RESEARCH ARTICLE

Local issues discussion forums in comparative perspective: whose voices are heard?

Simon Smith*

Centre for Digital Citizenship, Institute of Communications Studies, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK

What would a socially inclusive discussion forum look like, and how inclusive are existing local issues discussion forums? This paper asserts that one needs to refer to normative conceptions of democracy before it is possible to make such an assessment. It is argued that within the hybridized modes of governance of contemporary local communities, various kinds of intermediation often substitute for direct participation. Their occurrence is demonstrated empirically in an exploratory analysis of three European local issues discussion forums. Advocacy and inclusionary community-building practices allow the voices of socially-excluded groups to be heard, even when they are not present online. This occurs particularly when public goods are the subject of discussion.

Keywords: e-participation; governance; intermediation; local issues forums; online discussion; public goods; social inclusion

Introduction

There is survey evidence in relation to online political participation “of genuine mobilisation among harder-to-reach groups … [especially] among younger people … [whose] disinclination … to participate actively in the ‘real’ world either disappears or is substantially lowered in the virtual environment” (Gibson et al. 2005, p. 562). Online tools can set in train “a process of techno-political learning and the reception of ‘friendly’ political stimuli” (Gibson et al. 2005, p. 578) that effectively lower some of the barriers to participation by facilitating “political socialisation” (Gibson et al. 2005, p. 579). Similar conclusions follow from the eUser survey results (see Millard 2006).

Yet although discussion forums run by or within local authorities usually aspire to be socially inclusive, their user base typically constitutes a tiny fraction of a local population. In part, this is simply because excluded groups are less likely to be online in the first place, and thus exposed to beneficial “e-stimuli”. In part it reflects “normal” patterns of political participation through whatever channel. Before dismissing their relevance to all but a civic elite, however, we need to ask whether we are measuring the right variable if we simply count the number of users and (assuming we can get the data) assess how closely they represent the local population demographically. What would a socially inclusive discussion forum look like, and how inclusive are existing local issues discussion forums? This paper argues that one needs to define the normative project of governance for a given local context before it is possible to make such an assessment, but given that within most contemporary local governance regimes intermediation is an important means through

*Email: S.O.Smith@leeds.ac.uk
which participation occurs, measures of social inclusion must take account of this. The occurrence of various types of intermediation is then demonstrated in an exploratory analysis of three European local issues discussion forums.

**Local issues discussion forums**

The term “local issues forum” is used here to refer to a particular type of discussion forum, with due acknowledgement to the pioneers of this model, the Minnesota-based organization E-Democracy.Org. Many other discussion forums closely resemble this model, even if they do not explicitly ascribe to it. One incarnation of the E-Democracy.Org home page defined a local issues forum as “an online interactive public sphere” focusing on issues relevant to a geographically-bounded jurisdiction (Dahlberg 2001). They aspire to generate a permanent, local issue-based deliberative debate that invigorates local democracy from the bottom up. They differ from general discussion forums on the web because of the involvement of political representatives and public officials as participants, observers and sponsors of the process. This means that debate is both vertical (between politicians and citizens) and horizontal (between citizens, or indeed, between politicians). They also differ from most other discussion forums because they serve defined physical (territorial) communities. Typically, anyone from anywhere can join in (an ethos of openness is usually important), but the discussion is limited to issues affecting a defined locality or region, usually based on political/administrative boundaries. In the Minnesota model, participants are expected to use their real names to symbolize their personal accountability for the views they express, but elsewhere the use of pseudonyms or nicknames by participants is allowed. Here, both types are referred to as local issues forums.

The goal of social inclusion typically features prominently among the aims of local issues forums. So the goal of the Minneapolis local issues forum, as formulated in its charter, is “to provide a vibrant online space where citizens, elected officials, and community leaders – with diverse ideas and backgrounds – can discuss the important local issues facing our city in a civil and respectful manner” (E-Democracy.Org 2008). Its strategic plan for 2007–2009 includes the goal to “increase and sustain participation including efforts to raise ‘new voices’ in local Issues Forums” (E-Democracy.Org 2007, p. 1). Many politicians and civic activists involved in setting up UK Local Issues Forums using the Minnesota model as part of the Local eDemocracy National Project “expressed the hope that a diverse range of local citizens would participate in the LIF, which would come to represent a cross-section of the communities” (Coleman et al. 2005, p. 11), and, indeed, one of the over-arching aims of the National Project was “to use eDemocracy as a tool to address the problems of social exclusion and to develop and to provide a tool for purposeful social inclusion” (Coleman et al. 2005, p. 29). Often, the means by which it is hoped to improve the inclusiveness of traditional offline participation activities are simply attributed to intrinsic properties of the online environment, albeit for sound theoretical reasons: thus, the Internet is held by its champions to lower the barriers to participation through a combination of greater convenience, the possibility of anonymity – which might be important for minorities in certain political and cultural contexts – and the possibility of designing a more dialogical, interactive process than those which can easily be accommodated through offline channels (one which enables people to respond in natural language and, thus, to express their political views on their own terms). Important offline facilitators of social inclusion, such as outreach, are often neglected, in spite of abundant evidence of the importance of intensive, targeted outreach in engaging socially excluded
groups\(^1\) (Coleman \textit{et al.} 2005, Smith \textit{et al.} 2008a). It should be acknowledged, however, that E-Democracy.Org pays considerable attention to the need for outreach and training to “raise the voices of those less connected” (E-Democracy.Org 2007, p. 3).

