

Practicing a Participatory Presidency? An Analysis of the Obama Administration's Open Government Dialogue

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Abstract

Early in his presidency, Barack Obama promised the most open and transparent administration in United States history (Obama, 2009). This article assesses that commitment in practice by examining the Obama administration's "Open Government Dialogue" (OGD), a six-week, online public participation experiment conducted in the summer of 2009. Through the lens of the International Association of Public Participation's (IAP2's) "Core Values of Public Participation," the author considers the extent to which the design and processes of the OGD reflected the administration's stated commitment to public participation in government decision making. Based on an analysis of participant contributions during the OGD, and the reflections and critiques among public participation advocates and practitioners outside the formal channels of the OGD, it is concluded the OGD was a poorly designed and facilitated participatory experiment falling far short of the administration's pronouncements about its commitment to public participation. Although this general conclusion is troubling, that the administration undertook such a large, unmandated participatory experiment, suggests it will continue to engage in public participation experiments. This article proceeds from a position of assistance to the administration and the public in learning from the mistakes and shortcomings of the OGD, as well as its successes. In the final analysis, the administration needs to better translate its expressed support of public participation into concrete practices through a stronger understanding of the purposes and design of public participation. The public, especially participation advocates and practitioners must decide whether to exert pressure on the administration to demonstrate in practice an understanding of public participation in government decision making as a right.

Keywords: Obama, Open Government Dialogue, Core Values of Public Participation, International Association of Public Participation's, IAP2

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Introduction

President Barack Obama, on the campaign trail and in office, has made efforts to increase citizens' involvement in the processes and politics of U.S. federal governance. In 2008, Obama's presidential campaign connected with millions of voters through social networking technology and a devolution in organizing (see Norquay, 2008). Following the election, the Obama administration has promoted public engagement through face-to-face and online town hall meetings and the engenderment of grassroots legislative advocacy (e.g., Organizing for America). Although innovative, these practices were not designed to contribute substantively to policy development (e.g., party platform and legislation) or directed at transforming the processes of federal government decision making; they were, in fact, the politics of aggregation and adversarial democracy (see Mansbridge, 1983) in participatory dressing. However, in the summer of 2009, through the Open Government Dialogue (OGD), the Obama administration turned toward substantive public participation.

Conducted (primarily) online, the OGD brought together self-selected members of the public, as well as government officials and employees, to discuss and contribute to administrative rules on government transparency, participation, and collaboration at the federal level.¹ In addition to its stated aim of informing administrative rules, the OGD offered an opportunity to consider how strongly the Obama administration is committed to public participation in government decision making.

Drawing on data collected from the OGD forums and related discussions from a range of sources external to the process (e.g., discussion on listservs, social network sites, and blogs), this article reflects on the OGD in light of the International Association of Public Participation's (International Association for Public Participation, 2007) "Core Values of Public Participation." Taking a critical yet constructive position, the analysis highlights both the strengths and weaknesses of the OGD to make explicit its reproducible successes, to examine its failures for lessons, and to draw historically situated conclusions about the Obama administration's commitment to public participation in policy development and decision making.

¹ Federal employees participated both in the open forums of the OGD and through the Office of Management and Budget's MAX wiki. Contributions to the MAX discussion were made public and are available at <http://www.ostp.gov/cs/opengov/>

Following a discussion of the OGD structure, the data informing this essay, and the analytical framework employed, the OGD is considered in two sections. First, the focus is on the core values related to the *design* of the OGD, questioning the extent to which the design of the OGD reflected a commitment to public participation. In the second section, attention is directed to the core values related to the OGD's *processes*, or how public participation was facilitated during the experiment. The concluding section considers the OGD in light of a final core value that defines public participation as a right.

OGD Structure and Data

Beginning in late May 2009 and continuing through early July 2009, the OGD proceeded in three phases—brainstorming, discussion, and drafting—each hosted on a different computer-mediated platform. During the brainstorming phase, which occurred on IdeaScale (opengov.ideascale.com), “the White House [sought] to hear your most important ideas relating to open government” (National Academy of Public Administration, 2009a, para. 3). Contributions submitted during the brainstorming phase could be voted and commented on with the “most important themes and ideas to emerge” (based partly on participants’ votes) serving as partial ground for later phases (National Academy of Public Administration, 2009a, para. 3).² The discussion phase, hosted on the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy’s (Office of Science & Technology Policy, 2009a) blog (<http://blog.ostp.gov/category/opengov/>), was “designed to dig in on harder topics that require greater exploration or refinement” (para. 2). Software allowed participants in the discussion phase to make, vote, and comments on contributions. The drafting phase used MixedInk (<http://mixedink.com/OpenGov>), a collaborative writing platform, and asked contributors “to draft recommendations that translate good ideas and lofty principles into specific actions that can be taken to achieve open government” (Office of Science & Technology Policy, 2009b, para. 3). During the drafting stage, participants could post, vote, and comment on contributions, as well as combine contributions with new or existing text.

Under the broad themes of transparency, participation, and collaboration, each phase of the OGD had several predefined topics for discussion (see Table 1). A close study of Table 1 reveals

² In this article the word “contribution” is used to refer to any proposal, comment, or idea submitted during the OGD. The author refers to those who submitted contributions as “contributors.” The word “participant” is used to refer to people who took any role in the OGD, such as casting a vote or reading contributions.

issues in the design of the OGD that are best addressed here. First, the discussion topics show very little consistency within each theme across the three phases, and very weak relationships between the topics within any given phase. Among the topics, evidence of consistent relationships between no more than two under each theme could be found across the OGD phases. Take, for example, the theme of collaboration. During the brainstorming phase, the topic of “intra-federal government collaboration” and “collaboration between federal, state, and local government” were separated under the theme of collaboration. During the discussion phase, these topics were not even listed. For the drafting phase, these topics returned under the single heading of “inter- and intra-governmental collaboration.” Another, albeit singular, oddity was present in the theme of transparency, in which “defining transparency” was a topic only during the final stage of drafting. Hence, for the two previous phases, discussion of “transparency” proceeded without consideration of how to conceptualize the theme. Although there might have been a logic behind the administration’s vision for and structure of the relationships between themes and topics across the OGD phases, it was not always an obvious logic, raising early questions about how thoroughly the administration planned for the progression of the OGD.

