

Discussion, Deliberation, Democracy:
An Analysis of the Virtual Community e.thePeople

© Dana Walker
University of Michigan
e-Communities
April 2003

© 2003

Dana Walker

For questions or permission requests contact Dana Walker
walkerdm@umich.edu

Table of Contents

e.thePeople: Discussion, Deliberation, Democracy..... 4

Section One: Overview..... 5

Community Purpose..... 5

Tools Employed: A Hybrid Technology Structure 7

e.thePeople Activities..... 9

Section Two: Roles, Self-Identifiers & Reputation..... 11

Community Roles..... 11

 Recommendation One: Role Transitions 14

Self-Identifiers 15

Reputation..... 16

 Recommendation Two: System Metrics..... 17

Section Three: Identities..... 17

Identity Challenges..... 18

Identity Development – Political Identities 19

 Recommendation Three: Boundary Encounters – Delegations & Boundary Practices 20

Section Four: Conflict & Noise..... 22

Rules of Engagement..... 23

 Recommendation Four: Governance 23

Section Five: From Discussion to Deliberation..... 24

Architecture for Deliberation..... 25

Conclusion: The Evolving Community..... 27

The concept of deliberative discourse has a long history in American politics and is viewed by many contemporary political theorists as one of the tenets of a well-functioning democracy. It is through informed and respectful public conversation, it is argued, that quality ideas and opinions are discovered. Community organizers, academics, and policymakers have long thought about ways to create these deliberative forums. Many are now turning to the internet as a tool to improve civic participation and dialogue. The internet has been effective in enabling citizens to form new online political discussion communities. From grassroots activist organizations such as MoveOn.org¹ to interest-matching groups like MeetUp.com,² a number of effective political communities have emerged in the last few years. Although many of these online communities have a discourse component, deliberation is not their main purpose. In this respect, e.thePeople (ETP) is different. At ETP, the *primary* purpose is to engage in deliberative discussions on issues of public import. The goal, then, is to provide a social and technical infrastructure to encourage not only discussion, but deliberative discussion.

The purpose of this paper is to present an analysis of the ETP community. Specifically, the paper will describe the community's purpose, tools, activities, roles, identifiers, identities, norms and governance. Throughout the analysis, particular emphasis will be placed on making recommendations that might enhance or further develop the deliberative aspects in the community's discussions. It is my intent to highlight ETP successes and give some suggestions for areas that may need improvement.

The primary source of research was the community itself. Since January 2003, I have been a participant and observer in e.thePeople. I both followed current conversation threads as well as reviewed approximately 100 randomly chosen archived conversations. In addition, I conducted a phone interview with one site administrator to discuss the purpose, goals and usage patterns in the community. For secondary sources, I examined other deliberative communities, including

MoveOn.org, Project540³, and other Weblab initiatives⁴. I also did a literature search on online deliberative community practices and interviewed other online community organizers. Finally, I did some reading on the formation of political goods⁵ and deliberation, particularly Jim Fishkin's work on the deliberative opinion poll.⁶

The following is my interpretation of the community and its purpose, practices, roles and norms. I would welcome any feedback. Please feel free to contact me at walkerdm@umich.edu

Section One: Overview

e.thePeople is an online public space for discussion and deliberation on political issues. In essence, it is a large message board where members post articles and comments on public policy topics. These postings – or in e.thePeople lingo, “conversations” – may be based on a range of current news events, from the war in Iraq to internet privacy. As others read the conversation, they can join in the deliberation by providing comments or by rating the post as something they would “encourage” or “discourage” other members of the community to read. Comments and conversations with the highest cumulative ratings filter to the top and appear prominently on the home page.

Community Purpose

The Site Administrators' Purpose

The site's tagline, “democracy is a conversation,” aptly summarizes the original intent and continuing purpose of the community. The belief within the community is that the heart of a strong democracy is conversation – deliberative, thoughtful and informed dialogue. The owners created the space because of their own belief that the internet provides a new way for people to engage in this dialogue.⁷ From the site administrators' perspective, the purpose of the community is to encourage members, with a range of political ideologies, to participate in open and deliberative discussions.⁸

Designing a deliberative forum is no easy task. In a perfect world the debate would be open, uncensored, thoughtful and respectful. Members would engage on issues – listening to other viewpoints and perspectives and rethinking preconceptions. This was the design goal of ETP. As one site administrator wrote, “[We] started e.thePeople chiefly because we believed that respect and curiosity were sorely lacking in other venues for political dialogue. . . I hope that it is our common goal that this site does not become yet another web site for people to vent, promote their pet issues, and slam those who disagree with them.”⁹

Town Hall Participation: Members’ Purpose

Members participate at differing levels in the community. There are approximately 9,000 registered members. During March 2003, nearly 1,000 members visited the site and of those about 100 posted ten or more times.¹⁰ It is clear, then, that the majority of members participate peripherally and follow conversations by reading the main article and corresponding comments. In the minority are the more active members who participate by becoming both author and editor and posting articles and comments.

