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# Online Deliberative Discourse and Conflict Resolution

Donald G. Ellis

*University of Hartford*, [dellis@hartford.edu](mailto:dellis@hartford.edu)

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# Online Deliberative Discourse and Conflict Resolution

## **Abstract**

States and conflicting groups must get together at some point and engage in communication in an effort at conflict resolution. This paper examines the relationship between the Internet, deliberative discourse, and ethnopolitical groups in conflict. It focuses briefly on the public sphere but with specific reference to its role in democratic discourse in the online environment. It makes the argument that the online environment is uniquely capable of both constructing new and novel public spheres while at the same time establishing conditions of communicative contact conducive to conflict resolution. The Internet public sphere is particularly strong with respect to fostering new points of contact that are free from the constraints of society systems. Deliberative democratic theory can be adapted to the context of ethnopolitical conflict and Internet technology to open up new communicative spaces for problem solving. These new spaces can create a more diverse conversational environment, encourage a task orientation, and improve democratic discussion by creating argument-based conversations that are not as polarizing. Online communities are posed as contexts for reorganizing discourse in such a way as to increase the mutual obligation and interdependence that is central to the intersection of democracy and conflict resolution.

## **Keywords**

communication, deliberation, online, conflict resolution, argument

## INTRODUCTION

Clearly, communication is always an alternative to violence. In fact, it is the only morally legitimate alternative. But face-to-face communication is not always possible and sometimes groups in conflict require technological assistance for communicative contact. It is a challenge to find new ways to enhance the quality of mass participation in the democratic communication process, and stimulate new communicative practices. The primary goal of this article is to defend the claim that the Internet has potential to organize entirely new networks of communication, augment political debate, and enrich the quality of deliberation for all communities but especially those that are ethnically and geographically divided. For example, I argue that Israelis and Palestinians can activate a public sphere using the internet to move from conflict to peace. In support of this claim I will do three things: first, I will briefly restate the important relationship between a public communicative sphere and democracy. This is essentially the question of how decision making in a society acquires moral legitimacy. Secondly, I will quickly review three models of democratic legitimization but focus on the third which is deliberative democracy. Deliberative democracy entails a special form of rational communication, but the conditions of this form of communication can vary from formal authorized discussions to amateur political discourse that still has transformative value with respect to opinions and judgments. Third, I will focus on the specific nature of deliberative communication with particular emphasis on online contact. These Internet discussions provide an initial glimpse into the nature and structure of online arguments and suggest directions for future work and recommendations.

## DEMOCRACY AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

It is not necessary to recount here Habermas's account of how imperfect democratic discourse can be improved. Still, it bears underscoring that there is a very important way in which a democratic citizenry enriches the political process. The availability of deliberative communicative participation improves the mix of policy and holds leaders accountable. More importantly, deliberation legitimizes and lends moral weight to the decision making process. Much has been written about democracy and its advantages in terms of rights, moral legitimacy, freedom, and political equality (cf. Dahl 1998). But these advantages are only realized in the deliberative process. It is the opportunity to communicate and have potential influence that sustains democratic principles. Habermas's grandest hopes are to reformulate the morality of lawmaking and this can only happen with a highly activated and engaged citizenry. Increased decentralization is necessary to achieve a goal of pluralistic decision making. The tendency for citizens to identify with larger groups and direct their loyalty to organizations such as political parties is destabilizing to pluralistic democracies. The internet can play an important role in the

decentralization that is necessary to ensure that small discourse communities are included in the deliberative process.

One of the goals of smaller discourse communities is to instill the habits of communication so that agreement and decision making are encouraged. Learning the proper practices of democratic discourse increases the likelihood that divergent groups can find a way to improve dialogue with others who are from dissimilar backgrounds. Some of Habermas's (1984) earlier work, which called for spontaneous publics formulated around the "lifeworld" of society, has been criticized as unrealizable. But recent work recognizes a form of discourse that is pragmatic (Habermas 1987, 1996) and calls for a difficult but achievable form of discourse.