During the six weeks of the OGD, approximately 2,500 contributions from more than 1,180 contributors were submitted to the various web sites, of which both the quantifiable information (e.g., votes, authors, and rankings), and the content of the contributions were collected by the author. Among the quantifiable data, the most important for the present report are the number of OGD contributors and contributions. Figure 1 shows how the number of both contributors and contributions declined as OGD progressed.³ In addition to declining participation, Figure 1 also demonstrates a disproportionate ratio of contributions to contributors across all three phases, rising to approximately 3 to 1 during the discussion phase. Table 2 shows the number of contributions by theme and by topic, revealing a significant difference (approximately 4 to 1) between the number of contributions under the themes of transparency and participation compared to collaboration. Why there were so many fewer contributions addressing collaboration cannot be explained with specificity given the available data, but possible reasons include the framing of collaboration as an intra- or inter-governmental issue, or as a relationship between public-private entities, none of which are directly inclusive of the general population.

³ Interestingly, during the discussion phase, which was staggered, with a new topic being introduced every day, participation also experienced a day-by-day decline.

Table 1. OGD Topics by Phase and Theme

Phase/Topic	Transparency	Participation	Collaboration
Brainstorming	Making data more accessible	Federal advisory committees	Between federal agencies
	Making government operations more open	New strategies and techniques	Between federal, state, and local governments
	Records management	New tools and technologies	Do-it-yourself government
Discussion	Access to information	Rulemaking	Public-private partnerships
		Enhancing online citizen participation through policy	Achieving better results by working together
	Data transparency via data.gov	Enhancing citizen participation in decision making	Collaboration
	Governance	Improving online public participation in agency rulemaking	Prizes as incentives for public-private partnerships
	Open government operations	New technologies and participation	
	Transparency principles	Participation	
		Strengthening civic participation	
Drafting	Access to information: improving access to government data	All other participation recommendations	All other collaboration recommendations
	All other transparency recommendations	Enhancing online citizen participation through policy	Alternative and online dispute resolution
	Data transparency via data.gov: putting more data online	Improving online public participation in agency rulemaking/e-rulemaking	Inter-governmental and intra-governmental collaboration
	Open government operations: strategies for more open government	Citizen participation in government decision-making: creating new opportunities to engage	Prizes: creating incentives for public-private partnerships
	Transparency principles: defining transparency	New technologies and participation: enabling participation with new media	
	Transparency governance: institutionalizing transparency	Strengthening civic participation: training people to participate	

Note. The brainstorming phase had the additional topics of “Capacity Building” and “Legal & Policy Challenges” that were not included during the discussion or drafting phase

Analysis of the content of the contributions revealed that only a fraction (41 out of 2,500) addressed the OGD design and process issues that constitute this article's focus. Because articulating positions on the design and process of the OGD was not the purpose of the OGD, the relatively small number of contributors doing so is not surprising. The lack of such contributions, however, required extending the data analyzed in this article beyond the official OGD forums. Invaluable to filling the information gap concerning the design and processes of the OGD were external discussions on the Ning social networking websites of the IAP2 and the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD), the NCDD's blog and listserv, and other electronic forums. In addition to providing informed reflections on the OGD, these networks also made public otherwise unavailable information, such as notes from conference calls and meetings with White House staff discussing the OGD as the experiment unfolded, as well as an October 2009 discussion about the OGD between participatory advocates and White House staff. Rounding out sources informing this study are official notices and documents (e.g., Nation Academy of Public Administration, 2009b), the framing texts (i.e., introductions) produced by the White House for each phases and subphase, press releases, and news clippings.

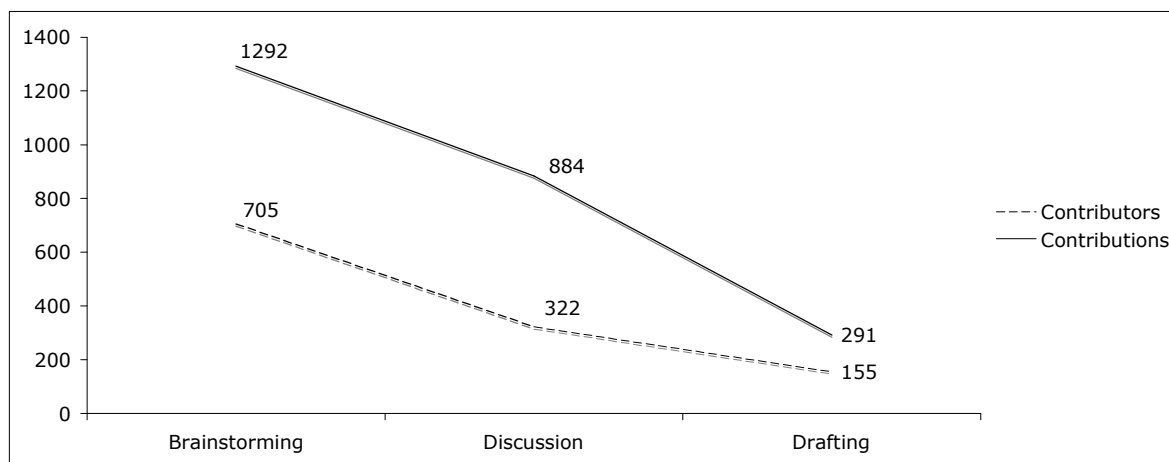


Figure 1. Number of contributors and contributions during each phase of the Open Government Dialogue.

