

Only a piece of the puzzle:

Evaluating online deliberative engagements

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Executive Summary

As planners and politicians struggle to engage the public around local development issues in an era of increased political apathy and decreased available time of the everyday citizen to commit to traditional face-to-face methods, online engagement has emerged as a potential strategy to reduce barriers to engagement and be relevant to the methods people use to communicate on an everyday basis. This shift raises questions, however, as to the effectiveness of online methods, particularly in relation to deliberative democratic theory that situates deliberation as the ideal form of public engagement. In attempting to address these questions using real-world examples, five online discussion forums containing 207 comments were analyzed using qualitative discourse analysis, and two interviews were conducted with forum administrators to assess how well online engagement adheres to the requirements of deliberation. The findings show that in its current state, online discussion forums are not deliberative, but they contain the potential to be deliberative if facilitated under the committed leadership of practitioners. Ultimately, online engagement is best situated as only one component of a larger engagement process, which as a whole can achieve deliberation by using multiple mechanisms and engaging all stakeholders through a variety of methods.

Introduction

With increasing population growth, cities and communities are continually having to deal with development issues to accommodate an increasing number of people in a shifting world climate, placing more demands on land use to housing to transportation to social issues to policy planning and more. Municipal governments, in accordance with their legislative responsibilities for mandated community plans, are continually addressing new proposals to attempt to develop their cities in a sustainable and livable way. Part of ensuring this involves engaging the public on proposed plans to gather input, obtain feedback, and help ensure legitimacy of the governing bodies. This is why the discipline of planning exists: to engage with the public and aid in the creation of plans and proposals that citizens support and that reflect a sustainable direction forward. British Columbia - and in particular the Metro Vancouver and Lower Mainland areas - is an interesting site for looking at engagement and planning as (like many other places) it is developing at a fast pace and has been involved in many high profile development issues over the past half century that have engaged and enraged citizens on many different occasions. As a result, the City and local municipalities have put particular emphasis on the role of public engagement to try to develop and implement successful plans.

Within the governmental realm, public engagement refers generally to the involvement of citizens (when speaking broadly) or residents (when speaking locally) in decision-making processes through solicited input and feedback. It is guided by ideals that encourage substantive participation; that is, it qualifies that all who are affected by an issue participate throughout the entire process, take part in active dialogue to learn and exchange ideas, and have explicit power in influencing the decisions made (Moote, McClaren, Chickering, 1997; Turner, 2014). It can also similarly be viewed as citizen power and the redistribution of power to include everyone, particularly those who are typically shut out of such processes (Arnstein, 1969). In facilitating full public engagement, the end result leads to determination of the public interest, which is the collective interest of all people in a community rather than that of individuals or interest groups or the simple aggregation of various interests (Kent, 1964). Typically this

translates into decisions that improve social equality, improve quality of life, and advance the city (or country or organization) forward in a positive and sustainable way.

The process of uncovering and implementing the public interest reflects a fundamental and direct connection to democracy, as in its most basic form (derived from the Greek word *demokratia*, *demos* meaning “the people” and *kratos* meaning “to rule”) it refers to a form of government where the people rule through political equity and direct decision-making (Held, 2006). Over time, of course, the concept has evolved into many different theories that tailor to different fundamental ideas about how democracy is best executed, and in contemporary North America, liberal democracy and pluralism are the dominant theories in practice (Weinstock & Kahane, 2010). Naturally, then, each different democratic theory has a different idea of the best way in which to engage the public. The theories of liberal democracy and pluralism generally believe that society best functions under representative democracy, and within engagement, therefore, individual and special group interests are emphasized over the public interest (Cunningham, 2002). That is, the self and its associated interests are valued over the collective interest. While it is currently the dominant view, this approach has attracted much criticism, and as a result other theories have emerged to try and improve the quality of democracy, including the theory of deliberative democracy and its associated mechanism of deliberative dialogue.

Deliberative dialogue, or deliberation, involves individuals coming together to engage in a discussion around an issue in order to reach a consensus over what decision or course of action is in the interest of the common good (Cunningham, 2002). It is based on the foundational work of Habermas (1989) and his ideas on the role of communication in overcoming obstacles through the creation of the public sphere, which he defines as a collection of private individuals that gather together as a public to discuss issues and create collective opinions through dialogue and reasoned communication. Within deliberative democratic theory, then, deliberation has emerged as the benchmark for conducting public engagement that is meaningful and impactful on the decision-making process, as it assumes that outcomes will be acted upon by the appropriate governing body.

At the same time that the theory of deliberative democracy has developed, another shift has been occurring within the practical realm of planning, as politicians, policymakers, and planners struggle to connect with the public on relevant issues. As interest in the traditional activities of town hall meetings and public hearings have decreased and political apathy in general has increased, the Internet has emerged as an opportunity to reach out and reduce barriers to engage wider audiences in the mediums that are most relevant to them today. Its emergence has taken on multiple forms, from online surveys and discussion boards to virtually-simulated worlds and interactive games, and many experimental projects have been developed as different methods are tested.

The introduction of this new medium, however, presents an interesting intersection between the new online engagement strategy and the ideals set forth within deliberative democracy. In particular, it raises the question of how effective online methods are at engaging people in accordance to deliberative dialogue, which has been established as the benchmark for achieving proper involvement of the public in planning issues. To venture further, it leads to speculation over whether achieving deliberation online is even possible. These queries are the focus of the present study, which is informed by the following research questions:

RQ1: How well do online engagement processes fulfil the requirements of deliberation?

RQ2: How effective are online engagement processes in contributing to decision-making in local planning issues?

Much literature to date has focused on the potentials and criticisms of both online public engagement and deliberative dialogue, including how deliberation might be translated into online spheres and the potentials and shortcomings of such an approach; however, little literature has focused on using real examples to assess how well online engagement actually ascribes to standards of deliberation that allow for legitimate public influence. Forester & Kahane (2010) expand on this deficiency in explaining that real-world contexts are often more complex than their theoretical conceptualizations, making the former

an important area of study. As such, in analyzing public engagement, it is important to move beyond theoretical discussions to see how ideas are already operating in real life, which will be an important step towards evaluating their true potentials.

This research, therefore, attempts to bridge this gap by using the existing literature to inform a systematic analysis of online public engagement discussion. Analyses will attempt to reveal whether or not (or to what degree) these conversations can be considered deliberation under deliberative democratic theory and contribute to a more robust democratic process in decision-making around planning issues. Findings from this research will hopefully shed light onto the realities of using online spaces for public engagement and provide insights and recommendations into how practitioners can best engage their stakeholders in a way that is meaningful and contributes to the creation of plans that the public supports. In conducting this research, Metro Vancouver and the Lower Mainland of British Columbia will be used as the geographic parameter for all case studies. This is because maintaining a consistent geographic location in assessing planning issues is important, as it situates the research in a particular social and economic context. Making sure that this context remains the same throughout the analysis is important as it prevents any external variables - that would be introduced by changing said contexts - from interfering or confounding results.

Background

The following is a comprehensive background on the issue of public participation within political systems and its relation to the rise of online technologies, with particular emphasis on the theory of deliberative democracy. This theory informs the framework of deliberative engagement as one approach to improving the quality of democracy through citizen participation. Later sections situate this topic within British Columbia and its history with public participation including current efforts at engaging citizens, which subsequently form the basis of this research.

Literature Review

The Changing Nature of Public Participation

The discourse of planning has long been centered on the perceived need to include members of the public in their processes. Beyond being simply a matter of principle, Arnstein (1969) argues public inclusion is a cornerstone of democracy. There is particular value placed in including local experiential knowledge in these processes as it helps create a form of “public knowledge” or “collective intelligence” that can better inform decision-making (Van Herzele, 2004; Bamberg, 2013; Lévy, 1997). This is valuable to governments because public participation can lead to increased perceptions of fairness that improve levels of satisfaction with government, particularly among those who are uncertain about the issue or governing body (Herian, Hamm, Tomkins, & Zillig, 2012).

As the development needs of growth management and economic advancement have evolved through the decades, so too have engagement practices, and new information technologies are allowing for greater possibilities in creating meaningful participation. In particular, the development of Web 2.0 technologies has greatly expanded engagement possibilities using the Internet. In a comprehensive review, Hanzl (2007) outlines the many different forms of online participation currently being experimented with: they begin at one end with 3D model presentations that simply allow public online viewing and education; to one-way informational models involving citizen opinions obtained through questionnaires or surveys; to more complex bidirectional virtual spaces that begin with discussion forums and advance all the way to role-playing games and entire augmented reality systems that rely on collaborative involvement by users. By proportion, many of the available models still focus on simple information transmission or visualizing exercises, and many of the more complex and involved models are still in experimental stages, but there is a stated great potential for these spaces to create dialogue between participants.

Online engagement is often understood in this way. It is often cited as having great *potential* to improve the quality of decision-making by way of public participation: potential to motivate more people to participate (Poplin, 2012); to determine the public opinion (Bamberg, 2013); to revitalize democracy from disengaged citizens (Macnamara, 2010); and to extend the public sphere (Dahlberg, 2001). These potentials lie in the Internet's ability to reduce barriers by providing open, de-centralized spaces that allow for many-to-many communication (Janssen & Kies, 2004), as well as eliminate the time constraints present in face-to-face processes (Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010).

But these capacities are often situated in contrast to its current realities and uses, many of which take the form of one-way information flows or disempowered visualization exercises (Hanzl, 2007), which run the risk of leading to what Evans-Cowley & Hollander (2010) describe as token participation, "emphasizing simple, one-way forms of communication that merely educate citizens to accept decisions that have already been made" (p. 399). There are also large challenges in recruiting enough participants that are representative of the population in question, and often those who participate online seem to be the same people that dominate offline processes (Dahlberg, 2001). This raises the issue of the digital divide, where online processes inherently exclude segments of the population that don't have access to the Internet, as well as the reality that simply affording access doesn't necessarily translate into wider participation (Janssen & Kies, 2004). Macnamara (2010) uses examples of online public consultation in Australia to identify policy, culture, resources and technology as the four key areas that influence the success of these efforts. And within these areas, he outlines some of the most important challenges to producing effective online engagements, including the ability of specific controversies to take over the entire conversation; a need to use a more informal tone and language that more closely mirrors the culture of everyday public life, as language that is too formal or 'governmental' can act as a barrier as it is uninviting to the average citizen; and the need for user-friendly interfaces that the public can easily navigate. This last point has also been echoed by other authors (e.g. Brabham, 2012), some of whom criticize the use of geographic information systems (GIS) (a fairly common visual-spatial form of online

public participation) as requiring a high level of proficiency to use properly, and therefore are not adequately accessible to the general public (Hanzl, 2007).

