Reports and Commentaries

3.7.6. ONLINE DELIBERATION:
THE FOURTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
by Yuri Misnikov

The Fourth International Conference on Online Deliberation (OD2010) took place on 30 June— 2 July 2010 at the University of Leeds, UK. It was the first OD event organised outside the USA (the previous gathering took place in Berkeley in 2008). The conference was organized and sponsored by the Centre for Digital Citizenship (CdC) of the Institute of Communications Studies, University of Leeds, Dipartimento di Informatica e Comunicazione Università degli Studi di Milano (Italy), the Public Sphere Project, and Evergreen State College (USA). The Conference Chairs were Stephen Coleman and Ann Macintosh, co-Directors of the CdC and Fiorella De Cindio (Dipartimento di Informatica e Comunicazione Università degli Studi di Milano). Organising Chairs were Giles Moss, Deputy Director of the CdC, University of Leeds, and Cristian Peraboni (Dipartimento di Informatica e Comunicazione Università degli Studi di Milano). The conference followed the work of the previous conference Chairs and supporters, Robert Cavalier (Department of Philosophy and Digital Media Lab, Carnegie Mellon University (USA)), Todd Davies (Symbolic Systems Program, Stanford University (USA)), Douglas Schuler (The Evergreen State College and The Public Sphere Project), and Peter Shane (Moritz College of Law), The Ohio State University and Knight Commission on the Internet Needs of Communities in a Democracy.

The conference agenda dwelt on the widespread diffusion of the Internet and a growing trend towards democratisation worldwide, which has encouraged new modes, projects and visions of citizen participation in decision making and governance. The specific aim of OD2010 was to bring together researchers, developers and practitioners from a wide range of disciplines and fields to examine the notion of deliberation in a virtual environment, and to discuss specific advances in online deliberation from a number of different disciplinary perspectives.

Another objective was to provide fresh updates regarding recent developments in online deliberation, to understand how other groups are applying the tools and techniques and ex-

change ideas in practical ways, to look at new case studies, and also to encourage a discussion among leading international experts on how online deliberative practices should be accounted for and justified conceptually, and, finally, to elaborate on what the future holds for participatory democracy.

The fourth OD conference objectives focused on the following topics: current research on online deliberation; research challenges which deliberation, and in particular online deliberation, pose for researchers, governments, communities and citizens; socio-technical design of online deliberative spaces; links between theories of deliberative democracy with experience with online deliberation; descriptions of tools and techniques that are already being tested or fielded; deliberative platforms using novel or unusual settings, technology or approaches; experiences and findings related to relevant technological theories (such as Web 2.0) and/or relevant social theories of deliberation and governance (such as public sphere, government 2.0 and civic intelligence); and case studies in applying and evaluating online deliberation in various formal and informal engagement domains.

The conference allowed for four distinct types of submissions: 1) research papers, 2) exploratory papers on ongoing research and innovative projects, 3) technology demonstrators, and 4) panels on pertinent issues. The conference was structured around four plenary and eight parallel sessions, which provided space for 15 full and seven exploratory research papers.

The conference opened on 30 June 2010 with the welcoming and introductory speeches made by Stephen Coleman and Fiorella de Cindio. The Keynote Presentation was delivered by Richard Allan, Head of Public Affairs for Facebook Europe, who spoke about the role of Facebook during the UK 2010 parliamentary elections.

On 1 July, Ann Macintosh and Todd Davies began the conference; they explained the history of the OD conferences and the rationale for the discussion. The first panel, chaired by Scott Wright (University of East Anglia), problematised the actual state of affairs of online deliberation with contributions made by Ricardo Blaug (University of Leeds), Laurence Monnoyer-Smith (University of Technology of Compiègne), Stephen Coleman (University of Leeds) and Todd Davies (Stanford University). Todd Davis pointed to the unrealised potential of technologies for the democratisation agenda. While decision-making continues to be an important area of technology application in politics and governance, it should be more actively used by citizens in many other ways, nationally or within particular neighbourhoods, in politics and social psychology; there is also a need to use new tools more innovatively and learn from each other.

Richardo Blaug, in turn, addressed the issue of why people should deliberate online; his main reasoning was that we have a need to discuss things with each other because individually shaped personal experiences cannot be a reliable basis for knowing what should be done in certain circumstances. Accordingly, social interaction and discussion are the core features of democracy, and citizens must be involved in political interaction to pre-empt their disaffection with modern increasingly elitist and cynical politics.

Laurence Monnoyer-Smith addressed the issue of inclusiveness and inequality of deliberative practices from a normative perspective of democracy. In her view, deliberative processes should be viewed as political institutions, for deliberation is imbedded in the social and

political, whereas the objective of technical design should be to facilitate productive public discussions.

