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The Unfulfilled Promise of Online Deliberation

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The Unfulfilled Promise of Online Deliberation

Abstract

Since online deliberation has not delivered on the expectations of more considered, democratic participation, the authors propose less focus on technological 'fixes' and more on re-conceptualizing its primary purpose to gathering resonance in an authentic public square. The ideas that emerge can then be deliberated in representative face-to-face public deliberations, with the coherent voice that results contributing to more inclusive, legitimate, and implementable democratic decision-making.

Keywords

online deliberation, deliberative democracy, public square

E-government has not lived up to expectations of delivering more inclusive, legitimate, implementable decisions. The predictions have not come to pass that e-government models would evolve from information and transactions to integration and even transformation of governance (Coursey & Norris, 2009).

The problem e-government faces is that complex and contentious issues, essentially all the important challenges facing us today, require not just *scaling out* (increasingly large numbers of people participating), but *scaling up* (improved ability to address complex issues of local and global scale). To date, e-government, at best, involves collecting and sharing ideas, galvanizing interest and eliciting participation (Hartz-Karp et al 2012), falling well short of addressing complexity or participative government.

Like the optimistic proponents of e-government, proponents of deliberative democracy – inclusive/representative, deliberative, influential decision-making – have envisaged that online deliberation could deliver both the *scaling out* of public deliberation and *scaling up*. This hope rested on evidence that face-to-face deliberative democracy initiatives were capable of scaling up deliberation (Niemeyer & Dryzek, 2007; Thompson, 2012). However so far, online public deliberation has failed to deliver. Although the authors, among many others, have been pioneering, trialing and continuously improving online public deliberation platforms for over a decade, the results have been highly disappointing. Online deliberation, dependent on the Internet's inherent strengths, including open access and self-management, has not passed the test of inclusiveness/representativeness or deliberativeness, even when decision-makers have committed to outcomes being influential.

The underlying principle of deliberative democracy is that the views of experts and decision-makers about complex issues are inadequate, both in terms of unraveling complexity and democratic decision-making. Both need the reasoning of all involved voices: not just loud and powerful voices, but the considered voices of those not usually heard – the silent majority and those who are marginalized. Hence, public deliberation participants need to represent diverse viewpoints and values, representative of the demographics and attitudes of the broader population. In face-to-face public deliberation, this is increasingly being achieved through random sampling/civic lotteries/sortition (Dowlen, 2008). Public deliberation participants need to become informed, carefully considering different viewpoints, beliefs, and values in an environment that is non-coercive and egalitarian. Rather than relying on advocacy, participants need to be charged with focusing on reciprocity, and a search for common ground, based on mutual justification and respectful understanding. However, this is not how we are taught to communicate, nor is it integral to our everyday lives online or in the real world. Our culture focuses far more on the need to have the answer, convince others and win the argument. In face-to-face public deliberation, skilled facilitation and participant agreement to 'rules of engagement' encourage such high quality deliberation.

How to achieve this in online deliberation? It is unrealistic to assume that online users in a self-managed environment will sufficiently understand and appreciate the inherent value of deliberation to sustain their involvement in resolving tough issues through respectful discourse, often with unlike-minded others. Moreover, the culture of the open web is aimed at instant gratification, antithetical to the goals and

processes of public deliberation. The inherent nature of online deliberation, with its typically asynchronous environment, is not conducive to intensive, empathetic, collaborative discourse. Rather, it is conducive to direct democracy that merely aggregates the unreflective opinions of self-selected voters, conveniently weighing in on every issue. Unfortunately we can't achieve nuanced solutions to contentious issues by aggregating opinions.

While there are some sites that aim to achieve online deliberation, they are mostly long-term communities of interest, devoted to specific topics such as medical problems or cultural issues, where the sense of community has been carefully nurtured over time. Online bloggers/papers may be of high quality, adding to learning, however, audience participation is mostly passive – a far cry from the demands of deliberative participation. Finally, unlike the careful elicitation of representative participation in face-to-face deliberation, online deliberation has a self-selection bias. This is exacerbated by the inability to provide equal opportunity to participate due to lack of access, appropriate skills, comfort with technology, as well as time and interest. Hence, online deliberation is likely to produce highly skewed data. Regardless of outcome, it will have perception problems in terms of representative legitimacy.

In our experience, what has worked? Our best results were obtained during the Australian Citizens' Parliament (ACP) in 2008/9, where we successfully engaged randomly sampled participants in online deliberation. In total, 8,000 invitations were sent to randomly sampled citizens across Australia to participate in the ACP. Surprisingly, 3,000 responded in the affirmative; of whom approximately 300 participated in the online deliberation. Since only 150 of the 3000 (1 representative per electorate) would be finally randomly selected for the in-person, 4 day ACP in Canberra, our "online parliament" gave the larger interested group the opportunity to participate. Their task was to deliberate in groups to develop proposals to strengthen our democracy, and then to individually prioritize the list. The technology platform helped participants to find issues that interested them, organize a group and run their own sessions, harvest their outcomes, and track which proposals resonated and emerged as authentic and validated community voices. We believe these groups were strongly motivated to make use of the tools by the assurance that their outcomes would be carefully considered by the forthcoming in-person deliberation (Sullivan & Hartz-Karp, 2013). Although this online deliberation addressed inclusiveness/representativeness as well as deliberation and influence, it only helped marginally in scaling out the deliberation to the broader public.

