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# Listening to the City

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## Contents

- [1 Listening to the City Online Dialogues](#)
- [2 Background Information](#)
- [3 Executive Summary](#)
- [4 Project Rationale and Objectives](#)
- [5 What was delivered?](#)
- [6 Communication Activity](#)
- [7 Successes](#)
- [8 Benefits to Citizens](#)
- [9 Benefits to Authority](#)
- [10 Benefits to Councillors](#)
- [11 Limitations](#)
- [12 Evaluation](#)
- [13 Lessons learnt](#)
- [14 What could happen next](#)
- [15 Additional information and sources](#)

## Listening to the City Online Dialogues

A two-week citizen dialogue to consider plans and discuss priorities for the rebuilding of Lower Manhattan in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks, open to New York City area residents and others affected by the tragedy, held in partnership with local decision-makers, including the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation.

## Background Information

Title: [Listening to the City Online Dialogues \(LTC-O\)](#)

Location: New York, New York, United States of America.

Web Site URL: <http://dialogues.listeningtothecity.org>

Primary Sponsor: LTC-O was initiated at the request of The Civic Alliance to Rebuild Downtown New York and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. It was made possible in part by grants from AOL Time Warner and the

Surdna Foundation.

**Organisation:** Presented by Web Lab in association with AmericaSpeaks and the Civic Alliance to Rebuild Downtown New York. Web Lab ( <http://www.weblab.org> ) is a New York-based nonprofit think tank that encourages and supports innovation on the Web, with a special emphasis on developing the potential of the medium to bring people together to explore both personal and public issues in powerful, transforming ways. AmericaSpeaks ( <http://www.americaspeaks.org> ), a non-profit organization, engages citizens in the public decisions that impact their lives. It organized the face-to-face discussion, with close to 5,000 participants, on July 20, 2002. The Civic Alliance to Rebuild Downtown New York ( <http://www.civic-alliance.org> ) is a coalition of more than 75 business, community and environmental groups representing a cross-section of New York and the Region that is providing a broad umbrella for civic planning and advocacy efforts in support of rebuilding Downtown New York.

**Budget:** \$60,000.00 USD

**Project Start Date:** July 30, 2002

**Project End Date:** August 13, 2002

## Executive Summary

In July 2002, The Civic Alliance to Rebuild Downtown New York, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey in association with non-profits Web Lab and America Speaks created Listening to the City Online Dialogues with a budget of \$60,000. The dialogues focused on two things; plans for redevelopment of the World Trade Center site and the surrounding business district and neighbourhoods of Lower Manhattan plus the creation of a permanent memorial for the victims and heroes of 9/11.

The goal of the online discussions was to compliment the 5000 person-to-person consultation and provide a means for citizens to have their views heard and reflected in the decision-making process. During the two-week discussion, 808 participants working in 26 parallel discussion groups (half facilitated and half unfacilitated), posted more than 10,000 messages and responded to 32 polling questions. Listening to the City (<http://dialogues.listeningtothecity.org>) had an impact on guidelines for new designs, the invitations to world-class architects to participate in a design competition, and the final design. A final poll found that 84% of the participants said they were satisfied with the dialogue and they indicated the chance to "have their say" and the mix of "people and perspectives" were the top reasons. Website: <http://dialogues.listeningtothecity.org>

## Project Rationale and Objectives

### Rationale

LTC-O was preceded by Listening to the City (LTC) on July 20, 2002, a face-to-face public event conceived by AmericaSpeaks ( <http://www.americaspeaks.org> ) and its partners as an "interactive, high-tech town meeting." Nearly 5,000 residents of New York City and the surrounding area worked in small, facilitated groups to collectively consider six concept plans for redeveloping the World Trade Center site and to discuss ideas for a permanent memorial for 9/11. AmericaSpeaks founder Carolyn Lukensmeyer had approached Web Lab in May, 2002 to propose the idea of an online citizens' dialogue that would, in essence, adapt the agenda-driven format of LTC using Web Lab's highly structured Small Group Dialogue technique (SGD).

### Objectives

Although there had been months of forums, hearings, editorials and letters to the editor since September 11, something else was needed: a process that would allow a cross-section of the population not just to express their opinions, but to offer recommendations based on thoughtful dialogue while probing complex issues and the sometimes-competing ideas held by people of good will.

The goal of the online discussions was to provide a means for citizens to have their views heard and reflected in the decision-making. Two government agencies, The Port Authority of New York & New Jersey (Port Authority) and Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC) were responsible for deciding how the land should be used, what memorial ought to be created and what the area's mix of commercial, residential, retail, cultural and other uses

would be, including which services would be added. These agencies recognized the historic nature of the task, and declared that they would seek public input in their decision-making.

## **Audience**

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the destruction of the World Trade Center and surrounding areas, many people had strong feelings about how the site should be rebuilt. Some, like relatives of those killed in the attacks, or people who lived, worked, or owned businesses in downtown Manhattan, had a direct, personal stake in the decisions that would eventually be made. However, millions of others, nationally and internationally, felt they had a stake as well. Participation in LTC-O was limited to residents of New York City and the surrounding area.

