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Direct deliberative governance online: consensual problem solving or accommodated pluralism?

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Abstract:

This paper describes and analyses distinct patterns of 'governance conversation' observed in interactions on a discussion list that aims to support local, direct, governance in a geographically colocated community in South Africa. Although each pattern relates to governance, making 'binding decisions', which has been seen as a key attribute of deliberative democratic processes, is almost entirely absent from the observed interactions. Nonetheless, the exchanges appear to be relevant and useful to the broader process of local direct deliberative governance. We investigate the extent to which the patterns feature instrumental or expressive dialogue, and subsequently support consensual or pluralist outcomes. The results propose that online interaction is particularly suited to facilitating the pluralist deliberation required to manage complex local governance problems. The outcomes observed in the case study further suggest the potential value of an infrequently investigated context of online deliberation – that of citizen-to-citizen deliberation of geographically local issues; and presents a broader conception of the role of online deliberation in local governance, where formal decision making is frequently over privileged in research.

Introduction

This paper describes and analyses distinct patterns of 'governance conversation' observed on a discussion list that was developed and maintained to support local, direct governance. Although each of the patterns relate to governance, we find that 'binding decisions', which have been seen as a key attribute of deliberative democratic processes (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004), are almost entirely absent from the observed online exchanges. Nonetheless, the interactions appear to be relevant and useful to the more broadly deliberative process of direct local governance.

The investigation makes a case study of a small, geographically co-located community - where deliberation between citizens directly concerns questions of local governance. In this sense, the case study presents an example of "neighbourhood democracy" (Barber, 2003; Leighninger, 2008). However, it should be distinguished from studies of online neighbourhood democracy, or more broadly online deliberative governance, where the research focus is on the interaction of citizens with government, and where policy formulation in its various forms is both key object and output of communication. In this instance, the online discussion spaces were conceived, set up and are maintained entirely as a spontaneous volunteer effort by members of the community; formal government, e.g. the city municipality, are neither the object of, nor significant participant in the conversations. Dialogue is between residents and largely concerns how they and their Residents Association might directly resolve local issues. Accordingly, residents understand the problems under discussion well and are often personally affected - and so highly motivated to participate in governance action.

The study draws on a combination of online discussion archives, field notes and interviews with key participants, and follows an approach based on the Structured Case methodological framework (Carroll & Swatman, 2000). Our development of theory has much in common with the grounded theory methodology (Heath & Cowley, 2004), though structured case specifically makes provision for an initial conceptual framework, to be refined, extended and tested through grounded observation. The initial framework employed here has two significant components: an

understanding of deliberative governance as much broader process than rational decision making dialogue; and the recognition of deliberation that may equally be valued as instrumental or expressive, a process potentially leading to consensual decision making or to the accommodation of pluralism (Cohen & Sabel, 1997; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004).

The tentative conclusions of the paper are:

- that a broad range of online contributions potentially play a role if we consider local governance as a deliberative process overall, rather than deliberative in each of its components,
- while many of these contributions have instrumental value (to inform, co-ordinate, collate input and resolve local problems), with the expectation of continued association, participants engage in significant expressive interaction that reaches beyond the issue at hand,
- the online lists, which might thus be regarded as an extension of the local public sphere, are driven by a combination of the two modes of interaction, instrumental and expressive
- while there appear to be no formal decision making processes on the lists, they are none the less effective at supporting governance action even where there is little implicit consensus, supporting the community to manage “wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1973) in a manner which respects the plurality of local opinion.

More broadly the case study proposes the value of an infrequently investigated context of online deliberation – that of citizen-to-citizen deliberation pertaining to geographically local issues; and additionally of a broader conception of the role of online deliberation in local governance, where formal decision making is frequently over privileged in research.

In the remainder of the paper we briefly present our methodology, followed by an overview of the theoretical framing informing the work. The case is described, and five patterns of ‘governance conversation’ subsequently presented which we consider representative of the online dialogue. We discuss the patterns in terms of their contribution to the governance process, and in view of the dimensions presented by the theoretical framing. The final section presents tentative conclusions, as well as points to further questions and future work.

Method

The case selection logic follows two principles discussed by Yin (2003) which may initially appear contradictory – the case is both *typical* of villages and neighbourhoods of a given size that exist throughout the world, and relatively *unusual* in what appears to be a successful ‘bottom up’ implementation of online media to support local, direct governance. The scope of this study is to investigate the sorts of interaction that practically occur as a result, and the potential impact that the online interactions have on local governance.

