

Community Deliberation Online: When We Can't All Meet Face to Face

We will present a new web-based tool: POD (Program for Online Deliberation). POD allows groups of people to meet asynchronously (at each individual's convenience) to discuss and make decisions. It augments email listserv and message board technology by allowing dialogue to be inserted into and around documents, proposals, or links in a variety of formats. Available this fall for the first time, POD grew out of our involvement in community technology and neighborhood improvement planning in East Palo Alto, California (see <http://apsaproceedings.cup.org/Site/abstracts/030/030006DaviesTodd.htm> for an earlier report). It addresses problems that were identified in community-based planning that relies exclusively on face-to-face meetings. While face-to-face meetings of residents and government personnel will probably always be necessary, if attendance at such meetings is the only way that residents and stakeholders can participate in community decisions then some people are bound to feel disenfranchised. In the most serious cases this can severely delay or undermine a plan or lead to a plan that is unsound. Relying on face-to-face meetings also often results in decisions being made without sufficient time or information, or by groups of insiders. Careful observations of community planning and extensive interviews with stakeholders in East Palo Alto led us to develop a tool that allows ideas to be discussed and collaboratively developed, with features for polling and decision making as well. Limitations in access to the Internet remain a strong concern, and we will discuss ways to address digital divides and to use the tool we have developed to benefit individuals who cannot use computers.

This presentation will discuss the technology we have developed in a non-technical way, aimed at planners and community representatives. It should provide enough motivation and instruction so that potential users can evaluate the tool's potential for their needs. Potential users and anyone interested in community or group decision making should come away with an understanding of how participation is limited for many people in contemporary settings, and how asynchronous online deliberation can be part of the solution.