THE INTERNET AND DEMOCRATIC DISCOURSE
Exploring the prospects of online deliberative forums extending the public sphere

Lincoln Dahlberg
Massey University, New Zealand

Abstract
Three prominent ‘camps’ have emerged within Internet democracy rhetoric and practice, each drawing upon different models of democracy: communitarian, liberal individualist and deliberative. Much interest has been shown in the former two camps by researchers and policy makers. This paper turns to an examination of the possible realization of the third camp’s vision – that the public sphere of rational–critical discourse will be extended through cyberspace. This paper’s method is to compare existing online discourse with a set of requirements of the public sphere developed from the work of Jürgen Habermas. Previous research of cyber-interactions reveals a number of factors limiting the expansion of the public sphere online. To explore how these limitations may be overcome, the paper examines an online democracy project that explicitly attempts to foster deliberation. It is shown how this initiative has been able to successfully surmount many of the impediments identified in less structured online deliberations, but that it has, along with similar projects, failed to gain a representative sample of the population and is increasingly marginalized by commercial sites, virtual communities of common interest, and liberal individualist political practices. The paper concludes that the expansion of the public sphere through the Internet requires not only developing deliberative spaces but also attracting participation from citizens who have been socialized within a commercialized and individualized culture hostile towards public deliberation.

Keywords
Internet, deliberative democracy, public sphere, e-democracy

INTRODUCTION: THREE INTERNET DEMOCRACY CAMPS

Much has recently been said about the possibility of the Internet enhancing democracy. Despite considerable speculation, many claims have been based upon actual online practices. Moreover, there is now a rapid growth of online political projects and Internet democracy experiments being carried out by government, corporate interests and citizen groups. Within these rhetorics and practices, three
dominant ‘camps’ have emerged. First, a communitarian camp, which stresses
the possibility of the Internet enhancing communal spirit and values. Second, a
liberal individualist camp, which sees the Internet as assisting the expression of
individual interests. Third, a deliberative camp, which promotes the Internet as
the means for an expansion of the public sphere of rational-critical citizen
discourse – discourse autonomous from state and corporate power through which
public opinion may be formed that can hold official decision makers accountable.

The third camp is less prominent than the other two within Internet rhetoric
and practice, yet the decentralized communications enabled through Web
publishing, electronic bulletin boards, e-mail lists and chat rooms does seem to
provide public spaces for rational–critical discourse. The deliberative position
also offers a more powerful democratic model. Both liberal individualist
and communitarian models posit a unitary subject, whether the isolated ego or
the undifferentiated communal subject. As such, both fail to take seriously the
multiple differences between subjects within pluralist societies. Moreover, both
assume a pre-discursive political subject that requires little in the way of public
discourse: democracy is either equated with the strategic competition between
pre-determined interests or subsumed within the ethically integrated community.
In contrast, dialogue and difference are central to the deliberative model. The
model assumes that difference always exists between subjects, difference which
necessitates a process of rational-critical discourse in order for privately-oriented
individuals to become publicly-oriented citizens and for public opinion to develop
that can rationally guide democratic decision-making.

Academic research into the possibility of the public sphere being facilitated
through the Internet is slowly developing. Here I intend to contribute to this
research by providing a general exploration of the prospects of online discourse
extending the public sphere. I begin by undertaking a brief survey of various
forms of public interaction online to differentiate deliberative from commu-
nitarian and liberal individualist practices. My attention then turns to the online
deliberative practices, asking to what extent they facilitate rational–critical
discourse and thus contribute to an extension of the public sphere at large. My
method is to compare online discourse with a set of requirements of the public
sphere derived from the work of Jürgen Habermas. I first report the results of a
comparison of online discursive culture in general with this public sphere model,
a comparison that reveals various limitations to online deliberation enhancing the
public sphere. I then explore ways in which these limitations may be overcome
by looking at a case study of Minnesota E-Democracy: an Internet-democracy
initiative in the USA that has attempted to facilitate online public interaction.
This case study shows how online discourse can be structured to more fully
approximate the requirements of rational–critical deliberation, but it also indicates that overcoming some of the more socially and culturally embedded impediments to the extension of the public sphere will require sustained effort and creative solutions.