Note. Contributor data on the drafting phase reported by MixedInk and cited by OSTP (2009c; 2009d) varies from that reported in this figure. MixedInk reported each time a contributor made a contribution for a total of 375 contributors. The data in Figure 1 counts only unique contributors.

Table 2. Number of OGD Contributions by Theme and Topic

Transparency		Participation		Collaboration	
Principles (D)	229	New strategies and techniques (B)	194	Intra- and inter-gov. collaboration (DR)	53
Government operation more open (B)	199	Strengthening civic participation (D)	127	Federal and state collaboration (B)	50
Governance (D)	129	Enhancing citizen participation(DR)	106	Prizes as incentives (D)	48
Making data more accessible (B)	116	New opportunities to engage (DR)	106	Public private partnerships (B)	41
Strategies for more open government (DR)	107	New tools and technologies (B)	79	Public-private partnerships (DR)	27
Data transparency via data.gov (D)	67	Citizen participation in decision-making (D)	68	Innovating in dispute resolution (DR)	23
Access to information (D)	55	Online citizen participation via policy (D)	42	Other recommendations (DR)	22
Open government operations (D)	53	Rulemaking (B)	35	Between federal agencies (B)	22
Records management (B)	47	New technologies and participation (DR)	34	DIY government (B)	13
Transparency definition (DR)	47	Online participation in rulemaking (DR)	30	Working together (D)	11
Access to government information (DR)	39	Agency rulemaking (D)	29		
Institutionalizing transparency (DR)	33	Strengthening civic participation (DR)	27		
Data transparency (DR)	29	New technologies and participation (D)	26		
Other transparency (DR)	28	Other recommendations (DR)	25		
		Federal advisory committees (B)	15		
Total	1178		943		310

Note. Letters in parentheses correspond to phase of the Open Government Dialogue in which the topic was posted (B=Brainstorming, D=Discussion, DR=Drafting). For formatting purposes many of the topic titles have been shortened.

Analytical Framework

The nature of the data informing this article imposed several challenges on the analysis. Because data were gathered from a disparate collection of publicly available sources generated without the prompting of the author (e.g., conducting interviews) the scope, focus, and format of the available data was outside the author's control and the data producers (i.e., contributors) were not available to probe for expansion or clarification.

To provide the structure necessary to make these fractured data meaningful, The OGD is examined through the "lens" of the International Association of Public Participation's (2007) "Core Values of Public Participation." There are seven core values:

1. Public participation is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process.
2. Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.
3. Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognizing and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision makers.
4. Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.
5. Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate.
6. Public participation provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.
7. Public participation communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.

The IAP2 core values are among a handful of statements (see, e.g., National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation, 2009) informing participatory forum designers and participants how to "make better decisions which reflect the interests and concerns of potentially affected people and entities" (International Association of Public Participation, para. 1). Intended "for use in the development and implementation of public participation processes" (International Association of Public Participation, para. 1), the IAP2's core values reflect collective practical and theoretical wisdom but lack explicit grounding in the scholarly literature and the rigor such a grounding

entails. It is necessary, therefore, to be clear about this author's interpretation of the core values and their application in this article.

At first glance, the core values appear as unproblematic principles that anyone concerned about public participation can stand behind. Ideas and ideals behind the core values (i.e., their theoretical interpretation and practical application), however, are subject to considerable debate. For instance, what it means to provide the information needed to participate in public participation, and who is affected, are contested (see, e.g., Bohman & Rehg, 1997; Elster, 1998). Many, if not all, of the core values also are interdependent (see Thompson, 2008), such that what it means to be "affected by a decision," for instance, influences who participates, which can affect the information needed, among other considerations. In this article the philosophical and theoretical debates about the core values' operative terms and assume vernacular definitions of theoretically knotty concepts (e.g., "affected interests") are side stepped. Questions such as, "What is the meaning of 'meaningful' in the core value calling for 'meaningful participation'?", are confronted only in instances where failing to do so would render discussion difficult.

Use of the core values assists in organizing the data but the loose operationalization of the core values adopted invites selective interpretation. To minimize unintended biases, at least three data points (or examples) were required to support each of the claims below. A practical implication of relying exclusively on unsolicited public sources means that some issues could not be evidenced as thoroughly as might be expected, while requiring only three congruent examples means the qualitative maxim of achieving "theoretical saturation" (see Strauss & Corbin, 1990) has, in some circumstance, likely gone unmet.

Although the limitations noted above caution against treating the perspectives on the OGD presented below as conclusive, they highlight the challenges of researching (and conducting) public engagement in computer-mediated environments, a topic the author returns to in the concluding section. For the moment, it should simply be noted that the OGD in general, and this research in particular, reflect what Lindlof and Taylor (2002, p. 261) described as the "multi-sited, partial, dispersed, and mediated" nature of the post-modern ethnographic field. Fields are no longer considered "singular, self-contained 'locations,' these fields are 'spaces of flow' organized around 'connections' between people, practices, events, and objects" (Lindlof & Taylor, p. 261). The OGD and this research are situated in an environment in which contingency and indeterminacy are realities that must be accepted, if not embraced.

OGD and the Core Values: Design

This section considers the design issues explicit in four of the IAP2's core values by examining if and how the OGD (a) promised public influence on the final decision(s), (b) promoted sustainable decisions, (c) sought input on how participation occurred, and (d) communicated the effect of participation on decisions. The core values represented in (a) and (d) are closely connected, and those in (b) and (c) share common themes, and, consequently, This author discusses each pair.

Promises and Effects of Participation

As of this writing, the Obama administration has not released the "Open Government Directive". Participation in the OGD was to inform; consequently, it is impossible to say what effect the experiment will have on the adopted rules or if the administration will disclose those effects.⁴ It is, however, possible to take account of the administration's promises about the effects of participation on the final decisions, as well as the demonstrable effects of participation within the phases of the OGD. This is the way the question of promises and effects of participation were approached below.