**Beyond access and skills: who benefits?**

Even if good outreach strategies were in place, however, is it sufficient to treat the “inclusion” issue as a recruitment problem in participation processes? A more holistic view – treating people’s experiences as multi-dimensional and embedded in social relations – defines social inclusion as something more than mere access to opportunities and the resources an individual can call upon to make use of them. In a paper synthesizing use of the term internationally, the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion found that definitions of social inclusion commonly also include concepts like respect, diversity, cohesion, shared goals and meanings, and a feeling of belonging to a community.\(^2\) This implies a need to critically examine participation as a political issue in order to assess its inclusiveness.

In e-government practice and theory, this more holistic conception of social inclusion is gaining implicit recognition. For example, as Internet use rates plateau out, and usage of e-government remains low in many countries, attention has been turning away from access and use towards proxy use and other forms of intermediation. This was recognized at the EU Ministerial e-Government conference in Manchester in 2005, and the new philosophy is encapsulated in a report by the UK government’s Social Exclusion Unit which states: “the digital divide is about a lot more than getting people online, and, indeed, may not always require this if services are enhanced by ICT and delivered by other means” (Social Exclusion Unit 2005). Cited examples of good practice in a report on European e-government included Greek Citizen Service Centres, where citizens and businesses can ask clerks to use the Internet on their behalf, Maltese e-government \textit{agents}, the Austrian e-Government Law initiative, in which staff act as official \textit{proxies}, and Portuguese Public Internet Access Spaces, in which trained personnel act as \textit{social intermediaries} within local communities (Millard 2007). In the latter case, there was a dramatic increase in online tax returns in Portugal (to 50% of all returns), more than half of which were assisted by intermediaries.

Furthermore, the sorts of intermediation which are emerging within public services are no longer only the “one-stop-shop” variety, but “based on longer-term and more stable relationships” that permit the sharing of personal experiences and tacit knowledge between intermediary and client (Millard 2006, p. 11). These qualities are even more likely to be present in the case of \textit{social} intermediation, where proxy users are likely to be representing individuals and groups with whom they have an emotional tie or a sense of shared identity.

Proxy use of the Internet via social intermediaries (i.e. having a friend or relative search for information on one’s behalf or make online purchases for you if you do not possess a credit card) is now recognized as an important form of access, albeit the divide issue is still relevant, since Internet users are themselves more likely to be proxy users than non-Internet users: 49% of current Internet users and 29% of non-users or past users made use of a proxy, according to a 2003 UK survey (Office for National Statistics 2007). However, these figures nonetheless demonstrate that the benefits of online services can spread to people who do not use the Internet. The importance of social intermediation as an access channel to \textit{e-government} services has also been recognized: in a cross-European survey, 42% of e-government users assisted family or friends (an average of 2.6 other people) with access to e-government (Millard 2006).
A third type of intermediation is the phenomenon of the “super-user” or “community networker”, who seemed to be central to getting local e-participation initiatives up and running in a number of UK pilots (Coleman et al. 2005, p. 39). They act as an interface between online and face-to-face networks. Such advocates for socially excluded groups, rather than the groups themselves, are the target audience for some of the online resources cited as good practice by the Social Exclusion Unit in the UK (Social Exclusion Unit 2005).

Therefore, the question from a social inclusion perspective has become “who benefits from ICT-enabled e-government services?” instead of “who uses e-government services?” This is beginning to be reflected in evaluation frameworks: the French Mareva methodology, for example, identifies “benefits for groups at risk”, “benefits for social cohesion” and “benefits to democratic participation” as outcomes to be measured, as well as “empowerment of local communities” and “mutualized infrastructure for communities” (Millard 2007, p. 28). These types of outcome do not necessarily presume direct use by the groups/communities concerned; on the contrary, there is an implicit assumption that some benefits will spread further, and by various channels, within the communities where projects are embedded. My research questions test whether we can extrapolate from the use of online public services to e-participation.

Research questions

Under what circumstances can local issues forums contribute to social inclusion?

Looking at usage, the indications are mixed. But unlike e-government use, which is skewed towards higher-income, more educated, employed and media-literate users (Eurostat 2005), the population of discussion forum users is at least more or less representative of the population of Internet users on income and educational grounds. Older Internet users are under-represented but unemployed Internet users are actually over-represented (Eurostat 2006). So, discussion forums appear to be a relatively accessible medium for disadvantaged groups that are already online. Altogether, around 33% of all European adults using the Internet have used a discussion forum of some kind.