## **Scope of the Project**

The dialogues took place in 26 small groups, all of which were active during the same two-week period. Messages could be posted to a group only by members assigned to that group. Participants could read and respond to each other's comments at any time, whether or not other members were online at the same time. The asynchronous system allowed members to join in when convenient and to spend time deliberately composing their responses. Half of the small groups were assigned an active facilitator and half were not.

During the two-week discussion, participants responded to 32 polls, with the questions and choice of answers drawn directly from observation of the ongoing dialogues. The results of the discussion and the polls were compiled, summarized and reported (with results from the face-to-face discussions held previously) to the public agencies with primary responsibility for the World Trade Center site and downtown New York. The complete discussion, with polling questions, results and background materials provided to participants, are available at (<http://dialogues.listeningtothecity.org> ).

## **What was delivered?**

### **What was planned?**

A large-scale citizen discussion online, to provide New York-area residents with a structured forum to:

- 1) Review official proposals for restoring lower Manhattan;
- 2) Deliberate on the proposals and share their reactions in small groups;
- 3) Vote on priorities and recommendations; and
- 4) See the resulting recommendations used by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, the Civic Alliance and other key decision-makers as they develop and review plans for rebuilding the downtown area.

LTC-O was initially planned to accommodate 2,500 participants. Each small group would be assigned 30 members, which worked out to about 83 groups. Because half the groups were to be facilitated, this meant that at least 42 volunteer facilitators would be required. The dialogue software was programmed to ensure maximum diversity within each group based on information provided by participants when they filled out an online registration form.

The plan was to present the agenda so all groups would begin discussion of new major topics at the same time, and would move through those topics together. Background information and framing questions were adapted from the LTC face-to-face event, to be posted by each facilitator and by the participants themselves in the unfacilitated groups. A report, consisting of major themes, polling results, demographic profiles, and representative quotes posted by citizens, was to be delivered to the New York planning bodies.

Some unique elements of the online discussion were: the opportunity to explore the issues in much greater depth than the one-day, in-person deliberations; the ability to include people who could not be available at LTC on July 20, 2002; the opportunity for participants to take part at personally convenient times over a two-week period; the possibility that discussions in different groups could cross-fertilize; and the value of the Internet as an instant archive, or a permanent record, of all comments posted by all participants.

## **Achievements**

After the 9/11 attacks, people everywhere, but especially in New York City, needed a way to express their anger and their fear and then, a little later, turn a collective outpouring of community spirit into practical energy. The dialogues gave participants a chance to contribute their opinions and ideas. More importantly, they were heard by those in power at a moment when it was easy to feel powerless. They were also delighted to be able to "meet" and learn from other New York area residents that they would never encounter in their daily lives.

The Listening to the City Online Dialogues employed an innovative Web-based communication technology in the service of deliberative democracy, enabling hundreds of New York-area residents to discuss rebuilding on the World Trade Center site, revitalizing Lower Manhattan and creating a 9/11 memorial. The resulting recommendations directly influenced public policy decisions. The Small Group Dialogue technique and technology is described in the "Benefits to Citizens" section below.

Although the process was not designed to produce consensus, strong majority sentiment emerged on several key issues and had a direct effect on the next stage of planning and development. In fact, the guidelines for new designs, the invitation to world-class architects to participate in a design competition, and the final design all reflect many of the citizen recommendations generated during the online dialogues.

The results of the discussion and the polls, along with results from the face-to-face discussions at the Jacob Javits Convention Center, were compiled, distilled and reported to the Port Authority and LMDC, the public agencies with primary responsibility for redevelopment of the World Trade Center site and downtown New York: ([http://www.weblab.org/ltc/LTC\\_Report.pdf](http://www.weblab.org/ltc/LTC_Report.pdf) ).

### **Facts or statistics on usage and users**

During the two-week discussion, 808 participants working in 26 parallel discussion groups (half facilitated and half unfacilitated) posted more than 10,000 messages and responded to 32 polling questions largely based on themes that emerged during the dialogues: ( <http://dialogues.listeningtothecity.org/WebX?writeDocument@@!doc=11> ).

Study of group demographics and relevant characteristics of the online participants revealed:

- Nearly 9 percent of participants were family members of September 11 victims.
- More than 12 percent were survivors of the attack.
- Almost 23 percent were employed in Lower Manhattan.
- 19 percent were residents of Lower Manhattan.
- Nearly 13 percent were displaced or unemployed because of September 11.
- 44 percent of registrants were under 34 years old.
- Nearly 25 percent of online participants were nonwhite.