The investigation draws primarily on original archive material - the records of online discussions in three closely related lists, over a period of 17 months. The 684 messages in the archive are mainly analysed textually, though simple quantitative measures also inform the work. Archive data is supplemented through semi-structured interviews with key local role players, as well as researchers' field notes of governance events and informal conversations with community members during the same period.

We make use of the structured-case research framework of Carroll and Swatman (2000) as an approach to engage with data from multiple sources. Structured-case features a processual model with three components:

- An evolving conceptual framework representing the current state of a researcher's/evaluator's aims, theoretical foundations and understandings. The researcher begins with an initial conceptual framework based upon prior knowledge and experience and iteratively revises it until the enquiry terminates.
- A research cycle structures data collection, analysis, interpretation and synthesis.
- Literature-based scrutiny is used to compare and contrast the evolving outcomes of the enquiry with literature.

In common with grounded theory, it encourages the researcher to produce new or revised knowledge that is demonstrably rooted in observation (Heath & Cowley, 2004). However, Carol and Swatman's approach is more permissive of an initial conceptual framework or theoretical framing, rather than striving for the 'ideal absence' of such commitment at the outset.

In the terminology of grounded theory, the "unit of analysis" is a list message, analysed within the context of a 'conversation' - a group of related messages. The coding process involves making multiple reviews of the archive, chronologically arranged, to develop a set of message codes and to identify conversations. We subsequently investigate how groups of conversations have similar codes associated. From this emerges the higher-level structure of interactions - what we have referred to as patterns of 'governance conversation'. Note that we use the term 'pattern' in its standard English form, in other words to denote conversations that have a number of key attributes (or codes) in common, rather than to associate with more formal usage such as in "pattern language" (Dearden & Finlay, 2006). Given the size of the case sample, and very specific scope of our study, the patterns are not proposed as a complete typology of any sort, though the patterns we describe are likely to be found in a range of similar contexts. In stead, they are mainly intended to characterise the sorts of interactions we observed in the case, a mechanism to support further analysis.

Theoretical framing

The two significant components of our initial theoretical framework are: an understanding of deliberative governance as a broader process than rational decision making dialogue; and the recognition of deliberation that may equally be valued as instrumental or expressive, a process potentially leading to consensual decision making or to the accommodation of pluralism (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). In this section, we briefly expand on the theoretical components in turn.

Kelly (in Budd, 2008) proposes that, in the context of civil society, the term governance can be "used to describe governing arrangements that are more than or greater than merely the institutions of government." Used this way, governance includes "all those interactive arrangements in which public as well as private actors participate aimed at solving societal problems, or creating societal opportunities, and attending to the institutions within which these governing activities take place" (Osborne, 2002). In this context, public participation potentially means more than only interfacing with government about their policies - but direct involvement of citizens in decision-making and also implementing acts of governance. This framing seems particularly relevant at local level, where citizens become directly involved in governing the world they are part of, and formal government has potentially limited reach.

We further refer to governance that is 'deliberative'. In the context of deliberative democracy, deliberativeness is commonly understood as a process of democratic decision-making based on public dialogue (Saward, 2000) where policy is most significantly shaped by "the force of better argument" (Habermas, in Klein, 2004) - a process which requires decisions to be based on "reasons" rather than for example the "entitlement" or "position" (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004) of their

proponent. These notions of public deliberation are however predominantly concerned with the tension between various 'publics' and the policies and executive powers of institutional government (Habermas, Lennox, & Lennox, 1974). Cohen & Sabel (1997) propose a framing of *direct deliberative* democracy more appropriate to our use of the term 'governance'. They advocate local governance where decision-making relies on the direct participation of those most affected by, and accordingly likely also most informed about and motivated to resolve an issue. The local focus of their proposed solution addresses a number of common criticisms of direct deliberative participation – for example that participants lack the specialist skills or knowledge, and the time to be comprehensively involved (Dahl, 1991). In this context, Cohen & Sabel (1997) further dismiss criticism that deliberation necessarily favours the rational, over emotive and other forms of expression. We propose that, given the broader definition of governance we have outlined, it is conceivable that direct deliberative governance be defined as a process that is deliberative in principle, though not necessarily exclusively deliberative in its components. Where citizens become direct actors in the governance process - rather than being confined to indirect participation by the deliberation of policy - there are a range of substantive contributions that they might make.