Usage of discussion forums and the like for democratic participation has not often been measured on a representative population sample, but one of the few such surveys in the UK (albeit somewhat dated) found fewer than 1% of Internet users in 2002 reporting such activities as “discussing politics in a chat group”, “joining an email discussion about politics” or “participating in an online question and answer session with a political official” (Gibson et al. 2005, pp. 568–570). Unfortunately, the survey did not ask specifically about discussion forums, but assuming it is possible to extrapolate, it would seem that, in most localities, their users make up a tiny and socially exclusive fraction of the population, which could be confirmed by looking at usage statistics. Dahlberg (2001), for example, found that the forum he studied – Minnesota E-Democracy – had a skewed representation towards higher-status socio-economic and white ethnic groups, as well as towards men.

Furthermore, some online political participation is not only socially exclusive but exclusionary. National political discussion forums, for example, have been criticized for homophily – a tendency for “homogeneity of in-group members” that diminishes the natural opportunities for negotiating difference within the public sphere (Wilhelm 2000, p. 103). They might, in other words, include more people by building bonding social capital (creating enclaves), while at the same time undermining bridging and linking social capital,
mirroring the common tension between inclusion at different spatial scales (e.g. at the neighborhood scale and the urban scale). Yet, as described earlier, most normative definitions of social inclusion consider the interaction between groups with different values and a movement towards the establishment of certain shared goals and meanings to be an essential dimension of a socially inclusive society.

The relatively local scale of a town or city may be a promising setting for e-participation initiatives that seek to avoid these exclusionary tendencies. Dahlberg (2001) argued that locatedness unearths common problems (since local issues are impossible to avoid where they impact on all the inhabitants of a place), and should therefore encourage greater diversity (since belonging is given by place of residence and not by selective affiliation), within the limits set by the diversity of social experience among the inhabitants of a city. This advantage is compounded by the fact that the most important local government competences concern public goods like “crime management, transport, waste disposal, air and water quality, health priorities”, consumed (and increasingly produced) by collective actors or by the local public as a whole (Shaddock 2007). It should, however, be noted that the same goods may be more or less public (i.e. non-excludable and non-rivalrous) in different social, political, and cultural contexts (Stewart et al. 2004), and that the nature of collective action problems varies according to the structure of the local population or the extent to which territorial issues span administrative boundaries (Rydin and Pennington 2000). Some issues will, therefore, be more suited to participative modes of governance than others, and this will vary from place to place. When analyzing online discussion, it is therefore important to consider whether the issues people are discussing concern public or private goods (and the spectrum of hybrid types in between), since different issues will present different incentive structures for collective action. The example of housing will be used below to illustrate how contextual factors (different degrees of public-ness) shape the opportunities and obstacles for the construction of a socially inclusive public discourse.

Can a citizen benefit from an e-participation tool like a local issues discussion forum without actually using it? What kinds of intermediation can occur in online discussion?

At first glance, it might seem that, unlike service use, democratic participation only carries meaning for those individuals who use a tool for themselves. The quality of the experience is, arguably, more essential to e-participation than to e-government service use. In the latter, socially excluded groups are focused on outcome rather than process (Social Exclusion Unit 2005), and are therefore willing to delegate responsibility for dealing with the state as long as they receive the benefits, but this may or may not be the case with democratic involvement.3 It is noteworthy that the Social Exclusion Unit report on tackling social exclusion through ICTs picks up on numerous examples of service access intermediation, but when it comes to the potential for ICT to contribute to social inclusion by building personal capacity and building social networks and civic participation, all the good practice examples cited assume direct use by the ultimate beneficiaries (Social Exclusion Unit 2005).

Representative systems encounter increasing difficulties in reaching socially excluded groups. Informal types of intermediation, built on long-term relationships of trust and mutual understanding, have a better track record on the whole (Smith et al. 2008b). Thus, it was argued by some of the founders of the UK local issues forums that community groups, who work intensively with the socially excluded, might be the most effective means of including their voices in a forum which hoped to influence local policy, given the
difficulties anticipated in persuading socially excluded individuals to take part personally (Coleman et al. 2005). From 2007, E-Democracy.Org has developed a strategy for “engaging people from diverse and less represented communities” that implicitly recognizes the important intermediary role of volunteers from such communities (E-Democracy.Org 2007, p. 3) who can voice the experiences of whole social groups, acting as advocates.

When considering these possibilities, much depends on our definition of democracy and the public sphere. Intermediation of any form is a problematic concept in a participatory democracy (towards which e-participation is itself sometimes held to be propelling us). Conversely, in a representative democracy mass public participation can be viewed as a threat to the stability or efficiency of democratic institutions (Creasy et al. 2007). Thus, the rationale for, value of and social acceptability of (e)participation are all shaped by normative conceptions of democracy. These are arguably becoming increasingly hybridized: Coleman et al. speak of an evolution towards direct representation, according to which “representatives still represent the public, but the public has a much closer and more ongoing communicative relationship with them” (Coleman et al. 2005, p. 40).

