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## Cultivating Deliberation for Democracy

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# Cultivating Deliberation for Democracy

## **Abstract**

Diamond's Liberation Technology describes how new communication technologies can help bring about democracy, but not how they can help improve an existing democracy. One natural idea is that technologies developed specifically for improving deliberation might help improve in quantity and quality the public deliberation required for a healthy democracy. To date, this has failed to happen; deliberation technologies have not been taken up by the public to any significant degree. I suggest that this is because such technologies have taken the wrong approach, imposing too much structure on deliberative discourse. An alternative is to "cultivate" better deliberation. This approach is taken by YourView, a new kind of virtual forum, which aims to enhance democracy by providing an opportunity for citizens easily access key arguments on major issues, take a stand on those issues, and help shape the "collective wisdom" - the considered collective view. By identifying when participants exhibit "epistemic virtues," and rewarding such behaviors, it encourages rather than imposes better-quality deliberation.

## **Keywords**

democracy, deliberation, deliberative democracy, deliberation technology, collective wisdom

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## Cultivating Deliberation for Democracy

Larry Diamond's "Liberation Technology" (2010) makes a powerful case for the catalytic role new communication technologies can play in transforming societies from closed and authoritarian to open and democratic. Yet the essay appeared at a time when, to many observers, the practice of democracy in traditionally open societies is being severely degraded – ironically, due in part to the operation of those same technologies. In an insightful paragraph, Diamond acknowledged this tension:

Even in the freest environments, the new digital means of information and communication have important limits and costs. There are fine lines between pluralism and cacophony, between advocacy and intolerance, and between the expansion of the public sphere and its hopeless fragmentation. As the sheer number of media portals has multiplied, more voices have become empowered, but they are hardly all rational and civil. The proliferation of online (and cable) media has not uniformly improved the quality of public deliberation, but rather has given rise to an "echo chamber" of the ideologically like-minded egging each other on (p.80).

Having noted the problem, however, Diamond immediately returns to his main concern, noting only that "These are real challenges, and they require careful analysis."

The question therefore arising is whether and how new communication technologies can be used to enhance the operation of democracy once it has taken hold. A natural idea is that these technologies might enhance democracy by improving democratic *deliberation*; and they might do this by being designed to support deliberation, i.e. by being de-liberation technologies.<sup>1</sup>

In ways that even my own juvenile self could barely have imagined, new technologies today support massive quantities of deliberation. Particularly in the online arena, it is now commonplace to debate issues of all kinds. Often this deliberation is high quality; for example, in the comments sections of opinion columns on nytimes.com you can routinely expect to find thoughtful debate over difficult issues simply by selecting "Readers Picks".

These new technologies offer some tremendous advantages over traditional forms of deliberation, including both the archetypal, face-to-face

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<sup>1</sup> I first encountered this useful pun in an email from Damien Smith Pfister.

debate, and the slower but generally more elaborate varieties mediated by handwriting and printing.

This profusion of technologically-mediated deliberative dialogue is surely good for democracy in some ways. Granted, most such deliberation is either trivial (were Ricky Gervais' comments outrageous?) or irrelevant to the public sphere (is Pluto a planet?). But mixed up in all this are countless conversations over matters of clear democratic significance: which candidate most deserves to be elected? How should asylum-seeking refugees be handled? Must our city be riven by new freeways? New technologies have created new possibilities for such issues to be explored and debated, and – to some immeasurable but non-negligible degree – this deliberative efflorescence would seem to aid the quality of understanding, the informedness of opinion, and the depth of engagement.

This is not to say that democracy, in countries like the United States and Australia, is actually improving. Democracy is assailed by numerous powerful forces, including some unleashed by these very same new technologies (Tanner, 2011). Consider YouTube: for every incisive documentary, it delivers dumpsters of digital dreck whose main function appears to be, in Postman's haunting phrase, amusing ourselves to death (Postman, 1986). The same technology can be both democratically liberating and intellectually debilitating.

Now, a curious fact about the new technologies supporting this abundance of deliberation is that none of them are really deliberation technologies.

Let me explain. A deliberation technology, for the purposes of this argument, is a tool developed specifically to facilitate or improve deliberation. Its design and implementation must somehow reflect and aid the distinctive nature of deliberation. A technology that happens to be extensively used for deliberation is not for that reason a deliberation technology. Email, for example, is not a deliberation technology, though it enables vast amounts of deliberation.

