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## Local Art, Local Action: A Proposal for Deliberating on and about Main Street

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## **Abstract**

In every campaign, politicians make promises. They spell out their hopes and dreams for their constituents and describe the dystopia that would exist should their opponent be elected instead. With campaign speeches characterized by lofty promises, buzz words, and vague generalities, deliberative opportunities exist for clarification and complexification of candidate (and party) platforms. I propose a unique possibility for local politics that would demystify the electoral process and increase civic engagement by providing community-level opportunities to participate in platform-formation, information-seeking, and deliberation. Specifically, I propose that local government host an issue-raising arts festival, which would lead to an online deliberative forum.

## **Keywords**

deliberative democracy, civic engagement, elections, online

Creativity is just connecting things. When you ask creative people how they did something, they feel a little guilty because they didn't really *do* it, they just *saw* something. It seemed obvious to them after a while. That's because they were able to connect experiences they've had and synthesize new things (Wolf, 1996).

These words of wisdom were spoken by the late Steve Jobs in a 1996 interview for *Wired* magazine. The technology guru has been celebrated as a creative visionary and one of the most influential thinkers of this generation (see, for example, the *Business Week* eulogy, Steve Jobs, 2012). Jobs brought together disparate ideas and bundled them together strategically to create something original in its totality but altogether common in its component parts. Thomas Friedman (2007) might call him a “great synthesizer” (p. 287).

Taking this definition of creativity as strategic synthesis as a starting point, I develop a proposal for one possible way to stimulate creative innovation in deliberative elections. Specifically, I outline plans for a multi-site, multi-phase deliberative exercise. First, a participant photography project hosted at a local festival would engage community members in the exercise by using a creative nonverbal form to elicit interest. Second, a strategically designed online forum would host deeper discussion and deliberation on the issues identified in Phase 1. Third, the online forums would yield a voting guide, which could be widely distributed to all registered voters prior to the election.

None of the component parts of my proposal are “new” in any real sense. That is, participant photography (Wang, 1999), community festivals (Manning, 1983), public deliberation (Gastil & Black, 2008), online forums (Lancieri, 2008), and voting guides (Canary, 2003) each have notable histories of their own. I am not claiming innovation with regard to any of these separate pieces of the puzzle. Nor am I suggesting that we merely mash these things together haphazardly into some sort of democratic Frankenstein's monster and call it progress. What I am arguing is that photographic displays, meetings, threaded online conversations, and so forth each function differently as sites of public expression and engagement. By strategically designing a communication infrastructure that takes advantage of the forum-based rules and resources of each of these existing entities, we can improve the practice of deliberative democracy and address substantial weaknesses of contemporary elections.

To this end, I proceed by describing current problems associated with agenda setting, civic engagement, and candidate accountability in electoral politics. I then outline my proposal through a narrative description of how the project could play out if implemented. Following this narrative section, I provide a justification of my decision to integrate these particular components through a

discussion of forum-based rules and resources. I close with a description of assessment opportunities for researchers and practitioners.

### **Problem Identification**

Three troubling problems in contemporary electoral politics revolve around agenda-setting, civic engagement, and candidate accountability for campaign promises. A thorough analysis of each of these issues is beyond the scope of this paper; however, in this section I consider each in turn and provide a general overview of some of its more problematic aspects.

Early research into the relationship between mass-media coverage of political campaigns and voter decision making suggested that media editors and broadcasters, through their selection and reporting of the news, influence what voters consider to be the key issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). A primary concern surrounding this agenda-setting function of the media is rooted in recent trends toward media conglomeration. By 2002, most broadcast media were owned by the “Big Ten” media conglomerates and by 2006, that number had shrunk to a mere six (Crachiolo & Smith, n.d.). Media mergers have led to an ever-smaller number of information gatekeepers. As a result, a small number of profit-driven corporations wield substantial control in defining the political agenda during campaigns through their decisions regarding which issues deserve media time and attention.