Habermas begins with the distinction between political discourse and everyday communication. This distinction has increasingly found its way into communication and political science literature (cf. Schudson 1997; Scheufele 2000; Wyatt, Kim, & Katz 2000) and proposes that political conversation only serves democracy if it is truly deliberative. That is, not just any type of discussion is acceptable. A casual "chat" about political events is not deliberative discourse. For communication to serve democratic principles it must include the presentation of differences and disagreements. The power of deliberation and the public sphere emerges from the existence of different opinions and backgrounds engaged in dispute over issues of substance.

### DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY AS A MODEL OF LEGITIMACY

A theoretical link between democracy as a macro conflict resolution strategy and communication as the micro context for decision making and relationship change is a key issue in the analysis that appears below. Ethnically divided societies who are trying to work out problems require a deliberative process that is part of the democratic process. This process must realize democratic procedures including freedom of expression and the rights to political organization and activity. The deliberative democratic process is the most fundamental guarantee of these rights. The deliberative process makes it possible to get from issues to systems (Lederach 1997). In other words, a focus on an immediate micro issue will be more useful if its discussion and potential resolution have broader structural implications.

An example from the work of Hertz-Lazarowitz and Eden (2002) will be instructive here. Hertz-Lazarowitz and Eden (2002) report on a peace education program in Acre, Israel that was a response to "voices that express distress, fear of the other, and discrimination in Acre" (211). Israeli-Jews and Israeli-Arabs would argue about the conditions in the cities with the Jews saying things like "this is going to be an Arab City in 10 years....We are on the losing end" (211). And the Arabs in contrast would say "Look at our schools, 1,300 children are crowded into one building that does not abide by the security regulations....The Jews, by comparison, have a fine school for every 300 students" (211). An argument between two citizens

of Acre could be viewed as an interpersonal difference on a micro level and require resolution between the individuals only, a resolution that would solve the problem by resolving the issue that prompted the disagreement. At another structural level, the problem might be defined as disfigured social relationship that needed redefinition. A conflict resolution specialist might decide that stereotypes and bias were at work and the solution to the problem lay in training in stereotype reduction and dialogue designed for deeper relationship change. The subsystem level focuses on a system of relationships that is smaller than society. Thus, neighborhood groups or parent associations in the schools might take up this issue. In the case reported by Hertz-Lazarowitz and Eden (2002) the community had formed a Forum of School Principals that became an organized structural entity.

The model of deliberative democracy described in this paper is most productive for raising both “issue” and “system” perspectives. It responds to some of the weaknesses of typical dialogue approaches (cf. Maoz & Ellis 2006) by having impact beyond micro interpersonal relations. This is especially true of subsystems that act as a bridge between immediate social relations and broader structural concerns. The Forum for School Principals began as a forum for the simple exchange of thoughts but became the foundation for citywide problems. This forum did not “deliberate” according to principles and issues described here or other explanations of deliberative communication (e.g. Elster 1998), but they did realize that a “change in our mode of communication” (213) was necessary. A deliberative democratic process provides an opportunity to address problems in the interpersonal context where communication is structured toward solving problems that overlap with the structured environment of counterparts, and thus create opportunities for social transformation. It is particularly powerful at connecting local and system concerns. On yet another level the problem might be seen as symptomatic of larger societal structures that sustain discrimination and prejudice. The solution would be to change society. Clearly, macro-systemic levels, such as The Israeli Ministry of Education in this case, must create opportunities and cooperate to improve the likelihood of success in social transformation of problems. But these mid level subsystems, as Lederach (1997) explains, are imperative for comprehensive and integrative solutions.

Democratic solutions to problems that emerge from ethnically divided societies deepen the legitimacy of a particular system of governance and problem solving. Israelis and Palestinians are caught in an intractable conflict where each side delegitimizes the other. The best way to elide these differences is to find a structural entity that is morally entitled to wield power. Deliberative democratic processes respond to two conditions of intractable ethno-political conflicts. These are (1) that such conflicts are between collectives and not individuals, and (2) that the conflict involves considerable inequalities. These mean that resolution techniques must tack

back and forth between individuals and collectives, and must have the moral legitimacy to transcend the inequalities.