Dozens of systems have been developed, and many offered up for public use.<sup>2</sup> Yet all this well-intended effort has been a spectacular failure, when measured by whether people spontaneously want to use the resulting systems. To

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<sup>2</sup> I personally have been involved in developing more than half a dozen such systems (see [timvangelder.com/software](http://timvangelder.com/software)). Those released publicly include Reason!Able (an educational desktop application aimed at improving reasoning skills and critical thinking; no longer available); Rationale (<http://rationale.austhink.com>; also an educational desktop application); bCisive (<http://bcisive.austhink.com>; a desktop application aimed at supporting general deliberative decision making); and bCisiveOnline (<http://bcisiveonline.com>; a simplified, collaborative online version of bCisive). None of these has taken the world by storm. The most successful, Rationale has sold many thousands of licenses to hundreds of organizations and individuals, but it is still a veritable minnow in the world of software and "dotcoms". My involvement with deliberation technologies continues with the development of YourView ([www.yourview.org.au](http://www.yourview.org.au)), discussed below.

my knowledge, dedicated deliberation technologies have yet to improve the quantity or quality of public deliberation by any significant degree. The rough yardstick I'm using here is comparison with the extent to which public deliberation has been facilitated by more generic technologies, such as the online comments system Disqus (disqus.com).

It seems that those technologists trying to improve deliberation have, by and large, failed; some who were not trying have had dramatic, albeit accidental, success.

Why is this? Perhaps the deliberation technologies developed to date just haven't been good enough. Most have been developed on miniscule budgets. If only resources comparable to, say, those put into a big new Hollywood movie were applied to developing a better way to debate, then we might have a system truly capable of engaging the masses.

An alternative view is that resources aren't the problem. Rather, inventors of deliberation technologies have been taking altogether the wrong approach. They look at deliberation as it happens naturally – whether face-to-face or online – and see something undisciplined, chaotic, and messy. To improve deliberation, they think, there should be more order. Participants must be more disciplined. And to make this happen, inventors of deliberation technologies have historically provided structure, guidelines, scaffolding, rules and constraints of various kinds (e.g. van Gelder 2007).

For example, one of the most elegant online deliberation technologies has been TruthMapping (truthmapping.com). Hoping to overcome some of the familiar problems of deliberative dialogue, TruthMapping provides an elaborate architecture within which only certain kinds of refined “moves” can be made. For example, an argument cannot be expressed in ordinary argumentative prose; rather, it must be broken into discrete premises and conclusions expressed as succinct whole sentences, with phrases like “From 1 and 2 it follows that” explicitly marking the logical structure.

The trouble is, using TruthMapping feels vastly different to deliberating in more familiar ways, whether face-to-face, on paper, on online. In much the way that, say, the experience of wearing a straightjacket is different to that of wearing ordinary clothes.

More generally, the masses have shown little interest in being enclosed in the normative corrals favored by the designers of any particular deliberation technology. TruthMapping has been going for a half-decade or more, and perusing the site, it seems that the sum total of the active participants could probably fit in a minivan. Sure, there will always be scattered pedants, philosophers and other oddballs who enjoy having their ruminations rigidly regimented. Truthmapping.com attracts its share, as do other deliberation

technologies. In general, however, the lesson is: you can build it, but hardly anyone comes.<sup>3</sup>

There seems to be an inverse relationship between structure and participation; the more rules and structure you provide the less people are inclined to play along. Possible reasons for this include:

1. Deliberation is a richly textured and subtly nuanced activity. Attempts to impose order must somehow squeeze this activity into the categories and possibilities afforded by whatever theoretical conception of deliberation the developers happen to be working with (e.g., the Toulmin schema). It is a bit like asking sculptors to use nothing but Lego bricks.
2. Deliberation is typically embedded in a dialogue containing many other ingredients – elaborations, clarifications, illustrations, asides, jokes, insults etc. Deliberation technologies try to filter out these supposedly irrelevant or superfluous elements so that participants can focus their minds on the deliberative essence. But the other ingredients help give context, meaning and interest to the deliberation. Take them away and what you've got left over is pretty much just an academic exercise.

But how could it be done any differently? How could a technology be designed to specifically facilitate deliberation without somehow imposing overt constraints on what participants are doing?

Comparing the metaphor of *construction* with that of *cultivation* might be instructive here. Deliberation technologists to date have typically seen quality deliberation as something to be carefully co-constructed by thoughtful participants using sophisticated software tools. But consider the humble vegetable plot. The gardener doesn't "construct" a healthy lettuce; rather, she creates conditions in which lettuces and other esculents thrive.

So how can a deliberation technology help cultivate, rather than construct, good quality deliberation?

- It should provide incentives for (quality) participation rather than rules.
- It should provide opportunities rather than constraints and barriers.
- It should work mostly behind the scenes rather than in the ~~user's face~~ user interface.

