



Crowdsourcing civility: A natural experiment examining the effects of distributed moderation in online forums



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ABSTRACT

Participation in discussions about the public interest can be enhanced by technology, but can also create an environment in which participants are overwhelmed by the quantity, quality, and diversity of information and arguments. Political participation is at a greater disadvantage than non-political activities in that participants from different parties already start out with established differences, which requires them to reach some form of common ground before progress can be made. Those seeking authentic deliberation are discouraged to participate when confronted with uncivil and inflammatory rhetoric. These issues are often exacerbated in online discussions, where lack of identity cues and low barriers to entry can lead to heightened incivility between participants, often labeled as “flaming” and “trolling”. This paper explores the extent to which moderator systems, tools online discussion forums use to manage contributions, can reduce information overload and encourage civil conversations in virtual discussion spaces. Using the popular website Slashdot as an example of sound moderation in a public discourse setting, we found that users move toward consensus about which and how comments deserve to be moderated. Using these findings, we explore how transferable these systems are for participation in public matters specifically to the unique attributes of political discussion. Slashdot’s political forum provides a comparison group that allowed us to find quantitative and qualitative differences in political posting, comments, and moderation. Our results show that large scale, civil participation is possible with a distributed moderation system that enables regularly lively debates to be conducted positively because the system provides tools for people to enforce norms of civility.

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1. Introduction

The literature examining the use of information and communication technology (ICT) for deliberation has often focused on the influences of medium on the ability of people to access and engage in deliberative arguments (Davis, 1999) or how technological tools can be incorporated to enhance deliberation (Kavanaugh & Isenhour, 2005). Particularly, in the context of public administration, it has been found that successful adoption of advanced information and communication technologies can lead to increased civic engagement, co-production, transparency, and more efficient and cost effective delivery of public services (Noveck, 2009). However, a consistent concern of public administrators in leveraging advanced information and communication technologies to interact with constituents is the potential for vitriolic messages by and between those participants who are using the channel. Even in non-political discussions there are angry “flame” messages, designed to lash out at participants; “troll” messages that offer falsely polemic

positions to elicit anger from other users, or simply the inability to have civil discussion in online forums are all concerns for those who are evaluating social media sites for public interactions (Pfaffenberger, 2002; Sproull & Kiesler, 1991). If these kinds of off-topic, uncivil messages are pervasive in online communications, they can dilute the value of the conversation by making users hard to find more fact-based, reasoned messages. This issue is important in the context of public administration, particularly e-government, where public administrators seek to recognize and respond to citizens’ voices on public issues through online discussions. If online mechanisms for public discussion are derailed because of hostile and uncivil messages, government agencies and participants may not benefit from information and communication technologies that aim to encourage deliberative and critical discussions among users. Online communities have a long history of examining technical and social responses to counter-productive behaviors in online discussions, which may be of use for informing the increased prevalence of these efforts to use information and communication technology to share and discuss the work of governance (Lea, O’Shea, Fung, & Spears, 1992; Poor, 2005). In addition, these online communities often reach a massive scale of interactions, with tens and hundreds of thousands of interested parties interacting. How the designers and managers of these systems share pro-social interactions in such massively-distributed,

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identity-constrained environments could be useful for future efforts in this area. Many scholars argue that new IT technologies, such as rating or moderation systems, can reduce information overload and improve civility of participants, and thus lead to deliberative discussions in online discourse arenas. This is because those technologies can help participants focus on discussion topics by filtering unnecessary, uncivil messages and comments (Goldberg, Nichols, Oki, & Terry, 1992; Resnick, Iacovou, Suchak, Bergstrom, & Reidl, 1994; Terveen & Hill, 2001).

In this paper we examine how a popular online community, Slashdot, which is an online news and discussion site with a large, persistent membership, has used a system of distributed moderation to facilitate deliberation in its discussion forums. We also present how facilitating political public discourse through social media ventures can contribute to public-to-government, government-to-public, and public-to-public engagement. By looking at previous work regarding necessary conditions for successful online communities, our goal is to define which conditions map to successful outcomes for communities that have a civic or public administration emphasis. As organizations at all levels better understand the barriers, opportunities, and design consequences in adopting social media technologies, their increased capacity and efficacy may affect the potential benefits such technologies allow.