While the first component of the framework concerns the scope of participation in deliberative governance, the second component concerns the goals and potential outcomes of contribution. It draws elements from a broader characterisation of deliberative democracy in Gutmann and Thompson (2004), who propose that deliberation may be characterised as instrumental or expressive, consensual or pluralist.

An instrumental view considers that "political deliberation has no value in itself, beyond enabling citizens to make justifiable political decisions" (p.22). Many definitions of deliberation, reflected e.g. in Pingree's (2009) recent aggregation of the definitions of prominent scholars of public deliberation, are implicitly instrumental when they suggest the goal of deliberative exchange is to "make sound decisions." To apply the perspective in the broader governance frame proposed by the first part of this discussion - conversations that contribute to deliberative process would only have value to the extent that they contribute directly to problem solving, decision making and co-ordinating of action. An expressive view in turn considers deliberation intrinsically valuable, for one "as a manifestation of mutual respect among citizens" (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004, p21) The expressive value of deliberation relates closely to the notion of the public sphere, a deliberative space "in which something approaching public opinion can be formed (Habermas et al., 1974)." While, as we have already discussed, Habermas considers the public sphere as a space 'between' the public and private, the framing of governance we adopt suggests a broader view of the public sphere - as an expressive space existing first and foremost between citizens. Hauser (1998) proposes that "public spheres are discursive sites where society deliberates about normative standards and even develops new frameworks for expressing and evaluating social reality." He emphasises that public opinion is located in "the dialog of informal discourse," what he refers to as "vernacular rhetoric" rather than idealised "rational deliberation". Our approach to local governance interaction particularly takes this view into account.

For the purpose of this study, we take direction from Gutmann and Thompson who consider that the two values - of dialogue as instrumental or expressive - are not incompatible and suggest any adequate theory of deliberation must recognise both. The discussion of deliberation as instrumental or expressive is closely linked to its outcome as a consensual or pluralist process. In other words, "should deliberation aim at achieving consensus through realising a common good, or through seeking the fairest terms of living with a recalcitrant pluralism?" (p.26)

One might argue that an aggregative process, based on a vote between opposing positions, is the extreme implementation of consensual decision making - one where one party wins, and another loses, presumably for the highest overall common good. Habermas in stead envisions deliberation

which finds genuine consensus through the "force of better argument" (Klein & Huynh, 2004). Saward presents a challenge to this view by stating that deliberation inevitably falls back on aggregative mechanisms where there is a fundamental lack of consensus, to allow decisions to be made (Saward, 2000). The process of deliberation might however exactly move away from such "positions" on an issue (Kahane & Senge, 2007), in stead focussing on interests - and particularly means of finding mutually beneficial solutions. In this view, an ideal solution respects and accommodates pluralism, rather than forces decisions between reciprocally disagreeable outcomes. It accepts that potentially there will never be consensus on certain issues. This relates to Cohen's (1997) vision for direct deliberative democracy at local level: "Because of the numerosity and diversity of sites, we want a structure of decision-making that does not require uniform solutions ... because of the complexity of problems, we want a structure that fosters inter-local comparisons of solutions".

To summarise, our review of theory proposes an investigation of deliberative governance that admits a broad range of citizen-to-citizen interactions, targeted at tackling local issues directly, rather purely through engagement with government policy. The framing further considers that in addition to instrumental value, deliberation at this scale may have expressive purpose - and that its value may lie exactly in supporting pluralism, rather than necessarily forming consensus. The process, as we have framed it, locates its 'publics' in the vernacular rhetoric of a local online forum rather than any formally sanctioned debate. This does not discount the importance or impact of formal government - nor of policy dialogue for that matter. In stead we focus particularly on a scope of, and approach to governance that we would argue offers an important compliment to these and which is often under privileged in research.

Where this theoretical frame is applied to the technology of an online list, it seemed that an instrumental view of its purpose predisposes to an instrumental view of technology - as a 'tool' primarily to reduce the coordinative overheads associated with direct deliberative decision-making, and potentially to assist in the process of forming consensus. The expressive view in stead encourages the researcher to consider the extent to which technology fulfils a broader social function by extending the public sphere, by for example creating a space where meanings can be contested. Rather than proposing one or the other as 'ideal' this research sets out to understand how interaction practically happens, given the theoretical perspective we have outlined.

