

4-16-2012

Emerging Communication Technologies and the Practices of Enhanced Deliberation: The Experience of Benjamin Franklin Transatlantic Fellows Summer Institute

Alessandra B. Von Burg
Wake Forest University, beaslea@wfu.edu

Ron Von Burg
Wake Forest University, ronvonburg@gmail.com

Gordon R. Mitchell
University of Pittsburgh - Main Campus, gordonm@pitt.edu

Allan D. Loudon
Wake Forest University, louden@wfu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd>

Recommended Citation

Von Burg, Alessandra B.; Von Burg, Ron; Mitchell, Gordon R.; and Loudon, Allan D. (2012) "Emerging Communication Technologies and the Practices of Enhanced Deliberation: The Experience of Benjamin Franklin Transatlantic Fellows Summer Institute," *Journal of Public Deliberation*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 , Article 14.
Available at: <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol8/iss1/art14>

This Symposium is brought to you for free and open access by Public Deliberation. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Public Deliberation by an authorized editor of Public Deliberation.

Emerging Communication Technologies and the Practices of Enhanced Deliberation: The Experience of Benjamin Franklin Transatlantic Fellows Summer Institute

Abstract

A U.S. Department of State funded program, the Ben Franklin Transatlantic Fellows Summer Institute, has taught hundreds of high-school aged students from Eurasia and the United States practices of democratic deliberation using networked media. A survey of the program's curricular innovations since 2006, involving integration of YouTube, Facebook, and documentary film, yields insight on how the advent and circulation of "(de-)liberation" technologies present pathways for young students to practice efficacious and convivial forms of cosmopolitan citizenship in our digital age.

Keywords

communication technologies, deliberation pedagogy

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Damien Smith Pfister for the invitation to be part of this symposium and for his extremely helpful feedback throughout the writing process.

Emerging Communication Technologies and the Practices of Enhanced Deliberation: The Experience of Benjamin Franklin Transatlantic Fellows Summer Institute

Introduction

Recent events on the global stage are stimulating reflection on the role of emerging communication technologies in shaping the trajectory of political deliberation and social change. Commenting on the series of “Arab Spring” uprisings Larry Diamond (2010, 70) notes, “[I]beration technology enables citizens to report news, expose wrongdoing, express opinions, mobilize protest, monitor elections, scrutinize government, deepen participation, and expand the horizons of freedom.” Yet Evgeny Morozov’s (2009) analysis of the 2009 Iranian “Twitter Revolution” strikes a more cautionary tone, showing how many of the same social media tools eventually boomeranged on activists striving to expand space for political deliberation in Iran’s repressive public spheres.

Such disparate accounts seem to underscore the new technologies’ complex and Janus-faced orientation toward public deliberation. They also highlight the salience of efforts to understand precisely how specific technologies inflect deliberative practices in particular contexts. Indeed, *opportunities* to deliberate created by technological innovation do not necessarily translate into more dynamic deliberative practices. For instance, Diamond (2010, 80) stipulates, “[e]ven in the freest environments, the new digital means of information and communication have important limits and costs. There are fine lines between pluralism and cacophony, between advocacy and intolerance, and between the expansion of the public sphere and its hopeless fragmentation. As the sheer number of media portals has multiplied, more voices have become empowered, but they are hardly all rational and civil” (see also Sunstein 2009; Weger and Aakhus 2003). The challenge, then, is to merge deliberative techniques with new communication technologies in ways that position such technologies as “tools for conviviality,” enabling “autonomous and creative intercourse among persons” to cultivate “individual freedom realized in personal interdependence” (Illich 1973). We agree with Howard Rheingold’s assessment that “point-and-click experimentation” by young people is unlikely to cultivate the “participatory media literacies” that are needed to keep future generations engaged in civic life (2008, 99-100). What is needed, then, is a concentrated pedagogy capable of harnessing native digital competencies toward enhancing deliberation. Communication scholars have long been interested in the challenges of finding new pedagogical methods to utilize emerging technologies in deliberative practices (see Crick, 2010; Keith, 2007). This essay proceeds in that spirit.