In what follows I'll try to illustrate this with reference a new deliberation technology, a virtual forum called "YourView."

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<sup>3</sup> In email communication around the time of writing this essay, the developer of TruthMapping, Jack Paulus, has stated that the site is being dramatically transformed. The points made here may no longer be true, or as true, of the new version.

YourView was conceived with the quixotic ambition of enhancing democracy by addressing a few of its obvious problems. One problem is that concerned citizens generally have no practical way to stand up and be counted on any given major public issue. Suppose I am against, say, fracking. Where, right now, can I easily go on the public record as being one citizen who is against this monstrous business? More generally, where is the place that anyone, any time, whichever side they're on, can go and cast their vote?

A second problem is the difficulty of being sufficiently well-informed to have a reasonable opinion in the first place. The bare minimum any citizen needs to know to be rationally entitled to a view on an issue such as fracking is: what are the key arguments on either side? Unfortunately people generally just don't know, despite – or perhaps because of - the torrents of news, opinion, promotion and propaganda gushing from innumerable outlets ranging from corporate polyphemes down to the most lowly bloggers and tweeters.

A third problem is that we rarely know what the public as a whole really thinks. On one view, the essence of democracy is that governments act in accordance with the will of the people. This presupposes that the will of the people can be known. But how? Some say that the will of the people is adequately expressed on Election Day. The trouble is, since many issues are in play at any given time, election results can't give us any clear indication of where the people stand on any particular issue. Having elected a Labour/Green government, where do Australians stand on, say, gay marriage? The election results themselves don't tell us.

Others say that the will of the people is determined easily enough by opinion polls or surveys of the standard kind. But these don't tell us what the people "really" think on complex matters. They do give us a statistical snapshot of top-of-the-head opinions of their randomly-selected participants, but these responses are typically:

- Ill-informed, in the sense that most people don't know very much about any given issue; indeed, they are rationally ignorant (Somin, 2004);
- Poorly considered – the respondents haven't engaged in any serious reflection;
- Manipulated by powerful interest groups making cunning use of tools of mass influence such as TV advertising.

As such they don't reflect what the public *would* think *if* it was adequately well-informed and was able to deliberate and reflect. Yet it is this more considered opinion which ought to constraint government in a healthy democracy.

"Deliberative democracy" theorists such as James Fishkin have been making these kinds of points for decades (Fishkin, 2009). They recommend an alternative: gauging what the public really thinks by running some kind of "deliberative polling" event in which a representative sample of the citizenry – a

“mini-public” - is convened to engage in an extended exercise involving interrogation of experts and face-to-face deliberations. Such exercises typically find opinion shifting substantially, lending support to the idea that standard opinion polling fails to capture the considered opinion of the public.

The main drawback of deliberative polling and similar exercises such as citizens' parliaments is that they very rarely happen. This is mainly because they are cumbersome and costly, and the required enthusiasm, funding and political support generally can't be pulled together.

So are we condemned, then, to never fully reaching the democratic ideal because (among other things) we have no practical and effective way to determine what the public really thinks?

Perhaps not. The internet now provides ways to handle problems that were previously intractable (Shirky, 2009). In this spirit, YourView is exploring the idea that a suitably designed virtual forum might be able to determine the collective wisdom of the participants on major public issues. Then, insofar as the participants statistically represent the whole population, it could be said to have identified the public will.

Indeed, all three problems listed above might be addressed by one and the same system. YourView raises major public issues and allows members of the public to express their view by “voting” and providing support or elaboration in comments attached to their vote. It provides succinct distillations of key arguments pro and con on each issue, so anyone can easily ascertain what those arguments are. And it synthesizes the viewpoints expressed on the site into a considered collective opinion – a “take” on the wisdom of the public as a whole.

Of course, YourView faces myriad challenges. Some of these would confront any deliberation technology; others arise because of YourView's distinctive ambitions. Three will be discussed here: How to determine the collective wisdom of the participants? How to encourage sustained engagement by large numbers of participants? And how to promote quality deliberation? In YourView these challenges are closely inter-related and addressed by the same mechanisms.

YourView is, naturally enough, organized around issues – the major issues facing the nation, such as whether to have a carbon tax, recognize gay marriage, and so forth. Participants can cast their vote for or against any given issue, and add a comment by way of support or elaboration. Doing a simple tally of the votes produces the “raw vote.” The raw vote may be of passing interest, but for all the familiar reasons, it can't be taken seriously as representing the public wisdom. For one thing, the participants are a biased (self-selected) sample. For another, participants may be giving only a “top of the head” opinion, without having become reasonably well informed and reflecting on the issue.

