

# II

## STAYING FOCUSED: TRACING THE FLOW OF IDEAS FROM THE ONLINE PARLIAMENT TO CANBERRA

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There exist many successful examples of public deliberation engaging groups of lay citizens, but questions remain about the extent to which deliberation can flourish online and how such discussions can be merged with more traditional public meetings.<sup>1</sup> Previous deliberative efforts have built online and face-to-face deliberative meetings in parallel, or they have integrated small-group deliberations into plenary sessions during a single-day event.<sup>2</sup> The 2009 Australian Citizens' Parliament was the first event to really make it possible to test those questions.

The deliberation process began in late 2008 with the Online Parliament (OP), which chapter 3 describes in more detail. The hundreds of participants in the OP divided into groups that generated eleven discrete proposals that then primed the face-to-face deliberations held in Canberra in February 2009. The Canberra face-to-face deliberations (hereafter called "F2F") included daily small-group discussions, which were recorded and transcribed. These transcripts, combined with the digital record of the OP's discussion threads, provide the first chance to track issues over the course of both an online and a face-to-face deliberative process. The aim of this chapter is to measure systematically the flow of language and ideas from the OP to the F2F. This question is important because it tests the viability of the Australian model for future public events that hope to link a massive online process with a more focused and exclusive face-to-face deliberation.

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## Integrating Online and Face-to-Face Deliberation

In theory, the OP process should have aided the F2F deliberations by providing the face-to-face deliberators with a set of concrete proposals to consider, thereby saving them the considerable effort necessary to generate a robust set of initial proposals. This could help to focus their energy on the final, most challenging, deliberative task—namely, that of weighing the best solutions against one another and making a prioritized set of recommendations. The most basic question is, did this happen? This is important to know because the OP/ACP may become a model for organizing future deliberations.

Even with a well-designed process, there are forces at work that could undermine efforts to integrate online insights into the face-to-face discussions. In particular, prior research suggests the tendency of groups to converge on a shared identity that sets them apart from other groups.<sup>3</sup> Prior face-to-face deliberating groups, even larger ones such as the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly (see chapter 1), have engaged in precisely this kind of identity-building activity amidst their more rigorous deliberations. This process may make it less likely that those meeting face-to-face will incorporate the results of prior online deliberations into their own deliberations. From a broader social-identity perspective, the challenge is to either establish the online participants as part of the same citizen-deliberator “in-group” as their face-to-face peers, or to appeal to the face-to-face deliberators' superordinate social identity as “citizens” to take seriously the views of their online peers.<sup>4</sup> In sum, the ability of Australian organizers to integrate the identities of online and face-to-face deliberators may prove the key to determining the influence of the large-scale online discussions on the subsequent F2F deliberations.

The closest research program to the present study comes from the small-group literature—the research on decision development by communication scholar Marshall Scott Poole. He and his colleagues tried to develop a way to measure how small decision-making groups moved through different “phases” of discussion—from, say, the “orientation phase” (getting to know each other) to the “decision phase” (actually voting on a choice). The difference here is that we are trying to trace the flow of *topical* tracks, rather than broader categories of talk.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, our task is more akin to the identification of topics in legislative bills, proposals, or agendas.<sup>6</sup>

We aim to track the frequency with which different proposals get discussed in the OP and F2F sessions and combine that with additional data