At the same time, there is the problem of system neglect among many citizens (Gastil, 2000). Even in years of exceptional turnout, U.S. citizens vote at a much lower rate than citizens of many other democracies. The 2008 presidential election yielded the highest turnout rate since 1968, with 61.6% of eligible voters submitting ballots (McDonald, 2012). Nonetheless, the 2008 U.S. voter turnout rate ranked twenty-third amid the fifty-seven democratic presidential elections occurring around the world between 2008 and 2010 (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2013). In off-year elections for state and local officials, voter turnout is especially low: officials are often elected with a single-digit turnout (Voter Turnout, 2012). The various reasons offered for low voter turnout include the following: highly technical ballot language alienates citizens (Magleby, 1984), citizens feel too uninformed to make effective decisions (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1997), and elected officials are not held accountable for being unresponsive (Gastil, 2000).

Regular, competitive elections theoretically institutionalize the last of these issues—candidate accountability—by empowering voters to reward their elected officials with reselection or punish them with deselection (Mayhew, 2004). When voter turnout maintains such consistently low levels, however, the proposition that elections actually serve this accountability function become

highly questionable (Przeworski et al., 1999). As many citizens disengage from electoral politics, the responsibilities and rewards of issue identification and political engagement fall to the media moguls active in setting the public agenda and the special interest groups with adequate levels of resources and motivation—groups which may or may not represent the concerns of the broader public.

Central to addressing any of these problems is the issue of recreating a meaningful role for common citizens in the electoral process. So, how can we design a system that will better inform uninformed voters, engage disengaged citizens, and hold accountable unresponsive officials? The proposal I develop integrates existing community structures with creative modes of communication in order to embed the practices of engagement, issue identification, information seeking, deliberation, and civic action into the normal functioning of U.S. towns and cities. Building more “informed communities” might be one route to reinstating a meaningful role for citizens in the electoral process (Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy, 2009). In an effort to make my vision clearer, I construct a narrative description of my proposal in action from the perspective of a hypothetical future in which this plan has been implemented.<sup>1</sup> Although I imagine this proposal could be creatively scaled up for larger elections, for this illustration I tell the story of a local candidate election. Let us imagine our candidates are facing each other in the November general election for the position of Mayor of Greenville.

### **Proposal Description**

Every summer, the city of Greenville hosts a festival of the sort that many towns do. Annually, small towns and cities in the state of Ohio alone host over 450 festivals between the months of May and August.<sup>2</sup> Although the themes of these festivals range widely, the events share a similar, general setup: a street, park, or other public space becomes the site for stages, displays, competitions, and activities in a temporary performance of community. I remember as a child walking circuits around the same dirt-worn paths of the fairgrounds with my father until he was sure he had shaken hands, traded stories, and “said hello” to everyone he knew. As we walked our circuits, we would linger at information booths, exhibits, and performances. Greenville’s annual festival serves as the launch event for my three-phase proposal.

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<sup>1</sup> See Lubensky (2013) for a justification of narrative accounts as a means of simplifying complex deliberative processes into accessible “mini-stories.” Such small-scale narratives allow readers to vicariously experience the proceedings in order to make evaluations based on process rather than judging only the outcomes of the proceedings.

<sup>2</sup> See Ohio Festivals’ *Festival Schedule*, <http://ohiofestivals.net/festival-schedule>.

## **Phase 1: Assessing Community Needs**

The city of Greenville decided to incorporate a new competition into this year's festival. The rules were released months in advance, and entries were due two weeks before the start of the event to be considered eligible for competition. Participants were tasked with completing this sentence: "A problem that needs to be addressed in our community is \_\_\_\_\_." All submissions were required to be group submissions, consisting of no fewer than six and no more than ten participants per group. Group members were responsible for taking pictures to illustrate or symbolize the problem identified in their prompt.<sup>3</sup> Each group member selected one photograph to title, caption, and include in the group submission. A final submission, then, consisted of six to ten photographs, titled, captioned, and mounted together under a particular topic of community need. Various groups in the community worked together to identify public problems and construct artistic displays. These displays were thematically organized by identified problem area (suffering schools, infrastructure issues, violence, theft, etc.) at the festival by a local curator.

