

DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

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““ At the heart of America’s liberal democracy are competitive elections, but this design choice does not enhance collective intelligence and wisdom. ””

John Ralston Saul, in “The Unconscious Civilization,” wrote “The most powerful force possessed by the individual citizen is her own government. ... Government is the only organized mechanism that makes possible that level of shared disinterest known as the public good.” During the winter of 1997, fifteen Boston citizens—from a homeless shelter resident to a high-tech business manager, from a retired farmer to a recent inner-city high school graduate—undertook an intensive study of telecommunications issues. Over two weekends in February and March, they discussed background readings and got introductory briefings. Then, on April 2nd and 3rd, they heard ten hours of testimony from experts, computer specialists, government officials, business executives, educators, and interest-group

representatives. After interrogating the experts and deliberating late into the night (with excellent facilitation), they came up with a consensus statement recommending judicious but far-reaching policy changes which they presented at a press conference at Tufts University, covered by WCVB-TV/CNN and the Boston Globe, among other news organizations. U.S. Representative Edward J. Markey, ranking Democrat (and former Chair) of the House Telecommunications Subcommittee, said, "This is a process that I hope will be repeated in other parts of the country and on other issues."

These ordinary citizens ended up knowing more about telecommunications than the average congressperson who votes on the issue. Dick Sclove, a lead organizer of the event, says that their behavior contradicted the assertion that government and business officials are the only ones competent and caring enough to be involved in technological decision-making. This lay panel assimilated a broad array of testimony, which they integrated with their own very diverse life experiences to reach a well-reasoned collective judgment grounded in the real needs of everyday people. This proves that democratizing U.S. science and technology decision-making is not only advisable, but also possible and practical.²¹

When the Framers of our Constitution met in Philadelphia in 1787, digital media, modern psychology, social psychology, and ecological and systems science did not exist. The deliberative democracy approach outlined above and expanded upon in this essay integrates the best of face-to-face social collaboration technologies with information and communication technologies for wise governance decisions. Using these kinds of processes and technologies we can actually hear what my collaborator and network colleague Tom Atlee

21 "Ordinary Folks Make Good Policy," Co-Intelligencer website, <http://www.co-intelligence.org/S-ordinaryfolksLOKA.html>, downloaded April 18, 2008.

calls the Voice of “We the People” expressing the public good.²²

At the heart of America’s liberal democracy are competitive elections, but this design choice does not enhance collective intelligence and wisdom. It fragments communities and societies into reductionist, adversarial “sides” and reduces complex spectra of possibilities to oversimplified “positions” that preclude creative alternatives. The norm is that citizens abdicate decision-making to elected officials, who are in turn heavily influenced by the special interests they must serve to raise money to be re-elected. With few exceptions, existing processes of democracy

- Do not provide much effective power to ordinary citizens
- Promote at least as much ignorance and distraction as informed public dialogue
- Serve special interests better than the general welfare
- Impede breakthroughs that could creatively resolve problems and conflicts, and
- Undermine the emergence of inclusive community wisdom

Voting developed as a process to support self-governance in American history, and at its inception in the 18th century it was new and innovative. In the town halls of New England, citizens gathered together, debated, and decided among themselves those who would hold leadership positions in the community. The method has not scaled to address the wicked problems we as a country and world face. Wicked problems are incomplete, contradictory and have changing requirements; and solutions to them are often difficult to recognize because of their complex interdependencies—solutions may reveal or create more wicked

22 How Can We Create an Authentic, Inclusive Voice of We the People from the Grassroots Up?
<http://thataway.org/forum/viewtopic.php?t=477> Initiated by Tom Atlee Modified by/ commented on by Kaliya Hamlin

problems.²³ Economic, environmental, social, and political issues are wicked problems.

In Tom Atlee's book, *The Tao of Democracy: Using Co-Intelligence to Create a World that Works for All*,²⁴ he highlights several working examples of Citizen Deliberative Councils., including Citizen Jury, Consensus Conference, and Wisdom Council.²⁵

These efforts have common characteristics that can be replicated in other communities. They are, to some extent, official, with an explicit mandate from government agencies to address public issues or the general concerns of the community. They generate a specific product such as findings or recommendations to the larger community and elected officials. They are real councils, meaning that they are in-person, face-to-face assemblies. Council members are from a fair cross-section of society, often randomly selected peer citizens. These bodies are temporary, not meeting for more than a few weeks. Their efforts are deliberative and balanced, and often facilitated to help participants to understand diverse points of view.