Ultimately, as a result of these shortcomings, there is a fairly common view that online engagement practices should exist as a supplement to more traditional types of consultation (Macnamara, 2010; Brabham, 2012; Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010). These practical realizations have also given way to research into the motivations that drive participation in online media in order to better understand how to achieve representative participation. Brabham (2012) found that overall participants are motivated to participate in planning processes for a variety of different reasons ranging from extrinsic to intrinsic, as well as from rational to norm-based or affective (emotional) reasons. Consequently, this variability among individuals points to the need to design engagements that utilize many types of motivators to attract diverse participants. Timmermans and Bleiklie (1999) also suggest considering and defining who is actually involved in the process and what the qualifications are for participation in order to determine how to get representative participation (as cited in Howlett & Ramesh, 2003, p. 147).

Beyond the potentials and criticisms of the Internet as a medium to conduct consultations, there are also debates around the role of the planner in administrating these engagements. The planner traditionally refers to the city employee that is responsible for putting together plans that are presented to local government for decision-making, but in the context of public participation the planner is also a facilitator, mediator and administrator in engaging citizens around a particular issue (although facilitating engagement is also often done by individuals other than the planner). In Finland, planners often see their role as delivering information and facilitating public knowledge-creation in order to assemble a proposed plan, but do not see their place as engaging in the discussion themselves (Bamberg, 2013). But Legacy (2010) found through a comparative analysis that ongoing involvement of planners in the engagement process ultimately made the difference in creating more implementable plans in Vancouver, BC. In being continuously involved in the engagement process, the planners were able to establish a rapport with the stakeholders which they could combine with their relationship with government to ultimately produce

more effective results. Additionally, in-depth discussion can elicit conflict and controversy between opposing views, in which case planners must be able to also function as mediators (Grant, 2009). Forester (2006) specifically terms planners as being a part of “mediated participation”, which requires them to deploy a set of mediation techniques to ensure engagement remains a constructive process even in the face of deep conflict. Planners are also responsible for creating the conditions for people to participate fully and effectively, which includes aspects such as framing issues, explaining ideas, and negotiating and synthesizing the various contributions (Forester, 1989). Planners, therefore, that place engagement as their central organizing principle and help facilitate transformative processes can help build public consensus and even effectively change opinions (Grant, 2009). As Grant also recounts, one prominent Vancouver practitioner sees great influence in the role of the planner:

He described the planner as a powerful force for social transformation working in a responsive way with community members and political leaders to achieve values of social justice and urbanity reinforced and reproduced through effective planning processes. (p. 368)

The planner’s role is important to consider because as online engagement spaces are developed, the presence of administrators will inevitably impact the power relations among the group and influence how the process unfolds. Effective planners can therefore play a large part in determining whether or not an engagement process is successful.

Altogether, online public participation is subject to a myriad of potentials, criticisms, and influences at the hands of the planners that develop and administrate them. But despite the immense variability these processes are vulnerable to, there has been a clear increased interest in governments to use these types of engagements (Macnamara, 2010; Dahlberg, 2001; Brabham, 2012) and unlock the potentials they hold.

Meaningful Engagement and the Role of Deliberation

Whereas planning was once criticized as being illegitimate and unachievable, Innes (1996) points to the development of the concept of consensus-building as a means for validating the planning discourse, as it promotes a type of participation that builds upon good reasons, long-term thinking, and cooperation to collectively define the public interest around a particular issue. And its practice has arguably been a large part of urban planning successes in the case of Vancouver (Grant, 2009). Determining the public interest is the ultimate goal of participation as it best reflects the collective will of a community and not individual or special interests (Kent, 1964). Meaningful engagement, therefore, should seek to achieve this in order to produce plans that reflect what the public's best interest is.

Arnstein (1969) has proposed a widely-referenced ladder of citizen participation that represents the different levels participation can take. It begins with the least participatory form, nonparticipation, where practices are claimed to be participatory but are actually just a form of manipulation. Increasing levels gradually improve to include tokenism forms that allow people to contribute ideas but have no guarantee of actual influence on decisions, and finally the last set of rungs that represent genuine participation and afford citizens control over the decisions made on an issue (See Figure 1). In Arnstein's view, citizen participation translates to citizen power, and its use should function towards creating social reform that redistributes more power to the 'have-nots' of society.

These ideas on meaningful engagement present benchmarks for public participation to ensure it is effective and impactful on the planning process, and one such way of doing this is through the process of deliberation.

Deliberation encourages participants to think broadly, logically, and together to turn formerly separate ideas into

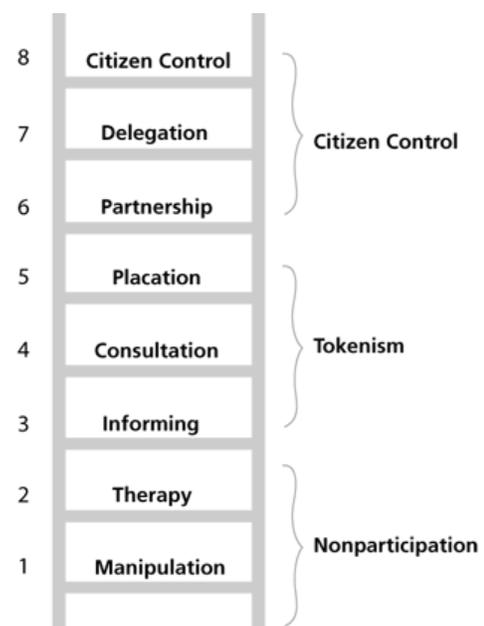


Figure 1 – Citizen ladder of participation (Arnstein, 1969)

connected public values, and has been identified as *the* requirement for achieving meaningful public engagement (Cai & Yu, 2009). Deliberation requires participants to engage in collaborative discussion and practice reciprocity, which is an openness to having their own views change as a result of the process (Cunningham, 2002). It necessitates the exchange of reasoned claims, being reflexive, attempting to understand arguments from another's point of view, sincerity, equal inclusion, and autonomy from external forces (Dahlberg, 2001). Cai & Yu have developed their own model of deliberation, outlining its natural progression through various stages (See Figure 2). Implicit in these steps is a sense of ownership by participants on the issue at stake, particularly through relating the issue to personal experiences and listening deeply to other points of view, which take the group in different directions before arriving at a common ground.

Deliberation is a key framework for conducting public engagement, and as such it has begun to make its way into online spheres as engagement generally moves online. Dahlberg (2001) situates deliberation as one of three 'camps' of engagement typically employed by administrators. Communitarian camps and libertarian camps promote communal values and individual expression, respectively, and generally promote a unitary subject. Deliberation on the other hand, embraces a differential plurality of views which it attempts to negotiate through dialogue, bringing private views into a public arena and working to expand the public sphere. And while the concept itself does not require the outcomes to have direct influence on planning decisions, deliberation tends to occur more readily when online processes are 'major', meaning that participants are likely to influence subsequent decisions (Janssen & Kies, 2004).

While the concept is noble, achieving deliberation online is arguably more difficult than in traditional face-to-face arrangements, as, among other

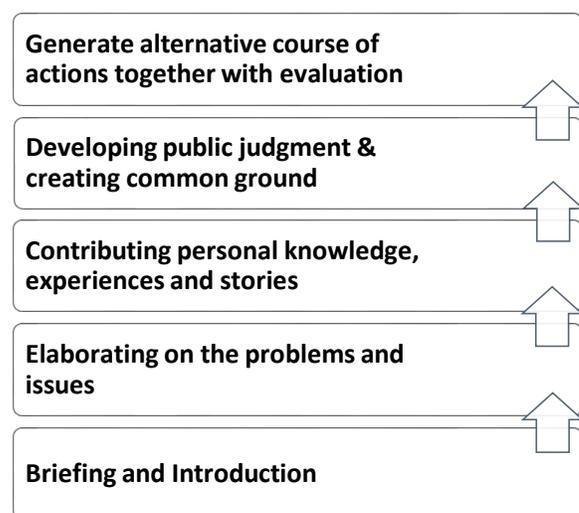


Figure 2 – Different forms of deliberation and their natural progression (Cai & Yu, 2009)

distinctions, contexts change and participants often are not able to grapple with issues in real-time or engage with others in the same raw manner as in-person engagements. It is vulnerable to the same criticisms of general online engagement, but also especially to alternative choice ways of interacting that do not require individuals to challenge their own assumptions; that is, if citizens have the option to engage in critical dialogue or in another more liberal individualist mode (such as writing to their local representative), people will largely tend towards the latter because it is easier, which prevents deliberation from occurring (Dahlberg, 2001).

Online deliberation, therefore, while an ideal for public participation processes, poses many requirements that are difficult to execute in an online space. But if done successfully, it has the potential to not only create meaningful engagement but to open up involvement to a wider array of individuals who are otherwise apathetic towards such processes. This is important not only for ensuring representative engagement, but in revitalizing a democracy increasingly being abandoned by everyday citizens.

Deliberation in the Context of Deliberative Democratic Theory

The concept of deliberation, while a practical framework in the consultation sphere, is implicitly connected to ideas about democracy because of its relation to the theory of deliberative democracy. Deliberative democracy is one of five twentieth century variants of democracy outlined by Held (2006). It stems from the original classical models that began with Athens' self-government and was transformed through republicanism, liberal democracy and direct democracy. Each theory attempted to build off of the shortcomings of its predecessor based on fundamental beliefs about the way democracy is best put into practice. Deliberative democracy emerged in the 1980s as a response to improve the *quality* of democracy in order to tackle public apathy and elitism through informed debate and continuous, reflective learning processes. It is based on two common ideas: that democracy should refer to the exchange of reasons rather than conflict of interests, and that justifying policies should be more democratic than it currently is in liberal democracies (Weinstock & Kahane, 2010). Reflective of the practice of deliberation itself, this theory advocates reciprocity and bringing private views into public discussion. Additionally, this theory

sees deliberation as the necessary process for achieving legitimacy and rationality in government (Cunningham, 2002).

Deliberative democratic theory presents potential improvements for democracy in contrast to the largely prevailing paradigms of liberal democracy and pluralism in North America. Liberal democracy aims to first and foremost uphold and protect the values of liberty and freedom for all citizens (Held, 2006). It generally aligns with and supports free-market capitalist economics, and consequently views the state as a threatening force of control that should be minimized as much as possible, and it believes society best functions under representative democracy (Cunningham, 2002). In concert with this theory, pluralism (also referred to as empirical democratic theory) places conflict between interest groups as a highly influential force in determining policy decisions, and citizen participation takes place through being involved in a particular interest group and working to advance that group's interests (Held, 2006). While its prominence was largely during the 1950s and 60s, the role of special interest groups is still a very relevant part of modern-day politics, although now it occurs mostly in the form of corporations and lobby groups, which is perhaps the most blatant criticism against this theory (Cunningham, 2002). In these realms, citizens engage only by putting pressure on elites, who enter political processes with steadfast opinions and turn the democratic process into a confrontation of rival interests (Weinstock & Kahane, 2010).