Regardless of level of participation, the main purpose for community involvement seems to correspond to the administrators’ intent – to engage, directly or peripherally, in a discussion about political issues. This engagement takes on different forms for different members. For those less involved, it may only include following the conversation, rating a post, or responding to member polls and petitions. At the higher levels of involvement, the member may actively engage in the conversation through authorship.

Importantly, for members that author content, e.thePeople is not only a forum to engage in a discussion with other members, it is also a gathering place to express their own opinions about issues of public interest. From their personal reaction to the State of the Union address to their

perspective on alternative fuels, the community provides the member a ready audience, where their opinion is published and then read and evaluated by their peers. For these members, there does seem to be a certain level of pride or ego involved in posting comments that are well-received by the community. Active users are often referred to in other member's postings and thoughtful comments are extracted and included in the community's weekly newsletter.

Tools Employed: A Hybrid Technology Structure

Message Board: The Conversations

The primary technology employed is an asynchronous, threaded message board.

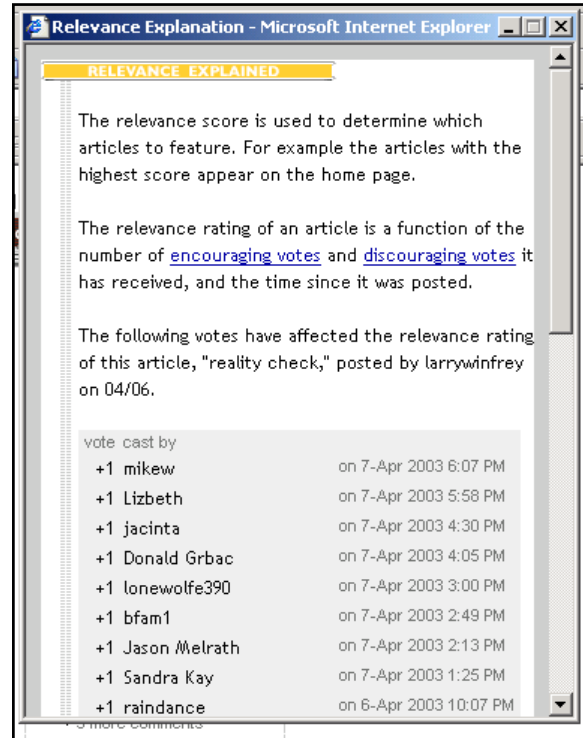
Conversations are broken up into four broad "thematic" areas to which a member can subscribe. The default themes (themes to which everyone is subscribed upon registering) include the main public forum, a meta category for discussion of e.thePeople and its operations, as well as two additional themes on "democratic renewal" and "America's global role". Additional, more localized, themes are available and center mostly on elections (e.g. Manhattan elections). Approximately 85% of the posts fall into the public forum theme.¹¹

The screenshot displays the e.thePeople website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for 'About', 'Login', 'Become a member', 'Donate', 'Free newsletter', 'Reply', and 'Search'. Below this is a secondary navigation bar with icons for 'Conversations', 'Polls', 'Petitions', 'Letters', and 'Help'. The main content area is titled 'Conversations' and 'Public Forum'. A featured article titled 'Need I say more?' is shown, posted on 04/03 by 'ericksenci'. The article text discusses political commentary related to Clinton and the White House. To the right of the article is a 'COMMENTS' section with two visible comments and a 'TAKE A POLL' section titled 'Did you agree with Clinton?' with 'Yes' and 'No' options.

Members can post new discussion threads, or articles, at any time and on any topic. And, any member can comment upon posted articles. Generally, conversations (article and corresponding comments) last three to four days and average about 8 to 10 comments, though the top conversations frequently get between 40 and 80 comments.¹²

Filtering: Relevance Revealed

Conversations are moderated through a collaborative filtering technology called a relevance rating. Users can rate any comment or article by giving it an “encourage” or “discourage” rating. The goal of the filtering is to allow the best ideas, those ideas that members would encourage other community members to read, to rise to the top and get the most notice. At the same time, by having members discourage the article, the rating system intends to make those comments or discussions that are inappropriate to the community and its purpose sink to the bottom.



The relevance score is important because it determines where the article will appear on the site. The score is calculated by subtracting the number of discourage votes from the number of encourage votes and then multiplying that number by a time variable, thus ensuring that the older the post the lower its relevance score.¹³ Articles with higher relevance appear prominently on the homepage. With 100+ new articles posted per week, where the article lands on the site influences whether or not that article will be read.

After an incident of voting fraud, the rating system was converted from an anonymous system to a transparent one. Now, any member can view who encouraged or discouraged the article. This has been a recent addition to the site and it is too early to determine its effect. Making the rating process transparent has the advantage in that members are held accountable for their votes. However, it may also discourage negative votes and at the same time encourage positive ones. This is an area the community should continue to evaluate.

