

Designing online community-based democratic deliberation

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Abstract:

This paper outlines a research proposal for the design of an Online Deliberation System (ODS) for use within 'media rich' community contexts. The research proposes to empirically analyse the processes of online deliberation in environments of increasing information abundance and then use this knowledge to design a more effective deliberative system. It is the contention of this paper that too much poor quality and opinion centred information online effects the quality of the deliberative process. The provision of access to online information within a deliberative framework can greatly improve the practice of user engagement; especially in terms of online communication that requires informed decision-based input from users.

Keywords: Deliberation Systems

No time to think

As defined by Goetze (2001; 6) "Methods of public engagement can be described as deliberative when they encourage citizens to scrutinise, discuss and weigh up competing values and policy options". Deliberation is concerned with "preference formation rather than simple preference assertion". However, the information revolution of the last half-century, in part brought about by easily accessible information and communication technologies (ICTs), has also exacerbated the potential for information overload, information gridlock, and thus less democratic deliberation (Virilio; 1995, Castells; 1996; Bimber; 2003, Hassan; 2004). When a space becomes too overloaded with competing values and ideas, individuals may actually avoid the competing ideas and stick to what they know.

Early commentators and cyber-enthusiasts were quick to promote the democratic potential of the Internet. They claimed that new technologies, free of censorial 'gate keeping', would spur political debate, facilitate direct democracy, and promote grass-roots political exchange among citizens and between citizen and state (Rheingold, 1995; Toffler & Toffler, 1995; Negroponte, 1995). There is much evidence to suggest that the Internet has indeed had encouraging effects upon democratic processes, however the numerous studies that examine the political efficacy of the Internet tend to over-emphasise the role of *self-publishing* for broad, informed and collectivist decision-making process (Bergman, 2003; Oates, Owen & Gibson, 2006). The ease of access, creation and dissemination of political information may also lead to information overload, user disaggregation, less deliberation, and even greater levels of political apathy (Shenk, 1997; Bimber, 1998; Oates & Gibson, 2006). The project that I propose will proceed on the premise that these more negative outcomes occur because of poor design and ill-considered ideas regarding how deliberative democracy may work online (Wright; 2006).

Too much information

The concept of 'information abundance' is rarely analysed in discussions of online political communication. However it is becoming increasingly clear that the Internet and ICTs more generally have reached a critical mass and have become so information-laden and dynamic, that the point has been reached where the political efficacy and democracy-promoting pathways need to be more seriously considered. As the media theorist Bruce Bimber observes; when citizens are given:

... greater capacity to select among multiple media sources, they are most likely to make selections to narrower and more compatible viewpoints. That is, citizens do not use a richer and more diverse media environment to better inform themselves about conflicting ideas and positions, but instead select a narrower and more parochial set of sources (2003:208).

Thus, the central task of the research will be to test this proposition. Accordingly the work will follow a three-pronged approach that will comprise a significant theoretical element, a unique empirical study, and a novel technical development. The work will take further, and into new realms a growing body of work on democratic deliberation that foregrounds *design* as a primary referent in effective political communication. The empirical work will target the key users and major innovators of online political sites such as institutional political parties, lobby groups as well as a representative selection of the principle non-institutional political websites such as Newmatilda.com.

A number of interrelated questions will be considered: how have online deliberative tools been applied and how can we assess their effectiveness? These lead logically to questions such as what exactly *are* deliberative ideas and how can we design them better online? More imaginatively, how can we involve people in an inclusive and meaningful way in political processes that are goal-oriented and consequential? The ultimate question I will consider is: *how is it possible to develop the theoretical basis and the technical tools to build effective online deliberation?*

Useful preliminary studies have appeared in the USA and Britain (Oates, Owen, Gibson; 2006, Ferdinand; 2005, Anderson et.al; 2006). These studies reveal a maturing approach to the study of political communication on the Internet that form a well-defined, empirically grounded body of work that can be adapted and tested in a range of political contexts. The nature of the connection between the social dynamics and the practical effects of ICTs is critical to understand how when faced with a plethora of choice in political opinion, users "...become overloaded and switch off, or avoid it and insulate themselves from alternative opinions by selecting only a narrow range of information sources" (Shapiro, 1999).

An Online Deliberation System

Through the contributions of the field of Humanities Computing (or 'Digital Humanities') we have learned that the Internet is far from being simply the 'deliverer' of knowledge (McCarty; 2005). There is an intrinsic message within the medium that goes beyond the heuristic offerings to the user that the technical developer provides. A lack of understanding of this has often led to inadvertently biased reference points that construct unnecessarily narrow academic discourses. It is critical to realise that choices made by programmers and developers to present and order knowledge are also a component of *an opinion*, and without an understanding of the interpretive choices that motivate their actions, we leave a significant gap in our understanding of how ICT shape knowledge production and dissemination, not only with political communication, but also within society more broadly.

