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Direct Deliberative Governance Online: Consensual Problem Solving or Accommodated Pluralism?

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

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Abstract

This paper describes and analyses patterns of 'governance conversation' observed in interactions on email lists that aim to support local, direct governance in a geographically co-located community in South Africa. It examines the extent to which governance conversations feature instrumental or expressive dialogue and how they subsequently support consensual or pluralist outcomes. Although each conversation pattern relates to governance, the making of consensual, 'binding decisions', which is usually seen as a key outcome 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. The results indicate that online interaction may be particularly suited to facilitating the pluralist deliberation required to manage complex local governance problems. The study points to the potential value of an infrequently investigated context of online deliberation – that of resident-to-resident deliberation on geographically local issues – and presents a broader conception of the role of online deliberation in local governance.

This paper reports on an infrequently investigated context of online deliberation – that of resident-to-resident deliberation on geographically local issues. The investigation challenges assumptions of democratic deliberation as mainly policy debate between citizens and government or, at local level, citizen activists holding their local administration to account. It also proposes a broader conception of the role of online deliberation in local governance, where developing consensus and instrumental decision making has frequently been over privileged in previous research.

The paper reports on a case study of a small, geographically co-located community of approximately 1500 citizens, focusing on an example of where online 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, is neither the object of nor a 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 they are highly motivated to participate in governance action.

The study draws primarily on online discussion archives, supplemented by field notes and interviews with key participants, and follows an approach based on the structured case methodology (Carroll & Swatman, 2000). The initial theoretical framework we employ has two significant components:

- an understanding of deliberative governance as an inclusive process, consisting of more than rational decision making,

- and the recognition of deliberation that may equally be valued as either instrumental, the means to action, or expressive, a "manifestation of mutual respect among citizens"; a process potentially leading to consensual decision making or to the accommodation of pluralism (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, p.21; Cohen & Sabel, 1997) .

As an analytical device, we identify distinct patterns of 'governance conversation' observed in online discussions and evaluate these in view of the theoretical framework. We find that a broad range of online contributions potentially play a role in deliberative governance if we consider local governance to be an evolving communicative process, rather than a series of discrete, purely issue driven episodes. While many of these contributions have instrumental value (to inform, co-ordinate, collate input and resolve local problems), participants engage in significant expressive interaction that reaches beyond the issue at hand. Online discussions are driven by a combination of the two modes of interaction: instrumental and expressive. 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. The discussions are none the less effective at supporting governance action even where there is little implicit consensus, helping the community to manage intractable issues, often referred to as "wicked problems" (Rittel & Webber, 1973), in a manner which respects the plurality of local opinion.

In the remainder of the paper we present an overview of the theoretical framing informing the work, followed by a discussion of case selection and methodology. 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 conclusions, as well as points to further questions and future work.

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 that deliberation 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 these theoretical components in turn.

Kelly (2006, p.205) 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, p.46). In this context, public participation potentially means more than interfacing with government about their policies - it includes the direct involvement of citizens in decision-making and 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 may have a limited reach.

We also 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 shaped ideally by the Habermasian principle of the "force of the better argument" (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. Existing notions of public deliberation are however predominantly concerned with the tension between various 'publics', on the one hand, and the policies and executive powers of institutional government, on the other (Habermas, Lennox, & Lennox, 1974). Cohen & Sabel (1997) propose the concept of *direct deliberative* democracy which is more in line with our use of the term 'governance'. They advocate local governance where decision-