For more, see page 19 of the final report at: [http://www.weblab.org/ltc/LTC\\_Report.pdf](http://www.weblab.org/ltc/LTC_Report.pdf)

- A final poll among the 84% of participants who said they were satisfied with the dialogue indicated the chance to "have their say" and the mix of "people and perspectives" were the top reasons for their satisfaction.
- When asked, "Have your feelings or opinions about any of the issues discussed shifted as a result of these dialogues?" 55% of respondents said they had shifted.
- When asked whether their respect for people with whom they disagreed increased or decreased because of the dialogues 53% said it had increased.

## **Communication Activity**

The Listening to the City Online Dialogue was announced to the public in several ways:

- It was announced to the several thousand people who participated in the face-to-face event.
- Some news coverage of the face-to-face event mentioned the online dialogue.
- The Listening to the City Web site had a prominent link to the dialogue Web site.
- Among the most effective announcement and recruitment techniques were emails that member organizations of the Civic Alliance sent to their members; several thousand emails were sent.

## Successes

During the July 20, 2002, face-to-face event, the six concept plans presented by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation had met with almost unanimous disapproval. The online dialogues picked up where the face-to-face event ended, focusing on prioritising elements for new plans, locating a memorial, the use of public space, developing the surrounding area, and the tensions between commercial renewal and neighbourhood revitalization.

Second and more importantly, the text-based medium of the Internet and the 14-day span of the dialogues offered participants a chance to explore issues with greater nuance and complexity. They also allowed opportunities to generate new polls in response to the evolving conversations.

The discussion was often intense and emotional, but with the innovative use of technology, (described in the "Benefits to Citizens" section of this case study), it was also respectful, thoughtful, and specific in its results. Most importantly, several recommendations from the deliberation were adopted by the public agencies responsible for the redevelopment efforts.

In any project that claims to offer citizen engagement in policy decisions, it is critical that a demonstrable feedback loop exists between participants and leaders or decision-makers. Not only must participants feel that decision-makers are "listening," there must be some indication that the priorities and recommendations voiced by participants have been given genuine consideration.

In this project, the heads of the planning agencies charged with decision-making wrote welcome emails at the beginning, and, at the end, follow-up emails which thanked participants and acknowledged the substance of their recommendations. Not only does this "closing of the loop" show that participants have been heard, it also may help to increase and cement a sense of personal efficacy for individual participants.

While it is not realistic - and may in fact be counterproductive in several different ways - to promise adoption of participant recommendations, it is vital to demonstrate that citizens' ideas and opinions have been heard and considered by leaders. The closing letters from the online dialogues offer examples of this kind of feedback:  
<http://dialogues.listeningtothecity.org/WebX?readDocument@@>

## Benefits to Citizens

LTC-O enabled citizens to become actively involved as direct stakeholders in a deliberative democratic process. Levels of access and participation were not restricted in the online dialogue, as is the case with time limits imposed on citizens speaking at public comment sessions at governmental proceedings. The LTC-O event design and SGD interface allowed each individual to control and self-monitor their levels of participation. They could participate as much or a little as personally desired in an open forum.

A flexible and user-friendly platform and electronic forum for discussion was one of the hallmarks of LTC-O. Resource materials in a Document Library ( <http://dialogues.listeningtothecity.org/WebX?readDocument@@> ) supplied to participants on the LTC-O website encouraged participants to become informed about important public policy issues and democratic processes. Many groups had "fact-fetchers" to post Web links to relevant information and articles that facilitated engagement and collaborative problem solving, rather than simply posting unsubstantiated opinions. Other aspects of the SGD technology platform made the discussions more productive:

### Limited group size

Unlike large bulletin boards, with hundreds or thousands of people posting at random but never really engaging each other, SGD assigns people to small groups, each with a limited number of members. Even though they begin as

strangers, participants often develop a remarkable level of intimacy very quickly, and become far more accountable to each other as a result.

### **Discussions unfold over time**

Unlike chat, where everyone must be online at the same time, SGD is an asynchronous message board dialogue, where all posts are available for reading at any time, and members can take as long as they need to write a response.

### **Limited duration**

Participants in a dialogue group start together and come to closure together. Limiting the duration encourages higher levels of participation, and a more intense group experience.

### **Less anonymity – more accountability**

By limiting group size, using member biographies, and beginning each group with self-introductions, SGD lowers the anonymity to raise the accountability, while still preserving the safety and privacy that a screen name provides. People are often more willing to say what they think or feel online than they are in person.

### **Education through background information**

Participants were provided with a wealth of resource materials through an online Document Library containing information, graphics and other reference materials:

<http://dialogues.listeningtothecity.org/WebX?readDocument@@>

These materials helped citizens to understand the workings and the tension between issues facing local government. Topics included:

- *Design Concepts and Plans*. Urban Design Approaches & Concepts Plans for the World Trade Center and Adjacent Areas.
- *Elements of Rebuilding: Revitalization Issues*. Competing visions of how downtown Manhattan (the area surrounding the World Trade Center site) should be revitalized: Economic Development & Employment, Transportation, Housing, Parks and Culture.
- *Creating a Memorial*. What is the best way to remember those who died on 9/11?
- *Closing Documents*. Including polling results; A Message of Thanks from Bob Yaro, Civic Alliance to Rebuild Downtown New York; A Message of Thanks from Frank Lombardi, Chief Engineer, Port Authority of New Yor/New Jersey

### **Additional benefits**

Like the face-to-face event, LTC-O opened a direct channel of communication between local decision-makers and citizens. It encouraged a participatory democratic process through a spirited dialogue on public policy issues. It offered citizens the opportunity to become involved as active community members at a grassroots level and engaged people not normally involved in public decision-making.

