

Digital Citizenship: E-Deliberation, Democracy and the Future of the Discipline

AN INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR STEPHEN COLEMAN
Conducted by Vlad Strukov

In an exclusive interview with the editor of *Digital Icons*, Professor Stephen Coleman discusses evolving forms of citizen participation. He examines e-deliberation as an emerging body of research, technological tools, social practice and policy-making related to encouraging and facilitating democratizing processes on the Internet and other post-broadcasting media. He examines e-deliberation environments and discusses the philosophical underpinnings of web interfaces and software enabling social online interactions between citizens and public officers. He views participatory processes from the point of view of governmental structures, commercial use and reflection pertinent to contemporary western academia. The interview with Professor Stephen Coleman took place on 10 July 2010 at the University of Leeds.

Vlad Strukov: *It is my great pleasure to welcome Professor Stephen Coleman of the University of Leeds. Thank you very much for agreeing to do this interview with me, Stephen.*

Stephen Coleman: It is my pleasure; I am pleased to be involved with this journal.

VS: *Thank you. I wonder if we can start with you letting the readership know more about what you do at Leeds and what your recent projects have been...*

SC: We have the Centre for Digital Citizenship, which is a collaboration between technologists and social scientists to ask the same questions, but in different ways. The questions are primarily about how citizen participation in governance of various levels, both the official national level but also supranational levels, in global campaigns of one kind and another and

in institutions; how these forms of participation can be facilitated in a meaningful and consequential way, using technologies that one might call post-broadcast technologies (the Internet and some things around the Internet). Now, the social scientists are raising questions for the technologists along the lines of, “Can you come up with ways in which we can structure discussion to make it more deliberative, to make it more inclusive, and to make it more meaningful and consequential?” The technologists are very often coming back to the social scientists and saying, “Can you tell us, what is the consequence of changing this bit of technology, what is the consequence of using a mobile phone rather than a desktop computer?” So this is a dialogue and everything we do involves an interaction between disciplines, where we both assume that we have an incomplete knowledge of what we are really talking about. The sort of projects that we work on include working with governments to try to help them create policy making, to help them use the Internet to gather public experience and expertise of which there is a huge amount outside of government and to refine legislation so that there is scrutiny by the public and not just by elective representatives. We look at the effect on the representative institutions: a lot of my work over the years has been trying to understand how we would reinvent representative institutions as twentieth and now twenty-first century bodies, rather than just living with the legacy of what are essentially nineteenth century bodies on the whole. And we do work with local communities, trying to understand how they can talk about the things that concern them. These are not only geographical communities, but also communities of practice, communities of passion, where people who have in the past been dispersed across distances can talk to each other about particular issues. And everything that we do is always around the question of democratizing the existing processes: how do we inject into these processes various norms that we are constantly arguing about. They are not fixed or uncontested norms in our mind, but they are norms of democratization. They give confidence to citizens to take power and speak in their own name rather than be spoken for. That I think is one of the most important objectives for our centre.

VS: *That sounds brilliant. And it also sounds to me like it is a long debate that has been revitalized because of the new technologies, of new means of addressing those issues. And I wonder if you can comment on this new buzz word that has come out recently and that is e-deliberation. And I wonder if you can specifically try to define it in the three perspectives mentioned in your first comment, i.e., in relation to the government of any country, to the commercial sector of the economy and to our academic discipline. We can probably reserve the last one as a separate question.*

SC: Well, deliberation is essentially about the assumption that we do not know the answers to lots of key questions and challenges that face us. This may be throwing our hands in the air and saying we do not even understand the question, which of course sometimes happens to governments when they are faced with pandemics or when they are faced with a terrorist threat. They do not even understand where something is coming from or why it is there, such as climate change or whatever. Or, it may be that our preferences are incomplete because we want lots of different things at the same time. You know, I want a faster route to work but I also want to conserve the countryside and therefore I do not want roads built; we often have inconsistent preferences. Deliberation is about sorting out those uncertainties, anxieties and

inconsistencies, not just within one person but amongst whole polities. It is about asking the question, “How can you, by shifting the preferences that you have, make sure that your values are well-served?” Now at the government level that is very important because governments really changed enormously over the last century. A hundred years ago or less, governments were essentially always asking the same questions as the last government that was in power. How do you protect the borders? How do you maintain a certain degree of economic stability? How do you maintain markets? And so on. Increasingly now, the most important questions that governments face are risk questions. They are questions that come to them apparently from nowhere, when all the expertise is somewhere else. Deliberation is really important because you do not have standard, simple, ideological foundations to rest upon. You have got to simply go out and talk about it. And there is a common sense argument, which is the more you talk about it the better things are. Now, you mentioned the commercial sector and that is very interesting. The commercial sector is ahead of government. They realize that if you want to sell a brand, the first thing you do is you get people talking about it. You get people talking about its defects and then you get rid of the defects. If you want to try to understand how you are perceived in the world, the best way is to get people talking about you. Governments (specifically political parties) are still somewhat locked into a mindset which says that we will dictate how people see them; it is called impression management. “We will be visible, but only on our terms”. But, increasingly, the commercial sector, and now I think some in the political sphere as well, are aware that these visibilities are something you cannot control. You know, if I walk down the street and I do not look like a nice person, the solution is not to persuade people that I do look like a nice person, but to look like a nice person. So governments that are acting anti-socially are never going to get away from this simply through spin. Deliberation is a very good way of creating a democratic opportunity for them to work out what sorts of things they are doing that are not working and what sorts of things would work. And how you get buy-in from lots of people—because one of the obstacles to that is risk, which I was speaking about. Overcoming risk is always dependent upon the adaptation of human behaviour. You think of climate change as one of the biggest threats facing societies today. There is no way we can solve climate change by passing a law. You could have every government sitting in the United Nations, or sitting in the Security Council of the United Nations, declaring unanimously that they want climate change to go away, but it will not go away. So, what has to happen is people have to change, businesses have to change and the nature of social competition and cooperation have to change. To make all of that happen requires a massive degree of consent. And that consent is probably not going to come about simply by telling people they must consent. It has to come out of discussion and argument.

