Moderator in Government-Initiated Online Discussions

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INTRODUCTION

In an older version of a Dutch Internet dictionary the moderator is defined as "a person who exercises censorship on a mailing list or newsgroup."[1] In the libertarian tradition of the Internet, moderation has often been viewed as conflicting with free speech and unrestrained communication (Tsagarousianou, 1998). However, as the history of the famous PEN-experiment (Public Electronic Network) in Santa Monica (1990-96) already showed, the free speech principle has to be weighed against other legitimate concerns, like the need to facilitate a genuine discussion and to counteract possible abuses of the medium (Docter & Dutton, 1998).

This article covers government-initiated online discussions between citizens, government officials, politicians, and social organizations. The importance of moderation of these discussions is now generally recognized (see, for instance, Coleman & Gøtze, 2001). Moderation is important to stimulate and regulate online discussions as purposeful social action. Some characteristics of online interaction, such as its virtuality or anonymity may diminish the psychological thresholds to participate in a discussion, but they may also inhibit the social cooperation that is needed to accomplish complex communicative tasks. From research on discussions in political newsgroups we know that discussions often serve more as a means for reinforcing preexisting views than to persuade others (Hill & Hughes, 1998; Davis, 1999; Wilhelm, 2000). These findings do not imply that the moderation of political newsgroups is imperative. As far as they can be characterized as online "free-for-all-discussions" that satisfy a social need to express opinions and concerns, this is an open question that can be left to the participants. Online discussions, however, that are initiated to involve citizens in dealing with public issues, do require moderation. In these settings, moderation is also necessary to realize some potential advantages of online discussions. Because of their asynchronous nature, there are more possibilities for structuring them. Various discussion lines can be opened and managed. Also, there is more flexibility possible in providing information. To reap these fruits, moderation is necessary.

BACKGROUND

A moderator can be defined as a person (or group of persons) who facilitates a discussion in view of its goals and agenda.

The moderator roles have been discussed since the inception of the Internet community. The Guide for Electronic Citizen Consultation, published by the Dutch Ministry of the Interior (1998), mentions three moderator roles. First, the moderator functions as a "host" so that the participants feel at ease. He shows them the way, so to speak, in the discussion, how it works, where information can be found, etc. Second, the moderator is seen as a "discussion leader." In this role, he furthers the progress of the discussion. Also, he makes sure that all participants actually take part in the discussion. Third, the moderator has a role as an "arbiter." He may designate certain postings as inappropriate and decide to remove them. Coleman and Gøtze (2001) have listed a number of metaphors to designate various moderator roles, based on work by White (2002) and others. These include the roles of "social host," "project manager," "community of practice facilitator," "'cybrarian," "help desk," "referee" and "janitor." These designations are useful, as they give an impression of the variety of moderator roles. White (2002) relates each role to specific types of communities and applications, and also indicates which key skills are required.

In this article, a more theoretical approach will be proposed by outlining a conceptual model of the "management" of Internet discussions. The underlying claim of this model is that it specifies all (main) tasks that have to be performed in the design and management of online policy exercises that should carry at least some weight in the political decision-making. A management approach suggests that certain general "management functions" have to be performed. I distinguish (1) the strategic function, (2) the conditioning function and (3) the process function (see figure 1).

The *strategic* function is to establish the boundaries of the discussion and to embed it in the political and organizational environment. This includes the following tasks:

- Establish the *goals* that the discussion is designed to achieve, both towards the citizenry and the institutional decision-making system;
- Establish and maintain the *substantive domain* of the discussion, i.e., the boundaries of the agenda within which themes and issues may be raised;
- Obtain *political and organizational support* for the discussion;
- Establish the *status* of the discussion in terms of influence on decision-making;
- Ensure that the *results* of the discussion will actually be carried over into the decision-making process and to give feedback on this to the participants.

The *conditioning* function refers to all kinds of conditions and provisions that have to be taken care of to further the discussion. This may include the following:

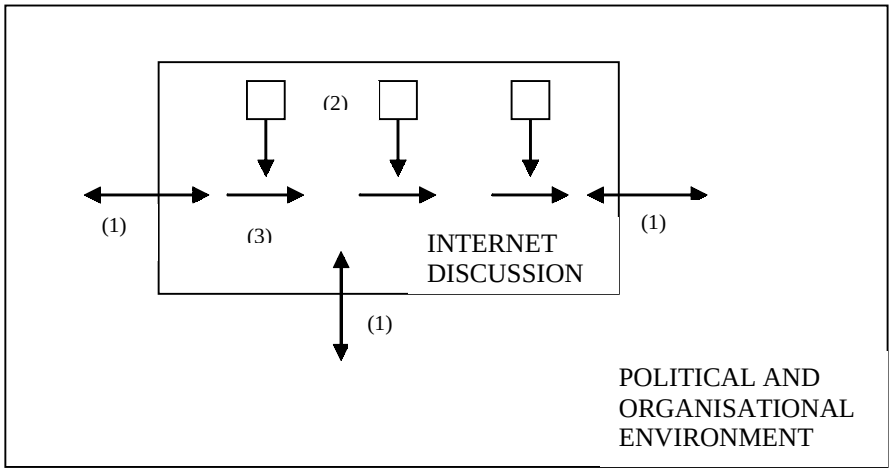
- *Solicit people* to join the discussion as *participants*;
- Provide *information to facilitate informed discussion*;
- Provide *supporting technologies*, such as moderation software, simulation models and visualization.

The *process* function includes all tasks that have to do with the discussion process as a cooperative, purposeful activity:

- Set the *interactional goal* of the discussion, i.e., the kind of results to be reached by the participants within the discussion, for instance, exploration of problem definitions or consensus about a proposal of policy measures;
- Specify the *agenda* of the discussion, within the substantive domain that has been established in the strategic function: the questions, propositions or themes to be discussed;
- Set the *schedule* of the discussion;
- Manage the *discussion process* in view of its interactional goal, its agenda, and its schedule, for example, assign messages to discussion lines or open new discussion lines;
- Facilitate the progress of the discussion by making *summaries* during the discussion;
- Stimulate the *interactivity* of the discussion, for instance, by stirring up participants to take part in the discussion and to give reactions to specific contributions;
- Set and maintain the *rules of the game*.

As an analytical tool, this model can be used in two ways. First, in an actor-oriented way, it can be used as an instrument to discover what moderators do (Edwards, 2002). Second, in a process-oriented way, it can be used to ascertain how the different management functions are performed and which actors are involved. Used in this way, the model allows for contributions to the manage-

Figure 1. The management of online discussions (Edwards, 2002; reprinted)



(1) strategic function: establish the boundaries of the discussion and embedding it in the political and organizational environment.
(2) conditioning function: take care of conditions and provisions.
(3) process function: further the progress of the discussion as a cooperative, purposeful activity.