

**DO CITIZENS 'DELIBERATE' IN ON-LINE DISCUSSION FORUMS?
PRELIMINARY FINDINGS FROM AN INTERNET EXPERIMENT**

A working draft – quote with caution!

Corinne Wales*, Sarah Cotterill* and Graham Smith*

*Centre for Citizenship, Globalization and Governance, School of Social Sciences, University of Southampton, c.a.wales@soton.ac.uk; gsmith@soton.ac.uk

*Institute for Political and Economic Governance, School of Social Sciences, University of Manchester, sarah.cotterill@manchester.ac.uk

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Abstract

In principle, the internet can bring a new dimension to the institutionalisation of deliberative democracy by allowing larger number of citizens to participate in the political process, overcoming barriers of time and space. However, factors such as anonymity and lack of direct contact between citizens in the online world throws up new and unpredictable challenges to the conduct of deliberation. To explore the nature of online engagement, we organised a large-scale randomised controlled trial, part of which involved inviting two groups of just over 1,000 citizens to participate in two asynchronous online discussion forums on youth anti-social behaviour (ASB) and community cohesion. Our aim was to investigate the extent to which engagement in such forums can be deemed 'deliberative'. This paper offers a framework for analysing the deliberative quality of online engagement that focuses on the realisation of inclusiveness, reason-giving, reciprocity, mutual respect and common good orientation. This framework is then applied to two threads focused on policy-relevant questions: the role of policing and community activities in responding to youth ASB and the role of faith schools. Preliminary results are mixed in terms of the deliberative potential of this form of online engagement.

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on a large-scale on-line experiment conducted in 2009 in which two groups of just over 1,000 randomly-selected citizens were invited to discuss highly salient political issues within a specially constructed virtual public space. Two research questions guided both the design of the experiment and the analysis in this paper: How do randomly-selected citizens behave when given the opportunity to participate in a large-scale online consultation event? To what extent can their interactions be understood as ‘deliberative’? The answers to these questions are significant if public authorities are to move from their primary use of the internet as a one-way information portal to a future where new technologies offer spaces for more interactive and accountable engagement with citizens (Schlosberg et al. 2006; Coleman and Blumer 2009).

In both theory and practice, deliberative forums are advocated as an alternative to traditional forms of public involvement (e.g. opinion polls, public hearings and meetings). The implicit hypothesis is that deliberation will lead to *better* decisions for at least two reasons: they are better informed and are publicly oriented. First, as Briand elaborates, ‘an essential element of deliberation is learning: acquiring factual information pertinent to an issue. Deliberation depends on the possession of such knowledge, for without it deliberation’s other tasks – weighing, judging, choosing, negotiating – can’t be performed properly’ (2006:1). Second, democratic deliberation demands confrontation by and challenge of difference (Thompson 2008). Decisions emerge after a reciprocal process where different views and standpoints are considered in an ethos of mutual respect. Decisions reached after deliberation are then, it is argued, different from those that would have been made had uninformed, private preferences simply been aggregated around an issue.

One common approach to evaluating deliberation is the extent to which individual preferences of participants have shifted following the provision of information and a period of interaction. This approach is particularly associated with the work of James Fishkin and colleagues on deliberative polls. In another paper, members of our project team have followed this strategy and discovered only modest changes of opinion on a limited range of policy-focused questions (Smith et al 2009; 2010). In this paper, we take a different approach, focusing instead on the behaviour of participants online; in particular, who participated and how they interacted. We do not focus on preference shifts, since this alone is not enough to tell us whether the interaction should be deemed 'deliberative' – after all, preferences can change for a variety of non-deliberative reasons. Rather we focus on the nature of the interaction of citizens; on process rather than outcomes (Price and Niejens, 1997: 344).

Initially, the paper offers a summary of the experimental design, with particular focus on the design of the discussion forums. It then offers a framework for assessing the deliberative quality of online engagement which adapts the discourse quality index (DQI) offered by Steenbergen and colleagues (2003) and the framework developed by Stromer-Galley (2007). This is then applied to the experimental evidence, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data. The analysis and the conclusions presented here should be treated with some caution, as the content analysis of one of the threads has only been coded by one researcher. As such our findings should only be seen as indicative at present.

DESIGNING THE DELIBERATION

Research into behaviour in on-line discussion forums reveals that much turns on design: Wright and Street contend that just as the House of Commons is a political space that structures and frames a particular type of interaction so different 'discourse architectures' can be constructed on-line – encouraging more or less deliberative behaviours. It is 'the form of technology, rather than the fact of it' that matters (2007: 854). Similarly Coleman argues:

The environment and structure of communication has a significant effect upon its content; synchronous chat rooms and peer-generated Usenet groups are no more indicative of the scope for online public deliberation than loud, prejudiced and banal political arguments in crowded pubs are indicative of the breadth of offline political discussion (Coleman, 2004: 6).

The research team worked with Ipsos-MORI to develop a novel internet-based experiment: a randomised controlled trial (RCT) to assess the potential of large-scale asynchronous online mini-publics. The experiment, which took place over three weeks in early 2009, involved 6,009 participants, the sample drawn from the Ipsos-MORI survey panel that regularly engage in market research (although none would have been invited to take part in research of this type before). Participants were randomly assigned to a number of different groups: one third to two discussion forums, one third to two information-only sites and the final third to the control. In this paper, we primarily focus on the 2004 participants who were randomly-assigned to the

two discussion forums.¹ Participants were invited to complete a questionnaire before being invited to participate in an online forum for three weeks. The first group of 1,002 participants focused on topics associated with youth anti-social behaviour ('The Truth about Youth'); the second on community cohesion ('Getting on Together'). Every two days new discussion threads were added on aspects of the topics. Halfway through this period, a second survey instrument was applied and the topics reversed. At the end of the period, a third questionnaire was applied. The rationale for running two topics was to allow an analysis of any ordering effect: for example, to see if focusing immediately on a controversial topic (community cohesion) led to increased flaming by participants. Empirical research has shown that the topic of the debate is a significant variable for explaining differences observed in deliberation. Topics touching on sensitive issues or personal values are more likely to lead to moralising discourses and flaming (Coleman and Gotze, 2002).