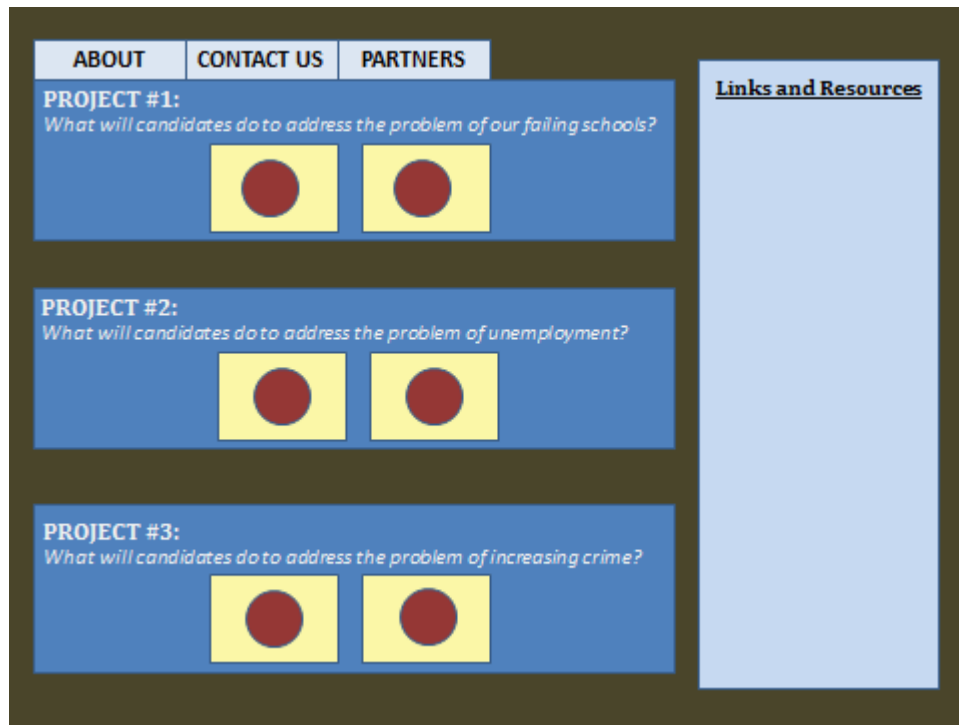
On the day of the festival, voter registration tables were set up at the ticket gate. When attendees registered to vote, gate workers issued them three tickets. Being registered to vote was not a prerequisite to attend the festival, but it was a prerequisite to voting on the photography competition. Community members came out to see the collaborative work of their friends, family members, and neighbors, indulge in fatty fried foods, and "say hello to everybody." Small slotted boxes sat in front of each photography display, and, as festival attendees walked their circuits through the festival, lingering at displays and exhibits, they were encouraged to place their tickets in boxes representing the problems they believed local officials most seriously needed to address. They could place three tickets in one slot if they believed it important enough, or spread out their voting power to as many as three topics. As attendees cast their votes, they legitimized a community problem as an issue that voters consider important. The three community problems with the most votes at the end of the event were selected for inclusion in an online forum.

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<sup>3</sup> For other examples of PhotoVoice or participant photography projects like this one, see Wang (1999); PhotoVoice Web site: <http://www.photovoice.org/>; From Where I Sit Project: <http://www.blurb.com/books/1099709>; and Kasson Voices: <http://kassonvoices.com/index.html>.

## Phase 2: Deliberating about Candidate Position Statements

Once the votes were tallied, the winning submissions were announced through local media and posted on the Local Art, Local Action (LALA) Web site. Their prompting statements were transformed into questions: “If elected, what would each candidate do to address \_\_\_\_\_?” These questions were posted along with links to the winning participant photographs. Each mayoral candidate received the three questions and was asked to submit their responses by the end of the week. Those responses were then posted to the LALA homepage, where anyone could read and compare the candidates’ responses. Additionally, the main page included wiki resources for public reference (see Figure 1, below).



*Figure 1:  
Local Art, Local Action homepage mock-up*

In a separate, private online forum, a stratified random sample of local citizens deliberated about candidate responses in a two-part discussion.<sup>4</sup> Trained

<sup>4</sup> Event organizers should demographically stratify a random sample of local citizens in order to match their particular area’s electorate in terms of sex, age, ethnicity, education, and party affiliation. The ideal sample size for these forums is somewhat context-dependent; however, a sample in the range of 20-50 people will likely allow for enough diversity to represent key demographics in most communities without becoming so large as to be unwieldy. For more

facilitators moderated these deliberations and participants had opportunities to grant expert witnesses temporary access to the forum to inform the discussion. The goal of round one of deliberations was to develop a set of focused questions for candidates. Although uninvited site visitors could not access the deliberative forum, the site provided a space for anyone to submit questions to be considered by the deliberating body as they discussed the candidates' responses (see Figure 2).