As part of the research I will develop and test the 'Online Deliberation System' (ODS) utilising 'Web 2.0' tools that will make explicit patterns of political deliberation on the Internet. This will provide a means of empirically investigating online political communication in the context of purported information abundance and political ghettoisation. The ODS will act as a 'test-bed' with which to examine a number of assumptions regarding the efficacy of online political deliberation. In summary the broad aims of the project are:

- To explore the evolving applications of online political communication since the beginning of the Internet
- To examine the notion of 'information abundance' and its recent technical responses
- To examine deliberative processes within a number of stakeholder groups
- To build and test an 'online deliberation engine' using 'Web2.0' tools

Through these processes we will address the following research questions:

- How can we better understand online deliberation in certain political contexts?
- How can we better design deliberative 'ideas' using online tools that will involve people in a meaningful and inclusive way in consequential goal-orientated political processes?

Through the combination of extensive theoretical and empirical work, the design and implementation of the ODS will make an important contribution to the emerging body of research on the nature of political communication on the Internet. Of chief significance is that the research will make explicit and open up to critical analysis the dichotomy between information abundance and online deliberative design. By consciously foregrounding information abundance as a condition of the present information revolution, new perspectives will emerge and fresh research areas in deliberative design will open up.

The approach I offer is innovative because it combines the theoretical sophistication of Media Studies with the technical proficiency of Humanities Computing to expose important issues of online political communication to critique in ways that were previously unavailable. To be able to make explicit what has been seen to be the formation of 'information islands' (Carson 2006) of insular pockets of political discourse, is an important achievement. The work will open up theoretical and technological pathways towards a more genuinely identifiable (and sustainable) online political engagement through democratic structuring. The ODS, as a fully tested and working digital tool, will be able to plot and construct patterns of how 'information islands' of narrow political discourses develop. On the positive side the ODS will facilitate interlinking of such political ghettos to come together to promote a diversity and inclusivity that is otherwise impossible. It will be the bringing together of the online 'political capital' and create the basis for a new articulation of politics that has the scope and the capacity for political deliberation to become meaningful and consequential.

Effective Deliberation

There are numerous theoretical considerations of the looming threats of 'information abundance' and its complex relationship to deliberative democracy; however they do tend to be speculative (Shenk; 1997, Bimber; 1998; Brandenburg; 2006 Carson; 2006). This is perhaps because the notions of 'information abundance' and democratic deliberation were largely exterior to the core aim of their research and because at the time of several of these studies, 'information abundance' was not as significant as it is now. The Internet currently has over one hundred million sites and is exploited by all political parties as well as thousands of civil society groups of all political persuasions. It is accessed regularly by the majority of the population in all Western developed nations and has become a central part of our political information systems¹. Furthermore, the Internet was never a 'finished project' anyhow and the recent technical developments that flock

¹ See *Netcraft* (an Internet monitoring service since 1995)

around the term 'Web2.0' considerably alter how we understand and make use of the Internet as a process of continual reinvention (O'Reilly; 2005).

The proposed ODS advances our understanding of 'effective deliberation' in two key ways. Firstly, effective deliberation can be empirically measured not simply by the amount of comments on a political site (and other quantifiable uses of online deliberative tools), but also through qualitative analysis of the goals of the deliberation itself and its connectedness to external political processes and institutions. (Coleman and Goetze; 2001). Several useful studies have recently appeared in the US and Europe that have developed methodological tools to measure online deliberation; however no major studies have yet been undertaken within the Australian context where this study is to be situated. (Kavanaugh; 2005 also see: the 'Online Deliberation' Conference; Carnegie Mellon; 2003 and Stanford; 2005).² This study will be the first major empirical investigation of key Australian political sites within the analytical framework of effective deliberation.

The second key way that I will advance effective deliberative design is through applying the empirical knowledge gathered to build and test the ODS. As noted by Heinz Brandenburg (2006), there is a growing 'Atlantic divide' between the United States and Europe in terms of the application of the Internet for political communication and deliberative design, and Australian innovations are somewhere between this:

The position of cyber-enthusiastic citizens as well as academics and cyber-literate politicians in the US appears to be that the Internet can self-manage in the absence of any form of government intervention, censorship and legislation. In contrast, the dominant position amongst scholars and policy makers in mainland Europe as well as in the United Kingdom is that we need constitutional engineering beyond giving mere access to people, namely the proactive creation of constitutive elements of a virtual public sphere, funded and partially initiated by public institutions (Brandenburg; 2006; p.215).

