# Online discussion could foster more democratically focused citizens – but only if the forums in which they take place are designed with this aim in mind

By Democratic Audit UK

*Political discussion is increasingly moving online, however critics of social media will often refer to the aggressive and confrontational nature of many such discussions, particularly where anonymity is involved. **Kim Strandberg** shares the results of a research study which shows that this need not be the case, with rules and good design able to foster the kind of debate which could help to facilitate deliberative democracy.*
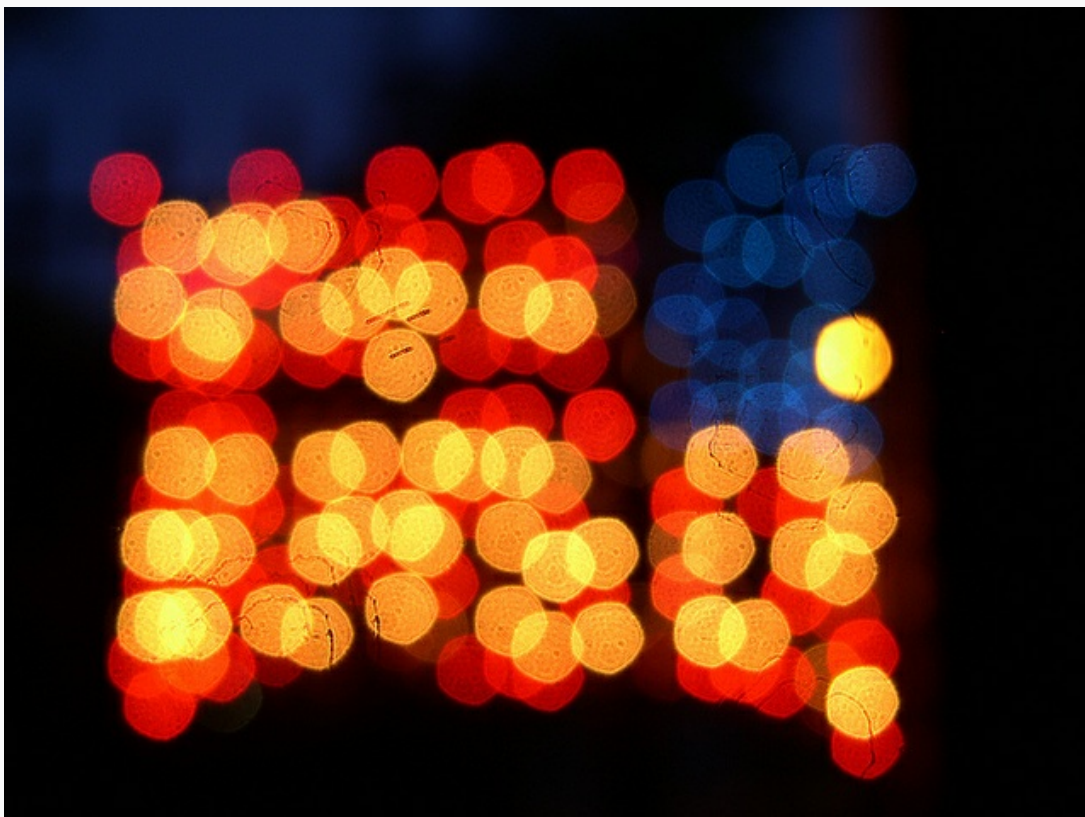
Jason Samfield, CC NC SA 2.0

I would claim that almost each and every one of us associates online discussion with something negative. Flaming, derisive comments, sexism, xenophobia, hate, etc. are all words that generally spring to mind. These connotations are, of course, partly prejudicial and also often too hastily made. There is certainly an abundance of online discussions in which constructive, engaging and interesting argumentation can be found. These, however, are probably not the norm nor do they usually make the headlines. Far too often, when left to their own devises, the online activities of citizens fail to bring about anything which political scientists, such as myself, would deem as even remotely positive for civic engagement. But what if there were ways though which online discussions could serve to democratically engage and educate citizens? Is that plausible and how could it be achieved? This blog entry concerns an online experiment regarding citizen discussions examining precisely these questions.