Different conceptions of democracy call for not only different levels of participation, but also different types. Within what is sometimes called a “plebiscitary democracy”, public interest is formed through the aggregation of preferences seen as sovereign, whereas in a so-called “deliberative democracy” the formation of public interest occurs through the integration of perspectives, viewing “society as an essentially social construct where preferences are endogenously produced” (Fagan et al. 2006, p. 40). Deliberative democracy does require “participation by an inclusive sample of citizens”, but within a “rule-based framework for discussion” (Coleman et al. 2005, p. 43) where status differentials are suspended in order to enable free and open interaction. Thus, whereas measuring the social inclusiveness of participation in a plebiscitary democracy would be relatively straightforward (because participation is a quantitative variable), in a deliberative democracy, we would need to pay attention not only to who uses discussion forums, but also to how issues are framed, prioritized, mediated, and (in some cases) settled, whose interests get advocated and whose identities get reflected in the discussion – in other words, whether the politics practised in the forum are inclusionary or exclusionary. Social inclusion becomes a qualitative phenomenon, and the focus is on connections, interaction, relationships and intersubjective communicative action rather than the participants as sovereign subjects (Linaa Jensen 2003). We would be particularly interested in how issues of diversity were handled, since this has implications for social cohesion.

Thus, depending on the dominant mode of governance and political culture (and assuming this is reflected in the democratization goals of an e-participation project-owner), we can envisage different scenarios for online discussion. The following table sets out three such scenarios, relating to archetypal modes of governance. Real-world situations will be hybrids, mixing elements of all three – for example, by employing different modes for different policy issues. E-Participation needs to be evaluated in relation to a normative governance project. We need firstly to answer the question: “what is (e)participation being asked to do in this historical and geographical situation?” in order to be able to answer the question: “is it sufficiently inclusive to serve this purpose?” As Table 1 shows, different governance scenarios imply different tests for social inclusion.

Scenario A assumes a change in mode of governance to a quasi-market mode, in which political leadership becomes more strategic and there is more scope for self-government of a plebiscitary type (e.g. referenda and voting). Public value is established in society through
quasi-market mechanisms by aggregating demand (counting votes) or by co-production (allowing citizens, as consumers, to “vote with their feet” or their personal budgets). This has recently been a strong trend in some European countries at the local scale in spheres like health and social services. There is little scope for deliberation or intermediation because interests are seen as fixed. In this case, it clearly matters entirely who participates which population groups are over- and under-represented online because benefits only accrue to direct participants. Furthermore, the potential impact on local democracy increases arithmetically with participation: the more participants, the more people are rehearsing and/or performing citizenship and thereby educating and enlightening themselves. If few participate personally, then few gain. A discussion forum may not be the best participation tool for this mode of governance because of its emphasis on direct decision-making: e-voting, e-referenda, etc. have more obvious applicability.

Scenario B assumes little change in mode of governance from the hierarchical mode typical of twentieth-century democracies (including local authorities), but to adapt to the information society, governments need increasingly more accurate and timely knowledge of public concerns. In this case, the focus is on the knowledge gains from public participation or engagement that have value to policy-makers, due to the possibility of accessing and integrating localized or distributed knowledge. Here, direct participation is not the key question. Instead, we want to know whose interests and identities are taken account of in the discussion and in any resulting decision-making process. The social
interests of excluded groups could, in principle, be adequately represented by advocates who take part in the discussion, since tacit knowledge (the key asset from a decision-maker’s perspective), even when it is highly distributed, exists in a community context: it is not unique to individuals. Thus, impact may increase initially with rising participation since there is more input to problem-solving (better asset-mapping and knowledge-pooling within a community), but mass participation may bring with it new problems, as the decision-making process increases in complexity. What matters more than numbers is the effective representation of all relevant interests and social positions, and their effective framing as inputs to decision-making. In this mode of governance, with its emphasis on vertical communication, a discussion forum could play an important role but would need to be configured and used to suit this purpose (e.g. threads for questions to the mayor or councillors or use by council representatives to solicit local knowledge and opinion).

Scenario C assumes a change in mode of governance to a network mode in which political leadership becomes more strategic (metagovernance) and many governance functions are distributed within networks. Public value is established in society by deliberation and collective learning, diffused from representative chambers to “deliberatively more demanding” segments of the public sphere (communities of critical reflection), which might function as strong publics (Eriksen 2007), policy networks (Lord 2004), project teams or insulated subaltern enclaves. This mode of governance is invoked when local authorities attempt to adopt a “place-shaping” role, coordinating or facilitating the actions of a network of partner agencies and also seeking to mobilize citizens and civil society organizations as co-producers of public goods and values (see Lyons 2007). Accumulating stocks of knowledge held collectively within such a community have the potential, through a process of continual self-reflection and intra-community dialogue, to “ameliorate the power imbalances” inherent in communicative action so that the community becomes less prone to domination by organized interests (O’Donnell et al. 2007, p. 13). Communities need a certain level of participation to become viable, and they also need to bring together previously unconnected actors – otherwise, they add nothing new to the way local stocks of knowledge are integrated and distributed. Advocates should have scope to act creatively and adopt new positions, without having to consult their “constituency”, but since this introduces a danger of elitism, a steady inflow of new participants who are likely to be more closely in touch with the concerns of those not present in the deliberative arena is sometimes seen as necessary to the health of deliberative democracy (Phillips 1995). On the other hand, an unstable, fluctuating membership could adversely affect relationship-building, so a balance needs to be found. What matters more than numbers are continuity and sustainability of participation, and the functionality of the forum as a space for networking and experimentation, which may sometimes require protection from surveillance or assurances of neutrality. Discussion forums clearly have a utility as participation tools to support this mode of governance by hosting or actually nurturing the sorts of communities of critical reflection necessary for it to function.