VS: Stephen, I wonder if we can keep the issue of e-deliberation and academic discipline for just a bit later. May I just inject another kind of trajectory for the conversation? And that is to comment on what you were saying to highlight that many things that you put forward I would define as elements of culture, or social practices. And I wonder if that stream of knowledge, or that stream of thinking, actually finds its way into e-deliberation in any way.

SC: Not enough. You are absolutely right. Your point is very well put. As I mentioned before, the constructivists and technologists, frankly, do not have a wonderful history of thinking about culture. And social scientists are at their worst because they tend to want to be seen as white coat scientists and tend not to be too perceptive about culture. Now, everything that we are talking about in relation to deliberation - the nature of language, the tools that you use to communicate, the nature of rhetorical persuasiveness - are fundamentally cultural questions. And one of the things that I hope that I and those who think like me bring into this debate is an understanding that we have to think first of all about the making of citizenship and the cultural shaping of all these tools, technologies, techniques and strategies of communication. What does it mean to argue if you are brought up in a family where to argue means that it is always going to end in tears and possibly in somebody being hit? Then argumentation is less likely to become a habitual part of your life. If, on the other hand, you are brought up to see the argument as the vivacity of, you know, the dinner table—throwing around arguments, disagreement and dissensus, arriving at better ideas—then you are much more likely to adopt an argumentative disposition. This is a cultural question. It is the question of the very nature of who sits at the top of the table; where the table is placed; and whether deliberation can involve those people who we might think initially have absolutely nothing that ought to be heard. Do we have a debate about the future of crime that involves criminals? If you do not involve criminals, then are you missing out on something? These are the kind of culture-specific questions that deliberative theorists cannot afford to ignore.

VS: *Stephen, if I can just interrupt you for a second and suggest another way of looking at it. That is to say, talking about cultural practices we are sort of trying to look at different structures of knowledge, different structures of power. Does that also imply that this concept of e-deliberation will differ when it is applied to different national contexts and different cultural contexts?*

SC: I think inevitably, because one of the most important things about spaces of deliberation is that those spaces are always surrounded by a history that preceded them, and they are also always surrounded by history is going to go on after them. Therefore, the kind of deliberative process one might have about welfare or the economy in the context of, for example, a very peaceful affluent society that might see itself as a leading power in the world, is going to be very different from one in which there is widespread mistrust of government and not much interpersonal trust. So I think that actually understanding the specificities of a particular culture is really important, particularly in these post-Soviet cultures that are so marked by pre-Soviet history, by aspirations of what they see themselves becoming and also, I think to a very great extent, by a misunderstanding by the rest of the world about what they are at the moment.

VS: *OK, excellent, may I just ask the last question and actually take us back to one of the things I raised in the middle of the conversation, and that is the relation of the concept of e-deliberation to academic disciplines. Where does it belong on the intellectual, university map?*

SC: I think to some extent we are creating a new sub-field. I would not call it an entire field. But I think we are doing what all universities should be doing right now and that is bringing departments that in the past had not spoken to each other to work together. So, I think that in any university you would want the technologists to get away from their tools for a little while and start to be challenged by the social scientists. But at the same time you want the technologists to challenge the social scientists. Indeed, what both of these need is people from the arts and from cultural studies to come in and challenge the social scientists and the technologists, saying, “Hey, there is a lot more going on all around of this”. You would want the geographers and the historians to join in. So I think this is a multidisciplinary area of research. I think it is one in which universities can demonstrate that we have something serious to say to society about one of its currently pressing problems, which is the problem of disengagement and the failure of trust and failure of efficacy. And I think it is an area in which there is some tremendously good scholarship; I mean I was amongst that group of people who not so long ago, of course, was seen as being a little bit eccentric for getting involved in all of this. I can still remember going to places where one would talk to journalists and they would say, “Ah, the Internet is going to go away”. Then you would talk to politicians and they would say, “If we ignore it for long enough, nobody is going to use it”. Nobody says this anymore. What is interesting is that in turn there is a new generation of younger scholars coming up who do not see the Internet as something new or exotic. They just see it as something that is part of life. Almost everybody seems to be on Facebook. Just in the early part of the 20th century when people used to write about the telephone, they used to do it within the context of special studies of the telephone. By the late 20th century the telephone was implicated in every study. The Internet is moving that way. And if we are going to be moving in the direction of how one creates a more culturally as well as politically cohesive society, then the concept of e-deliberation should actually be quite a priority amongst our intellectual studies.

VS: *Excellent! Thank you very much, indeed, Stephen, for this thought-provoking conversation and we look forward to more.*

SC: Thank you for inviting me. Thanks.

STEPHEN COLEMAN is Professor of Political Communication at the Institute of Communication Studies of the University of Leeds. His main research interests include: methods of political engagement; uses of digital media in representative democracies; intersections between popular culture and formal politics; political efficacy; political aesthetics, performance and rhetoric; literary and dramatic representations of politics; and forms of deliberation and decision-making. Together with Professor Ann Macintosh, he co-directs the Centre for Digital Citizenship, an interdisciplinary research centre which conducts research into the changing nature of citizenship and governance in a networked society. He is the author of *The Media and the Public: Them and Us in Media Discourse* with K. Ross (2010), *The Internet and Democratic Citizenship: Theory, Practice and Policy* with J. G. Blumler (2009), *What Happens in Parliament* (2001), and many other publications.

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