

Rethinking the ‘Informed’ Participant: Precautions and Recommendations for the Design of Online Deliberation

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One of the benefits of public deliberations often cited by practitioners and theorists alike is the potential to help participants become more informed about an issue, by providing them with relevant information and competing arguments. While the act of deliberation alone is often argued to provide this benefit (Eveland 2004), many deliberative forums also emphasize additional resources such as pamphlets, videos, or expert testimony to ensure all participants have access to balanced information (e.g., Fishkin and Farrar 2005). A growing trend in the field of public participation is to incorporate computers to enable participants to view and explore interactive maps and other multimedia information resources (Craig et al. 2002). These kinds of resources can be particularly useful in deliberations about urban planning or environmental issues, where they are used to help communicate complex ideas such as spatial equity or the predicted environmental impacts of a proposed action. One of the great promises of designing forums to support deliberations on the Internet is the ability to cost-effectively share multimedia resources with a far greater number of participants than can be done in face-to-face settings.

While this development is often interpreted as another positive step in narrowing the divide between citizens and experts, there has been very little research examining the impacts these information resources may have on

the participants in public deliberations or on the dynamics of deliberative process. In this chapter, we bring a theoretical perspective to the questions: How is it that information resources made available in online deliberative forums help to create informed participants? Or in other words, what are the relationships between these information resources and the creation of informed deliberation participants? And, what does it mean to be an ‘informed’ participant?

To explore these questions, we are influenced by the work of Michel Foucault, specifically the notion that all information is located in networks of power through which information is produced and legitimized; and therefore information is not only partial and biased but also always political (Foucault 2003). We illustrate this point by examining the map—a commonly used information resource in deliberative forums. Drawing on geographic theorists we demonstrate how the map necessarily represents a privileged and politicized reality, while simultaneously enjoying an aura of objectivity that is not as readily given to textual evidence. We describe how this theoretical perspective problematizes the role of information resources in deliberation. We argue for a re-thinking of the ideal informed participant as someone who is not merely aware of the various facts and arguments about a given issue but able to critically assess and position those ‘facts’ and arguments in relation to shifting landscapes of power relations. We also describe significant implications of this theoretical perspective for the field of online deliberation. This is followed by a series of specific recommendations for the designers of online deliberative forums that may help orient participants to this kind of critical political awareness. Finally, we conclude with a set of precautions for researchers.

1 Rethinking Information and Politics

Supporting deliberation can be thought of as a project of shifting and controlling power relations among participants in such a way that results in a ‘level playing field’, where civil and equitable discussions over political matters can take place. The design of deliberative forums is often concerned with reducing obstacles to participation and ensuring that all background information is balanced and factual. Efforts are often made to reduce antagonisms and partisan politics, to ensure that discussions are reasoned and sensitive to multiple points of view. We wish to make a distinction between this more conventional treatment of *politics*—as something to be managed and minimized—with a conceptualization that acknowledges how politics permeates the very project of deliberation. Here, we draw on postfoundational approaches in order to resist fixed notions of the political in deliberative situations (see Sparke 2005).

We advocate the analysis and design of deliberations where all efforts of informing (the inclusion or exclusion of certain language or voices) are conceptualized as always-already political and produced through power. Therefore, the concern is not how to control the information and activities of the participants to reduce 'power struggles' and account for any difference but to realize that all information provided and all structuring of activities have political status. This section proposes a rethinking of information and politics in three discussions, around: a different conceptualization of power, a multiplicative approach to information, and the implications for this rethinking in the realm of the map.

Providing information during deliberative situations is *a priori* political. By this we specially mean that all information is produced through operations of power. Power enables certain closures and openings during the creation, packaging, and distribution of information resources. This production of information occurs through particular normalizations (including proficiencies, controlled vocabularies, relations of truth, ways of knowing). These normalizations work to politically produce an *informed* participant. Moreover, this idealized informed participant is entirely contingent upon power relations, including particular and situated knowledges (technical, social, cultural, political, or other ways of rationalizing and systematizing meaning). Many questions assist in making these relations more visible. What particular knowledges facilitated the material production of information resources before and during deliberation? How were these information resources presented during deliberation?

