# A bliki model to support political discourse formation

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper presents a bliki model which combines the potential of a blog and a wiki in order to support the creation of a constellation of political discourses in the public sphere and promote critical reflection among them. The model is inspired on traditional local public participation events that usually take the form of a face-to-face meeting where participants discuss some issue or problem and, in the end, produce a document summarizing the highlights of the event.

The model embraces the collaborative paradigm fostered by the Internet and tries to support the creation of a set of documents (using a wiki), each one representing a particular discourse, whose content is generated from the discussion held in a blog. It is based on the identification of relevant ideas expressed in the blog, which are then sorted according to the point of view (discourse) they support, and are incorporated into the wiki document representing that discourse by those participants supporting it.

#### **Categories and Subject Descriptors**

H.5.3 [Information Interfaces and Presentation]: Group and Organization Interfaces – *asynchronous interaction, computer-supported cooperative work, web-based interaction.* 

#### **General Terms**

Design, Experimentation.

#### Keywords

Public participation, deliberative democracy, discourse formation, bliki, wiki, blog.

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

Deliberative democrats emphasize deliberation, not voting or interest aggregation, as the essence of democracy. In particular, they recognize the public sphere is at any time home to *constellations of discourses* and the role of deliberation is to promote reflective choice across them. It is this process of *contestation of discourses* in the public sphere that influences the content of public policy.

The process of political discourse formation can be viewed in a similar way of a strategic planning process which entails two phases [1]:

- A divergent phase where participants provide comments or ideas concerning the topic at hand;
- A convergent phase where participants try to synthesize what is generated from the divergent phase, by selecting, refining and consolidating relevant ideas into different discourses (representing different points of view).

Blogs and wikis are some of the most popular web-based tools available on the Internet. They are the essence of Web 2.0 in the sense that they allow anyone to produce and make available content very easily and, unlike the traditional media, without intermediaries. This characteristic makes them powerful tools to revitalize the public sphere and foster online political deliberation. As a result, many initiatives tried to take advantage of this potential and use blogs and wikis to promote public deliberation [2; 3; 4]. Although some success has been achieved, further analysis show that both tools have shortfalls and lack the ability to complement themselves.

In its essence, both blogs and wikis can be considered as collaborative writing tools although they exhibit very distinctive characteristics: while blogs are recognized as adequate tools for supporting political discussion (divergent phase of public deliberation) they lack the ability to produce a clear outcome of those discussions; similarly, while wikis are recognized as adequate tools to support the production of joint documents/discourses (convergent phase of public deliberation), they lack the necessary instruments to properly support political discussion and to cope with the plurality of contemporary societies. It is clear then that a combined tool (let's call it a bliki) could prove to be useful in establishing a bridge between the two phases of a discursive participatory event. The purpose of this paper is to present the bliki model being used in the development of a public participation discursive support system.

The next section analyses discursive democracy and the way it reconceptualizes public participation as a deliberative exercise in the public sphere. Section 4 presents the potential and shortfalls of blogs and wikis to support online political (public) deliberation (in both divergent and convergent phases) and the main way those tools are being combined into blikis. This section ends with a list of requirements necessary to overcome the shortfalls of wikis and blogs and take advantage of their potential to support deliberative discourse creation. Finally, section 5 presents a bliki mode, aimed at responding to those requirements, which is being developed as part of a larger public participation support research program. The paper ends with some considerations on the limitations of the model proposed and future developments.

# 2. POLITICAL DISCOURSE FORMATION

To be able to analyze the desired features of a bliki in supporting political discourse formation it is necessary to understand the concept of public participation as a deliberative exercise that emphasizes the creation and contestation of discourses in the public sphere.

#### 2.1 Discursive democracy

The work of Jürgen Habermas [5], particularly his emphasis on deliberation in public spheres, has influenced many theorists of deliberative democracy. Among them, John Dryzek [6] proposes a more critical type of deliberative democracy, termed discursive democracy, that emphasizes the contestation of discourses in the public sphere. Dryzek defines discourse as "a shared way of comprehending the world embedded in language", having at its centre "a story line, which may involve opinions about both facts and values" and featuring "particular assumptions, judgments, contentions, dispositions, and capabilities" [7]. According to Dryzek, the public sphere is then at any time home to constellations of discourses and the role of deliberation is to promote reflective choice across them. This process of contestation of discourses in the public sphere influences the content of public policy according to the relative weight of these discourses at a given time and place. Therefore, Dryzek proposes to re-conceptualize public opinion as the "provisional outcome of the contestation of discourses in the public sphere as transmitted to the state (or transnational authority)". He proposes that such transmission can be accomplished by a number of different means, including the deployment of rhetoric through the alteration of the terms of political discourse, by creating worries about political instability, and by arguments being heard by public officials. This type of deliberative democracy gives citizens the possibility to influence policy adoption and execution without the interference of any political institution (such as parties and representatives) and constitutes an important perspective to take into account when considering the role of ICTs in the transformation of democracy.