Since 2006, we have hosted the Benjamin Franklin Transatlantic Fellows (BFTF) Summer Institute—a United States Department of State funded program designed to teach high-school aged students from both Eurasia and the United States practices of democratic deliberation using networked media—and have developed new pedagogical tools to engage this challenge. The BFTF Summer Institute, a month-long program dedicated to teaching youth the virtues of debate and deliberation in transnational settings, draws its name from American statesman and international diplomat Benjamin Franklin, who championed innovative uses of media technologies (such as pamphleteering in his day) to promote social mobility, free speech and international cosmopolitanism. In the spirit of Franklin’s efforts, we seek to merge deliberative practices with the emerging communication technologies that today’s youth, both American and international, are most familiar.

Each year, an average of 55 fellows, 10 from the United States and 45 from Europe and Eurasia, spend July at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, studying and practicing deliberation and advocacy. The program blends in-class instruction with opportunities for application in the local community. In the first half of the program, fellows take classes on constitutionalism, citizenship, social movements, and documentary film-making. In the second half of the program, fellows put these lessons into practice through various exercises in advocacy. Each year, we have renovated the curriculum with new approaches to civic engagement and community service, integrating emergent communication technologies such as blogging, podcasting, video sharing, and social networking. Our renovations are based on our own reflections of the program and the follow-up surveys of the fellows. While we do not have systematic data on how the fellows incorporate technology into deliberative practices beyond their experience at the Institute, many alumni correspond with us regularly, recounting how they have employed the teachings from the Institute into their our experiences and follow-on projects. This essay shares how the BFTF Summer Institute uses new communication technologies to promote deliberative practices in mobile, diverse, and digital worlds. Even though the entire Institute requires considerable resources, we focus on teaching communicative capacities that are applicable in a variety of deliberative contexts. Because the BFTF Institute draws students from a wide-range of socio-economic conditions, we are particularly interested in using communication technologies that are not resource intensive. To that end, throughout this essay, we reflect on our own “learning curve” in blending deliberation pedagogy and fellows’ use of new communication technologies.

YouTube and the Electoral Process

In 2007, CNN and YouTube teamed up to sponsor two United States presidential primary debates that utilized new digital video technology to increase citizen participation in electoral politics. Unlike previous debates where the right to pepper presidential candidates with questions lay exclusively with a moderator, individuals were asked to create and post videos to YouTube with questions for the candidates. With input from users’ feedback, CNN aired selected questions directed at an individual candidate or the entire field.

While candidates prepared for the presidential debate in July 2007, BFTF students worked on a parallel track, following a curriculum focused on the twin rhetorical pillars of invention and judgment. In courses covering topics such as “The Art of Questioning,” “Questioning Exemplars,” “Questioning Pitfalls,” and “Production Tips,” students studied how to isolate topic areas, hone wording, polish performances, and digitally produce 30-second question clips that were uploaded to the official YouTube site for possible inclusion into the debate (see Smith, 2007b).

The student-developed questions covered topics ranging from global warming to Kosovo and included graphics and voice-overs. In one question, a Norwegian student asked about global warming while noting that Italy and Australia are committed to doing more than the U.S. In another question, an Andorran student pressed the candidates on how to resolve inconsistencies between the U.S. human rights record at Guantanamo and the war on terrorism. These exercises not only yielded a compelling set of eleven video questions for the Democratic debate and over twenty questions and supporting video for the Republican debate; they also provided opportunities for students to develop portable skills in rhetorical invention.

In another segment of the institute, students honed acuity in rhetorical judgment, by studying the issue of what makes a good question. Teachers devised a basic rubric for assessing questions, and while viewing the Democratic presidential debate, students used a Likert scale to evaluate each question in four categories. Many of the students' submitted questions received an extraordinary amount of attention from YouTube viewers. As of March 2008, the 16 video questions submitted by the BFTFI had been viewed almost 30,000 times. Even those questions not ultimately selected for inclusion in the debate had an impact in getting campaign strategists and candidates to think in different registers, outside the box of shopworn mainstream media themes. As Jeff Parcher, senior communications advisor for presidential candidate Bill Richardson explained, "We had research staff watch every video and put each question in a database. Priority was given to questions we hadn't had before and/or those that seemed to have a high probability of being chosen (based on newsworthiness, articulation, incisiveness, etc.)" As Parcher explained further, "The breadth of the questions and especially the involvement of so many young Americans has made this quite different, unique and potentially a great new addition to the debate process" (qtd. in Smith, 2007a). Political debates utilizing the YouTube format have since occurred in other countries, with BFTF Summer Institute students applying their argumentation skills accordingly. For example, a Greek student alum of the BFTF Summer Institute had two of his questions aired on the Greek national television channel Skai, which hosted a presidential forum using citizen-submitted YouTube questions (see Loudon, 2008).