In order to recognize power in this way, a political project must be undertaken where power is understood as a capillary process—Foucauldian notions of power as 'neither given, nor exchanged, nor recovered, but rather exercised' (Foucault 1977: 89). Specific to our interest in deliberation, power is not to be conceived as something held by deliberation planners and to be obtained by participants in the course of best procedure or best argument (i.e. to empower). Nor should power be conceived as something that necessarily restricts or oppresses participants during the deliberation and thus requires an erasure of power from the idealized process. Rather, information resources are produced within relations of power and knowledge: a complex ether producing and positioning truths, expertise, participants' knowledges, discourses, and normalizations within multiple frameworks of subjugation. What we are after is not (and should not) be an arresting of power; rather, our approach is toward a realization that information always already constitutes the 'playing field' and the 'players' through power's enabling. For example, information resources always employ normalizing discourse—legitimizing certain knowledges over others. Conceptualizing

information in this way, demonstrates how the notion of the 'level playing field' (where, presumably, power imbalances are temporarily bracketed) is problematic when not analyzed as always already a political operation of power.

One approach to taking a critical perspective of power pluralizes the meaning of information and expands the possibilities for (re)interpretations and (re)examinations of information resources. This multiplicative approach to information is reminiscent of Nancy Fraser's (1992) critique of Habermas' (1989) public sphere, where she describes the ways in which Habermas' enablistms of participants (via 'universal pragmatics') during these specified procedures oversimplify and constrain the activities of the individuals taking part, as well as stricture the information provided. Key to Fraser's critique is the implication that Habermas' supposed transformation of participants from 'private' individuals into a 'public' oppresses the 'private' (which is precluded from 'public'). As Fraser (1992) explains, that which is 'private' is conceived as some 'prepolitical starting point' (130). In the field of online deliberation, designers often conceptualize information resources in a similar way, as having a 'prepolitical' role to play in the transformation of participants into *informed* deliberators. However, as Fraser's work suggests, it is important to identify the political status of 'prepolitical': information resources.

In recent work, critical cartographers have repoliticized the map as an information resource by using techniques of (re)interpretation and (re)examination. Like all information, maps are productions that privilege certain perspectives on reality, and this privileging is a political act (Crampton 2001). Maps, by definition, represent the world by portraying some aspects of reality while hiding others. For example, a road map represents highways, exits, cities, and other items useful to car travelers while omitting elements like ecosystems, hair salons, and burial grounds. Such privileging of information in maps is necessary to make them useful for particular tasks. However, in the context of deliberations, this privileging often has major implications. John Pickles (2004) draws attention to three different perspectives on how to read maps as productions that are necessarily political: the map is an interpretative act, the map has a particular gaze, and the map constructs a sense of realities.

Map as Interpretation

Pickles (2004) is interested in reconstructing the map as a product of interpretation, deconstructing what seems to be a dominant notion of the map as a technical product. His point is to situate our notion of this information resource within the context of the author's intention, values, and identity,

whether conscious or unconscious, therefore debasing notions of the map as singular fact or truth.

Map as Gaze

Critical cartographers forward the notion of the 'cartographic gaze', which calls attention to the map's (and map readers') perspective (i.e., a view from somewhere rather than nowhere) (Pickles 2004). This 'gaze' is a notion of reduction and control coming from some position of purpose when maps (and information) are produced. The concern is with complexity and perspective; maps reduce complexity to simply the object of the author's intent, while manipulating the perspective from which the observer also gazes onto the map. These 'technical' decisions, while not seemingly political ones, have directly political implications.

Map as Reality

Drawing on King (1996), Pickles (2004) traces how maps are understood as reality—maps in interesting ways produce a reality. The boundaries, territories, and hill shading in the map construct a particular understanding, structuring the way in which the observer can 'see' the world and community.

2 Implications for Online Deliberation

By acknowledging that all information is political and thereby power-laden, the introduction of information into a deliberative forum is realized as a political act. Furthermore, if we acknowledge that maps work to construct our sense of reality, then we should also recognize that particular maps privilege certain types of reality and thus certain types of arguments about how to best address a problem over others. More generally, when we introduce a map into a deliberative forum, we fundamentally shift the political dynamics of that deliberation.

A useful illustration of this point is Ramsey's (2008) case study into the use of a geographic information system (GIS) to inform a deliberative process intended to identify acceptable solutions to a conflict over water shortages in southern Idaho. The state water management agency developed this system, which visualizes measured and predicted water flow through a valley in the form of an interactive map, in hopes of introducing a 'credible' and 'objective' information resource that could serve as the basis for discussions. They developed the system to track the flow of water based on what they found to be the best available information. However, based on the data available, the GIS could only be used to tell a particular kind of story about the water shortage problem—one focused on efficiency of water use by farmers in the valley. It was silent regarding other major arguments in this

dispute, such as theories about the causes of diminished spring water flows that feed the valley water system. As a result, attempts to focus deliberation around the information provided by the GIS prevented and precluded certain arguments from being made and hindered the process of collectively constructing alternative understandings of the problem. Recognizing the development of the GIS and its introduction into the deliberative process as inherently political is central to analyzing the context within which it was received and the way in which it worked to privilege and marginalize certain discourses and ways of knowing.