The key point in presenting these scenarios is to demonstrate that only under a market-based (plebiscitary) scenario would absolute levels of online participation assume decisive status for measures of inclusiveness. In other cases it is equally important to examine the indirect, as well as the direct benefits of online discussion for socially excluded groups: a hierarchical scenario directs attention towards the constituencies or group interests which are included or excluded (whether or not they are present), whereas a network scenario directs attention to the inclusionary or exclusionary nature of the politics practised in strong publics, enclaves, project teams and policy networks. We should also be conscious that discussion forums, while they are relatively flexible participation tools and can be
configured in different ways to suit different purposes, have strengths and weaknesses that mean that they are more suited to the hierarchical and, especially the network mode of governance than to the market-based mode.

Methodology

Evaluators and researchers meet a major obstacle in analyzing online political discussion: we generally cannot get very much, or very reliable, information about who uses online forums, due to registration procedures that allow anonymity, difficulties of access to any user registration records that are held, low response to online surveys and ethical concerns for “expected privacy” in online environments, which a researcher could unwittingly disrupt (Pittenger 2003, AoIR 2002, Sharf 1999). Not surprisingly, therefore, the DEMO-net project noted that “currently there is very little research on the relationships between demographics and online participation” (O’Donnell et al. 2007, p. 8). Fortunately, discussion forums also have one big advantage for the researcher: namely, their richness in (usually unstructured) content. Compared with other, more structured e-participation methods, the content of discussion forums is more reflexive and thus more complete as a record of a participation process. Transcripts of a debate can, therefore, be analyzed in situ with less risk that errors of interpretation will result from lack of tacit contextual knowledge, since it is common for relevant contextual factors to be recorded in the dialogue itself (for example, via references and links to external agendas such as policy processes and media stories, or by participants divulging fragments of their own backgrounds). In fact, the discussion in forums that share at least some characteristics of community is often precisely about “the intensive exploration of context” driven by a search for a community logic that transcends limited individual perspectives (Aikens 1999, p. 191).

Online political discussion forums can thus be treated from a social construction of technology perspective, given that the technology they employ tends to be relatively flexible, both at the stage of configuration by the authority/initiator, and also at the point when they are re-appropriated in the act of use (or non-use) by members of the local community. The resultant socio-technical system thus tends to be highly idiosyncratic, shaped by local political culture, as well as an internal community-building dynamic.6

Research methods

With a view to the practicalities of evaluation (given the ethical, sampling and sheer access problems associated with researching online communities), I have restricted myself to non-intrusive research methods. This also has the virtue of avoiding self-selection. In combination they would, nevertheless, tell us a good deal about the inclusiveness of the sample7 (scenario A), about wider constituencies included via advocacy (scenario B), and about the inclusionary or exclusionary nature of the politics practised in a forum (scenario C). These outcomes, of course, have real impacts (benefits or threats to socially excluded groups) to the extent that the discussion is integrated into local decision-making or ground-up collective action. I have not attempted to evaluate the level of institutional integration systematically, just as I have not attempted to analyze the particular combinations of modes of governance that prevail in each case study locality. This would require fieldwork. I have simply assumed that all three scenarios are likely to be relevant (to greater or lesser extent) in each situation.
The main research method employed was a qualitative meta-reading of a sample of threads from three local issues forums in different European countries. Threads were selected purposively during an extended period of non-participant observation within each forum (weekly visits over a period of at least one year). Since this is a preliminary investigation, intended only to illustrate how a more systematic evaluation might be undertaken, I was looking for occurrences of intermediation but not seeking to assess its prominence within the overall communication repertoires of the forums in any exact fashion. My meta-reading of the discussions was informed by:

1. Keyword searches, using terms that relate to minority groups, the construction of local identities, and the discursive framing of diversity and commonality.
2. Profiles of thread initiators and high-volume users to try to identify who is setting the agenda for discussion, how they present themselves, and who else they claim to speak for.
3. Comparison between the discussion forum “agenda” and the relevant local council agenda. Council minutes represent a useful benchmark against which to assess the breadth of issues covered in the online discussion.
4. Identification of discourses that invoke offline actors as stakeholders, supporters, opponents, beneficiaries or victims, and perform advocacy, lobbying or self-representation with reference to group identities.