These processes were created before the Web existed, and as such were labor intensive, expensive and difficult to scale.²⁶ But now we have

23 Wicked problems are defined here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wicked_problem

24 Atlee, Tom, *The Tao of Democracy: Using co-Intelligence to Create a World that Works for All*, available here: http://www.collectivewisdominitiative.org/files_people/Atlee_Tom.htm

25 The reader can learn more about these efforts at the following websites: http://www.collectivewisdominitiative.org/files_people/Atlee_Tom.htm, <http://radio.weblogs.com/0120875/stories/2003/03/23/citizenDeliberativeCouncils.html#13>, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Citizens'_jury, <http://www.co-intelligence.org/P-ConsensusConference1.html>, <http://www.co-intelligence.org/P-wisdomcouncil.html>

26 Scaling in the computing, network sense is the ability to to either handle growing amounts of work in a graceful manner, or to be readily enlarged. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scalability> In practical terms a website that can handle 2000 visitors a day may not work with 10,000 or 100,000 or a million visitors day. The democratic voting process that worked well in a New England town of 1,000 people or a state of 10,000 citizens is not scaling well to a nation of three hundred million

an emerging suite of online tools that can augment these processes and reduce their costs. The right combination of face-to-face deliberation with online tools can be as revolutionary as the self-governance process developed by the Framers in 1787.

Any neighborhood council, city council, region, state or even national lawmakers can use these processes to tap the wisdom and decision-making potential of the people. Here's how it could work:

Pick an Issue. Choose the topic from all the possible problems that could be tackled. Issues can be surfaced online using popular participation websites such as Digg that allow users to rank issues or polling via a network like Twitter.

Frame the Issue. Framing an issue for deliberation means describing the range of approaches to an issue and the arguments and evidence for and against each approach. A wiki is the kind of tool that will allow large groups of people (think Wikipedia) to work on understanding and elucidating an issue together.

Select Deliberators. This step is key to the legitimacy of citizen councils. The selection of deliberators must represent the diversity of the community and be resistant to outside pressures. This gives them a legitimacy that is similar to, but more refined than, the selection of juries, which also seeks to convene a cross-section of the community. Database tools can be used to create unbiased and inclusive selections of deliberators. These same kinds of tools can also be used to pool citizens willing to participate in deliberative councils.

Collect Information and Expertise. Gathering information from a range of experts and stakeholders about the pros and cons of different approaches is the next step. This is an important factor in both collective intelligence (which learns from and integrates diverse views) and legitimacy (the willingness of ordinary citizens and officials to respect the outcomes of the process). We can find experts via the Web, draw in their expert testimony via web video conferencing, and perhaps have

online forums where their knowledge is aggregated. Massive datasets of expert information are now free and available about critical issues, such as environmental toxins and the relationship between lobbying funds and legislation in Congress. These can be compiled, presented and widely shared with visualization tools, using methods beyond prose or PowerPoint to present critical information and tell relevant stories.

Deliberation. Most citizen deliberative councils involve 12-24 deliberators meeting in concentrated dialogue over four to eight days (distributed over one to ten weeks, depending on the method), led by professional facilitators. Since this may not be feasible in all circumstances, we can use the distributed intelligence of the Web to augment the in-person deliberations. Deliberations can happen both online and face-to-face over time, thus reducing the time and cost. Different algorithmic and semantic tools can be used to help deliberators see patterns of agreement and understanding.

Decision-Making. It is important to find processes that produce a deliberative Voice of “We the People” that the vast majority of the population will recognize as legitimate. Online tools like Synanim.com build consensus and shared statements using a multi-step online process. Iteration can also happen using methods like Digg or Slash-dot-style voting and community commentary.

Dissemination and Impact. It is critically important to the ultimate success of citizen deliberative councils that their impact on public awareness, public policy, and public programs be discussed and understood. Online tools are critical to these assessments in a variety of ways. Politicians and other officials should also sign pledges in support of these efforts (this can be a campaign issue) that can be shared online. Ongoing feedback can be integrated and continually shared with the public using online phenomena like Facebook and organized networks like MoveOn.org to share results and empower “We the People” to ensure its Voice is heard.

The approaches and processes discussed in this essay are not an answer to our democratic woes and difficulties. The tools and advantages of the Internet alone aren't enough to augment existing democratic processes and strengthen our country. This essay is intended as a call to action and research to learn how best to scale new methods of citizen consultation, leadership, and wisdom together with online tools. I invite a more thorough exploration of how these steps can create a deep well of ongoing, meaningful citizen participation in the critical decisions of our government at all levels.

About the Author

Kaliya Young Hamlin designs and facilitates gatherings of professional technical communities addressing large challenges. She is an expert in the field of user-centric digital identity, blogging at unconference.net and identitywoman.net. Born and raised in Vancouver, Canada she has lived her whole adult life in the United States and recently applied for citizenship.