In democratic theory, discussion between citizens is central to any conception of deliberative democracy. According to the theory, political systems which emphasise public discussion between free and equal citizens perform better and enjoy higher levels of legitimacy than our current representative democratic systems. This places great emphasis on actual discussions and their procedural features. Essentially, if discussions are to bring about positive effects, scholars have argued that they need to be rational, reciprocal, include reasoning, justifications, motivations of opinions, reflection, sincerity, respect and equal participation from all discussants.

Thus, the general online discussion climate described in my introduction is not nearly ideal from such a democratic point of view. It has been argued, though, that if one were to deliberately design online discussion venues to meet such procedural criteria, one would also find that citizens engaging in the discussions would be fostered into being more "democratically oriented". Admittedly, this is a bold claim – but one which is nonetheless crucial considering how much time of peoples' contemporary lives are spent online.

In autumn 2013, I was in charge of a research project in Finland which set out to empirically test this claim in an online experiment with 70 Finnish citizens taking part. Essentially, we deployed two online discussion fora; one in which there were no rules of conduct, and one in which both moderation and rules encouraging discussion in line with the deliberative norms were in place. Our participating citizens were then randomly assigned to each of these discussions and tasked with discussing a certain matter. Half of the discussions were carried out anonymously and half with the participants knowing the identity of the other participants. Bearing in mind that online anonymity is often seen as the culprit for most of the online malaise described in the introduction, we wanted to include such a setting in our experiment.

After the discussions had ended, we disseminated an electronic survey, which measured the impact of the discussions, to all participants. The impact, or as we called it, the outcomes, of the discussions were thereafter compared between the discussion which had been left to its own devices and the discussion which had been carefully designed according to deliberative criteria. The outcomes by which we strived to approximate "democratically oriented" citizens, all of which had been derived from the literature, were opinion changes, opinion coherence, internal and external efficacy, generalized and political trust and readiness for future political action. The crucial question: did the discussion designed to foster democratically oriented and engaged citizens bring about more positive outcomes than the anything-goes discussion?

Well, I already implied the answer in the headline to this blog entry: yes, the democratically designed discussion venue generally brought about more positive outcomes than the unregulated forum. Specifically, we found that citizens discussing in the designed forum changed their opinions and values and that their group-level opinion coherence also increased. In other words, they agreed more with each other than the citizens who had discussed without rules did. Moreover, they increased their feelings of being politically competent (internal efficacy) as well as their view on the functioning and responsiveness of the current political system (external efficacy). Even more intriguingly perhaps, most of these effects were more profound when discussing anonymously, a feature which is often found in real-life online discussions, than with known identity.

In essence, our findings on the micro level did show seeds which eventually could grow into what democratic theorists envision, on the aggregate level, as political systems which are "better functioning and perceived as more legitimate". One should, however, be careful in drawing too broad ranging conclusions from one small-scale experiment. I would nonetheless argue that these are important findings. Though it may seem as rather trivial and somewhat tautological that democratic design brings about democratically positive effects, those effects will nonetheless not come to realisation unless precisely that design is present. In several European countries, such as Finland and the UK, government initiatives towards engaging citizens via electronic avenues are well underway. If these continue to appear at an ever accelerating rate and, like our small-scale experiment did, serve to foster and engage citizens democratically it would appear that all is not gloom and doom when it concerns the online realm as a democratic venue.

—

Note: the experiment which this entry concerns is reported on in depth in a recent article in the European Political Science Review. It represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit UK. Please read our comments policy before posting.

—

Kim Strandberg is special researcher and associate professor in political science at the Åbo Akademi University in Finland. Although a researcher of online political participation he does not use any social media. He can be reached at kistrand@abo.fi.