Web Lab and its project partner, AmericaSpeaks, also believe that increased citizen dialogue on public decisions deepens a sense of political efficacy among participating individuals, in local and regional communities and beyond.

## **Benefits to Authority**

### **Achievement of strategic objectives**

After the July 20, 2002, LTC event at the Javits Center, the press reports that reverberated across the nation told of the citizens' overwhelming rejection of all six WTC concept plans. It was on the crest of this reaction that most people responded to the links and e-mail invitations to join LTC-O.

As The New York Times reported in a feature story about the LTC-O, "The online groups are also being scrutinized as

a model for civic engagement on local and national issues. Some who have monitored the process suggest that online discussion may be a more promising way to promote democratic debate than a Javits-style town hall -- in part because it is more practical" (Harmon, 2002).

### **LTC-O helped to fulfil Government requirements and legal mandates**

For government decision-makers, LTC-O provided structure and focus for what would otherwise have been a cacophony of individual voices. Citizens were eager to participate, and planners were eager to listen. Their listening gave the planning process legitimacy in the eyes of both the public and elected officials.

Using this technique and the SGD platform, government agencies, businesses and non-profit groups can gather large numbers of people into dialogue on difficult issues, in a cost-effective way. People who are geographically dispersed, with wildly diverse personal schedules, can "meet" online for a thoughtful exchange of views over an extended period of time, when it might be difficult or impossible for them to meet in a room together.

### **LTC-O helped to raise the profile of the authority both to citizens and to other Local Authorities**

When authorities said that they were prepared to listen to citizen input, a message of inclusion was clearly sent by the authorities to the people. This approach encouraged citizen participation and comments. It also signaled that these authorities were willing to embrace the dialogue process and emerging information and communication technologies (ICTs) to improve decision-making.

## **Benefits to Councillors**

### **Councillors helped to be closer to policy decisions**

An LTC-O style dialogue with contributions from multiple citizen voices is an opportunity to improve policy decisions and community outcomes. Councillors are direct beneficiaries of the dialogues and exchanges between citizens as they engage one another and share views on important matters of public interest.

### **Councillors aided to be more informed of the concerns of the population in their ward and events in the community**

One concern of LTC-O participants was whether governmental decision makers would hear their views. LTC-O offered the public an opportunity for a robust and informed public dialogue and a voice in city planning and development.

## **Limitations**

### **In what areas could the scope of the project have been more broad?**

Although nearly 25 percent of registrants were nonwhite, minorities such as African-Americans and Latinos were underrepresented in the dialogues compared with their proportions in the population of New York and the surrounding area.

In terms of sheer numbers of participants, it was fortunate that only 800 people participated, rather than the originally planned 2500. The intensity of the discussion in many groups made it difficult for some facilitators and monitors to follow closely. LTC-O was not fully staffed or prepared to manage a dialogue with three times the number of actual participants.

### **Other limitations restricted the success/benefit of the project**

*Financial:* Despite the dramatic nature of the subject matter, and the potential of the dialogue to have a direct impact on decision-making, it was extremely difficult to raise funds for the project. Not only was there a short time frame, but some foundations interested in civic engagement were skeptical about the possibility of creating a high-quality online discussion, while the sources that would best understand the goals and methods of an online dialogue (such as foundations of technology companies) were in financial distress. Although both the AOL Time Warner Foundation and the Surdna Foundation provided discretionary grants for the project, many other foundations turned the project down, saying they were out of money or the project was outside their guidelines. Even with professionals working at a

discount and many volunteers, Web Lab and its parent organization, Digital Innovations Group, Inc. ended up subsidizing the project, putting tremendous strain on the organization.

*Logistical:* Because the online discussion was added to the mix after planning for the large face-to-face event had already been underway for months, the Civic Alliance did not begin recruiting participants for the online discussion until they had registered 5,000 participants for the Javits Center event. In the end, there were just over 800 registrants for the online discussion, although planning anticipated up to 2500 participants (for example, recruiting and training facilitators for half of the projected 84 groups). The project was scaled back when it became apparent that participation would not approach the planned participant count.

