

## ***CP Technique No. 37C: Audience Response Systems***

In the late 1960s a professor in MIT's Political Science department, Tom Sheridan, was working on a black box that – he envisioned – would someday allow people anywhere to give their city councils immediate feedback on what they were debating.

Tom Sheridan was attempting to take advantage of an emerging technology: ***cable TV***. With the advent cable TV, it was going to be possible to have not just three or four, but lots and lots of TV channels. Having an almost unlimited number of TV channels, created the potential to air programs that didn't necessarily have a large viewership, programs such as live coverage of the meetings of governmental boards, commissions, and other legislative bodies. People who were interested in making government decision-making more open, more accessible, more transparent – and thereby more participatory – came up with the idea of Public Access Channels. These would give ***access*** to governmental decision-making for the general public – that “public” that tends ***not*** to attend meetings or join committees. But, Tom Sheridan and others wanted to go a step further. They felt that it should be possible for interested citizens to not only ***listen in*** on the deliberations of their elected and/or appointed public decision-making bodies, but to also ***contribute to that debate with instant feedback . . .***

His idea was that people could observe city council meetings live on public access channels. They, then, could – perhaps on a small “black box” – push a “Thumbs-down” button, if they disapproved of an idea that was being debated, or a “Thumbs-up” button if they felt like supporting the idea. It was a modest Buck Rogers idea for people interested in promoting citizen participation.

More than 40 years have elapsed; we're now in a new century, and some people have followed up on Tom Sheridan's idea.

### ***The birth of “Audience Response Systems”***

In the late 1960s or early '70s the ***Audience Studies Institute*** (the ASI) – a Hollywood institution – developed a proprietary black box very similar to Tom Sheridan's, a gadget ***to test audience response*** to unreleased motion pictures. Here is what they did.

They would gather test audiences of various sizes, and they would explore these audiences' reactions to different plot-lines, etc. ***before*** going nation-wide with a particular movie. They gave each member of the audience a small, hand-held, gadget – or clicker – with several buttons on it. As these people watched the movie, they were instructed to push buttons on the clicker buttons to register their reactions and emotions.

The ASI's motive was a ***marketing*** motive; they used their gadget to predict the public's response to movies that one of their clients considered releasing. After all, marketers work hard to predict whether the buying public will – or won't -- go for a product, such as a movie, ***before*** they market their product. This device allowed them to predict how young people would

react, how mature people would react, how men would react, how women could react, etc. . . . and what the difference in reaction would be with *one version* of the movie versus a slightly *different* version, etc. . . .

Brilliant! This kind of information is worth a lot to a studio that is trying to decide which version of movie to release, and this kind of information is worth even more to the advertisers who – after all – would like to know the demographics the movie would appeal to the most.

One danger with *asking* audience members for their feedback – a group of people in a room who can watch each other’s reactions – is *crowd psychology*: i.e. the situation where a person bases his or her response *not* on what he or she is thinking but on what *the person next to them* is doing or saying, or what the group as a whole is doing. After all, it is almost impossible not to be influenced by “the crowd.” . . . We’re all just human! And that, of course, gives a marketing researcher misleading input.

The way the ASI’s gadget gets around this is:

- First, the gadget is a small, hand-held, wireless gadget.
- Second, a person in the audience can click buttons on his or her gadget *without* letting anyone near them see what buttons he or she is clicking.
- Third, the wireless receiver/computer – controlled by a facilitator -- stores the input it receives from all the clickers and displays them only *after* all the clickers have been clicked – if at all. (Whether the display is visible to the audience or only to the facilitator is in the facilitator’s control.)

This *prevents* crowd psychology – it’s also called the “raised hands” syndrome -- from coloring an audience member’s response.

A slightly different version of these wireless gadgets has evolved into “Student Response Systems.”