The variation between these democratic theories represent different approaches to the public policy cycle as described by Howlett & Ramesh (2003). In practice, policy formation is typically debated and decided upon by specific members of a policy subsystem that are knowledgeable or experienced in the issue and have a certain level of power in regards to the topic at hand. With the dominance of pluralism, the influence of interest groups, congressional committees and government agencies became an increasingly tight network to the point that its impenetrable relations were termed the "iron triangle" of policy formation. In contrast, and based on the view that influence should be dispersed over many involved parties, the authors describe how the idea of "issue networks" arose as a different type of policy

subsystem that incorporates a large number of people that represent different levels of involvement and types of persuasion regarding the issue. This latter idea is what deliberative democracy attempts to harness to counter the dominance of the iron triangle.

Deliberative democracy attempts to improve upon these theories by reintroducing citizen involvement into political processes, which it believes is necessary in order to have a legitimate political order. Rather than the belief that individuals have fixed preferences that are simply expressed and aggregated and taken into formal legislatures to be considered in making decisions, deliberative democracy sees individuals who deliberate as capable of altering views and coming up with the public interest, which should in turn drive decision-making (Cunningham, 2002). It promotes an active conception of the citizen, where persuasion is done through reason and reciprocity and whose use ultimately bridges differences (Weinstock & Kahane, 2010).

As any other democratic theory, however, deliberative democracy is subject to its own challenges and criticisms. First, because of its newness, Weinstock & Kahane (2010) argue that it has not yet reached theoretical maturity, which could account for some of its current limitations. These authors also point to criticism that ‘compromise’ would be a more realistic goal of deliberation than ‘consensus’, which would arguably take an unreasonable amount of time and effort to reach. Some also warn that achieving a deliberative democratic society would “require an ambitious educational project” (p. 7) to create the citizenry it demands; that is, people who are flexible in their opinions, open to change, and ready listeners. This is perhaps where the creation of space and the administrator’s role in guiding the process becomes even more critical, as not all people are prone to deliberation. But ultimately, in today’s large-scale societies, having all decision-making be based on face-to-face public deliberation is unrealistic and far too time-consuming, raising the question of how deliberative democracy can be realized on a large scale (Held, 2006).

This is where online deliberation might provide a possible answer to this question, based on its ability to provide access to a wider audience (who if presented with an array of motivations will be more

likely to participate) as well as its ability to cut across the time constraints typically placed on in-person processes. And in an era of what has been termed post-democratic, where public democratic processes are controlled spectacles, citizens engage only in responding to provided cues, and private corporate elites rule the system (Crouch, 2000), deliberative democracy is a theory that promises to seek to reduce such power imbalances and restore accountability to the public at large.

Summary & Conclusion

As public participation evolves and increasingly moves into online spaces, there are many potential benefits and challenges it may bring to planning processes. Important among deliberative democrats, however, is that these online spaces facilitate public deliberation in order to create a sense of the public good that can guide decision-making to ensure democratic ideals are being upheld and citizens are involved in their local political arenas. The process of online deliberation provides its own set of challenges and criticisms, many of which have yet to be fully explored, which is why this research attempts to use all that is currently known to generate findings that can begin to inform that which is not yet known about the effectiveness and potentials of online deliberative engagement.

British Columbia Context

Within British Columbia specifically, Metro Vancouver has a long history of planning and engagement. Beginning in the late 1960s public consultation was utilized to create a “livable region” plan, and Grant (2009) explains at length how the efforts of one Vancouver planner in the subsequent 30 years created a discipline of “experiential planning” that was centered around consensus-building through public engagement. Transition to the present day, and many high-profile planning issues have continued to take place in this region over the past decade, including a controversial plan to convert a Vancouver road to a cyclist-only path, to most recently a public transportation plebiscite to introduce a 0.5% sales tax in the Greater Vancouver Regional District for public transportation initiatives, both of which received strong public opposition. Despite these failed plans (which suggest a deviation from the “transformative”

days depicted by Grant), public engagement has been an important component of the City's development strategy, particular under the leadership of Mayor Gregor Robertson, who created the Engaged City Task Force in late 2012 and tasked them with engaging the public in new and innovative ways to get citizens involved in their city's planning processes.

Vancouver also has its own online consultation platform called Talk Vancouver, where residents can sign up and provide feedback on planning issues that arise in their communities. As an online platform, however, Talk Vancouver lies within what Arnstein (1969) would refer to as consultation and a form of tokenism, as feedback is provided by each independent user and users cannot connect with other users or see what they are writing. As such, no conversation can take place, and it is therefore not a plausible model for achieving online deliberation.

Another online platform that has risen out of Vancouver is PlaceSpeak. This social enterprise is a location-based consultation platform developed in Vancouver in 2012 to address an identified need to allow citizens to have a meaningful voice in their city's planning processes. Businesses, organizations, cities and municipalities can license an account and set up a hosted page on a particular project or plan they are currently undertaking. Citizens can register a free and private account and then view, comment on and participate in discussions on the various hosted topics. PlaceSpeak's stated mission is to "empower people everywhere to provide their verifiable feedback on public consultations" and provide space for citizens to influence local decision-making processes (PlaceSpeak, n.d.). Since its inception, the platform has been used across Canada and boasts clients such as the Vancouver School Board, TransLink, and many city governments including the City of Vancouver, Chilliwack, Langley, and Calgary. Unlike Talk Vancouver, PlaceSpeak allows users to interact with one another in discussion forums where administrators pose questions. This gives it the capability (read: not automatically guaranteed) of achieving a level of engagement that could be considered deliberative. As a tool, then, it is a good candidate for examining how well online platforms function as deliberative engagement.

While there are multiple other platforms that provide similar functions as PlaceSpeak, many require you to purchase the software before being allowed access to its content and do not provide information on the institutions that are currently using the software (e.g. UserVoice, IdeaScale, Granicus, Citizen Space, Zilino), while others provide platforms that, similar to Talk Vancouver, are not designed with even the capability of allowing for deliberative engagement (e.g. CrowdGauge, CivicInsight). Furthermore, many of the available platforms are not targeted at or designed for governments (e.g. Front Porch Forum, Loomio), which in the context of deliberative democratic theory would be a necessary precursor in order to evaluate an online platform's ability to improve the quality of democracy as it directly relates to political decision-making. PlaceSpeak is not only openly available to the public and geared towards government participation, but its design is at first appearance congruent with the base requirements for deliberation. In addition, because PlaceSpeak was developed in Vancouver, the majority of its hosted forums are from the Lower Mainland and therefore provide multiple standardized case studies for examination. This is an important aspect because the alternative - that is, studying individual projects and its associated, personalized online sites around the province separately - would introduce many confounding variables regarding the structure of the platform and the parameters of use for each case. PlaceSpeak, therefore, offers an accessible, standardized, and geographically-based platform from which to analyze multiple cases of online engagement, and for these reasons it is the chosen medium for this research.

Methodology

The theoretical context guiding the design of the methodology employed in this research is the theory of deliberative democracy, based on its understanding of how democracy should function; that is, through actively engaged citizens deliberating over issues to develop a rational public opinion that informs the decisions politicians and planners make. As deliberative democracy also supports the use of online and e-government initiatives (Held, 2006), it provides a useful lens to approach this study. Results will therefore

pertain to how online consultation processes produce effective deliberation to improve democracy as it has been conceptualized by this theory.

In accomplishing this, a particular challenge resides in evaluating engagement in terms of the level of deliberation it facilitates, because defining what constitutes deliberation is a much contested topic within the literature. This is why the main methodological consideration for this research pertains to responding to this challenge. In their working paper, Janssen & Kies (2004) outline how the concept of the public sphere (which, informed by Habermas (1989), they see as the positive result of successful deliberation) is defined in myriad variations by different authors. Schneider (1997), for example, includes equality, diversity, reciprocity and quality as the criteria for achieving the public sphere, while Jensen (2003) includes form, dialogue, openness, tone, argumentation and reciprocity. While some of these aspects naturally repeat or overlap (e.g. equality and openness, or reciprocity), they fail to agree on what exact criteria necessarily constitutes deliberation. Dahlberg (2004) also sees the problem with such variation and the difficulty it poses for empirical research into the topic, and explains how there are some core problems with this “first phase” of investigation (these include a poor theorization of the public sphere, poor connection between the definition and empirical evaluation, and poor explanation and understanding of its generalizability). In lieu of this understanding, Dahlberg (2001) proposes his own set of criteria that address these issues and build on Habermas’ theory of communicative rationality for the public sphere. His criteria, along with their descriptions, are the following:

1. 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” (p. 623)
2. Reflexivity
 - “Participants must critically examine their cultural values, assumptions and interests, as well as the larger social context” (p. 623)
3. 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” (p. 623)
4. 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” (p. 623)
 5. 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” (p. 623)
 6. Autonomy from state and economic power
 - “Discourse must be driven by the concerns of publicly-oriented citizens rather than by money or administrative power” (p. 623)

Dahlberg (2004) himself explains that his criteria represent a starting point to be critiqued and built upon, and are to a large extent hypothetical. But Janssen & Kies (2004) situate Dahlberg as the most developed and comprehensive set of criteria to date for evaluating the public sphere as it occurs through deliberation, and therefore they state that his criteria will be what they use for their own evaluation. So while it may still be a developing mechanism for measurement, Dahlberg’s framework will be the most useful tool for this research and can begin to provide evidence of its use in practice and potential considerations for modification.

In addition, it is worth adding that Cai & Yu’s (2009) conceptual model of deliberative dialogue is also useful in evaluating engagement practices. Their model builds off of previous work on deliberative

dialogue and deliberative democracy and combines it with concepts from Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation. The result, while not a criterion for deliberation, is a basic structural process that the authors see all deliberative processes going through in a logical step-by-step manner. This process model is useful in evaluating online engagement because content can be analyzed for the aspects implicit within each step, which can provide insights into whether or not online engagement seems to follow this process. Cai & Yu's model will therefore provide an additional methodological framework for this research.

Methods

This research employed both a qualitative discourse analysis and one-on-one interviews to assess the effectiveness of online engagement activities. PlaceSpeak has already been identified as the choice platform to conduct this analysis, and within PlaceSpeak five forums were used as case studies: City of Port Moody Official Community Plan hosted by the City of Port Moody; New Westminster Master Transportation Plan hosted by the City of New Westminster; Chilliwack Official Community Plan Update hosted by the City of Chilliwack; University Village Local Area Plan hosted by the Municipality of North Cowichan & City of Duncan; and Vancouver School Board - Our Future hosted by the Vancouver School Board¹.