The most elemental model of democracy is based on elections. Most people see elections as the basic source of democratic moral authority. The problem is that citizenship is limited to the electoral choice among candidates. Ordinary citizens do not choose issues and it is possible to elect people who hold positions that are contrary to the interests of the many people. Although elections are supposed to maximize incentives for those who are elected to remain accountable to a citizenry, such elections are subject to manipulation, abuse, and a failure of genuine obligation to a constituency. A second source of democratic legitimacy is direct democracy. It has a constituency deciding on agendas and issues by direct votes. People choose freely their own political fate and direct democracy is appealing as a model of legitimacy. Still, direct democracy is cumbersome and, more importantly, it fails to inform and actualize its participants. Nothing ensures that citizens will have informed opinions or that they will give thought to the impact of the decision on others. The “losers” in an argument or initiative have not necessarily been included in the solutions, nor have they consented to be governed by the winning position. The assumption of assumed consent is too abstract to bear moral weight.

### DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

Deliberative democracy is rooted in the advantages that accrue from reciprocity. As Gutmann and Thompson (2004) explain “The basic premise of reciprocity is that citizens owe one another justifications for their institutions, laws, and public policies that collectively bind them” (133). This means that justice and the legitimate acceptance of social and political constraints on a group must emerge from a process where all parties have had ample opportunity to engage in mutual reason-giving. From reciprocity flows respect for the other. Gutmann and Thompson (2004) also refer to publicity and accountability as essential conditions of deliberative democracy. That is, discussion and decision making must be public to ensure justifiability, and that officials who make decisions on behalf of others must be accountable. Binding decisions lose moral legitimacy to the extent that they have been made in a manner unavailable to the public, or by individuals who are not accountable to constituencies.

What is particularly important about deliberative democracy from a communication perspective is its ability to transform the perspective of the individual. Election centered and direct democratic processes value the individual but focus primarily on the opportunity to participate. Deliberative processes draw on communication in the form of discussion and argument with the aim to change the motivations and opinions of individuals. The deliberative process contributes to a changing sense of self and identity because participants are immersed in a social system that manufactures new ways to think about problems and orient toward

others. This deliberative social system moves people out of their parochial interests and contributes to a broader sense of community mindedness, as well as providing new information that clarifies and informs opinions. This is a fundamental identity widening process. Identity widening is the act of extending and enlarging one's identity so that it includes more groups, people, and ideas. It can be thought of as expanding concentric circles. Gaertner and Dovidio (2000) refer to this as the recategorization processes. Very simply, you recategorize your cognitive representation of multiple groups with distinct boundaries into one group with more common boundaries. Hence, if an Israeli-Jew moves from a rigid definition of membership in his own group with strict boundaries (that include only, for example, Judaism, Zionism, Holocaust, Eretz Israel) to an identity that includes Palestinians through universal humanistic values or recognition of Palestinian national and political aspirations, then that Israeli-Jew has "widened" his identity. A communication perspective on conflict resolution considers identity widening to be at the core of change because settling ethnic conflicts is more than a legislative trick or new way to divide the pie. Rather, deliberation is uniquely able to marry the process of solving practical issues to the psychological and interpersonal changes that are conducive to conflict resolution.

The characteristic discourse of deliberative democracy must be "practical." In other words, discourse that results in legitimate rules and provisions for the groups that produce them. Freedom to participate, equality, and a cooperative search for information and solutions are all part of this practical discourse (Habermas 1996). Moreover, divided groups trying to solve problems and improve relationships must listen to all voices, present the best arguments possible, and genuinely consider the culture and historical conditions of the other. These are not presented as naive and idealistic. Clearly, the discourse of deliberative democracy can be posed as an unreachable idealistic dream, but even Habermas (1984, 1996) recognizes that people behave strategically, manipulatively, and often do not measure up to the goals of such discourse. Still, the parties must attempt such discourse with a good faith commitment that requires them to invoke the Grician (1975) principles of communication related to clarity, truth, appropriateness, and sufficiency. These communication habits are probably more achievable than those required of dialogue such as empathic listening (Bush & Folger 1994), reconciliation (Kriesberg 1998; Ellis 2005), or the host of communication patterns associated with a "dialogic" experience (Moaz & Ellis 2006).