**MAPPING COMMUNITARIAN AND LIBERAL INDIVIDUALIST ONLINE PRACTICES**

Despite cyber-libertarian rhetoric, cyberspace has never been a space free of offline administrative power. The Internet has to various degrees been developed, monitored and regulated by government. Nor are cyber-interactions free of corporate power. The Internet is now largely developed and controlled by corporate interests and online commerce dominates the Web. However, an enormous amount of discourse takes place online relatively autonomous from state and economic affairs. It is this interaction, and specifically that which is oriented towards public or political conversation, that I am interested in exploring here. My intention is not to provide an inventory of politically-oriented practices. Rather, I aim to identify and critically discuss (in relation to democratic qualities) examples of online politics that approximate the communitarian, liberal individualist and, in the next section, deliberative democracy models.

Much online public interaction involves participation in virtual communities: cyber-groups based upon people connecting with others who share similar values, interests and concerns in order to exchange information, gain companionship and provide emotional support (Wellman and Gulia 1999). There are literally tens of thousands of virtual communities in cyberspace, flourishing via e-mail lists, electronic bulletin boards, online chat groups and role-playing domains. Many are linked to mega-communities, websites that host literally thousands of online communities. The OneList.com mega-community boasts over 900,000 groups and 18 million members. Geocities (geocities.yahoo.com) offers web space where tens of thousands of individuals and groups ‘build’ their homepages around ‘themed communities’ or ‘clusters of interests’ – ‘communities of like-minded pages’. Both OneList and Geocities are now part of Yahoo, which itself hosts thousands of online ‘clubs’ (clubs.yahoo.com). Other mega-communities include SixDegrees.com, Microsoft communities (communities.msn.com), Lycos clubs (clubs.lycos.com) and TalkCity.com. These mega-community sites are largely corporate owned and profit-oriented. They offer free space to virtual communities but sell space to advertisers attempting to target certain communities of interest – indicating the ongoing colonization of online life by economic interests.
However, much of the discourse within these groups simply consists of titillation, gossip and slander, superficial banter and other kinds of lowest-common-denominator exchange. While a great diversity of communication takes place across cyberspace, some of which does involve critical discussion of controversial issues, many participants simply seek out groups of like-minded others where member’s interests, values and prejudices are reinforced rather than challenged. The result is a fragmentation of cyber-discourse into mutually exclusive cyber-communities. Recent research of online bulletin boards by Davis (1999: 162), Hill and Hughes (1998: 72–4) and Wilhelm (2000: 97–9) shows that even groups focused upon issues expected to involve diverse opinions often simply develop into ideologically homogeneous ‘communities of interest’. Despite providing horizontal communication, virtual communities offer at best a ‘weak’ form of democratic participation because of their exclusive nature. Members of virtual communities are not often forced to confront the full range of public concerns and values that are to be faced when living with difference in everyday offline life. Discourse within virtual communities thus promotes the communitarian subject constituted within, and bound by, an ethically integrated community.

In contrast to these virtual communities, there are an increasing number of liberal individualist online initiatives promoting the use of the Internet to provide individuals with the means to access a plethora of political information and express views directly to elected representatives. Many such projects are US-‘based’, including DNet (dnet.org), Project Vote Smart (vote-smart.org) and The California Online Voter Guide (calvoter.org). DNet is an ‘independent’ online initiative that aims to improve democracy primarily by providing information about candidates’ positions on election issues. As well as media reports and other secondary source election information, DNet’s website encourages candidates to post issue statements, biographical data and endorsements (Doctor and Dutton 1999: 226). This ‘unfiltered’ access to politicians’ views is supported by a facility for citizen-to-candidate communication: candidate e-mail contacts and occasional live interviews where users can communicate directly with candidates or with experts (1999: 228). Project Vote Smart is a libertarian style, non-profit, web-based project that, since 1994, has provided extensive information on US congressional candidates. The California Online Voter Guide pulls together election-oriented information and resources offered on the Internet to help voters make informed decisions about the many choices available. Within the guide, voters can find hundreds of links to official campaign websites, phone numbers for campaign offices and campaign contribution information.