Unfortunately, despite our efforts to make the online platform more engaging, improving "the promise, the bargain and the tool" (Shirky, 2008), our continuing online initiatives have yielded disappointing results in terms of scaling out the deliberations. Accordingly, our focus has now shifted from continuous improvement to re-engineering the purpose of online deliberation. We have blown up our assumptions that online deliberation is capable of replacing competently facilitated face-to-face public deliberation as an effective means of addressing complex issues, while reaching multitudes. Repeated attempts to integrate the role of facilitator within the online technology have not been successful. The alternative of trying to engage skilled facilitators each time there is an online deliberation clearly limits the potential to scale out participation, and flies in the face of the Internet's self-managed

experience. Instead, our re-engineering effort has focused on leveraging the strengths of online deliberation (self-managed capability, cost effectiveness, speed and capacity to scale out), while mitigating its deliberative weaknesses (self selection, asynchronous environment, inherently supportive of instant gratification). In fact, face-to-face engagement as part of the overall process seems key to building confidence that the online deliberations matter enough to motivate the level of engagement required to achieve “deliberative mass,” that is, the conditions under which engagement might become truly deliberative.

Even in face-to-face deliberation, it is conceded that “self interest, suitably constrained, ought to be part of the deliberation that eventuates in a democratic decision” (Mansbridge et al, 2010). One way we have achieved that in face-to-face public deliberation is to encourage lobby groups and others committed to particular view, to take the role of ‘experts’ whose role is to inform mini public participants of their views and respond to questions asked. These ‘expert’ proponents are given the same opportunity to present their viewpoint as other ‘experts’ such as researchers and public administration officials. However, when that has been done, they play no further part in the deliberations unless called upon again by the participants. This has advantages not only of serious and equal consideration of diverse points of view, but also enables interest groups to better understand the deliberation process, feel heard, and hopefully be less likely to impede implementation of the deliberated way forward (Gastil, 2014).

What if we were to give a similar role to online deliberation participants? Online deliberation could scale out public deliberation to involve many more people by enabling groups to submit deliberated views to representative deliberators, giving the latter a far broader overview of community views. These would be better explained and more considered than survey data, often given as background information to those deliberating. By changing the role of online deliberation, the need for random selection or eliciting representativeness would be irrelevant. Online participants who were self interested or had similar interests in/passion for a particular issue or value would be welcome. Online groups could be new or existing communities of interest. The instigator of the issue or another group member could act as the “curator”, combining the group thoughts into a coherent voice, in a way that is transparent to the group. While thinking together would be facilitated, the platform would offer flexibility in how this could be achieved. This new freedom to be an advocate, seeing if one’s ideas resonate with others, and then adapting views to increase their influence, could effectively tap into the deeper motivation and energy that is often missing online, and could help us to achieve deliberative mass. In short, we need to attract the strong energy in our communities into shared forums, and then help to channel it constructively - harnessing the energy before it dissipates.

Prospective online deliberators could be encouraged and targeted by the “promise” of helping them connect with those similarly interested to develop their idea into a proposal that could influence decision-makers. The “bargain” would start with online participants taking responsibility for contributing, maybe through involved deliberative participation, maybe via quick contributions, inputting views, suggesting, commenting, endorsing, and/or voting. But the most important responsibility would be to learn what others in the community value so a group’s proposal can be made more attractive to the broader community. In return, the organizers would be

responsible for administering the platform, disseminating each group's outcomes, and attracting broad public involvement in reviewing and voting the outcomes up or down. The "tool", the online platform, would help participants to think and work together in an accessible, easy, enjoyable and useful environment that seamlessly caters to all modes of communication. This system could be used together with synchronous video, voice and chat, and, intersecting with face-to-face deliberation, it could create a functioning 'public square', conducive to dialogue and deliberation; an uncensored spawning ground for resonant, authentic voices. Such a scenario is far more realistic than the hoped for technological 'silver bullet'.

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Brian Sullivan is the founder of Practical Evolution, LLC and a technology and process consultant for deliberative democracy. He has worked on many projects in Australia and India with Dr. Janette Hartz-Karp including Australia's first Citizens' Parliament as well as numerous public engagement projects in the U.S. He leverages his 25 years of technology and 10 years of deliberative democracy experience to bring people together in constructive dialogue to understand one another, explore their differences and pursue their mutual interests through practical cooperation using web, mobile, and face-to-face activities in a platform called CivicEvolution.