2. Theoretical backgrounds

2.1. Public administration goes digital

The use of information technology to exchange information and provide services from government organizations to citizens, businesses, and other branches of government has resulted in an increased interest among public administration scholars in e-government. The aim of e-government is not simply to reinforce existing forms of interactions, but to create new forms of participation that improve the relationship between the public and the government to increase government efficiency, effectiveness, and transparency (O'Reilly, 2010). Poorly designed participation opportunities, however, can overwhelm governments and leave the public feeling ignored and marginalized. To realize the potential inherent in our growing democratic surplus, public administrators must focus on designing quality systems that make information accessible and interactions rewarding.

Internet users are more likely to be active in voluntary group activities, making use of the Internet for collaborative purposes (Rainie, Purcell, & Smith, 2011). These groups often have a governing component, be it electing an official, attempting to solve policy problems, or raising awareness for an issue. Public administrators are vested in many of the same issues and should seek to harness the energy and expertise of their citizenry as an asset to accomplish similar goals. Toward that end, we intend to build on the research that has found that usable websites (those that have accessible content and organized in an easy to navigate manner) are more likely to encourage public engagement (Coleman, Lieber, Mendelsen, & Kurpius, 2008). Although public administration is still in the nascent stages of adopting Internet tools for this purpose, non-governmental websites have been addressing the issues of public input and discourse, providing an opportunity for public administrators to avoid initial pit falls and adopt best practices, both technically and socially.

2.2. Virtual public spheres

Mediated discussion environments go by a variety of names, including online communities, social media, flash forums, virtual publics and Web 2.0. Particularly, online tools with explicit focus on political deliberation continue to be developed. As an example, OpinionSpace¹ is

being used by the U.S. State Department to enable public conversation about controversial policy issues (Faridani, Bitton, Ryokai, & Goldberg, 2010). Sites like Newstrust² attempt to bring deliberative processes to discussions on mass media news stories (Lampe & Garrett, 2007).

However, it's also possible that rich political interactions can occur in online systems that do not have political discussion established as a primary goal. The development of social media (e.g. Facebook and Twitter) has expanded these virtual discussion spaces. Research has indicated that social media has become a space where the public interact regarding government during elections (Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008; Vitak et al., 2011), as well as outside of election cycles (Rainie et al., 2011). Some have argued that there is a danger that online information seeking and interaction can have negative effects on exposure to alternative viewpoints (Sunstein, 2001). Subsequent research (Horrihan, Garrett, & Resnick, 2004) showed that this is not necessarily the case; people who seek information about politics online do get exposed to a variety of viewpoints as measured by their ability to express opposing perspectives.

According to Jones, Ravid, and Rafaeli (2004), virtual publics are “symbolically delineated, computer-mediated spaces... that enable a potentially wide range of individuals to attend and contribute to a shared set of computer-mediated interpersonal interactions” (p. 195). We propose the term *virtual public spheres* to describe virtual publics where discussion is the main goal of interaction rather than a by-product. These spaces are typically made up of a large number of users who are unknown to each other in other contexts. Users interact many-to-many rather than one-to-many or one-to-one. Comments in these spaces are persistent rather than ephemeral, archived for future consumption.

2.3. Information overload and civility in online discussion

With the advancement of information and communication technologies, digital places have increased to provide Internet users with the possibility to discuss politics freely (Huisman, 2011). The online spaces for public discussion allow for massive participation in sharing information about political issues through reduced barriers to entry and independence from geographic limitations (Edmunds & Morris, 2000). However, online environments with an abundance of information available can result in information overload that refers to the state of being exposed to too much information, distracting individuals with a limited cognitive capacity from making a decision or staying informed on a topic (Hogan, 2009; Levy, 2008; Miller, 1956, 1962). Information overload is troublesome in that it can prevent people involved in public conversations from contributing to deliberative and critical discussions. For instance, Jones, Ravid, and Rafaeli (2002) found that users in Usenet newsgroups are more likely to respond to simpler messages in situations of information overload, and tend to end their participation as overload increases. Also, Jones and Rafaeli (1999) contended that there is a struggle to achieve critical mass of people contributing to the conversation, proposing that online communication takes a S-shaped pattern of frequency of occurrence. A sharp increase after that critical mass is achieved leads to information overload, and communication levels off as participants are less motivated by the rate of message. Jones and Rafaeli (1999) have described this as a tension between the critical mass needed to benefit from “shared public online interpersonal interactions” and the breakdowns that occur in information overload conditions.

Information overload often can result from a surfeit of angry and off topic messages, which bring about unproductive and uncivil discussions. One typically designs online spaces with the assumption that they will allow for critical and reasoned forms of political deliberation

¹ <http://www.state.gov/opinionspace/>

² <http://www.newstrust.net>

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