There are also many liberal individualist Internet democracy initiatives
‘outside’ the USA. Electronic Democracy – New Zealand!, for instance, concentrates upon making government and political information available online. There has also been a rapid growth (again led by US initiatives) of private companies, such as Politics.com, Vote.com and SpeakOut.com, offering political information and communication through the Internet. Politics.com was launched in October 1999 with the express aim of becoming ‘the place where politics happens on the Internet’. It claims to provide the best resources for following, understanding and enjoying the race for the Presidency in 2000 and beyond. It promises personalized news, state-level information, discussion boards and a directory of political sites. Vote.com offers users the chance to vote on a topic listed on the site. Votes are collated and sent to congressional representatives, senators and the President. Subsequently, users are sent reports on how their representatives voted on each issue. SpeakOut.com promotes itself as ‘the place where you can make a difference’ by ‘taking action’, which means letting ‘your views’ be heard through direct letters to representatives and politicians, answering survey questions, taking part in instant online yes/no polling and signing petitions. The expansion of such corporate online politics sites will make it increasingly difficult for low budget non-profit organizations to attract the very limited attention of the online public. This is illustrated by the transfer, under pressure to expand, of the ‘independent’ DNet in February 2000 to Grassroots.com, a media and technologies company aiming to create ‘the Internet’s premier political action destination’ (quoted from Grassroots.com website). The tendency for new political sites to be corporately backed threatens their democratic possibilities. While such sites may not explicitly endorse particular views, they must avoid any controversial issues or critique that might scare away participants, political interests, advertisers and sponsors. Thus, like the offline corporate media, commercial online politics sites tend to provide services and content that reinforce the status quo.

However, corporate initiatives are unlikely to completely dominate liberal individualist politics online. Democratically-oriented governments around the world are also embracing such models, developing websites that provide a number of services to the citizen including extensive public information, electronic forms for making submissions and completing transactions, formula replies to e-mail enquiries, and electronic voting. Yet, government online services – important as they are for helping develop open and accountable decision-making systems – are always affected by the interests of those in power. This can be seen by the way government websites are often used for selling policies and personalities (Davis 1999). Democracy requires political information flows and public debate autonomous from both corporate and administrative power.
All these online liberal individualist political initiatives share an emphasis upon information provision and direct communication between individuals and decision makers. This emphasis assumes a political subject who only needs to be given the appropriate information in order to make the right choices. This subject suits governments and corporates because it fits a top-down consumer model of politics where individuals choose from an array of competing political positions displayed before them. Liberal individualist initiatives provide spaces for representatives to sell their positions directly to individuals, sidestepping critical public debate. Such initiatives are basically extensions of the partisan political websites of political parties and interest groups and the staged electronic town hall meetings now taking place through the Internet.4

In contrast to the communitarian and liberal individualist models based upon pre-discursive expression of shared values or private interests, deliberative democrats argue that a ‘strong’ model of democracy requires a public sphere of rational-critical discourse. Respectful and reflexive deliberation is demanded in order for self-seeking individuals to be transformed into publicly-oriented citizens and public opinion to develop that can feed into formal decision-making processes. An overview of practices promoting this deliberative model will now be undertaken, an overview which will lead to an assessment of the extent to which such practices are facilitating the public sphere at large.

**MAPPING DELIBERATIVE ONLINE PRACTICES**

Fortunately, for the deliberative democrat, many spaces of discourse exist online that may be seen as extending the public sphere. Besides the many insular virtual communities and individualistic political websites, there are numerous forums of informal public interaction on Usenet groups, e-mail lists, web boards and chat groups where participants enter into rational–critical debate. There are also a growing number of democratically motivated citizens developing initiatives to expand these informal online deliberations. Minnesota E-Democracy (e-democracy.org) is the oldest and possibly most successful experiment in developing an ‘online commons’. Since 1994, it has facilitated e-mail based forums where participants engage in discussion of a wide range of issues relating to Minnesota politics. The project’s central forum, the e-mail list Mn-Politics Discuss (MPD), attracts over 400 participants (about half of whom post) and has been replicated in a number of Minnesota E-Democracy ‘issues’ forums (focusing upon the cities of Minneapolis, St-Pauls, Duluth, and Winona) and in the Iowa E-Democracy project (e-democracy.org/ia). The model was also adapted by the
United Kingdom Citizens Online Democracy (UKCOD) project and borrowed by the Nova Scotia Electronic Democracy Forum.\(^5\)

Other online deliberative democracy projects are developing somewhat independent of Minnesota E-Democracy. One promising initiative is the Canadian ECommons project (e.commons.net), which is presently soliciting and discussing ideas on how to best build a public space online. In Britain, the Hansard Society’s Democracy@cy Forum is pioneering ways of enabling citizens with relevant social and cultural experience or expertise to discuss specific issues under consideration by UK parliamentary bodies.\(^6\) Another deliberative project, still in its early stages of construction, is CivicExchange: Strong Democracy in Cyberspace. CivicExchange is being designed with the belief that ‘cyberspace is the new public space of the next [this] century.’ It ‘aims to build a deliberative website that will facilitate lively and self-governing political discourse . . . [that] assure[s] ongoing deliberative, thoughtful dialogue where citizens can think and (re)think issues, confront new ideas and people, and change their minds in the course of the discussion’ (quoted from CivicExchange home page).\(^7\)

