Where are we now and what next for online deliberative methods?

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Introduction

There is growing contemporary interest in the application and value of deliberative processes in both policymaking and social research. These processes have their roots in democratic and political theory, based on the normative principle that citizens should be able to participate in reflective and informed discussions about key policy questions that affect them before reaching decisions on the way forward. Common formats for deliberation include Citizens' Assemblies, Juries and Deliberative Polls and these are pursued alongside other representative forms of democracy. More recently, the use of deliberative methods in social research has increased and is focused on the provision of information and facilitated discussions to explore public attitudes and their underlying drivers and values.

Whilst there is variation in the literature on the indicators of and conditions for deliberation, the presumption is that these processes are capable of improving the quality and legitimacy of any related decisions, providing those who participate with the opportunity to increase their knowledge of a subject, and the time to reach thoughtful judgements and views. Engaging in deliberation is also often correlated to changes in participant opinion and is thought to positively impact civic competencies, such as propensity to vote.

Whilst far from a new phenomenon, deliberation is again back on many people's agenda for the role it might play

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in response to rising societal challenges, including climate change, populism and post-COVID recovery as well as declining trust in democratic processes and institutions. In parallel, the involvement of citizens in forms of science and research also continues to strengthen with an increasing need for high quality social science methods to support this that draw on dialogue and engagement.

The National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) has launched a Centre for Deliberative Research that brings together expertise in participatory methods and public engagement across a range of policy areas. It focuses on uncovering attitudes after citizens have been provided with evidence and an opportunity to discuss the issues with experts and others. Alongside policy-facing work, the Centre leads on methodological developments and provides fresh thinking on how deliberative research can respond to big societal questions now and in the future.

This builds on a long legacy at NatCen. We delivered the first ever Deliberative Poll back in 1994 and we've more recently followed that up with the first and largest online Deliberative Poll in the UK using video conferencing.

However, much of what is known about deliberation to date has been developed from where people meet in person, leaving us with a methodological gap about how we 'do deliberation' in online formats. This paper addresses this gap by reflecting on the state of the evidence in this space, as well as some of the considerations for developing our use of online approaches now and in to the future. Many of these reflections are drawn from an event which brought together speakers from across academia and practice. We are grateful for their time and insights.

Where are we now?

In the last decade or so, studies into deliberation and the Internet have grown in quantity, with interest in the potential this might hold to address some of the limitations of face-to-face approaches, not least issues of scale, cost and inclusion. The costs and practicalities associated with in-person work is commonly a limiting factor on

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event size, and it can be logistically challenging to bring people together across a wide geography. We know that due to the commitments needed to come away from home or work, representation from certain groups can be difficult to ensure, particularly including people with health and mobility issues or caring responsibilities.

Much work to date has been based on internet discussion forums which, whilst they provide an alternative way for people to participate and allow for discussions at scale, have struggled to demonstrate that effective conditions for deliberation can be achieved through text alone. The general consensus is that there is a need to adapt design and technical architecture to make sure online settings can meet deliberative ideals, both asynchronously (i.e. a post to a discussion board) and synchronously (i.e. discussions with others in real time), not least to ensure facilitated deliberations to alleviate opinion polarisation.

Video conferencing – providing real time audio and video of participants – seems to hold promise as an adaptation that might help create effective deliberative spaces and it is something that has become increasingly available, and indeed increasingly familiar in our personal and professional lives as a result of the COVID pandemic. It is important to note though that digital exclusion and literacy become an obvious limitation.

However, there are very few empirical studies that have examined this mode, leaving us with a series of questions on efficacy, quality and participant experience. Questions therefore remain about how we know we are designing 'good' process for participants and in general we are faced with the challenge of how we can be confident in the robustness of our processes and their outcomes.

What we do have access to now is an increase in practitioner led thinking, not least because the pandemic accelerated the range of people getting to grips with keeping deliberations going and navigating the shift to online. Whilst this insight is practice focused and largely anecdotal, it is contributing to our knowledge of considerations for designing online work. This includes:

- a focus on the platforms and software that can support events, including whether other sites or portals are needed for people to engage with or access information in between video-based events;

- clarity on what is being asked of participants and how engaging online might differ from face-to-face work – for example, whether people have a quiet room they can be in to participate;

- providing pre-event technical support to ensure people are prepared and able to use software and technology to enable their full participation;

- using more frequent, shorter sessions to deliver events rather than day or weekend long sessions; and

- re-thinking how the skills of facilitation can work when you are not in the room together, limiting the ability to read some cues and introducing variation on engagement and attention.

From our own work we also know that attrition is greater for online work, we would estimate as much as 35–40% compared with 20% for face-to-face work.

We have also learned something about the opportunities of online deliberations so far. They are potentially more convenient (both for participants and organisers) than face-to-face events and represent potential cost savings and a lower carbon footprint. They also encourage experimentation with innovative and creative methods. For example, the potential to easily crowdsource ideas and facilitate large scale data capture or offer more immersive experiences on a given issue to more directly bring topics to life.