Although writing about deliberative communicative processes and problem solving between groups in conflict can hover in the rarefied air of theory, recent work is more empirical and pragmatic. And although few would make grandiose claims for deliberation or assume it automatically leads to consensus, there is considerable research which demonstrates that under the right conditions deliberation encourages a public spirit, promotes tolerance, and broadens

perspectives (Dryzek 2000; Mutz 2002; Gutmann & Thompson 2004; Chambers 2003). Still, challenges remain. For example, the group polarization effects predicts that following deliberation group members move to more extreme positions than indicated by predeliberation opinions (Sunstein 2002). One explanation of group polarization is that group members seek approval and recognition from others and therefore align themselves with those of a like mind, and presents themselves as champions for a position. The polarization effect is powerful but it still does not challenge the general claims of deliberation. Moreover, there is research that poses suggestions for overcoming polarization effects (cf. Fishkin 1995; Ackerman & Fishkin 2002; Sunstein 2002).

Deliberative communication processes have also been criticized for insufficient attention to diversity and identity. Original formulations of deliberative theory had agreement and consensus as its aim at the expense of recognizing differences. The articulation of diversity was traded away for common agreement. Moreover, some earlier presentations of deliberative communication privileged a narrow western style of argument and reason giving. It was highly rationalistic and disadvantaged the reasons of marginalized groups (Young 1996). But deliberating in a democracy has responded to these issues by pushing its conceptions of argument and reasoning beyond the highly western style model of impartiality. It is now a given that deliberative processes accept a more pluralistic notion of reason giving (Benhabib 1996). Chambers (2003) explains that “deliberative democracy has benefited from the ‘what about. . .’ line of argument. What about aboriginal peoples and their use of story telling and greeting, what about African Americans and their repertoire of meanings, what about women. . .what about the religious. . .what about the oppressed?” (322). Actually, research theorizing about communication and deliberation has merged diversity theory with deliberation (Benhabib 2002). There is now much more sensitivity to the different perspectives on arguing and reasoning represented in different cultures. Work by Maoz and Ellis (2002) has shown how Israelis and Palestinians go to what Johnstone (1986) calls “argumentative ground” or the point at which you can argue no further. The Maoz and Ellis (2002) analysis shows how cultural groups (Israeli-Jews and Palestinians in this case) deploy certain rhetorical devices to manage arguments avoid the appearance of bias, and protect themselves against counterargument. The recognition of the impact of diversity on cultural argument has enriched the debate about deliberative theory by particularizing and concretizing the concepts of argument. The challenges of diversity and pluralism have moved deliberative theory in necessary directions, but still have not negated its core assumptions about public reasoning and the value of moral legitimacy by insisting on accountable discussion.

## THE CONDITIONS OF CONTACT AND DELIBERATIVE DISCOURSE

Another concern about deliberative discussion is the conditions of discourse. Deliberative discourse is dependent on controlled communication. Controlled



communication is the key to using communication to manage and resolve conflict. Burton (1969) was an early proponent of controlled communication and he meant little more than creating an atmosphere in which participants could talk about issues and perceptions and conflict, and use this to develop some common functional interests. Controlled communication is simply using a principled communication process to try and achieve a goal related to the conflict. This could involve preparation for negotiation, issue analysis, mediation, relationship transformation, problem solving, reconciliation, identity widening, or anything else. The establishment of effective communication—designed to unearth new approaches, ideas, and relationships—is one difference between communication approaches and earlier more directive third-party approaches to problem resolution. Micro communication approaches are less concerned with realistic analyses of negotiation outcomes than with innovation and changing relationships. The theory emerges more from interpersonal and intergroup levels than the international one.