Online deliberation is not confined to the context of western democracies. An example of a deliberative project focusing on a less than democratic non-western political jurisdiction is Malaysia.Net. Malaysia.Net operates effectively despite explicit media censorship of political issues within Malaysian borders by operating from an offshore (Australian) ISP. Its discussion forum attracts nearly 700 subscribers of whom a large proportion are Malaysian residents keen to discuss public issues in a relatively free environment. Its effectiveness is not only indicated by the vibrant online discussion that takes place but the fact that the forum has received messages containing clarifications from high-level officials (Clift 1998).

Deliberative forums can also be found in a number of local government online initiatives such as Santa Monica’s PEN, Amsterdam’s Digital City and the IperBoL project of Bologna (see Tsagarousianou et al. 1998). However, as Hale et al. (1999) show, municipal networks do not often actively encourage citizen deliberation. Even the much celebrated deliberative aspects of Santa Monica’s PEN are now being downplayed by city officials and are not being taken up by councils emulating PEN (Doctor and Dutton 1998: 147). Most local government online efforts follow the liberal individualist-oriented national government initiatives looked at above.\(^8\) Such efforts tend to overlook the unique qualities of the Internet for facilitating political dialogue, and instead employ the Internet simply as a means to improve the efficiency of the liberal individualist systems already in place.

In any case, government provided deliberative forums cannot replace the need for public deliberations independent of administrative power. Fortunately, there is extensive civil society-based deliberation online. As well as the discussion
forums considered above, there is a huge amount of web publishing being undertaken by individuals and civic organizations that is facilitating public deliberation. The thousands of civic activist groups utilising the Internet to draw attention to particular issues spark deliberation at local, national and global levels. This extension of the public sphere can be seen from how web publications and online dialogue have stimulated debate and protests over capitalist globalization.

Along with the myriad of alternative web publications constructed by a multiplicity of individuals and organizations, commercial online media initiatives are beginning to play an important role in stimulating rational deliberation through their reporting. For example, FijiLive.com provided an alternative source of information and views on the 2000 Fiji coup when more established media sources had problems circulating news. The major commercial mass media are also providing websites where their daily columns can be found in both written and Webcast form, including areas dedicated to political news. Some news organizations, including CNN, The Washington Post, the LA Times and the BBC, are also providing discussion forums and live chat sessions hosted and commented upon by people knowledgeable in the issues concerned. The combination of up-to-date news and discussion forums enables reasoned deliberations to take place. Unfortunately, as mentioned earlier, media corporates are not the most suitable sponsors for democratic talk as their profit-making ambitions tend to inhibit rational-critical deliberation.

Despite the expansion of communitarian and liberal individualist projects and the rapid colonization of cyberspace by commercial interests, there are still many spaces for non-commercial, non-government rational-critical discourse online. But how well do these deliberative forums actually measure up as public sphere constituting spaces of rational-critical discourse? To answer this question we need to assess these deliberative practices more closely.

**EVALUATING THE POSSIBILITY OF ONLINE DISCOURSE EXTENDING THE PUBLIC SPHERE**

A set of ideal requirements of public sphere discourse are needed in order to determine the extent to which online deliberations are facilitating rational-critical discourse and to identify any factors inhibiting an extension of such communication. I have previously developed such a set of requirements from Habermas’ theory of democratic communication and surrounding debates. The set of requirements can be summarized as follows:
Exchange and critique of reasoned moral-practical validity claims. Deliberation involves engaging in reciprocal critique of normative positions that are provided with reasons rather than simply asserted.

Re/Exivity. Participants must critically examine their cultural values, assumptions and interests, as well as the larger social context.

Ideal role taking. Participants must attempt to understand the argument from the other’s perspective. This requires a commitment to an ongoing dialogue with difference in which interlocutors respectfully listen to each other.

Sincerity. Each participant must make a sincere effort to provide all information relevant to the particular problem under consideration, including information regarding intentions, interests, needs, and desires.

Discursive inclusion and equality. Every participant affected by the validity claims under consideration is equally entitled to introduce and question any assertion whatsoever. Inclusion can be limited by inequalities from outside of discourse – by formal or informal restrictions to access. It can also be limited by inequalities within discourse, where some dominate discourse and others struggle to get their voices heard.

Autonomy from state and economic power. Discourse must be driven by the concerns of publicly-oriented citizens rather than by money or administrative power.

