Building an Online Deliberation Platform – Bottom-up Civic Engagement in Singapore

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Abstract

Singapore, known for its authoritarian government leadership, is entering a more competitive democratic system [8]. To facilitate the bottom-up civic engagement, novel Information Communications Technology (ICT) tools that support alternative forms of democracy need to be explored. Our team is building an online platform for deliberative democracy. We plan to tackle the challenges of incorporating important deliberative democracy values into the online system and validating its effectiveness in the context of Singapore. This paper presents a brief overview of recent trends in online political deliberation research. Potential design implications for the system are discussed.

Author Keywords

Online Deliberation; Deliberative Democracy; Singapore; User Engagement

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction

Although the Singaporean regime has enjoyed broad support, its legitimacy appears to be primarily based on the economic growth and material gains the government delivers [1]. A national survey has shown that in addition to outcomes, Singaporean citizens are more likely to accept the rightfulness of a policy if they perceive the process of policy making to be legitimate [2]. One important assessment of the legitimacy of the process is whether citizens perceive that there are sufficient opportunities to engage in public discourses. In line with the communicative definition of procedural legitimacy, deliberative democracy is considered an innovative form of democracy that promotes collective decisions with better citizen engagement [4]. The bottom-up deliberative governance encourages respectful and reasonable communications rather than traditional forms of voting and delegation. However, the merits of deliberative democracy might be hard to achieve considering the implementation difficulties. For instance, the ordinary citizens might not be willing or capable of contributing to a reasonable and respectful open discussion. The sheer number of eligible participants also implies high cost and long time period during the discussion.

Fortunately, the growing prevalence of smart devices and high penetration of internet connection in Singapore gives us the optimism of bringing down the threshold for participation. The proliferation of online deliberative tools such as Debate Graph, MIT Deliberatorium and IdeaScale, reflects the growing interest of moving offline deliberation online. Online deliberation carries some benefits such as low cost of participation, geographically diverse participants and asynchronous participation [7]. Moreover, the ubiquitous nature of internet access also renders people the potential ability to translate everyday talk to political activism [3]. However, for internet to become an effective medium for facilitating political deliberation in daily life with a more profound effect, the problem of user engagement and usability needs to be addressed.

The following sections will present the values important to deliberative democracy, and identify potential challenges for designing a deliberation system in Singapore.

Deliberative Democracy and Singapore

Deliberative democracy affirms the need to justify decisions made by citizens and their representatives as well as require unconventional processes [4]. A deliberative process aims to produce valid decisions through public discourse.

There are four characteristics of deliberative democracy that could serve as a design guideline [4]. Firstly, the most important characteristic is the reason-giving requirement. Gutmann and Thompson [4] believe that deliberators should exhibit "reciprocity" by giving reasons to support their arguments that any others trying to attain fair cooperation cannot reasonably reject. At the same time, the process should be accessible to all of whom the discussion concerns, which means that deliberation and its outcomes should be publicly available to all participants equally. In addition, binding decision and dynamicity are characteristics critical for the constantly evolving decision outputs of the deliberation process. The online platform needs to facilitate achieving these goals of the deliberation process although they are idealistic and might be hard to implement.

Singapore, a city-state and island country lying at the southern tip of Asia, has a unique blend of Western and Eastern culture. It has long been famous for its high capitalism and modern authoritarianism. The Singapore model has been successful as Singapore is confident, prosperous and orderly though it has an effective single party system [9]. Traditionally, the majority of population are either politically apathetic or having fears of being involved in politics. However the younger generation seems to be far more actively involved in online politics.

Besides a cultural shift, this phenomenon might be attributed to the fact that Singapore has enjoyed high ICT penetration since the government initiated a master plan for an "intelligent island". The Internet access was 78% in 2010 and mobile penetration reached 137% in 2009 [9]. With the favorable infrastructure and younger Singaporeans' growing likelihood to share their political views on the web, it is beneficial for the government to engage the citizens more online.

Current Online Deliberation Systems

There is a worldwide interest to engage citizens online, as many systems support the online process of citizen participation in policy formation. Some ongoing examples include Engage Obama and Climate Colab in which the policy making process is crowd-sourced to the citizens. The citizens are invited to propose their own solutions to political issues and discuss the pros and cons of the proposed plans within the community.

Some of these platforms adopted Argumentation System structures such as Issue-Based Information System (IBIS) [6], because argumentation is central to

the process of deliberation. As giving reasons is the primary criterion of deliberative democracy, a structured argumentation system is vital for citizens to think and respond reasonably about issues. Some promising systems are the MIT Deliberatorium and Debate Graph. By using deliberation maps, the system takes care of redundancies and tries to link the arguments more logically. These systems generally focus on the pedagogy of argumentation, often coming with a complicated structure.

Thus it is hard to engage an average citizen on these online deliberation platforms. It will be difficult to attract them to participate and organize themselves voluntarily on these platforms. Some attempts have been made to address this issue, such as the attention mediation methods proposed by Klein [6] and external incentives of prizes and community bonding in the case of Climate Colab [5]. However, there has not been a cost-effective solution especially on a large scale and the core problem of low usability for argumentation system has not been resolved. Therefore, to introduce the platform to Singaporeans, user engagement should be a key consideration.

Design Challenges

Among many challenges, we find that lack of user engagement is one of the most prominent. We will discuss some potential solutions below.

Participation needs to be guaranteed throughout deliberation process. One key phase that is crucial to participation is at the beginning of the deliberation session when participants are given the opportunity to learn about the policy issue and norms of a deliberation process. The normal introduction sessions are

expensive to execute in large scale and unlikely to equip every average citizen participant with enough knowledge and skill to participate in the deliberative process. There is a need for tutorial system that is always accessible and self-paced. The user confidence could be built with real-time feedback that could also help them correct wrong concepts during the tutorial. The learning should be deployed for both learning about the "issue" of deliberation and the correct method of using the system. Thus equal participation becomes plausible with a reasonable equality in the deliberator's skill levels at using the online interface.

Another problem that impedes participation in online deliberative platform is the overflowing of information and the difficulty for participants to navigate in the information convolution. It is common to have duplicate entries or irrelevant arguments centering a topic. In order to address the problem, we need some conscious restructuring .One way to do this is to moderate the process with designated personnel such as in the MIT Deliberatorium [6]. However, the problem associated is the overloading on the moderators who have to go through the post one by one. Some creative solutions, such as crowdsourcing or engaging cognitive computing, need to be experimented for the platform to become scalable.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is a huge potential in supporting bottom up civic engagement by developing novel online deliberation platforms in Singapore. By reviewing current state-of-art platforms, the limitation of user engagement is revealed. We have identified design challenges for the system implementation regarding the problem.

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