A good starting point for this section is a memorandum issued the day after Obama's inauguration. Calling for an "Open Government Directive" to guide the administration's public engagement practices, the memorandum stated the administration was "committed to creating an unprecedented level of openness . . . [to] ensure the public trust and establish a system of transparency, public participation, and collaboration" (Obama, 2009, para. 1). The OGD brainstorming phase began with a reference to the memorandum and the declaration that: "The President is calling on you to *help shape* [emphasis added] how that commitment is fulfilled" (National Academy of Public Administration, 2009a, para. 1). The idea of "helping to shape," stated in various ways, was the central promised effect of the OGD. Introducing the discussion phase, the administration stated that it was "*asking for your help* [emphasis added] . . . fleshing out the issues, potential solutions, and the pros and cons" (Noveck, 2009, para. 13) of the contributions from the brainstorming phase. When the time arose for drafting, a preface informed participants that contributions would "*inform* [emphasis added] the drafting of an 'Open

⁴ The White House released the Open Government Directive on December 8, 2009. It can be found here: http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/assets/memoranda_2010/m10-06.pdf

Government Directive' to Executive branch agencies" (Open Government Directive, 2009, para. 8).

In a normative sense, a commitment that public participation "help shape" or "inform" policy is a weak ideal (see Arnestine, 1969; Fung, 2006; Kelshaw & Gastil, 2008). However, without recourse to the final product (i.e., the Open Government Directive), it cannot be determined how much public participation affected the forthcoming policies. However, a sense of how participation might "help shape" these policies might can be gleaned by examining how participation shaped the OGD. Consideration of the effects of participation within the OGD also brings into focus if (and how) the administration communicated participants' impact on its decisions.

At the beginning of the second phase of the OGD, the administration summed up the brainstorming and framed the discussion phase as follows:

We have culled a short list of topics for deeper and more focused conversation from among the suggestions you posted during this Brainstorm. . . . We read and considered all the proposals. We took the voting into account when assessing your enthusiasm for a submission, but only somewhat in evaluating relevance. The ideas that received the most organized support were not necessarily the most viable suggestions. (Noveck, 2009, para. 2–3)

In addition, the administration explained that some "great ideas" were not incorporated into the discussion phase because they were unrelated to the themes of transparency, participation, and collaboration; consisted of commercial proposals; were outside the purview of the Executive branch; or were directed at specific agencies (Noveck, 2009). Long-range suggestions were described as being "bracketed . . . in favor of working with those that can lead to change in the shorter term" (Noveck, 2009, para. 5). Although the administration provided these explanations, nowhere was there presented an accounting of the original contributions included for "deeper discussion" and those that were abandoned or "bracketed," nor was there a rational or metric provided by which participants could independently assess the ideas that were included and excluded. Descriptions of the use of public participation in shaping the discussion phase, however, were verbose compared to those that preceded the drafting phase. At the beginning of the drafting phase lengthy explanations about the use of public input had given way to short declaratives, such as, "Many of you suggested potential principles...Now we would like you to

describe concisely what that set of principles might be” (Transparency Principles, 2009, para. 2).⁵

In summary, the OGD had mixed results regarding its performance related to the core values of participation’s effect and impact. The administration’s stated goal of public participation (i.e., “help shape”) was minimal, amounting to a technologically advanced practice of notice and comment. Although the purpose of public participation is to help shape policy, the degree to which participation can do so varies widely, from having no effect to having a substantive impact on the final policies. The latitude within the polls of potential impact are so vast and the issues the OGD dealt with so expansive that even after publication of the “Open Government Directive,” it may be impossible to recognize the public’s impact. Short of word-for-word incorporation of any contribution (e.g., NCDD’s “Principles of Public Engagement”), the only means of fully understanding how much input the public had will likely be what the administration chooses to report, and it is not clear that the administration will disclose detailed information on that matter.

Sustainable Decisions and Input on Participation

Sustainable decisions, according to the core values, are promoted by “recognizing and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision makers.” Here is encountered an inadequate understanding of the needs and interests of the administration and of the public. An investigation of the contributions that participants made and the administration’s framing texts throughout the OGD would provide insights into those needs and interests, but such a discussion requires more space than is available here. For present purposes, conclusions can be drawn about the sustainability of the decisions the OGD is to inform by connecting the issue of sustainability with the related core value of input into participation.

On the question of public participants’ voice in structuring their participation, it can be stated unequivocally that participants had no such voice; the OGD was conceptualized and implemented absent solicitation of public input on the design of participation.⁶ The lack of an

⁵ The administration was responsive to one procedural critique during the OGD. Following calls from participants for more time during the drafting phase, five days were added to the original timetable.

⁶ The White House Office of Public Engagement did host at least two conference calls with invited guests where participants gave feedback on the OGD. Most of the feedback, however, was not acted on during the OGD. In addition, on October 29, 2009 several public participation advocates were invited to the White House to discuss a

invitation to participate in the design of OGD, however, did not prevent participants from offering during the forums both their assessment of the design, and suggestions for improvements. Keyword searches of the full text of all contributions from each phase of the OGD revealed less than 1% of the contributions in each phase addressed issues of participatory design.⁷ Table 3 provides information on the number of contributions addressing the participatory design during each phase of the OGD. As Table 3 shows, the majority of contributions (70%) were made during the brainstorming phase.

To delve deeper into the contributions listed in Table 3, an inductive analysis was employed to categorize the contributions based on their content. Through a process of reading and categorizing the contributions, The author has concluded, as shown in Table 3, that most (68%) of the contributions about participation attended to issues of the OGD's "functionality and usability," defined as any contribution bearing directly on how participation occurred during the six weeks of public participation.

