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ESTABLISHING POLITICAL DELIBERATION SYSTEMS: KEY PROBLEMS

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The extension and transformation of political participation is dependent on widespread deliberation supported by information and communication technologies. The most commonly found examples of these eParticipation systems are political discussion forums. Though much of the discussion of these technologies is conducted in the eGovernment and (particularly) the eDemocracy literature, political discussion forums present a distinct set of design and management challenges which relate directly to IS concerns. In this article we analyze problems in establishing political deliberation systems under five headings: stakeholder engagement, web platform design, web platform management, political process re-shaping and evaluation and improvement. We review the existing literature and present a longitudinal case study of a political discussion forum: the Norwegian DemokratiTorget (Democracy Square). We define key problems in each of the five areas which need to be overcome in order to launch and sustain a successful net-based political deliberation forum.

Keywords: eParticipation, deliberation systems, political discussion forums, system design, system management

1 INTRODUCTION

eParticipation involves ‘the extension and transformation of participation in societal democratic and consultative processes, mediated by information and communication technologies (ICTs)’ (Sæbø, Rose and Flak, forthcoming). It responds to a perceived decline in political engagement, a disconnection between citizens and their elected representatives, and a consequent decline in the legitimacy of political institutions. Information and communication technologies (ICT), and particularly internet technologies are often considered to be a potential solution to these problems - offering new possibilities and opportunities for political participation. Two forms of eParticipation can be discerned (Avdic, Hedström, Rose and Grönlund, 2007): citizen-sponsored and government-sponsored. Spontaneous citizen participation in the political debate is extremely widespread on the net, through the various forms of web 2.0 communication and user-generated content (blogging, social software etc.). Governments also sponsor eParticipation initiatives which seek to improve citizen engagement in the political process; these initiatives potentially have a different character where the participation can have a direct influence on decision-making (though they rarely do). Often the starting point in this kind of initiative is internet support for deliberation – discussion and reasoned argument on political topics. The preferred vehicle for this kind of deliberation has been the political discussion forum and all technologically advanced democracies have these systems, at local, regional national or super-national level. In this article we focus on the second kind: the design and management of purpose-built systems for eParticipation, by and on behalf of government

Though no comprehensive evaluation of these projects exists, it is clear that many initiatives are rather unsuccessful. Though the technology platform appears deceptively simple and cheap to implement, the majority of efforts fail to attract widespread interest amongst citizens or politicians, are unrepresentative (Dahlberg, 2001), lead to poor information (Koch, 2005) or poor quality of debate (Hagemann, 2002), are monopolised by a few vocal contributors

(Hagemann, 2002), or have security and trust issues – particularly if there is a voting component (Xenakis and MacIntosh, 2005). Therefore, although little discussed as yet by IS researchers, a deliberation system initiative can reasonably be understood as an information system design and management problem. The technical systems are embedded in social systems that reflect societal structures, the distribution of political power, the psychological make-up of citizen-users, and the organisational conditions of government institutions. In this article we provide a summary of the problems involved in launching and running political deliberation systems based on a literature review and a case study. We investigate questions raised by extensive review of the eParticipation literature (Sanford and Rose, 2007; Sæbø et al., forthcoming):

1. Who are the stakeholders for deliberative systems and how can they be engaged?
2. How should the web platform be designed and managed?
3. How should the political process be supported?
4. What are the desired outcomes?
5. How can the systems be evaluated and improved?

We organise the literature review, case narrative and analysis under five headings which reflect these questions: stakeholder engagement, web platform design, web platform management, political process re-shaping and evaluation and improvement. As the paper's contribution we summarize key problems in each of the five areas.

2 RESEARCH METHOD: QUALITATIVE LONGITUDINAL SINGLE CASE STUDY APPROACH

This section presents the research strategies used in the collection and analysis of data, in the development of theoretical frameworks and constructs and in the derivation of results and conclusions.