Comparison of online deliberations with this set of requirements provides a measure of the extent to which the public sphere is being facilitated through the Internet. Such comparison shows that exchange and critique of political claims (first bullet point) can be found to be taking place everyday within cyberspace through Usenet groups, e-mail lists, web forums, chat groups and web publishing. However, research also shows that exchange within many deliberative forums fail to approximate the other requirements in a number of ways. First, reflexivity is often a very minimal part of cyber-deliberations. Second, many online forums fail to achieve a reasonable level of respectful listening or commitment to working with difference. Third, it is difficult to verify identity claims and information put forward. Fourth, discourse tends to be quantitatively and qualitatively dominated by certain individuals and groups. Fifth, extensive exclusions from online forums occur as a result of social inequality. Finally, the expansion of economic interests into more and more areas of online life is leading to the displacement of rational deliberation by instrumental rationality in many online forums.

How are these limitations to be overcome? To help answer this I will turn to a case study undertaken in my PhD research of the Minnesota E-Democracy...
initiative (see Dahlberg 2000; 2001b). My study compared the deliberations of Mn-Politics Discuss (MPD), the forum at the centre of Minnesota E-Democracy, with the public sphere requirements listed above. The comparison showed that Minnesota E-Democracy has been able to shape online deliberation in such a way as to overcome many of the limitations of other less structured cyber-forums and is thus able to more effectively extend the public sphere. It has done this through the use of e-mail lists, the formalization of rules and guidelines, the careful management of the forum, the development of self-moderation, and the focus on issues located within a geographically bounded political jurisdiction.

E-mail listserv technology was chosen over other Internet communications media for a number of reasons. E-mail lists offer a push technology ensuring that all subscribers receive all messages. E-mail is also the most popular and easy to use online tool at present. Furthermore, strictly defined forum rules and boundaries tend to be more acceptable in e-mail lists than more traditionally anarchic spaces such as Usenet. Participants themselves often encourage strong list management, not wanting to waste time dealing with unwanted e-mail. Despite the control possible through list-serv technology, Minnesota E-Democracy project organizers have chosen to ‘manage’ rather than ‘moderate’ MPD. Instead of pre-approving every message, the list manager keeps an eye on the list and helps steer it towards achieving its goals of deliberative exchange. This steering includes encouraging members to abide by list rules and guidelines, encouragement that is aided by the fact that a six month suspension from the forum can follow from either a breach of a rule after one warning or serious and ongoing violations of list guidelines. Rules are strictly monitored by forum management while guidelines have been developed as a set of standards of online behaviour for the self-regulation of the list. The guidelines ‘provide a framework for MPD participants to hold each other accountable to the purpose and goals of the forum’ (Clift 1999). Members are encouraged to take responsibility for guiding each other, via private e-mail, as to what is deemed suitable posting content and style. Finally, in contrast to the geographically unbounded nature of the Internet and many online forums, MPD focuses strictly upon issues affecting those living within the state of Minnesota. The aim is to foster ‘serious’ and meaningful political discussion on Minnesota issues.

How do these means of structuring discourse move online deliberations closer to the requirements of the public sphere? What problems still lie in the way of extending the public sphere through the Internet? To answer these questions I will briefly review my case study findings, comparing Minnesota E-Democracy’s moulding of its online deliberations to each requirement of the public sphere conception in turn.\footnote{11}
Minnesota E-Democracy has developed MPD as an online forum where political claims relating to the concerns of those living in Minnesota are put forward with reasons and critically assessed by others. The use of an e-mail list encourages this deliberative form, fostering a vigorous exchange of position statements and rebuttals. Forum aims and guidelines also help develop the required deliberative structure, appealing to participants to keep dialogue on task and well substantiated.

**Reflexivity**

Dogmatic assertions of pre-set positions, where participants are unprepared to revise their positions in the light of what others post, does take place on MPD. However, the moulding of positions can be witnessed within MPD to a greater extent than many other online deliberative forums. This reflexivity is fostered through deliberations as participants are challenged to rethink their positions when confronted with strong critique and powerful alternate positions. Reflexivity is further encouraged by guidelines imploring participants to present their positions carefully, listen to others, and take time to reply.

