Online Forums as an Arena for Political Discussions:
What Politicians and Activists Can Learn From Teachers

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This paper discusses the use of online discussion forums in various "e-democratic" practices in light of the lessons learned from the field of education. Informed by a conceptual framework drawn from the role of public sphere in electronic democracy and the ideal learning conditions of a computer-mediated communication environment, the author analyzed two discussion forums maintained by a government and a civil society group. Results suggest that, in both cases, online discussion forums only reflect a few elements of effective online learning and therefore, have yet to reach their full potentials. Implications for future research are discussed.

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Introduction

As the use of IT-based communication medium such as email, listserv, web-board, web-blog, and pod-cast becomes the new social norm in recent years, speculations about the possibilities of a democratic renewal have also emerged. By reducing the distance and barriers between citizens, politicians and civic groups, it is argued that the diffusion of these new media technologies will facilitate the level civic participation, revitalize political deliberation and resulting in a more "direct" democratic system (Rheingold, 1993; Grossman, 1996; Rash, 1997). Consequent to the increasing use of information technologies in the political arena, a developing field of e-democracy studies has emerged since the late 1990s, covering the various aspects of political behavior, institutions and processes, ranging from political campaigns and mobilization (Schneider & Foot, 2002; Ferdinand, 2000), grass-root movements and activism (Wilhelm, 2000) to governance and administrative reform (Hague & Loader, 1999; Gibson et al, 2004; Fountain, 2002). However, despite a growing number of researches and literatures on this subject matter, scholars remain divided on the real political impact of new media technologies – a difference of opinion often attributed to methodological variations and also to the changing nature of a developing medium (Agre, 2002).

One of the ways to assess the political potential of new media technologies is to measure whether they can be used to generate *political knowledge*, as political action should ideally stem from a sound understanding of the issues at hand. In other words, one should not be talking a good game about politics, but in fact does not possess a firm grasp of the important concerns surrounding the individual and his or her communities. A key ingredient to foster this production knowledge is the presence of an environment where individuals may learn from one another and collectively progress through cooperation and the exchange of ideas – such is also the essence of democratic deliberation discussed in many scholarly works (e.g., Habermas, 1964; Dahlberg, 2001). Today, as politicians and civic groups attempt to engage the tech-savvy youth of today with new media technologies, educators in colleges, universities, and K-12 education are also incorporating these technologies into their classrooms to facilitate teaching and learning for similar reasons. As the success and failure of these online platforms seem to depend on whether they can foster a collaborative environment with a shared sense of community (e.g., Blanchard, 2004; Schwier & Balbar, 2002), how politicians might learn from the educators, and certainly vice versa, in utilizing these technologies are therefore worthy of further exploration.

This study takes the former perspective and casts the various "e-democratic" practices in light of the lessons learned from the field of education. More specifically, the focus is on one of the most popular web-based technologies commonly used by politicians, activists, and teachers alike – online discussion forums. As a tool for promoting conversational modes of learning, it has been suggested that online discussion forums can lead to enhanced learning outcomes for students (Krentler & Willis-Flurry, 2005). The goal of this research is to explore the research question of: to what extent does online discussion forum reflect the ideal conditions of a learning environment? Using a conceptual framework drawn from previous research and literature on technology and learning, the author analyzed the structural features of two discussion forums maintained by a government and a civic group. By applying an evaluative framework on a real life case, the author hopes to gather empirical data that will contribute to the larger debate on the political potential of the Internet and also open the door for further research.

Use Online Discussion Forum in Political Arena

Online discussion forum is a web-based software application used for groups to communicate online. Other technologies that perform similar functions include online bulletin boards, news groups – all of which have been around since late 1980s and early 1990s. Typically, an online forum consists of many folders containing messages on a specific subject, also known as "threads." Each thread is a series of "messages" – a message similar to email that represents individual contribution to a conversation on the same topic (UK Higher Education Academy, 2005). Online discussion forum has been widely used by politicians, civic groups, and governments around the world to engage citizens or to solicit feedbacks from the general public. Here, the author presents two real-life cases of the use of online discussion forum.