Case description

In this section we present demographic information relevant to the online participation of community members in deliberative governance. We subsequently describe the governance arrangements, which both create the need for, and facilitate direct, deliberative governance; and finally discuss the intended purpose of, creation and early evolution of online tools that this study focuses on.

The case comprises a community of approximately 1500 residents, on the outskirts of a large city in South Africa. Its relatively remote location, with very limited local employment, means that the working population are disproportionately represented by independent professionals and business people, who are able to work remotely and so well versed at using online technology. While many residents, retirees for example, conversely have limited exposure to web-based technology, there is an unusually large support base in their neighbours and friends as a result. The overall demographic suggests that the community have formidable human capacity in terms of governance - there are locally resident lawyers, doctors, academics, environmental specialists and technical consultants who variously contribute voluntarily.

In terms of formal government, the village falls within the mandate of the larger city municipality,

which supplies basic services and collects revenues. As is common in South Africa, the residents have voluntarily formed a "Residents and Ratepayers Association" (RRA) to attend to matters of local governance and to represent the interests of the community to the city municipality. Because of geographic distances, low population density and limited human and financial resources, formal government have limited capacity at local level in South Africa (Wunsch, 1998). The RRA is accordingly formally recognised by the city municipality, and departments of the municipality interact with the RRA committee daily on matters ranging from infrastructure development to the delivery of basic and social services. In many cases, the RRA have assumed direct responsibility to co-ordinate and execute local governance actions.

In practice, the business of the RRA is conducted by a committee of five volunteers, elected at an annual general meeting. The committee has bimonthly meetings, open to all residents and ratepayers to attend, though in reality the meetings are rarely attended by anyone but committee members. The RRA had accordingly experimented with the use of web-based tools, using volunteer technical assistance, to better co-ordinate their work, involve residents more actively and provide for a more communicative governing platform. Over a period of five years, the efforts included several iterations of a village website, an online forum, a map based incident reporting tool and several mailing lists. The experimental, somewhat ad hoc approach meant that some of these tools had become redundant or had fallen into disuse when this study was conducted. We accordingly based our investigation on the main residents mailing list, as well as two subsidiary lists, which appeared to be the tools most prominently used to conduct governance. Though these email lists afforded technically unsophisticated interaction, they were most accessible and so broadly used - and afforded complex deliberative interaction none the less.

The RRA committee had set up the residents mailing lists primarily to improve their own communicative capacity and the list was initially simply managed as an outgoing address list in the the Gmail (Google) account of the chairperson of the RRA committee. Residents however soon started making use of the list by responding the the outgoing emails with requests to the moderator – first to post their own announcements, and once a precedent had been established, to engage others in conversation related to governance. Within 8 months, the returning message volume had increased sufficiently that the RRA channel functioned to all extents as a two-way mailing list. The functionality was subsequently formalised under a new Google email address, the identification changed to reflect its official purpose and invitation sent to residents to use the new, "official" mailing list. A second moderator was also appointed to manage the increased moderation load. Subscription management was none the less conducted manually, with new resident emails in many cases co-opted by the RRA moderators. At the time of this study, the list had 415 subscribers, and 86 of those had posted messages. Though exact figures were not available, the RRA chair estimated that at very least one in every two households were represented by a subscriber on the list. Compared to the offline meetings, the lists had clearly served the purpose of better communicating the business of the residents association, and also involving a larger proportion of residents in governance related dialogue.

Soon after the residents list was formally announced, a topic generated sufficient conflict and message volume that many list members complained to the moderators, some unsubscribing from the list. As mechanism to deal with the increased volume, and in an attempt to lower what moderators (and clearly some participants) perceived as "noise" on the main list, a second (topic specific) list was set up by a community volunteer using Mailman (Warsaw) technology. Mailman offered more sophisticated tools to RRA moderators, and its automated subscribe and unsubscribe functionality allowed the list to be more self managing. During the period of this study, two more such lists were set up. The work we report on in the following section considers the nature and contingency of interaction in these lists in more detail.

Governance conversations

Here we describe the results of coding analysis, five patterns of ‘governance conversation’, giving a more detailed look into the content of and nature of deliberation on the lists. Note that conversations that were not governance related - such as small ads, lost and found notices and general event notices - were deliberately omitted from the analysis. These contributions potentially increase the value and relevance of the lists, but we consider it outside the scope of this paper to report on the additional dimension.