**Ideal Role Taking**

Developing respectful dialogue is a priority for those organizing MPD and has been effectively fostered through list managers and participants appealing to forum rules and guidelines. While explicit abuse is formally ruled out, it is list self-management, aided by positive guidelines on how to undertake civil communication online, that is centrally responsible for helping build respectful deliberations. This respectful listening in turn encourages retention of participants serious about putting themselves in the position of the other. Commitment to ongoing deliberations with difference – as against the fragmentation of cyber-interactions into virtual interest groups – is further maintained by the use of e-mail lists, self-regulation, and focusing deliberations upon local issues. E-mail lists require the most active commitment of any Internet communications medium – each subscriber must ‘deal with’ all messages to a forum. Self-regulation encourages participant list ownership and, in turn, commitment to the forum and concern for the quality of discussions. The focus upon issues impacting upon, and intimately related to, those living within a particular geographically
bounded political jurisdiction leads to particularly meaningful and sustained deliberations.

**Sincerity**

The level of deception of identity, interests and information on the forums of Minnesota E-Democracy is minimal. Respectful deliberations have helped develop this level of sincerity. Openness of identity is also encouraged by the strongly monitored rule that participants are to sign their posts on every message with at least their real full name, e-mail address and city of residence. The rule also forbids the use of pseudonyms, anonymous postings and other people’s identities. Although signing is not always fully complied with, Clift (2000) reports that ‘no one has ever used a fake or borrowed identity effectively’ and the use of anonymous postings is very rare. In addition, guidelines state that ‘[a]ll posts should be as accurate as possible and never intentionally false’. These ‘openness’ rules and guidelines tend to be closely monitored by forum participants. Challenge awaits any poster who fails to identify themselves or to back up their claims with verifiable information or sources. Moreover, the grounding of discourse in the shared, geo-politically bounded lives of individuals encourages intimate interactions that draw out participant’s real needs, concerns, and interests. This helps maintain honest exchanges. The forums’ geographical locatedness also assists with any necessary verification of identities, interests and information; participants are mostly Minnesota residents whose identities and interests can be easily checked while the claims raised refer to Minnesota events that can be readily confirmed by list participants.

**Discursive Inclusion and Equality**

MPD has a strictly monitored ‘two messages per-day per subscriber’ rule that ensures all subscribers have opportunity to be heard. However, demographic discrepancies (gender, ethnicity, occupation, income, education) between those posting on MPD and those in the offline population indicate that not all possible positions and objections are being heard on the forum. Participation is, in fact, both quantitatively and qualitatively dominated by those already powerful offline (politically active, educated, white, males). Gender is the clearest example of this. Not only are there many more men than women posting on the list but also a masculine, agonistic style of discourse pre-dominates despite the high level of respect fostered. The over-representation of the voices of a certain privileged segment of the offline population also occurs in many other online
politically-oriented forums (see Hill and Hughes 1998; Davis 1999; Wilhelm 2000). Thus, social and cultural differences and inequalities found within offline discourse become somewhat replicated within online deliberations, putting into question the democratic validity of public opinion formed.

**Autonomy from State and Economic Power**

While Minnesota E-Democracy can never fully escape the wider socio-economic context within which all Internet interactions are placed and state and (particularly) corporate power seep, it does attempt to maximize its independence. Minnesota E-Democracy utilizes the state-commercial-dominated infrastructure and technologies of the Internet and yet is able to secure a significant degree of independence from direct state and commercial interests. It is not affiliated to any political party, interest group or private concern. It does not accept commercial advertising or announcements. The forum’s independence from direct government interference is largely secured through the US constitution and its guarantees of freedom of speech and association. Unfortunately, the rapid commercialization of cyberspace makes it increasingly difficult for non-profit, volunteer-based projects such as Minnesota E-Democracy to compete for the attention and time of online participants. As well as all the corporate backed media, shopping, and entertainment websites, politically-oriented efforts – as seen above in the cases of profit making mega-communities and .com liberal individualist projects – are increasingly being hosted or directly run by corporate ventures selling subscribers to advertisers. Minnesota E-Democracy itself has not completely sidestepped the Web’s commercialization. Advertisements have become an (minimal) aspect of every post since the move, in May 1999, to eScribe.com, which offers its services (the organizing of discussion forums and their archives) at the cost of accepting advertising banners attached to e-mail posts as well as web pages.13