*Disruptions:* All previous SGD events had explored emotional issues so Web Lab was prepared for emotional discussions. However, the intense advocacy for new WTC towers of equal height to the destroyed buildings was surprising. A vocal minority of members in two or three groups made excessive, repetitive posts and took a belligerent attitude toward members that felt otherwise, monitors and administrators who worked to manage the disputes. Fortunately, one of the side-benefits of Small Group Dialogue is that a disruptive participant can only affect his or her own group; discussion in other groups continued to be positive, constructive and respectful. Steven N. Pyser and Cliff Figallo (2004) have drawn from their experiences facilitating the "Listening to the City" dialogues and shared their insights about the full-value contract tool and its impact on building trust in the process. ( <http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/cgi-bin/abstract/108061649/ABSTRACT> )

### Obstacles encountered

The relatively short planning phase for LTC-O and the modest funding raised during that time were among the primary reasons that only 1000 area citizens registered for the online event, as opposed to the 2,500 originally planned. A longer lead time and greater funding for media outreach would have attracted wider online participation.

Another perhaps unavoidable obstacle was the challenge of coordinating content, logistics and even core agenda for the online dialogue among numerous partners and stakeholders, including Web Lab, AmericaSpeaks — the lead partner in the overall LTC initiative - the Civic Alliance to Rebuild Downtown New York (itself a coalition), the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, the remote online facilitators and monitors, and a handful of consultants and writers engaged by Web Lab and other partners. The adaptation of the all-day face-to-face agenda to an online format and the distillation of the online results for timely inclusion in the project's final report to decision-makers were the two most difficult steps to shepherd through this multi-stakeholder process.

It is also worth noting that the multiple organizations described above differed significantly with each other in terms of their familiarity, facility and, indeed, trust, with the very premise of citizen participation through Internet tools. LTC-O occurred midway between the dot-com crash that soured many observers on the Internet's prospects and the Howard Dean phenomenon that brought online participation to new global attention. Therefore, LTC-O faced a climate of mingled ambition and skepticism.

Lastly, in two of the facilitated groups, facilitators made their presence known after some members had already posted. These late-starting leaders did not gain the same role recognition that other facilitators established. In one case, a domineering member reframed the agenda to focus solely on rebuilding the WTC towers to their original height.

## Evaluation

At the inception of LTC-O, Web Lab and AmericaSpeaks designed the dialogues to include groups led by facilitators and groups that would "facilitate" themselves. The following comments on the comparative effectiveness of facilitated and unfacilitated online dialogue were made by facilitation coordinator Cliff Figallo in the weeks after LTC-O:

The process did not include establishing objective criteria for evaluating which groups were most effective and which factors made them so. But a re-reading of the group dialogues, noting various aspects of their activity -- facilitator presence, timing and style, and the general tone of conversation, for example, the group's tolerance for conflicting views or degrees of confrontation -- has led to the following observations:

- The Small Group Dialogue approach is effective in stimulating productive dialogue among motivated participants. It sets boundaries on membership and time commitment, which help to build familiarity and trust (the same people will be present from beginning to end) while requiring focus (the agenda for discussion is

limited).

- Groups were more collaborative in tone when there was 1) the steady presence of a facilitator or 2) at least two members who served as emotional stabilizers, or both of these. The most successful facilitative voices regularly injected humour and eloquence into the dialogues, and offered behaviour modeling and positive reinforcement to various viewpoints. The most collaborative groups had larger sized "core groups" of members who were involved in conversations and posted regularly through the dialogues. Core group sizes varied from nine to fifteen, with an average of twelve active members.
- While some groups were slower to evolve without a designated facilitator, most unfacilitated groups established norms of leadership and contribution, fuelled by the presence of a handful of engaged members and ad hoc leaders, and prompted by the e-mail newsletters that were broadcast to all groups. The newsletters presented starter material for use by unfacilitated groups for each major discussion topic.
- For some facilitators, the agenda-driven format of the event handicapped their usual style of group-led conversation. As they expressed it, the rigid schedule felt discordant with the natural group discussion rhythms. Some issues were rushed to an end. Other issues, when introduced according to the planned timetable, were repetitive.
- Nearly half of the LTC-O participants had never before been involved in an online dialogue. This may account for the "shyness" factor that saw participation as low as 50% in some groups. Technical problems and personal schedules, mostly because of vacations, also contributed to nonparticipation. However, Web Lab is extremely excited by this demonstration that citizens with little to no experience with online discussion can easily become effective contributors to an online deliberation. In previous SGD projects, only about a third of a group actually posts. The 50% participation in LTC-O was actually better than the norm.
- Despite the fact that the software was programmed to create heterogeneous groups, the postings of the most active members of each group strongly influenced the "personality" of their group. The most active members generally included the trained facilitators, but also included the most (and least) collaborative of the members.
- The presence of family members or close associates of people killed on 9/11 was a significant factor in some groups, and less of one in others. These participants, their stories, and their strong feelings about honouring the memories of their loved ones sometimes tempered the political rants of other participants. However, the emotional tenor of those exchanges also may have inhibited the more practical discussions of redevelopment in some groups.
- Facilitators who greeted each group member individually and continued to address them by name in the dialogues stimulated more focused dialogue and greater participation. Facilitators who chose to be less present and involved in the conversations did not stimulate such participation.