However, working behind the scenes, YourView calculates another take on the issue, purportedly the *considered collective view* of this group of participants, drawing on whatever information YourView can glean from all participation on the site. Obviously the raw vote on an issue is one important part of this information, but YourView doesn't take the raw vote at face value. Rather, in computing the collective view it weights a vote by another key quantity, the "credibility" of the participant who cast it.

In the ordinary sense, a person's credibility is the extent to which it is reasonable to trust what they say. In YourView, credibility is interpreted as the extent to which the participant can be deemed worth listening to, based on all their involvement on the site to date. YourView calculates credibility by doing data mining and analytics on the traces participants leave, including data directly created by their own activity (e.g., how many issues they have viewed or voted on), and data created when others respond to that activity.

To elaborate a little, YourView works by operationalizing the concept of an *epistemic virtue*. This is essentially a form of thinking or interaction which is conducive to the acquisition of knowledge. For example, being *open-minded* (though not too open-minded) is generally regarded by epistemologists as a good thing because it gives you opportunity to learn from others and modify your own beliefs. Epistemic virtues have attracted quite a bit of attention from epistemologists in the past few decades; indeed there is now a field known as "virtue epistemology" (e.g., Fairweather & Zagzebski, 2001).

There is no single canonical list of epistemic virtues, and different lists might be drawn up for different purposes. YourView's list currently includes open-mindedness, informedness (being generally knowledgeable); cogency (being able to support one's view with compelling arguments and evidence); flexibility (being willing to change's one mind when appropriate); authenticity (forming and expressing sincerely held views); independence (not slavishly following any group or ideology); and deliberativeness (being inclined to participate in constructive deliberative exchange).

Epistemic virtues manifest themselves in behavior. This is obvious in our ordinary interactions: for example, we can observe when somebody fails to be open-minded by rejecting out of hand any viewpoints in conflict with their own. Similarly, epistemic virtues can be manifested in behavior in online forums. That behavior leaves digital traces or clues. YourView works by collating these clues and inferring the extent to which a participant is exhibiting an epistemic virtue. From there, it computes an overall credibility score; and using credibility scores and other information, it computes the collective wisdom of the participant group. This collective wisdom may differ significantly from the raw vote.

The second challenge was encouraging sustained engagement by a sufficiently large number of participants. Credibility is also key to this meeting

this challenge, but via basic “game-ification.” Crucially, credibility has to be earned. New participants start out with almost no credibility, and over time can gain - or lose - credibility depending on what they do in the forum and how others respond. Achieving higher and higher credibility scores in a challenging environment is intrinsically rewarding. Further, credibility scores appear alongside participants’ usernames, so credibility is highly visible. And the more credibility a participant has, the more power they have in the system. For example, the higher the credibility, the more space they are granted to express their thoughts. And perhaps most profoundly, participants with high credibility have the well-deserved satisfaction of knowing that their votes and ratings carry more weight, and are thus more influential in determining the collective wisdom of the group; and knowing that others know that. In short, high credibility is not only intrinsically satisfying; it is rewarded with both status and power in the YourView world.

Credibility is also the key to addressing the third challenge, that of improving the quality of deliberation on the site. Via the mechanisms just described, YourView creates strong incentives to make contributions exhibiting epistemic sophistication and impressing others. In so many online discussion forums, participants will make ill-considered or obstructive contributions in part because there is little incentive to avoid such behavior. In YourView a participant can be “punished” via a hit to their credibility score, rendering them less visible and reducing their ability to influence the emergent collective view. In the terms introduced above, YourView is clearly trying to cultivate rather than construct deliberation. On the surface, participants can engage in deliberation online much as they would in any other online discussion system which happens to support large volumes of deliberation. However, working behind the scenes it is creating incentives and providing opportunities for gradual uplift in deliberation quality.

YourView is in early stages; indeed it is still experimental. In particular YourView still has only a rudimentary ability to discern epistemic virtues from digital traces of participant activity; improving this capacity is an ongoing program of research and development. It remains to be seen whether YourView will succeed, by any relevant criterion. In particular, it remains to be seen whether YourView will succeed where so many deliberation technologies have failed to date in improving, in any substantial way, the quantity and quality of public deliberation on important public issues. However if it does succeed, it will be providing at least a partial answer to the opening concern: whether and how can deliberation technologies can promote democracy. Whether, that is, de-liberation technologies can help us achieve the more profound level of liberation in which democracy is not only functioning but functioning well, in the sense that *eunomia* results in part from the expression of the true will of the people.

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