In constructing the discussion forums, we were attentive to a number of design features that might enable or inhibit deliberation (Janssen and Kies 2004; Wright and Street 2007). We aimed to construct a public space which would encourage participants to see themselves as citizens who would perceive their input as meaningful and where there were no obvious barriers to free and fair interaction between participants.² The forums were hosted on specially commissioned phpBB 3.0.x boards with specific design features employed to effect such orientations:

¹ For an explanation of the full experimental design which allows us to distinguish between the relative impact of interaction and the provision of information, see Smith et al (2009; 2010).

² This can best be described as a 'normative theory of practice' which Guttman contends 'refers to the purposeful attempts of practitioners to employ particular practices as a means to fulfil normative theoretical stipulations' (2007: 417).

- Participation was incentivised with entries into a prize draw each time participants spent 10 minutes of more online, and participants were sent a reminder email each time a new thread was added.³
- The asynchronous technology allowed participants to log-on and contribute whenever they wished.
- When logging in for the first time, participants were greeted with a video from the then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Hazel Blears, who gave her support for the project and committed herself to consider the issues raised by participants.
- Participants were directed to ‘rules of discussion’ that they were expected to abide by (see Appendix 1).
- Participants did not need to give background information on their gender, age, ethnicity, etc. to other participants – this was entirely optional.
- Easily accessible background information was offered via a ‘fuel for thought’ box on relevant threads: short briefing documents and audio-visual materials, including specially commissioned videos of community representatives offering different viewpoints.
- Thread themes were designed to ease participants into discussion of policy through a sequential process: initial threads focusing on their experiences of their neighbourhood and later threads focusing on policy options.
- Visible (although relatively light) moderation that prompted contributions, particularly from those who had not posted, and summarized the arguments to date.

³ It was important to design an incentive that could be used easily by public authorities and did not involve extravagant expense. Mini-publics typically offer an honorarium of around £100 to participants. This would be too much of a cost impediment for such large numbers.

- Participants were able to easily report any posts that they believed offensive or having broken the rules of discussion.

The design feature that arguably caused the most animated discussion amongst the research team and its advisory board was whether moderation should be pre- or post-contributions. Concerned that the controversial nature of at least one of the topics (community cohesion) would lead to flaming that might undermine the willingness of participants to engage (and at worst, hate speech that could be deemed illegal), we received strong advice to utilize a pre-moderation strategy, with posts ‘vetted’ before being made public. We decided against this strategy on two grounds. First, on purely pragmatic grounds we were attempting to design a process that could be easily adopted by public authorities. Pre-moderation increases costs substantially. Second, we wished to see if the combination of the other design features we had employed would encourage more civically-minded behaviour on the part of participants without recourse to pre-moderation.

A FRAMEWORK FOR MEASURING DELIBERATION ONLINE

Arguably the most systematic approach to ‘measuring’ deliberation is the Discourse Quality Index (DQI) developed by Steenbergen and colleagues (2003). Normatively grounded in Habermasian discourse ethics, the DQI rests upon the following criteria: open participation; reason-giving; considerations around the common good; mutual respect; and consensus-building, all familiar categories to those versed in theories of deliberative democracy. The DQI was developed to evaluate the deliberative quality of parliamentary debates. In attempting to apply it to the pilot for our experiment, we found that in a number of important respects its transferability across different

empirical conditions (in our case internet engagement) has been bounded by this initial research focus. More recently the DQI has been modified by the original team and used to analyse a variety of more informal deliberative settings (Steiner, 2009). One significant development from this more everyday empirical engagement is the acknowledgement of the power of storytelling and a reconsideration of its place within a deliberative framework. Moreover consensus building has been succeeded by a more modest ‘force of the better argument’ category where some level of opinion change or recognition of the other’s argument is evaluated. But even the revised DQI may fall foul of criticisms that it continues to privilege a particularly sophisticated form of communication: ‘polite, orderly, dispassionate, gentlemanly argument’ as Young famously argued (2000: 49; see also Dutwin 2003).

A second process-based approach developed and applied by Stromer-Galley attempts to analyse the deliberative content of discussions between ordinary citizens where deliberation is conceived as engagement ‘in reasoned opinion expression on a social or political issue in an attempt to identify solutions to a common problem and to evaluate those solutions’ (2007: 3). Her coding scheme has fewer demands for and implicit judgements of political sophistication than the DQI and is thus less empirically bound to arenas where finely honed deliberative skills and capacities are expected personal capabilities (Dutwin 2003). Both the DQI and the Stromer-Galley approach have provided useful benchmarks against which our own thinking on coding and analysis has developed.

Our own framework emerged out of what we considered were the necessary elements of deliberative interaction: inclusiveness; reason-giving; reciprocity; mutual respect; and common good orientation (see Appendix 2 for coding guidance). The application of this framework allows us to evaluate the extent

to which it is possible to marry the virtues of mini-publics such as citizens' juries and deliberative polls with democratic aspirations for increasing the number of participants in the political process. The on-line architecture offers the possibility of 'scaling-up' democratic deliberation, but to what extent is deliberation realized in practice?

A. Measuring Inclusiveness

For deliberative democrats, inclusiveness has at least two elements: presence and voice. For many advocates of deliberative designs, random selection (either pure or with the application of quota sampling) is the most effective way of ensuring engagement of a diverse body of citizens that reflect the variety of social groups and perspectives within the broader population (Smith 2009: 79-88). This is certainly the logic of mini-publics such as citizens' assemblies, citizens' juries, deliberative polls and the like and is replicated in our experiment through the drawing of quota samples (age, gender, education, geographical location and political interest⁴) from the Ipsos-MORI survey panel. However, in the experiment, the acceptance of an invitation does not necessarily mean that citizens participated in the sense of logging-on to the boards. In analysing the extent to which political equality as presence is realised, we therefore focus on the characteristics of citizens who log-on to the discussion forum.