Case studies are the research strategy of choice when 'how' questions are posed (how do you design and manage eParticipation systems?), where the researcher has little control over actual behavioural events, and where the focus is on 'a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context' (Yin, 1994). Benbasat et al. (1987) consider case studies particularly appropriate for sticky, practice-based IS problems where research and theory are at their early formative stages. Exploratory cases studies are well suited to the development of hypotheses at the early stages of theory formulation – where the key problems determined in our analysis can be understood as hypotheses for dysfunction in the design and management of deliberation systems. A longitudinal strategy is chosen, since it facilitates observation and preliminary evaluation of the effects of design and management decisions. The single case strategy is dictated by limited availability and access to similar projects, however the case is considered 'typical' (Yin, 1994), in as much as it shares many points of similarity with the other cases documented in the literature. The similarities include: a regional government sponsor, project organisation, an external developer, focus on developing the software, limited engagement of citizens and politicians and difficulties in managing the site once implemented.

The research follows a multiple data collection, multiple analysis strategy. The data was collected over a period of 28 months, from winter 2003 to fall 2005 using multiple methods. This period covers the initial genesis and development of the discussion forum DemokratiTorget, its implementation and use (particularly during the run up to the local election fall 2003), an intervening period where it fell into disuse and was temporarily discontinued, and its evaluation and re-launch in 2005. One of the researchers was a participant observer (following the project meetings) throughout this period. Data collection methods included: direct and participant observation of the project and its steering committee, project documents study, fifteen semi-structured interviews of politicians and administrators, system observation, transcription of project email conversations (for example with the system vendor) and recording of citizens' and politicians' postings to the debate forum. The data

collection triangulation here involves the consideration of design and management decisions and their effects from three perspectives: those of the project team, those of the users, and by direct observation of the systems itself, and particularly the communicative discourse recorded in the system by its users. Data was recorded as audio recordings and transcriptions, project agendas, minutes and notes, project design and specification documents, evaluation reports, stakeholder validation summaries, email collections, phone conversation notes, the complete collection of postings to the forum during the 10 months period it was up and running, and interview notes and transcriptions.

Four analyses of the data sources were undertaken. Studies based on the earlier analyses are previously published as (Rose and Sæbø, 2005; Sæbø, 2006; Sæbø and Päivärinta, 2005). The first analysis consists of textual content analysis of the contributions posted in the discussion (Rose and Sæbø, 2005; Sæbø, 2006; Sæbø and Päivärinta, 2005). Both qualitative and quantitative content analysis were undertaken to understand the shape and significance of the deliberative activity (the postings) at the forum. Genre analysis (Yates and Orlikowski, 1992) is used to deepen this understanding and to relate it to design and management considerations (Rose and Sæbø, 2005). Democracy Square is written up as a conventional narrative case study in Sæbø's (2006) Ph.D. thesis, where the events, actors, and eventual progress of the project are described, ordered and related. The narrative is used to focus the analysis on design motivations and decisions and their consequences, giving a structure for the consideration of cause and effect. The final analysis is theoretical: stakeholder's perspectives are scrutinized in relation to different models of democracy (Päivärinta and Sæbø, 2006). This analysis contributes to a broader understanding of the overall democratic and societal goals of this kind of project, and how they are implemented in software applications and deliberative processes. The methodological approach is represented in Figure 1.

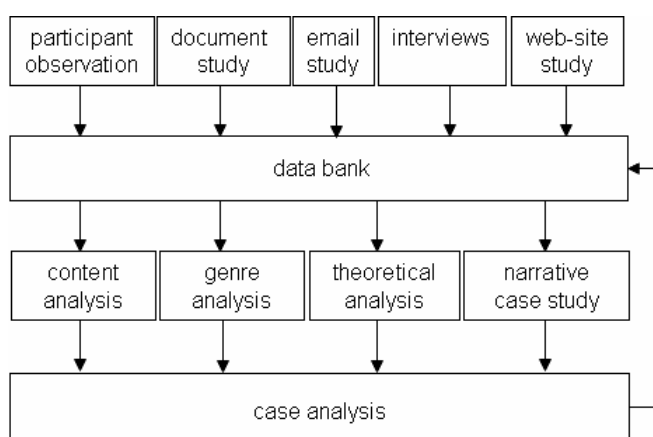


Figure 1. Research process

The research approach ensures triangulation of concepts and results, as developing understandings are iteratively fed into new analyses, and considered by 5 researchers. In the present study the data and the previous analyses are revisited and the results organized in response to the five research questions. The results are related to a theoretical grounding built up from an analysis of the literature considering similar types of political forum development and implementation projects.