Authentication

ETP employs a relatively simple authentication system. Individuals must register as a member and then login to the site in order to post articles and comments. The registration process requires a member to choose a username and provide a valid email address. Although registering with multiple usernames is discouraged, there is no technical process in place which guarantees that a member maintain only one username.

e.thePeople Activities

Gathering Places for Conversation

The primary activity on the site is deliberative conversation. Consequently, the main gathering place for community members is the Conversation section of the site. As noted previously, conversations are divided into four main themes to which members are automatically subscribed. Theoretically, the theme sections should be used to help members reduce some of the noise on the site and manage content. However, it is not clear that the themes are useful in this manner. By far the most active section (representing 85% of all posts) is the “public forum” and members seem to post to that theme even if their post would better fit in another category. Perhaps users are unaware of the different conversation themes or are worried if they post to a less popular theme their article will get little notice. However, in order for themes to be effective it may be

helpful to more clearly indicate the purpose of each and the advantages of posting an article to a particular theme.

Polling

In addition to participating in conversations, members can create polls related to conversation articles. Polls provide a quick way to get a sense of how people stand on a particular issue without needing all members to respond through a narrative. Users answer the poll, press submit, and the data is aggregated and displayed to other members. For example, the poll connected to the State of the Union conversation asked members to grade the President's address on a scale of A through F. This gives members another means of communication based on their desired level of participation – they can answer the poll, answer the poll and give textual feedback, or only give textual feedback.

The screenshot shows the eThePeople website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for 'About', 'Logout', 'Edit Profile', 'Donate', 'Free newsletter', 'Write', and 'Search'. Below this is a secondary navigation bar with icons for 'Conversations', 'Polls', 'Petitions', 'Letters', and 'Help'. The main content area is titled 'Polls' and features a poll titled 'Why do you thing we are waging this war on Iraq?' with 162 votes. The poll was created by CoffeeBean on 4/2/03. The results are as follows:

Option	Percentage
Iraq Possess Weapons of Mass Destruction.	41 %
Saddam Hussain is evil and kills his own people	36 %
We are in it for Anglo-American Neo-imperialism to redefine the world order	26 %
We are in it for Oil	25 %
Our weapons inventory needed to be updated	6 %
Iraq caused 9/11	4 %

Below the results, there is a 'Take this poll' link and a 'Total Votes: 162' indicator. A disclaimer states: 'This poll is not scientific and reflects the opinions of only those Internet users who have chosen to participate. The results cannot be assumed to represent the opinions of Internet users in general, nor the public as a whole.' To the right of the poll results is a 'SEARCH' box with an 'advanced' link and a 'TAKE A POLL' section. The 'TAKE A POLL' section includes a prompt: 'Have an idea for a poll? If you'd like to write a poll that's not attached to an article, you're ready to get started!' and a list of options for a new poll, including 'Saddam Hussain is evil and kills his own people', 'Iraq Possess Weapons of Mass Destruction.', 'We are in it for Anglo-American Neo-imperialism to redefine the world order', 'We are in it for Oil', 'Our weapons inventory needed to be updated', and 'Iraq caused 9/11'. There are 'dislike this poll' and 'See results' links at the bottom right of the poll area.

Petitions and Letters

In addition to creating polls, members can create and post petitions that are then sent electronically to policymakers. Petitions exist on any number of topics, from legalizing marijuana to giving local counties the right to regulate hunting. The Letter section of the site is powered by Congress.org and simply links the user to information on their state and national Congressional representatives. The petitions and letters sections are not as fully integrated into the deliberation as the conversations or polls and there is no schedule, announcement and seemingly no ritual related to their creation.

Newsletter

The site managers create a weekly broadcast newsletter. The purpose of the newsletter seems to be threefold. First, it is a way to keep members connected to the site and to keep ETP on the member's "radar screen."¹⁴ The newsletter is one of the few ways that site administrators can communicate with members on a scheduled basis. It also provides an excellent way to summarize and promote discussions that occurred throughout the week. Finally, and importantly, it provides a way of highlighting conversation topics and the members that are contributing to those conversations. In the "conversation highlights" section of the newsletter, the site managers excerpt comments and cite the specific author. Because this is a deliberative community, both sides of the issue are highlighted. The newsletter is an interesting and highly effective way to both show the deliberative process as well as recognize active or thoughtful members.

Section Two: Roles, Self-Identifiers & Reputation

The community is composed of individual members each interacting differently. The purpose of this section is to examine how individual members operate within the community by describing the roles they play, the way in which they identify themselves and their perceived reputation.

Community Roles

.....
Amy Jo Kim, in *Community Building on the Web*, describes a linear progression of community membership. Kim writes that it is common for members to progress through five successive stages of involvement, from visitor, to novice, to regular, to leader and finally to elder.¹⁵

Members in each of these roles play an important part in the way the community functions and communicates.

At e.thePeople, the member's role is not indicated by the system. From the system's point of view, you're either a member or you aren't. Members are not distinguished by the date they enter the community, by the number of posts they make, or by the number of times others have cited their posts. And, unlike other communities, long-time or active members do not get additional

privileges. In this sense, the role and corresponding purpose a member plays is determined by the way they interact in the community, not on system metrics. The following table summarizes the membership lifecycle in e.thePeople.