Table 3. Contributions Addressing Participation by Emergent Topic

OGD Phase	Topic							Total
	Abuse	Functionality/ Usability	Impact	Privacy	Public Notice	Sustainability	Time	
Brainstorming	1	21	2	–	2	1	2	29 (0.70%)
Discussion	2	7	1	–	1	–	–	11 (0.26%)
Drafting	–	–	–	1	–	–	–	1 (0.02%)
Total	3 (0.07%)	28 (0.68%)	3 (0.07%)	1 (0.02%)	3 (0.07%)	1 (0.02%)	2 (0.04%)	41 (100%)

survey of OGD participants. Notes from the conference calls and the October 29, 2009 meeting can be found on the NCDD listserv archive at <http://lists.thataway.org/SCRIPTS/WATHATAWAY.EXE?A0=NCDD-DISCUSSION>
⁷ Contributions were searched for the terms "site" and "open government." The first term was selected to find contributions about the platforms while the second sought contributions addressing general issues in the OGD. It is possible that additional comments on the design and/or processes of the OGD would be located by closer investigation.

Table 4 lists all ideas contained in the functionality and usability contributions, further divided (again through an inductive approach) into several subtopics.⁸ The remaining contributions (excluding functionality and usability) were placed into seven emergent categories (see Table 5), many of which, such as the “Impact of OGD,” “Public Notice of the OGD,” and “Sustainability of the ODG,” relate directly to one or more of the core values. Since functionality and usability contributions relate more clearly than the others to the core value of having a voice in structuring participation, These matters are discussed in more detail below.

Analysis of the contributions listed in Table 4 shows that some participants in the OGD found the computer platforms difficult to navigate, lacking good organization of the contributions, and sought voting mechanisms that were more discriminating.⁹

Although it is important for participatory designers to be aware of such concerns when working in online environments, it is unlikely that even the most attentive designers can ensure the technology employed is immediately usable by all (i.e., has a minimal learning curve) and functions as all participants desire. The more substantive concerns raised by contributors addressed issues of reflexivity in the OGD design, fostering connections among participants, and the ease of conducting independent analysis of the contributions. By any measure these are sophisticated critiques which, taken together, demonstrate a desire on the part of the contributors (and those who voted in support of those contributions) for public participation to facilitate more than a voice. These contributors sought public participation that fosters interaction among the public, the government, and the data; in other words, participation that is not only functional but relational as well.

In contrast to their relatively small numbers inside the OGD forums, comments and critiques of the structure of participation were widespread outside the OGD forums. Following the brainstorming phase, Bonnemann (2009) developed a list of 26 ideas that “would considerably improve the participation experience” and “increase the overall quantity and quality of participant input” (para. 5). Reflections on the discussion phase were sparse, but one NCDD listserv member, noting how “some are having trouble posting comments,” considered it useful

⁸ Many contributions contained more than one critique or suggestion, what this author calls “ideas.” Both Table 4 and Table 5, list the ideas contained within each contribution. Only light editing (e.g., spelling and grammar) of the ideas was done.

⁹ Interestingly, not one of the contributions concerning voting (all of which were posted during brainstorming) critiqued the presence of an evaluative function during what is normatively a non-evaluative process of idea generation (see Sunwolf & Seibold, 1999).

Table 4. Functionality and Usability Contributions by Emergent Topic

Analysis	<p>An easy way [is needed] to download the complete set of the ideas, comments and votes in a delimited text format or some other well-structured format. (Brainstorming)</p> <p>The current comment analysis technology fails to create a “learning system” . . . the government’s response to the public comment has to be timely, interesting, and relevant. (Brainstorming)</p>
Critique	<p>A place [is needed] to comment on the actual framing of the questions. (Brainstorming)</p> <p>Create a place to accommodate people who want to critique an interface or suggest improvements. (Brainstorming)</p> <p>It would be good to have a category specifically for feedback and suggestions about this site. (Brainstorming)</p>
Contributing	<p>Attach a Pro and a Con WIKI to each idea. (Brainstorming)</p> <p>Allow people to publish in their own way . . . that would allow the government and others to aggregate them for moderation and analysis. (Brainstorming)</p> <p>The title, description, and “Why is This Idea Important” sections should be able to be revised. A history of changes should be viewable for each post. (Brainstorming)</p> <p>Position the CAPTCHA [Completely Automated Public Turing Test To Tell Computers and Humans Apart] code box ABOVE the submit button. (Discussion)</p>
Moderation	<p>Have a placeholder where a comment has been removed! (Discussion)</p> <p>Posts are said to be removed by the community of users, but there is no way to verify this. (Brainstorming)</p>
Organization	<p>A symbol shouting “New” would be great. (Brainstorming)</p> <p>A checklist of categories. Anyone can suggest other categories. (Brainstorming)</p> <p>Add a "Preview" and "Speller." (Brainstorming)</p> <p>Ideas with similar topics [should] be grouped together. (Brainstorming)</p> <p>Install a search engine by keywords. (Brainstorming)</p> <p>It sure would be nice to be able to keyword search this website. (Brainstorming)</p> <p>Limit visible information shown in an idea and click if more information is desired. (Brainstorming)</p> <p>Make the posts anonymous and list them in random order. (Brainstorming)</p> <p>Table of contents within Title/Subject by category. (Brainstorming)</p> <p>Threaded, rated comments. (Brainstorming)</p> <p>Tree structure would go far in allowing us to follow a conversation. (Discussion)</p> <p>User could show the Idea titles ordered by say: Recent, Top, Controversial, Tag, Title-Contents, Tag, and others. (Brainstorming)</p> <p>Include a “Reply to post . . .” so that the conversation can be followed. (Discussion)</p>