making relies on the direct participation of those most affected by an issue and accordingly those who are also likely to be most informed about and motivated to resolve it. As a result, 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). Cohen & Sabel (1997) further dismiss criticism that deliberation necessarily favours the rational over emotive and other forms of expression – in their view the local context potentially affords less formal, more inclusive forms of interaction. 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, in other words where decisions or actions are legitimised by a public exchange of meaning, though this exchange of meaning might not be situated as much in rational debate as in other forms of public expression or contribution. Where citizens become direct actors in the governance process - rather than being confined to indirect participation through debate over 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 contributions. It draws elements from the broader characterisation of deliberative democracy in Gutmann and Thompson (2004), who characterise deliberation as either 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" (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004, p.22). Many definitions of deliberation, as reflected 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." In this view, conversations that contribute to deliberative processes only have value to the extent that they contribute directly to problem solving, decision making and co-ordinating action. An expressive view, by contrast, considers deliberation to be intrinsically valuable, "as a manifestation of mutual respect among citizens" (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004, p.21). The expressive value of deliberation further has implications for our interpretation of the public sphere, the deliberative space "in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" (Habermas et al., 1974, p.49). While Habermas considers the public sphere to be a space 'between' the private sphere and the state, the framing of governance we adopt here suggests a different view of the public sphere - as an expressive space existing first and foremost between citizens. Hauser (1998, p.86) 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 dialogue of informal discourse," what he refers to as "vernacular rhetoric" rather than idealised "rational deliberation". Our approach to local governance interaction here is based on a similar view.

For the purpose of this study, we follow Gutmann and Thompson (2004) who argue that instrumental and express dialogue are not incompatible and suggest that 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?" (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004 p.26)

One might argue that an aggregative process, based on a vote between opposing positions, implies decision making by imposed, or processual consensus - one where one party wins, and another loses, presumably for the highest overall common good. Habermas instead envisions deliberation which finds substantive consensus through the "force of the better argument" (Klein & Huynh, 2004). Saward presents a challenge to this view by stating that deliberation inevitably falls back on aggregative mechanisms to allow decisions to be made (Saward, 2000).The process of deliberation might however move away from mutually exclusive "positions" on an issue (Kahane & Senge, 2007), a 'pro' and 'anti' faction for example, instead focusing on the underlying interests of stakeholders - and particularly the 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.

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 than 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. Instead we focus on an approach to governance that, we argue, offers an important complement to more formal deliberations and which tends to be underprivileged in research.

Where this theoretical frame is applied to the technology of an email list or online forum, 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 (Cordella, 1997; Bertucci, 2008), and potentially to assist in the process of forming consensus (Buckingham Shum, 2008). The expressive view instead encourages the researcher to consider the extent to which technology fulfils a broader social function by extending the public sphere (Castells, 2007; Dahlberg, 2001), by for example creating a space where meanings can be contested (Deuze, 2006). 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.

Method

The investigation draws mainly on archived primary data - the records of online

discussions in two closely related email lists[1], over a period of 15 months. The 684

messages in the archive are analysed textually, though basic quantitative measures also

inform the work. The interpretations we subsequently make of this archived data are

further informed by semi-structured interviews with key local role players, as well as

field notes based on observations of governance events and informal conversations with

community members during the same period.

The case selection logic follows principles where both interpretive/constructivist

and positivist authors seem to find agreement (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Myers, 2009; Yin, 2003):

that a single case is justified where it is *unusual* or unique, or where it can claim to be

representative or typical of a situation - in particular where it presents a *critical* view of

given understanding by virtue of either of these attributes. The case presented here might

accordingly at once be considered unusual in that it explores a less commonly studied

context of online deliberation, while at the same time presenting a situation common in

villages and neighbourhoods of a given size that exist throughout the world, both in terms

of participants and their use of technology.

We make use of the structured-case research framework of Carroll and Swatman

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[1] We use the terms "lists" and "email lists" interchangeably to refer to online discussions

exchanged by email through a mailing list manager - also referred to as an electronic

mailing list. Though email lists afford similar interactions to web based forums, forums

normally require participants to complete registration and then make contributions by

visiting the forum web page directly.

(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 allows for an initial conceptual framework or theoretical framing, such as that we set out above, rather than striving for the 'ideal absence' of such commitment at the outset. Our goal was to use the case study to develop a "grounded account" (Myers, 2009), initially at least in the form of an exploratory study of a less well understood context. To this extent, the study makes its claim to validity not so much in reasoning from a sample to population, but from case to theoretical constructs (Myers, 2009; Yin, 2003). As Flyvbjerg (2006, p.422) argues, it is a misconception to think that "[g]eneral, theoretical (context-independent) knowledge is more valuable than concrete, practical (context-dependent) knowledge."

