Moderation in Government–Run Online Fora

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INTRODUCTION

A Dutch Internet dictionary has defined the moderator as "a person who exercises censorship on a mailing list or newsgroup."[1] Censoring the content of online discussion has often been considered as conflicting with the Internet's libertarian tradition of free speech and unrestrained communication (Tsagarousianou, 1998). However, as the famous PEN-experiment (public electronic network) in Santa Monica (1990-96) showed, the desirability of free speech must be weighed against other legitimate concerns such as the need to facilitate discussion and counteract possible abuses of the medium (Docter & Dutton, 1998).

This article analyses government-run online fora in which citizens and social organizations can discuss amongst themselves—or with government officials and elected representatives—issues of public concern. Effective moderation is considered crucial because the perceived anonymity in online fora weakens the norms of constitutive/self censorship that regulate face-to-face behaviour. It is thought that this can lead to "flame wars," polarized debates and dominant minorities. Thus, while the anonymity of online environments may diminish the psychological thresholds that can limit participation, it may also exacerbate them—inhibiting the social cooperation needed to accomplish complex communicative tasks. Moderators, it is suggested, can mitigate such problems by stimulating and regulating discussions—facilitating purposeful social action (Coleman & Gøtze, 2001; Edwards, 2002, 2004; Wright, 2006a).

Initial empirical analyses of online political discussion tended to focus on usenet newsgroups and found that debates were of poor deliberative quality and reinforced rather than changed pre-existing views (Davis, 1999; Hill & Hughes, 1998; Wilhelm, 2000). We must not extrapolate from this that all online political discussion is of poor quality—or, indeed, that all online discussion must be of high deliberative quality. The Internet provides us with a virtual commons upon which diverse interests can set up camp; the relative "free-for-all" provided by usenet can perform a useful socio-political function alongside regulated, government-led discussions. The two are not mutually exclusive. It is important that government-run online forums have clear aims, and are designed, structured, and moderated (or not)

to ensure these are achieved (Wright, 2005; Wright & Street, forthcoming). A minimum level of moderation is normally required for legal reasons. Of course, this is balanced by local laws and rules on the right to free speech.

THE VARIED ROLES OF THE MODERATOR

A moderator can be defined as a person (or group of persons) who facilitates a discussion in view of its goals and agenda. Moderators can perform a wide range of functions from censorship to facilitation, dependent on the aims and context. The Guide for Electronic Citizen Consultation, published by the Dutch Ministry of the Interior (1998), mentions three moderator roles:

- **Host:** Guiding and making participants feel at ease
- **Discussion leader:** Progresses discussions and makes sure that all discussants have a chance to participate
- **Arbiter:** Designates which postings are inappropriate and removes them

Drawing on work by White (2002) and others, Coleman et al. (2001) have fleshed out this approach listing various metaphors to designate potential roles. These include: "social host," "project manager," "community of practice facilitator," "cybrarian," "help desk," "referee," and "janitor." White relates each role to specific types of communities. These designations are useful as they highlight the variety of potential functions.

Broadly speaking, two types of moderation have been adopted by governments: content moderation and interactive moderation (Wright, 2006a). To moderate the content of respondents' posts is to perform an act of censorship. Content can be moderated by electronic or human filters. Electronic filters are crude as they take no account of context and can be easily circumnavigated. Human moderation negates these problems, but raises further issues such as the subjectivity in making decisions. Content moderation is typically conducted silently: moderators do not reply to posts, facilitate discussions, or feed the discussions into the policy process. Furthermore, people whose messages

are considered inappropriate are not given an explanation for their message being deleted. This is, thus, a restricted and narrow approach to moderation. It is primarily suited to government-run discussions in which tens of thousands of messages are expected; where it would be unfeasible to adopt more interactive measures because of resource costs, and where pre-moderation would inhibit the flow of the discussion.

Governments have adopted various forms of interactive moderation by choosing specific roles from the list previously outlined to meet their aims. In this article, we go beyond a "pick and mix" approach by developing a "management" model of Internet discussions. The underlying claim of this model is that it specifies the principle tasks that have to be performed in the design and management of *decision-influencing* online policy fora. The model builds on theories of deliberative democracy, in which, citizens commit to resolve problems of collective choice through free public deliberation. Following Benhabib (1994), three principles can be derived that constitute a deliberative procedure. The first principle builds on Habermas' (1971) ideal speech situation and states that participation in deliberation is governed by norms of equality and symmetry; decisions are made by the force of arguments rather than power manoeuvres. Moderators advance these norms by attempting to promote discursiveness amongst participants and stopping the more active participants from dominating debates and agendas. They also encourage politicians and other institutional actors to participate. Benhabib's second principle states that all participants have the right to question the assigned discussion topic. This can be achieved by moderators being open to new or amended discussion topics both at the start and during the discussion. The third principle argues that everyone has the right to initiate reflexive arguments about the rules of the discourse procedure, and how they are applied. It suggests that the moderation policy should be transparent and negotiable. A users panel can be set up to resolve disputed decisions by moderators. Together with the agenda, the rules can be consolidated in a commonly agreed discussion group charter.

To specify possible moderator roles in interactive moderation, we use a management approach. This suggests that certain general "management functions" have to be performed. We distinguish (1) the strategic function, (2) the conditioning function, and (3) the process function (see Figure 1). The strategic function is to establish the boundaries of the discussion and to embed it in the political and organizational environment. This includes the following tasks:

- Establish the *goals* of the discussion, both for citizens and the institutional decision making system

- Establish and maintain the *substantive domain* of the discussion (i.e., the boundaries of the agenda within which themes and issues may be raised)
- Obtain *political and organizational support* for the discussion
- Establish the *status* of the discussion in terms of their influence on decision making
- Ensure that the *results* of the discussion will actually be carried over into the decision making process and to give feedback on this to the participants

The *conditioning* function involves the provision of all kinds of resources (including the recruitment of participants) to ensure the health of discussions such as:

- Solicit people to join the discussion as participants
- Provide information
- Provide supporting technologies, such as moderation software, simulation models, and visualization

The *process* function includes all tasks that establish the discussion process as a cooperative, purposeful activity:

- Set the interactional goal of the discussion (i.e., the kind of results to be reached by the participants within the discussion, for instance, exploration of problem definitions or consensus about a proposal of policy measures)
- Specify the agenda of the discussion, within the substantive domain established in the strategic function: the questions, propositions, or themes
- Set the schedule of the discussion
- Manage the discussion process: its interactional goal, agenda, and schedule. For example, assign messages to discussion lines or open new discussion lines
- Facilitate the progress of the discussion by making summaries during the discussion
- Stimulate interactivity in the discussion by, for example, encouraging participants to take part in the discussion and to give reactions to specific contributions
- Set and maintain the rules of the game

As an analytical tool, this model can be used in two ways. First, in an actor-oriented way, it can be used as an instrument to discover what moderators do (Edwards, 2002). Second, in a process-oriented way, it can be used to ascertain how the different management functions are performed and which actors are involved. Used in this way, the model allows for contributions to the management of online discussions by actors other than the moderator. Especially important is the distinction between what the moderator does and what the initiators of the discussion do (Edwards, 2004—see next).

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