First is the online discussion forum hosted by the government of Singapore as part of its *e-consultation* programs. E-consultation, as defined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), is a "two-way interactive relationship in which citizens provide feedback to government. It is based on the prior definition of information. Governments define the issues for consultation, set the questions and manage the process, while citizens are invited to contribute their views and opinions through web-enabled applications" (OECD, 2001). Singapore's online consultation portal was launched in March 1997 to reach out to Internet-savvy and younger Singaporeans. The portal includes online polls, a general feedback/reply area, specific comment section for cutting red tape and government waste, a policy digest that provides relevant background information, and online discussion forums. The online discussion forum, which is the primary subject of this study, operates differently from other open-topic discussion forums on the Internet. As mentioned earlier, the government defines topics for discussion and generates the question threads, which will be open for public comments only for a given period of time.

Figure 1: Online Consultation Forum in Singapore
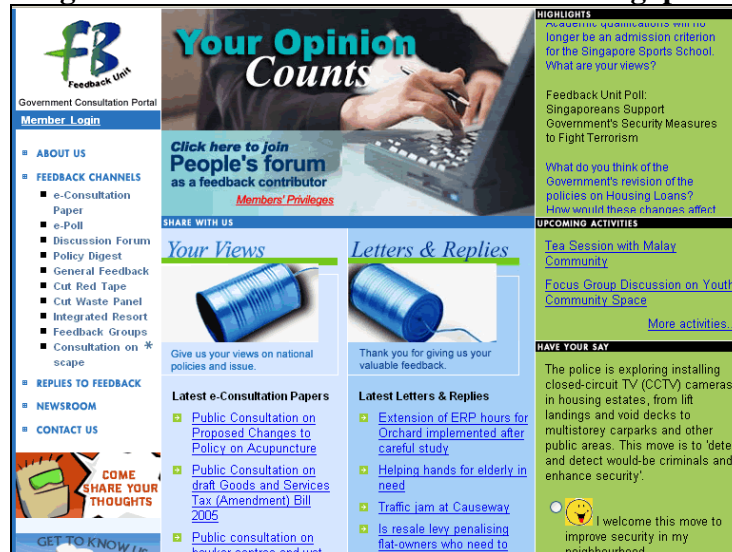
The second example is the Voice of Youth discussion forum maintained by the United Nation's Fund for Children (UNICEF). Voice of Youth was launched in 1995 as a way for more than 3,000 young people from 81 countries to send messages to world leaders at the World Summit for Social Development. The website and the online discussion boards were created in

1997 for young people to interact with one another over the Internet. In addition to the discussion forum, the website also features an area where people can find out more in-depth information about various issues concerning child rights and development and also an area where people can take different action, online or offline, in their respective communities.

Figure 2: Voice of Youth by UNICEF

Relevant Literature

Theoretical Approach

Two intertwined theoretical perspectives formed the contextual basis of this study: the notion of electronic democracy and the notion of public sphere in a computer-mediated communication environment. The ideals of democratic deliberation and the role of information technology in pedagogical settings then provide a conceptual framework to collect and analyze empirical data. With regards to electronic democracy, many scholars have been concerned with elaborating the features of this and similar terms (e.g., Hague & Loader, 1999; Kamarck & Nye, 2002; Gibson, Rommele & Ward, 2004; Jankowski, 2001). Electronic democracy can be broadly defined as "the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to facilitate a hybrid democratic system that values self-determination, participation, voice and autonomy" (Hague & Loader, 1999). Electronic democracy is not a replacement for traditional democratic institutions or processes – rather, it is a broadly inclusive term that refers to using ICTs to: facilitate more accountable government, create a more informed citizenry, facilitate citizen participation in decision-making process, and facilitate participation in debate and deliberation.

One of the key functions of these e-democratic practices is that it creates a platform for citizen-to-citizen and citizen-to-government communication. The existence of such channel of communication is particularly significant to scholars who believe that democratic governance should reach beyond democratic elections to incorporate a true participatory process of "ongoing, proximate self-legislation and the creation of a political community capable of transforming dependent private individuals into free citizens and partial and private interests into public goods" (Barber, 1984: 151). The key to achieve this ideal of democracy is the functioning of a public sphere through which every citizen in the state could become an acting member of the

government, and they participate "in the government of affairs, not merely at an election one day in the year, but every day" (Jefferson, 1816, cited in Arendt, 1991: 254).