In the terminology of grounded theory, the "unit of analysis" that we use for textual analysis is an email list message, analysed within the context of a 'conversation' - a group of related messages. The coding process involves making multiple reviews of the chronologically arranged archive, at first to develop a set of message codes and to identify conversations, and then to associate relevant codes from the set with each message in the archive. We subsequently investigate how groups of conversations have similar codes associated. From this emerges the higher-level structure of interactions - which we refer to as patterns[2] of 'governance conversation'. Given the size of the case sample, and very specific scope of our study, the patterns are not put forward as a complete typology, though the patterns we describe are likely to be found in a range of similar contexts. The patters are mainly intended to characterise the sorts of interactions we observed in our case and as a mechanism to support further analysis.

To form an initial impression of the overall composition of the message archive, messages were broadly categorised during a first review of the list archive. We also compiled basic statistics on message frequency, subscriber numbers, and the distribution of message contributions over subscribers.

Having thus established a general picture of the contributions in the two most active lists, we undertook a closer study of the message contents in a second round of

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[2] We use the term 'pattern' in its standard English form, in other words to denote conversations that share a number of key attributes (or codes) in common, rather than the more recent semi-formal usage, as in "pattern language" (Dearden & Finlay, 2006)).

coding – what sort of governance conversations did the lists sustain; and to what extent were the conversations instrumental or expressive, developing consensus or maintaining pluralism?

Messages that were not directly 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 this additional dimension. The subsequent database of messages was then reviewed in chronological order. We tagged messages adjacent in time and similar by topic to identify conversations, and similarly linked conversations that appeared to have been re-animated after extended gaps in time. Examples include the discussion of a new waste removal system; a debate about aggressive, uncontrolled dogs; co-ordinating resident feedback to external stakeholder process; and a short exchange about a forthcoming community meeting.

[Insert table 1 about here.]

In addition to tagging messages by conversation, we developed a refined set of codes to more accurately describe message content (summarised in Table 1.) These were more consistently of the same semantic level (Rugg & McGeorge, 1997) than those employed in the first round, more directly relevant to governance, and made closer reference to the theoretical frame that had been introduced. During a second detailed review of the archive of the Baboon and RRA lists, the codes were associated with

messages. Codes were not applied exclusively - any individual message might be tagged by more than one code, and some of the codes are considered 'auxiliary', providing modifying information valuable to later interpretation rather than purely describing content.

Case Description

The case comprises a community of approximately 1500 residents, on the outskirts of a large city in South Africa. It is a relatively remote location, with very limited local employment, which means that the working population are disproportionately represented by independent professionals and business people, who are able to work remotely and so who are accustomed to using online technology. Residents who do have limited exposure to web-based technology, retirees for example, have substantial support from their neighbours and friends. The overall demographic suggests that the community have formidable human capacity in terms of governance - there are resident lawyers, doctors, academics, environmental specialists and technical consultants who all 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 representatives of the RRA 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 who are elected at an annual general meeting. The committee has bi-monthly 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 set up by community volunteers - 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 email 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 email list, as well as two subsidiary lists, which appeared to be the tools most prominently used to conduct governance. Though these email based online discussions afforded technically unsophisticated interaction, they were most accessible and so broadly used - the technology also proved appropriate for complex deliberative interaction.

The RRA committee had set up the residents email list primarily to improve their own communicative capacity and the list was initially simply managed as an outgoing address list in the Gmail (Google) account of the chairperson of the RRA committee. Residents however soon started requesting the moderator to forward their own messages – at first to post event announcements or notices, 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 in effect as a two-way mailing list. The functionality was subsequently formalised under a new Google email address, the email "from" header was changed to reflect the association's identity and an invitation was sent to residents to use the new, "official" email list. Subscription management was none the less conducted manually and new residents were co-opted by the RRA moderators, by being automatically subscribed.