### ***Student Response Systems***

Teachers who use these in large classes do some or all of the following:

- A lecturer periodically projects quick questions on a screen while he/she is lecturing. Students then click their answers on their hand-held clickers. The answers display on a screen that’s only visible to the instructor . . .
- All of this while the lecturer is continuing to speak. This use of the Audience Response System allows the lecturer to get a feel for whether the material he/she is trying to communicate is registering with the students or not, whether the students are following or whether they are confused.

- A carefully thought-out use of this system can make for a very dynamic interaction between lecturer and audience, . . . even with an audience of hundreds or thousands.<sup>1</sup> When done well, you might call this a “**high-tech give-and-take.**”

Some teachers use a Student Response System differently:

- They project **test questions** during a class.
- Students are asked to punch in their answers.
- The professor’s receiver/computer not only displays the class’ answers in a graphic form, it also records **each student’s specific answers**. This version requires that the receiver/computer recognize **each** of the clickers and know which student is the owner of that clicker.
- The teacher, thus, can see which students are “getting” the material he/she is trying to convey and which ones are not getting it.
- The teacher, then, may choose to engage a particular student in a Q and A discussion. The teacher may choose to select a student who **is** following, or he/she may choose one who **isn’t**. Either way, the teacher already knows where the student’s level of understanding is and can, therefore, start the discussion from there. (As a teacher, I have to say: “**Wow!**”)

Some teachers use these clickers not just to facilitate the teacher-student dialogue, but to conduct **quizzes and exams**. Provided the test questions are of a Yes/No, True/False, or Multiple choice nature, the clicker technology allows the instructor to collect each student’s answers straight into his/her computer – even in a class of hundreds. The test **scoring** – since all the answers have to be in a Yes/No, True/False, of Multiple choice format – can be done by computer software and, thus, can be done almost instantaneously.

### ***The Technology of Audience Response Systems***

There are a number of companies<sup>2</sup> that are offering Audience Response Systems. All of these systems allow people in a meeting to press a variety of buttons on a small, hand-held, wireless device. The collective responses of all the meeting participants who are pushing buttons shows up instantly on the facilitator’s receiver/computer screen.

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<sup>1</sup> One of the Audience Response Systems that is on the market at the time of this writing can accommodate as many as 2,000 clickers.

<sup>2</sup> At the time of this writing, the following were some of the systems that were available: Padgett [www.pciipro.com](http://www.pciipro.com) – TCM Communications [www.tcminteractive.com](http://www.tcminteractive.com) – Meridia [www.meridia-interactive.com](http://www.meridia-interactive.com) – the Extreme Group [www.theextremegroup.com](http://www.theextremegroup.com) – Turning Point [www.turningtechnologies.com](http://www.turningtechnologies.com) – Audience Response [www.audienceresponse.com](http://www.audienceresponse.com) – Communications Technology International [www.comtec-ars.com](http://www.comtec-ars.com) – and PowerCam [www.powercomars.com](http://www.powercomars.com)

### ***A public involvement example of the use of an Audience Response System***

The European Union's effort to have its constitution adopted by all of its member countries ran into trouble in 2005.<sup>3</sup> With no Plan B in place, the process of constitution adoption stalled. The European Commission,<sup>4</sup> then, concluded that it needed to *listen more* to its various publics and proclaimed "*a period of reflection.*" Out of that period of reflection came "*Plan D,*" a plan for "*Democracy, Dialogue, and Debate.*"

"Plan D" envisioned an intense effort for more and better communication between:

- the 495 million grass-roots people in the 25 member countries,<sup>5</sup>
- the many, many governmental and non-governmental institutions of civil society, and
- all the political decision-makers.

Several major public projects – *all aimed at involving the huge, complex, European public of about 495 million people* -- were funded:

- 1. The "European Citizens' Consultations," (described below)
- 2. "Our Europe,"
- 3. "Our Debate,"
- 4. "Our Contributions,"
- 5. "Radio Web Europe,"
- 6. "Our Message to Europe,"
- 7. The "Tomorrow's Europe Deliberative Poll," and
- 8. The European Movement's "Speak-Up Europe."