Table 4 (cont). Functionality and Usability Contributions by Emergent Topic

Platforms	<p>A VERY SIMPLE naive-user interface [is needed]. (Brainstorming)</p> <p>Constantly allow [website] to be reviewed, critiqued and adapted. (Brainstorming)</p> <p>All users to participate with minimal technological background. (Brainstorming)</p> <p>Explain Web 2.0 to people. (Brainstorming)</p> <p>I need more simple clear explanations . . . like a diagram to show where and why and how to press the keyboard. (Brainstorming)</p> <p>Make it easier for novice users to jump right to their area of interest. (Brainstorming)</p> <p>Open Government includes educating the public on using this technology. (Brainstorming)</p>
Users	<p>Private messaging and expanded profiles (interests, description of personal philosophies) [of participants]. (Brainstorming)</p> <p>Subscriptions to specific people's ideas, votes, comments, and specific ideas. (Brainstorming)</p>
Voting	<p>Actual count of positive and negative reaction. (Brainstorming)</p> <p>Arbitrary voting methods that doesn't allow for alternative ones. (Brainstorming)</p> <p>Make sure that every participant really votes only once. (Brainstorming)</p> <p>Provide a record of how many positive votes and how many negative votes each idea gets. (Brainstorming)</p> <p>Users should have the capability to remove or change their vote. (Brainstorming)</p>

to circulate instructions about how to use the OSTP blog. Among participatory advocates (on the NCDD email list), the drafting phase received the most criticism for its design.

Because the drafting phase received only one contribution concerning its design within the OGD, comments from NCDD listserv members offer a unique, albeit limited, contribution to the present discussion. One NCDD participant noted that the platform used in the drafting phase required a “non-standard editing interface [that] lock the drafters into working online from [MixedInk’s] servers,” making it difficult to collaborate. Another commented that “learning the site takes some time, and its rather clumsy . . . hard to get a quick overview . . . which is not inviting.” Yet another explained that she “got lost fast in phases two and three . . . because it’s confusing and I don’t feel skilled enough.” Finally, suggesting a central cause of the frustration, a participant wrote, “Obama's process starts out with one fundamental flaw, simply in that engagement happened too late in the process; the design came from the top.”

Table 5. Contributions on Participation by Topic

Abuse	<p>It is very easy for powerful interests to mobilize their members/friends to participate, skewing things in directions that are favorable to their views. (Brainstorming)</p> <p>System administrators, techs and other high level access personnel should not be allowed to control or modify what is entered into the system. Neither should users be allowed to flag comments for whatever reason due to their abusiveness that has been demonstrated. (Discussion)</p>
Access	<p>I'm a German national and shouldn't be able to post this. (Brainstorming)</p> <p>Did the website include a Spanish version? (Brainstorming)</p>
Commercial Services	<p>I was disturbed to read this paragraph under the MixedInk LLC Terms of Use . . . At the very least there should be a "proprietary notice" on the home page that states proprietary information submitted to this site is subject to [MixedInk's] terms of use policy. (Drafting)</p>
Impact	<p>Letting users/commenter know how their information will be securely reported and acted upon is a good practice. (Brainstorming)</p> <p>What formal process for authentically including fringe ideas into innovative problem solving will be employed on the national level? (Discussion)</p> <p>What formal process will assure that individual meanings are fully understood? (Discussion)</p> <p>What formal process can groups of diversified decision makers apply to establish a meaningful systems view of a complex situation before understandings are reduced to recommendations? (Discussion)</p>
Public Notice	<p>Minimal advance public notice of Open Government Dialogue and the brief period allowed for comments means that many Americans will be precluded from participating. (Brainstorming)</p> <p>Developing novel techniques meant to involve "more than the usual suspects" needs to be teamed with advertisement in more traditional media. (Brainstorming)</p> <p>That there is no direct link to this "blog" page on the OSTP home page is another issue of non-transparency. (Discussion)</p>
Sustainability	<p>The Open Government Dialog should be repeated, at least yearly. (Brainstorming)</p>
Timeline	<p>Why is the White House only holding this forum open for a week, and over the Memorial Day holiday, to boot? (Brainstorming)</p> <p>One week is not enough for this important initiative. It should be transformed into an ongoing tool for citizen participation in making decisions effecting their lives. (Brainstorming)</p>

What makes these quotes from OGD participants interesting and telling is not their critiques per se but their sources—people presumably informed about participatory designs and processes. As members of the NCDD listserv, these individuals likely have a better than average

understanding of participatory designs, and experiences that would allow them to participate efficiently and effectively. Participatory experts, however, like others, found the OGD forums poorly designed for their stated purposes and difficult to navigate, which might explain, in part, why participation in the OGD experienced a negative curve.

OGD and the Core Values: Processes

In any participatory event, design and processes are intimately connected, with the most reflexive designs incorporating processes evaluations into the participatory structure (see Dietz & Stern, 2008). Processes, however, are not often foregrounded in the existing literature, which gives disproportionate weight to participatory design and effects (see e.g., Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004; Sanders, 1997). Even in the IAP2 core values themselves there is an imbalance between design and process, with, by my interpretation, only two of the seven values attending explicitly to process. In the following sections, the administration's efforts are examined during the OGD to seek out and facilitate involvement, and to provide the information necessary for meaningful participation, the central concerns of the core values addressing processes.

Seeking and Facilitating Involvement

The difficulty of getting a diverse collection of people to participate in public participation forums is a long-standing lament among government officials, participatory advocates, and engaged citizens. Proposals for engaging more than the "usual suspects" in participatory governance range from financial compensation (Gastil, 2000) to legal compulsion (Lieb, 2004). Although a widely discussed and critical topic regarding public participation, the Obama administration engaged in minimal effort to seek out and facilitate involvement in the OGD.

The first broadly circulated notice of the OGD, which described the event as "groundbreaking" and "unprecedented," was a press release dated May 21, 2009 (see White House, 2009), the first day of the brainstorming phase. A search of the Nexus/Lexis database found that after the May 21 press release, the OGD progressed for 4 weeks without remarks from the White House to the public directly or through the media. On June 22, *The New York Times* ran an article (see Hansell, 2009) on the OGD that quoted administration officials, but there was no other coverage by major media outlets. Furthermore, searches of the White House website returned no mention of the OGD in President Obama's public addresses or in the daily press

briefing transcripts before, during, or after the OGD. Finally, the Office of Public Engagement's website promoted the OGD only once, on the first day of brainstorming.