Soon after the residents list was formally announced, a discussion relating to feral baboons' presence in the village, and the resulting human-animal conflict, generated sufficient disaccord and message volume that many list members complained to the moderators, some unsubscribing from the list. In order to deal with the increased message volume, and in an attempt to reduce what moderators (and at least some participants) perceived as "noise" on the main list, a new topic specific list was set up by a community volunteer. Near the end of this study, two more such lists had been set up under similar circumstances. The initial analysis below takes the main list and first offshoot into account - labelled the RRA and Baboon lists - though the subsequent discussion will consider the complete set.

Quantitative Analysis of Online Interactions

In total, 433 messages had been posted to the community lists during the 15 month period of this study. Our first round review of their contents lead to a set of categories that were not particularly symmetrical, some referring to topics where discussion had been sustained for some time, others to broad forms of contribution to group brief exchanges. The exercise none the less proved useful as an initial descriptive mechanism and provided the basis for further analysis.

[Insert Figure 1 about here.]

Figure 1 shows the relative composition of the archive of 79 messages that had been contributed between April and June 2009 to the RRA list. We report on this 3 month slice of the data as some topics were split into sub lists directly thereafter, while earlier the list was yet gathering momentum. 73% of contributions over this period could be classified as governance related – including notices by the RRA, messages relating to governance matters beyond the community (external), crime and the management of human-baboon conflict. The remaining was a combination of event and lost&found notices, small ads (classifieds) and discussions relating to pets.

[Insert Figure 2 about here.]

The RRA list had 277 subscribers by July 2009. The Baboon list, having been

seeded from the same user base just before, had slightly fewer, as some users unsubscribed within its first weeks. Though exact numbers for July 2009 are not available, there were 306 confirmed members 6 months later. The RRA chair estimated that at least 50% of households were represented by a subscriber on the lists. This was at least partly the result of aggressive subscription of new and existing residents by moderators. Over the 15 month time window of this study, there were 240 messages posted by 86 contributors in the RRA list. The Baboon list received nearly the same number - 193 messages by 84 contributors.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of this contribution over users, a power law curve as has frequently been reported for participation online (Hindman, 2008; Shirky, 2003). The top 10 posters had contributed 50% of messages in the case of the Baboon list, 58% in the case of the RRA.

[Insert Table 2 about here.]

Table 2 presents more detail about the top ten contributors on each list. While their membership strongly overlaps, the two lists have different contributors. Because it is used as a reporting tool for governance matters, the RRA list attracts relatively higher participation rates from those in "official" roles:the chairperson of the residents association, co-ordinators of the neighbourhood watch, the fire service and wildlife management. The Baboon list has an entirely different tone. There are fewer notices from the moderator and a higher proportion of the top contributors are residents who hold no

formal role in local governance.

Discussion

The fact that 50% of households were represented by a member on the list was largely the result of aggressive recruitment – the list moderator subscribed existing residents from an RRA address list and added new residents as soon as their email details were available. However, the fact that over 30% of the members of each list subsequently engaged in governance related deliberation - without being prompted or lobbied to do so - points to the pertinence that the issues being discussed had to them.

433 messages that were directly related to governance had been contributed over 15 months. Though this suggests a contribution rate of just under one message per day, in reality there were bursts of conversation followed by periods of silence. At its peak, the Baboon list received ten messages per day, though one to four per day were more common during periods of activity. Many members expressed their unhappiness with what they thought was excessive traffic on the list and moderators attempted to slow the pace of discussion at times by delaying message approval. There was also some discussion about separating or filtering messages further into topic orientated sub lists beyond what had already been done. In answer to this the moderators maintained that the RRA list was valuable to the extent that it had a broad local audience rather than being split into self interested channels. It was a "public good" that required work from moderators as much as participants to maintain.

