Public Smoking Arguments:
A Comparison Between Issue Forums, Blogs and Public Hearings

Challenge:
Research on the connection between deliberation activities and democratic decision-making is challenged to demonstrate what actually occurs, not merely what the ideal should be. “Deliberative democracy” as a line of research has produced theories addressing an ideal model characterized by open citizen participation, pursuit of the common good, justification of assertions or demands by reasons, and reciprocal respect demonstrated by participants. Other lines of research attempt to decipher what occurs during deliberations that can influence policy outcomes, citizens’ desires to participate, their attitudes on topics, or behavior changes. One focus of research in both camps has been the way in which participants in deliberation argue the issue at stake. Two ICDD scholars pursuing this line of research explored whether different deliberative contexts influence the resulting quality of participants’ arguments. Recognizing that a moderated group discussion (an “issue forum”) is only one form of deliberation citizens might participate in, ICDD researchers Dr. Tim Steffensmeier and Dr. Bill Schenck-Hamlin compared the moderated group discussion context with two other political communication settings: online message boards and city commission public hearings. Their interest was to decipher any argument quality differences found in differing communication contexts discussing a common issue – a proposed local public smoking ban.

Solution:
The researchers used a quantitative measuring tool named the Discourse Quality Instrument (DQI) to compare citizen communications in Manhattan, Kansas, during a year when citizen discussion and local and state legislation were focusing on the issue of smoking regulation. Transcripts were made from two public hearings held by the city commission, an online message board on the issue by the local newspaper – The Manhattan Mercury – and a series of ICDD-convened community conversations following the National Issues Forum deliberation format. Analysis of the transcripts was made according to four DQI measures: (1) equal opportunity for participation; (2) justification for arguments; (3) respect for groups, demands, and counterarguments; (4) constructive politics, and (5) an introduced measure – use of personal narratives. The two ICDD researchers and one graduate student individually coded all of the communications, then ran a statistical comparison of their results to achieve agreement on their coding before comparing the measures across the three political communication contexts.

Results:
The first measure – equal opportunity for participation – was not significantly different across the issue forums, online message board, and public hearings. Justification of arguments (rated as lacking justification, inferior justification, or qualified/sophisticated justification) was significantly different, with the message board having the most inferior justifications, public hearings the most sophisticated justifications and appeals to the common good and issue forums the most qualified justifications. Respect was divided into respect for others (explicit and implicit), respect for other communicators’ demands, and respect for others’ counterarguments. These demonstrated significant differences, with message boards containing the most comments showing disrespect for others, issue forums demonstrating more implicit respect for others, and public hearings exhibiting greater explicit respect for others. Message boards similarly demonstrated disrespect for other communicators’ demands, while issue forms showed more implicit respect for others’ demands. Respect for counterarguments was not demonstrated in any of the three venues. Constructive
politics was rated positional (no attempts to consider alternative positions), alternative or mediating. Public hearings produced more mediating proposals, while issue forums generated more alternative proposals than message boards. Personal narratives were produced more during public hearings than either issue forums or message board communication.

The researchers were interested in the degree to which these three venues move participants toward the ideal of a consensus that is rationally motivated. In public hearings, participants were more likely to offer a mediating proposal that functioned like a compromise, whereas issue forums showed greater evidence of alternative proposals. The researchers attributed this to differing motives guiding these two forms. In public hearings, immediacy is present; policy is determined by actions, so participants may be more motivated to offer mediated proposals that slightly alter the policy under discussion. These increase the chance of a majority opinion forming. Conversely, issue forums begin with an emphasis placed on policy exploration and development, leading to an increased understanding of the issue. Through the exploration of various possibilities something new may emerge. This research demonstrated that participants in the smoking issue forums developed alternate demands suggesting that this venue serves as a site for invention or innovation. The researchers concluded that their findings support greater credence for public issue forums as forms of citizen input to policy formation.