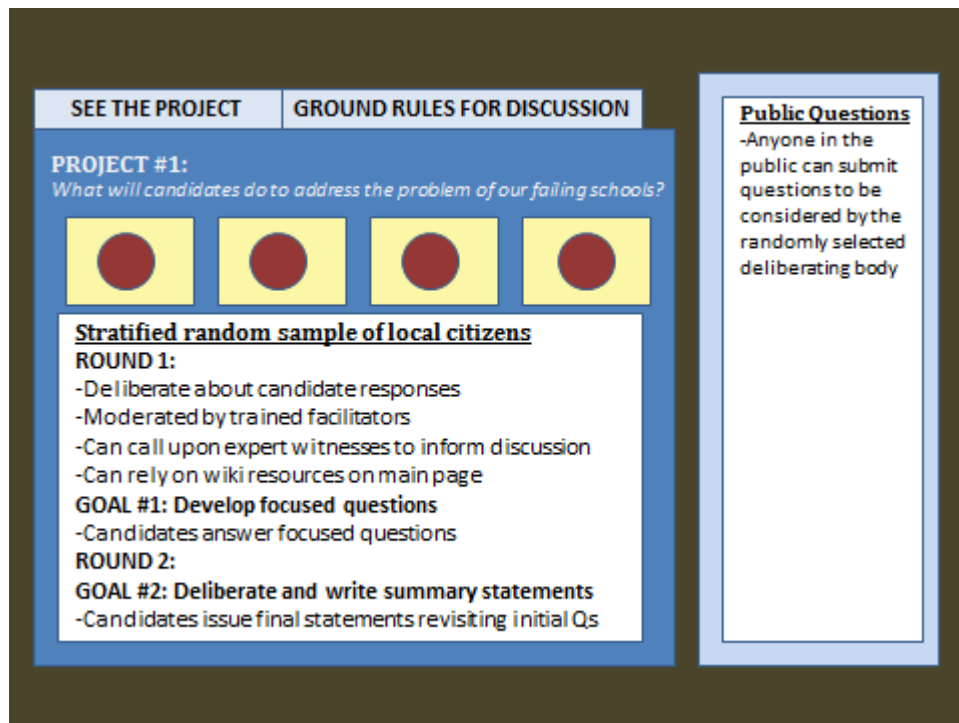


Figure 2: Private forum for enclaved deliberation about candidate responses

Candidates then had an opportunity to submit to the deliberators answers to the focused questions. These responses were meant to clarify, elaborate on, or modify candidates' original statements. Following reception of these responses, the citizen deliberators launched into round two, the goal of which was to write summary statements outlining arguments for and against each candidate on each issue and making recommendations regarding other policy ideas unmentioned by the candidates but considered by the deliberators. These summaries were posted to the updated LALA homepage and published in the local media for public

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guidance regarding sample size, consider other examples of this sort of forum design, such as Gastil's (2000) discussion of selection panels ( $n = 50$ ) and Knobloch et al.'s (2013) discussion of Oregon's Citizen Review Initiative ( $n = 24$ ).



consumption. Candidates then issued a final statement revisiting the initial issue questions in light of the deliberators' summary statements.

### Phase 3: Publishing and Distributing Voter Guide

The main page, accessible to all, was then updated to display each question, the initial candidate responses, panel summary statements, and final candidate statements (see Figure 3, below). A version of this updated main page was adapted for print publication and distribution as a local voter guide.<sup>5</sup>