An assessment of the 'state of practice' within the field of online political communication has never been attempted in Australia; however the field is being 'mapped' internationally by individuals such as Lars Hasselblad Torres of the Americaspeaks.org project. Australia's most well-known initiatives tend to be somewhere between the United States and the European models; perhaps not unusual given the historic role the two powers have had within Australia. Our initiatives range from attempts to design elements of a constitutive public sphere through Nationalforum.com.au and Newmatilda.com, to the somewhat Libertarian immoderation of Indymedia.com (build on software designed in Sydney). Australian online political communication is somewhere between the BBC's Action Network (bbc.co.uk/dna/actionnetwork) and the highly successful US based Moveon.org. The ODS will modify, refine, and transform existing models and develop a new model using elements of 'ideal' deliberative design and elements of a 'liberal heuristic' design that facilitates community-driven-ordering, filtering, and visualisation of knowledge using 'Web2.0' tools and 'folksonomies'. The ODS will offer user-generated ordering and filtering of knowledge, built upon an Opensource database such as Mysql.com, as used by the site digg.com, and will offer 'interoperability' between various groups.

Without a framework that foregrounds deliberation as an essential component of online political communication then the central issue of *effective communication* remain invisible.

1) Theoretical Work: Defining Deliberation

The project will build upon, and take into new realms, work on deliberation and online deliberative design carried out at leading international centres. These include the America Speaks project in Washington DC, Professor James Fishkin's Centre of Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University, and the Deliberative Democracy Consortium, also based in Washington DC³. One of the most promising recent software developments is Brian Sullivan's CivicEvolution.org that includes a sophisticated set of non-partisan deliberative tools applicable to various small group contexts (based in San Francisco). There is also Tom Steinberg's mySociety.org in the UK, who has with a team of volunteers, developed petitioning software used by number 10 Downing Street (and other initiatives). In Australia, Dr Lyn Caslon of Sydney University and Dr Janett Hartz-Karp of the consultancy firm 21stcenturydialogue.com are active in the field of deliberative democracy and have for many years applied innovative deliberative tools within a range of political contexts. During this formative stage, theories of deliberation and a tentative framework of 'ideal' online deliberative design will be developed. Drawing on the work distilled from Coleman and Goetze (2001), Fishkin (1991), and Kavanaugh et.al (2005) the following working definition of deliberation is a useful starting point:

<http://news.netcraft.com/> (Accessed 13 September, 2007)

² See: Online Deliberation 2005, *The Symbolic Systems Program, the Centre for Deliberative Democracy, the Center for the Study of Language and Information, and the Centre for Internet and Society at Stanford University*

<http://www.online-deliberation.net/conf2005/index.php> (Accessed 13 September, 2007)

³ The Deliberative Democracy Consortium is 'a network of researchers and practitioners working together to strengthen the field of deliberative democracy' see:

The Deliberative Democracy Consortium (DDC)

<<http://www.deliberative-democracy.net/>> (Accessed 13 September, 2007)

- **Access to balanced information**—Deliberative processes are primarily concerned with discovering what citizens think about issues once they have become informed about the various options. The information given to citizens must be comprehensive, balanced and accessible.
- **An open agenda**—Deliberative questions are likely to set out the broad parameters of the anticipated discussion and the agenda must be open to revision and expansion.
- **Time to consider issues expansively**—Deliberative exercises must be temporally expansive, allowing citizens adequate time to think through an issue and then work out their position on it.
- **Freedom from manipulation or coercion**—All political exercises are at risk from manipulation, whether in subtle terms such as rigging the questions or in pressuring the participants to arrive at certain conclusions
- **A rule-based framework for discussion**—Democratic deliberation is not a Libertarian free-for-all. People feel safer and discuss more freely when they are aware of the transparent rules of the debate
- **Participation by an inclusive sample of citizens**—High Quality deliberation can be highly exclusive, but not if it purports to be democratic. Efforts must be made to recruit participants who are representative of those affected by or concerned about the issue being considered.
- **Scope for free interaction between participants**—Deliberative exercises require citizen to citizen interaction as well as citizen to government. Participant must have access to other participants to discuss and debates the main points.
- **Recognition of difference between participants, but rejection of status based prejudice**—Deliberation means that expert opinion does not over ride the deliberative processes of the citizens but become a component of ‘balanced information’.
- **Goals**—what are the specific goals of the deliberation and are they meaningful and consequential and are they being met?

These categories will be interrogated and refined in the initial phase and will provide the theoretical basis for exploring the nexus between deliberation and effective deliberative design as it occurs in the contemporary United States, the UK, and Australia.

2) Empirical Work: Measuring Deliberation

Having completed this initial theoretical stage, I will move to developing and refining the basis for the empirical investigations. For the field work, a thorough research process will be conducted to select suitable groups and sites within Australia such as Getup.org.au, Actnow.com.au, NewMatilda.com, and Nationalforum.com.au. The sites and their participants will be tested within the analytical framework of *effective deliberation through effective deliberative design*. This work will rely upon some of the work done by Dr Andrea Kavanaugh from Virginia Tech in the US, a Human Computer Interaction (HTI) specialist, and researcher on one of the oldest and well known community networking initiatives; the Blacksburg Electronic Village.⁴ I will adapt for my own project the pioneering set of criteria that she and her colleagues have developed for analysing online deliberative activity in a number of settings in Blacksburg and the US (Kavanaugh; 2005).