Were the OGD a typical government program undertaken by the White House, the lack of public announcements on the subject would not be surprising, but the OGD was an effort at public participation; hence, by definition, it required public awareness to succeed, which required seeking out and facilitating involvement.

Information for Meaningful Participation

The core value of providing “participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way” poses a definitional problem. As stated, this core value defines necessary information by recourse to perceptions of participation, which are situated and individual, and, hence, neither stable or universal. Below, this author approached the degree to which the OGD fulfilled the core value of providing information for meaningful participation by considering what information was made available to participants and by examining how that information could or could not foster understanding of the issues under discussion and participants' ability to make informed contributions to the OGD.

When the OGD kicked off, the administration posted a message on the homepage of the brainstorming website. In addition to eight questions “to consider in formulating ideas,” the administration described the focus of the brainstorming as follows: “We are seeking innovative approaches to policy, specific project suggestions, government-wide or agency-specific instructions, and any relevant examples and stories relating to law, policy, technology, culture, or practice” (National Academy of Public Administration, 2009a, para. 2). In response to this sweeping charge, participants submitted their contributions, which then were analyzed by fellows at the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA).

Prior to the start of the discussion phase, NAPA (2009b) sent to the White House a report presenting a synthesis of key themes from the brainstorming session, which the OSTP posted on its blog at the start of the discussion phase.¹⁰ In addition, each of the three themes of the discussion phase (i.e., collaboration, transparency, and participation) was introduced by a lengthy review of the contributions presented during brainstorming, and a similar but shorter message

¹⁰ The NAPA report, although useful, left its methodology undefined leading at least one OGD contributor to question its reliability.

preceded each topic for discussion. The introductory messages of both the themes and subtopics varied in format and author, but generally included: (a) an identification of the purpose of the discussion phase, (b) a summary of contributions from the brainstorming phase, and (c) a few questions about the topic to direct contributions during the discussion phase.

In contrast to the extensive background information provided during the discussion phase, the topics of the drafting phase were introduced by only a few summary words and directions to review comments from the other phases, from government employees postings to the Office of Management and Budget's MAX wiki (see Footnote 1 above), and documents submitted to the White House and posted at the OSTP's website. The drafting phase, however, for the first time, specified what the administration sought from participants: "A good recommendation will be no more than 4 sentences and a set of recommendations will be no more than 1 page" (Office of Science & Technology Policy, 2009a, para. 4). A random sample of contributions made during the drafting phase demonstrates that contributors generally followed these instructions.

From the discussion above, mixed results emerge concerning the information provided by the White House that facilitated understanding and informed involvement in the OGD. The brainstorming phase was introduced in almost complete absence of information about the administration's goals and the topics of discussion, the purposes of brainstorming, and the type/format of desired contributions. Without those framing devices and instructions, participants were left to guess what, from the administration's perspective, constituted effective participation. At the other end of the spectrum was the discussion phase, during which participants were presented with quite a bit of data to inform participation. Through the NAPA report and its own analysis, the administration made the results of brainstorming (or at least its interpretation of the results) accessible, providing a foundation for discussion. During the drafting phase, although detailed directions about what was sought from contributors were provided, the situation overall returned to one lacking useable information, as during the brainstorming. During this last, and perhaps most important, phase, participants could not readily build on the information developed during the previous phases.

Finally, information that fosters understanding and effective participation is only useful to the extent that there is time to digest, reflect, and discuss it with others. Although each of the phases of the OGD was longer than the one preceding it, at each stage, the administration provided information without a significant grace period between its distribution and the

beginning of next phase. Only 2 or 3 days across a weekend separated the ending of each phase and the beginning of the next.

Conclusion: The OGD and the Obama Administration's Participatory Stance

The heart of the IAP2's core values is the principle that "those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process." Every other position expressed in the core values is an extension of that principle. The stronger a government holds participatory involvement in decision making as a right, the more likely it is that its participatory designs and processes will be informed, inclusive, and impactful. Although it overly simplifies matters, practical articulations of acknowledging a right to participation exist on a continuum from little acceptance of the right (i.e., limited participation) to a full embrace (i.e., participation as transformative). Where, then, in light of the OGD, is the Obama administration on this continuum?

The picture of the OGD drawn above complicates rendering an absolute ruling on the question just posed. On the one hand, the Obama administration undertook a large public participation project (on issues of participation) for which no legal requirement for even minimal public input existed. These actions suggest a strong position in favor of public participation on the part of the Obama administration. On the other hand, the OGD was not promoted, lacked clear descriptions of the effect of participation on policy, and failed to involve participants in the design. In the space between, the administration employed technology that was difficult for some to use and the OGD lacked consistency with regard to providing the information necessary for meaningful participation. Viewed as a whole, the performance of the OGD reflects an administration that, at best, is committed to the idea of public participation yet unsure how to put its commitment into practice.

Although it is tempting to view the Obama administration in the best possible light, there is good cause to believe that the administration appreciates not the idea public participation, but the symbolic value of appearing participatory. The administration had (at least) 120 days to consider the design of the OGD forums, yet there was no indication that the White House consulted, prior to beginning the OGD, with any groups or individuals with experience and knowledge regarding participatory practices. As a result, the OGD went live on three computer mediated platforms that facilitated virtually the same means of participation (e.g., leaving comments), none of which

sought to foster sustainable communities of participants and which, when examined in detail as a whole, presented no obvious logical flow from phase to phase. On the process side, the OGD was needlessly hurried, under-promoted, and poorly facilitated (e.g., lacked adequate information and framing), flaws that frustrated participants, constricted participation, and likely caused participation to decline. In summary, the OGD had extensive problems, many of which could have been anticipated through either reflection, research, or consultation with practitioners inside or outside the government.

