

DESIGNING HUMILITY INTO ONLINE NEWS COMMENTS

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The public sphere around media outlets offers many examples of dysfunctional behaviors that deeply undercut the humility of public dialogue.¹

The goal of the project is to explore how e-deliberation platforms can be adapted by media institutions to promote more constructive and reasonable dialogue in news comments. In other words, is it possible to structure an online environment that promotes reason giving and intellectually humble interactions?

The project will test the capacity of two open-source e-deliberation platforms that take very different approaches to support more intellectually humble dialogue in the comment section of online newspapers. *Deliberatorium* enables the co-creation of an argument map that promotes dispassionate reason giving. *Pol.is* induces a more emotional understanding of the perspective of others, highlighting networks of opinion and allowing participants to reflect on and change their position within the network. Both platforms have been piloted in the field: *Deliberatorium* was used by 400 members of the Italian Democratic Party to deliberate over a proposal for electoral reform (Klein et al. 2012); *Pol.is* by a social movement in Taiwan (g0v) where 1800 people contributed to the definition of an Uber regulation (Tang 2015).

The project will employ a large, innovative field experiment. It will be delivered by an experienced research team and consultants, overseen by an interdisciplinary advisory board, and involves partnerships with the Mozilla Foundation (currently collaborating with New York Times and Washington Post to develop tools for the future of journalism), the g0v social movement, and the Participedia and Empatia research programs. We have interest in the project from significant media organizations in the UK and US.

Key project members

PI: Graham Smith (University of Westminster). Specialist in democratic innovations.

CoPI: Michael E. Morrell (University of Connecticut). Specialist in deliberation.

CoPI: Paolo Spada (Southampton). Specialist in e-deliberation and experimental design.

¹ See for example <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/jan/31/online-comments-toxic-interaction-racism-harassment>
<http://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/jan/31/comments-audience-censorship-criticism>
<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/apr/13/trolls-trampling-political-discourse-abuse>
<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/apr/18/welcome-to-the-worst-job-in-the-world-my-life-as-a-guardian-moderator>

Implementation consultants:

Perry Walker (New Economics Foundation) Specialist in participatory events

Mark Klein (MIT idealab) Specialist in argument mapping software

Matthew Fisher (Yale) Specialist in metrics of intellectual humility

Rachel Collinson (London) Specialist in digital engagement

International research board:

Political science: Andre Bachtiger (Stuttgart), H el ene Landemore (Yale), Mark Warren (UBC)

Psychology: Hugo Mercier (Neuch atel)

Engagement: Tiago Peixoto (World Bank Digital Engagement Unit), Lex Paulson (Sciences Po)

Technology: David Ascher (Mozilla), Audrie Tang (pol.is)

The project will begin with user and designer input into the efficacy of different design characteristics for news comments platforms. We will hold 15 participatory design events with citizens, 3 with journalists and a larger event with technology experts at the Mozilla Festival in London. Each activity will be followed by individual user experience (UX) testing sessions. This process will inform the adaptation of *Deliberatorium* and *Pol.is* for the field experiment.

The project will then implement three separate e-deliberations in partnership with the media outlets. Readers will be invited to participate through an online campaign and stratified random groups of readers will be encouraged to provide comments on the three different platforms (*Deliberatorium*, *Pol.is*, status-quo). The experiment will track group level metrics of intellectually humble and reason-based dialogue and individual level metrics of intellectual humility. The research team and board combine experts of metrics of dialogue quality from political science, computer science and psychology.

Our experience from previous experiments and from the work of our digital campaign specialist is that we will recruit at least 3,000 participants (if not more with the right choice of topic). With these numbers we will be in a strong position to test the efficacy of the three platforms, treating smaller groups of around 100 participants. We will also have the statistical power to identify additional group treatment effects such as modes of moderation (including an automated process) and anonymity/disclosure and individual level treatments including specifically designed frames to promote humble dialogue.

All aspects of the projects will be devised in collaboration with an interdisciplinary research board and through liaison with members of the Public Discourse Project to ensure the suitability and replicability of metrics.

Expected outputs and deliverables;

Five types of deliverable will be produced by the research team:

- Academic publications – a substantive findings paper to be submitted to leading US political science journal; a paper on the design process for a leading ICT journal; a methodological paper for a research methods journal

- Media – policy brief, video and events with media outlets to promote key findings and recommendations.
- Software – two open source platforms for news comments
- Metrics – a field tested set of metrics for intellectual humility at the individual and group level
- Open access database – the anonymized data will be housed on the repository of participedia.net to ensure the widest access by the academic and other research communities.

One of the rationales for including a broad interdisciplinary research board is to not only tap their expertise in the design and delivery of aspects of the project, but also to give them early access to the data to develop their own deliverables.

Project timeline;

The project will last 2 years and can be divided into 6-month blocks.

1. February-July 2017: focus groups and deliberative events on platform design
2. August 2017-January 2018: design of platforms, experiment & metrics.
3. February-July 2018: implementation & data analysis
4. August 2018-January 2019: production of deliverables

Promoting cultural change

The project will provide practical evidence to media outlets on how to improve their comments platforms to support more constructive and less strident dialogue over socially and culturally diverse issues. These findings will have broader application, beyond news outlets, for institutions using asynchronous text platforms. The integration of leading media outlets, along with the g0v social movement and the Mozilla community increases the potential for meaningful cultural change.