## Dialogue Benchmarks

Web Lab conducted a post-dialogue survey of participants with an extremely high response rate (over 200 responses: more than 50% of active participants and more than 25% of all registrants). The raw data has been shared with academic researchers and the research is ongoing.

A representative group of questions follows:

1. Over time, did your respect for people in your dialogue group with whom you disagreed increase or decrease?

- increased a lot -- 18% (39)
- increased somewhat -- 35% (78)
- didn't change at all -- 26% (57)
- decreased somewhat -- 8% (17)
- decreased a lot -- 4% (9)
- no opinion -- 9% (20)

- no answer -- 1% (2)

2. When individual group members acted inappropriately, other group members took actions that were:

- very effective -- 23% (50)
- somewhat effective --26% (57)
- not very effective -- 10% (21)
- counterproductive -- 2% (4)
- no opinion -- 37% (82)
- no answer -- 4% (8)

3. Compared to other online forums in which I have participated, the quality of dialogue and discussion on LTC was:

- much higher -- 27% (59)
- somewhat higher -- 20% (45)
- about the same -- 8% (18)
- not as high -- 4% (9)
- no opinion -- 38% (84)
- no answer -- 3% (7)

4. Compared to face-to-face discussions I've had on the issues we discussed, the quality of dialogue and discussion on LTC was:

- much higher -- 20% (44)
- somewhat higher -- 26% (58)
- about the same -- 27% (60)
- not as high -- 14% (32)
- no opinion -- 11% (24)
- blank -- 2% (4)

### Measures used to assess the project

One year after the dialogues, Columbia University conducted a follow-up survey of participants about reasons for participation in LTC-O and the impact of the project.

### Participation

- Of the 140 participants who responded to the survey, 82% said that they participated because they “wanted to influence the decisions that were made about Lower Manhattan.” Approximately 46% said they wanted to share their opinions with other New Yorkers (respondents could give multiple reasons); 43% felt a civic obligation to participate; 34% wanted to learn about the rebuilding process; and 29% wanted to emotionally process the events of 9/11.
- Of the 140 participants who responded to the survey, approximately 20% said that they had chosen to participate in the online dialogues rather than the in-person forum because they preferred a dialogue conducted online. Another 12% said that they could not have spared the time for an all-day in-person event. Other respondents said they had been busy the day of the in-person forum (23%), had been too late to register for the

in-person forum (16%), or had only heard about the online dialogue after the in-person forum (14%).

## Impacts

- Of the 140 participants who responded to the survey, 37 % believed that the online dialogues had had an impact on the rebuilding process. Approximately 35% percent of the respondents believed the dialogues had had only marginal impact, no impact, or an adverse impact. Other respondents variously expressed their hope that the dialogues had had an impact without knowing whether they had or not, said they simply did not know whether the dialogues had had an impact, or said the dialogues had had an impact on participants themselves.
- Respondents who believed that the dialogues had influenced the rebuilding process described various impacts: the dialogues had given rebuilding officials a better sense of the public's priorities and had alerted them to issues that were likely to be sensitive; corrected the misperception that New Yorkers did not want tall buildings; heightened the impact of the in-person forum; provided a variety of concrete rebuilding ideas; strengthened the momentum for opening the design process. Some respondents described the dialogues as having a more subtle impact than the in-person forum, but also as giving participants the opportunity to articulate more thoughtful ideas. Some respondents said that the impact of the dialogues had been not marginal but negative: the dialogues had given participants the illusion of having a voice in decision-making and that made it easier for officials and private interests to operate without any real accountability.
- The Columbia researchers asked participants how participation had changed their opinions of the rebuilding process. Asked to name one opinion or assumption that had changed for them because of their participation, many talked about their surprise in finding out how other people felt about an issue or their new insights into how responsive or unresponsive decision makers were. A sizable minority reported changing their opinion about what should be built at the site. They came to the dialogues believing the land on which the buildings had stood should be preserved as a memorial and they left believing that construction would not dishonour the memory of the dead. Or they came believing that the towers should be rebuilt identically to the way they were and left believing that to do so was economically unviable. Issues like these inspired strong feeling on both sides. Yet for many participants, the exposure to new information and new points of view led them to rethink old assumptions.
- Many groups planned to continue their discussions online or in-person after the dialogues ended. At least several groups did. Some participants surveyed a year after their participation also mentioned continuing relationships with particular group members.
- One online dialogue group was invited to meet with rebuilding officials and was subsequently profiled in The New York Times.
- Participants in Listening to the City, as well as decision makers, were excited by this new mode of citizen engagement and they talked about the possibility of using the format to discuss other policy issues like education and crime. This was true of the online dialogues as well as the face-to-face forum. The online dialogues have been used as case materials on deliberation in university courses.
- A number of participants were passionate about the need to rebuild the towers exactly as they had been before. A minority were hostile to others with different views and, in a few cases, downright belligerent. However, many champions of rebuilding were simply delighted to discover others who shared their passion. They pointed out that the option of replicating the towers had been almost absent from public debate; they then began to strategize about how to get it seriously considered by decision makers. In that sense, the online dialogues made it possible for people to identify an issue that had been left off the deliberative agenda and to press for its inclusion.
- Columbia University researchers who studied the different styles of discussion used in the dialogues found that when participants put their opinions in the context of their personal experiences, they were more likely to elicit responses from other participants than when they did not. Telling personal stories fostered the give and take expected of deliberation. However, participants were much more likely to recount personal experiences when they were invited to do so by facilitators and when they were talking about broad themes in rebuilding. They tended not to recount personal experiences when they were asked to discuss areas of policy such as transportation, housing and economic development, despite the fact that the issues were controversial. Those discussions were too easily and mistakenly seen as technical, rather than value-based.

