

Chapter 14

Democratic Deliberation in Online Consultation Forums: A Case Study of the Casino Debate in Singapore

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter examines the extent to which the Internet can represent a place for negotiation, consensus building, and civic participation using Singapore's online consultation portal and the debate over the decision to build the nation's first casino resort as a case study. The structural design of the consultation portal and the entire content of a discussion thread with 508 posts were analyzed with a conceptual framework drawn from previous studies of democratic deliberation. Findings suggest that while the forum reflects some criteria for deliberation, the lack of transparency and government participation raises the question over the quality of the discourse and overall effectiveness of this online medium. Current challenges, recommendations, and directions for future research and development are discussed.

BACKGROUND

The rapid diffusion of information communication technologies (ICTs) over the last two decades has brought changes to the political landscape throughout the world. It has been noted that the Internet's unique technological properties, such as interactivity, immediacy, connectivity, point-to-point and non-hierarchical modes of communication, low cost to users, and accessibility across national boundaries (Barber, Mattson, & Peterson, 1997),

will reduce the distance and barriers between voters and politicians, and consequently facilitate a more direct citizen involvement in the political process (Agre, 2002). One of the many ways that such civic engagement can be seen is through the discussion of political issues *online* – in chatrooms, message boards, blogs, social media sites, and other types of web-based forums.

Although many previous studies of online political talk have noted that the Web provides a meeting place for people from different social, cultural and political backgrounds to form communities, build social relationships, share opinions, and discuss

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issues with one another (Baym, 1995; Rheingold, 1993; Wellman, 1999), others have observed that, rather than facilitating diversity, people tend to interact with users who share similar interests and values (Van Alstyne & Brynjolfsson, 1996) and hear the echoes of their own voices (Sunstein, 2001). Whether the Internet can truly represent a public sphere for negotiation, consensus building, and democratic deliberation remains to be seen, but the conditions in which online discussion may or may not flourish, and the criteria used to evaluate its outcomes are key to answering this question.

This chapter addresses these issues through the lens of a case study that explores the structure and the content of an online discussion thread in Singapore's online consultation forum. As the high-tech hub of Southeast Asia, Singapore is known for its adoption and development of information communication technologies in the private and public sectors. Recent studies indicate that Internet penetration rate in Singapore has reached 67.4%, with more than three million users (Internet World Stats, 2009). Singapore's electronic government scheme and the overall e-readiness have also consistently received high praises from benchmark reports (e.g., Economist Intelligence Unit, 2008; West, 2007). While these achievements are remarkable, Singapore is also known for its censorship and control over the Internet, a practice that has long attracted criticism domestically and abroad (e.g., Amnesty International, 2004; Gomez, 2000). The juxtaposition between the freedom afforded by technological advancement and the restrictions imposed by government regulation therefore makes Singapore a unique case.

In 2005, the Singapore government proposed plans to develop two casino-based entertainment resorts in an effort to stimulate its tourism industry. The decision to build the nation's first casino generated a vibrant debate among Singaporeans over whether the government should abandon its long held position against legalized gambling. In the months leading up to the final announcement, the government solicited views and feedback on

the subject matter from the public through various communication channels, including several online discussion threads in its online consultation portal. By examining the effectiveness, or lack thereof, of this online medium to encourage public discussion and facilitate deliberation, this case study hopes to contribute to our understandings of online discussions in a political context and also to the broader conversation about the promise of the Internet as a public sphere.

SETTING THE STAGE

Online Consultation and Relevant Research

Online consultation, a term that refers to the government's use of web-based technologies to seek policy suggestion and feedback from the public, is an emerging trend in electronic government research and practice. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defined online consultation as, "A two-way relation in which citizens provide feedback to government. It is based on the prior definition by government of the issue on which citizens' views are being sought and requires the provision of information" (OECD, 2001, p. 5). In other words, the government identifies the issues for consultation, sets the questions and manages the process, while citizens are invited to contribute their views and opinions through web-enabled applications.

From the government's perspective, online consultation represents one of the many communication *channels* that, in addition to other traditional means, are used to reach out to the public. From the citizen's perspective, it may be seen as an online meeting *place* where people interact with one another to express their opinions or discuss public policy issues. However, online consultation differs significantly from other online fora, such as blogs, bulletin boards, or social networking sites, in the sense that it is considered

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