These forums were chosen as case studies to test PlaceSpeak's efficacy as an online platform for deliberation for a number of reasons. First, as we are situating the goal of deliberation within deliberative democracy and the goal to improve the quality of democratic participation, it is important that each of the forums are government-hosted and directly reflect the act of citizens becoming involved in their local political decision-making. Participating in an online forum hosted by a special interest group or private

¹ In the initial proposal, two more case studies were included but were later dropped as one of them was not a government-hosted forum and, along with the other, they were each over three times the average length of the other forums and would have required too much work to analyze given the time parameters of this study

company does not function under the same intentions or goals of engagement as that of government, and including them would effectively skew the data. And in order to fully assess their efficacy, each case study needed to contain closed forums that took place in the past and to which decisions on what to do with the results would have already been made. This is important because it allows for analysis to reveal and highlight how planners envision the role of public engagement and its practical use in decision-making processes. Additionally, the size of the forums was considered as a factor due to the pragmatic concern of feasibility and time constraints on the study. As a result, the average length of each forum is 54 comments, providing sufficient text to analyze but not so much as to be unfeasible. Also important in selecting the case studies was their geographic location. As this research is centered on evaluating engagement within the political, social and economic context of British Columbia, it is necessarily important that each case study is located within the provincial boundary. Once all of these factors are taken into consideration, the five chosen forums were the ones on the platform that fit all the above criteria to allow for a complete and consistent analysis. Additionally, it is worth noting that Mason (2002) acknowledges the pragmatic reality in qualitative research of selecting documents based on their availability and ease of access - which under the time constraints of this study were indeed a factor taken into consideration – but she also highlighted the importance of still ensuring selection is done in a systematic way to obtain documents that are meaningful, which is what the above reasons justify.

With these case studies, then, this study uses both discourse analysis and interviews because each alone is incapable of fully analyzing the data and answering the present research questions. Janssen & Kies (2004) argue within their own research into online deliberative processes that analyzing texts alone is insufficient at determining how well Dahlberg's (2001) criteria are being met, necessitating the use of interviews as a second method. This research follows the same understanding. The discourses analysis, therefore, will be used to assess how the written content aligns with criteria on deliberative dialogue, while interviews will be used to determine how the results were utilized and whether or not agency was given to citizens for their involvement in the engagement process.

Discourse Analysis

Documents are constructions that reflect particular intensions, contexts, authorship, and consequences (Mason, 2002). And the discourse embedded within textual documents drives and reinforces these elements as it combines text and practice to communicate particular social understandings and values or beliefs (Deacon, Pickering, Golding, & Murdock, p. 147). Henry & Tator (2007) describe discourse as the following:

...ideology and discourse comprises a broad range of coded narratives, rhetorical arguments, words, ideas, images, and practices, which taken together enable individuals, groups, and institutions to socially construct a symbolic or imagined sense of community, a framework for interpreting who is 'us' and who is 'them' (p. 118)

Discourse, then, is a process of transforming underpinned beliefs, ideologies and contexts into expressions that another individual can interact with, perhaps without even fully being aware of the intensions driving that expression. As van Dijk (1997) explains further, discourse in the form of conversation or dialogue actually accomplishes a social act, one that is embedded in various social and cultural contexts, so talk performs a function, or as Deacon et al. (1999) put it, talk represents “ways of *doing*” (p. 304) (emphasis original). All of these complex interactions are bound up within any document, and so the process of discourse analysis attempts to deconstruct texts to reveal the particular contexts within it and, importantly, its relation to other textual pieces and to the document as a whole. Doing so not only aids in understanding the construction of ideas through language, but also the intricate relations between text and context.

In this research, then, performing a discourse analysis will deconstruct the discussion forums in PlaceSpeak to understand how well the language and text used aligns with the deliberative framework for creating meaning and, as it were, ways of doing. The protocols were therefore designed with this purpose, based on the existing literature on what constitutes effective deliberation. In particular, Cai & Yu's (2009)

conceptual model of deliberation and Dahlberg's (2001) set of requirements for the public sphere were selected as the frameworks for designing protocols that operationalize each concept within both models. These frameworks represent some of the most comprehensive models to date on deliberation and some of the most thought-out attempts at creating defining criteria for public deliberation. This protocol set therefore functions as a test of the effectiveness of online forums as well as a test of implementing and operationalizing the criteria outlined by these authors. Each model is broken down into annotated sections below describing how each criteria fits into the designed protocol set.

Cai & Yu's (2009) conceptual model of deliberative dialogue

Briefing and introduction: Under the model this includes description of the issue, background, objectives, resources, and constraints (p. 127). Within the protocol set this is operationalized through:

- Micro Analysis H) Administrator Involvement: The administrator is the key provider of information on the project and also the ensuing consultation process, so any posts by the administrator are opportunities to provide a briefing on the topic at hand.
- Micro Analysis F) Contribution of relevant information to the problem: This is where citizens can also play a role in introducing and informing others by providing facts or resources they have obtained through their own experience with the issue.

Elaborating on the problems and issues: Under the model this refers to participants reframing or reformulating the problem, generating a broader spectrum of issues, and questioning assumptions and values (p. 127). Within the protocol set this is operationalized through:

- Macro Analysis A) Dominant themes: These majority views or opinions reflect what the users feel are most important about the issue, which often reformulates the issue under said dominant theme, and through multiple themes it adds to the spectrum of issues overall.
- Macro Analysis B) Minority groups/views: These minority views function the same as the majority views, except for that their views are not largely supported by the group. Nevertheless,

they are important in broadening the spectrum of issues in ways that otherwise wouldn't be acknowledged by the majority group.

- Macro Analysis E) Criticizing higher authority: In criticizing either the authority overseeing the project or other implicated institutions, users are calling into question the values and assumptions these bodies are making within their plan and expressing these concerns with other users.
- Macro Analysis F) Presence of ideological talk: In doing so, users are reframing the issue according to a certain set of beliefs and therefore altering the perspective to elaborate on the issue according to a certain ideological set.
- Micro Analysis C) Critical of own values and/or assumptions within post: Questioning a user's own values or assumptions is important in the process of elaborating on the issue because it opens individuals up to receiving other perspectives that may not necessarily align with their own beliefs.
- Micro Analysis E) Contribution of relevant information to the problem: Contributing relevant information helps expand the problem and improve the knowledge base of all users to inform their views

Contributing personal knowledge, experiences, and stories: Under the model this involves gathering ideas from individuals and connecting them to the issue and among one another (p. 127). Within the protocol set this is operationalized through:

- Micro Analysis I) Reference to first-hand experiences: This directly equates with the model criteria, and provides the opportunity for others to connect to similar experiences.
- Micro Analysis B) Reasoned claims; opinion backed with logical explanation: Contributing ideas and experiences that can be useful in helping other people understand a particular perspective requires that the contributions are reasoned and logical.

Developing public judgment and creating common ground: Under the model this involves developing a mutual understanding to reach a common agreement and link private ideas to form publicly shared values (p. 127). Within the protocol set this is operationalized through:

- Micro Analysis A) Exchange of ideas, as in conversation: Thinking together requires that users engage in discussion around ideas to come to an agreement over the best course of action, so they must reply to each other's comments.
- Micro Analysis D1) Explicit recognition of another author's idea or comment: As conversation doesn't have to necessarily have to take place in the form of a reply, if a user points to another user's idea in their own comment, this also signifies an exchange of ideas and can contribute towards building common ground.
- Macro Analysis C) Supportive responses/remarks: In being supportive, users may (although not necessarily) express that they agree with the comment made, creating at least a two-person mutual understanding.
- Macro Analysis I) Changed opinion: If an individual is visibly seen as changing their opinion from a previous post, then this functions as evidence of movement towards a more common agreement.
- General Commentary 7) Was there a sense of consensus that was reached? How do you know this? : By observing the entire forum as a whole conversation piece, this question assesses whether or not overall the users appeared to reach a common understanding and/or course of action based on their individual posts as well as interactions with one another through the forum.

Generate alternative courses of action together with evaluation: Under the model this refers to producing suggestions or solutions and methods of evaluating them (p. 127). Within the protocol set this is operationalized through:

- Micro Analysis G) Contribution of alternative solution or suggestion: Users provide suggestions or solutions to address the issue or what they feel is most important about the issue. These

solutions may be based on a collective understanding, or they may reflect only the individual views of a user who was not engaged in sharing or considering others' views.

- Micro Analysis M) Expressed desire for continued involvement in issue: Continued involvement opens up the opportunity that they wish to see the course of action that is taken and how this action will be evaluated once it is implemented.

Dahlberg's (2001) criteria for the public sphere

Exchange and critique of reasoned moral-practical validity claims: Under the model this refers to sharing and evaluating one another's ideas which are not simply asserted but are accompanied by logical reasoning (p. 623). Within the protocol set this is operationalized through:

- Micro Analysis A) Exchange of ideas, as in conversation: While it is not guaranteed that these ideas will be logically supported, it is naturally a critical aspect of this criteria.
- Micro Analysis B) Reasoned claims; opinion backed with logical explanation: Rather than simply asserting claims, this provides evidence of users supporting their ideas with logical reasoning that can then be appropriately critiqued by another user.
- Micro Analysis D1) Explicit recognition of another author's idea or comment: Explicitly acknowledging another user demonstrates that they have read their post and are subsequently commenting on their idea.
- Micro Analysis D2) Reasoned criticism of another's values: This means that a user has read and thought about another user's idea and has formulated a reasoned response that evaluates that idea and challenges their values in order to try and produce different values that can be publicly shared. Note: The opposite of this would be Macro Analysis D) Oppositional responses/remarks, including shaming or ridiculing, which discourages alternative contributions.

Reflexivity: Under the model this refers to users critically examining their own values, assumptions and interests within the larger social context (p. 623). Within the protocol set this is operationalized through:

- Micro Analysis C) Critical of own values and/or assumptions within post: If a user is being critical of their own values, it opens them up to considering the larger social context and recognizing and adopting the shared public values that lie within this context.

Ideal role taking: Under the model this involves trying to understand another's perspective on the issue by listening to each other in an ongoing dialogue (p. 623). Within the protocol set this is operationalized through:

- Micro Analysis A) Exchange of ideas, as in conversation: Understanding another's perspective requires conversation, so this is a fundamental starting point for this criteria.
- Micro Analysis D1) Explicit recognition of another author's idea or comment: Again, explicitly acknowledging another user demonstrates that they have read their post, considered it, and are subsequently providing feedback on the idea.

Sincerity: Under the model this involves each participant contributing all information relevant to the problem, including intentions, interests, needs, and desires (p. 623). Within the protocol set this is operationalized through:

- Micro Analysis F) Contribution of relevant information to the problem: Relevant information including facts and history, but also needs and desires based on the information the user knows.
- Micro Analysis J) Reference to first-hand experiences: This form of story-telling sheds light on the user's needs and desires through their direct experience with the issue.
- Micro Analysis L1) and L2) Anticipation of project impacts (ideal and worst): Anticipating impacts is another way of users sharing their desires for a project by foreseeing the potential improvements or damages a particular idea may elicit.

