7-1-2014

The Design of Online Deliberation: Implications for Practice, Theory and Democratic Citizenship

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Abstract

The essay focuses on the role of design in online deliberation, and outlines three directions for future research. First, research must embed the study of *the technical and organizational architecture* of online discussion spaces, as an ongoing area of inquiry. Scholars need to take stock of varying available design choices and their potential effects on the deliberative quality of online public discourse. Second, looking more broadly, research must examine the *design of deliberative processes* as they manifest themselves via digital technologies. The author discusses the importance of surveying the broad array of processes that are currently employed, and the varying theoretical assumptions that they convey. Third, the essay concludes with an outline of possible implications that online deliberation endeavors may have on democratic citizenship, and calls for further research on the broader implications of this work for promoting healthy democratic societies.

Digital technologies were first introduced to the field of public deliberation since they enabled practitioners to overcome key obstacles that they were facing at the time, specifically problems of scale and inclusion, and logistical constraints associated with time, cost, and geographic location. But clearly there is more to the matter than logistics. The unique qualities of online media and web 2.0 technologies in particular, bring with them novel ways of applying theoretical ideals that may fall outside the scheme envisioned by theorists prior to the dispersion of the Internet. In some cases online deliberation is applied to complement face-to-face endeavors, and thus guided by 'face-to-face thinking;' but in many other cases online initiatives encompass an independent realm of civic involvement with unique character. To paraphrase Marshal McLuhan (2008), the online medium brings a new message to public deliberation, and it is this message, which ought to be the focus of our research.

The field of online deliberation should therefore focus on the design of online deliberation, and this topic breaks up into three lines of inquiry. The first line of inquiry is *design in the technical sense*. Here I am referring to the technical and organizational architecture of discussion spaces (for example, see Wright & Street, 2007). This line of research is premised on the belief that the Internet can foster effective public deliberation. However, this is not a necessary disposition of the hardware or software, but needs to be facilitated. Put differently, the potential of the Internet to embed deliberative democracy and facilitate inclusive and effective public deliberation, lies not in the ICTs themselves, but in the way by which these technologies are used. For example, user comments sections in online newspapers may be designed as a long list of statements with no means for lay users to process the information or productively engage in public discussion. But when users are offered an opportunity to rate comments, report abuse, and respond directly to comments of their interest, the same space turns into threaded discussions, which are focused around selected user contributions. Together, these design features have the potential of producing effective and focused public conversation, albeit limited due to the nature of the news site's goals and purposes.

Thus, design features matter for the potential of online spaces to facilitate effective public deliberation. The dynamic and rich nature of the digital environment requires us to embed the study of design as an ongoing line of inquiry. Further, as we look at design, we must look broadly at work being done outside of the fields traditionally associated with deliberation – namely, politics, government and communication -- and take stock of creative ideas coming from varying outlooks. For example, research on planning provides creative ways for augmenting face-to-face deliberation with gaming technologies to enhance participants' understanding of the challenges involved in planning processes (Gordon, Schirra, & Hollander, 2011; Gordon & Manosevitch, 2011). In another vein, insights from cognitive psychology provide the basis for using visual cues to promote more deliberative contributions in online forums (Manosevitch, Steinfeld & Lev-On, 2014).

The second line of inquiry is design in the broader sense, namely the *design of the deliberative process* as it manifests itself via digital technologies. Archon Fung (2003) surveyed the variability of designs employed in face-to-face public deliberation initiatives. Fung pointed out how different design choices convey differing understandings of democratic theory. Indeed, the design of a deliberative process conveys an understanding of the intended goals, the nature of the discourse, the

respective roles of citizens, communities, public officials, and institutions in the process, and more. Most importantly, the design of the process determines the possible democratic outcomes that these initiatives are able to pursue.

Fung argues for the importance of taking a nuanced look at the practice of public deliberation, rather than making a macro-level statement about the nature of the field and its effects on democratic life. Similarly, the research on online deliberation needs to provide an in-depth account of the broad array of design choices currently employed in the realm of online deliberation, specifically institution driven initiatives (e.g., Coleman & Gotze, 2001; Macintosh & Whyte, 2008). How are practitioners using ICTs to involve citizens in policy deliberation, and what theoretical assumptions do these endeavors convey? Differently put, what is the theoretical message underlying the actual manifestation of these ideals as they reveal themselves in the practice of online deliberation?

This line of research is important for the theory and the practice. As Fung explains (2003), recognizing the complexity of the field and the broad array of design choices, enables practitioners to make informed decisions about the type of design that deems most appropriate to the particulars of their social-political context. For theorists, insights gained from the descriptive nature of the practice could help refine the theory, and strengthen its value as a working theory of democracy. For example, Farina et al. (2012) point out that the current design of public commenting in e-rulemaking has resulted in mass commenting, most of which stems from advocacy action campaigns and consequently is of little significance to policy making. In essence this design reflects a participatory view of democracy in which participation is valued, regardless of quality. Such an approach meets the ideal of inclusion but undermines ideals of substantive public deliberation. It also imposes extensive work on public officials, who must devote public resources to scrutinizing large numbers of comments, the majority of which do not contribute to improving public policy. Taking such insight from the practice raises the question – what is the right balance between ideals of inclusion and quality for actual policy making? Do we need to refine the theory in light of the practice, or adjust the practice instead?

Lastly, research on online deliberation ought to focus on the broader implications of this work for democracy and citizenship. Deliberative and participatory theories of democracy gained standing as a response to changes observed in Western democratic societies, with citizens around the world showing consistent declines in political orientations necessary for the stability of democratic institutions (e.g., Putnam, 2000). Theorists have argued that integrating deliberative practices within democratic institutions may serve as a remedy for the shortcomings of traditional democratic governance by promoting the quality of public policy decisions (Macedo, 1999), increasing their perceived legitimacy (Manin, Stein, & Mansbridge, 1987), and promoting political orientations such as political knowledge, efficacy, and political participation (Fishkin, 2009). Indeed, the accumulated research tells us that participation in face-to-face deliberation supports these claims (e.g., Fishkin, 2009), but we do not know enough about the impact of online processes.

The third line of research should therefore focus on gathering more evidence to assess the impact that participation in online deliberative initiatives has on political orientations that are necessary for maintaining healthy democratic societies. In particular, aggregate

data from a wide spectrum of online initiatives and differing political contexts worldwide, could help illuminate the extent to which these practices meet the challenges that deliberative theorists sought to address as they were crafting new directions for contemporary democracies. In the same vein, we must inquire further about how the practice of online deliberation impacts democratic norms and culture. Coleman and Moss (2012) argue that deliberative citizenship is not a natural trait, but a construction that needs to be cultivated. Indeed, scholarship tells that in the absence of appropriate designs that encourage constructive discourse, online discourse does not meet deliberative ideals (e.g., Witschge, 2004). And yet, online deliberation endeavors seem to matter beyond the immediate goals of specific policy issues. It is important to inquire how this work may help cultivate deliberative norms in contemporary societies, and thus mitigate the effects of much existing online discourse that undermines deliberative democratic ideals.

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