Of course, we are not suggesting that information resources, such as maps or the GIS described above, should be banned from deliberative forums. Such resources play an important part in enabling certain understandings of complex problems, but they must be presented in a manner that foregrounds, rather than hides, their politics. For example, deliberation forums and facilitators should draw attention to the origins of maps and the perspectives they represent. Participants should discuss the *political* meaning of these maps as well as their relevance to science or policy making. By repoliticizing information and the deliberative forum more generally, facilitators can help foreground shifts in political dynamics and the privileging of some perspectives over others, encouraging the critical political awareness of participants and, perhaps, motivating efforts by participants to call for (or create their own) alternative maps that present alternative stories, and that thereby also enable multiple interpretations.

This issue is particularly salient in online contexts. By comparison, face-to-face deliberations such as Deliberative Polls[®] often feature experts clearly representing particular political perspectives on an issue who present evidence (information), thereby cueing participants to the fact that evidence needs to be considered in relation to the presenter's perspective. However, online evidence (e.g. maps) can easily be presented and/or received out of context, potentially appearing to participants as a window on reality that represents no particular perspective (i.e. viewed from nowhere). For this reason, designers of online deliberation environments need to be particularly careful to qualify maps and other information resources as political products within complex power relations by foregrounding the 'gaze' and supporting maps' multiple interpretations.

We recognize that the idea of politicizing a deliberative process might appear to be inviting conflict and therefore seem counter to the goal of providing space for reasoned and civil discussions among participants with different points of view. However, we argue that efforts to artificially construct a depoliticized environment in this way works only to disguise processes of privileging and marginalization such as those described above. We also argue that a repoliticized deliberative forum is not necessarily incom-

patible with many of the normative goals of deliberative democratic process, such as respectful and reasoned debate and the quest to identify shared stories about how the polity (however defined) should address the political problem at hand. However, such a forum calls for (and, we hope, can foster) participants who are not only 'informed' about various facts and arguments relevant to an issue but who are also able to critically assess and position this information in relation to the shifting political landscape of power relations. It is for this reason that we call for a reimagination of the ideal informed participant as somebody who recognizes that all information is political and that the project of deliberation is designed to shift power relations in particular ways.

3 Design Recommendations for Online Deliberation

We propose a few recommendations for how to design and structure online deliberative forums that may cultivate a critical political awareness among participants. At the time of publication, these recommendations are currently being used to motivate the development of an online deliberative forum called 'Let's Improve Transportation', part of a larger research endeavor exploring ways to support public participation in regional transportation improvement decision making.¹ Below we highlight a few of the design decisions and explain how they might help orient participants to a more critical approach to deliberation.

- **Foreground how information resources were produced.** Call attention to the author(s) of a map and how (and why) the data were collected.
- **Demonstrate that information resources have multiple interpretations.** Invite specialists with alternative points of view to write critical analyses/reviews of a map.
- **Include multiple and conflicting information resources.** Provide multiple maps depicting different elements of a problem and emphasize how each represents a different story (which potentially conflict).
- **Encourage critical evaluation of information resources.** Orient questions and discussion around the critical evaluation of the perspective, intention, meaning, validity, and relevance of a map and map data. Encourage participants to consider whose story the map is telling, and whose story is not represented.

¹ See <http://www.pgist.org> and <http://www.LetsImproveTransportation.org> (both last accessed November 1, 2008) for more information.

4 Conclusions

The designers of online deliberative forums should continue to problematize ways in which certain ‘offline’ or ‘technical’ decisions around the handling of information resources are political actions, worthy of active reflection. Here we have attempted, somewhat briefly, to draw out some themes of this problematization to emphasize the work carried out when attempts are made to ‘level’ the field of deliberation through the introduction of information resources. In particular, we advocated a notion of power which exposes the politicized production of all information and knowledge, as illustrated by critical re-readings of the map. We proposed an alternative handling of information resources that opens space for multiple interpretations. Our implications and recommendations for online deliberation are centered on a key notion—being an informed participant requires a critical political awareness not emphasized by many in the field of deliberation. While realizing that this somehow ‘critical’ participant is idealized, we argue that the design of deliberative forums should support (not hinder) the participants’ process of developing a critical political awareness.

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