This empirical part of the research will focus on sites designed by activist groups, local government, and other civil society groups, so there is a need to be flexible to the range of deliberative processes, contexts, and measurements of deliberative frequency. The focus of political sites can range considerably from single issue sites (such as banning Nuclear Energy), to sites with a wide range of political topics (either set by the sites moderators or by the contributors themselves). There are also a mix of styles that can range from sites that acts as a political hubs linking outward to a variety of sites, whilst others may value user-contributed content such as ‘community journalism’ sites (Kavanaugh et.al; 2005). This rudimentary matrix of deliberative activity/design developed for the Blacksburg project will be refined and applied in this second phase of the research (Figure 1).

⁴ The Blacksburg Electronic Village, *Virginia Tech*,
<<http://www.bev.net/about/research/>> (Accessed 13 September, 2007)

Figure 1: Deliberation/ Design matrix

	DESIGN>								info
		listserv	chat	forum	polls	documen ts	architect	interface	order
IDEALS v									
• Balance		no			yes	no		n/a	
• Agenda		ad hoc			yes	yes		yes	
• Time		asynchr on			yes	yes		n/a	
• Freedom		yes			no	no		no	
• Rules		none			yes	yes		yes	
• Inclusive		no			no	yes		no	
• Interaction		yes			no	no		no	
• Difference		no			no	no		no	
• Goal/resolve		no			yes	no		yes	

Useful focused questions to ask of online deliberative processes include: *Does the site offer search engines, text, audio or video whereby the user can gather more information about the organisation and its objectives? Does the site offer email contacts for itself and other individuals and organisations that encourage people to express opinions and provide feedback? And does the site offer online chat or Q&A sessions with moderators and leaders of the organisation?* (Lusoli; 2003)⁵ Data will be synthesised and its meaning derived through a methodological continuum between the evidence and interpretation that foregrounds effective deliberation. Empirical observations, user questionnaires, and oral interviews with site administrators may test the ‘deliberative hypothesis’ in unanticipated and novel ways that may call for re-interpretation or a deeper investigation through follow-up work.

3) Technical Work: Designing Deliberation

The empirical knowledge gathered and distilled during the second stage will be used to build an online deliberation system that will be tested through at least three real-world pilot studies. The pilot studies will in turn test some of the best practices designed into the deliberation system so that the findings may be later used to further develop the system. There is immense energy and opportunity in the broader technical Internet field at the moment focussed around the new tools and techniques that are popularly referred to as ‘Web2.0’ (O’Reilly; 2005). This term refers to an emergent set of practices and technologies that afford such knowledge organisation possibilities as sophisticated, user-centred ordering and filtering of information through ‘social classification’ (called ‘tagging’ or ‘folksonomies’) and RSS Feeds (Really Simple Syndication). The term folksonomy—the opposite of taxonomy—refers to a system of ‘bottom-up’ user-generated categorisation (or tagging) of online digital objects such as articles, blog entries, video, photos, and sound files. User-generated tags can be aggregated into ‘tag clouds’, thus making it possible to visualise, albeit in a nascent and rudimentary way, the data aggregating across or within any given network and repository. It is this ability to ‘integrate information in new ways, the desire to harness distributed knowledge, and the need to engage users as co-developers’ that I find extremely exciting for this project (Yankel; 2006). *‘Interoperability’, or the ability for groups to engage with one another is one of the central components of ideal deliberation and one of the central principles of Web2.0.* These new tools can be harnessed to compare ‘knowledge maps’ between groups, to broker and invite collaboration, and thus address some of the pressing issues of fragmentation and diminished deliberation in a time of information abundance. Much that is positive can flow from the application of these tools to worthy political processes.

To conclude, the Information revolution brought about by new technologies may also be fostering confusion, disaggregation, political fragmentation, and less considered understanding of our political processes and the choices that they provide. Deliberative ‘ideas’ are seldom well-designed into the structure of online political initiatives, simply because there is not enough understanding of what deliberation is online and how it can be better designed. The proposed research and software development, the Online Deliberation System (ODS), will provide new understandings of the relationship between citizens and the political communication processes of the Internet simply because the Internet has speedily become central to the political campaigning of all the major parties as well as a myriad of civil society groups.

⁵ Wainer Lusoli has developed useful frameworks/ datasets to measure deliberative activity on 29 political organisations in the UK between 2002-3
<<http://www.lusoli.info/>> (Accessed 13 September, 2007)

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