## Lessons learnt

## **Avoiding obstacles encountered when undertaking this type of project**

LTC-O can be seen not only as a valuable contribution to the decision-making process of New York City's planning bodies, but also as a powerful prototype of online civic deliberation on issues of emotional importance to a population. The presence of an experienced and effective online facilitator in a group does not seem to be as important as good communication and facilitation modeling for the small groups as a whole. This is important when looking at the potential of scaling online civic deliberation for much larger populations dealing with more widespread issues such as national healthcare or Social Security. Online groups can be self-facilitating if the agenda anticipates the population's priorities, if communications properly prepare participants for their dialogue, and if the software is designed to help balance participation among the members.

This also highlights a related issue: in an online discussion that unfolds over time, people who have more free time (or more emotional investment in the issues under discussion) will often post much more frequently than others. That, in turn, can be intimidating to other members with limited time. In the post-dialogue survey, participants were asked several questions to try to determine how much this happened, and to ask for feedback on possible solutions. SGD, like online discussion in general, is a work in progress. The more we do it, the more we learn, and the more we learn, the more opportunity we have to experiment with solutions.

## **Usability of the products of the project increased**

Another notable characteristic of the dialogues was the strong motivation of members to tell their personal stories, and to lead with strong opinions about the redevelopment or the planned memorial. These opening conversations were powerful, but they often advanced the topics of discussion ahead of the scheduled agenda. Spreading that agenda across two weeks was thus not always compatible with many members' sense of urgency. Indeed, more members logged in and posted significantly more messages in the first week than in the second. By Day 14, participation had tapered off in almost all groups, with about half as many members posting messages as had posted during the first week. In the future, a pre-dialogue survey of registered members could help to evaluate how participants feel "charged" with opinions and predispositions that would affect the progression of a discussion agenda. Based on the pre-event survey, the dialogue agenda could then be adjusted to anticipate the behaviour of the group.

## **What could happen next**

### **Products of the project used in further work**

Listening to the City Online produced powerful dialogues around a highly emotional topic. Judging from members' communications during and after the event, it was frustrating to some but rewarding to many. Much was learned about how future online dialogues can be used in civic deliberation.

SGD, currently in its fourth generation of software, is not only fully operational, but also customisable for a broad range of circumstances, and, with sufficient financial resources, can be scaled to accommodate thousands of participants.

Most recently, SGD was used to create "First Person Plural," a two-week dialogue for women who have had breast cancer that will serve as the basis for a book. In 2004, Web Lab conducted an interfaith dialogue on marriage for same-sex couples, held in partnership with the American Friends Service Committee.

SGD was used in two other post-9/11 discussions, one for youth, and one for readers of MSNBC.com. In 2002-2003, Web Lab was a partner in Project 540, a national youth civic engagement initiative, funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts, which brought together over 1,600 students for online deliberations on change at their schools and in their greater communities.

Successful SGD events in earlier years include discussions on interracial families, in partnership with PBS.org, and the impeachment of President Clinton. The technique has been praised in articles in The New York Times, The Washington Post, and the Los Angeles Times, among others.

### **What effects/impact has the project**

As discussed above: (1) the results from online deliberations were compiled, summarized and reported for use by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, the Civic Alliance, and others when they developed and reviewed

proposals for rebuilding downtown New York. See ( [http://www.weblab.org/ltc/LTC\\_Report.pdf](http://www.weblab.org/ltc/LTC_Report.pdf) ). (2) Several key recommendations from the deliberation were adopted by the public agencies responsible for the redevelopment efforts.

The Listening to the City process, which included LTC-O and its face-to-face companion events, is generally recognized as a watershed moment in the city and the state's recovery from the horrors of the 9/11 attacks. Most notably, the public outcry for deliberation and reverence in the reconceptualization of Manhattans iconic silhouette slowed the pace of re-development and brought new attention to its multiple, often conflicting requirements. One obvious proof of this influence is an editorial in The New York Times that immediately followed the face-to-face event, which borrowed its theme and was titled simply, "Listening to the City."