Stephen Coleman described different uses of technology, which should be assessed not merely for its hardware properties but also for its capacity to enable social impacts; for instance, a conference is also a technology which can be used for learning and interacting. Another use is determined by intentions; technology always produces unintended results, in addition to predicted outcomes. Citizenship is a special type of technology that, apart from voting or reading newspapers or watching TV political programmes, is a way of making something. According to Coleman, deliberation helps citizenship technologies evolve and ensures that a citizen never turns into a political consumer (Editor's Note: See Vlad Strukov's interview with Coleman in this issue). Ultimately, deliberation is a constant rehearsal about relationships with others. Deliberative processes can facilitate the emergence of a deliberative citizen, who is capable of using technology democratically.

Todd Davis presented on the experience of deliberation in the USA. He noted that there are democratically inspired theories that do not believe politics should be deliberative. There are also instances of American public policies being irrational, not shaped by deliberative discussions or rational consideration, but rather driven by negative advertising, emotion, etc. The USA might be unique in this sense, which explains why decision-making has been less consultative and deliberative compared with other democracies. The role of technological design and its impact on deliberation and democracy will continue to grow, impacting popular consciousness and political landscapes.

The parallel sessions that followed addressed many issues and challenges that online deliberation is faced with today. They range from the state and role of argumentation in public deliberation, different models of electronic consultations in law making, the role of design in deliberative practices, recent experiences in rolling out the new Open Government Initiative in the USA, lessons learned from evaluating electronic participation, challenges of consensus-building through deliberation online in South Africa to the role of technological design in public discourses.

It was also highlighted that (a) everyday talk in non-political chat rooms can be very political, (b) there are certain rules that make deliberation successful (deliberative e-rulemaking for decision facilitation), and (c) the importance of online news for stimulating public discussion by posting comments on discussion threads.

A special panel was organised to reflect on (a) emerging technologies for online deliberation (panel members: Simon Buckingham Shum, Open University; Tom Gordon, Fraunhofer; Nikos Karacapilidis, University of Patras; Anna De Liddo, Open University; Ann Macintosh, University of Leeds; David Price, Debategraph; Chris Reed, University of Dundee) and (b) post-Soviet experiences in online deliberation in Russia and Ukraine (panel members: Taras Kuzmov, Ukraine, e-Democracy Portal, Thompson Foundation; Yuri Misnikov, University of Leeds; Vlad Strukov, University of Leeds; Florian Toepfl, Harriman Institute, Columbia University).

The latter panel described examples of Russian and Ukrainian Internet use for (a) blogging among Russian provincial governors and how deliberation friendly such blogs are, (b) online discussion to choose and vote for the most prominent Russian historical figure, and (c) political mobilisation and support in election-related context in Ukraine. The discussion that

followed acknowledged that new web-technologies are being actively used not only in the western democratic context, but also in partial democracies in transition from the communist past; it was specifically underlined that there is a lot of technological and social innovation in these countries as well and that the Internet has engendered a whole range of new political processes.

There were also a number of exploratory papers delivered that focused specifically on European (Raphaël Kies, Simon Smith, Martin Karlsson, Laurence Monnoyer-Smith,) and Canadian experiences (Karen Louise Smith) of online deliberation, while Scott Wright addressed more fundamental issues of how the online deliberation agenda should be framed conceptually and practically.

A special video link was organized with Beth Noveck who is currently in charge of new government policy in the USA. In her presentation 'The View from the White House', she explained what the new US administration had done so far and how it is going to use new technologies in the future for greater interaction between government officials and citizens, including organising deliberation and consultation on various policy issues. The disclosure of government-held information is another important goal of the Open Government Initiative, which is highly decentralised and allows government departments to innovate within their areas of competence. She underscored that it is not an easy process; there are many obstacles to remove and new things to do so that the USA can catch up with other more advanced countries in this respect. The presentation was followed by a panel discussion in which Todd Davies and Stephen Coleman reflected upon Noveck's talk; the conference participants were also able to pose questions during the online session.

Finally, the concluding plenary panel chaired by Giles Moss discussed future strategies for extending deliberation. Panelists Jay G. Blumler, Fiorella de Cindio, David Osimo, and Douglas Schuler provided their visions and thoughts as to what should be done in order to advance online deliberation further, based on the lessons learned and new emerging opportunities. All agreed that there is a lot of unutilised potential for making online deliberative practices a more effective tool of participatory democracy.

The conference web site is <www.dico.unimi.it/OD2010>. Additional information can also be found on the web site of the Centre for Digital Citizenship <http://digitalcitizenship.co.uk> and its blog <http://digitalcitizenship.co.uk>.

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