	Characteristics	Purpose to Community
Visitor / Lurker	Visitors are essentially transparent to community, leaving no trace of their existence.	There is little apparent value placed on visitors, but visitors are essential in the cycle because they are the source of new community members.
Newbie	Newbies haven't learned norms and culture of community.	Important to community because they provide new ideas and a new perspective to the discussion, adding a dimension to the debate that doesn't always exist when only core members (who know each other) interact.
Core Member	Core members initiate new conversation threads. Their posts are usually thoughtful, well written and formatted. Often cite other community members and link to outside resources.	Provide the backbone of communication and keep the conversations going and active. Core members are quick to post new articles; consequently, there is a constant rotation of new conversation subjects.
Leader / Elder	Leaders initiate conversations about the practice, norms and culture of the community. They also provide a sense of history in their posts, referring to previous conversations (one-year or more).	Force an ongoing evaluation of how the community is operating, how to change practices and technology to best meet the needs to the community members and their purpose. Also provide a sense of history and "institutional" memory to the community.

Visitor/Lurker

Visitors participate peripherally by exploring the site and reading the conversations and comments. Visitors leave no trace of their participation. They are not asked to sign a guest book and since only registered members can post articles and comments, their name is not associated with any section of the site. The community does not seem to put significant value in its visitors, providing little way for them to participate. As with any community, visitors at e.thePeople do serve a valuable purpose, however, since they are the source for new membership.

Newbie

New members are those who have registered for the site but aren't fully engaged in the community. There is no system-centered way to distinguish a new member from a regular or core member – nothing in the member profile indicates the member's joining date, the number of times they have logged on to the site or the number of posts they have made. Generally, new members separate themselves by the manner in which they post. Some simply say they are new.

Others seem to disregard textual formatting in their posts, ignoring the basic HTML tags of bold, italics and hard returns.

There is little system support for new members. There isn't a clear introductions conversation thread and there are no official greeters in the community. Community members are enthusiastic about welcoming new members when that member indicates they are new, but it doesn't seem to be a regular practice to introduce yourself in your first post or comment. New members do bring an essential energy to the community by introducing new perspectives. Core member conversations are sometimes predictable, where members already know what the other is going to say and are ready to respond. New members, however, often bring a new point of view and a way of writing that is unanticipated.

Core Member

Core members initiate new conversation threads, create polls and petitions, and respond to main articles with comments and encourage/discourage votes. These members are the bread and butter of the community – keeping the conversations active, current and interesting. What distinguishes a core member from a new member is how the member posts. In general, core members understand the norms and culture of the community; indeed they negotiate that culture. At e.thePeople value is placed on quality writing that expresses a point of view without the use of profanity or insults. So, although core member posts can be passionate, they generally aren't insulting or invective. Additionally, the articles written by core members often link to outside resources and cite sources. For example, in the article responding to Powell's UN address the author linked to the transcript of Powell's speech. Additionally, core members engaged in debate excerpt sections of the original post, highlight the excerpt in italics, and then respond – a cultural norm for textual debate in ETP.

Leader/Elder

As with all other membership roles, community leaders are not delineated by any system-defined membership mark. The real distinguishing factor between a core member and a leader, however, is that leaders start conversations regarding the operation of the community. They engage the community in a discussion of its *own* practice. For example, a community leader recently started a discussion on the value of the encourage/discourage voting system – a conversation that eventually led to a change in the relevance system. In this manner, leaders provide an essential source of self-analysis for the community, thinking about the best ways to engage in the practice of public debate.

It is not clear if there is a distinction between a leader and an elder in this community. There are members who have some institutional memory and often refer to conversation threads that may be a year old, but there doesn't seem to be a real difference between these members and leaders. Site administrators are the closest approximation of a community "elder." The site managers both participate as members of the community and administer the ETP organization. The administrators respond to member comments, post deliberative article threads, push conversations in a "deliberative" direction, and make decisions about site management.

Recommendation One: Role Transitions

ETP does not provide enough structural assistance in helping members move from one role to the next or to even improve their functioning within their current role. The rules of engagement are not obvious to new members or even to core members. To learn about the relevance system, for instance, a member would need to read through archives of old discussions on the relevance rating, its purpose, and the problems that have existed in the past. Furthermore, the site structure and its operation are not clear – members question how to rate articles, what constitutes a deliberative conversation and how to use the search function. Finally, there are few ways that new members can introduce themselves before making posts.

recommendation one: system support for inbound trajectories

It would be advisable to create more structured trajectories for participation. Specifically, inbound trajectories¹⁶ should be created so a newcomer that joins the community with the intention of becoming a full participant can have some system help to do so.

- 1.) Create a “new member introductions” theme within the Conversations section to make it easier for members to introduce themselves.
- 2.) Have a section on the site dedicated to new members and visitors. That section should have clear information on how the site operates, including: how the relevance score is calculated, what it means to encourage/discourage a post, what makes a good article/comment, how to keep a *deliberative* conversation going, what are the basic rules of engagement and examples of conversations that have been successful.
- 3.) Create a member directory – a simple listing of all member profiles – to help members get to know each other, even if they aren’t posting frequently.