Discursive inclusion and equality: Under the model this means that every user affected by the issue or claim is given equal opportunity to contribute to the conversation, which can be limited by external

factors of access or internal factors of dominating voices (p. 623). Within the protocol set this is operationalized through:

- Macro Analysis B) Minority groups/views: The presence of minority views provides evidence that some users are able to (and feel able to) contribute their thoughts that may not align with a majority view.
- Macro Analysis C) Supportive responses/remarks: Supportive remarks encourage conversation and the contribution of views or opinions that may be similar or dissimilar from the majority.
- Macro Analysis D) Oppositional responses/remarks, including shaming or ridiculing: Oppositional responses have the opposite effect of supportive remarks and discourage contribution of different views because rather than being a reasoned critique of an idea, oppositional remarks attack the base value of a post without adequate or respectful reasoning.
- General Commentary 8) Did anyone seemingly drop out of the forum due to frustration or discontent with the process? : Dropping out would be evidence that an individual did not feel equally entitled to contribute or that their opinions were not being respectfully heard.
- General Commentary 9) Did anyone dominate the conversation? : Dominating voices may have the ability of limiting other users with different views from speaking up for fear of being the minority or being labeled as such.

Autonomy from state and economic power: Under the model this refers to the need for discourse to be driven by citizens and uninfluenced by administrative power or authority (p. 623). Within the protocol set this is operationalized through:

- Micro Analysis H) Administrator involvement: Any involvement the administrator has within the forum can be tied to a level of influence they are having on the process, which can serve as an information-providing function or as swaying opinion through authoritative influence.
- Macro Analysis E) Criticizing higher authority: In criticizing an authority (either the administrative team and its associated institution or other powerful groups) users are explicitly

acknowledging the influence these groups may be having on the process or the issue and establishing their opposition to this influence and the manner in which it is affecting the issue. In doing so, it openly acknowledges their role for all users to see, and conversation then has the opportunity to move forward with conscious awareness to consider or avoid any top-down influence.

Interviews

Qualitative interviews were conducted with the intention of determining how the forum administrator perceived the process that unfolded, how effective they believed the outcomes were, and how well they would consider it to be deliberative. Even more importantly, however, was finding out what their plans were to utilize the information gathered from PlaceSpeak, and the general parameters they set around the influence of public engagement on their decision-making practices. Interviews were conducted after the completion of the discourse analysis as it allowed for a greater ability to engage with the participants on the material from the forum, as well as provide greater opportunities to guide the conversation to connect with insights already gleaned from the textual analysis. Interviews were initially targeted at each of the forum administrators, but due to scheduling and timeframe restrictions, only two interviewees were available for participation. The implications of this are discussed in the limitations section.

In order to capture the type of data being sought, protocols were designed according to the semi-structured qualitative interview. Mason (2002) describes qualitative interviews as a dialogic exchange that follows a relatively informal discussion style where protocols serve more as thematic topics rather than a set list of questions. While in order to ensure that all the necessary information was available for reference during the interview, a complete set of questions were written down; however, during the interview, this list only served as a point of reference and discussion was left to unfold naturally.

The use of interviews will allow for the PlaceSpeak forums to be categorized into Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation. Arnstein's model is well-referenced within other literature to inform new insights into the deliberative/engagement process, and therefore it is a key part in assessing how well online engagement functions as deliberation. Arnstein's model was applied to the interviews as opposed to being built into the discourse analysis because positioning within the ladder is primarily determined by *how* the engagement results are used by those in power. Therefore, speaking directly with these influencers is necessary in order to compare PlaceSpeak against this framework. And as Mason (2002) also describes, interviews can uncover the situational context that may be important to understanding the data itself (which cannot be acquired through other, more quantitative methods) and which is very important in understanding how administrators perceive the role of online engagement and therefore how it can be positioned on the participation ladder. Below is a breakdown of how Arnstein's model can be related to the present research.

Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation

(1) Manipulation & (2) Therapy: The first two rungs on the ladder are described as types of “non-participation” that actually serve to enable powerholders to inform and educate citizens in order to sway their opinion (p. 218). Within the context of PlaceSpeak, this would apply if administrators had no intention of use for the results and saw its role as an information dissemination tool to explain the project and its benefits.

(3) Informing & (4) Consultation: The third and fourth rungs on the ladder are labeled as “degrees of tokenism”, where citizens can contribute their thoughts and ideas and the information is read and acknowledged by the powerholder, but there is no assurance that their inputs will be acted upon or used in any way (p. 219). Within the context of PlaceSpeak, this would apply if administrators compiled all of the comments into a document or report, but did not have any evidence of this information being put to use or decisions that reflect consideration of the engagement material.

(5) *Placation*: The fifth rung on the ladder is also designated as a “degree of tokenism”, but is slightly above the previous rungs insofar that it formally seeks out minority or citizen voices to advise and represent their group of views, but all formal decision-making power still resides with the original powerholders (p. 220). In PlaceSpeak, this would be an unconventional phenomenon given its structure as an online medium where all individuals are represented as equal users, but could be present if an administrator somehow selected a specific user to comment on behalf of their associated group. Use of material would again, however, be unassured and there would be no evidence of the forum’s influence in decision-making.

(6) *Partnership*: The sixth rung on the ladder is the first that falls under the category of “degrees of citizen power” where citizens have the ability to negotiate with powerholders over decisions (p. 221). In the context of PlaceSpeak, this would be present if a citizen or representative of the users was delegated to take the results of the forum and act as an equal member of power at the decision-making table to represent the users’ interests.

(7) *Delegated power*: As the next degree of citizen power, this seventh rung places the majority of decision-making power for a particular project with the citizens, and powerholders must enter into a bargaining process to affect decisions (p. 222). Within PlaceSpeak, this would again arise if the forum was designed so that the users (or a representative of the users) took the results of the forum as indications of the decisions the public wished to be made and presented them to the administration, who could then try and negotiate with them before the users/representative decided on the final decision(s) on the plan.

(8) *Citizen power*: The last rung on the ladder is citizen power, which “guarantees that participants or residents can govern a program or an institution, be in full charge of policy and managerial aspects, and be able to negotiate the conditions under which “outsiders” may change them” (p. 223). In PlaceSpeak, this would only be the case if the forum was designed for users that made up the governing body on a plan and all decisions made on the forum (or in the larger engagement process that the forum is a part of) were guaranteed to be implemented.

Findings

In total, 270 comments and replies were analyzed among the five forums, involving 106 unique participants. The highest number of replies on a comment was five, while the average number of replies was 0.4. Comments ranged greatly in length, from one-sentence statements to entries filling an entire printed page. On the landing page of the hosted issue, all of the forums contained detailed and thorough descriptions of the project or issue being consulted on, except for the City of Port Moody Official Community Plan page which only featured a brief description of the plan under review. When administrators created discussion threads, then, this information did not need to be reiterated and no briefing was provided within the forum; new discussion threads typically just contained the question being asked. Administrator involvement within the discussion was generally minimal, but still varied greatly between the forums as each administrator seemingly saw their role differently. The Vancouver School Board – Our Future and Chilliwack Official Community Plan Update administrators, for example, were notably active within the forum responding to comments and providing additional information about the issue or authority where it related to the comment. This helped add to the briefing information outlined by Cai & Yu (2009) as the first step in the deliberation process. The other administrators, however, chose to be completely uninvolved in the actual discussion taking place, except for the University Village Local Area Plan administrator who only replied to comments to encourage them to attend the next open house meeting to share their ideas or concerns. Potential reasons for this will be discussed later on.

So while the administrator role in providing introductory information was left largely to the site's landing page (at least minimally satisfying Cai & Yu's (2009) first step), the choice involvement by two administrators raises the question around influence in relation to Dahlberg's (2001) criteria that calls for autonomy from state and economic power. On one end, this model would suggest that having administrators replying directly to the comments inserts their authoritative influence, and in doing so the process is no longer citizen-led or free from external power; however, it is impossible for the process to

be entirely autonomous from the city as it's being hosted by them as part of their engagement process. Additionally, in certain cases administrator involvement has assured users that their thoughts are being heard and that questions they were posing were being answered. In the Chilliwack forum, for instance, after the administrator provided a very detailed response to one user's expressed concerns, the user responded with, "Thanks to some positive answers to my negative questions", and then proceeded to express additional views based on the newly acquired information. In other words, the user appreciated someone addressing his concerns and the discussion was then able to progress beyond those concerns and encourage more informed opinions. In addition, administrator involvement did not seem to prevent users from feeling able to criticize the authority on things they felt weren't being done properly, including the engagement process itself in the case of Chilliwack. The fact that users felt comfortable criticizing the authority hosting the forum suggests that any influence administration may have had was not damaging to the agency citizens felt in their ability to express their thoughts. In this way then, autonomy from state power, while expressed as a criteria by Dahlberg to prevent insincere influence of engagement outcomes, is perhaps less of a harmful influence here and more of an assistance as information is needed throughout the course of the process.

According to Cai & Yu's (2009) model, the second step in the deliberative process is elaborating on the problems and issues, which includes questioning assumptions and reframing the problem. Generally, most views posted to the forums fell somewhere within a certain dominant view, with slight variations between them, so the scope of the problem was not greatly broadened in this way. There were minority views present in each forum (with the exception of the University Village Local Area Plan), but these generally only made up one or two posts. This lack of minority views could just be representative of the population sample participating. No one openly criticized any of the minority views (except for one racist comment which was quickly responded to with reasoned opposition) so it was not discouraged in that way, but at the same time no one ever replied to these views to explore the alternative perspectives further. There was also no evidence of users being critical of their own values or assumptions, so it is

difficult to say whether or not they opened themselves up to considering other perspectives. While it is possible users could have been reflexive in reading other comments prior to posting their own, Dahlberg (2001) reminds us that if given the option, people will avoid having to challenge their own ideas, so they are unlikely to be doing it of their own accord when interacting with the forum. Therefore Dahlberg's criteria of reflexivity is not fulfilled in these forums, and we can reasonably assume it is not taking place outside of the text. Nevertheless, in terms of elaborating on the problem, while not including a vast array of non-dominant perspectives, users were quite active in pointing to different aspects of the issue - from health to environmental to economic factors – as well as related issues that stem from the initial project, including traffic implications and geological issues with land stability. Overall, then, they were able to generate a range of ideas built off of a main dominant perspective.

One way these ideas were communicated in the forums was through stories and experiences, as well as facts and other related knowledge users had obtained through some level of invested effort in the issue. Because of the geographic relevance each issue presumably has to citizens who feel compelled to participate, their use of stories provides a very relatable way to corroborate their opinions. One user from the Port Moody Official Community Plan demonstrates this well:

I think the Coronation park neighbourhood is being short changed in saying it is old, small etc..
We bought in this neighbourhood 3 years ago and love living in this area. We moved out of East Vancouver and were surprised to find an actual neighbourhood with good neighbours who care for each other and act neighbourly [...] Also because the housing in this neighbourhood is older it means it is affordable enough for younger families to buy a house with a yard and raise a family. Just because it is close to a skytrain station doesn't mean it needs to become yet another high density center to pack people in tiny apartments.