Announcement: This pattern involves simple informative announcements: advertising a governance meeting, information on service schedules, a press release from the city municipality, a message to create awareness of an issue. Particularly early in its existence, the main list was mostly used to broadcast announcements. In some cases the announcement generated replies – for example to show enthusiasm for an event, or to provide additional information - but did not involve the expression of differences of opinion, or an explicit evaluation of any sort. Though superficially announcements appeared utilitarian, they nonetheless afford the contributor an opportunity to frame an issue or action and implicitly present an opinion or value statement in the process.

Feedback exchange: This pattern includes messages that solicit evaluations from list members, as well as their subsequent responses. It also includes messages which provide ad hoc updates to fellow residents on the progress or otherwise of an initiative. What distinguishes the feedback pattern from other types of conversation is that, though the term implies response, these conversations do not develop into reciprocal dialogue on the list. Answers are sent directly to the requesting party, who are not obliged to publish these, nor to engage in further discussion. In the alternative form of an ad hoc update, no response is expected. As an example, soon after the list was initiated, the residents association sent out a request for feedback on the performance of a contractor collecting recyclable waste. In this instance they chose to publish some of the direct responses they received, as well as the ‘off list’ reply of the contractor to complaints. This generated no further discussion however - feedback acknowledged, the issue was considered closed unless further complaints were received.

Stakeholder coordination: Though all of the conversational patterns we identify imply coordination at some level, this pattern relates specifically to the use of the list to co-ordinate community participation in a broader, typically externally initiated governance process. Rather than primarily supporting the deliberative capacity *within* the community in other words, the list was used to provide a stronger voice to the community as a collective entity (to the extent that there was consensus at local level). This process involved a combination of information sharing, encouraging participation, arranging off-line events and ultimately submitting appropriate, coordinated response. In one instance, the list facilitated feedback to an environmental management plan of the city municipality, which would have direct impact on residents’ access to a natural, protected area. In another, residents used the list to make collective response to a proposed property development in the wetland adjacent to the village. The development was unanimously disliked, though for divergent reasons, and the list afforded participants the opportunity to broaden their understanding of the potential impacts, and of the most appropriate and legally sound responses.

Deliberative mediation: The pattern broadly involves that an incident is reported, supported as problematic (or dismissed), a responsible party identified and then public pressure or sanction applied to prompt action. This is distinguished from the final category in that the problem is relatively simple, has a clear ‘owner’ and can be resolved after one or two rounds of discussion, typically without involving significant normative debate or enduring conflict of opinion. Some months after the list had evolved to a many-to-many channel of communication, residents began using it to resolve what they perceived to be governance related problems. In one example,

someone complained of being attacked by another resident's stray dogs. This was quickly followed by emails from others - confirming the problem, identifying the owners and applying public pressure on them to act. While in this case the owners quickly acknowledged their responsibility and took action, in other cases those deemed responsible further engage online to negotiate either the true extent of the problem, or their role in its resolution.

Deliberative engagement: In this pattern, conversations involved what is otherwise known as "wicked problems" (Rittel & Webber, 1973) – issues that were complex, included significant normative dimensions and which frequently lead to increased controversy following debate, rather than resolution. Typically the issues had an obvious and significant impact on residents, but there were no known solutions and no clear problem owner. Discussion appeared to cycle through phases – at times dominated by heated normative discussion of the issue, at times by investigation of potential solutions or by reports of incident details. In some cases, an aspect of the issue would prompt conversation resembling one of the four other types identified – for example where a sub component of a broader problem lent itself to deliberative mediation. Overall, shifts in conversation occurred in response to posts on the list (the list became self propagating at times), but also to external events - the status of solutions being attempted, problem incidents. This meant that conversation did not follow a clear sequential pattern, appeared to be recursive, and the problem seemed to be no nearer resolution after months of deliberation. While there were several such instances in the list archive, the most exemplary case involved the ongoing attempts to manage the destructive behaviour of a rogue troop of baboons. The baboons had taken to raiding houses for food, making frequent attacks and causing significant damage in the process. The incidents also threatened the well being of the animals, an endangered and protected species, as they frequently hurt themselves in the unfamiliar human environment. This provided strong motivation for local residents to attempt to resolve the problem, but also prompted significant normative as well as instrumental debate about the most appropriate resolution. The issue caused sufficient controversy for list moderators to move the discussion into a dedicated list - where it nonetheless generated 34% of overall message traffic during the measurement period.