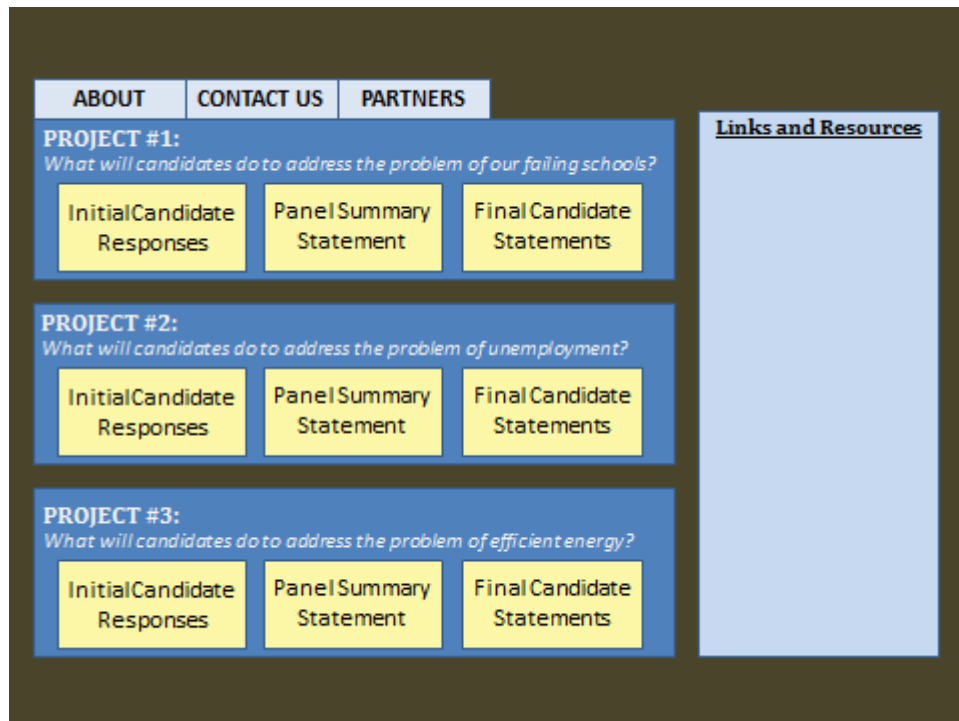


Figure 3: Final homepage mock-up

### Justification

The multidimensional nature of this proposal makes detailed description of every facet impossible in the given space. Nonetheless, in this section I explain why I chose to combine the particular component parts in the way that I have suggested, and I direct interested parties to relevant sources for further reading.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the development and distribution of guides like this in practice, see Freelon et al. (2012).

The crux of my argument centers on the idea that scholars and practitioners of dialogue and deliberation are, to varying degrees, grappling with questions of interaction design. Mark Aakhus (2007) has described design as “an activity of transforming something given into something preferred through intervention and invention” (p. 112). Practitioners of public deliberation and dialogue make great efforts to create conditions that are conducive to particular types of conversation about public issues. Working within the social constructionist tradition, public dialogue scholars have articulated theories and practices that promote collaborative meaning-making and dialogic contact (see Anderson et al., 2004; Black, 2008; Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997; Pearce & Pearce, 2001; Zoller, 2000). Practitioners such as members of the National Coalition of Dialogue and Deliberation often describe their work in terms of creating a “safe space” for dialogue or creating the “conditions” for deliberation. Within this community, great attention is paid to the design of the event and the actions of the event’s facilitators, such as creating group guidelines, coordinating speaking turns, and framing the event.<sup>6</sup>

The creation of such an event depends on both locale- and forum-based rules and resources. “Locale” refers to the physical arenas in which discourse can occur. Through everyday patterns of action, inaction, and interaction locales acquire rules and resources that dictate how to behave in this place (see de Certeau, 1984; Giddens, 1979/1994). “Public” spaces suggest by their name accessibility by all; however, in practice these spaces are highly regulated through zoning laws, surveillance, and local norms regarding appropriate behavior (see Mitchell, 1995). For this reason, locales such as parks, fairgrounds, municipal buildings and the like might be more accurately described as semi-public spaces due to the fact that they are only *conditionally* accessible (see Verschaffel, 2009). That is, the only people who can legitimately cross the threshold into a semi-public space are those who agree to play proper roles and follow the rules:

Certain groups have easy access while others are barred. But a threshold is more than an obstacle. It also marks a transition from the street to a conditioned space: one may enter the theatre or the museum on condition that one plays the game and takes part in what goes on inside... All people must leave behind (at least part of) themselves on entering the playing field. Just as the actor is not himself when he plays a role, the spectators who play the audience are no longer themselves. They are participants in an ongoing play (such as: science, or art), or a discussion within the space of an institution (Verschaffel, 2009, p. 142).