3 DESIGN AND MANAGEMENT OF POLITICAL DELIBERATION SYSTEMS

In this section we examine the existing theoretical literature and reported cases on the design and management of deliberation systems. The study is organised under five headings reflecting the initial research questions.

3.1 Stakeholder engagement

Political deliberation in this context is often characterized as a dialogue between two stakeholder groups: politicians and citizens. The focus is on the interaction between the two groups (Chadwick and May, 2003; Hudson-Smith, Evans and Batty, 2005). Both are often treated as if they were homogenous stakeholder groups. However; young people are addressed specifically by some discussion forum projects (Finn and Detlor, 2002; Macintosh, Robson, Smith and Whyte, 2003; Rose and Sæbø, 2005). The limited success of these projects is explained by the failure to engage young people by allowing them to influence political decision-making (Masters, Macintosh and Smith, 2004) and their lack of sympathy with the style and structure of political and political debate (Macintosh et al., 2003). Engagement of citizens pre-supposes a critical and deliberative political culture (Biasiotti and Nannucci, 2004) and a willingness to take ownership of local policy making (Callanan, 2005). Education may therefore play an important role.

Discussion forums are often regarded as an opportunity to promote participation and civic engagement to a wider audience, often at the local level (Macintosh et al., 2003). Access to technology is one major factor affecting the democratic potential of the Internet (Ranerup, 1999). Where individuals have unequal access to technology (based on location, gender and class) eParticipation services (like discussion forums) may be dominated by citizens' group already privileged in the democratic discourse (Jensen, 2003b; Papacharissi, 2002). A more optimistic perspective argues that if access can be granted to more citizens, participation will follow (Ainsworth, Hardy and Harley, 2005). Further accessibility concerns reflect the cost of Internet use (Olsson, Sandstrom and Dahlgren, 2003), language (Olsson et al., 2003) and policy information transparency (Bekkers, 2004). User skills and individual competence are found to be prerequisites for well functioning discussion forums (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman and Robinson, 2001; Olsson et al., 2003). Competence is needed to be able to use ICT in general (Olsson et al., 2003), to understand the rationale behind the technology (Ranerup, 1999), and to be able to screen and interpret large amount of online information (Stanley and Weare, 2004). Since such competence is unequally distributed, discussion forum projects run the risk of attracting technophiles, more interested in appearance than function (Macintosh et al., 2003), or of making the information rich richer (Stanley and Weare, 2004).

Jansen and Kies (2005) argue that citizens' motivation to participate is dependent on assumed political impact. Such impact is not present if government officials' or politicians' participation is limited or non-existent. The presence of politicians is found to contribute to respectful tone and factuality debates, even though they may use debate forums for their own purposes, e.g. election campaigning (Jensen, 2003b). Rose and Sæbø (2005) investigated politicians and citizens roles in more detail, and found that citizens engaged in discussions in order to set agendas and influence political decision making, whereas politicians demonstrated their specialist expertise through argumentation and election campaigns, and argue that both sets of interests needs to be accommodated in on-line communities. Politicians are rarely the main focus of attention. However Jensen (Jensen, 2003b) argues that the presence of individual politicians at a deliberation space was a major reason for its success.

3.2 Web platform design

There is a common agreement that the design style of the discussion forum influences its outcomes, particularly deliberation form and style, and willingness to participate (Aikens,

1998; Carlitz and Gunn, 2002). However there is currently little research on design. Discussion categories can pre-defined or established dynamically. Predefining directs discussion in specific directions, whereas user-defined threads increase ownership and flexibility. Dialogue forms (e.g. question and answer) can also be determined in design. Janssen and Kies (2005) focus on the choice between synchronous and asynchronous dialogue:

“It is fundamental to distinguish the real-time discussion spaces (chat rooms) from the asynchronous online discussion spaces that do not have time constraints (email list; newsgroups; Bulletin boards; forums). It is generally recognized that the former are spaces of encounter that attract ‘small talk’ and jokes, while the latter constitutes a more favourable place for the appearance of some form of rational–critical form of debate since it allows participants to spend more time to think and justify their interventions.” (p 321)

Identity management design can favour anonymity or identification control. Anonymity can be challenging, since it may heighten the level of extremist and hate speech (DiMaggio et al., 2001). However Koch (2005) argues that anonymity could be seen as an opportunity to increase deliberation quality since the debaters are no longer tagged by traditional markers such as age, sex and race. Identification control may increase the entrance threshold (by requiring some kind of registration), but may improve quality, accountability and the obligation to participate and respond (Janssen and Kies, 2005). Citizen ownership is thought to promote engagement and trust in government (Callanan, 2005), and can be encouraged by including citizen groups in the design and development of the system (Macintosh et al., 2003).