The coupling of question-production with the new communication technologies demonstrates the rhetorical efficacy of deliberation technologies in creating new modes of citizenship. While the CNN/YouTube model demonstrates the potential for deliberation technology to vitalize citizen participation, our experience with the BFTF Summer Institute shows that focused pedagogical interventions can elevate the quality of these public contributions. A curriculum that underlines how to use networked media in rhetorically efficacious ways can give citizens the tools necessary to craft digital artifacts capable of standing out in an era of information abundance. Overall, our exit survey data suggest fellows obtained argument and media skills that increased the self-perception of their *legitimacy* as direct contributors to democratic discourse.

Documentary Film and Civic Engagement

In 2010, we introduced a new component focusing on documentary video production and multi-media projects in concert with the Documentary Film Program (DFP) at Wake Forest University. Our commitment to preparing engaged, critical, and media-literate citizens was thus refocused toward studying salient civic issues in order to produce digital artifacts that could circulate to multiple audiences. In order to produce rich multimedia texts, fellows participated in community activities tied to their areas of research interest. For example, fellows interested in education and child welfare worked with various community partners that focused on after school programs. The curricular additions provided by the DFP complemented the existing curriculum on civic engagement and public advocacy.

The fellows were initially asked to choose research topics that exposed them to issues such as poverty, environmental degradation, and human rights violations. Institute directors then connected research groups to local community-based organizations focused on similar themes. This portion of the program complemented the emphasis on debate and deliberation, based on participatory and deliberative models of citizenship (see Aristotle 1977; Barber 1984; Dewey

1927; Dryzek 1990; Pateman 1970; Putnam 2000) and gave the fellows an opportunity to meet the people who are directly affected by the problems they were researching. The hands-on experiences of community service provided the fellows with a perspective ‘from the ground level’ and inspired them to develop specific messages to audiences that could also be moved to care. Each group used Flip-Cameras—a relatively inexpensive recording technology—to shoot footage of their experiences with these community partners.

Through the formal curriculum, the fellows had studied how to construct persuasive messages and utilize strengths of different media forms to disseminate those messages. Working in workshops, they had the opportunity to produce their own multi-media websites that incorporated video, blogs, pictures, and interactive presentations of research about the specific issues. In addition, the fellows produced various videos and short documentaries and contributed to the main BFTF blog and their own personal blogs. While many fellows were familiar with these new technologies, they were often undisciplined in their use. This was particularly salient regarding video, where many fellows were initially satisfied to simply point and shoot. The skill set nurtured by their education in documentary film-making helped correct such tendencies. The pedagogical emphasis on narrative, imagery, editing and shot selection cultivated the skills necessary to make more cohesive, provocative, and thoughtful contributions.

Our emphasis on using multimedia technology to spark deliberation around pressing social and economic issues expanded the fellows’ argumentative repertoire. Fellows were required to move beyond purely textual argument and learn to express themselves through audio and visual means. Part of this process involved expanding students’ vocabulary in terms of the language of sounds and images, but the multi-mediated nature of their campaigns also demanded novel modes of argument invention. The fellows needed to integrate the various dimensions of their project—the blogs, the documentary films, the interactive websites—into a cohesive digital text that was attention-grabbing and persuasive. Aggregating the material they produced required fellows to generate new ways to integrate both the form and content of these new communication technologies. For example, by reflecting on how a mini-documentary about food donations complements a blog on poverty and nutrition, fellows learned how to connect different threads of research and, through this synthesis, created fresh ways of looking at persistent problems.

The fellows’ facility with this process is a reflection of the way this technologically-savvy generation is already used to communicating. The workshops, however, exposed them to new means of communication and, perhaps more importantly, showed how networked media can serve deliberative ends. While many Fellows were quite adept at using videos, blogs, social networks, and multi-media outlets to chat with friends and connect to those they already know, the program demonstrated how the same tools can reach new audiences for grander, more public-spirited purposes. Their experiences through the BFTF Summer Institute taught them how to turn new technology into deliberation technology.