It was not unexpected that message contribution would follow a power law distribution. This has been reported frequently of online interaction (Hindman, 2008; Shirky, 2003), and is consistent with our observation of governance discussion lists at regional level (Van Der Merwe & Meehan, 2009). We did note that the two lists attracted different participants, and that even those in "official positions" locally were in reality community volunteers. Further, it would not necessarily be true to equate the more frequent participation of some users with a stronger voice in relation to governance. Our observations of a regional case study suggests that the top contributors add impetus or dynamism to a list, while the remaining participants add important diversity of perspective, making contributions which may have equally significant impact (Van Der Merwe & Meehan, 2009). It is also important to consider that in the local context these lists do not function in isolation, but act as supplementary channels to offline conversation and face-to-face meetings. That said, the quantitative data suggests stronger participation online than for example during the annual general meeting (AGM) of the RRA, the most significant opportunity that residents have to provide input to governance offline. In 2009 there were 38 residents at the meeting, 5 of whom were RRA committee members. In the 2.5 hour meeting, 30 minutes near the end were allocated to 'matters arising', the only opportunity for those not reporting on official business to speak. Less than half those present chose to make use of the opportunity. There were residents who communicated prominently in both venues, in particular the chairperson of the RRA who effectively coordinated both channels, though we noted that there were others, who were stalwarts online, who had not even attended. We noted significant crossover of

conversations online and offline, none the less – at the AGM, deliberations that had originated online are continued and issues arising from the meeting are taken up online thereafter. As a result, the offline meeting seemed less a matter of the RRA committee reporting back, after a years' work behind closed doors, than of a continued conversation.

In summary, the preliminary quantitative data suggests that the lists presented a useful complement to offline engagement, a collection of communication channels that were able to engage a broader segment of residents in local governance deliberation than would otherwise have been the case. The simple email based communication tools appeared sufficiently flexible to support a range of communication – from simple notices to complex deliberation - and presented a low barrier to entry for new users. Many subscribers had however variously expressed their unhappiness with "noise" on the list. What they did not agree on was which sorts of online conversations were not noise and were more constructive in the context of local governance.

Qualitative Analysis - Governance Conversations

Over the entire archive of discussions, a timeline of code instances gave no immediate sense that there was a progression or any particular pattern within the dialogue. What we saw instead was a mix of topics and styles of exchange – in effect several conversations happening at the same time. This was compounded by the asynchronous nature of the contributions and the relatively ad-hoc moderation, which resulted in messages being posted to the list in batches rather than in real time as an argument unfolded. When the results were however disaggregated to look at threads of

conversation in isolation, a clearer sense of the dynamics of interaction emerged. For the purpose of analysis, we subsequently make reference to five patterns of governance conversation that were prominent in the coded data: *announcement, feedback exchange, stakeholder co-ordination, deliberative mediation* and *deliberative engagement.*

Nearly a third of the messages were not so much part of a conversation online as individual notices and announcements, or requests for (off-list) feedback - each of which had typically been associated with 'problem information' or 'solution information' codes. We referred to these as *announcements* and *feedback exchanges.*

Announcements included 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 *announcements* 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 purely instrumental, they nonetheless afforded the contributor an opportunity to frame an issue or action and implicitly present an opinion or value statement in the process.

Feedback exchanges included messages that solicited evaluations from list members of some or other aspect of governance, as well as messages which provided ad hoc updates to fellow residents on the progress of an initiative. We made the distinction

that, though *feedback exchanges* implied some form of reciprocation, these conversations also did not develop into dialogue on the list. Answers, if at all, were typically sent directly to the requesting party, who were not obliged to publish these, nor to engage in further online discussion. As an example, soon after the list was initiated, the RRA chairperson sent out a request for feedback on the performance of a 3rd party contractor collecting recyclable waste. This generated no further discussion – off-list feedback acknowledged, the issue was considered closed unless complaints were received.