3.3 Web platform management

Most discussion spaces have some degree of moderation which may influence deliberative outcomes. Moderation may have considerable influence on the topics under discussion, the style of dialogue and can limit the role for dissenting voices (Ainsworth et al., 2005). It can restrict ownership of agenda setting and the decentralised definition of topics (Janssen and Kies, 2005). Moderation may be occasional – limited to discouraging flaming outbursts and soothing over-heated debates (Carlitz and Gunn, 2002). Moderation may however be resented by debaters and has the possibility to be conscious or un-conscious political censorship. Nevertheless Jensen (2003c) argues that a high level of active moderation can lead to a improved quality of argumentation.

Citizen ownership may also influence the building of engagement and community, since technology effects reflect active choices made on the basis of its owners’ interests and cultural norms (DiMaggio et al., 2001). Bekkers (2004) argues that it is important to include citizens and other stakeholders in the initiating phase to achieve commitment and ownership. However, it is equally important to allow for the self-organisation and evolution of the online content (Bekkers, 2004). Feedback to deliberators is important if deliberation results are seriously considered by policy -makers Macintosh et al. (2003) describe how young people receive feedback on how their contributions are relayed further in the decision-making process.

3.4 Political process re-shaping

Political deliberative systems are intended to connect in some fashion with the political process. Discussion forums often have little formal role in the policy-making cycle but act as arenas for free public debate (Hill, 2003; Paolillo and Heald, 2002) or channels for social movements or oppositions (Fung, 2002). There is little evidence that free-standing discussion forums impact policy making; however the existence of a public sphere alongside the one-sided official truths of totalitarian or semi-totalitarian societies may represent an indirect voice in decision-making (Fung, 2002).

Deliberation can be consultative or informative without challenging the traditional roles of politicians as decision makers and citizens as voters (Päivärinta and Sæbø, 2006). Citizens may be asked to submit suggestions to the public authorities (Aidemark, 2003), dialogue may be initiated for the purpose of teaching inhabitants how to become e-citizens (Biasiotti and Nannucci, 2004), or citizens can be given the opportunity to communicate with representatives and government officials (Nugent, 2001). Discussion forums can be a communication channel supporting feedback to bureaucracies (Ainsworth et al., 2005), politicians (Papacharissi, 2002), political institutions (Papacharissi, 2004) other policy makers (Biasiotti and Nannucci, 2004) or decision makers (Sæbø and Päivärinta, 2005). Papacharissi (2002) points out that the ability to provide politicians with direct feedback does not guarantee influence over policy formulation. Citizen input can also be more explicitly and directly connected to decision-making processes (Held, 1996; Pateman, 1970). Politicians and citizens share an interest in dialogue and discourse leading to the formation of political opinion, and the open display of deliberation legitimizes the exercise of power. Discussion forums can be used as an interactive channel for policy making (Bekkers, 2004). Several motives can be discerned for interactive policy making, including involving (otherwise disenfranchised) young people (Macintosh et al., 2003), bridging the cleavage between politics and administration, achieving acceptance for policies among relevant stakeholders and enhancing the quality of policy formulation (Bekkers, 2004). Although the opinions of online debaters mirror those of their offline counterparts, interactive policy-making may shake-up prevailing relationships within policy networks and introduce new voices (Stanley and Weare, 2004).