Dialogue groups, which typically have different theoretical assumptions about communication, refer to the contact hypothesis as a condition of controlled communication. The contact hypothesis (Pettigrew & Tropp 2000), which is not my concern here, is an attempt to control communication in order to maximize the possibility of having various communicative effects. Although deliberative democracy theories may draw on numerous principles associated with effective communicative contact, they differ from dialogic approaches in at least one important way. Dialogue group experiences demand privacy, confidentiality, discretion, and even secrecy as individuals communicate in intimate ways and groups work to transform their relationships (Kriesberg 1998; Maoz & Ellis 2006). But deliberative democratic processes require a well-order public sphere. The public sphere is not private or secret. On the contrary, it works to produce openness, accountability, and accessibility. Equality as a condition of contact is certainly necessary for accountability when deliberating. But *access* to a public space and the possibility of creating new forms of public space that are legitimate venues of deliberation is a first requirement.

### THE INTERNET AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The creation of public spheres is a genuine problem in an age of individualized media and where people “bowl alone” (Putnam 2000). In fact, truly engaging either conflicting ethnopolitical groups or citizens who require political involvement is difficult and often seems beyond our wherewithal. But modern technology can help as well as hinder communicative engagement. The internet can empower individuals and make it possible to construct a community of shared interest. In the language of the public sphere, the internet can foster points of contact that empower the identified groups and draw attention away from other societal systems. It is possible to organize contact and the construction of a public sphere between two conflicting groups of any type or demographic profile. Groups can be assembled online on the

basis of statistically representative samples or around any other profile of communicative interest. For instance, in the earlier example of the problems over funding for schools in the Israeli-Arab and Jewish community, it would be possible to create an online deliberative process—with the goal of both practical problem solving and intergroup development—for the school principles, or teachers, or students, or any combination. The software for such processes already exists, is easy to use, and continues to develop. My argument is that deliberative democratic theory can be adapted to the context of ethnopolitical conflict, and that internet communication technology opens up new and unique communicative spaces for problem solving and intergroup relations. The internet helps satisfy the conditions of deliberative democratic processes and makes possible a type of communication that allows for self-expression and engagement in debate and discussion of the other. In doing so it forms new communities of discourse that can mature into influential political bodies and agents for reconciliation. Let's explore in more detail how this works.

It remains the case that the “public” sphere must be created. In other words, the distinctive qualities of the internet—e.g. speed, access, asynchrony—are not particularly important because they can result in negative effects as well as positive ones. Conflicting ethnopolitical groups who refuse to engage one another will not be convinced by the internet. And computer mediated communication cannot simply replace the existing public sphere with electronic contact. Rather, it must constitute a public sphere of participants who exhibit the features of dialogue and are interested in “publicness.” The deliberative process rooted in the internet mediated public sphere must be a viable mechanism for the expansion of dialogue and communicative interaction. Thus the possibility of creating unique public spaces, which are sometimes inaccessible to others, enables political and social power to be distributed in society. The possibility of these internet technology created spheres means that groups that use them are less subject to the persuasion of professionals, or the influences of their own elites, and more able to participate in a “rational” public in the sense the results of the communication more legitimately reflect group interests. The point is not to create a site for information but to engage neighborhood groups, nongovernmental organizations, political entities, civic society, and those with ideological differences in responsive dialogical interaction. As long as there are participants from divided societies willing and able to organize themselves into a distributed public, there will be an element of civil society with transformative capabilities. These participants may come from formal or informal organizations and can deliberate on issues of various types. But as an internet constructed community develops and becomes a location for group deliberation, it transforms itself from a commons to an institutionally organized and entrenched democratic space.

Briefly, a deliberative space for conflicting groups needs to be structured with certain features in mind (cf. Noveck 2004) and internet technology can enable the process quite well. These features include *accessibility*. Technological availability can be a problem but is becoming increasingly available and easy to use. As in any deliberative or dialogue group there must be *equality* with even access to speaking, *transparency* so no rules of the public space are secret or biased, and *accountability*. The public space must be constructed to ensure that participants communicate in such a way as to guarantee inclusiveness, information, and a broad spectrum of viewpoints. Still, the fact that the technology can create a “rational” public is more important than the existence of some intrinsic favorable qualities.