Findings
This section presents exploratory findings from my three case studies, which were a large English city, a medium-sized Czech town and a small Slovak town. The respective user bases of each forum amount to less than 0.1% of the total population in the English city, 2.2% in the Czech town, and 2.6% in the Slovak town. In absolute rather than percentage terms, the numbers were broadly similar (a few hundred) in all cases. The design and hosting of the forums differs: the English forum is an unstructured listserv hosted independently by a civic initiative; the Czech forum a threaded messageboard with predefined thread headings hosted on the local authority web site; and the Slovak forum has a question-and-answer format which displays like a blog, and is also hosted by the local authority. Only the Slovak forum is pre-moderated. Involvement of politicians and officers varies: it is most intensive in the Slovak forum, since every contribution is guaranteed an answer from the responsible officer or politician (often from the mayor); whereas it is significant, but more sporadic, in the Czech forum (37 council officers and politicians are registered users but only a few contribute regularly), and in the English forum (several regular contributors are local councillors but often do not indicate their status).

Advocates
Despite relatively narrow and seemingly predominantly male user bases, there is evidence of social diversity in terms of the subject matter and range of opinions, and there are numerous examples of advocacy for offline others, falling into three categories: the explicit forwarding of letters and messages from others; opening a discussion about a problem faced by known others; and speaking in defence of other groups out of a general “social conscience”. The third type is more common in the English forum, whereas in the Czech and Slovak forums a personal connection normally exists.
**Organic intellectuals**

High-volume users raise issues they believe to have wider community concern and name (real or presumed) opponents and allies. In these instances, they are acting less as advocates for groups distinct from themselves than as spokespeople for broader groups with which they themselves identify. In the Czech and Slovak cases, these groups are most commonly neighbors, i.e. co-residents of particular districts and streets. This is less common in the English case, perhaps because the forum is used less as a means of “petitioning” the authorities (which is very obvious in the Slovak case) than for horizontal communication among citizens (including politicians acting in the capacity of citizens). Other group identities that occur frequently are transport user groups (all cases), commuters (Slovak and English cases), leisure interest groups such as people who play a particular sport or gardeners (Czech and Slovak cases), or small businesses (Czech and Slovak cases).

**Exclusionary communicative practices**

On the other hand, there are also instances of social stereotyping, snobbery and exclusionary group identification, most frequently directed at the perceived anti-social behavior of certain groups of the population defined by the writer using ethnic, class, or lifestyle differentiators. This is particularly notable in the Slovak forum, where the Roma minority (who mostly live in a “ghetto”, across the railway line from the rest of the town) feature as a point of reference for crime and disorder. They are the one group who do not have any online advocates, save, to a certain extent, for the mayor himself. In the English forum, exclusionary communicative practices most commonly relate to party political affiliations, and are usually (though not always) directed at other forum users.

**Self-disclosure as social positioning**

Users often disclose considerable detail about their social background even in the two forums which allow anonymous postings. Anonymity is frequently challenged (both by citizens and by politicians, who often evidently feel uncomfortable discussing with anonymous partners), but it may be someone’s obscurity about her or his social position rather than their real name which is challenged. A revealing exchange between two anonymous users of the Czech forum ended with one “coming out” and signing his subsequent posts. He did not, however, merely use his real name (in fact, he kept his nickname as his user ID), but added the label “pensioner, [name of town]” to his signature, thus revealing his (perhaps surprising) social status and age group. Local residence and especially local origins are commonly used to gain credibility in the Czech and Slovak forums. “Outsiders”, if they cannot or do not wish to disguise their “otherness” (such as a Czech small business owner living in the Slovak town, whose contributions were written in Czech rather than Slovak) feel compelled to introduce themselves by telling an “arrival story” that affirms their commitment to the local community (how he loved the town when he first came there). A Slovak doctor who contributed to the Czech forum was challenged to justify her “interest” in the public life of the Czech town (which was through friendship ties). Everyone has interests and a “background”, and contributors are actively exploring these in their exchanges. They are conscious that political dialogue is by its nature a dialogue between different social positions as much as between particular individuals. Anonymity, moreover, has different
connotations in different political cultures (Coleman et al. 2005). It is a particularly sensitive issue in a post-communist setting, since anonymous tip-offs to the authorities were a pathological feature of the pre-1989 public sphere, as illustrated by a contribution from the mayor of the Slovak town following a spate of offensive anonymous contributions to the forum (including accusations of favoritism in municipal employment practices): “I belong to a generation for whom anonymous letters and phone calls were seen as something no decent person would stoop to. For many people today it’s becoming normal. I’d be only too glad to meet you face-to-face to exchange views, but there must be a genuine effort on your part to get to the truth.”