**EXPANDING ONLINE DELIBERATIVE FORUMS: OVERCOMING ELITISM AND MARGINALIZATION**

Minnesota E-Democracy demonstrates how online public discourse is not only with us in some sense, but how it can be fostered to more fully develop rational-critical deliberation. The initiative shows how online discourse can be structured so as to stimulate reflexivity, foster respectful listening and participant commitment to ongoing dialogue, achieve open and honest exchange, provide
equal opportunity for all voices to be heard, and maximize autonomy from state and corporate interests. Unfortunately, Minnesota E-Democracy, along with other online deliberative forums, threatens to be marginalized by commercialized and privatized forms of participation. Online deliberative forums also have to compete for attention with less demanding forms of political engagement—common interest groups that support and promote particular interests and liberal individualist projects where participants can download information and directly express their views. Indications are that deliberative forums are losing this competition. Even when deliberative options are available, most people are not interested in participating in them. This is illustrated by the experiences of initiatives like UK Citizens Online Democracy, which have attempted to combine both direct individual-to-representative communication and critical citizen-to-citizen dialogue only to find that participants overwhelmingly choose the former liberal individualist mode of political participation and neglect the latter. Moreover, the participation that does take place in forums like MPD tends to be dominated both quantitatively and qualitatively by individuals from the dominant culture offline, putting into doubt the inclusivity and discursive equality of the deliberations that take place.

Given this scenario, online deliberative spaces may largely be following the course of what Habermas described as the bourgeois public sphere, a narrowly defined rational-critical public increasingly marginalized by the commercialization of the medium and by more populist forms of political participation. The factors preventing the expansion and inclusivity of online public deliberations clearly originate from offline social and cultural conditions. Marginalization of online rational-critical deliberations will occur as long as consumerism and other non-critical private modes of interaction dominate cultural participation and individualized interaction dominates politics. A lack of full inclusion and discursive equality within online public spheres will remain as long as there are inequalities in the distribution of social resources, including telecommunications infrastructures, money to pay Internet costs, computing skills, cultural expectations, free time and community support.

How can online deliberative efforts such as Minnesota E-Democracy overcome such structurally embedded limitations? The answer lies in the fact that it is the very practice of deliberation, as shown from the history of the public sphere, that transforms cultural norms and social structures and thus enables an expansion of the public sphere (see Dryzek 1996: 48–53). Online deliberative practices that presently exist, whether informal or organized, effect a transformation of individualized-privatized action into rational-critical public communication.
But this deliberative practice must itself be expanded if the resulting transformation is to be any more than a localized affair. Such expansion requires significant intervention, funding, and support from government and public interests. First, online spaces free from state and corporate power must be put aside for public deliberation. Given the increasing corporate control of the Web, such spaces need to be protected via regulations that curb surveillance, accord the Internet common carrier status, and protect the interactive, decentralized, and open form of the Internet. Second, financial support from government and non-government sources is desperately needed to develop these spaces; funding is required to enable deliberative initiatives to resist incorporation by commercial and non-deliberative interests and to expand, multiply and improve. Third, and most importantly, the efforts and energies of democracy advocates is needed to not only secure this regulatory and financial support but also to help with the development and improvement of deliberative spaces. Developing and improving deliberative spaces and institutions is essential if we are to encourage people constantly bombarded by commercialization and used to liberal individualist or communitarian forms of political participation to take part in deliberative spaces. Moreover, creative solutions are needed to increase the representativeness within online forums of women and other presently under-represented groups.

Such improvements and creative solutions can be developed by examining again the experiences of online deliberative initiatives and experiments. Drawing upon the Minnesota E-Democracy project, we can already identify a number of ways of attracting a greater number and wider representation of the public. We must first ensure a safe environment by maintaining respectful and sincere deliberations. Minnesota E-Democracy has also shown that forums can be made attractive to the public by linking them into everyday lived reality, by focusing discussions upon the offline political problems faced by participants. Moreover, we must employ technology that is user friendly and accessible. E-mail is such a technology. However, we cannot rely upon e-mail indefinitely. New deliberative models and technologies need to be developed to attract an online public being offered ever more seductive and easily consumable options. Fortunately, experimental efforts to develop attractive and useful deliberative forums are underway. Steven Clift’s ‘Open Groups’ initiative attempts to build more accessible online forums by developing a set of ‘open standards’ through which online interactive hosts can describe their forums in order to help ‘people search, locate, evaluate, and join ongoing interactive public groups across the Internet.’

Weblab.org has developed a successful ‘small group dialogue technique’ based upon deliberative democratic principles. Bodies Electric’s, in association with
the CivicExchange Programme, has developed pnyxUnchat software (unchat.com) that applies to web-based communications the ideas of democratic debate. The Berkman Center for Internet and Society is undertaking research to develop a web-based messaging system to facilitate and improve online deliberative forums. Researchers at The California Institute of Technology have been developing and applying HyperForum computer software, software that allows many people to participate in an online deliberation of a complex policy problem. All these efforts need further support and funding. This may be achieved, following Blumler and Gurevitch’s (2001) recent proposal, through the creation of a publicly funded authority, independent of government, that would have the responsibility of encouraging, co-ordinating, publicizing, and resourcing online deliberative initiatives.

