qualitative Interviews	55
3.5.1 Number and Length of Interviews	55
3.5.2 Purpose	56
3.5.3 Interview Questions	57
3.5.4 Steps in the Interview Process	58
3.5.5 Interview Limitations	59
3.6 Ethical Considerations	60
3.7 Summary	60
Chapter Four: A Case Study in Introducing New Technology	
4.1 Background	62
4.2 Inviting Public Submissions	62
4.3 Text Message Submissions	64
4.4 Results of the Combined Consultation	65
4.5 The Outcome of the Text Message Submission Experiment	66
4.6 Conclusion	67
Chapter Five: Submitter Survey Results And Interviews	
5.1 Introduction	69
5.2 Survey Results	69
5.2.1 Response Rates	69
5.2.2 Prior Experience in Making Submissions	71
5.2.3 Use of Communication Tools in Previous Submissions	72
5.2.4 Changing Communication Tools of Choice	73
5.2.5 Alternative Communication Tools	73
5.2.6 Communication Tool Convenience	75
5.2.7 Perceived Effectiveness of Communication Tool	77

		<i>Page</i>
	5.2.8 Introducing a New Communication Tool	79
	5.2.9 Survey Participants' Demographic Details	80
5.3	Survey Results By Demographic	82
	5.3.1 Gender	82
	5.3.1.1 Use of Communication Tools in Previous Submissions	83
	5.3.1.2 Alternative Communication Tool	83
	5.3.1.3 Communication Tool Convenience	84
	5.3.1.4 Perceived Effectiveness of Communication Tools	84
	5.3.1.5 Introducing a New Communication Tool	85
	5.3.2 Age	86
	5.3.2.1 Use of Communication Tools in Previous Submissions	86
	5.3.2.2 Alternative Communication Tool	87
	5.3.2.3 Communication Tool Convenience	87
	5.3.2.4 Perceived Effectiveness of Communication Tools	89
	5.3.2.5 Introducing a New Communication Tool	89
	5.3.3 Educational Attainment	90
	5.3.3.1 Use of Communication Tools in Previous Submissions	90
	5.3.3.2 Alternative Communication Tool	90
	5.3.3.3 Communication Tool Convenience	91
	5.3.3.4 Perceived Effectiveness of Communication Tools	93
	5.3.3.5 Introducing a New Communication Tool	93
	5.3.4 Employment Status	94
	5.3.4.1 Use of Communication Tools in Previous Submissions	95
	5.3.4.2 Alternative Communication Tool	95
	5.3.4.3 Communication Tool Convenience	96
	5.3.4.4 Perceived Effectiveness of Communication Tools	97
	5.3.4.5 Introducing a New Communication Tool	98
5.4	Feelings Toward Current and Future Communication Tools	98



	<i>Page</i>
5.5 Summary of Survey Findings	101
5.6 Interviews: The Professional Submission Perspective	106
5.6.1 Paula Allan	106
5.6.1.1 Personal Definition of Consultation	107
5.6.1.2 The Current Political Environment	107
5.6.1.3 Communication Tools	107
5.6.1.4 Parting Words	108
5.6.2 David Forrest	108
5.6.2.1 Personal Definition of Consultation	108
5.6.2.2 The Current Political Environment	108
5.6.2.3 Perceived Value Council Places on Public Input	109
5.6.2.4 Communication Tools	109
5.6.2.5 Encouraging Public Participation	110
5.6.2.6 Parting Words	111
5.6.3 Evan Natrass	111
5.6.3.1 Personal Definition of Consultation	112
5.6.3.2 The Current Political Environment	112
5.6.3.3 Perceived Value Council Places on Public Input	112
5.6.3.4 Conduct of PNCC's LTCCP	113
5.6.3.5 Communication Tools	113
5.6.3.6 Parting Words	114
5.7 Conclusion	114
 Chapter Six: Results of Interviews With Councillors and Administrators	
6.1 Introduction	116
6.2 The City and Regional Councillors	117
6.2.1 Cr Heather Tanguay	117
6.2.1.1 Person Definition of Consultation	117
6.2.1.2 PNCC's LTCCP	118
6.2.1.3 Consultation and Public Input	119
6.2.1.4 Example of a Positive Consultation Process	119
6.2.1.5 Communication Tools	120
6.2.1.6 Parting Words	120
6.2.2 Cr Lynne Pope	120
6.2.2.1 Person Definition of Consultation	121
6.2.2.2 PNCC's LTCCP	121
6.2.2.3 Consultation and Public Input	122