In evaluating the extent to which equality of voice is realised, our focus turns to posting. We analyse this in two ways. First, by attending to the socio-economic and other characteristics of posters: to what extent are there differentials across social groups in actively contributing to the discussion forum? Together with our analysis of presence, this account of voice allows us

⁴ The nature of the survey panel meant that we had to accept that ethnic diversity and lack of access to the internet could not be used as the basis of quotas.

to intervene into ongoing debates on the nature of the digital divide (e.g. Norris 2003) and the preponderance of the 'one-timer effect', where citizens post only once, but do not return (Graham, 2002).

We complement this traditional analysis of voice with a second strategy: a focus on the category of difference. Here we consider the extent to which different arguments are put forward; through content analysis we focus on the presence of disagreement on the threads. After all, voice without the articulation of different positions undermines the need for deliberation (Sunstein, 2001, 2003; Thompson, 2008: 502). As Gutmann and Thompson argue:

Why is disagreement so vital? The reason is that it forces more careful consideration by challenging points of view—hence, those who deliberate form better reasoned opinions. Moreover, deliberation expands the repertoire of considerations and arguments, and thus it fosters understanding, among participants, of multiple points of view (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996 in Price et al 2002: 96)

B. Measuring Reason Giving

At the core of all theories of deliberative democracy is what may be called a reason-giving requirement. Citizens and their representatives are expected to justify the decisions they would impose on one another by giving reasons for their political claims and responding to others' reasons in return (Thompson, 2008: 498). We have already raised our concern that the analysis of reason-giving in the DQI may be too restrictive. Thus, while making a simple distinction between expressions of opinion with no justification offered and those where some form of reason or argument is given, we then distinguish between different sources of justification: personal experience; contributions

of other participants; briefing materials; external authorities; and the moderator (Price et al 2006: 56; Stromer-Galley, 2007). Even if participants do not behave in a classically deliberative fashion, then we still wish to know how they justify their opinions (if at all).

C. Measuring Reciprocity

Deliberation requires participants to consider the views of others. As such reciprocity is a crucial consideration, arguably even more so online where there is a danger that participants will simply talk past each other; posting in response to the question at the head of the thread without regard for the contributions of others. As Stromer-Galley states: 'it is important to note whether participants are actually engaging each other, or if they are simply engaging in monologues in the presence of an audience, which in turn fails to respond' (Stromer-Galley, 2007: 7). Reciprocity does not, of course, entail agreement. As such we focus on explicit and non-explicit agreement and/or disagreement with the posts of other participants. As Jansenn and Kies contend this 'element of reciprocity captures the degree to which a conversation is a real 'discussion'' (2004: 13).

D. Measuring Mutual Respect

One of the major concerns that policy-makers and practitioners have in establishing online discussion forums, particularly on controversial policy issues, is that interactions will degenerate into flaming: offensive comments on other participants and/or those under discussion. Flaming has been frequently documented, particularly for synchronous forums. For example, Coleman notes: 'In Usenet political discussions, people talk past one another, when they are not verbally attacking each other. The emphasis is not problem solving, but discussion dominance' (Coleman 2004: 6; see also Sack 2005: 268). The moderated, asynchronous nature of our experimental design may well

deter such behaviour (Janssen and Kies 2004: 4-5), but that is a matter for empirical investigation.

Drawing from the DQI, we code for two dimensions of respect: respect towards the arguments of other participants and respect for the groups under discussion. However, our approach deviates from the DQI somewhat. Parliamentary debates are typically highly stylised, with experienced rhetoricians practising established forms of respect towards other participants. Interactions and behaviours in online discussion forums are far less formalised and established and as such our approach is to look for occasions of explicit disrespect to other participants and/or those under discussion. Where contributions fall within the 'rules of discussion' that were established for the forums (see Appendix 1) or carry no inferences that participants or groups under discussion are unequal, unworthy etc., then they are assumed to be respectful. In coding 'disrespect' to groups (either young people or a particular minority ethnic group), we distinguish two levels: first a general negative perception or stereotyping of the group under consideration (e.g. (all) kids are 'bone idle' or 'disrespectful'; (all) faith schools 'brainwash' or teach 'rubbish'); the second more overtly offensive and discriminatory remarks.

E. Measuring Common Good Orientation

Our final category is the extent to which participants appeal to the common good in their contributions. The DQI has two categories here: the common good conceived in utilitarian terms, that is, with reference to the 'greatest good for the greatest number' and the common good in terms of the Rawlsian difference principle with reference to helping the least advantaged in a society. We have two concerns with this approach. First, this two-fold distinction arguably limits other forms of common good expressions. Second,

we need to remind ourselves again that Steenbergen and his colleagues were focusing on parliamentary debates where many of the contributions are lengthy and a speech could be prepared and an argument delivered systematically over a significant period of time. In comparison, most contributions to online discussion forums are only a few lines long. That said, we do not wish to abandon attention to the common good. In this paper, our approach is inductive – drawing out examples of the different ways that participants appeal to the common good in their contributions (Jansenn & Kies, 2004: 16). At a later date, we may attempt to offer a more systematic characterisation.

SELECTING AND ANALYSING THREADS

Both groups of 1002 participants were invited to discuss two broad topics: youth anti-social behaviour ('The truth about youth') and community cohesion ('Getting on with each other'). The topics were broken down into a series of threads, with 2 new threads appearing very second day. The early threads tended to focus on the direct of experience of participants in their own neighbourhoods, building towards discussion of policy options. We report on one thread from each subject, namely:

Thread 1: "Should we have more activities for young people or better policing?" (part of the youth ASB topic)

Thread 2: Do faith schools have a role to play in bringing neighbourhoods together or do they create more divisions? (part of the community cohesion topic)

These two threads were selected for analysis for a number of reasons. First, participants were faced with making judgements about competing policy options: in thread 1, a choice between investing in policing or community activities; in thread 2, the role of faith schools. In both cases there are obvious differences in public discourse on these issues and as such we would expect to find disagreement. Second, in the case of faith schools, we have included a controversial topic, one where flaming is more likely. Third, they are threads with relatively high numbers of contributions from participants.