Many scholars have argued that, in many sense, the Internet resembles an online public sphere where political participation and democratic deliberation can be generated. The end result of this information revolution will be the rise of what Lawrence Grossman (1996) terms the "Electronic Republic" – a democratic system where new media technologies are used widely to increase people's power and influence on the decisions of the state. While these cyber-optimists greeted the new technology with high hope, they also admit that technology alone is not enough: without an educated and informed public, such democratic renewal is likely to become meaningless and even dangerous (Grossman, 1996; Carpini, 2003). In other words, the idea of *learning* is essential to the proper functioning of public sphere. The purpose of this paper is to examine whether online discussion forums may constitute such learning environment, where political knowledge could be generated. To do so, this study uses a framework drawn from existing literature on technology and education.

Conceptual Framework

Information technologies have become an integral part of education in recent years. Many K-12 classrooms, colleges and universities have adopted web-based applications and course management systems such as Blackboard and WebCT as a tool to assist educators and facilitate learning experience for students. While the popularity of these technologies grew, existing literature on the relationship between the use of technology and student's educational achievement remain cautiously optimistic. Previous researches using various experimental design and case studies suggest that students in technology-rich environments showed increased achievement at all educational levels and that and showed significant percentile increase in performance on achievement test when instruction was computer based (Kulick, 1994; Shacter, 1999, Sivin-Kachala, 1998).

One of the key questions asked by many of these education researches is: what are some of the factors that contribute to a successful online learning environment – for the purpose of this study, through the use of online discussion forums. According to Peterson and Caverly (2005), a successful online discussion forum needs to have the following three elements: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. Social presence refers to the ability of the participant to recognize each other as "real people" in a social environment, beginning with safe online activities that allow personal exchanges among participants. This need to create an safe environment for online social activities is echoed by McClure (1998), who suggests that *safety* – students need to feel safe in their shared environment, both by password access and by the set of agreed guidelines for contributing, and *intimacy* – the relative anonymity of the online classroom can lead to more intimate thoughts being shared than might occur in a face-to-face group, are two important issues concerning online classrooms.

The second element, cognitive presence, refers to the ability of the participant to construct meaning and learn from each other through a sustained discussion. In other words, the discussion must be *authentic* – providing realistic and meaningful task (Herrington & Oliver, 2000) along with building practical, contextualized and relevant knowledge (McLoughlin & Luca, 2001) will increase the value of discussion to the students and help them achieve learning outcomes. Lastly,

Garrison et al (1999) hold that successful online discussion provides a teaching presence that is appropriately structured and facilitated. The significance of having a facilitator or moderator in online discussion is also expressed by McClure (1998), who suggested that participants must be able to receive *feedback* – confirmation from the moderator that they are on the right track and also *encouragement* – participants will respond better with an actively encouraging environment. Also, students need to be free to display certain degree of *independence* – free to express their own independent thoughts, and not be pressured to express the same opinion as others in a *non-threatening* environment.

Table 1 below sums up the ideal condition of an online learning environment:

Criteria	Definition and Function
Independence/Autonomy	The discussion forum must be free from outside pressure. Users must be able to freely express their opinions.
Privacy/Anonymity	The discussion forum must ensure user's privacy is protected and also allows option for users to remain anonymous. This will increase the level of trust and facilitate an online social environment.
Equal participation	Participation of the discussion forum must be equal – this should be both personal (gender, race, etc) as well as technological (minimal hardware requirement).
Clarity of discussion guideline	The discussion forum must present a clear guideline for the participants so that they understand the objective of the discussion and also what they can accomplish through active participation.
Background information	The discussion forum must provide background information of the issues being discussed so that users can refer to these materials or learn from it during the process.
Feedback/Interaction	The discussion forum must include a moderator or facilitator to interact with participants and provide feedback so that the discussion will contribute to the learning process of the participants.