Self-Identifiers

Each member has multiple ways to identify themselves in the community. Identifiers range from conventional signals like usernames and profiles, which require very little effort to create, to assessment signals such as the member’s perceived reputation, which require constant attention.

Username

The most common and only required self-identifier is the member’s username. Most members use their full name or initials as their username. Despite the fact that the community is a forum for deliberation on political issues, members rarely indicate their political ideology in their usernames (e.g. democrat, republican, independent) nor do they use pseudonyms that advocate a cause (e.g. alternative fuel, no war). This is not an explicitly stated policy, but does seem to be a cultural norm indicating that the *primary* purpose of e.thePeople is discussion. It is a violation of community standards for a single user to have multiple usernames, however, it is technically possible. Using multiple usernames causes problems in the community, however. For example, there was a recent incident of voting collusion where a single user with multiple usernames was purposely gaming the rating system to suppress articles of a certain ideology.

Member Profile and Signatures

Members can also create optional profiles and signatures. The profile contains biographical information such as first and last name, gender, birth year, hometown, email, race, personal URL and religion. The majority of core members partially fill out a profile and include some kind of biographical text. However, most do not include their political affiliation, gender or race. Some members use their biography to try to bolster their credibility. For example, one member included a list of political articles he has published.

In addition to a profile, a member can add a signature to every post she authors. Again, signatures run the gamut from pithy quotations to anti-war statements. The signature, it seems, is a culturally appropriate place to advocate for a particular cause. Additionally, leaders are now using the signature section as a way to encourage certain community practices. One community leader, for example, included in his signature what he believes is the correct practice of encouraging or discouraging comments and posts. "If the comment title is "Discouraged because..." the text is intended to be editorial rather than topical. I encourage other moderators to reveal their identities and reasons, to ensure that discouragement isn't being used to further ideological ends."

Reputation

While the profile, signature and username reflect what a member says about herself, those signals don't indicate how that member participates in the community, the role she plays, or how the community views her. As noted earlier, there is no system-centered way to establish the reputation of a member. Instead, the system tracks the reputation of a posting (encouraged/discouraged votes, number of comments, number of times viewed). Posts that have the highest rating are those that are most prominently displayed on the site. Although it is the post that has a reputation, the author inherits a reputation from her prominent posts. Members who initiate conversations that engender numerous comments and favorable "encourage" votes

receive a certain level of unstated reputation. These members have their comments excerpted in the weekly member newsletter and are cited in other member's articles.

Recommendation Two: System Metrics

Although a karma system is inappropriate for the community – all participants should have equal access to express themselves – it may be advisable to have some way to recognize member contributions. The member newsletter is one good avenue. I also suggest some limited system metrics that would be listed in the member's profile. These system metrics would help core members get additional recognition for their posts, give members who track other ETP users an easy way to find their recent articles, and provide new members a way to learn community practices by looking at what and how core members post. The metrics would not give members any additional privileges in the system; they would simply give members additional recognition in the community.

recommendation two: system metrics

Add the following system metrics to the user profile:

- 1.) Join date
- 2.) Last post date
- 3.) Ten most recent articles posted
- 4.) Ten most recent comments posted

Section Three: Identities

Along with roles and self-identifiers, identity negotiation is important in understanding how individual members operate within the community. Identities are asserted and challenged in ETP and it is through both this assertion and challenge that community identities are thus negotiated. A member can declare her identity – political ideology, religious stance, viewpoint on the world – through articles and comments. This declaration is the primary way in which a member builds her community reputation as a competent and contributing member. Conflict ensues when a

member's identity is disputed or misinterpreted. In addition to developing an identity in the community, there also seems to be a desire to use this community as a way to develop a *political identity* – an identity of engagement and political efficacy¹⁷.

Identity Challenges

Serious participants join the community so they can engage others in discourse; ideally, thinking about other perspectives and shaping informed opinions. Through posting articles and comments, members both assert their identities and develop a reputation. Conflict occurs when members feel their identities are misinterpreted or when there is a perception that others are misrepresenting themselves.

Identity Misinterpretation

Members place considerable value in establishing their own identity or reputation and maintaining it. Recently, several posts were removed from the site because ETP administrators concluded that the conversations were being manipulated through coordinated encourage/discourage voting by a single user with multiple accounts. In reaction, one member involved in the postings responded by asserting his legitimacy in the community. “As long as you & administration KNOW who I am & that I have & use ‘ONE’ screen name that's enough for me. The fact that I was manipulated into being any part of or associated with ‘fraud’ activity or behavior effects my credibility as a professional here.”¹⁸

Assertion of Intellectual not Ideological Identity

The stated rule of engagement in ETP is that articles should be rated based on their content and thoughtfulness, not on the political ideology of the author. Furthermore, participants should enter conversations with a willingness to listen to alternate viewpoints. These rules of engagement, however, are not clear to the community at large. ETP participants bring with them other ideological memberships – memberships that may encourage the evaluation of a viewpoint based

on the other's political position, not on the quality of the argument. Consequently, ETP members frequently assert their identity by claiming their competency in the community and stating their willingness to listen to the content of the debate.