	<i>Page</i>
6.2.2.4 Example of a Positive Consultation Process	122
6.2.2.5 Communication Tools	123
6.2.2.6 Encouraging Public Participation	124
6.2.2.7 Parting Words	125
6.2.3 Cr Paul Rieger	125
6.2.3.1 Person Definition of Consultation	125
6.2.3.2 PNCC's LTCCP	126
6.2.3.3 Consultation and Public Input	126
6.2.3.4 Communication Tools	127
6.2.3.5 Encouraging Public Participation	127
6.2.3.6 Parting Words	128
6.2.4 Cr Marilyn Brown	128
6.2.4.1 Person Definition of Consultation	128
6.2.4.2 PNCC's LTCCP	129
6.2.4.3 Consultation and Public Input	129
6.2.4.4 Example of a Positive Consultation Process	130
6.2.4.5 Communication Tools	130
6.2.4.6 Encouraging Public Participation	131
6.2.4.7 Parting Words	131
6.3 The Council Administrators	132
6.3.1 Andrew Stevenson	132
6.3.1.1 Perceived Council Value on Public Input	132
6.3.1.2 Communication Tools	133
6.3.1.3 Encouraging Public Participation	134
6.3.2 Charlotte Hume	134
6.3.2.1 Perceived Council Value on Public Input	135
6.3.2.2 Communication Tools	135
6.3.2.3 Encouraging Public Participation	136
6.3.3 Michelle Bisset	136
6.3.3.1 Perceived Council Value on Public Input	137
6.3.3.2 Communication Tools	138
6.3.3.3 Encouraging Public Participation	139
6.3.4 John Walker	139

	<i>Page</i>
6.3.4.1 Perceived Council Value on Public Input	139
6.3.4.2 Communication Tools	140
6.3.4.3 Encouraging Public Participation	140
6.4 Conclusion	141
Chapter Seven: Discussion	
7.1 Introduction	143
7.2 Case Study	145
7.3 Attitudes Towards Communication Tools	147
7.4 Participation, Communication, and Teledemocracy	150
7.5 Participants' Demographic Characteristics	154
7.6 Encouraging Participation	157
7.7 Conclusion	159
Chapter Eight: Conclusion	161
Appendices	
Appendix A: Principles of Consultation	167
Appendix B: Local Authority Area Map	169
Appendix C: Survey Questionnaires	171
References	177

## List Of Figures And Tables.

	<i>page</i>
Figure 1	Context of Conventional Participation
Figure 2	Context of Authentic Participation
Figure 3	Cr Brown's Matrix
Table 1	Consultation Methods and Responses
Table 2	Text Message Support For Skate Park In Windmill Park
Table 3	Number of People Who Had Made Previous Submissions
Table 4	Number Of Submissions Made To PNCC
Table 5	Most Used Tool In Previous Submissions
Table 6	Respondents Who Used The Same Communication Tool
Table 7	Alternative Communication Tool Choices
Table 8	Attitudes to Convenience of Communication Tools (%)
Table 9	Number of Participants Who Do Not Have Access to Communication Tools
Table 10	Attitudes to Communication Tool Effectiveness (%)
Table 11	Number of Participants Who Do Not Have Access To Communication Tools
Table 12	Do Stakeholders Want Text Messaging?
Table 13	Participants' Gender
Table 14	Age of Participants
Table 15	Participants' Highest Educational Attainment
Table 16	Participants' Employment Status
Table 17	Most Used Tool In Previous Submissions (Gender)
Table 18	Alternative Communication Tool Choices (Gender)
Table 19	Attitudes To Convenience of Communication Tools % (Gender)
Table 20	Communication Tool Effectiveness % (Gender)
Table 21	Do Stakeholders Want Text Messaging? (Gender)
Table 22	Most Used Tool In Previous Submissions (Age)
Table 23	Alternative Communication Tool Choices (Age)
Table 24	Attitudes To Convenience of Communication Tools % (Age)
Table 25	Number of Participants With No Access To Communication Tools % (Age)
Table 26	Attitudes To Communication Tool Effectiveness (Age)
Table 27	Do Stakeholders Want Text Messaging? (Age)
Table 28	Alternative Communication Tool Choices (Education)
Table 29	Attitudes To Convenience of Communication Tools % (Education)
Table 30	Number of Participants With No Access To Communication Tools % (Education)
Table 31	Attitudes To Communication Tool Effectiveness % (Education)
Table 32	Do Stakeholders Want Text Messaging? (Education)
Table 33	Alternative Communication Tool Choices (Employment)
Table 34	Attitudes To Convenience of Communication Tools % (Employment)

Table 35	Number of Participants With No Access To Communication Tools % (Employment)	<i>Page</i> 96
Table 36	Attitudes To Communication Tool Effectiveness % (Employment)	97
Table 37	Do Stakeholders Want Text Messaging? (Employment)	98
Table 38	Submission Receiver Interview Schedule	116

### **List Of Abbreviations**

Cr	Councillor
IAP2	International Association for Public Participation
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
LGA	Local Government Act
LGNZ	Local Government New Zealand
PNCC	Palmerston North City Council
RDC	Rangitikei District Council
TDC	Tararua District Council
WDC	Wanganui District Council
MDC	Manawatu District Council
HDC	Horowhenua District Council

### **Authors Note**

At the time of undertaking this research, it was also the year of local body elections. Palmerston North's Mayor at the beginning of this study was Mark Bell-Booth. The interview with Cr Tanguay was undertaken, and therefore written in context, before her October election to the Mayoralty.