Table 1: Criteria for Effective Online Learning

Method

This research utilized the case study approach as a way of integrating the conceptual framework with empirical evidence gathered from the two discussion forums chosen for the study. According to Bradshaw and Wallace (1991), case study is a good way to understand the relationship between case and theory, either by supporting existing theories or by "explaining

conditions that deviate from conventional theoretical explanations" (1991: 154-171). Robert Yin (1981) suggests several uses for the case study methodology: as preliminary research, to describe a situation (referred to as a case history), or to use to test explanations for why specific events occur as well as to make causal inferences (1981: 97-8). As an exploratory study, case study method was therefore considered to be an appropriate approach for this study.

Research Measures & Data Collection

As discussed earlier, this study focuses on the structure of the online discussion forum. By *structure*, the author refers to the design and other external characteristics that may undermine or facilitate the process of learning. For example:

- What is the degree of administrative control on the online discussion forum?

- What is the level of transparency in the management of the online discussion forum?

- What are the criteria for participating in the online discussion forum?

- How are the issue of privacy and anonymity handled on the online discussion forum?

- What kind of background information (of the issues in discussion) does the forum provide?

To collect empirical data for this research, *content analysis* was performed. According to Babbie (2002), content analysis is an appropriate mode of observation for the study of recorded human communications because it provides an objective and systematic method to collect reliable quantitative data. To guide the content analysis and gather specific information, the criteria for effective online learning as mentioned in the conceptual framework was operationalized into a set of corresponding indicators as shown in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Measures for Content Analysis

Criteria	Indicators
Independence/Autonomy	-Editorial/admin control -Prior approval
Privacy/Anonymity	-Privacy policy -Registration
Equal participation	-Prerequisite -Technical requirement -Disability access
Clarity of discussion guideline	-Guideline -Service Policy -Contact Info
Background information	-Archival Records -Background info
Feedback/Interaction	-Moderator presence -Moderator participation

Methodological Limitations

The use of content analysis as the primary approach of gathering empirical data presents certain methodological limitation in evaluating whether online discussion forums may resemble an effective learning environment. For example, content analysis cannot measure whether users of the forum have learned from the discussion, nor can the method interpret the intent of participants when the post specific messages. Gathering this information will require other techniques such as in-depth interviews, ethnographic observations or experimental manipulation to test the acquisition of political knowledge, all of which are beyond the scope of present study. While the implication of this methodological limitation is that this study only can only address specific issues related to the design and structure of online discussion forums, it is worth noting that the technical characteristics of a website have been shown to induce different user experiences (e.g., Curtis & Lawson, 2001), analyzing the structural features is therefore a necessary first step toward evaluating the potential of these discussion forums.

Findings

Content analysis of the two selected discussion forums maintained by the Singapore government and UNICEF suggested that in either case, online discussion forums resembled several, if not all of the elements for an ideal learning condition. The online platform showed potential to become a public common where citizens can exchange views freely on major or national issues. However, there were several issues with the structure and design elements of the discussion forums, all of which represent hurdles for the discussion forum's ability to engage citizens and encourage civic action.

Independence & Autonomy

First, the discussion forum in Singapore's online consultation portal did not demonstrate a sense of *independence/autonomy*. While the forum was free from commercial influences as it clearly prohibited any direct selling, advertisement, or promotional messages, it was not entirely free from administrative control. The forum did not require prior approval for posting messages, however, the administrator reserved the right to remove messages that were deemed irrelevant to the topic of discussion, and had taken such action against several participations (as indicated by others who expressed similar concerns). Given Singapore's history in media censorship and control over freedom of speech, such restrictions calls into question of whether the participants would feel safe enough to express their own independent thoughts in the discussion forum and not be pressured to express the kind of opinion that were deemed by the government as appropriate. Similarly, the Voice of Youth forum maintained by UNIEF also stated that the administrator monitors messages on a daily basis. While the forum appeared to be free from commercial and political pressure, the administrator reserved the right to remove "messages that threaten or promote hatred toward individuals or groups or messages that violate or are inconsistent with the mission of UNICEF" (Voice of Youth, 2006).