Facebook and Sustained Deliberation

Like many other organizations, the BFTF Summer Institute drew on the social networking site Facebook to aid the program goals. Facebook has become a kind of “enclave deliberation technology” for the program, spurring internal dialogues about follow on projects when fellows leave the Institute. The evolution of fellows’ use of Facebook shows how deliberation technologies can organically adapt to new situations over time. In 2010 and 2011, we initiated ‘closed’ groups for the accepted fellows and staff members. The intent was to orient

new fellows, provide a space for them to get to know one another, and distribute information for their trip. The Facebook groups allowed the fellows to ask questions about the program to staff and administration and learn more about each other.

We predicted that the fellows would engage in personal discussion in the closed Facebook groups. The group far surpassed our expectations, moving quickly from a forum for personal conversation to more explicitly politicized discussions, allowing the Fellows to ‘test’ the issues they identified as important. The fellows began discussing non-controversial yet revealing preferences over books, movies, and authors, and moved to rather provocative questions about politics and values. The ongoing conversation, as a mode of digital citizenship, encouraged rather personal and detailed feedback from people none of the fellows had met in person, face-to-face. As teenagers, this may seem rather natural; though some fellows contributed more often and in more depth than others, most participated in some way.

In 2011, we also created an open Facebook group for the fellows’ families, friends, as well as BFTF Summer Institute alumni and others to join the conversation. This open group became a way of informing a larger audience. Both the closed and open groups became discussion sites for follow-on projects that extended the civic engagement lessons learned at the BFTF Summer Institute to fellows’ home countries and regions. Through Facebook, fellows invited other fellows, at times even BFTF Summer Institute alumni with whom they had not interacted in person, and together organized and delegated responsibility for new projects. For example, shortly after leaving Wake Forest University, 2011 alumni initiated and promoted the issue-specific group “2011 Immigration Project.” This project emulated the deliberative interactions among alumni who have organized and directed five major projects, including Youth Understanding Politics, YUP (2009-Present); *Youth Leadership Summer Institute* in Europe (<http://yasoinstitute.org/>); and *Youth In Charge Civic Engagement Seminar Armenia* (<http://youthincharge.wordpress.com/>).

The closed group continues to serve as a platform for ideas, discussion, proposals, and updates. The fellows, as well as the BFTF Summer Institute staff and administration, have shared frequent opportunities for further engagement. For example, fellows who developed follow-on projects after their involvement with the BFTF Summer Institute frequently solicit advice and participation from alumni. Such postings often precipitate further deliberation on the nature of the engagement and the opportunities for volunteerism. The range of engagement is stunning, flowing seamlessly from calls for environmental activism to educational planning.

Facebook serves as an enclaved deliberation technology, offering a protected space where like-minded citizens can discuss strategy before trying to mobilize wider publics. That such forums are enclaved does not make them un-deliberative, for deliberation is exactly what happens when ex-fellows discuss action steps to make a difference in their communities. In some ways, this protected space mirrors the experience of social movements that turn inward to discuss strategy before engaging more diverse audiences (see Sunstein, 2009, 76-80 on networked communication technology and enclaves). If the BFTF Summer Institute Facebook groups remained insulated from broader publics, their efficacy in stimulating democratic deliberation would be limited. However, the deliberative skills acquired by the fellows, combined with their increased technical acumen and sense of civic agency, amplifies the conversation beyond the localized, on-campus community. The horizon of deliberation stretches not only across international boundaries and audiences, but also across different generations of the BFTF Summer Institute. The several projects that the fellows have developed post-BFTF Summer Institute demonstrate that fellows from different iterations of the Institute consider

themselves a part of the large BFTF Summer Institute family and work together because of common interests and purposes. The Facebook groups facilitate and encourage this inter-generational, trans-spatial, issue-based, and enclaved deliberation.