**Mediating between social positions**

“Getting to the truth” involves disclosing social positions as a first step. A second step, in a deliberative public sphere, is to justify those positions using rational arguments, and then to work out solutions or to “make progress” in some other respect. There are few examples of collective action and partnership coordination, though this may simply be invisible using my research methods (i.e. they occurred offline). There are, however, instances of mediation and conflict resolution which span the online and offline spheres (and thus involve stakeholders not directly present in the forum itself): the mayor of the Slovak town, for example, used the forum to make several offers to mediate inter-group disputes by organizing face-to-face meetings; contributors to the English forum helped, with their suggestions, to resolve harassment suffered by a small trader. A very lively discussion occurred in the Czech forum following the annual festival of wine in 2007, in which two perspectives competed: there were several participants who resented the “commercialization” of the event and its apparent targeting of a younger audience (reflected in the choice of live music) – for them (and, they claimed, many other people they know) it had become less relaxed, less family-friendly, and less local and familiar. Other participants clearly liked the new format, and pointed to record attendances as a sign of its popularity. This prompted a suggestion in the forum that in future the festival could be held over two days, with one day of “traditional” events followed by a commercial music festival. Although no politicians contributed to this particular thread, 37 council staff and representatives are registered users, so it may not be coincidental that a few weeks later the mayor announced that the 2008 festival of wine would indeed be a two-day event along the lines suggested.

**Discussion agendas**

Council agendas are quite closely matched by the topics discussed online, particularly in the Czech and Slovak cases, which may be partly due to steering from forum architecture in one case, and the question–answer format in another. In the English case, where the structure is least pre-determined, the range of issues covered is broader, the focus is sometimes less local and the forum assumes more of a “community noticeboard” function, with the council as merely one of several “content providers”. The level of involvement of politicians and council officers differs considerably between the three forums – highest in the Slovak case, which is actually structured to encourage vertical rather than horizontal communication; and lowest in the English case, where (alone of the three cases) politicians’ profiles do not indicate any difference in status from citizens.
Public goods

In terms of policy domains, the themes that dominate the discussion are remarkably similar: transport and traffic, housing, urban development (upcoming or ongoing construction projects and development threats), crime, anti-social behavior and public safety, the environment, waste management, litter, green and public spaces, health, education, culture and recreational sport. Most of these are public goods, capable of provoking relatively broad alliances among different social groups and, with the exception of the last three named, not particularly prone to rent-seeking behavior by special interest groups. Transport is a good example: it is an issue which affects everyone who uses urban space, and competing user groups exist, but they are not necessarily stratified by income, cutting across social classes to a large extent. In each of the forums, spokespeople for car drivers, cyclists, public transport users and pedestrians are very vocal: no user group is obviously in the minority in terms of the loudness of their voice in the discussion.

Public housing is an issue that indicates the importance of local context and differing local constructions of public goods. The rights of council tenants are defended vigorously in all three forums, but the advocates differ. Czech and Slovak municipalities continue to own and manage a larger stock of council housing than is common in England. There is also still a broader social mix among council house tenants in Central Europe (state sector housing has not been residualized to the same extent as in the UK). Therefore, “organic intellectuals”, emerging from the ranks of council tenants, are readily found among forum users, which apparently is not the case in the English forum, where only one or two contributors describe themselves as social housing tenants, but many others speak out as supporters (especially concerning a controversial stock transfer ballot). Their communicative action is informed by a more general sense of social justice (“acting out of social conscience rather than self interest” to paraphrase one contributor). The costs and benefits of maintaining a high-quality public sector housing stock cut across social classes in the Czech and the Slovak towns, but despite the narrower targeting of the benefits of public-sector housing in the English city and the apparent prevalence in the forum of individuals who only bear its costs, a putative collective action in favor of continued council ownership was, nevertheless, able to take shape. It is not clear whether some properties of the discussion forum itself as a community-building enterprise helped incentivize this behavior, but it is significant that it did not foster collective action in favor of the stock transfer by higher-status social groups whose material interests, arguably, would have been better served by this option.

Special interest issues

Some special interest issues were discussed in the forums. For example, culture, education and recreational sport concern particular interests defined by life stage or lifestyle. They find advocates largely because members of those groups are present in the forum. However, some group-specific issues find advocates in spite of the online absence of members of that interest group. An example of the latter is the airing of racism issues by campaigners and protest organizers in the English forum. Children’s interests find a champion in the Slovak forum who is apparently neither a child nor a parent.
Social justice

Social justice is also invoked when issues are framed in relation to wider social relations, including the social relations of production. Here, too, a diversity of perspectives can usually be found. An example from the Czech forum was a discussion on the construction of a roundabout which meant considerable traffic disruption for several months. Complaints about the perceived slow pace of work led to a discussion about the work practices of construction firms (seen as exploitative by some), workers’ rights and attitudes (perceived as lazy and lacking “pride in the job” by others). There were also advocates for the rights of inhabitants living nearby to noise-free evenings and weekends (people living nearby would be relatively socially excluded groups, who were noticeably not present in the online discussion, but had numerous defenders, even though their interests conflicted with commuters’ desire for faster completion of the work).