From the remaining coded messages, several substantial threads of conversation were identified next for having high incidence of 'co-ordination'. These transpired to be instances of *stakeholder co-ordination,* the list being used to co-ordinate community feedback in an externally driven stakeholder process. Rather than supporting deliberation within the community as such, the list was being used to provide a stronger voice to the community as a collective entity. 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 robust responses.

There were also threads of conversation which did seem to follow conventional deliberative development - an incident is reported, supported by others as problematic (or dismissed), a responsible party is identified and then public pressure or sanction applied to prompt action. In terms of the system of codes, what we labelled *deliberative mediation* would progress from 'problem information' and 'normative' contributions, to 'solution information', followed by 'action' – though notably without the discussion going through a phase of 'decision' contributions. Issues addressed successfully by *deliberative mediation* were all relatively straightforward – that is, there was a clear problem 'owner' and it could be resolved following 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 such 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 engaged online to negotiate either the true extent of the problem, or their role in its resolution.

In terms of the proposed theoretical framework, the first four patterns of conversation were characterised – if not at first – by developing consensus and a relatively high proportion of instrumental contribution. If there was conflict, it was not at the level of expressive (normative) statements. However, what remained of the discussion

archive seemed to follow no such patterns. It was clear these conversations more often than not involved "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. 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 wellbeing of the animals, an endangered and protected species, as they frequently injured themselves in the unfamiliar human environment. This provided strong motivation for local residents to attempt to resolve the problem, but also prompted significant expressive as well as instrumental debate about the most appropriate resolution. The issue quickly caused sufficient controversy for list moderators to move the discussion into a dedicated list – what we have referred to as the "Baboon list." The new list generated 34% of overall message traffic during the 15 month measurement period of this study.

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

Figure 3 shows the occurrence of each of the codes assigned to the Baboon discussion over 8 months, each vertical mark representing a single instance of the codes listed on the Y-Axis. The bottom row, labelled "all", gives an impression of the way in which this one thread of conversation would go through periods of peak activity. The dialogue was at times sustained for several weeks, followed by long silences as the problem temporarily abated or as participants apparently exhausted their motivation to contribute. While the sequence and relative composition of 'problem information', 'solution information' and 'expressive' contribution varied between the conversational episodes, each would typically coincide with attempts by participants to control or steer the process, and inevitably at least an attempt to move deliberation to action.

It was particularly notable that no messages in either list were tagged with the 'decision' code – in other words, there were no instances of overt decision making, nor for example voting behaviour on the lists. None the less there were several instances where participants were able to move from deliberation to (offline) action. This is discussed in more detail in the following section.

Discussion

We described already how '*announcement*' and '*feedback exchange*' communication

contributed to the local governance process in spite of not being deliberative in themselves. As they have been defined here, the two types of conversation did not involve the level of reciprocal discussion that indicated (or required) consensus nor conversely expressed pluralism. Interactions shared information, provided opportunity for instrumental feedback and provided input to governance processes. As a result residents became directly involved in governance, and the residents association was encouraged to conduct its business in a responsive manner. These two patterns of conversation also most closely reflected the instrumental goals of the residents association when they set up the list: 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 RRA list was initially dominated by announcement and feedback contributions, with the RRA committee using it 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)."*

'*Stakeholder coordination*' conversations were predicated on the assumption that there was sufficient consensus to be able to coordinate a response. Rather than being an internal deliberation, what we observed was collusion – a case of 'the community' responding collectively to an external demand on the basis of shared instrumental and expressive goals. Sunstein (1999) discusses how such consensual dialogue has the

potential to lead to more extreme opinions. In the examples we have investigated of this case, the evidence suggests rather the shaping of an informed, possibly broadened consensus - differences of opinion did none the less persist, particularly on normative aspects of a case.