Reflections on Deliberation Technologies

BFTF Summer Institute fellows leave Wake Forest aware that the whole world is not tuning in to their YouTube videos, their short documentaries, and their Facebook pages. They do, though, walk away with a larger sense of their presence in a networked world and see it as a natural, obvious place to reach out to others and start something new. Throughout the years, we have learned and adapted to fast-developing technology and have embraced it as a way to encourage deliberation before, during, and after the BFTF Summer Institute. Exit surveys for the last three years show that the fellows are very satisfied with their experience and leave North Carolina ready to start their own projects—perceived self-efficacy regarding civic engagement is higher than when they began. They have started several initiatives that often imitate and replicate the BFTF Institute, in the form of multi-national programs with funding from the fellows' own regions and nations. One particular program, YUP (Youth Understanding Politics) now in its fourth year, has received grants from the European Union (EU) and it has developed from a debate summer program into a variety of workshops on issues that range from understanding Roma minorities to EU elections. The fellows involved in this project, as well as other follow-on projects, span across generations of BFTF alumni and various regions, and they adopt the use of deliberative technologies in ways that replicate and surpass our models. In 2011, fellows developed a summer initiative in Armenia and combined the civic engagement, documentary, and online components in their program, adding online talks that were recorded and made available on YouTube. These examples demonstrate that the deliberative pedagogy at the heart of the BFTF Institute is easily replicable in new contexts. Tapping the liberatory potential of new communication technologies requires attention to the convivial task of cultivating deliberative cultures. Healthy civil societies flourish when newly liberated citizens cultivate the deliberative habits essential for democratic decision-making. Deliberation technologies stimulate and facilitate democratic public culture by opening new forums for communication, broadening the landscape of argument invention, and expanding the circumference of the deliberative community. Throughout history, communication technologies, from the newspaper to the television, have been celebrated for their democratizing potential, only to be co-opted by pre-existent power structures. New information communication technologies, however, require fewer resources for publication and thrive on lateral networking offering greater promise for sustained deliberative practices.

Three virtues of deliberation technologies stand out from our experiences recounted above. First, deliberation technologies enabled fellows to use technology in ways that legitimized their entry point into deliberation. Fellows meshed their argumentation and question-formulating skills with the deliberative attributes of new communicative technologies, finding audiences beyond their localized community. Second, deliberation technologies expand the possibilities for argument invention as these mediums coalesce into a cohesive digital text. The fellows became fluent in audio, video, multi-faceted productions that aim to reach audiences who share their passions. Third, as digital citizens, the fellows' ideas of audience became much wider than a traditional, local (present) set of people who may be close to them. Proximity is redefined in a digital world as a passion for issues that somewhat supplants geographical closeness.

Although the BFTF is a grant-funded summer program, the various pedagogical strategies that we have shared here could, with some adaptation, be integrated into secondary and post-secondary curricula. Creative renovations of, for example, Public Speaking, Argument, or Civics classes could orient students' rhetorical production not just toward the immediate, embodied audience present in the classroom, but the wider networked audiences accessible through digital media. Our experience shows that, to invert the famous catchphrase from *Field of Dreams*, building deliberation technologies does not guarantee citizens will come; however, carefully designed and reflexive programs of study that encourage sophisticated rhetorical approaches to public conversation might well produce citizens that can use deliberation technologies to enhance democratic discourse throughout the world.

References

- Aristotle (1977). *Politics*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Barber, B. (1984). *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Crick, N. (2010). *Democracy and rhetoric: John Dewey and the art of becoming*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.
- Diamond, L. (2010, July). Liberation technology. *Journal of Democracy*, 21 (3). p. 69-83.
- Dewey, J. (1927). *The Public and Its Problems*. Denver: Swallow Press.
- Dryzek, J. (1990). *Discursive Democracy: Politics, Policy, and Political Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Keith, W. (2007). *Democracy as Discussion: Civic education and the American forum movement*. Lexington: Lexington Books.
- Louden, Allan (2008, February 12). YouTube debates go international. *DebateScoop*, Available On-line: <http://www.debatescoop.org/story/2008/2/12/135338/973>.
- Morozov, E. (2009). Iran: Downside to the "Twitter Revolution." *Dissent*, Fall. p. 10-14.
- Pateman, C. (1970). *Participation and Democratic Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

- Rheingold, H. (2008). Using participatory media and public voice to encourage civic engagement. In ed. W. Lance Bennett, *Civic life online: Learning how digital media can engage youth*. Cambridge: MIT Press. 97-118.
- Smith, R. (2007a). Inside the Richardson debate prep room. *Huffington Post*, July 22. Available On-line: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ross-smith/inside-the-richardson-deb_b_57312.html, accessed January 20, 2008.
- Smith, R. (2007b). YouTube debate questions go global. *Huffington Post*, July 20. Available On-line: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ross-smith/youtube-debate-questions_b_57125.html, accessed July 20, 2008.
- Sunstein, C. (2009). *Republic.com 2.0*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Weger, H. and Aakhus, M. (2003). Arguing in internet chat rooms: Argumentative adaptations to chat room design and some consequences for public deliberation at a distance. *Argumentation & Advocacy*, 40. p. 23-38.