## OVERCOMING RESISTANCE TO PUBLIC SPHERE DELIBERATION

Up to now we have assumed the positive value of discussion. And, to be sure, deliberative discussion improves the quality of reasoning, legitimizes ultimate choices, and helps us surpass the limits of our own reasoning and imagination (Simon 1983). But a major problem to always overcome for deliberative discussion is the fact that people avoid challenging conversations. This could be the result of apathy, the threatening nature of politics, uncomfortable interpersonal consequences, or any number of personal psychological reasons. Moreover, it is simply difficult to be political. There are threats of isolation for expressing political opinions, feelings of intellectual inadequacy, ignorance, misperceptions of others, and hesitancy to upset group norms (Wyatt, Kim, & Katz 2000). Being genuinely political requires work, training, education, and effort that many are unwilling or unable to undertake. The question becomes, then, whether or not internet created public spheres can overcome any of these obstacles.

## DIVERSITY

The process of promoting peace or stabilizing politics requires that gaps between people be transcended. In other words, deliberative communication is a method of securing consensus and helping divided groups coordinate their meanings and actions. Cultural, ethnic, and social diversity in societies is responsible for the greatest distance between people. Online public spaces facilitate participation from more people. It improves the conditions of deliberation by creating a more diverse conversational environment. When groups are divided and seeking an avenue for contact to work out problems and improve relations the internet can be more welcoming for diverse individuals. I am not referring to the use of the internet for a meeting of like minds to reinforce one another; but rather the impact of the electronic public sphere on perceptions of the communication process. Robinson, Neustadtl, and Kestnbaum (2002) concluded that the online environment made it easier for users to be more supportive of diversity and different points of view than those in face-to-face discussions.

It remains true that individuals left on their own to find others online will typically end up hearing their own voices, and wall themselves off from others thereby maintaining Sunstein's (2002) fear of polarization. But we must consider the specific deliberative task. Online conflict resolution between divided ethnopolitical groups begins with diversity and disagreement. It is not an ad hoc collection of users reinforcing each other. Moreover, one central tenet of conflict resolution designed to halt violence and make progress toward stability is to construct viable agreements. Such agreements are based on incompletely theorized agreements as termed by Sunstein (1999). These are agreements on particulars or solutions without agreement on the abstract moral principles that under gird the agreement. So, for example, an environmentalist group and a religious group could agree that an endangered species should be protected without agreeing on the reasons. The religious group might believe the species is a reflection of God's work, and the environmentalist, completely to the contrary, might believe that the species is the result of evolution and necessary for ecological balance. Their agreement to protect the endangered species is incompletely theorized in the sense that both groups are clear on what they want, but do not agree on the general theory that accounts for it. Internet contact is particularly conducive to this type of agreement. This deliberative approach seeks the benefits of short term agreement over attempts at the deeper transformational change that is the goal of more "dialogic" (Folger & Bush 2001; Maoz & Ellis 2006) approaches to conflict resolution. We will further discuss the implications of this in the section below. But online contact for the purpose of problem solving between contending groups makes it possible to assemble the diverse groups sometimes necessary for discussion. It makes it easier to form groups of different shapes, sizes, and compositional factors and lowers the access barrier for minority and dissimilar voices.

Conflicting ethnopolitical groups, as well as any society with diverse demographic groups, have subgroups and interests that are not represented by leadership. Participation in the conflict resolution process is unequal because of a lack of influence and resources. Resources can include numerous things such as time, money, and skills, but online opportunities can affect all of these. Teachers, workers, government officials, nongovernmental organizations, grassroots groups, and citizens of all stripes can lower the barriers to these resources.