The content analysis was undertaken using Nvivo software, according to the coding framework discussed above and more formally laid out in Appendix 2. **Findings must be treated with caution and considered preliminary since only one of the threads (thread 1 on youth ASB) has been coded by two researchers.** A future version of this paper will include a second coding of thread 2 and report on levels of inter-coder reliability.

PRELIMINARY RESEARCH FINDINGS: DELIBERATION OR NOT?

A. Inclusiveness

In considering presence, analysis of participants' behaviour reveals that just under half of those invited to join in the deliberation chose to take no part in it. Out of those who did log onto the site, more than half logged on only once. It is thus only a relatively small minority who were present on the site regularly (Table 1). The characteristics of those who were present will be interrogated later in this section.

Table 1 Numbers visiting the site

	Board 1		Board 2	
Did not log on	475	47.4%	456	45.5%
Logged on only once	286	28.5%	269	26.8%
Logged on 2-5 times	179	17.9%	205	20.5%
Logged on 6-10 times	44	4.4%	49	4.9%
Logged on 11 or more times	18	1.8%	23	2.3%
Total	1002	100%	1002	100%

Turning to voice, conceptualised as posting, a quarter of participants in both deliberation groups (28.8% and 25.8% respectively) logged onto the site without posting. We cannot draw any hard and fast conclusions from this statistic because these participants may have ‘lurked’ in the sense of watching and learning from the deliberation (passive participants) or they may have simply logged on and off intermittently out of more fleeting interest or, rather, sustained disinterest.⁵

Out of those who posted, the largest group on each board only contributed once during the life of the three-week experiment: the ‘one-timers’ are a significant sub-group, although again this does not mean that they did not return as ‘lurkers’ (further analysis is required to ascertain their behaviour patterns). In the first deliberation group, a third of those who posted did so more than five times (7.2% of the whole group posted more than five times). The maximum number of posts by any one individual was 71. Among the second deliberation group 28.7% of participants posted at least one message during the three week deliberation. There was a slightly higher proportion of frequent posters in this group: 10.7% of the whole group posted more than five times. The maximum number of posts by any one individual was 157 (note, these frequent posters were unusually active compared to their peers,

⁵ Smith et al (2010) found no opinion shift amongst lurkers in the experiment.

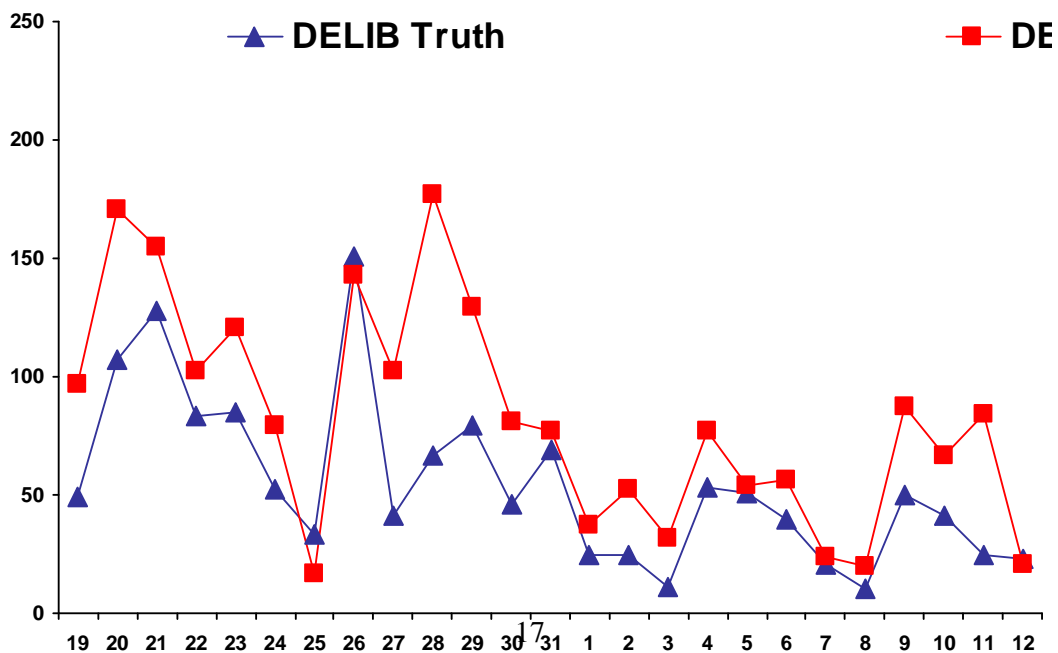
but not obviously disruptive by other measures). Thus, there is a greater likelihood amongst those who post to post again rather than to just post once (see Table 2).

Table 2 Numbers of posts per participant

Deliberation Group	Board 1		Board 2	
	Did not post	764	76.2%	714
Posted only once	71	7.1%	69	6.9%
Posted 2-5 times	95	9.5%	112	11.2%
Posted 6-10 times	36	3.6%	51	5.1%
Posted 11 or more times	36	3.6%	56	5.6%
Total	1002	100%	1002	100%

As Graph 1 indicates, there is evidence of drop-off in posting over time for both groups – a familiar statistic for online discussion forums. While participation on the two discussion forums follows the same basic pattern, there is some difference, with the group that began with community cohesion tending to post more actively.

Graph 1: Number of posts per day



This global picture of participation can be complemented by the analysis of posting on the two specific threads we selected for further investigation (Table 3). The overwhelming majority of participants on the two threads contributed once: only 3 to 6 participants returned to add one or more further comments. While this does not in itself indicate a ‘one-timer’ phenomenon, since we do not know whether participants’ continued to observe the thread, it does not bode well for participants reflecting on, and responding to, the contributions of others (a theme we pick up under ‘reciprocity’).