# **2.2** Public participation as discourse formation and influence

In his characterization of participatory mechanisms, Archon Fung [8] uses three dimensions to form a "democracy cube". Along the third dimension ("Influence and Authority") Fung distinguishes between those mechanisms which allow participatory exercises to exert influence upon public authority, and those that aim at empower participants to directly take decisions themselves. This is an important distinction because deliberative public participation is usually associated with the idea of a process on which participants (common citizens) reach a decision that is to

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be upheld by public officials. So, as democracy is associated with voting, so is public participation associated with formal interest aggregation methods, a pre-condition to assure a decision is reached at the end of the process.

This "mediated society-wide deliberation" [9], although indirect in its impact, aims to exert influence "both through the advice they provide to officials and through their impact on public opinion" [8]. Although not relying on formal aggregation methods to produce a decision, deliberative (discursive) participative methods can still benefit from producing some kind of formal output that would enhance their degree of influence.

# 3. BLOGS AND WIKIS AS TOOLS TO SUPPORT PUBLIC DELIBERATION

From the many web-based tools available on the Internet, blogs and wikis appear to have the necessary characteristics to support society-wide deliberation on the public sphere:

- They allow a discursive approach to public deliberation instead of relying on formal decision making methodologies (e.g. multiple criteria decision making) and thus they require minimum cognitive efforts from the participants;
- They are highly popular, easy to create, maintain and use, thus lowering the technological barriers to participation;
- They may be categorized as collaborative writing tools that could be used not only to support discussion (contestation of discourses) but also to help produce an outcome of the process (e.g. a set of documents summarizing/representing the constellation of discourses that emerge form the deliberative process) that might enhance the influence over public officials.

Despite these common characteristics, blogs and wikis exhibit some particularities that make them suitable for different phases of public deliberation.

#### 3.1 Blogs

Drezner and Farrell define blogs (or weblogs) as "a web page with minimal to no external editing, providing on-line commentary, periodically updated and presented in reverse chronological order, with hyperlinks to other online sources." [10]

According to its "State of the Blogosphere, February 2006" Technorati (www.technorati.com) was tracking 27.2 Million blogs (over 75,000 new weblogs created every day), and the blogosphere tracked was doubling about every 5.5 months. It is no surprise that blogs are now being used in such areas as health, education, corporate communication, and politics.

Regarding the role of blogs within the political system, Drezner and Farrell state that blogs have not only played an important role in scrutinizing politicians' public and private activity ("nailing the scalps of politicians and media figures to the wall") but they have also played a highly important role in shaping campaign tactics and strategy, influencing not just legal issues and politics but also policy outcomes [10]. Furthermore, blogs have been used to promote citizen participation in local democracy [3] mainly because "as a discursive form blogs stand between traditional print and broadcast media and small group discussion". [11]

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However, results from previous experiences show that although blogs are recognized as adequate tools for supporting political discussion (divergent phase of public deliberation) they lack the ability to produce a clear outcome of those discussions [12]. That is manly because posts are organized in a chronological linear structure, which means that information and ideas posted on blogs quickly loose visibility in a few days. Comments associated with posts, even if organized in a threaded way, quickly get buried along with their posts, some of then clearly off topic or improper. The consequence is that ideas and arguments about a certain topic keep getting periodically repeated because new comers don't realize that, deep in the archive, those ideas and arguments have already been presented. Nevertheless, the blogosphere it is today perhaps the most vibrant place in the public sphere where political ideas can be exchanged and discussed.

## 3.2 Wikis

Putting it simply, a Wiki "is a server-based collaborative tool that allows any authorized user to edit Web pages and create new ones using nothing more than a Web browser and a text entry form on a Web page." [13] The capability of facilitating distributed writing, editing and document sharing is largely responsible for the success of wikis and, like blogs, for its adoption as a collaborative tool across organizations.

