From Messages to Meetings: The Promise and Challenges of Online Deliberation

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TED ‘06, Mantova, Italy
October 24, 2006
Background
Family
Ancona
Miners Union
“the great compression”
U.S. political context
too big
american exceptionalism
deep cultural myths
Online deliberation…

• the promise

• the challenges

• our approach
The promise...
"E-democracy may be the 21st century’s most seductive idea."
- Keith Culver (2003)
Deliberation benefits group decision making
theory
juries...
Weak Pareto Condition
(Arrow, 1951)

If all individuals prefer A to B, then the group should prefer A to B.
Groups can do better than preference aggregation
empirical research
Deliberative polling...
Online tools enhance information dissemination and group communication
The “second Gutenberg revolution”

- Email lists
- Message boards
- Text message trees
- Web publishing
- Blogs (with commentary)
- Wikis
Information ≠ Action
Action motivates participation
Action $\Rightarrow$ Decision procedure
Can’t online tools be used for democratic decision making?
Benefits of online deliberation…

• more time to react

• more information

• more ability to participate
The challenges
Information tools don’t support group action
Online deliberation is happening on a large scale for...

- Very small groups (~3-4 people)
- Somewhat larger groups when like-minded
- Technically proficient groups (e.g. open source development)
- Professional/workplace teams
Assertion: Online democratic decision making is not happening on a large scale for grassroots groups.
Why?
lack of market incentives
culturally specific reasons
“The problem with socialism (democracy?) is that it takes up too many evenings.”
- Oscar Wilde
interface complexity
technical challenges
browser wars
civil society challenges
In the u.s., funding for democratic technology infrastructure is problematic
professionalization of civil society
open source development
culture challenges
coders over designers, users
“Mine is best”
The Deme/Groupspace.org approach
Consider these groups...

- Volunteer advisory boards
- Neighborhood associations
- Consortia of nonprofits
- Grassroots activist groups
- Labor union chapters and caucuses
- Clubs and religious congregations
- University-based groups
- Ad-hoc citizen groups (e.g. for community planning)
Groups do things like...

- Get to know each other and share information
- Define their mission and goals
- Make and observe rules (e.g. bylaws)
- Plan joint activities
- Make budgets and spend money
- Issue joint statements (e.g. press releases, flyers)
- Form committees and work with other groups
- Keep and retrieve records of all these things
So what's the problem?
In fast-paced regions people are having a harder and harder time getting together for meetings.
Much group communication must be asynchronous (people participate at different times, different places)
Existing and widely available async tools (email, message boards, blogs, wikis) are not well suited to group action
So... group activity either doesn't happen ("bowling alone") or...
it is managed by paid professionals/the few who have time
And so we have...

- “Inner circles” and managers rather than group democracy – professionalization of advocacy and service
- Fewer opportunities to meaningfully take part in groups and movements
- People sticking to their narrow social circles
- Elections that are determined by TV ads and expensive, influence techniques (e.g. “perception management”)
- Citizens who don't vote/don't take voting seriously
- Politicians who are accountable to lobbyists more than to constituents
What is needed?
An asynchronous (available at different times, different places) tool for *online group deliberation*
And it should be...

- freely available
- nonproprietary (controlled by the group)
- Comprehensive
- easy to use*
- widely compatible with hosting environments
- trustworthy (secure, transparent)
Thus... Deme

• Begun in 2003 out of PIECE: partnership with East Palo Alto Community Network (http://piece.stanford.edu), student programmers

• “demes”: geographically-based communities (originally, districts of ancient Athens)

• Target: enhancing legitimacy/effectiveness of community groups in east Palo Alto which rely on f2f meetings
Familiar features

- Group spaces with defined membership and guest access options (similar to Yahoo, MSN, Smart Groups etc.)
- User accounts and multiple groups available
- Threaded discussion viewer with optional email-backing
- Collaborative editing of documents
- Sharing/storage of files and links
Distinctive/unusual features

- Discussion centered on agenda items
- Split-screen display for cross-view referencing (like D3E)
- Flexible polls and decisions
- Threaded in-text comments in documents
- Discussion-integrated project planning tool
- Multiple meeting areas per group space
- Embedded website viewing
- Goal of comprehensive meeting support
Two broad design goals

• Relationship visibility

• Boundary distinguishability
Old version – group homepage
Old version – meeting area

A document can be anything that contains text you want people to read. It is possible to post and view documents other than plain text ones (e.g. pictures, Word documents, video clips), but currently only plain text documents support in-text commenting (explanation of in-text commenting will follow shortly). But there are many possible documents that can be posted in a meeting area even now. A document could be the proposed bylaws of your group, a press release you are drafting together, an interesting article you want everyone to read, or something else, as long as it is in text form.

Deme was designed to support document collaboration, document-centered discussion, and decision making about documents. "Document collaboration" means that two or more people work together to draft and/or revise a document. In the action menu (the pull-down menu filled in light blue) you can always select "New Document" to post a document from scratch. When you are currently viewing a document in the folio viewer's item display, the action menu will also contain an option for...
Old version – Decisions

Meeting Area

Groups: My Groups > Demo Group > Learn Demo Here

4. Example: Decision

Example: Decision [Decision]

Question: Let's try to make a decision. The decision concerns whether the text of 'Example: Document' is sufficient as an overview of how documents function in a meeting area. Click 'Vote now' to make your choice known, and note that you can annotate your vote with a comment. I have selected 'consensus' as the decision rule, meaning that everyone has to agree for this proposal to pass.

Decision called for by: andrew, Feb 02, 17:31

Voting has closed. Closing message

Choices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approve &quot;Example: Document&quot;</th>
<th>Total votes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Don't Approve "Example: Document"

1

Member choices/comments:

andrew

Approve "Example: Document"

Feb-02, 17:32

I agree with the current state of "Example: Document"

Don't Approve "Example: Document"

Feb-02, 17:32

I agree with the current state of "Example: Document"

guest

Jul-05, 07:05

Just to see what happens.

Did not vote:

todd, brandon, brett, melodie, curt, mike...

Comment: New Poll: "Example: Decision"
Feb 02, 17:31

Let's try to make a decision. The decision concerns whether the text of 'Example: Document' is sufficient as an overview of how documents function in a meeting area. Click 'Vote now' to make your choice known, and note that you can annotate your vote with a comment. I have selected 'consensus' as the decision rule, meaning that everyone has to agree for this proposal to pass.
New version – meeting area
New version – group homepage
Deme Architecture
(through spring 2006)

Browser:
HTML/forms/HTTP,
DOM+JSON+XHR,

PHP

Filesystem

MySQL

Email

Postfix
Summer 2006 on…
Rewriting in Ruby on Rails
Groupspace.org
Conferences on Online Deliberation:

• Carnegie Mellon University (June 2003)

• Stanford University (May 2005)

• TBD (sometime in 2007)
International Society for Online Deliberation

• Biennial conference

• Session sponsorship at other conferences

• Bring together technologists, researchers, and practitioners

• Coordination!
The Deme team (2003-):

Alex Cochran, Todd Davies, Jonathan Effrat, Mic Mylin, Ben Newman, Brendan O’Connor, Andrew Parker, Leo Perry, Aaron Tam