Comment: Pointing out that you value the liberal political perspective and mention none of the conservative persuasion indicates a closed stance and one which is not conducive to the free flow of ideas.

Response: I won't backpeddle and insist that I have no biases, nor will I try to defend my record of constantly going up against conservatives of the likes of Rush, Savage, and the other minor minions. . . I will, however, take you to task if you insist that I cannot be persuaded to see things from a True Conservative viewpoint. As I have said before, I share many of the core values of True Conservatives! . . . I consider my mind un-closed and yet not so open that my brain falls out. . . Thanks for the chance to re-iterate my stand on the whole Liberal/Conservative ideology.¹⁹

Identity Disputes

Identity challenges are relatively common in e.thePeople and correspond to the tensions in the community. There are frequent challenges to an author's perspective, such as claims that a person is a "left-wing nut" or a "despicable rightist." Most often, these claims are leveled to diminish the author's viewpoint – relegating him to an extremist and unthinking position. There are also challenges to a person's competency and level of contribution – with some members being called "on the fringe," "sicko" or even "mental cases." And there are challenges of multi-membership – professing someone isn't really who they say they are.

Identity Development – Political Identities

This is serious business. I do not want any of us (even XXX, XXX, or any of the fringe) to forget that we have a chance to be a voice that makes a difference.²⁰

In addition to the tension of characterizing and asserting individual identities, there also seems to be a need for members to be politically effective – to create a bridge beyond their immediate community to a larger audience. Within the group, members engage in deliberation as a form of political participation. However, there is a sense that participation reaches beyond the intra-group relations. Members explicitly and implicitly understand that while they are communicating with

each other they are also engaging with external bodies. One member writes of his awareness of being Googled, “One of the benefits of being Googled is that it puts us (ETP) up front in the search for many topics. I want to find ways to enhance the quality of what is found by the searchers of Google land. This is the way that we will entice more participation and membership, IMHO.”²¹ Not only is this external engagement assumed, it seems essential.

The site owners have created petitions and letters as a way to connect members with policymakers. However, these boundary objects are removed from the normal community engagement. The site link “Be a Part of the Solution” leads the user to information on e.thePeople, not information on the larger political community. Furthermore, there is a sense of inaction, the site administrator wrote:

*As devoted as we all are to talking about politics, from time-to-time, I hear rumblings about how to turn talk into action. In our recent feedback survey, 81% of you said that creating "more opportunities to organize and take action" was "very important" or "critical," making it the top overall priority. And while I think that letters and petitions can play a role in political action, I recognize they are not enough.*²²

Again, part of the community and individual identity is the creation of a space for deliberation and at the same time the creation of a space for larger political action and efficacy.

Recommendation Three: Boundary Encounters – Delegations & Boundary Practices

Deliberation is a form of political engagement and core members are successfully engaging *within* the community to develop a political voice. However, members are expressing a need to amplify their sphere of influence, to have their voice heard and increase their own sense of political efficacy or action. One member, frustrated, wrote, “I truly believed that ETP participants were going to be different. The introduction even said that you would be different but all I have seen is plenty of TALK, very little ACTION and even less RESULTS. That's really no different than what our leaders are doing.”²³ While members can imagine greater connections

of engagement, there aren't effective structures in place to allow practical alignments with broader practices – bridging to larger communities or other forums²⁴.

In *Communities of Practice*, Etienne Wenger introduces the concept of boundary encounters – practices which communities create to connect to other communities.²⁵ His construct of boundary encounters, specifically the creation of delegation and boundary practices, may be a helpful model to assist in this “no action” frustration among ETP members. Building on its strengths as a discourse community, ETP could create delegations of “deliberative” emissaries that would enter other political communities and engage those groups in deliberative discourse. In another form of delegation, ETP members might create jointly-authored deliberative letters to the editor where an ETP deliberative discourse was conducted, points summarized, and the summary submitted to local newspapers. This would help ETP members both “evangelize” on the value of deliberative discourse as well as have their voice heard in a larger audience. Finally, deliberative events could be staged where policymakers and mainstream media representatives are invited to participate in a deliberative discussion and then take the result of that discussion back to their own community.

Boundary practices – sustained and ongoing boundary encounters – could also be created. For example, ETP core members might create smaller, local discourse groups that are geographically based. These local groups would be different than current ETP groups because they wouldn't be formed around elections and should be structured to fully integrate the current core ETP members. These local groups could engage in discourse with advocacy groups and municipalities on issues of local concern.

recommendation three: deliberative political engagement

Ways to spread the word on the importance of deliberative discourse:

- 1.) Send deliberative emissaries into other communities.
- 2.) Conduct deliberative events where policymakers and mainstream media representatives join deliberative conversations about issues of public import.
- 3.) Jointly-authored deliberative letters to the editor.
- 4.) Create smaller, localized ETP groups who work with local advocacy groups and municipalities.

Section Four: Conflict & Noise

E.thePeople has been successful in attracting a variety of members with differing ideological viewpoints and values. And regardless of ideology, members have engaged each other in debates and dialogues. However, the community struggles with conflict resolution. Although conflicts can be ideological in nature, much of the frustration in the community comes from disagreements about the rules of engagement (or lack of rules), how to minimize the harm of troublemakers and how to effectively moderate content – filtering out some of the irrelevant or extraneous posts.