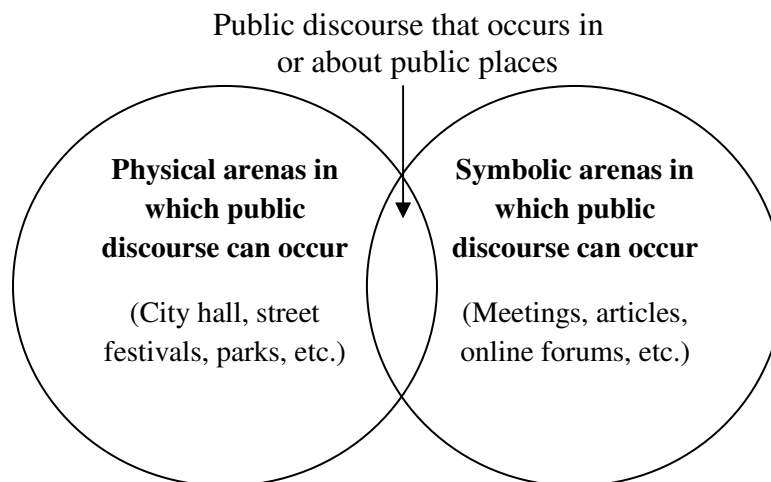
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<sup>6</sup> See Black (2012) for a review.

In this way, institution-specific spatial logics, defined by recurrent patterns of everyday interactions, provide people with cues for setting-appropriate behavior.

Of course, attention to spatial logics makes apparent the politics of geography. Supposedly “public” places are, through their use, inevitably made more accessible, welcoming, or comfortable to certain subsets of a population (Mitchell, 1995). To use the festival as an example, acknowledging the politics of space does not necessarily mean we must design segregated events for each subset of a diverse population; however, it does suggest that event planners should be conscientious that everything from the site they choose to the timing of the event and the food available can influence who shows up. Because the festival is intended to be an engaging event, strategic decisions must be made regarding target populations. Do you seek to engage underrepresented populations? Do you reach out to likely voters? These are context-sensitive decisions to be made by event planners.

These considerations of physical space also interact with the rules and resources of symbolic arenas to define the deliberative space. As an example, consider a classroom. The everyday patterns of interactions occurring in the locales of classrooms often take the form of classes. A class is a particular type of forum or symbolic arena in which discourse can occur. As such, when class is held in a classroom, an overlapping set of rules and resources are activated—those of the classroom (locale-based) and those of the class (forum-based).



*Figure 4: Diagram illustrating locale- and forum-based rules*

In this way, all arenas of human interaction are enabled and constrained by the rules that govern them. By more closely attending to the relationships between physical and symbolic sites for particular types of public discourse, practitioners

can more strategically design interaction spaces to more closely align with the philosophical ideals of deliberative democracy while simultaneously addressing current weaknesses in electoral politics.

In this proposal, I sought to construct one example of this sort of strategic design by integrating participant photography, community festivals, public deliberation, online forums, and voting guides to take advantage of particular overlaps in locale- and forum-based rules and resources. I asked, what does each component part do well, and how could these assets complement each other to embed a structure that will better inform uninformed voters, engage disengaged citizens, and hold accountable unresponsive officials?

Participant photography excels at raising awareness about community problems by asking participants to identify and frame an issue through their own frame of reference (see Wang, 1999). I situated these photographic displays within community festivals, which served as an example of already-existing sites of community engagement. Many deliberative democracy scholars and practitioners share a discursive bias when they speak of participation and engagement in public decision making, as indicated by an over-reliance on variations of formal public meetings as solutions for increasing participation, engagement, or deliberation. I am not advocating for the total abolition of public meetings; however, if a goal of deliberative democracy is to increase public participation and engage people in decisions that affect the whole community, perhaps scholars need to look beyond the formal spaces of public meetings and traditional forms of civic engagement to think more broadly about deliberation in community life.

Community festivals provide one such avenue for public engagement by creating spectacle and performance, both of which require an embodied presence. Phaedra Pezzullo (2007) described “being present” as a *mode of advocacy*:

Being ‘present,’ like roll call in school, indicates the significance of someone literally coexisting with another in a particular space and time. Yet, a rhetorical appreciation of ‘presence’ also can indicate whether we *feel as if* someone, someplace, or something matters (p. 9).

Festival attendees express their engagement by showing up. So, by integrating a forum designed to raise awareness with a forum designed to elicit presence, we create an opportunity for participation through attendance and engagement. Therefore, it is not that the festival itself needs to be a formal deliberative event; but rather, the festival serves as an *engaging* event and the photographic displays start conversations, both of which launch a larger process that supports a more deliberative democracy.