Discussion

The five conversational patterns that we discuss in the previous section propose that a range of interactions online contribute to direct deliberative governance of the case community - given the perspective that the governance process is deliberative overall, rather than composed primarily of deliberative contributions. In this section, we accordingly consider the contribution of the patterns in terms of the dimensions highlighted in the discussion of theory: to what extent does communication have instrumental, or expressive value; and to what extent is communication consensual, or pluralist. We then consider the practical and theoretical implications of the analysis.

The ‘announcement’, ‘feedback exchange’, ‘stakeholder coordination’ and ‘deliberative mediation’ patterns make the most obvious "instrumental" contribution.

While ‘announcement’, ‘feedback exchange’ and ‘stakeholder coordination’ conversations may be below the level of deliberation, we have described in the previous section how these conversations nonetheless contribute to the overall direct, deliberativeness of the local governance process. Interactions share information, provide opportunity for feedback and provide input to governance processes. As a result residents become directly involved in governance, and the residents association is encouraged to conduct its business in a responsive manner. The first three patterns of ‘governance conversation’ also most closely reflect the goals of the residents association when they set up the list: Our interviews with list moderators established that the lists were created, and are presently maintained, primarily to lower the coordinative cost (Cordella, 1997) associated with local governance for members of the RRA committee. The main list was accordingly initially

dominated by announcement and feedback contributions, with the association using the channel to share governance information, request feedback and keep residents informed of initiatives. Once the list was more formally established, the association directly invited residents to contribute along similar lines: *"You are very welcome to send emails to [the list] intended for the Association, or send us items to go out on the mailing list (village announcements, lost and found, but not commercial announcements)."*

Though not intended by its creators, the list also proved useful to resolve simple problems, what we labeled 'deliberative mediation'. Once a protocol for bi-directional communication had been established - not only between the civic association and residents, but between residents themselves - people appropriate the list to deal with what they perceive as governance problems. In several cases issues are resolved which had been referred to the residents association, but which they were unable to resolve in isolation. Where several independent messages follow up an initial complaint, adding pressure on the problem owner to act, the social space appears to be very effective at motivating response. An email from the conversation we cited as an example reads: *"After ten years of living in [village], [street] has become a "No Go" [sic] area because of these same dogs. The youngest male, in particular, has threatened me on several occasions ... someone will have to take action before a child gets savaged."* In this case, after 10 similar emails, the owners took action within a day.

We have already discussed that 'deliberative engagement' conversations are less clearly instrumental to direct governance. The dialogue often appears to become an end in itself - driven by controversy, by a contentious post, or by a renewed outbreak of the issue, rather than genuine attempts to resolve. There are multiple cycles of problem definition, discussion of solutions, normative debate - frequently re-treading well known territory without seeming to reach a conclusion or even development of discourse. It also generates significant work for moderators - for 9 months, the baboon discussion alone generated more messages than all other topics combined. In interviews, the moderators confirmed they did not consider such conversations particularly constructive at resolving the issue, much as they recognise the conversations have an informing function. They further report that many list members unsubscribe after, or during confrontational debate, particularly where the discussion degrades to a personal attacks. One message to the forum simply reads: *"Please remove me (again) before I drown in this stuff."*

To discuss the "expressiveness" of conversations in turn: we considered overt normative content an indication of expressive communication. The coding results indicate normative content in all forms of contribution - though in some cases more overt than others, and so more likely to constitute expressive deliberation. 'Announcements' were frequently accompanied by normative motivation, or facts augmented by normative statements. One invitation for example reads: *"As a conservation village, it would be great if we could encourage everyone to sign up for Earth Hour on Saturday."* 'Feedback exchanges' on occasion included a normative interpretation of the facts presented, while in 'stakeholder coordination' interactions the conversation itself was less often expressive, than some of the arguments discussed at second hand. 'Deliberative mediation' involved normative statements to back up an initial problem statement, to signal support - and in some cases to compel the problem owner to act. It is however 'deliberative engagement' conversations, the discussion of wicked problems, that provided the most significant opportunity for expressive dialogue. Posts contained significant normative content - in the baboon related discussion, this included for example the values of community as conservation village, the competition between humans and other species, and the right to self destination - to name but a selection. This more than often lead to discussion that was difficult to moderate, and had a tendency to become personal. At the height of an argument about baboon management, an email reads: *"...[the problems are caused by] the weekend and holiday house owners, who don't read this and will do nothing about it!!!) so here is a good solution for the baboon lovers, why don't you chase all those people out first, right????? they*

caused it!!!.”