Table 3 Posting on the two selected threads

	Board 1 Activities / policing	Board 1 Faith Schools	Board 2 Activities / policing	Board 2 Faith Schools
Posted only once	52	32	51	82
Posted 2-5 times	3 (2 times)	3	2	6
Posted 6-10 times	1 (7 times)	0	1 (7 times)	0
Posted 11 or more times	0	0	0	0
Total participants	56	35	53	88
Total posts	65	38	62	97

The data we have presented to date only provides an account of numbers of participants, not of their socio-economic and other characteristics. It tells us nothing of who these participants are. Does participation in the discussion forum (in terms of both presence and voice) reinforce well-known differentials across social groups (e.g. Verba et al 1978)?

Table 4 Factors affecting participation (standard errors in parenthesis)

Variables	Presence (log-in at least once)	Voice (post at least once)
Female	0.196*	0.480***
	(0.094)	(0.108)
Age 25-34	0.333	0.064
	(0.176)	(0.215)
Age_35-44	0.481**	0.195
	(0.173)	(0.208)
Age_45-54	0.518**	0.337
	(0.176)	(0.210)
Age_55+	0.723***	0.579**
	(0.164)	(0.195)
Non-white	0.264	0.288
	(0.160)	(0.172)
Level 1 qualification	0.517*	0.500
	(0.218)	(0.263)
Level 2 qualification	0.487*	0.576*
	(0.197)	(0.240)
Level 3 qualification	0.340	0.363
	(0.210)	(0.258)
level 4-5 qualification	0.524**	0.575*
	(0.191)	(0.233)
Other qualifications	0.380	0.496*
	(0.205)	(0.249)
Frequent internet user	0.222	0.503
	(0.207)	(0.276)
High political interest	0.356***	0.302**
	(0.103)	(0.114)
Constant	-1.181***	-2.579***
	(0.319)	(0.404)
Observations	2000	2000

* p=0.005; ** p=0.01; *** p=0.001

A cross-section logit regression run on the two deliberation groups combined provides initial insights into the characteristics of participants (see Table 4). Here presence is defined as having logged on to the discussion forum at least once during its lifetime; voice as having posted at least once – i.e. no distinction is made for level of usage (a factor we plan to analyse in future research). The regression generates interesting findings.

To some extent, traditional differentials of participation are replicated. So, for example, for both presence and voice, age is significant, with the oldest group

(55 plus) more likely to engage. Similarly political interest remains a significant indicator of participation in both senses. The picture for education is more ambiguous: although for presence higher qualifications have a higher degree of significance, this is not replicated for voice. For the classic variables of age, political interest and, to a lesser degree, education, the traditional participation bias is felt: the online world mirrors offline differentials. But there are two important caveats that complicate the picture.

The first is gender. Particularly in relation to voice, women are more likely to make contributions to the discussion forum than men. How can we account for this reversal of the traditional participation bias (Phillips 1991)? Speculative explanations relate to the institutional architecture of the discussion forum. Its asynchronous nature allows participants to engage in their own time. For women engaged in domestic labour, who may previously have experienced this as a barrier to traditional forms of participation that require attending meetings at inconvenient times, online participation may be a more accessible option. Further, the anonymity afforded to participants may also offer a partial explanation. Whereas in face-to-face settings, established social practices tend towards the marginalisation of women's voices, the internet, in particular where anonymity is a factor, may be reshaping gender relations. These remain highly speculative thoughts that require further investigation.

A second factor that is worthy of consideration is that frequency of internet use is not significant in either presence or voice. We had expected those participants with more familiarity with the online world to participate more: this was not the case. Clearly those without internet access are denied the opportunity to participate in such a forum: in that basic sense we have a digital divide. But, the nature of the digital divide in its full sense is more

complicated. In some ways it bears the same characteristics as traditional participation bias (age, political interest and, to a lesser extent, education), but in relation to other characteristics – gender and internet use – the story is more ambiguous.

Finally, our account of voice also considers the extent to which different perspectives (or discourses) are verbalised on the threads. After all, even if marginalised social groups are present and making contributions, if the variety of perspectives around a policy issue (which do not precisely match social characteristics) are not discussed, then it would be difficult to judge the process inclusive. In both threads we found that there was a reasonable spread of opinions offered (see Tables 5 and 6).

Table 5 Competing perspectives on youth ASB thread

	Board 2	Board 1
More activities for young people	19	18
Better policing	6	13
Both	20	14

Table 6: Competing perspectives on community cohesion thread

	Board 2	Board 1
Faith schools have a role	19	9
Faith schools have no role	38	23

Digging deeper, on the youth ASB thread (Table 5) there was disagreement over the appropriate role of the police (some believing the police were ‘too soft’ and others believing the police should be more involved in constructively engaging with young persons); youth activities (some believing that there were plenty whilst others argued the need for more); and the role of

the state.⁶ Similarly in relation to faith schools, both sides of the debate were offered on the threads, although the perspective that faith schools have a role in society was less prominent in terms of number of posts. However, it was certainly not absent. It is also notable that different religious standpoints were offered, with participants declaring atheist, Catholic, Church of England and Muslim affiliations.

B. Reason-Giving

While our analysis of inclusiveness paints a complicated picture which, at least in relation to our findings on gender and the impact of internet use, may be heartening to proponents of e-deliberation, the findings for reason-giving are not so positive. As Table 7 reports, the majority of contributions on both threads offered no form of justification: they were simple assertions of opinion. This is certainly problematic from the perspective of deliberative democracy which requires the public justification of arguments.

Table 7: Forms of justification

Board	Board 2 Activities / policing	Board 2 Faith schools	Board 1 Activities / policing	Board 1 Faith Schools
Opinion only	41	56	51	33
Explicit personal experience	12	20	10	4
Briefing materials	1	0	1	0
External authorities	2	1	0	0
Other participants	0	1	1	0
Moderator	0	0	0	0
Not explicit	4	0	1	0

⁶ While the posts on this thread for both deliberation groups tended to endorse the policy of increasing opportunities for young people rather than the visibility of police on the streets, the quantitative analysis of opinion shift revealed modest movements amongst those who had posted away from both of these policy options (Smith et al, 2010).

