Tools and Participation: Tales from the Trenches

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Psychology    Democracy

Technology
Talk outline

Challenges
• Psychological
• Technological
• Political

A Possible Future
Conditions of “old world” democracy

• Most people illiterate

• Must gather face to face in order to meet

• Record keeping, computation difficult
Psychological challenges

- Dominance of automatic, unconscious (versus deliberative) cognition
- Primacy of preferences over arguments
- Self-deception
- Status quo bias
- Self-serving bias
- Altruism
Technology challenges
PIECE

Partnership for Internet Equity and Community Engagement

EPA.Net <--- Symbolic Systems Program
“The problem with socialism (democracy?) is that it takes up too many evenings.”
- Oscar Wilde
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
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 (e.g. the bay area), people are having a harder and harder time getting together to do these things.

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 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!


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
Key design issues

- Desktop versus web-based
- Proprietary versus open-source
Group homepage (2003)
Meeting area (2003)

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
Around 2004 - new developments

“Web 2.0”
AJAX - richer UI without page reloads
Ruby on Rails - web application programming framework
Key new apps (Facebook, Youtube, Gmail)
Post-Dean effect/CivicSpace
Meeting area (2005)
Group homepage (2005)

Visual guidance: affordances, icons, and labels
Tabbed switching between item, discussion, and combined views
Internal view histories (HTML caching)
XMLHttpRequest loading of comments and items
Dynamic string filtering for searching items and comments
Wiki-like editing of documents, with version memory* for comments
Live JavaScript chatting
First rewrite in Ruby on Rails
2007 - more external developments

Developer platforms
• Facebook Platform
• OpenSocial

Spread of social networks beyond youth/university use
Summing up - technology challenges

Open source web applications
• compete with free services
• lead to different goals vis-à-vis commercial services

Architecture and design must be flexible, anticipate future developments
Political challenges
Problem of election integrity in the U.S.

insecure procedures

uncounted votes and/or stuffed ballot boxes

absentee voting

lack of effective response to voting irregularities
Technology responses

Design for an accurate count (Verifiedvoting.org)

Allow distributed verification of legitimacy of votes (Whovoted.net)
Who Voted?

A website for seeing who is officially recorded as having voted in each election

Precursor to a means for verifying total number of legitimate votes
Demo
Political challenges

An idea that is new may clash with other values (e.g. privacy)

Opponents may be able to mischaracterize your project
A possible future on the technology side
Choices for free-to-use tools

Content management systems (CMSes)
• open source
• multifunctional
• integrated

Commercial tools (e.g. Google Calendar, Facebook)
• tend toward narrower task focus
• stand-alone
Deme Scheme (2007-)

Goal: modular, integrated with data sharing applications on other sites

Architecture: class hierarchy built on top-level notion of “item”
Demo
PIECE, Deme, and Who Voted Contributors (2002- )

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