3.5 Evaluation and improvement

Discussions forums are usually introduced to achieve some kind of effects, such as more (or better quality) deliberation, more responsive democratic systems, better control mechanisms, opportunities for new voices to be heard in the political discourse, or better feedback from citizens to decision makers. Some commentators see deliberation sites as a democratic force that promotes open debate, whereas others see the potential for enhanced government control and increasing the divide between the politically powerful and powerless (Ainsworth et al., 2005). Researchers study a variety of other effects: participator numbers and demographics (Callanan, 2005), argumentation quality and deliberation tone (Jensen, 2003a). Bekkers (2004) observes (rather pessimistically):

“We can conclude that quality of the debate, the participation and the responsiveness of these virtual policy making processes has been rather poor. The emphasis has been on the interactive gathering of information and opinion polling by using other, non-traditional communication channels (the internet), which do not threat the ‘modus operandi’ of representative democracy.”

4 DEMOKRATITORGET (DEMOCRACY SQUARE)

In 2003, the Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion granted funding for the DemokratiTorget (Democracy Square) project, with the stated purpose of fostering electronic dialogue between politicians and citizens. The principle focus of the project was to establish a discussion forum for these parties. It was initiated seven months before the local and regional elections in an attempt to include voters in political decision-making processes, legitimize local autonomy and increase electoral participation. The principal feature of DemokratiTorget site was its discussion board, where citizens and politicians could initiate and participate in themed debates. The site opened on 20.08.03 and activity peaked at the local election on 15.09.03, declining to little or nothing thereafter. 525 contributions were posted in the 26 days between the site opening and the election, as opposed to 68 in the 269 days from the elections until the board was closed down. The project was observed over a period of 28 months. Involvement in the development phase lasted approximately five months, from the initiation

of the project until the discussion forum was launched. Phase two analyses were based on discussion forum activity which lasted for 10 months until the discussion forum was terminated.

4.1 Stakeholder engagement

In the development phase the project group discussed strategies for getting stakeholders to participate. Politicians were assumed to be committed to participation. Little attention was given to motivating them; however they were kept informed of progress, and were offered training in how to use the finished solution. Young people were considered a major target group, and the project group discussed what kinds of services young people would like to have – though without consulting any prospective users. Thus project members were, by their own admission, “on thin ice” discussing young people’s needs. At a later stage a forum discussion targeted democracy and the Internet, discussing how the Democracy Square could contribute. A commentator summed up one of the dilemmas discussed:

“... dialog is important. However there will be a problem if it turns out that the political candidates don’t take it (the Democracy Square) seriously, but just consider it a kind of exercise in democracy”(posting, nickname)

One third of the participants posting messages were politicians, posting half of the postings. After the election the politicians posted only 2 (out of 69) contributions until the termination of the project, leaving a lot of citizens complaining about their level of activity:

“I’m incredibly disappointed by the activities at these pages. It is reasonably to believe that politicians would like to discuss major topics and post contributions. Now we, the voters, are the active parties. I start to wonder; are you politicians similarly passive as elected representatives as well? The term ‘politician disdain’ comes to my mind” (posting, full name)

4.2 Web platform design

The Democracy Square forum was set up with 25 discussion categories which included subjects of expected local interest. The categories were formed from suggestions made by software developers - later discussed by the project group. Some forum discussions ended up discussing which category they fitted in. The categories sometimes made it difficult for contributors to figure out what was going on.

“ it is difficult to identify questions concerning (my party), or my self. You then have to look through all categories... How on earth could I keep track of all the postings?” (Interview with a politician)

“Because of all the categories I need to check every day in every category, which is quite laborious...Unwieldiness is a way to exclude users. I started to look through everything yesterday, by the end 14 categories where still left” (Interview with a politician).

A convention that was built into the site, along with hierarchical thematic threads, was the question and answer principle. A direct response to an earlier contribution was labelled ‘answer’ by the software irrespective of its actual role in the dialogue. Contributors took up this principle and formulated many of their postings in this form; however using it for many different ends: sometimes to encourage new contributions, sometimes to change the subject, sometimes to close down an uncomfortable subject.