Not all participants agreed on the value of expressive dialogue - some considering it simply humorous, some sufficiently offended to unsubscribe: *“what a load of rubbish - please can we keep to baboons...this not a general forum for ranting and raving unless of course it concerns baboons! Whoever the moderator is should not let posts like this contaminate the discussion please.”* Others clearly indicated how highly they value the expressive dialogue: *“Since venturing into the cyberworld of public discussion, it's been an unaccustomed pleasure to receive responses from fellow residents whom I have never met! As such, then, this Forum and the baboon issue, generally, has the wonderful side-effect of representing a gathering place, a waterhole, if you like, such as our village, without its marketplace, does not have.”* The fact that a quarter of messages in the baboon conversation included overt normative content indicates the extent to which participants were compelled to engage in expressive discourse. Expressive discussion, at very least, establishes the range of values held within the community. This in turn formed a significant part of evaluating both the definition of the problem, and the potential solutions considered. We would argue that while ‘announcement’, ‘feedback exchange’ and ‘stakeholder coordination’ had served an obvious instrumental purpose, it was through the expressive content in ‘deliberative mediation’ and ‘deliberative engagement’ that the mailing list had evolved from a one-way channel of communication to something approaching an extension of the public sphere. The expressive communication particularly has value to a geographically co-located community - because there is expectation of continued association and a significant likelihood of first hand encounter.

The theoretical framework of this research included a second set of deliberative dimensions – whether engagement serves a consensual or pluralist purpose. ‘Announcement’ and ‘feedback exchanges,’ by their definition, did not involve the level of reciprocal discussion that indicated (or required) consensus, nor expressed fundamental pluralism. ‘Stakeholder coordination’ conversations were based on the assumption that there was sufficient consensus to be able to coordinate a response – a case of ‘the community’ responding to an external demand. Sunstein (Sunstein, 1999) discusses how such consensual dialogue has the potential to lead to more extreme opinions. In the examples we have cited of this case, the evidence suggests rather the shaping of an informed, possibly broadened consensus - though none the less differences of opinion persisted on some aspects of a case. In ‘deliberative mediation’, consensus was implicitly expressed, where it existed, for example by the extent to which a complaint gained support, or there was agreement on who was the responsible party. Where this pattern of conversation encountered pluralism, the discussion either died down, or evolved to ‘deliberative engagement’. In one example, residents deliberated over powerful external lights on several houses, after some of these had been vandalised. To some, the lights were bothersome and a waste of energy, in opposition to the values of a ‘conservation village’; others considered the lights a necessary deterrent to crime. In light of the opposing, but relatively well reasoned and uncontroversial points of view, the discussion quickly died down. Where the discussion relating to baboons initially met a similar impasse, it escalated – most likely because the issue caused significant disturbance and directly affected a large number of residents. Our earlier discussion of ‘deliberative engagement’ already highlighted the significant pluralism that it entails.

The discussion of consensus and pluralism relates to the extent to which definitions of deliberation consider decision making the instrumental goal of deliberation. Presumably, for a deliberative decision to be made, some level of agreement is required. We have argued against the simplest form of aggregative consensus, in favour of a deliberative solution to be shaped from pluralism. In this case, it appears overt decision making was absent in all five patterns of communication we identified. One might most obviously indicate that the particular online space did not include sufficient mechanisms (such as automated polling) to facilitate aggregative decision making. However, it is significant that protocols to collate input - as might be expected of a face to face

meeting – had also not been employed in any of the discussions. In some patterns, such as ‘announcement’ or ‘feedback exchange’ there appears to be no need for collective decisions. In ‘stakeholder coordination’ decision making is not appropriate because engagement in the list is part of broader process - as in case of the wetland development described earlier. During ‘deliberative mediation’ issues appear to be resolved through more tacit forms of agreement – by the apparent support any one side of an issue gains. Finally, in case of wicked problems, decisions are by definition not as simple as putting a number of options to a vote.