Absent voices

One notable “silence” in all three forums, especially when compared with the respective council agendas, is social services, and perhaps most of all, older people’s services. These are issues for which councils have considerable responsibilities in all three countries, and take up a major proportion of time in council meetings, and yet users of these services do not apparently have many advocates in the forums. They are issues which have relatively clearly-defined user groups, but which may be less visible to non-users of those services (or their relatives). They are not cross-cutting themes in the way that transport, parks and urban planning affect all groups who live, work or are otherwise active in a particular urban environment. Nor do they appear to spur a debate between social positions framed around more general conceptions of social justice.

A second absent voice from most discussion is inhabitants of neighboring areas. They may have common or competing interests in respect of urban development issues, for example, and yet the discussion forums seem to be populated almost exclusively by citizens. These areas, along with ethnicity, therefore present the greatest challenges for enhancing the inclusiveness of online discussion. It may be that other (e)participation tools are simply more appropriate to issues with clearly definable user groups and few externalities, while discussion among a geographically wider population may simply be taking place elsewhere, in online spaces with a regional or sub-regional identity. In this case the challenge is to prevent the fragmentation of the online public sphere.¹⁰

Conclusions

Deploying e-government to meet the needs of disadvantaged groups has to invoke not only skills and access measures but also flexi-channeling and social intermediation (Millard 2006). Unless we are radical direct democrats, the same principle ought to apply to e-participation. Most e-participation tools aspire to host a discussion which is inclusive and diverse, reflecting a cross-section of the local population. Although forums are little used by disadvantaged groups, this exploratory study has demonstrated that there is considerable scope within them for intermediation practices, allowing “socially excluded” voices to be heard.¹¹ These practices develop chiefly around goods locally constructed as public goods, but also around some special interest issues with little evidence of rent-seeking behavior by narrow group interests.
The fact that intermediation occurs online is a rather obvious, even banal conclusion. This makes it all the more surprising that the role of intermediaries in e-participation (as opposed to e-government) has been little researched. Key questions for further research include additional investigation on the importance of context (local modes of governance, as well as technical design) in shaping participation habits and the politics of social inclusion that occur online, and the question of whether e-participation tools like discussion forums can help make the forms of intermediation which have been documented here more effective compared with, or in combination with, offline channels. If so, perhaps they can do two things: meeting the call for “virtual public spaces that enable an individual’s voice to develop into a community (public) voice” (OECD 2003, p. 7), while at the same time constructing a community (public) voice that includes the interests and identities of offline individuals and groups.

Notes
1. Guidelines on resident involvement in community development from the UK government go so far as to recommend that “successful and sustainable community involvement” requires four to six dedicated community outreach workers per 10,000 target population, which may account for 10% of the programme budget (renewal.net 2002). Coleman et al. apply a similar rule of thumb to e-democracy, recommending that “as much effort needs to go into outreach as into the day-to-day running of projects” (Coleman et al. 2005, p. 41).
2. There is often a certain tension between the individual and collective dimensions of social inclusion (Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion, 2002).
4. In the United States, for example, participation in political discussion forums has been muted, it has been argued, by a strong representational bent to American political culture: Americans tend to delegate to political representatives, and the most dynamic developments in e-democracy in the United States have been in tools designed to enable the public to hold their representatives to account, such as webcasting (Peart 2007). In Europe, by contrast, political culture tends to be somewhat more participative (though generalization is dangerous), and deliberative tools like discussion forums were found to be more common (Peart and Diaz 2007).
5. The social climate of forums may also be affected by the ratio of “browsers” to “posters”.
6. The shaping influence of political culture on e-democracy applications has been invoked as a powerful explanatory factor of the diverse uses of essentially the same technological infrastructure in different local contexts (see several of the studies in Tsagarousianou et al. 1998, Guthrie and Dutton 1992, Malina and Ball 2005, Myles 2004).
7. Evidence is weakest here, because no demographic data about users was collected or was accessible.
8. The figures refer to numbers of contributors, not browsers or registered users. Given the different formats of the discussion forums, this was the most comparable measure.
9. It would be useful to investigate how important design is in shaping the opportunity structure for participation. This would necessitate interviewing key stakeholders to reconstruct the political bargaining processes that preceded the commissioning and design of the forums (Wright and Street 2007).
10. The author is aware, for example, of a lively sub-regional discussion forum linked to the Slovak case study.
11. Furthermore, it is encouraging to note that discussion forums in countries with a sharper digital divide do not appear any less diverse or more dominated by narrow, exclusionary politics, except in relation to ethnicity (which is probably connected with cultural differences rather than the extent of the digital divide).

References


Coleman, S., et al., 2005. *From the ground up. An evaluation of community-focused approaches to eDemocracy.* Bristol: Bristol City Council/Local eDemocracy National Project.


Smith, S., Lindsay, S., and Bellaby, P., 2008a. Social inclusion at different scales in the urban environment: locating the community to empower. *Urban studies*, submitted for publication.