### REDUCED CUES

Certainly, the absence of a "live" physical image on the internet changes the impression one can leave as well as altering interpretive practices. It is true that as technology evolves the cue environment gets richer (e.g. webcams), but the social information for impression formation remains significantly altered. Most online deliberative groups rely on verbal language which is more subject to editing and control. There are advantages to information and linguistic expression mattering more than looks, gender, race, or membership in other social categories; namely, it

forces a greater task orientation (Walther 1992). This increases the likelihood that arguments are assessed more on their quality than on the social position or image of the other person (Dahlberg 2001). This is a special feature of the internet. The opportunity to reduce the influences of stereotypes, status, and prejudices of all sorts results in improved decision making and participation from lower status others. Moreover, written communication tends to be perceived as more serious.

Yet, status differences and group identities can creep into messages or be revealed offline. And there are potential costs from a reduced cue environment. It does blunt politeness norms and cause people to communicate less sensitively. But most of this research pertains to internet chat rooms and discussion groups where the goal is not necessarily to construct and manage and democratically desirable deliberative environment. When online groups are organized with an eye toward maximizing deliberative potential they are controlled for system design and implementation with respect to participants, rules of discussion, and include such features as moderators (Price & Cappella 2002). Moreover, anonymity is not the goal of deliberative discourse. A direct confrontation of others, including their social demographics, to solve problems is a goal of online deliberative discourse. Tidwell and Walther (2002) found that computer mediated discussions were more task oriented but still produced more questions, self-disclosure, and fewer peripheral exchanges. The impersonal nature of online communication promotes rationality and disciplines the participants toward quality discussion by discouraging group interaction that detracts from effectiveness. In short, the impersonal nature of online communication enhances group work (Walther 1996).

### IMPROVING DEMOCRATIC DISCUSSION

Beyond the question of the interest and value of the online context, there are important questions with respect to the usefulness of online communication for political discussion. Early portrayals of online work described it as sparse and not very encouraging of serious work. But later studies have found advantages for deliberative discussion in many features of online interaction. Studies by Price and Cappella (2002), for example, argue that the availability of online discussion opportunities expands political engagement and improves thoughtfulness on political issues. Online discussions can produce reasonable argument-based conversations that are not excessively polarizing and lead to serious consideration of issues. The Price and Cappella (2002) studies focus on policy issues in the U.S. but there is no reason to believe that the advantageous features of online contact should not accrue to political groups. Participants are engaged in the process and there is an increase in social trust as the number of online discussions increases.

## DELIBERATIVE COMMUNICATION

One of my principle arguments in this essay is that deliberative communication, which is oriented toward controlled discussion and problem solving, can improve relations between conflicting ethno-political groups. This is as opposed to dialogic strategies, which claim that deeper cultural and psychological engagement is necessary to transform relationships. Deliberative processes seek agreement at lower levels of abstraction that are, in Sunstein's (1999) terms, "incompletely theorized" but solve practical problems and establish a foundation for deeper agreement to emerge. Deliberative discourse seeks a public space by which groups can confront one another on a problem and produce binding results; results that have attendant psychological and attitudinal benefits as well as practical and political benefits. Below are qualities of deliberative communication that characterize the deliberative context. They are of course not exhaustive but fundamentally related to the benefits of deliberation and the process of managing conflict between groups.

One of the problems posed by anyone making decisions is how to process information. In other words, even with the best information one could gather it is never exactly obvious how to use the information. This is because problems are complex and humans are limited. This is the problem of *bounded rationality* termed by Simon (1983). Very simply, deliberation increases the odds of making better choices because individuals can step beyond the boundaries of their own abilities and interact with others. They can participate in the intelligence of others and have their own intelligence stimulated in new ways. Moreover, conflicting groups are often motivated to deceive the other. They withhold information, motivations, and manipulate information for strategic reasons. This is because there are usually incentives to misrepresent information and gain advantage. But deliberative discussion improves the availability and clarity of information. Even if I believe that someone has strong reasons to manipulate me, it sharpens the consideration of my own information. And the opportunity to see things from the others perspective is improved by deliberation. This is related to the problem of bounded rationality because my own information and experiences limit the extent to which I can conceive of things in any other way. Numerous studies point to the value and effectiveness of communicative contact where members of conflicting groups transcend their limits and find new ways to solve problems with former enemies (cf. Hertz-Lazarowitz & Eden 2002). Wittes (2005), in her analysis of negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians, stated that "the small teams who met repeatedly over months in Oslo built a common language and a common view of their task that enabled them to overcome obstacles" (140-141). This is recognition of the multiplicative effects that deliberative discussion has on the available intelligence applied to problems.