In the minority of cases where justification is offered, participants tend to appeal to their own personal experience rather than any other source of legitimation. So, for example, in the thread on faith schools we find contributions such as:

As a catholic it was inevitable that I would go to a faith school which was in the 60's and 70's. On having my own children they both went to primary faith schools. It was during this time my attitude changed. I had been taught by Nuns and found them very welcoming whatever the faith of the person, my children however were taught by catholic teachers whom I found very biased... .Since then my granddaughter has gone to a faith school and at last we seem to have found a happy medium, all faiths are welcome, but there is an onus towards the catholic faith which is why we send our children there and they have taught the children to respect other faiths... Using faith as a weapon against others is a crime against the people (487).

From my previous teaching experience I feel that they can have a beneficial effect on their pupils in the development of learning, and I know that the 'faith' has been used as a weapon of discipline, in terms of 'behave here or you can go to the local state school' (734)

... faiths are a division. As an atheist I know I can be looked at as a lost cause... When I was at school we had a wide range of faiths and learnt from this alone. It makes them more ready to accept others opinions and views... (85)

I agree they can be divisive; but my wife points out that they can give a sense of belonging in an environment of different faiths. That was her experience as

a Moslem in South Africa. Her experience can perhaps be replicated here...
(895)

This appeal to personal experience is of interest given the divide that has existed within theories of deliberative democracy, where feminists in particular wish to highlight testimony and storytelling as valid and necessary forms of justification (e.g. Young 2000). The quotes also demonstrate that people felt free to 'declare themselves' in terms of their faith (or lack) which perhaps supports the de-inhibiting thesis in relation to on-line, and in particular anonymous, environments.

For designers of forms of online engagement, the statistic that is most dramatic and will cause pause for reflection is the negligible use of the briefing materials that were available to participants. The low numbers accessing materials on these two threads is replicated across the whole forum (Table 8) where a sizeable majority (over 70 percent on both boards) of those who visited the boards at least once accessed no materials at all. Even if we focus on those who posted, the figure is only slightly improved, with only 40 percent accessing material at least once (Smith et al 2010). While low, our finding is comparable – if not an improvement – on earlier experiments carried out by the Hansard Society.⁷

Table 8 Frequency of use of materials for participants who logged on at least once

	Board 1		Board 2	
No materials accessed	375	71.2%	431	78.9%
Accessed once	60	11.4%	58	10.6%
Accessed 2-5 times	70	13.3%	45	8.2%

⁷ Interview with Ros Ferguson (15th February 2008), previous director of Hansard's e-democracy programme.

Accessed 6-10 times	13	2.47%	6	1.1%
Accessed more than 11 times	9	1.7%	6	1.1%
Total	527	100%	546	100%

This is a challenging finding for at least two reasons. First, we had put a great deal of effort into producing highly accessible and relevant materials in different formats (documents and video clips) that were highly visible on each thread. The frequency of use certainly did not justify the time and resources put into the creation of this background information. Second, and more seriously for deliberative democrats, we can assume that most of the posts on these policy areas were not informed by reflection on the positions of competing experts and community representatives active in the field. This demonstrates a significant difference between engagement online and offline. In traditional mini-publics (citizens' juries, deliberative polls, etc) participants are exposed to competing expert evidence in plenary sessions: they cannot avoid information input. Online, this is more difficult to design. It is possible that we could have forced participants to engage with information before they were permitted to post, but that would almost certainly have reduced levels of engagement. If we are looking for informed interaction between participants online, this is a design challenge.

C. Reciprocity

While there is very occasional evidence of fairly sophisticated expressions of reciprocity – e.g. acknowledging previous arguments and offering qualified agreement and disagreement – this is rare. Only around 20 percent of participants on either of the threads we analysed offered any reliable evidence of reciprocity at all: generally simple statements of agreement or disagreement. The results suggest that the majority of participants (at least on

the threads we have analysed) displayed a lack of reciprocity; a lack of explicit acknowledgement of the arguments of others. From a deliberative perspective this general failure to acknowledge the contributions of others is problematic, given the place of reciprocity within theories of deliberative democracy. Whether we should be surprised by this result is another matter since arguably many of the practices we associate with reciprocity are at least partially para-linguistic (non-verbal). Explicit reciprocity is something that may be lost when we move online and rely primarily on the written word ('smilies' etc. being no adequate substitute!).

However, whether we can definitively conclude that most participants posted without reading/listening to others is another matter and needs more careful consideration and analysis. Both researchers who coded the youth ASB thread picked up on the fact that each discussion had its own particular 'flavour'. A number of posts, whilst not explicitly acknowledging those preceding, would employ the same words, or pick up on themes and ideas, or seem to build on arguments expressed previously. Practically though, in these cases where there was no direct reference to the posts of others it proved very difficult to come to an agreement between coders about 'non-explicit' reciprocity. We will have to consider further the codification of this category, because whilst difficult to evidence, such behaviour should not be disregarded.

D. Mutual Respect

The headline finding in relation to mutual respect (to the surprise of our partners Ipsos-MORI and members of our advisory group) is that there were no episodes of flaming on either discussion board over the life of the project. At no time did the moderators feel that they had to remove a post and no participant flagged up another post as offensive. In itself this is a significant policy-relevant finding: there has certainly been reluctance on the part of

public authorities to use internet-based technologies to enable discussion of controversial areas of public policy. However, this finding is highly specific and almost certainly relates to the very particular design of the forum: the combination of invitation to participate, seriousness of presentation (welcome by the then Secretary of State etc), explicit rules of discussion, moderation (even though a post-moderation strategy), etc. But it does provide evidence that with attention to institutional design, spaces can be created where citizens engage respectfully on controversial matters of public policy.