Also, like blogs, wikis have been used in a political context, for instance, as a tool to support the making of a political platform [4; 14]. Contrary to blogs, wikis are recognized as adequate tools to support the production of joint documents (convergent phase of public deliberation) although they lack the necessary instruments to properly support political discussion. As a consequence, users often do not discuss the changes that they are making and, instead of collaborating to build a common content, they simply engage themselves in "edit wars" merely replacing each other's content [4]. In some circumstances, eventually, these "edit wars" become part of a negotiation process which ultimately leads to a better final product [15]. That is the case when a Neutral Point of View policy (NPOV) is adopted and followed, thus explaining the success of projects such as the Wikipedia [4]. This is incompatible with the plurality of contemporary political discourses (the conservative vs. the liberal, for instance) which no NPOV or negotiation process can conciliate. The alternative is the creation of "political point-of-view" wikis as proposed by Kevin Makice [14].

# 3.3 Blikis

Given the individual strengths of blogs and wikis, integration of both these tools seem to be appropriate [14]. According to Martin Fowler, the term *bliki* was coined by Ward Cunningham to designate "something that was a cross between a wiki and a blog" (<u>http://martinfowler.com/bliki/WhatIsaBliki.html</u>). So, the idea of combining together the functionality of blogs and wikis is not new. Of course, wiki and blog engines have evolved in such a way that they now incorporate many common facilitating mechanisms such as RSS feeds, search capabilities, trackback and so on. Still, their original DNA remains different as blogs are considered an ideal tool to foster discussion in thread mode, while wikis are seen as tools for formalizing synthesized knowledge in a document lacking a discursive support. Even though there are many bliki (also known as wikilogs) implementations available on the web (see, for instance, <u>http://usemod.com/cgi-bin/mb.pl?WikiLog</u>), there seems not to be a lot of attention paid to this combination in the academic literature [16]. Nevertheless it seems that the way blikis combine wiki and blog functionality is essentially by keeping the linear, chronological, structure of contributions (posts and comments in blog style) but allowing them to be edited in wiki style, which is not enough to provide the necessary support to build a constellation of discourses in the public sphere.

# 3.4 The missing link

Despite the efforts made to combine the features of blogs and wikis and take advantage of their potential in supporting the process of creation and contestation of discourses in the public sphere, it still seems necessary to bridge the gap between them:

- Political discussion (contestation of discourses) should be made primarily through the blog: internet users are accustomed to the threaded mode of presenting ideas, arguments and so on. It is important to take advantage of the vitality the blogosphere presently exhibits when it comes to foster political debate.
- It should be possible to identify relevant contributions (ideas) among posts and comments and to sort each relevant contribution according the topic it addresses and the discourse it "belongs" to. This means identifying the correct place to "insert" the idea in the correct document from those being prepared on the wiki. This should be done primarily on the blog and in decentralized, collaborative way.
- The formalization of each discourse should be made on the wiki considering the relevant contributions found on the blog. The end result should be a constellation of different discourses about a certain public policy issue/problem.
- The NPOV policy should be abandoned when building each document on a wiki since political discourses do not constitute "neutral points of view". Only those participants affiliated with a particular discourse should be allowed to edit the corresponding wiki pages in order to minimize content wars.
- It should be possible to track down easily which posts or comments have been selected to be incorporated on each discourse and acknowledge when it has been successfully incorporated in that discourse.
- Editorial wars regarding the content of a document should be separated from editorial wars regarding the style of that document. This means that wiki discussion/talk pages should be used mainly for stylistic and minor change discussions, leaving the bulk of content discussion to the blog.

This paper proposes a new bliki model that aims to address these requirements considering that the system being developed is to be used in a public participation support context.

# 4. THE BLIKI MODEL AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION SUPPORT SYSTEM

A system is being developed to support public discursive deliberation by integrating a blog (Wordpress) with a wiki (MediaWiki). These tools were chosen because they are both highly customizable engines, they have a large number of installations, they have a huge legion of supporters that develop extensions and provide support through developer forums, and use the same programming language (PHP) and database engine (MySQL).