Though not intended by its creators, the list also proved instrumentally useful to resolve uncomplicated instances of conflict within the community, what we labelled '*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 appropriated the list to deal with what they perceive as governance problems. In several cases, issues were so resolved which had been referred to the residents association, but which they were unable to resolve. 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. In '*deliberative mediation*', consensus was implicitly expressed, for example by the extent to which a complaint gained support, or there was agreement on who was the responsible party. Where this sort 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. Given the opposing, but relatively well reasoned and uncontroversial points of view, the discussion quickly died down. Parties on either side had exhausted their arguments and motivation to continue the debate. However, where the discussion relating to the baboons met a similar impasse, it escalated to more heated debate – most likely because the issue caused significant disturbance and directly affected a large number of residents.

We have already discussed how 'deliberative engagement' conversations are less clearly instrumental to governance than any of the others forms we observed. The dialogue appears to become an end in itself - driven by controversy, by a contentious post, or by a renewed outbreak of the issue, rather than by any genuine attempts to reach a resolution. 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 developing the discourse. It also generates significant work for moderators – for 9 months, the baboon discussion alone generated more messages than all other topics combined. In follow up interviews, the moderators confirmed that 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 personal attacks. One message to the email list simply reads: *"Please remove me (again) before I drown in this stuff."*

The coding results indicate expressive 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. In the baboon related discussion, this included, for example, the values of community as a conservation village, the competition between humans and other species, and the right to self destination – to name but a selection. This more often than not lead to discussion that was difficult to moderate and had a tendency to became 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 an expectation of continued association and a significant likelihood of first hand encounter.

The evaluation of expressive and instrumental contributions in each of the patterns will be framed by the extent to which one considers decision making to be 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 a broader process - as in the 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 that any one side of an issue gains. Finally, in the 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 the humans' nor the 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, and 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; 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 some degree of collective action.

Conclusions

Hauser (1998, p.83) frames the role of deliberation in governance thus: "Democratic

governance rests on the capacity of, and opportunity for citizens to engage in enlightened debate. Although deciding public policy through argument has little to recommend it in terms of efficiency, the purpose of deliberation...is not efficient government but educated judgement." This case study proposes that, in the context of a small, geographically co-located community, online deliberation may fulfil this function and more, becoming a potentially significant channel for citizens to directly participate in or co-ordinate the acts that govern their local environment. As it was intended, the community discussion list had become an instrumental tool to support a direct approach to democratic governance. We would claim that, in addition to the instrumental facts of the matter, there is significant enduring value in the expressive aspects of residents' online communication - the ability of asynchronous conversation to maintain what may be inevitable pluralism on some matters, rather than forcing contingent consensus.

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 the view 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.

More than a series of discrete deliberative events, the online conversations appear to constitute an emergent, evolving facet of the local public sphere (Habermas et al., 1974) where online interaction routinely crosses boundaries with (and potentially amplifies) the offline in an informal manner, constituting what Hauser (1998) refers to as 'vernacular rhetoric.' More than an episodic information sharing and decision making mechanism, the instrumental aspects of conversations develop a dynamic 'shared understanding', or at the least shared experience. From this emerges the potential for future action - to the extent that participants develop a sense of collective or individual efficacy (Bandura, 1999; Kavanaugh, Kim, Perez-Quinones, Schmitz, & Isenhour, 2008). In the process, residents participate in an expressive negotiation of values and liberties, a more interactive construction of each individual's "imagined community" (Anderson, 1991) than might happen otherwise.

We had proposed in our introduction that an instrumental view of deliberation predisposes to an instrumental view of related technology - as a 'tool' primarily to reduce the coordinative overheads associated with direct deliberative decision making. The expressive view instead encourages the researcher to consider the extent to which an online forum, as a socio technical system, fulfils a broader social function to create a new

space where meanings and values can be contested. These theoretical positions are not

exclusive, nor, certainly, without precedent in the literature. The objective of this paper -

to focus on their role in governance at the level of community or neighbourhood -

grounds the discourse in the practicalities of direct resident involvement at a scale that

arguably has significantly different dynamics than that of even a regional policy debate.

The details observed of these interactions propose both opportunities and constraints for

the relationship of technology with direct local democracy.

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