

Engaging with users

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A growth industry under New Labour

- A key commitment in the development of New Labour's approach to public services
- Strong rhetorical advocacy in many service areas especially local government, health, housing, and transport but some examples of counter trends
- Commitment more managerialist than political (and usually officials in lead)

Varieties of User Engagement

- Information collecting consultation: substantial growth in surveys, formal consultation leaflets and meetings, increasing use of focus groups
- Decision making involvement: citizens' juries, referendums and other voting mechanisms, user group forums, planning for real, interactive websites

Evidence of progress?

- Innovation and capacity building in methods
- Installing a habit of consultation if not user management
- Building an engagement culture: sustained commitment does make a difference (evidence from localities)
- Commitment at level of rhetoric remains high : civil renewal agenda
- Still a gap between expectations of users and those of governors, only limited evidence of impact on decision making
- Evidence of manipulation of user voice
- Fears about consultation overload

What lies beneath (rat choice)?

- A rational choice model of engagement: would predict a calculating approach by participants (cost/benefit and free-riding concerns)
- Expects modest engagement and views participation as at strongest strongest when something significant at stake (NIMBY etc)
- Reputation and trust management by public authorities is key

What lies beneath (soc cap)?

- A social capital model would predict higher involvement where networks of trust, information sharing and norms can grow
- Where providers are able to build networks with users engagement will grow, but this will take time and institution building
- Countervailing effects of wider trends in social capital count against engagement (TV watching, less homogeneous communities)

What lies beneath(resources)?

- Engagement driven by resource capacity, SES gives access to skills, capacity and sense of efficacy
- Predict that with rising education more engagement but with clear social gradient
- Capacity building could open up new opportunities for participation

Assessing New Labour's achievement

- All three models of engagement suggest blocks as well as opportunities
- New Labour's achievements are limited but worthy when assessed against the predictions of the models
- The future is CLEAR: can do, like to, enabled to, asked to and responded to.