The "engagement with others" is one of the strengths of the deliberative process. This is particularly important for the decision making process because

although there are times for secrecy (e.g. balloting), *deliberative communication forces a particular form of justification*. In other words, it makes relying purely on self interest difficult if not impossible. At its core, deliberative communication is based on disagreement, but more importantly “skilled disagreement.” There is much to skilled disagreement—e.g. task focus, knowledgeable use of reasoning and evidence, perspective taking, etc.—but these details are not my the concern here. There is a presupposition toward justifying claims by logical means. This implies a treatment of issues with respect to advantages and disadvantages in search of novel and acceptable solutions. There is more to this than the familiar call for reasoned discourse reminiscent of high school civics. Online deliberation in particular is a process of moving from personal opinion to group judgment. It helps conflicting groups progress from the constrictions of selfish interests to choices based the inclusion of others. One criticism of deliberation is that it is elitist and that minority or disadvantaged groups must rely on passions. But passions (symbolic passions) are certainly within the traditions of deliberative communication and may still be analyzed rhetorically as substantive and matched with reason. Moreover, as Gutmann and Thompson (1996) explain, the argument that rational deliberative discourse favors an established order lacks historical perspective, and “Most of the force of radical criticism of society in the past has relied on rationalist challenges to the status quo” (134). Even the telling of a personal story or narrative (Bar-On 2000) can be part of the deliberative process as a step toward reaching consensus on difficult issues. Moreover, narrative structures are certainly subject to argumentative analysis.

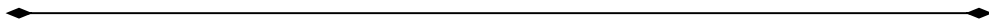
In some cases, a group can reach an agreement and it requires little of the group members with respect to implementation or compliance. It is more likely that a collective decision will benefit from a group commitment to the decision. Deliberative communication improves participation and increases *cohesive consensus*. A collective decision following deliberation has the psychological benefit of commitment by group members because of the nature of the communication. The process of subjecting communication to stricter argumentative criteria and exceeding the boundaries of one’s own rationality prompt proposals that are more “public” in nature; that is, they represent the attitudes and opinions of the participants and they are more committed to the results. Simply the opportunity to speak and have a say increases support for the outcome of discussion. Moreover, deliberative communication draws theoretical sustenance from democratic communication which emphasizes processes rather than outcomes. People in mature polities are accepting of political decisions even if they do not agree with them, because they accept the process as adequate or fair. The principles of deliberative communication have substantial legitimacy since they are grounded in those individuals most affected by the outcome. As Manin (1987) makes clear, the source of legitimacy in decisions is not the will of the majority but the outcome of the idea formation process. The sense of liberty and respect that groups benefit from comes from a process of

research, discussion of alternatives, and the social exchange of reasons and arguments.

## CONCLUSION

My argument here has been two fold. On the one hand, I have developed the potential to develop electronic public space for deliberative processes. This has drawn on the traditions of democratic discourse as a mechanism for transforming relationships between groups. The idea that working on a practical problem separating two groups, and doing this by approximating as closely as possible the conditions of deliberative democratic discourse, produces group outcomes beneficial to conflict resolution has been a main theme of this analysis. On the other hand, the internet permits a form of discourse that result in participants addressing each other in a type of interaction that is normative and incurs mutual obligations. If these obligations are preserved and broadened then a new public sphere and a new discursive environment is possible. This new environment addresses certain problems and opens us the possibility of a future more inclusive community.

A mutual obligation and interdependence that is conducive to conflict resolution is possible only in a democratic form of communication that is responsive to differences, plurality, and multiple perspectives. Online communities are posed as interesting and potential contexts for reorganizing conversation. If this ultimately enables conflicting groups to solve problems across borders and publics then it does so as a mechanism not just of discourse but good discourse.



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