The main goal of the blog component is to promote the presentation and discussion of ideas in the public sphere, thus supporting the divergent phase of the deliberative process. It is very simple to expose a new idea on a blog (through a post for instance) and discuss it using the commenting facility (threaded or not). But, the end result is simply a series of entries, organized chronologically, where different topics are discussed, where different points of view about each topic are presented, mixed even with some off topic remarks. Someone who arrives in a middle of a discussion has a hard time knowing what has been said before and risks duplicating arguments and asking questions already answered. It is also clear that search mechanisms, tagging possibilities, categorization and simple archives are not good enough to provide a newcomer with a coherent discourse about the issue being discussed. That is the role of the wiki component which aims at supporting the convergent phase of the deliberative process. The goal is to provide a tool through which those involved in the discussion that share a particular point of view could sum up the ideas and arguments presented in the blog in a coherent text. This way it is expected that a set of coherent texts, each of one representing a particular discourse (point of view) about a certain issue, will emerge. This set of documents (representing a constellation of discourses) can also be used to influence the action of public authorities.

The following sections will present some of the most important characteristics of the model being proposed and the system being developed.

#### 4.1 Authors and authorship

It is important in a public participation support system that everyone may read all contributions (posts, comments, wiki and talk pages). Therefore the system being developed makes all contributions public.

However, to make everyone accountable for their contributions and, hopefully, avoid (or at least mitigate) the "trolling" and "flaming" phenomena, those who want to participate (writing posts, comments, or changing the wiki pages) are required to formally register themselves into the system. Although registration is required, all contributions will be presented anonymously in order to focus the discussion on ideas and not on the persons that present them.

Despite the fact that, on the whole, the NPOV policy is abandoned, it is still necessary to maintain a certain degree of consistency of points of view within each discourse. Therefore, each participant will be at any moment associated with only one discourse, which means that he/she will be able to edit only one of the discourses (which may comprise several wiki pages) on the wiki. This approach seeks to minimize contention associated with hot-topic issues (for instance) by taking an approach similar to the creation of "smaller groups" as proposed by Kevin Makice [14]. This process takes into account the similarity of points of view (discourse) between participants and it is self-organized.

So, registered participants will be distinguished among those who are already associated with a particular discourse (*committed participants*) and those who are still "free" (*registered participants*).

Only *committed participants* can edit the corresponding (discourse) wiki pages and talk pages on the wiki. This way, participants are encouraged to post their ideas on the blog first, engage in a discussion with all users, submit their ideas to an evaluation, improve them and only then try to incorporate them on the discourse they support.

# 4.2 Discourses and topics

The wiki part of the system is organized into *discourses* and *topics*. Each *discourse* aims at representing a particular point of view about a certain problem/issue under discussion, it is organized around several *topics* (in the same way as a "common" document has sections and subsections), and may comprise one or several wiki pages.

Although each discourse may address its own topics, users are advised and encouraged to structure the discourses according to a common set of topics. Therefore, upon creation of a new discourse, a template is available that mirrors the structure of topics defined in the "most accepted" discourse (the discourse with more *committed participants*).

The wiki main page provides an entry point to all discourses, each one described by a simple two-line maximum phrase. It is this description that will be used to categorize the entries (posts and comments) on the blog.

# **4.3** Posts and comments (divergent phase)

Only *committed participants* can write posts on the blog. Every *registered participant* can make comments. Every post and every comment may have two types of tag:

- A *discourse tag*, indicating to which discourse does the author of the post or comment wish to contribute to. The author may choose the tag, just before submitting the text, from the already defined discourses or it can leave it blank, thus signaling that he/she wishes to start a new discourse. A post or comment written by a *committed participant* will have, by default, the *corresponding discourse* tag.
- A *topic tag*, indicating to which topic of the chosen discourse he/she wishes to contribute. The author may choose one of the topics being discussed in the chosen discourse, or he/she may define a new topic tag. Authors are encouraged to use already defined topic tags (even across different discourses) unless they aim at really beginning a discussion about a new topic.

Each contribution will be evaluated according to two parameters, *concordance* of point of views and *relevance* of ideas, in a similar way of other social bookmarking systems.

Posts or commentaries bearing a *discourse tag* can only be evaluated regarding their *concordance* with the discourse by the *committed participants* associated with that particular discourse. A positive evaluation on concordance naturally implies a positive

evaluation on relevance of ideas. When the number of positive concordance evaluations reaches a (dynamic) threshold, that post or commentary is automatically added to the list of posts and commentaries waiting to be integrated in the corresponding wiki discourse (see section below).