The public sphere will not be extended merely through the diffusion of a new technological artefact. People must be drawn into rational-critical discourse before new technologies can be successfully employed to extend the public sphere. As Barber (1998: 261–3) notes, the application of new technologies within societies dominated by commercial and individualist values and ‘thin’ models of democratic participation will more than likely ‘produce the same uncivility and cynicism that characterize politics in the older technologies, radio and television, for example. . . . If the technology is to make a political difference, it is the politics that will first have to change’. There must be ‘a will toward a more participatory and robust civic society’. Such a will already exists within many online deliberative forums. Those concerned with fostering deliberative democracy in the twenty-first century must foster this nascent will by pushing for protection and financing of online discursive spaces and by putting time and energy into developing and participating in deliberative initiatives like Minnesota E-Democracy. More in-depth research is also needed to identify further ways to improve and extend online deliberations and to link these with the offline public, so that they are neither co-opted by commercialism nor sidelined by narrowly defined virtual communities and individualist forms of online politics. In this vein, I hope that this paper is not only a useful evaluation of the Internet’s relationship to the public sphere, showing the ways in which the latter can be extended through cyberspace, but that it is itself a vehicle for the promotion of deliberative culture and a sovereign public.

Lincoln Dahlberg
Massey University
New Zealand
1. Up until recently, analysis of the relationship between the Internet and deliberative democracy has been limited to the work of a number of graduate students and individual researchers. See, for instance, Abe (1998), Schneider (1997), Wilhelm (2000) and my own research, Dahlberg (2000). More extensive research on facilitating deliberative discourse and the public sphere through the Internet is now being undertaken, see, for example, the research of The Berkman Center for Internet & Society (http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/projects/deliberation/) and The CivicExchange Strong Democracy in Cyberspace project (http://webserver.law.yale.edu/infosociety/civicexchange.html). Note, unless otherwise stated, all URLs and websites referred to in this paper were last accessed on 7 May 2001.

2. I have more extensively delineated these three camps in relation to their respective democratic models and past electronic democracy rhetoric and practice in Dahlberg (2001a).


4. Electronic town halls on the Internet are not turning out to be particularly deliberative affairs. Although 30,000 users logged into Bill Clinton’s first ever live Presidential Internet chat on 8 November 1999, ‘only 27 were able to get their questions answered, and those only after their questions were triple-screened’, and after having to watch for the first hour ‘a secretary transcribe, word for word, prepared remarks Clinton read off a teleprompter’ (Weiss 2000).

5. Nova Scotia Electronic Democracy Forum no longer seems to be operating. The future of UKCOD has also been somewhat uncertain, going ‘offline’ for a considerable time during 1999 and 2000. It has recently set up a new homepage at http://www.democracy.org.uk/

6. The Democr@cy Forum’s homepage is at http://www.democracyforum.org.uk/

7. The CivicExchange homepage URL is given above.

8. Some national governments are now facilitating online discussion forums alongside more conventional services. See, for instance, the British Government Internet website (http://www.number-10.gov.uk/).

9. I developed this set of requirements in my PhD research (Dahlberg 2000). I drew heavily from Habermas’ work on communicative action, discourse ethics and deliberative democracy, see, in particular, Habermas (1984: 1–26; 1990: 43–115; 1996: 267–387). Cooke’s (1994) illuminating work on Habermas’ idealizations of communicative rationality and Chamber’s (1996) insights into the conditions of discourse have also been very useful.

10. Here I refer to my doctoral research (Dahlberg 2000). Also see Dahlberg (forthcoming) Similar conclusions have been made by Davis (1999), Hill and Hughes (1998), Schneider (1997) and Wilhelm (2000).

11. This case study was undertaken in my PhD research and involved observations of deliberations, (limited) quantitative content analysis, and semi-structured interviews with ‘key informants.’ For further discussion of the case study’s methods and findings, see Dahlberg (2001b).

12. For further on the dialogic ‘rhythm’ of e-mail exchange see Kolb (1996: 15–16).

13. The move to eScribe.com did spark some protest from participants but the general consensus has been to simply (try) to ignore these ads.

14. See http://www.opengroups.org

15. The Berkman Center URL is given above. The HyperForum homepage can be found at http://mars3.gps.caltech.edu/HyperForum/
REFERENCES