Democracy may be a conversation – but it is not an unstructured and unfettered one. As one scholar wrote, “Deliberation is more than just talk, it requires weighing together various approaches to solving problems. It is public articulation structured according to specific rules, designed to transform individual prejudice into public reason and form general will.”²⁶ The key point is that deliberation is structured by rules, norms and specific architecture. Though there are certainly rules in the community, those rules are not clear to all members – even core members. Furthermore, the rules aren’t always enforced, creating a great deal of frustration when particular members consistently violate the policies.

Rules of Engagement

Members engage with one another through deliberative conversations. Barriers to entry and exit are low, by design, encouraging the participation of a variety of people regardless of political viewpoint. Member profiles, the quality of a member's posts, the perceived reputation in the community and the community's shared repertoire of routines, terminology, and artifacts allow members to engage each other in debate. This set of tools can grease the wheels of trust and mutual respect. An author will cite another member's article, feeding the reputation of the other author, while at the same time providing support for her argument. At other times, however, the engagement is less than harmonious. Members vote down comments without explanation and based solely on differences in ideology, not on the quality of the argument. Members post abusive, content-free comments. Finally, some members, with less commitment to the community, troll the site waiting to incite additional conflict in already highly-charged discussions.

There are some written artifacts indicating what is and is not appropriate to post in articles and comments, including limited posting guidelines and a user agreement (which is difficult to find after you have become a member). Furthermore, there are current and archived discussion threads about conversation norms and practices. But most of the rules of engagement seem to be in a constant state of negotiation. Questions about the voting system, the ability for members to have multiple usernames, posting the same information numerous times, and the lack of a system-tracked member reputation scheme are issues that are debated.

Recommendation Four: Governance

Despite these negotiations there doesn't seem to be consensus on what the rules should be or how to enforce them. As a first step, it would be helpful to write down and make the existing rules, policies and norms more prominent on the site. If the user agreement was more noticeable and was referred to more often, it may cut down on some conflict

regarding misbehavior. For example, it would be more effective if members responded to users who consistently violate the community's user agreement by citing exactly what rule they violated. This will help focus the community on what behavior is acceptable and why certain behavior is unacceptable. Now the response to abusive members is more abuse.

In addition, ETP should consider creating governance committees, tapping into the energy of the core membership and channeling that energy in positive ways. Those small groups or committees could facilitate discussions about governance issues – such as dealing with abusive posts, how to cut down on the number of duplicative or extraneous articles and the possibility of creating more sophisticated filtering mechanisms (e.g., personal filtering mechanisms). After consensus is achieved in the small group, a larger group discussion could then be more easily facilitated.

recommendation four: governance

In order to help resolve some of the problems with conflict it would be advisable to do the following:

- 1.) More prominently display and create more specific rules and policies on engagement.
- 2.) Create a governance committee of core ETP members that can discuss conflict resolution issues in a small, facilitated group and then report back to the general membership.

Section Five: From Discussion to Deliberation

The purpose of the site may be to engage in deliberation, but ETP often looks like a discussion board, blog site or collection of virtual letters to the editor. As one member wrote, “Certain people, who shall remain nameless, tend to flood this site with posts that are more appropriate for AOL message boards. This is not a blog site! Nor is it a personals site for trolls”²⁷

But inappropriate messages are only one symptom. First, the conversations tend to be short, lasting only three to four days. As a result, there are multiple snippets of discussion about the war, for example, but it is hard to get a holistic view of the issues, the values or the policy choices. Second, many authors post articles and then leave the discussion, not coming back to defend their point of view or facilitate discourse. Finally, the debate has become polarized. Even articles that are deliberative in quality (cite the source of information, are thoughtful and studied, and ask deliberative questions) get negative votes that seem to be based on their ideological viewpoint. This polarization, in many ways, reflects the debate in the country. However, ETP is supposed to be different and the tenor of discussion, even in times of crisis, is cause for concern.

Architecture for Deliberation

Norms of debate exist in the community. Core members excerpt parts of the article and respond. Regular members generally cite their source, an important aspect of informed discourse. Members often enforce these norms, urging others to cite their sources or to respond with specific information. As with other rules of engagement, it would be helpful to clearly state some of these norms in the user section of the site.

Although norms exist to push deliberation, the architecture of the site may be hindering its progress. Deliberation, by its very nature is a slow and thoughtful process. As such, deliberative conversations should – theoretically – last more than 3 to 4 days. But the relevance rating system discourages lengthy conversations. As the conversation ages, its relevance score drops. Though it is understandable to want new content on the home page, it may be advisable to reduce the weighting scheme thus allowing some of the more popular conversations more time to develop.