In a decision with little precedent in our experience, the Civic Alliance agreed to schedule their final report to the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (and to that body's ultimate authority, Governor Pataki), so that the collected input of the online participants could be included in the same recommendation document as the results from the face-to-face discussions.

In the months and years that followed LTC, media reports and public discussions about recovery and rebuilding were framed more explicitly as a dialogue between decision-makers and citizens, as with the highly-publicized contest and presentation of the nine aesthetically distinct architectural designs for Lower Manhattan. This was also evidenced in the highly public squabble between David Childs, the architect retained by site owner Larry Silverstein and Daniel Liebeskind, the close advisor to LMDC, who pleaded his own case to the press calling himself a "steward" of the public's wishes.

Web Lab and AmericaSpeaks also believe that the close partnership between practitioners of face-to-face and online public deliberation continue to serve as a benchmark to the community of practice in the field of citizen engagement and perhaps in the wider civil society. Web Lab receives unsolicited inquires on a regular basis for tools and consultation in citizen outreach processes, and these inquiries often make reference to the successes of LTC-O.

## Additional information and sources

### *Partners:*

The Civic Alliance to Rebuild Downtown New York

- <http://www.civic-alliance.org>

The Lower Manhattan Development Corporation

- <http://www.renewnyc.com>

AmericaSpeaks

- <http://www.americaspeaks.org>

### *Further Information:*

Harmon, A. (2002, September 26). Vox Populi Online. The New York Times.

Pysner, S. N. and Figallo, C. (2004). The Listening to the City Online Dialogues Experience: The Impact of a Full Value Contract. Conflict Resolution Quarterly, 21:3.

Survey responses. Poll results from 32 survey questions presented during the dialogues are online at: <http://dialogues.listeningtothecity.org/WebX?writeDocument@@!doc=11>

"The Big Idea: Citizen Planners," Francesca Polletta, City Limits monthly, December, 2003 - <http://www.citylimits.org> - Francesca Polletta is an associate professor of sociology at Columbia University and the author of Freedom Is an Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements (University of Chicago Press, 2002). Our thanks to her for additional analysis and contributions to this report.

"Taking Democracy to Scale: Creating a Town Hall Meeting for the Twenty-First Century," Carolyn Lukensmeyer

and Steve Brigham, National Civic Review, vol. 91, no. 4, Winter 2002.

Sections of this case study have been adapted for use from an original journal article, Figallo, Cliff; Miller, Jed; Weiss, Marc (2004) "Listening to the City Online Dialogues: Overview and Observations," which appeared in Issue #6 of *Group Facilitation: A Research and Applications Journal*, a multi-disciplinary publication focused on the art and science of group facilitation. The aim of *Group Facilitation* is to advance knowledge of group facilitation and its implications for individuals, groups, organizations, and communities. It is published semi-annually. ( <http://www.iaf-world.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3498> )

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--Steven N. Pyser, Jed Miller, Marc Weiss

### Author Biographies

**Steven N. Pyser** ( [TheDialogue@comcast.net](mailto:TheDialogue@comcast.net) ) was an online facilitator for Listening to the City Online Dialogues. He is a principal in a consulting firm that provides dialogue, strategic planning, conflict management, and synergy services to educational institutions, corporations, and nonprofit organizations. He is a member of the faculty at the University of Phoenix, Greater Philadelphia (Pennsylvania) Campuses, where he teaches undergraduate, graduate business, and management courses. Pyser facilitates public conversations and dialogues and conducts workshops on diversity, issues of public importance, group facilitation skills, and conflict management. He serves on the editorial board for Conflict Resolution Quarterly, as a staff editor for Journal of Legal Studies Education and on the editorial board of Journal of Cognitive Affective Learning. He received his J.D. from Temple University School of Law.

**Jed Miller** is director of Internet programs for the American Civil Liberties Union ( <http://www.aclu.org> ). From 2001 through 2004, he was director of dialogues at Web Lab, where he oversaw SGD projects. He has spoken about digital democracy at the Kettering Foundation and at the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation. In 2004, he collaborated with Rob Stuart of the E-Volve Foundation on "Network-Centric Thinking," for Planetnetwork Journal ( <http://www.planetwork.net> ). As interactive editor at NYTimes.com from 1999-2001, he managed all reader forums and created the web discussions for The Times's Pulitzer-winning 2000 series on race in America. Jed has built online communities on AOL, abuzz.com and audible.com.

**Marc N. Weiss** is the founder and Executive Producer of Web Lab. He is also the creator and former Executive Producer of **P.O.V.**, ( <http://www.pov.org> ) an award-winning series of independent documentaries now entering its 18th season on PBS (the U.S. public television network). He created P.O.V. Interactive, public TV's first interactive website, in 1995. With Barry Joseph and Brian Clark, Weiss is the co-inventor of the Small Group Dialogue technique that was used for the LTC-O Dialogues, as well as many other dialogues on topics ranging from race in America, to gay marriage, to breast cancer. He is currently developing a fictional TV series that will integrate factual stories submitted via the Internet.

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