All eight were efforts to create what the European Commission hoped would constitute *meaningful inter-national and intra-national "Democracy, Dialogue, and Debate."* The results of all of these citizen participation efforts were then presented to:

- A. the European Commission,

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<sup>3</sup> Although the heads of state of the then-25 member organization (The European Union has since then accepted two more countries into its membership.) had all accepted and adopted the constitution, when that constitution was put to referenda in France and the Netherlands, the citizens of those countries voted against it.

<sup>4</sup> The executive branch of the European Union government, responsible for proposing legislation, implementing policies, and the routine running of the government

<sup>5</sup> That number has since expanded to 27.

- B. Members of the European Parliament, and to
- C. European Officials at a concluding conference called “The Future of Europe: the Citizens’ Agenda.”

Let’s look at the first (in the listed above) of the eight citizen participation efforts, the “*European Citizens’ Consultations.*”

- Citizens were randomly selected in each of the 27 member countries – about 1,500 in all. They were asked, with the help of professional facilitators, to *debate Europe’s future.*
- The *agenda* for those debates was created by another 27 *panels* of randomly selected citizens – *eight in each of the 27 countries.* Each of those eight-person groups of citizens, with the assistance of a professional facilitator, discussed – in a round-table setting – what that agenda should be. Each of the eight participants – you guessed it – had a hand-held, wireless *Audience Response clicker* at his/her disposal. Each of them could vote his/her opinion or preference on a given issue – without being influenced by what the other seven people at the table were entering, i.e. without becoming a victim of crowd psychology, because they could not see what buttons were being pushed by their seven colleagues. The facilitator, who was in charge of the receiver/computer, only showed the overall results to the group *after* all eight of them were done voting – if at all.

#### *Some Caveats about the use of Audience Response Systems in this case*

We don’t know where Tom Scheridan is these days, but he would be proud of the implementation of this kind of high-tech citizen participation.

As for us, we’re not all that excited. We’re troubled by a whole bunch of questions, including:

- How in the world can it be rationalized that “*randomly selected*” citizens are *more* representative of the public than citizens who are elected – by that public – to represent them in their legislative bodies: parliaments, regional boards, commissions, task forces, committees, town and city councils, etc.?
- How in the world can people call a process that involves 1,500 randomly selected citizens from a population of nearly 495,000,000 people a “*participatory*” process?
  - While the process *involved 1,500 people, the process excluded over 494 million people!* . . . After all, the process *excluded* – also randomly – the 494,998,500 *un-selected* people . . . OK, it’s a process, maybe even a constructive, creative process, but it’s more of an “*exclusion*” *process* than a “participation” process.
  - These 27 countries all have elected and appointed governmental bodies: legislatures, and many, many boards, commissions, councils, etc. These many existing *bodies involve many times 1,500 people, and thus, exclude far fewer people.* And, these legislatures, boards, commissions, councils, etc. *represent*

the population . . . Randomly selected people may *reflect* the population, but they *don't -- and can't --* represent them!

This is not to say that the European Union's "Democracy, Dialogue, and Debate" effort isn't a constructive one; God knows, they've got to do *something* to get their constitution moving again. And, if using an Audience Response System helps them get to informed consent, bully for them! It's just that in most of the actual public involvement efforts that we have ever been involved in, input that helps you to know how popular – or how unpopular – a particular issue is has not been particularly useful. It's more *substantive* input that we usually are after . . . not input that lends itself to a Yes/No, True/False, or Multiple choice format that people can punch buttons for on a clicker.

Finally, what we keep repeating with *all* public involvement tools, has to be stressed especially with cool tools like wireless gadgets: *Don't fall in love with the coolness of a tool!* Instead, examine your *needs* on a given project . . . i.e. your Citizen Participations needs . . . *then – and only then --* rummage through your tool-box of Citizen Participation tools and *select the tools that are most appropriate to those needs.*

Because Audience Response Systems, essentially, are a technology for *voting* by ad-hoc audiences, they have very little to offer for the kinds of consent-building needs that most of our client agencies have. But, we *can* envision special situations – even for governmental agencies – where it *would* be just the thing to have.