4.3 Web platform management

The project group signed a contract for the development of the site with a software firm located in Kristiansand, whose focus areas included E-democracy software implementation. The contract was made without a formal call for tenders. Due to time constraints (seven months from project initiation until the election), the project group was not able to discuss the objectives for the E-democracy project in detail before concentrating on the technical concerns. The prototype was first introduced to the project group less than five weeks before it was launched. Technical flaws remained and further development was required, and the design of Democracy Square was not discussed further in detail by the entire project group

before it was launched. Some of the early debate in this forum concerned the practical operation of the forum, both at the technical level (some complaints about navigation speed) and at the level of use policy and social conventions. One contributor was enraged that some of his critical comments were posted but never displayed – he assumed they had been censored. The board moderators denied this (while retaining the right to censor ‘inappropriate’ material). It remained unclear what happened to the offending messages. An etiquette question arose over the question of how challenging, rude or offensive a contribution could be, and many contributions tried to impose limits - often replying to an offender with a direct reference to those limits:

“I can’t really say that I appreciate your way of making your point, but ... “ (posting by politician, full name)

4.4 Political process re-shaping

Content analysis of the postings identified conflicting interests between politicians and citizens. Politicians seemed to focus on a desire to demonstrate expertise in political matters to a broad range of voters. Citizens seemed more interested in engaging politicians in discourse in order to set agendas, influence political decision-making and affect election results. The analysis showed that only a few conversations aligned both politicians’ and citizens’ such that the needs of both groups could be served. The difficulty of getting the right people to participate was discussed by various contributors, complaining about the absence of: politicians in general, contributors from one particular region, the young, and the more senior elected local politicians. The politicians interviewed were more motivated by the idea of influencing others and marketing their political viewpoints, than being themselves influenced by listening to ongoing debates. A major concern was the quality and representativeness of the arguments, making it difficult for politicians to judge the usefulness, of the online debates. Politicians tended to react defensively to aggressively phrased or seemingly unreasoned arguments, and to avoid debates on sensitive topics where they could easily be exposed, criticised or had no easy solution.

4.5 Evaluation and improvement

The Democracy Square project was clearly appreciated by discussants when it was launched. A number of postings argue that the opportunity to have direct discussions between citizens and politicians, to ask politicians direct questions and to allow a wider audience to participate made DemokratiTorget an important contribution to the political debate. After a while, discussion moved to improving the forum. Politicians wanted reminders when questions or comments are added concerning themselves or their party, since it took a lot of effort to check all the categories for relevant topics. A clear question and answer section was suggested. More information was requested, and some found the technology to be bothersome, making it too difficult to log in and contribute. Politicians were requested to take more part in the discussions (not only in the election campaign). Finally, more formal connection to the political process was requested, including feedback on how contributions influence policy decisions. The project was evaluated by the project group in the autumn of 2003. The decision-makers seemed generally to believe in the future and potential of the site. However, after the election, activity at the site dwindled, with many discussions fizzling out in unanswered questions. The Democracy Square project was terminated 10 months after it was launched.

5 KEY PROBLEMS IN ESTABLISHING POLITICAL DELIBERATION SYSTEMS

In this section we analyze the case study in relation to the literature study in order to summarize the major problems confronting initiators of political deliberation system projects. We summarize the key problems in each of the five interest areas:

5.1 Stakeholder engagement

Key problems in the area of stakeholder engagement include targeting specific user groups by geography, age, profession, job, social status, education or other characteristics (rather than aiming at 'citizens' in general). Rather little thought was given to the characteristics of the user-group at DemokratiTorget. In particular the engagement of politicians – symbolizing the commitment of the policy makers to the deliberative process – can be (and was) problematic. Lack of incentives for participation can result in poor take-up. Politicians typically need opportunities to profile themselves or their parties, whereas citizens primarily seek influence in the policy making process. Ownership by government promotes trust, at least in the Scandinavian democracies, but overuse of control detracts from community ownership and development – an important feature of engagement. As with other internet systems, implementation is not enough to secure user engagement. Many government agencies consider discussion forums primarily technical implementations, whereas active outreach to potential users through other media is normally necessary. Often investment in user-competence and education is necessary, as well as on-going management and evolutionary development.