To use the baboon discussion as an example - while the merits of potential solutions were repeatedly debated, a conclusive decision could not be made because the problem was sufficiently complex and poorly understood that even experts could at best guess at the outcome of action. The participants further did not have the resources, nor the official sanction to carry out many of the proposed “comprehensive” solutions – much less negotiate an agreement between at least three government agencies disowning their share of responsibility to find a resolution. The online deliberation did however lead to an informally co-ordinated, experimental approach to managing the issue - in some instances with improved outcomes. From the range of opinions, norms, problem incidents and potential remedies there gradually emerged a repertoire of arguments and candidate solutions. From these, consensus emerged amidst the pluralism that, at very least, it was in neither human or baboons interest that the animals remain in the village. As a result it became possible for groups to informally test solutions in a way that was self-regulating, without requiring unanimous decision. The ultimate outcome, though not finally resolving the issue, was an informal management strategy – improved reporting, measures to reduce the impact of raids, strategies to steer the troop back out of village once they arrive. We propose that the nature of deliberation online was partly instrumental to the outcome: asynchronous communication (Wellman et al., 2003) meant that many residents had the opportunity to be part of an ongoing dialogue, without the community incurring the cost or complication of regular offline meetings this would otherwise have required; the responsiveness of the medium (Deuze, 2006) made it possible for residents to report incidents accurately, directly after they occurred, as well as to provide immediate feedback on both proposed solutions, as well as experimental implementations; and the relative anonymity of the medium (Price, 2009) facilitated expressive, pluralist interactions which created sufficient common ground to enable level of collective action.

Conclusions

While the work that this study reports on is still in progress, we present the following tentative conclusions.

The theoretical overview proposes that a broad range of online interactions potentially contribute to local, deliberative governance – if we consider local governance a deliberative process overall, rather than necessarily deliberative in each of its components. The analysis of discussion archives accordingly presents five patterns of ‘governance conversation’ which all play a significant role in local governance within the case community. Considering the size and nature of the sample, we do not propose anything near a comprehensive typology, though the patterns we describe are likely to be found in a range of similar contexts. In stead, we used the patterns as a mechanism to be able to analyse and discuss this particular case and the range of contributions therein.

The five patterns are:

- Announcement – participants share governance information or advertise a community/governance event.
- Feedback exchange – participants provide or request information in response to a governance initiative.
- Stakeholder coordination – participants coordinate a local response to an externally initiated

- governance process.
- Deliberative mediation – participants informally mediate the direct resolution of local governance problems.
- Deliberative engagement – participants engage in sustained, pluralist discussion of a complex governance problem.

Our initial theoretical framework further proposed that deliberative contributions be evaluated as instrumental or expressive, consensual or pluralist. We find that the ‘announcement’, ‘feedback exchange’, ‘stakeholder coordination’, and ‘deliberative mediation’ patterns make the most evident instrumental contributions, but also provide less overt expressive contributions. ‘Deliberative engagement’ most clearly supports expressive dialogue. We find in turn that this appears to be instrumental to the shared understanding required to manage inherently pluralist, complex governance problems. The evidence proposes that the online discussions are driven by a combination of the two modes of interaction, the instrumental and expressive. The findings support Guttman and Thompson (2004), that a complete framework of deliberative governance must integrate the two perspectives.

Though the investigation does not show evidence of overt decision-making, there is a strong case that the online conversations significantly support governance action. It appears that the online discussions rarely “create” consensus, but are effective to support action where some level of implicit consensus exists - as we observed in the ‘feedback exchange’, ‘stakeholder coordination’ and ‘deliberative mediation’ patterns. Furthermore, online deliberation appeared to be particularly suited to manage the sometimes unavoidable pluralism (Cohen & Sabel, 1997) that complex issues introduce to local governance. The case analysis supported not only that expressive communication online creates mutual respect (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004), but that it potentially allows participants to identify shared interests with respect to an issue, which makes a mutually acceptable management solution possible. We have further argued that, in the context of local governance, the asynchronous and responsive nature of the online medium seems particularly suited to supporting such an ad hoc, pluralist engagement process.

While this single case presents a very specific context of deliberation, the patterns of ‘governance conversation’ we observed are recognisable in, and the issues they pertain to have underlying themes that are very possibly common to the deliberations of communities the world over. Further, the online tools used by the case community are relatively unsophisticated, widely used and easily adopted. While we are unable to generalise on the basis of this study population, the outcomes observed in this case proposes the potential value of an infrequently investigated context of online deliberation – that of citizen-to-citizen deliberation pertaining to geographically local issues; and additionally of a broader conception of the role of online deliberation in local governance, where formal decision making is frequently over privileged in research. This is not to propose local citizen-to-citizen deliberation in opposition to for example participatory institutional policy dialogue, nor to ignore the importance and challenge of democratic, deliberative decision-making where this is required; but in stead to suggest aspects of online deliberation that deserve further research attention.

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