The author of a comment or post bearing a *discourse tag* which gets concordance evaluations above the threshold immediately becomes *committed* to that discourse, and is therefore able to edit the correspondent wiki pages.

Posts or commentaries without a discourse tag can only be evaluated according to the relevance of the ideas expressed in it. This way, even those who disagree with a certain contribution may still consider that that contribution is relevant enough to be considered in a discourse. Any registered participant can evaluate a contribution regarding its relevance.

When an untagged contribution reaches a certain threshold of relevance evaluations, it is up to the author of that contribution to create (or not) a new discourse on the wiki (see section below). The same applies to discourse tagged contributions that do not get enough concordance evaluation from the participants committed to the related discourse, but still get enough relevance evaluation from all participants. In case the author of such a contribution decides to create a new discourse on the wiki, he/she will become committed to that discourse (stopping his/her committed relation with any other discourse).

## 4.4 Building discourses (convergent phase)

Posting and commenting constitutes the divergent part of the deliberative process. Instead of relying on a centralized facilitator (much like sometimes happens in public participation face-to-face meetings) to write down a summary of what has been expressed, the wiki allows the participants themselves to do that in a collaborative way. However, instead of trying to produce a single summary document, participants can build as many different documents as different points of view (discourses) expressed in the discussion.

In order for a registered (non committed) participant to be allowed to start a new discourse page on the wiki it is necessary that at least one of its posts or commentaries on the blog is considered to express *relevant* ideas by the other participants. That is, one of its posts or commentaries needs to get a number of *relevance* evaluations above a certain threshold.

The participant who creates a new discourse becomes *committed* do that discourse. Since different discourses about a certain issue may be conflicting, only those participants associated with a particular discourse (*committed participants*) can edit the wiki pages related to that discourse and engage in discussion in the corresponding talk pages. It is up to the set of participants already committed to a particular discourse to select new participants to become committed. Only participants who have contributed to the discussion with a post or comment in the blog expressing his/her wish to become committed to that discourse (by choosing the corresponding *discourse tag*) and whose post or commentary gained *concordance* evaluations above a certain threshold become committed to that discourse.

A participant whose contribution has been accepted for integration in a particular discourse is the main responsible for making the changes necessary to the integration of the ideas expressed in the contribution, although any other committed participant may change the wiki pages.

Each discourse has a corresponding *contributions page* in the wiki that presents a link to the posts and comments selected from the blog to be incorporated in that particular topic of that particular discourse.

It is the sole responsibility of the author of a contribution to signal that the ideas expressed on that contribution are already integrated in the discourse. This way it is possible, in each *contributions page*, to distinguish between those ideas awaiting integration from those already integrated. To monitor possible adulteration of text that would amount to the idea being removed, each committed participant may subscribe to individual topics and this way be notified every time a page is changed.

Any participant currently committed to a discourse who believes he/she no longer agrees with that discourse is allowed to create a new one. However, it should be emphasized that the "strength" of each particular discourse depends ultimately on the number of participants committed to that discourse. Furthermore, the quality of each discourse depends ultimately on the collaborative efforts of as many participants as possible.

# 5. FINAL REMARKS

Democracy in general and public participation in particular has now being influenced by the proposals of deliberative democrats. The creation and contestation of discourses in the public sphere has been recognized as a powerful mechanism that influences political action, particularly at local level. On the other hand, the Internet is now considered an important part of the public sphere and the blogosphere in particular is seen as a vibrant "place" to discuss political ideas. There is however a sense that the potential of blogs is still not fully reached as they do not prove adequate to produce an outcome of the discussion they support. As collaborative writing tools, wikis seem to be the appropriate complement to blogs. All it is necessary is to develop the adequate model to take advantage of the potential of both blogs and wikis and create a synergy between them.

The purpose of this ongoing research project is to develop a model that would allow bridging the gap between blogs and wikis by taking advantage of their potential for discussion (blogs) and document production (wikis). The model proposed bliki in this paper is being currently incorporated in the development of a broader public participation support system and it is expected to be improved as feedback begins to emerge from its use.

Among those changes, it is possible to foresee the need to support stronger peer-to-peer collaboration by providing direct communication channels (chat-like) and synchronous communication/collaborative writing mechanisms to enhance the possibilities of successfully creating documents that represent each discourse of the constellation of discourses in the public sphere.

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