5.2 Web platform design

Over-centralised traditional development methods can be problematic because of the overriding need to generate engagement. User-led evolutionary development is often indicated. Digital divide and equity problems require disability adaptation, learning style adaptation and interface usability targeted at particular levels and styles of technology competence. Structuring of debate, argumentation and dialogue is beyond the competence of many systems developers, and often results in the inscription of naive assumptions. Identity management can be problematic, involving design decisions about passwords, user security, unique identities, matching of digital and physical identities, anonymity, selection of users (for instance limiting users to a particular geographical area) and digital signatures. Further problematic areas concern the choice of media (text, voice, live camera) and platform (phone, web, mobile, digital television). In addition discussion forums are often part of a package of internet services for citizens which can contain many different types of informational, transactional and entertainment features. The composition of the package and its presentation and organization can take many forms and be targeted at different audiences.

5.3 Web platform management

On-line spaces normally require some form of management, and this activity is often forgotten in the planning stages. Launch is an important initial consideration, swiftly overtaken by daily moderation and censorship problems. Policies for which online behaviours and content are tolerated and encouraged are seldom thought out before implementation. Rewards and sanctions are therefore improvised in response to circumstance. Currency, dynamism, and timeliness - ensuring that content reflects current issues is important; sites with out-of-date content deter new users. Site managers may play a role in analyzing and summarizing content and forwarding it to other actors and forums in the political arena or the policy-making process. They may also be responsible for ensuring feedback - that the outcomes and political results of the participation exercise are reported back to the participator. Balance between manager and user control needs to be struck appropriately. A further problematic area is evolutionary development – how is the site developed in response to changing needs after the original developers are gone and the funding is spent?

5.4 Political process re-shaping

Perhaps the most challenging problem relates to the role of internet deliberation in the political process. Few deliberation sites are designed with impact in mind; however lack of

visible impact on policy-making or the political discourse is likely to deter many rational citizens who wish to spend their time in constructive ways, leaving behind only those with self-interest, extreme points of view or psychological need as a primary motivation. Whereas political process analysis can fairly easily be undertaken, establishing the role of the forum in the political process is often beyond the authority scope of project managers, system designers or administrators. This commonly involves power sharing strategies, determining how the power balance between citizens, government officials and elected representatives should be affected, and eventually the re-design of governance practice to accommodate inputs from participation. Often this kind of change to governance meets legitimate resistance from powerful lobbies with an interest in the status quo, and is best considered as part of a wider strategy for civic participation.

5.5 Evaluation and improvement

Particularly troublesome in the establishing of political deliberation is understating which outcomes are desirable, and how those outcomes can be described and measured. Commonly targeted outcomes are quantity of participation, engagement of particular civic groups (such as the young), quality of deliberation and changes in the democratic organisation of governance (for instance towards more direct forms of citizen influence). In each case it is necessary to determine relevant indicators and evaluation criteria and collect evaluation data – starting with base data from which to measure improvements. This is rarely undertaken in discussion forum projects – leaving them with problems in documenting success or failure, and in justifying future funding. A further problem where evaluation activities are absent is reflective learning and improvement of practice.

6 CONCLUSIONS

In this research investigation we posed five questions about political deliberation systems (here exemplified by online political discussion forums):

1. Who are the stakeholders for deliberative systems and how can they be engaged?
2. How should the web platform be designed and managed?
3. How should the political process be supported?
4. What are the desired outcomes?
5. How can the systems be evaluated and improved

We analyzed the existing literature and organized material from several different types of case study analysis of DemokratiTorget under five headings: stakeholder engagement, web platform design, web platform management, political process re-shaping and evaluation and improvement. Our research questions imply normative answers, which our research is not yet advanced enough to provide. However we are able to identify key problems in establishing these systems relating to these five questions. We found that key problems include:

1. insufficient effort to profile target stakeholders and engage them through appropriate incentives,
2. the design of dialogue structures and the management of identity, as well as incorporating deliberation in a context of useful and interesting related functions,
3. moderation, content analysis, the forwarding of discussion results and relevant feedback,
4. securing user-led evolutionary development of the site,
5. the embedding of the deliberation system into the wider political landscape, and
6. establishing outcomes, measuring them and learning from experience.

The internet is an important political communication media and net-deliberation has the potential to improve the reach and range of democracy, perhaps even to improve its fundamental nature. Understanding of practice in the design, deployment and management of political deliberation systems is essential for practitioners tasked with running them. Understanding the key problems in establishing these systems through analyzing practice

examples and the relevant theoretical context is the first step towards developing generalisable normative guidelines – the researcher's way to help practice.

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