By referring to personal stories, this user not only situates themselves within the issue but provides an opinion that others may be able to relate to and build upon to begin to parse out a consensus. While overall there was not a significant amount of explicit reference to such first-hand experiences (the

majority of claims or opinions did not rest directly on reference to experience), participation in the forum reasonably expects that citizens are personally tied to the area and therefore any contribution will be based on how they have experienced the area and the opinions that have resulted from that. This goes a long way towards achieving not only Dahlberg's (2001) criteria of sincerity, but also Cai & Yu's (2009) third phase. Beyond stories, many others used facts and external resources (e.g. news articles, reports) to back up their claim, and also expressed their intentions and desires (a part of sincerity in dialogue) through anticipating the various impacts, both ideal and harmful, associated with a particular project outcome, such as the impact anticipated by one user over the New Westminster Master Transportation Plan:

[...] We believe the expansion of the vehicular capacity of the Pattullo Bridge will create serious problems for the current and future children of our city [...] Their routes to school will become less safe, and more parents will choose to drive their children to school, rather than have them walk or bike. The quality of the air they breathe will deteriorate. There will be adverse impacts on the livability of their neighbourhoods [...]

By anticipating potential impacts, the user was able to provide evidence of their claim that the Pattullo Bridge should not be expanded, and was able to build up a ripple effect of impacts that they believed could be expected. Again, use of all of these mechanisms within the forums helped create easily understandable and relatable opinions, and as a result were one of the most common types of evidence referred to across all of the case studies.

However, at the same time, while the use of stories functions as a form of evidence given to a claim, outside of this there were not many reasoned comments posted overall. Many ideas were contributed within the discussions, but not many users backed up their opinions with logical reasoning or explanations as to why they believe the things they do. Many followed structures similar to this one posted on the Vancouver School Board forum: "I am not in favour of cross boundary enrolment. It is my feeling that all Vancouver schools should be great. If you spent the same amount of time supporting your

neighbourhood school as you spend driving your children to school perhaps the issue would be moot”.

This comment contains a claim, but it is not supported by a logical explanation and does not provide a constructive suggestion. So not only does this type of post lead to questioning of the validity of their claims, but it also does not allow other users to fully consider their perspective (as their perspective is not made clear) and prevents dialogue from occurring between users. This ideal role taking, as Dahlberg (2001) refers to it as, is very important in the deliberation process and requires an ongoing dialogue.

Compared to the amount of comments posted overall, however, not much conversation took place among or between users, as there were on average only 0.4 replies per comment. Additionally, even when replies occurred, the majority were still independent posts that reflected similar ideas to the original comment, and no direct or in-depth conversation between users occurred. In 75% of cases, idea exchanges only went so far as one user replying to another, with no further discussion or response by the original author (this only occurred in two instances), making it difficult for dialogue to evolve through different perspectives to the point where public judgment can be determined. And in order to fulfil Dahlberg’s criteria of the exchange and critique of reasoned claims, many factors need to be met simultaneously: an exchange of ideas, critique of those ideas, and reasoning to explain the critique, and rarely were all of these criteria met all at once within any of the forums. Ideas were exchanged, and a small portion of comments were fully reasoned, and even more rarely users would critique others ideas (in fact, this only occurred on average twice per forum), so having it all occur within one exchange was virtually non-existent, except for two instances. One of these instances occurred within the Port Moody forum and took place between five users (the most ever involved in an idea exchange) and contained all of the standards set out by Dahlberg to meet this criterion:

User 1: Port Moody is a wonderful city which I have called home now for 11 years. I welcome new development to the city but we have this challenge of fulfilling a requirement to densify around the new stations. There is only a small portion of land (approx 1km) between the Chine to the south, and the ocean. In this land we want to fit 2 major road networks for transporting Port

Moody residents as well as many other communities to our East, a railway system, and a combination of residential and commercial development! My top priorities for any development to be successful is having in place the right transportation infrastructure [...]

User 2: Re “we have this challenge of fulfilling a requirement to densify around the new stations” – this is a common misconception. The draft OCP and supporting material suggest this is required – BUT IT IS NOT. Port Moody is well ahead of its regional growth commitment right now. Densification was not a requirement for the two Evergreen station areas in Port Moody. ONLY if Port Moody wanted a third station (or more) would this requirement come into play.

User 1: Thank you for commenting on my post regarding densification. Can you please provide an information source that indicates Port Moody is ahead of the regional growth commitment for 2 rapid transit stations. If Port Moody does move forward with development I feel a 3rd station in the Barnet/Clarke area would be a good addition.

User 2: There are lots of sources, but here’s a link to a Metro Vancouver table: [provides link]

User 3: Thank you so much for those 2 excellent sources you provided. Port Moody is way ahead of its expected growth from the 2011 OCP as far as I understood and your 2 sources prove this. **SO WHY THE BIG PUSH ON POPULATION GROWTH & DENSIFICATION?** What are we not getting here We need to work together to attend council meetings to make sure council & staff hear our concerns

User 4: Thank you for that very informative document. With so many people projected to enter our city under this draft OCP, we would be well ahead of our 2041 projections. This is a huge change and is something that should be debated more fully by the public. There is a decided lack of amenities in the OCP, including parks, schools, recreation, emergency services, senior services and hospital care. All these new people will want to access these services...

User 5: Thank you, [user name]!!! This needs to be front and centre for Council and public opinion.

While lengthy, this conversation demonstrates a full exchange and critique of ideas. It begins with a reasoned critique of one user's post, who followed up to ask for a source that might help him to see the other user's perspective, and upon providing it, it enabled multiple other users to connect around the idea and form a level of consensus on the issue, even encouraging the users to work together and continue to be involved in the engagement process. It not only began to reveal a sense of agreement, but did so through reasoned critique and explanation, bringing it closer to the possibility of forming the public interest.

While this development of public judgment is a success within the forum, this was only one of two instances in which this occurred, and for the most part such dialogue did not materialize. In addition, most of the replying that did take place was positive or affirming. There were 26 supportive or encouraging remarks made overall, as well as 10 instances of explicit recognition of another user's idea outside of a direct comment/reply scenario, and all were positive, with comments going on to express users' own similar views. As a result, no one created space to deeply consider or challenge another's contributions. And because of this, there was only one instance in all of the forums where there was an observed slight change in opinion from one user who shifted their views after reading and replying to another user's comment:

User 1: [...] I do agree that priority needs to go to local students for enrolment. If there is not space left, then International applicants will have to enrol elsewhere [...]

User 2: I think the priority should be given to local students. Cross boundary enrolment should definitely be allowed. A certain number of International students should be allowed spots at all schools, encouraging their enrolment in a variety of locations in Vancouver.

User 1: I like this; A certain number of spots designated for international students does encourage cultural diversity, which is a decidedly healthy component in education in general.

In this instance, the user changed their opinion on the structural availability for international students after considering another user's idea. Now this user was also very active in the forum in expressing their views, which could have been why their opinion change was noticeable, and either way it was still the only example of a changed opinion. This suggests that other opinion changes could have occurred outside of the forum text, but because they were not posted directly onto the forum it was not part of the discussion and could not affect the engagement process, rendering it negligible. Overall then, reaching consensus was never clearly achieved, mainly because there was no follow up to all of the discussion to try and bring ideas together, and no evidence of final opinions were displayed within the forum. In the end, each of the forums mostly revealed that there was a majority group that represented the dominant opinion or opinions, with a few minority views, some reasoned claims as well as some minimal exchange of ideas, and this was as close to a consensus as was reached. Therefore while the groundwork and user willingness might have been present, there was no final effort or push to accomplish Cai & Yu's (2009) fourth step of developing public judgment and create common ground for action.

This lack of achieving consensus could be partly attributed to the lack of ideal role-taking required by Dahlberg (2001) to ensure users consider ideas from another person's perspective. While it is not possible to assess whether or not the users were readily capable of considering another's perspective, within the forums the opportunity didn't often arise to do so, as 65% of responses within idea exchanges were in agreement to the comment, as were 90% of the instances when an individual explicitly referred to another's idea. This means that most individuals posted independent comments on the forums, and when they did engage in dialogue the majority of the time it was in agreement to the posted idea and therefore there was no need to understand their perspective as they already shared it.

Cai & Yu's (2009) last phase in their deliberative model is generating solutions and evaluations. While they envision this model as a step-by-step process, the difficulty in online spaces is that such stages

are difficult to control and indeed were not controlled in any of the PlaceSpeak forums. Therefore, many individuals posted alternative solutions or suggestions, but these were largely brought up in their original comments based on their own opinions and therefore were not reflective of the entire conversation or taking into account everything that was presented on the forum. And in terms of evaluation, only three users expressed a desire to continue to be involved in the process (where determining evaluating methods might be involved in the larger engagement process). While this does not guarantee a measure of evaluation, it is the only method of even establishing the potential for being involved in evaluation.

Finally, on inclusion and equality within the forums (Dahlberg's (2001) last criteria), as already mentioned there were few minority views present: nine comments out of a total 270. It is not possible to tell whether the lack of minority views was because the participating population was largely in agreement or if minority users did not feel welcome or comfortable in posting their views, or perhaps didn't have access to the Internet at all. While there was much variation between other comments and the themes addressed, in referring to the basic claim being made, only nine were clear minority views that the majority of users did not share. Pointing to environmental reasons against an issue may not have been reflected in the other comments against the issue, but it reflects the same majority claim of being against the project, just from different angles; whereas a comment in favour of the project is a clear minority view that comes from very different values and beliefs that, according to Dahlberg's model, need to be explored and considered before coming to a final judgment. However, even when minority views were present, they did not receive reasoned replies or further inquiries from other users, and any reply they did receive often resembled the one featured in the Port Moody forum in response to an individual who liked the draft plan and suggested better accessibility to a local pub: "Really? More bars is your concern?" This type of remark does not reflect a sincere attempt to understand the other user's view and does not advance the dialogue. So while minority views were visibly present, they were not included in the forum or adopted into the main discussion to be debated upon.

It is worth noting, however, that beyond the above example there were no other oppositional remarks made to minority views, so this does not have appeared to discourage the equal participation, and the minority user in this scenario actually responded back to the remark seemingly unphased. Additionally, no one appeared to drop out of the process due to their minority stance or because of unfair treatment (although it is impossible to know for certain), and while some voices were very present and active in contributing their (always dominant) opinions, they never belittled other's views so did not *prevent* inclusive participation in that sense - although again, it is difficult to say whether or not their strong presence may have *discouraged* others from participating out of fear of simply being the minority. So while the PlaceSpeak platform is constructed to be open and inclusive to all who have Internet access, it seems that minority views are not equally heard in practice and are not being fully considered or debated within the forums, neglecting to fulfil Dahlberg's (2001) final criterion.