The Obama administration and the public should take many lessons from the OGD, only a few of which can be discussed here (see, for others, Table 6; Bonnemann, 2009). First and foremost, an overarching limitation of the OGD was the lack of attention by the administration concerning its goals, which directly impact the design and facilitation of participation. The goal of participation as helping to shape policy is admirable but far too abstract for an experiment on the scale (both physically and conceptually) of the OGD. The OGD might have proceeded more efficiently and effectively had the administration offered a draft Open Government Directive as a starting point for discussion along with an invitation for participants to reach beyond that proposal's boundaries when contributing. The absence of such a concrete proposal from the administration, combined with poorly defined topical areas and a lack of detailed direction, means that the public's demonstrable effect in shaping policy through participation in the OGD is likely to be minimal, which can lead to less incentive to participate in the future.

Second, evidence suggests that the administration failed to reach out to experienced public participation managers both within and external to government. Due, in part, to a demonstrated lack of understanding of public participation design and processes, the administration structured and facilitated an experiment in which, as late as the drafting phase, participants were still writing "comments," not the requested policy proposals.

By entering into discussions with people who have experience in public participation practices, many of the problems noted above could have been avoided, the design and process would have been stronger and more effective, and a signal would have been sent by the administration that it takes participation seriously. The Obama administration has an exceptionally positive perception among the liberal leaning public participation advocacy and practitioner community, as well as access to the human resources of federal agencies with extensive experience in public participation, such as the Environmental Protection Agency. Why

the administration did not draw on public and private resources is a question that only the administration can answer. The effect of not consulting with others, however, was clearly demonstrated in the decidedly lackluster OGD experiment.

Finally, the technology employed during the OGD had, as noted above, multiple deficiencies. Yet one issue—the difficulty of extracting and preparing for analysis information from the sites—was present among the critiques offered by contributors, constantly demanded as a feature of an open digital government in the OGD forums, and was confronted directly by the author. Collecting data from the websites used during the OGD for use in this article required copying, pasting, reformatting, importing, and cleaning the contributions and associated votes, contributors' names, and other information. Although these procedures were necessary to make sense of the aggregate contributions during each phase, and to permit building on the contributions in later phases, few, if any, participants in the OGD were likely to invest the time required to render the data useable in this manner. And, if participants were inclined to reformat the data, the OGD proceeded to quickly for them to do so. In designing future electronic public participation processes, the administration needs to think about not only how users interact with the platforms but with the data on those platforms, starting with the capacity to download delimited datasets, to sort information online, and, at the very least, to print from the platforms (which could not be done with MixedInk).

In the final analysis, there exists a wide gulf between the administration's descriptions of its participatory stance (e.g., "groundbreaking") and its practices as represented by the OGD. Whether the administration's enacted position on participation will be weak or strong in the future remains an open question, posing a choice for engaged citizens and participatory advocates. As long as the Obama administration's practical stance on participation remains ambiguous, the public will continue to find it difficult to engage the administration in philosophical and political struggles regarding public participation, and will face difficulties in assessing future administration efforts at public participation. Given the administration's demonstrably ambiguous practical stance on public participation, advocates and practitioners must choose whether to exert political pressure on the administration to align its practices with its strong pronouncements, or its pronouncements with its weak practices. If the administration does not articulate the position it performs in practice, participation advocates, as well as the

public at large, cannot effectively engage the administration in future participatory forums or contests over the role of public participation in civic life.

With respect to the OGD itself, much work remains to be done to make full use of the exceptionally large collection of good (and bad) contributions contributors provided. Among the questions that remain to be explored are: What practical ideas and resources can public participation scholars, advocates, and practitioners cull from the OGD contributions? What interests and values did contributors in their contributions express, and what are the implications of these interests and values for the practice of public participation? In addition, of course, it will be necessary, when the Open Government Directive is published, to consider how much of an impact the OGD had on that policy. The OGD and this analysis have ended, but there exists much more to be learned from the record of engagement participants left behind.

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Table 6. Summary Analysis of the OGD

Core Value	OGD Successful Attributes	OGD Failing Attributes
1. Public participation is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process.	The act of hosting the OGD suggests that the Obama administration might lean in the direction of participation as a right.	The poor planning and execution of the OGD means that advocates of public participation cannot be idle. Continued pressure is required to ensure the Obama administration internalizes and acts on the belief of public participation as a right.
2. Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.	The OGD was described as a process that would "help shape" the Open Government Directive.	There is very little prospect that the public will be able to see its impact on the Open Government Directive, or that the Obama administration will disclose details about how much public participation helped to shape the policy.
3. Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognizing and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision makers.	The Obama administration hosted several meetings with participation advocates and practitioners to discuss the OGD.	The Obama administration provided very little discussion of its own needs and interest, and designed no spaces within OGD for the general public to express their interests.
4. Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.	The Obama administration used relatively simple, publicly available, online resources to conduct the OGD.	The Obama administration was virtually silent about the OGD throughout the entire process. There was almost no communication with the public about the experiment.
5. Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate.	After hearing from participants about the rushed timeline, the Obama administration extended the drafting phase.	There was virtually no public discussion by the Obama administration about the design, processes, or timing of the OGD prior to its start.
6. Public participation provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.	The Obama administration made public an independent analysis of the brainstorming phase, and provided its own analysis.	The Obama administration provided very little direction concerning what it considered meaningful participation.
7. Public participation communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.	With respect to the Open Government Directive, it is too early to make a conclusion. However, following brainstorming, the Obama administration reported the reasons for excluding certain contributions from the discussion phase.	Neither the Obama administration's analysis nor the independent analysis of the brainstorming phase discussed their methodologies in detail. Such analysis was completely absent following the discussion and drafting phases.

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