Privacy & Anonymity
 The issue of *privacy and anonymity* are important factors for online discussion, as they will determine the degree of trust and dictate the level of participation. In this regard, Singapore's consultation forum offered an environment that protected privacy and anonymity. There was a clearly defined privacy policy, which stated that the government does not collect personally identifiable data if users are only browsing the website. There was no registration required before participation or posting messages, although users had the option of creating an account (and thereby registering personal information) to the Feedback Unit. When posting message in the discussion forum, users did not have to enter any personal information such as name or email address. The discussion thread also did not display any identifiable data such as IP address, only the name/pseudo-name and the date and time of posting. In other words, citizens can choose to remain totally anonymous when participating in discussion forum.

Similarly, UNICEF's Voices of Youth forum also carried a privacy policy that clearly stated that it does not collect personally identifiable information from visitors without their knowledge. While registration is required to participate in the forum, only the name, date of birth, country of residence, gender and email address were collected membership and other personal information were optional. Voice of Youth will not contact users unless otherwise indicated by the user, and the information was collected only for research purposes. The site also provides a clear instruction on how to modify, review, or delete user profile online.

Equal Participation
 In terms of *equal access*, participation appeared to be open and without restrictions such as citizenship, age, or gender. The website only made minimal technical recommendation (e.g. Internet Explorer 5.0 and above), and mentioned nothing about Internet connection speed or hardware requirement. The consultation portal also stated that the content of the website site is accessible for the hearing and vision impaired. As for the Voice of Youth website, participation also appeared to be open and without restriction – only that users are required to register in order to post messages. However, there was no mention of any technical requirement or disability access.

Clarity of Discussion Guideline
 In this respect, Singapore's portal clearly fell short of providing adequate information that allows users and the public to understand the operations of the consultation portal as well as the online consultation process. In addition, the portal did not present adequate information that explains the consultation process (e.g. how are the messages handled/followed up). In terms of specific discussion guideline, the government offered a brief Netiquette guideline that prohibited defamatory statement, name-calling, obscene, vulgar, sexually-orientated, hateful, or threatening messages. The website, however, did not provide a clear definition of what would be considered as "irrelevant" or "inappropriate" message that is subject to removal.

 In contrast, the Voice of Youth forum provided much more adequate information. The website has an FAQ area where questions like "why should I take part in the discussion?" and "what will happen to my ideas" are answered. The website also provided links to into a bimonthly VOY newsletter called *What Young People Are Saying* – a publication in which thoughts and ideas expressed in the discussion forum are compiled into. In terms of specific

discussion guideline, the discussion forum also posted similar Netiquette and warnings about using vulgar, hateful, and inappropriate language in the discussion forum.

Background Information

Providing background information on the issues being discussed is important to the quality of the discussion. Both Singapore's online consultation portal and the Voice of Youth website provide background information for users – however, they were situated in separate sections outside the discussion forum. In the case of Singapore, this was reflected in a "policy digest" area, where users can find news briefings, press releases, and external links to further researches on a specific issue. As for the VOY forum, background information was created under the section called "Explore," where users can find fact sheets, the big picture of the issue, photo journals, real life stories, endorsement or stories by celebrities, interactive polls, and quizzes, etc. Most of the content in this section are gear toward younger adults, the primary audience of the VOY website.

Presence of Moderator

Finally, neither discussion forum had a moderator present during the discussion. Although the Voice of Youth website stated that, "moderators oversee specific forums and have the ability to edit and delete posts, move threads, and perform other manipulations...becoming a moderator for a specific forum is usually rewarded to users who are particularly helpful and knowledgeable in the subject of the forum they are moderating," moderator activities and participation appeared to be rare.

Discussions and Conclusions

This study sets out to explore the extent to which online discussion forums reflect the ideal conditions of a learning environment in the case of the two discussion forums maintained by Singapore's online consultation portal and UNIEF's Voice of Youth website. The findings, as described in the previous section, revealed that in both cases, the online discussion forum resembles a few elements defined in the conceptual framework. The implications of these results, both in terms of the pedagogical and political potential of online discussion forums are discussed below.

Clarity of Objectives and Focus of Discussion

The first issue concerns with impact of 1) lack of moderator presence, and 2) lack of clear discussion guidelines, both of which have significant impact from both pedagogical and political standpoint. As suggested previously, there was no moderator or facilitator present in both discussion forums. While the absence of a moderator may allow participants to freely express their thoughts and opinions, it also opens possibility for the discussion to be taken off topic or to be "hijacked" by participants (e.g., individuals engage in head-to-head debates). This particular observation is no surprise – it is common in a computer-mediated environment that communications become arbitrary and out of control, as previous studies on Internet chartrooms, mailing lists, discussion forums or message board have shown (Wilhelm, 2000). The presence of a moderator or facilitator to guide the discussion may help to alleviate this particular concern by maintaining the focus of the discussion and thereby creating a more *sustained* debate among the participants.