The online forum is a version of the random sample panels that have a long history in deliberative theory and practice. As John Gastil (2000) has noted,

Different panels would serve different purposes, but the basic structure is the same: each panel would involve drawing random samples of citizens, selecting witnesses, convening deliberative sessions among citizens, and using decision rules to record summary votes and statements of the citizens' view (p. 162).

Hosting one such panel online affords certain deliberative benefits. As just one example, by sharing links and referencing discussions occurring outside of the deliberative forum, participants with minority opinions within the group can legitimize their opinions by accessing a wider range of ideas through online resources (Polletta et al., 2009). Like any communication medium, however, online forums have limitations, including problems of source credibility, Internet literacy, and personal accountability (especially in anonymous forums). Challenging these critiques are recent studies suggesting that online forums can overcome these limitations so long as, *like any other communication medium*, they are thoughtfully designed to serve their intended deliberative purposes (Davies & Chandler, 2012; Towne & Herbsleb, 2012). Given the fast pace of innovation online, it is conceivable that intentionally designed interfaces can supplement most of the traditional benefits of face-to-face interaction with additional benefits of convenience and ready access to credible information.

I chose an online forum for this proposal because what the Internet can do well—when the forum is designed to do so—is store and distribute information widely, in a way that promotes transparency and access. In this way, the community event served as a site for registering people to vote, identifying issues that were important to voters, creating an opportunity for engagement by going to where the people are, and generating interest in a local election. Since community members were active in creating displays which framed the online deliberation, they would presumably be interested in seeing how candidates and other community members responded to the questions they posed or voted for. The “initial response”-“final statement” structure of the candidate comments provided voters with an opportunity to see not only candidates' stated proposals for addressing various community problems, but also how responsive candidates are to criticism and how steadfast they are in their professed values.

A hybrid approach (face-to-face and online) creates a mechanism for moving between text and conversation, creating shared resources (convergence) and opportunities for interpretation and dissent (divergence).<sup>7</sup> Democracy *is* a

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<sup>7</sup> See Sullivan and Hartz-Karp (2013) for an extended example of one such hybrid approach in the juxtaposing of face-to-face and online forums in the 2009 Australian Citizens' Parliament.

never-ending oscillation between convergence and divergence: We must have shared resources, common language, and recurrent focusing of our attention on a common object; and, as soon as those resources are accessed, language interpreted, and object seen, differences will certainly emerge. Similarly, a technologized world is a hybrid world, where many citizens frequently move between various modes of communication. Democracy in such a world must be connected to a communication infrastructure capable of moving between the convergences and divergences characteristic of this system of governance.

### **Assessment**

Multiple opportunities for practical assessment and scholarly study exist within the framework of this proposal: (1) participant photography interviews and discourse analysis to identify and analyze community problems;<sup>8</sup> (2) surveys (Wimmer & Dominick, 2010), ethnographic observations (Atkinson et al., 2007), or interviews (Gubrium et al., 2012) at the community festival to study civic engagement and the performance of community; (3) conversation analysis (Sidnell & Stivers, 2012) of the online forum to assess social and analytical deliberative measures (Gastil & Black, 2008); and (4) a follow-up survey through all established networks to examine the relationship between participation, engagement, accountability, and responsiveness in electoral politics. Survey distribution could occur through a three-pronged approach. First, a link on the Web site could lead online viewers and participants to the survey. Second, the same survey could be distributed by email to supporters/festival attendees. Finally, the local issues voter guide could include a print version of the survey.

### **Conclusion**

I do not submit this proposal as a panacea for all that ails other approaches to deliberative democracy. As Karen Tracy (2010) reminds us, “the concrete expression of democracy is imperfect, never more than a flawed enactment of an ideal” (p. 2). And so, may this necessarily incomplete proposal inspire wild ideas, that we might address problems currently plaguing democracy and cultivate a culture of creativity for identifying and responding to inadequacies that are sure to arise as we strive to create a more participatory polity.

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<sup>8</sup> Many possible resources exist to guide scholars and practitioners interested in carrying out any of these assessment techniques. In these footnotes, I offer possible starting points. For more information about participant photography methodologies, see Wang (1999).

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