This does not mean that all contributions fell within our criteria of ‘respectful’ towards other participants and/or the groups under discussion. On only one occasion on the threads we analysed was there an explicitly disrespectful comment towards other contributors, and in this case it was fairly weak: ‘I cannot believe this nonsense...’. As we might expect there was more explicit negativity expressed towards the groups under discussion. On the youth ASB thread that we analysed, across both boards 29 contributions (23 percent) could be defined as disrespectful towards young people, in the sense that they stereotyped and displayed a general level of negativity – e.g. young people are too lazy and bone idle. Most posts, however, were respectful, often distinguishing between the majority of young persons who are well-behaved and those that are anti-social. On the faith schools thread, there were (perhaps surprisingly) less overtly disrespectful contributions, with 12 cases (8.9 percent) being explicitly disrespectful, 7 of these against non-Christian faith schools in particular. Examples include:

To bring up your child in such an insular world is tantamount to brainwashing (97)

...I think it's a lot of fools teaching kids a load of rubbish but that is my view and everyone is entitled to their own views (878)

What I don't think is right, is that our Christian festivities and celebrations i.e. Easter and Christmas, are eroded due to the fact we may 'OFFEND' other faiths e.g. Muslims (622)

Such stereotyping was not couched in highly offensive terms; it addressed the topic under discussion and seemed to express anxiety about the erosion of 'British' values and culture – an anxiety that was present across almost all threads – rather than hatred towards that which is different. Moreover, such views at times generated responses. For example

You cannot simply abandon your faith when you move to a new country, and it is exactly because you are in a country with a different faith than yours that you want to instil in your child the same values that you have... you would still need to integrate with the general population... faith schools could and should teach about the country's ideal (67)

Fair point 67 about not expecting people to give up their faiths... Think the basic values of love, honour etc. are consistent among faiths.. (175)

The open tone of both discussions, in terms of both expressions of prejudice and occasional challenge, has implications for policy makers, where post-moderation has been viewed as very risky. It appears that constructing a generally respectful online public space can be achieved as long as appropriate behavioural cues are embedded. An expensive and time-consuming pre-moderation strategy is not necessarily required.

E. Common Good Orientation

At this point in time, our analysis of the extent to which contributions express a common good orientation is highly speculative and our analytical framework underdeveloped. Based on a single coder's reading of the faith school thread, we can distinguish a range of different ways in which participants have made appeals to the common good in their argumentation. These include appeals to:

- Shared values: Of the 16 posters who believed faith schools were cohesive on Board 1 seven posters thought that this was because of the values they inculcated such as tolerance, love, and honour. Relatedly, a further three posters argued that a key aspect or value of faith was to bring people together. Two posters argued for Christian faith schools as the building block for integration and the retrieval of 'values lost'. One poster argued that faith schools were better than the 'pc society' in teaching our children things 'clearly against our belief' and similarly, another poster argued for a wider education than the state offering which acknowledged the 'spiritual aspect to humanity'.
- Rights: The most popular argument for the retention of faith schools on one board was that they were an essential element of parental rights or choice (8 posters). Appeals to rights also appeared on the other board. Two rights-based posters across both Boards expressly disagreed with the notion of faith schools and the majority of others expressed no real preference for school but defended the rights of others to choose. One poster argued for the right on the basis of it representing a last liberty against the state.
- Openness to all: Six of those participants who were in favour of faith schools qualified their preference: 'providing they are open to all, unbiased'.

- Divisive: By far the most expressed opinion on both boards against a permissive policy towards faith schools (27 posts in total) was that they were divisive: ‘I agree with lots of the posts here that they only cause divisions’, ‘again faiths are a division’. Others expressed similar opinions using different words: that faith schools are insular, leading to more conflict, that they separate social groups, that they are elitist, that they drive neighbourhoods apart and undermine the concept of integration by encouraging sectarianism.
- Equity: One poster pointed out the impracticality of providing state faith schools for all faiths when communities in contemporary Britain are so diverse.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: JUST HOW DELIBERATIVE?

We can draw a number of conclusions from our preliminary analysis of the behaviour of participants in our online experiment which neither confirm the utopian impulse that the online world is the hotbed of deliberative democracy or the dystopian impulse that it is a world where the loudest and brashest are heard. Our findings are more mixed.

For those wishing to embed deliberative practices online, our experiment offers some positive news, particularly in relation to mutual respect, but also in some respects in realising inclusiveness and a common good orientation. The fears of those who believe that internet discussion forums by their nature will degenerate into flaming on controversial topics are not confirmed: posts generally remained within the rules of discussion established for the forum and the contributions that we defined as ‘disrespectful’ were far from overly offensive. But the limits of our findings on mutual respect must be

recognised: they relate to a very specific design which embedded a range of pro-civic behavioural cues. Respectful deliberation can be engendered online – much depends on institutional design.

We have already noted that our findings on orientations towards the common good are speculative at this point, but are positive and may well be indicative of a strong link in practice (as in theory) with mutual respect: the two virtues may be self-reinforcing.

While the findings on inclusiveness are mixed – in some ways the discussion board reinforces traditional participation bias (for age, education and political interest) – the findings on gender and frequency of internet usage are intriguing. Feminists are concerned that deliberative practices can tend towards the marginalisation of certain social groups: our experiment suggests that one traditionally marginalised social group – women – actually participate to a more significant degree. Again, the lack of significance of high levels of internet usage suggests that we need a more nuanced account of the nature of the digital divide.

But it is important to recognise the apparent failings against deliberative criteria, in particular in relation to reciprocity and reason-giving. The findings under these two categories tend to be complementary: participants generally contribute without (explicit) recognition of the contributions of others or recourse to background information. This indicates a lack of the forms of reciprocity, listening and informed interaction that are fundamental to accounts of the deliberative ideal.

One response to our findings and to the analytical framework is that we are expecting too much from participants; that we should apply a lower standard

of judgement. One option would be to develop criteria associated with, for example, 'discussion' (Aldred 2002; Stromer-Galley 2007) or 'everyday talk'. In light of the modest opinion shifts resulting from the discussion forums (Smith et al 2010) such an approach would be worthy of consideration, although our findings of a lack of reason-giving, reciprocity and informed contributions would still be a legitimate ground of concern within a revised framework.