Another issue that may present a potential hurdle for participants of the discussion forum is the lack of a clear discussion guideline. In order to create an effective learning environment, it is necessary for the users to know the objective of the discussion (e.g., Why the issues are being discussed? What can the discussion accomplish?). In the case of the Voice of Youth forum, administrator posted brief introductions as "opening questions" – a series of suggested discussion topics or brief background information. Similarly, administrator in Singapore's online consultation forum also posted brief introduction on the issues being discussed. However, both websites fail to provide a clear statement on *how* or *what* this discussion can accomplish. As a result, the *validity* and the real purpose of the discussion can be questioned by participants. For example, users of the online consultation forum in Singapore openly questioned the sincerity of the government to really "consult" with the public.

Linking Information & Furthering Actions

The second issue concerns with the ability of the forum or the website to create a seamless web environment where participants can go beyond the discussion forum to learn more about the issues being discussed or to take further action. This is a particular important element, especially if the goal of the discussion forum was to engage citizens in policy debates (e.g., Singapore's online consultation portal) or to stimulate social change (e.g., UNICEF's Voice of Youth). In this regard, both Singapore's online consultation portal and UNICEF's Voice of Youth website fail to create such environment. While both websites contains elements that provides background information of the issue and also difference ways in which users can take further actions, they were designed as separate area where users have to leave the discussion forum to access the information.

The two problems mentioned above can be addressed with adjustments of the discussion forum in terms of "procedure" and "structure." Procedurally, the discussion forum will benefit from the presence of a moderator whose function is not to control or manipulate, but actively participate in the discussion. It will also be advantageous if participants can be briefed with relevant background information before/during the consultation process. These changes can be achieved with a structural re-design that further integrates the background information provided in the separate area into the discussion forum, creating a multi-staged discussion, where users are encouraged to go through a step-by-step process, in which an understanding of the background issues could better prepare participants for a meaningful discussion.

To conclude, this study is an attempt to evaluate the political potential of online discussion forum by exploring the extent to which its structural features may reflect the ideal conditions of a learning environment. From the data collected, it is reasonable to suggest that online discussion forums in either the Singapore or the UNICEF case still have rooms for improvement in order to achieve all of the criteria defined by the conceptual framework of this study: independence/autonomy, privacy/anonymity, equal participation, clarity of discussion guideline, background information, and feedback/interaction. As more and more citizens are relying on the Internet to receive political information and to participate in political activities, it is important that the political actors who "provide" these channels of online communication to

should be cognizant of the quality and effectiveness of the medium. To that end, this study illustrates two examples of online discussion forums from the perspective of online learning.

Future Research: Evaluating Online Discussion Forums

As the present research only focuses on the structural features of discussion forums, it also opens the door for a number of future studies. For instance, a qualitative analysis of the discussion content will provide useful insights on the quality of conversation generated in these discussion forums. In addition, it will be beneficial to compare the quality of discussion between privately run political online forums, official forums that are supported by the government such as Singapore's online consultation portal, and non-government supported forums such as UNICEF'S Voice of Youth forum. From an implementation perspective, it will also be useful to explore what kind of social or technological mechanism (e.g., digital interactive applications) can enhance the structure of online discussion and create an environment for collaborative learning.

While online discussion forum is one of the oldest web-based applications, digital technologies are constantly transforming. It is important to recognize that with a changing medium like the Internet, the path to create an effective online discussion medium could be a trial-and-error process. There is no universal solution to address the needs of different groups and organizations. E-democracy practitioners who wish to utilize online discussion forum as a tool to encourage political engagement and action should explore the experience of others and determine what they can provide, and what their audience want. To this end, this paper offers the perspective from the government of Singapore and UNICEF, in which the use of online discussion forum shows great potential but there still remain rooms for improvement.

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