Second, the encourage/discourage system doesn't seem adequate for the community. Some members use e/d to indicate the article's deliberative quality while others use it to indicate agreement or disagreement with the author's political viewpoint. This is a political community and people seem to want to express their ideology and to disagree with others. Consequently, it may be helpful to allow members to rate on both an ideological and deliberative scale. One option is to have two ratings – one for deliberative quality and one on agree and disagree. MoveOn.org employs an agree/disagree vote and it seems to have some success. The agree/disagree vote would be aggregated and displayed, but would not factor into the relevance score. In this way, members could rate an article on its deliberative quality and still say that they disagree with that article's ideological stance.

Finally, ETP could create some opportunities for small group discussions. Groups of 20-30 members would convene in facilitated discussions lasting 3-4 weeks. Held quarterly or bi-annually, these synchronous or asynchronous conversations would give members the opportunity to engage in more sustained dialogue on a particular topic. A core member or administrator should facilitate the discussion. Furthermore, all dialogue participants should first receive a set of briefing materials or source material so each participant enters the conversation with similar information. These small group discussions have seen some success in groups like Listening to the City²⁸, Project540²⁹ and the Electronic Dialogue Project³⁰.

recommendation five: more deliberative deliberation

To put more of a deliberative aspect into the discussion, ETP should consider the following.

- 1) Change the rating system to reduce the influence of time thus allowing conversations to last longer.
- 2) Add a rating for agree/disagree and continue to emphasize that the encourage/discourage rating is a vote on the deliberative quality of the article or comment.
- 3) Introduce small group discussion. Held a few times per year, these time-limited and facilitated discussions of 20-30 members may encourage a deeper engagement on specific political topics.

Conclusion: The Evolving Community

ETP has a great number of strengths. It is a discourse community in which the core set of members are committed to discussion. It is a community that has been able to attract a set of contributors representing a wide range of political ideologies. Finally, it is a community that has strong site administrators, who are responsive to member needs, who push conversations in deliberative directions, and who are committed to the goal of deliberative discourse. E.thePeople is also a community balancing its goals of being a public forum of discussion with its goals of creating a trusted, respectful environment where members can build their own reputations and have an audience willing to read and think about their comments.

This is a community in progress, creating a set of artifacts and rules of engagement. It is a community grappling with the difficulties of engaging people in effective and open discussion while still trying to build trust among members. This is a community of deliberation – in all its messiness. As such, any changes to the site should move the community in a more deliberative direction and move away from the regular political discussion boards on the net. By building on its strengths, ETP can continue fulfilling its unique role and enable members to engage in a different kind of discourse.

¹ <http://www.moveon.org>

² <http://www.meetup.com>

³ <http://www.project540.org>

⁴ <http://www.weblab.org/home.html>

⁵ Sullivan, J.L., Borgida, E., Jackson, M.S., Riedel, E., & Oxendine, A.R. (2002). A tale of two towns: Assessing the role of political resources in a community electronic network. *Political Behavior*, 24 (1), 55-84.

⁶ Specifically, "The Deliberative Opinion Poll: A Dialogue," *The Public Perspective*, May/June 1992, at 29.

⁷ <http://www.e-thepeople.org/a-national/about/fullstory/point>

⁸ <http://www.e-thepeople.org/a-national/about/fullstory>

⁹ <http://www.e-thepeople.org/a-national/article/14986/view>

¹⁰ personal email correspondence

¹¹ From analysis on e.thePeople site.

Theme	# of Posts			Total # of Posts	% of total
	Jan-03	Feb-03	Mar-03		
Public Forum	318	339	607	1264	85%
Meta	7	14	25	46	3%
Dem renewal	3	3	4	10	1%
global role	53	39	74	166	11%
	381	395	710	1486	

¹² Personal correspondence

¹³ <http://www.e-thepeople.org/a-national/about/fullstory/how>

¹⁴ Kim, Amy Jo (2000) *Community Building on the Web*. Peachpit Press.

¹⁵ Kim, p. 116

¹⁶ Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge, U.K. and New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, p. 154.

¹⁷ Sullivan, et. al.

¹⁸ <http://www.e-thepeople.org/a-national/comment/44468/1/view>

¹⁹ <http://www.e-thepeople.org/a-national/comment/45083/view>

²⁰ <http://www.e-thepeople.org/a-national/comment/45154/view>

²¹ <http://www.e-thepeople.org/a-national/comment/45154/view>

²² <http://www.e-thepeople.org/a-national/article/14074/view>

²³ <http://www.e-thepeople.org/a-national/article/14998/view>

²⁴ Wenger. (1998), p. 178.

²⁵ Wenger. (1998), pp. 111-115.

²⁶ Noveck, Beth Simone. (Winter 2003). "Designing Deliberative Democracy in Cyberspace: The Role of the Cyber-Lawyer." *Boston University Journal of Science and Technology Law*, 9 B.U. J. Sci. & Tech. L. pp. 1-90.

²⁷ <http://www.e-thepeople.org/a-national/comment/31224/view>

²⁸ <http://www.listeningtothecity.org/>

²⁹ <http://www.project540.org>

³⁰ Price, Vincent and Joseph N. Cappella. (Summer 2002). "Online Deliberation and its Influence: The Electronic Dialogue Project in Campaign 2000. *IT & Society*, Volume 1, Issue 1, pp. 303-329