We are left then with a mixed picture. We can scale-up participation using online technologies and through careful institutional design engender certain elements of deliberative practices; but there are some elements that offer a greater challenge. In other words, the deliberative cup is half full – or half empty.

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APPENDIX 1

Rules of discussion

DO:

1. Most importantly, engage in the debates and enjoy yourself!!
2. Respect others by not posting offensive comments relating to race, religion, gender, nationality or sexuality or other personal characteristics.
3. Stay on-topic. Only post messages that are related to this online deliberation.
4. Stay relaxed. Though this deliberation is important and influential, taking part should be a positive experience.
5. Protect yourself and others by not posting anyone's personal information addresses, phone numbers, email addresses or other online contact details
6. Be yourself at all times – please don't impersonate or falsely claim to represent a person or organisation.

DON'T:

7. Swear, use hate-speech or make obscene or vulgar comments.
8. Break the law. This includes libel, condoning illegal activity and contempt of court (comments which might affect the outcome of an approaching court case).
9. Repeat the same comment on more than one thread or topic.
10. Advertise. You can mention relevant products and services as long as they support your comment.

APPENDIX 2

DELIBERATION CODING GUIDANCE

Theme (tree node)	Quantitative statistics	Qualitative Coding options (node)	Description	Analysis
1. Presence	1. Frequency of posting and logging on.			What proportion of the potential participants are posting to this thread and how does this compare with other threads?
2. Difference	2. Posting and logging on by socio economic status.			Are those posting to this thread drawn from the whole population (gender, age, education, ethnicity, political interest and computer use)?
		2.1 Different perspectives (inclusiveness)	Posts will be coded according to the perspective they take. This will be done inductively, looking at the number of different perspectives expressed by participants and grouping similar opinions together.	Are there diverse viewpoints expressed? (we can compare info and delib threads) Is there any evidence of 'View dominance – that an apparent homogeneity of views has excluded other opposing perspectives? e.g. are

Theme (tree node)	Quantitative statistics	Qualitative Coding options (node)	Description	Analysis
				some perspectives raised briefly and then silenced by the majority? Is there any engagement between discourses? Does the facilitation promote or dampen variety of discourse?
3. Equal Voice	3. Number of posts per person, by socio economic status			Is the debate dominated by a small minority? What is the extent of one-timers? Is any one group under- or over-represented? (gender, age, education, ethnicity, political interest and computer use)
		3.1 Frequent posters	The most frequent posters will be identified from the stats. Their behaviour in terms of justification, respect, recipricocity and spamming can be compared to other participants	How do the most frequent posters behave? Are they more considered and respectful in their deliberation or are they crowding out others by repeatedly stating the same ideas? This will tell us whether there has actually been any conversation.
4.	4. Number of	4.0 no		To what extent do participants use

Theme (tree node)	Quantitative statistics	Qualitative Coding options (node)	Description	Analysis
Justification	participants in the thread who viewed the materials relevant to this thread.	justification		<p>different types of evidence to justify their contributions? How does this vary between the information groups and the deliberation groups?</p> <p>Note: the fact that a participant did not mention any evidence does not necessarily imply their contribution is not based on evidence.</p>
		4.1 explicit personal experience	personal stories, first hand accounts, accounts from close friends or family members	
		4.2 briefing materials	references to the briefing documents (implicit or explicit), including statements of absence of or problems with facts in briefing documents.	
		4.3 external authorities	Explicit references to the mass media, web sources, reports, books etc.	
		4.4 other participants	reference to prior comments in the discussion. This must be an explicit reference back: e.g. "like Charles said". The thought needs to clearly use another participant's argument or evidence as a reason for their own opinion.	

Theme (tree node)	Quantitative statistics	Qualitative Coding options (node)	Description	Analysis
		4.5 moderator	Reference to prior comments by a moderator. This must be an explicit reference back: e.g. "like the moderator said". The thought needs to clearly use another participant's argument or evidence as a reason for their own opinion.	
		4.6 not explicit	participant are builds on previous comments and have just not made the reference explicit	
5. Disrespect towards groups		5.1 Disrespect young people	Explicit disrespect towards young people, including sarcastic comments.	What proportion of the posts are disrespectful to the groups in society which are the subject of the delilberation? How does this relate to the variety of discourses that are present?
		5.2 Disrespect ethnic group(s)	Explicit disrespect toward other ethnic groups, including sarcastic comments.	
6. Recipricocity		6.1 Not a response	This post is not a response to another post	To what extent are participants engaging with one another and considering the claims of others, rather than simply making statements in response to the questions asked by the
		6.2 Response Agree	Explicit response to another post, agreeing with the views expressed	
		6.3 Response	Explicit response to another post,	

Theme (tree node)	Quantitative statistics	Qualitative Coding options (node)	Description	Analysis
		Disagree	disagreeing with the views expressed	facilitators?
		6.4 Non-explicit response Agree	This post seems, from its content, to be picking up on ideas expressed in an earlier post and agreeing	
		6.5 Non-explicit response Disagree	This post seems, from its content, to be picking up on ideas expressed in an earlier post and disagreeing	
7. Disrespect towards others		7.1 Disrespect other participants	Explicit comment showing disrespect towards: another individual who has posted; other posters in general; or the contents of a post (including sarcastic comments)	To what extent are participants engaged in respectful discussion with one another? How do levels of respect vary between topics? How does respect change over time?
8. Common Good		7.1 Common good statement	Posts which express an other-regarding sentiment will be coded here. The common good is a wide term and could include "the nation", "young people", "the poor" etc as well as narrower concerns like "people round here". Inductive coding, creating codes to	To what extent and how do participants express common good sentiments?

Theme (tree node)	Quantitative statistics	Qualitative Coding options (node)	Description	Analysis
			reflect the content of the posts.	

