



Chapter XVI

On-Line Discussion Forums in a Swedish Local Government Context

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This text describes experiences of four on-line discussion forums that are used in a Swedish local government context. The main issue is how aspects such as the implementation of the forums, functional features of the forums, and activities to increase access to Internet affect the on-line debate. Furthermore, the debate in the on-line forums is evaluated against the ideal of deliberative democracy. Lastly, three strategies for how the amount of debate in the on-line forums might be increased are outlined. One strategy would be to provide citizen groups with access to technology in order to involve them in the forum and the local government network as such. Another strategy would be to welcome a completely open debate in the forums, in the hope of getting a discussion that also includes issues that are of relevance to local government. Yet another strategy would be to more seriously involve local politicians in the discussion. This group seems to be of strategic importance when aiming at democratic effects of on-line forums.

Introduction

The main aim of this text is to present experiences of on-line discussion forums in a Swedish local government context. In particular, we will discuss various aspects that affect debate in on-line discussion forums, but also strategies that might be used to increase the number of contributions to the debate. There are several reasons why these experiences are of value to the field of Community Informatics. Using information technology to improve democracy, equal access to technology, and active citizenship can be defined as ideals that are of importance to this field. There are many connections between these ideals and the experiences of on-line forums

that will be presented. According to writers like Buchstein (1997), it is more likely that the Internet will have democratic effects if it is used in connection with existing political institutions: "Here computer democracy would be based on an already existing community and used to distribute and collect information and to foster deliberation" (Buchstein, 1997, p. 260) he argues. This is the case in the experiences that will be presented in this chapter. Also, the on-line forums that will be discussed were introduced in local government projects aiming at improving democracy and increasing access to technology. This makes them particularly interesting to Community Informatics as a test of whether the J.S. J.S. Internet has had any democratic effects. Finally, in the small but growing literature on community networks and civic networking, to which this piece of research belongs, a number of issues and aspects are treated (Tsagarousianou et al., 1998). A common issue is for example how the networks as such are initiated ('from above or from below'), or more particularly to what extent the citizen groups have been active in the process of implementation. However, a more thorough investigation of the discussion in the on-line discussion forums is more seldomly seen, though there are a few exceptions (Docter and Dutton, 1998; Tambini, 1998). The following text will contribute with such experiences. This is another reason why the following experiences are of particular interest to Community Informatics.

There are several ideals in a discussion about how IT in general, and the Internet in particular, can improve democracy. One ideal is called quick democracy or plebiscitary democracy. According to this ideal citizens should make an on-line vote on all political affairs. Otherwise, opinion polls should constantly be arranged to keep the politicians informed about the views of their voters. An alternative ideal is deliberative democracy. Here, representative democracy is taken as a starting point when asking how it could be strengthened and made more participatory (Friedland, 1996; White, 1997; Åström, 1998). Consequently, a genuine discussion between citizens and politicians, or a deliberative process, is defined as being of utmost importance. For this reason, citizens must be allowed to form opinions with the help of IT, rather than to just express them. It is also important that there is somebody who can be held responsible for the political decisions (Street, 1997). As a consequence, a politician within, e.g., a local government council is highly relevant as a contributor to a deliberative process.

The choice between these alternative democratic ideals when studying on-line forums is almost an obvious one. First, on-line forums are designed to support a debate that goes on for an extended period of time, and not to give a quick hint of popular opinion. Also, due to the fact that new contributions and issues can be introduced over time, citizens cannot be expected to react as quickly and in such a structured way as would be necessary in an opinion poll. In conclusion, the focus of the following text will be on experiences of using on-line forums in a local government context with the aim of satisfying the deliberative ideal, rather than other democratic ideals.

The next section will treat some issues of interest that will be in focus in the following against a background of previous research. More precisely, we will find a description of aspects that, according to literature, are likely to influence the debate in on-line forums and its democratic effects.

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