For the interview portion of this study, a total of two interviews were conducted that lasted approximately 35 minutes and 45 minutes. While this number came short of the initial desired number of interviews due to declined offers to participate and the inability to reach contacts, this is nonetheless the resulting situation. If not for nothing, it is a lesson both in timing and diligence of preparation as well as the reality of time-constrained research and the impacts of targeted participants. In any case, the two interviews I was able to conduct revealed valuable insights into the realities of the online engagement process and its perceived role in governmental decision-making. Both interviews had many similarities to each other, as well as a few differences. Perhaps most importantly, both administrators recognized openly that the role of their engagement process for the particular project in discussion centered on consultation and gathering feedback; that is, *not* collaboration or empowerment to make decisions. This is key, as it immediately displays that the administrators in charge of structuring and running the engagement do not see deliberation (which involves both collaboration and empowerment) as a necessary or appropriate feature of the process; "it's a lot safer in terms of controlling the process if you're still controlling it", as

one administrator put it. And this was not to say that they rejected the idea of empowerment, but that it was unclear whether such a possibility was “workable” or whether it “fit into the municipal kind of framework”. This speaks directly to their conceptualization of democracy itself and how the public should be involved in political decision-making, which will be discussed in more detail later. In addition to this similarity, both interviewees also referred to their use of PlaceSpeak as an experimental pilot project because their city had not done online engagement before. Interestingly, one city council had encouraged their planning team to try an online approach to engage a wider audience, while the other city was very hesitant at using an online method and the administrator, feeling very strongly about the need to have an online presence, had to push for the pilot project to go through. The interviewee felt so strongly because they recognized the importance of “meeting people where they were” instead of requiring people to come to them (in person), which is a noted advantage of online methods in terms of ease of access. One of the other advantages, which both individuals also agreed on, was that use of PlaceSpeak appealed to a different, younger demographic that is usually missing from traditional engagement methods. One of the individuals noted that by looking at the most common times people were posting on their forum (roughly between 7 p.m. and 2 a.m.), suggested that these were younger families who worked all day and had to deal with young children and therefore would never be able to make it to an open house. So, offering an online method allowed the city to reach a demographic that they can’t reach through any other traditional in-person method. In reaching this demographic, however, the administrators noted that they simultaneously weren’t reaching the demographic who prefers face-to-face engagement, which is primarily the older generation (which one administrator possibly attributed to the fact that this demographic tends to be uneasy about providing identity information online). Therefore, online engagement was not seen as engaging every stakeholder involved in the issue as it catered to a certain group of people who are comfortable with technology. This suggests that using the Internet makes engagement more accessible for some, but were it to be the only method of engagement it would certainly not be accessible to everyone. It also was suggested that people prefer the more traditional methods, because they can attend to it and hear what everybody has to say face-to-face in a big group and discuss

it, whereas in online discussion “you might come into it for a bit and then go away for a bit, come into it again at different times”, to which an administrator admitted it would be difficult to achieve the same type of (more in-depth) engagement that occurs in person. In light of this, one of the administrators noted that across the entire engagement process, they were able to engage everyone using a variety of methods, and the other administrator echoed this:

Typically in the past we’ve had public meetings and open houses and all sorts of things and it’s really hard to get people to come out [...] So really trying to get people interested and then make opportunities for them to participate in ways that they want to. So for us it was really important to have a really broad range of different types of public engagement activities to try and make ourselves as accessible as possible to the community.

In this way online engagement is not seen as the sole or primary form of engagement (nor would either administrator ever want it to be), but rather as one piece of a larger process that together is inclusive in engaging everyone, although subsequently in different capacities. These other pieces were described as including town hall meetings, public hearings, open houses, community talks, and surveys (both paper and online).

Both interviewees felt that there was a mix of independent posts along with conversation within the forum, and neither seemed to think there was anything particularly good or bad about that. All results from both forums were compiled into reports which were then presented to Council who “considered” the information when making decisions. In other words, the information from public consultation was not the only or primary aspect considered, and it was left to Council to ultimately make the decision they felt was best. One interviewee described it this way:

You can’t just formulate policy on the fact that somebody said one thing and another person said something else; you have to consider it with the bigger context and whether it makes sense [...]

At the end of the day the City takes into account the public interest overall, as opposed to just the

interest of the neighbourhood [...] So I think the public piece is really important, to have that feedback, and to take it into consideration, but it's not always going to be the determining factor.

This understanding reflects the way this individual conceptualizes the role of public engagement in general, where Council is responsible for making the public judgment, because engagement only represents individuals' or interest groups' independent views. This is because they do not envision public engagement as requiring deliberation, and that's probably because they see Council as responsible for making those decisions so there is no need to have the public be in agreement - they just need to capture as many interests as they can so Council can take everything into consideration before deciding accordingly. In this way, deliberation is not desired by the city, so there is no one to try and facilitate it through engagement, and as Dahlberg (2001) mentions, people are not naturally prone to deliberation because they don't like challenging their views, so they will likely not enter into deliberation on their own, and in this way its likelihood of occurring is lost. This is confirmed as one administrator expressed that research had showed people's top preference for engagement was through surveys, likely because they are simple and quick and don't require a lot of commitment or vulnerability. In this scenario of engagement, then, the administrator's role becomes one of "managing expectations" during the process, and being fully transparent about what information they are looking for and how it is going to ultimately be used.

Even in light of this, each administrator perceived different roles for themselves *within* the online forums. One individual stressed that aside from correcting information or responding to a direct question, they did not involve themselves in the discussion and instead chose to let it occur in an "organic" way, as their role was to collect feedback and present it to Council so they needed to ensure that their contribution wouldn't "editorialize" the report by introducing influence. In slight contrast, the other administrator confirmed that they helped to guide conversation slightly and respond to questions right away, so they saw their role as more active and participatory in encouraging discussion and providing information where appropriate. This could partly be because the administrator found that they had a lot more views on

the site than actual participants (as did the other forum), but still viewed this as a good thing because at least they “can say that that many people saw it and at least know about it”. This informing role of engagement (although lowest on Arnstein’s (1969) ladder) was considered a success as the administrator admitted that most people are usually otherwise oblivious to the workings of the city, so at least this was a step in the right direction. In other words, getting involved more as an administrator was at least providing more information that others could read and then know about.

In terms of PlaceSpeak as a platform, both administrators echoed the same reasons for choosing it, which was providing the ability to reach more and new people; the fact that at the time PlaceSpeak was one of the only available options on the marketplace; and affordability. Interestingly, one administrator also mentioned that PlaceSpeak being a Canadian platform was crucial, as public institutions are required by law to store all data in Canada, and so the fact that PlaceSpeak was Canadian allowed them to use a hosted online platform at all. In the end both also felt that the site was fairly user-friendly and provided all the features they needed for their engagement process. The demographic information as well as user-location verification features were well-liked, and while both said they would recommend PlaceSpeak to others, one admitted that they would have to assess the appropriateness of using that method and the affordability of it (prices have since gone up) before using it again, while the other had since begun developing their own online platform within the city website and said they would prefer to use their own site in the future as management was still “not sold” on PlaceSpeak (for reasons which they couldn’t say).

While PlaceSpeak itself was not identified as a platform they would necessarily use again, both interviewees recognized the important value of online engagement in general, and as a result will continue to use it as one part of a multi-faceted approach. One administrator explained their support for the online approach based on a personal and professional belief that “giving people everything they need to self-educate and answer questions responsibly is the direction that the city must go in”. While this takes on a decidedly liberal and individualist view, it nonetheless reflects how they believe the engagement process should function. This administrator also recognized, however, that there is a difference in quality of

engagement that occurs between the platforms. They characterized town hall meetings as more personalized and where *conversation* happens, compared to public hearings which provide *comments*, and online forums which provide *responses*. This is perhaps another reason why a comprehensive approach that includes all of these methods is seen as the best option, so as to ensure that at least some level of conversation occurs beyond isolated opinions.

From these interviews it is clear that both cases fall onto the fourth rung of consultation, and in some cases the third rung of information, both of which are classified by Arnstein (1969) as degrees of tokenism that do not offer any real empowerment to citizens, and particularly to the have-nots and minorities. What is interesting is that both administrators recognize where their engagement efforts reside within the spectrum, but both seem to be comfortable achieving such a level as it fits with how they understand the process to work, and within their work structure they see it both as fulfilling their mandated role and as sufficient within the larger process. As a result, both administrators did not seek out deliberation nor openly encourage it, despite any potentials it may have had to occur.

Implications

There were many different components revealed through the analysis, with some that support the existence of deliberation and others that point against the presence or even possibility of deliberation. At this point it is worth noting that PlaceSpeak self-labels their platform as a consultation tool. In relation to Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation, consulting is not an ideal model to achieve as it falls short of what full and empowered engagement should be, and it also falls short of achieving Dahlberg's (2001) criteria of critical self-reflection and sustained dialogue. PlaceSpeak's categorization of themselves might suggest that it would not be able to provide deliberative dialogue simply based on the medium's infrastructure, however this is not necessarily true. While PlaceSpeak might not view themselves as a tool meant for deliberative engagement, it does contain the potential and all the necessary structural features to facilitate deliberation if utilized in that manner: provides an open and accessible platform that is free for the public to use (provided they register as recognized citizens); contains pages for information and

discussion where users are not limited in what they can post; and allows users to comment and reply on each other's posts to potentially start a conversation. So the attainability of deliberation within the platform itself is there.

In looking at the content already present on PlaceSpeak, however, the study's first research question is responded to with the conclusion that deliberation on the whole was not present. Forum participants were unable to develop a public judgment or consensus beyond the majority view as individuals were not reflexive and did not take on the necessary role of sincerely considering others perspectives through an ongoing dialogue. Any conversation that did occur was consistently short (that is, generally one or two replies to a comment) and more often than not in agreement to the idea as opposed to logically critiquing and inquiring about it. And as a result of this, there was very little reasoned exchange of ideas between participants and therefore any proposed solutions or suggestions were based on independent, isolated opinions and not the public interest, which is what proper deliberation should lead to.

Perhaps one of the biggest implementation reasons for this is because the administrators operating the forums were consciously not trying to facilitate deliberation, instead only aiming to consult the public and gather feedback across multiple platforms, of which PlaceSpeak was only one. If administrators and facilitators of engagement do not see their role as attempting to foster deliberative dialogue, then the process is likely not to turn out to be deliberative, because again, as Dahlberg (2001) mentions, people are not prone to deliberation on their own. And the fact that one administrator within their forum encouraged users to attend an open house to share their ideas or concerns suggests that the function of the forum was not seen as conducive to facilitating the same process that unfolds at the open houses, and comments that appeared to tailor to this traditional method were flagged as being better served offline and in person.

In turn, one of the biggest fundamental infrastructural reasons for not achieving deliberation is because online engagement is a fragmented process. As one administrator mentioned, in online processes citizens will participate for a certain period of time and then drop out for a period of time and then re-enter at random points throughout the process. This is a positive aspect for the medium in terms of

accessibility as it eliminates the time constraints of face-to-face engagement (Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010) and allows individuals who are otherwise busy to participate when they have the time; however, it is a negative aspect in terms of achieving deliberation as it creates a disjunctive process that, compared to in-person engagement, cannot follow procedural steps, which is precisely how Cai & Yu's (2009) model for deliberative processes is laid out. In the online sphere, such an approach is extremely difficult to execute, and likely would never happen on PlaceSpeak.

Despite these indications that deliberation is unachievable online, it is equally important to recognize that there were definite pieces of deliberation present within the forums that suggest there is some degree of potential and that it is *possible* to engage deliberatively online. Through both administrators and users, ample information was continually supplied to ensure all users were well-informed about the issue from multiple perspectives, and this information allowed for a healthy elaboration on the problem to generate new and related issues despite not being critical of each other's contributions. Many users also instinctually turned to the use of stories and experiences to convey their opinions and ideas (one of Cai & Yu's (2009) phases), and while usually not fully reasoned, this suggests that with supportive direction to fully explain their views, individual contributions could set the right foundation for a deliberative critique and exchange of ideas to occur. Finally, the process on PlaceSpeak was also reasonably autonomous from external authoritative influences. As it was hosted by the city and therefore not citizen-initiated or citizen-led, there is necessarily some degree of unavoidable influence; however administrator involvement was never more than information-providing, and it did not prevent users from being openly critical of higher authorities including the hosting city. In this way, power relations were kept in check.

Based on these observations, there are pieces of deliberation that speak to the potential for it to arise under the right conditions; however, this would require dedicated commitment to proper facilitation by the administrators, whom without deliberative engagement would never materialize. And as the interviews established, these facilitators do not recognize or believe in this goal because they ascribe to a

different democratic theory – that is, not deliberative democracy but rather liberal democracy - which places final decision-making power in the realm of the Council or ruling government body, and conceives the role of public engagement as only an opinion-gathering process to be considered in concert with other contributing factors. As such, the study's second research question has been revealed as there being minimal effectiveness in online engagement contributing to decision-making processes. Additionally, even if administrators were to somehow align to the deliberative process, online engagement as displayed through the case studies were not inclusive and equal of all affected stakeholders, which is a criterion of Dahlberg (2001). There were few minority views presented in any of the forums, and those that were present were not acknowledged or incorporated into other users' posts, so it is impossible to say that all stakeholder groups' views were equally considered within the forums. This is either because, as one administrator speculated, certain groups (particularly older citizens) are not comfortable using the Internet or displaying their identity online and prefer face-to-face engagements, or as (Janssen & Kies, 2004) have depicted as a potential barrier to online processes, certain minority groups do not have Internet access and are therefore automatically excluded. Both of these could potentially explain why there were so little minority views in the forums, and ultimately suggests that while the Internet boasts of increased accessibility, it may only be more accessible to *some*, and primarily the younger, more technologically comfortable generation.

PlaceSpeak unfortunately did not collect age as part of their demographic information, but if the above is true, it would also help explain why there were such prominent majority views, as the users came from roughly the same demographic that likely shared some of the same views and concerns. This finding is interesting as it reflects a documented challenge in recruiting representative participants, but for different reasons. Whereas it has been noted that often those who participate online seem to be the same people that dominate offline processes (Dahlberg, 2001), in this research it the opposite is suggested: that the people who participate online are very different from those who attend in person, but that as a result this excludes precisely the people that engage in the traditional methods they prefer, and the end is result

is still unrepresentative populations. At any rate, unless extensive effort is made to ensure the participants in online engagement are representative of the affected stakeholder groups, deliberation can never be fully attained through this medium. And as one administrator confessed – in any type of conventional engagement in practice – “not everybody is [ever] in the room” at one time, which to practitioners is currently simply a reality of the field.

With all of this in mind, and in light of the knowledge that both interviewees consciously utilized online engagement as one part of a multi-faceted engagement approach, this research agrees and aligns with other literature such as that of Macnamara (2010), Brabham (2012) and Evans-Cowley & Hollander (2010), that situates effective online engagement as part of a larger process. Only when this larger process is considered as a whole can engagement be deemed as successful in integrating everyone into the conversation. And if deliberation is to occur in the engagement process, it must be done across the entire procedure generally and primarily within face-to-face engagements where direct dialogue in a closed setting and timeframe can make its facilitation much more feasible. Most importantly, there is a requisite that the administration and planning team must be diligently committed to achieving deliberation and in trying to recruit (again, across the entire process) every representative stakeholder group in the issue to ensure effective deliberation can take place. Only then can deliberation be achieved to improve the democratic process according to deliberative democratic principles.

Lastly, it is also worthwhile to assess how the frameworks implemented in this research performed as methods of measuring the level of deliberation in practice. Arnstein’s (1969) model, while not directly tied to deliberation, was very useful in situating the PlaceSpeak forums in a larger context of public participation. And it became particularly useful as a reference when the interviewees compared their hosted forums against this model (or a similar version of it) in discussing how they perceived its function. It undoubtedly turned out to be the most appropriate model to assess the interviews against given the type of data that was obtained.

Cai & Yu's (2009) framework of the phases of deliberation was also helpful in identifying key factors that make up the deliberative process. The issue that arose within this study is that the conceptualization of the process was designed for in-person engagements, and therefore its translation into an online medium was not well-suited as this sphere operates without the space and time boundaries that traditional methods have. In this sense, the framework's actual conceptualization and construction automatically put online engagement at a disadvantage of adhering to it. Whether or not deliberation can occur outside of a set step-by-step process remains unknown, but investigation into this would be critical in order to further examine the Internet's potential at delivering public deliberation. This is precisely where Dahlberg's (2001) criteria for deliberation is useful, as it provides a list of criteria that are independent of a timeframe. In practice, this framework functioned well as a measurement of deliberation as it included a broad array of factors that encompassed all aspects of discussion found in person or online. The difficulty, however, is that while Dahlberg's criteria are meant to operationalize deliberation, there was a strong need to operationalize his criteria into protocols to create an effective discourse analysis, and in the end many other features, or more specific versions of his criteria, had to be created to try and fully capture the text and assess it against the model. Aspects such as "understanding the argument from the other's perspective", "a commitment to ongoing dialogue", or "a sincere effort to provide all information relevant to the particular problem" (p. 623) are arguably vague ideas that require a certain level of interpretation to implement into an analysis. While across the article Dahlberg explains each of his criteria in more detail, the concepts on the whole can each take many different directions and careful planning must be used in order to select which specific descriptions are most appropriate to use in developing protocols. Therefore, while Dahlberg's attempt at operationalizing the achievement of public sphere discourse represents one of the most developed efforts at doing so, in practice it perhaps still needs to be modified further to be fully operationalized.

Limitations

With every attempt to properly evaluate the potentials of online engagement as a form of deliberation, this research – much like all others – is subject to certain limitations that impact its validity and generalizability. The first and perhaps most important limitation is that because of timing incompatibilities, I was only able to connect with and interview two forum administrators as opposed to the initial goal of five. This was partly because of declined offers to participate and an inability to make contact, but also partly because of time constraints due to late ethics approval such that remaining participants who were initially interested had departed on vacation and were no longer available to participate. As a result, interview findings cannot be generalized to reflect all case studies that were involved in this study, and therefore encounter extreme difficulty in being able to inform on the realities of online engagement use across the province and beyond. Under different circumstances, had more interviews been conducted, it would have provided a much more accurate reflection of how PlaceSpeak results are utilized. Additionally, this study only had the capacity to analyze a small set of forums, in this case five. Analyzing more forums and of varying length would provide more generalizable and robust data on how PlaceSpeak functions as an online engagement tool.

Another consideration is that the frameworks used to develop protocols for the discourse analysis are not proven methods for assessing deliberative texts. Because deliberation is still not a solidly defined concept beyond certain main defining criteria, coming to a conclusion over what constitutes deliberative dialogue is still contested. In addition, there are few authors beyond Dahlberg (2001) and Cai & Yu (2009) who have attempted to conceptualize and operationalize the evaluation of deliberation in a manner that can be empirically tested. With further development and implementation, such frameworks might improve or become more fully developed so that their use confidently assumes that deliberation can be found to exist or not exist within selected dialogue.

At this point it is also worth noting that while this research adhered to the theory of deliberative democracy, this is only one approach to effective democracy. Other democratic theories would disagree

that deliberation should be sought at all, or that online engagement needs to be anything more than opinion gathering, which is rooted in their democratic and political views. This study reflects the effectiveness of online engagement in accordance with deliberative democratic theory, which assumes that more a more engaged and involved citizenry produces a better democracy. This approach may not be shared by everyone.

Another limitation to this study is that discourse analysis is only as good as the researcher doing the analysis, and because it was my first endeavour at using such a method, I do not have a learned skillset at deconstructing text within its various social and political contexts, and it is likely that a more experienced researcher in this field would have picked up on things that I missed. This is something that is unavoidable, but I acknowledge the limitation my own role as a researcher may have had on my results, which could potentially be shifted with more experience in using this method.

Finally, while PlaceSpeak was an appropriate site for analysis, there are other platforms that function similarly, such as mySidewalk and Open Town Hall, which further research could benefit from examining. Examining other platforms would not only produce more data to argue for or against the capabilities of online engagement as deliberative, but could also be compared to PlaceSpeak in order to assess possible contributing factors that may lie within the structure of the platform itself.

One may argue that another limitation to this study is that I was only able to work off of the available text, and therefore don't know the real motivations behind each individual post, and perhaps opinions did change or users were reflexive and that information just wasn't posted on the forum. But this is precisely the point: what I am able to analyze on the forum is all that the other users and also the planners and administrators are able to go off of as well. Unlike in a face-to-face engagement where everything that goes on is relatively visible to all those in attendance, in an online sphere everything remains private except for the text that is constructed and posted. So while something such as a changed opinion may exist, if it is not publicly displayed on the forum it will also not be applied to the collective engagement process and ultimately won't impact the final decision-making process.

Conclusion

The public engagement process in British Columbia is ever-evolving as the needs of cities and the upheld democratic theory of governments change over time. With increased public apathy and decreased public participation in planning issues, however, there has been a recognized need to discover new ways of engaging with the public, and the Internet has provided one of those new avenues with the promise of increased accessibility and ease of use. This model might function extremely well under a liberal democratic view where engagement functions primarily as an opinion-gathering tool; however, within deliberative democratic theory, public engagement is conceived as a very critical and involved process that requires commitment on many levels in order to execute successfully. This increased emphasis of importance, as well as increased numbers of criteria to be met, makes deliberation challenging to achieve online, and has not been achieved within the context of this research. Instead of viewing online engagement as a new way forward, practitioners and researchers alike should consider viewing it as a new component to add to the repertoire of already-in-use methods, including town hall meetings and open houses, which can serve as better areas for practicing deliberation and which when taken as a whole, strengthens the engagement process to include more people in the ways that allow them the opportunity to participate in the most meaningful way possible. In other words, it is not about solving the puzzle, but rather adding another piece to the existing picture.

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