Where next?

Methodologically, there are three significant aspects to deliberation; the communicative principles that distinguish discussions, the extent to which processes can influence an outcome, and the practical aspects of what enables or constrains people's participation.

We therefore think the following themes relevant to evidence and practice are important to focus on next in the development of online deliberations.

Communication and expression

Theorists imagine deliberations as processes in which participants engage in settings that emphasise equality and mutual respect. Deliberations are designed such that participants encounter contrasting points of view on the topic under discussion and advance their views through dialogue, but we don't yet have a clear view of how or whether such ideas are achieved in online settings. For example, is it a problem that people aren't physically in a room together? Do online platforms limit our ability to read body language, build rapport and sense others' feelings and responses to what is being said? We know from our work on projects such as the Future of Britain study, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), that although it may take longer for participants to build rapport with one another

online, people are able to form connections and empathise with one another online as they would offline, particularly when they share their personal stories. An additional potential benefit of going online is that video conferencing platforms may act to diminish some of the usual power dynamics that exist when participants are physically in a room together. Whilst facilitators can often end up being the focus of a group, video conferencing platforms draw our attention to whoever is speaking at any given point.

However, there is also a danger that if participants are limited to deliberating via online platforms, their ability to express themselves fully could also be limited. This is where the opportunity of technology and learning the hallmarks of deliberative dialogue in online formats might be. We should also see the importance of values and emotions, as well as 'reasoned arguments', which can be expressed in a range of communicative styles.

Scale

Technology offers us an opportunity to scale up the number of people who can get involved and have their say on issues under deliberation. This is thought to have several benefits, not least that with the right technology you can bring high quality deliberation to the mass public and, in doing so, impact democracy and society quickly. By providing platforms that can promote civil discourse, you can engage people from different sides of an argument and provide balanced and accurate information in part as an antidote to much modern media – and in particular social media. Finding ways to scale up also means there are more opportunities for people to 'practice' deliberating and access the potential benefits of exposure to different arguments and stepping outside of their echo chambers.

Colleagues at Stanford University in particular are taking this one step further by creating deliberative platforms using artificial intelligence and group decision making to truly scale up the number and range of people who can deliberate at any one time. Their Automated Moderator Platform is designed on Deliberative Polling procedures and replicates many of the cues and processes human moderators

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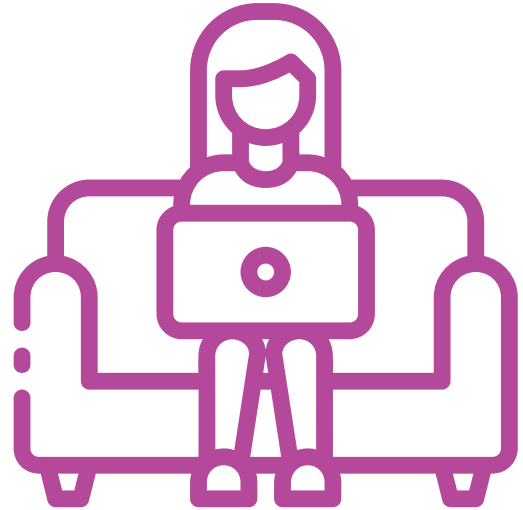
would use. With the potential to engage so many people in an issue, does this also help us develop more workable or informed policy responses that are likely to work for a greater number of citizens?

But the idea of scale works both ways in deliberation and some scholars argue that some of the detail or uniqueness of process and people's experience of it could be lost. We also don't yet understand whether automated approaches can be flexible enough to accommodate a range of communicative styles.

Inclusion

Moving deliberation online creates new opportunities to increase inclusion and widen participation.

There are several benefits of going online in heightening inclusion. We know that it can be easier for some groups, such as those with caring responsibilities or mobility issues, to take part online rather than travelling to an in-person event. It can also be beneficial for individuals to be able to participate whilst being in an environment which is comfortable or familiar to them.

Yet despite these benefits, there are still those who risk being excluded

through the shift to online. Although we have seen a rise in the use of online communication platforms like Zoom during the COVID pandemic, suggesting digital skills and confidence might now be less of a barrier to participation than previously, there are still significant numbers of people who don't have access to online devices or the Internet. This therefore raises the question of how we facilitate and encourage those less able or comfortable going online to participate. Some ways in which we might address this include providing WIFI boosters and offering pre-event technical support sessions, so that people are able and confident to participate in online events. We may also need to be prepared, in the short term at least, to find ways to engage people who won't attend an online event alongside those who do if we want to be able to better represent public views.

In addition to taking measures to reduce digital exclusion, we can also learn from features of in person events. Best practice in inclusive sampling and recruitment processes should be built into project design, through to providing accessible event materials and offering practical support for things like childcare. On a wider level, we should

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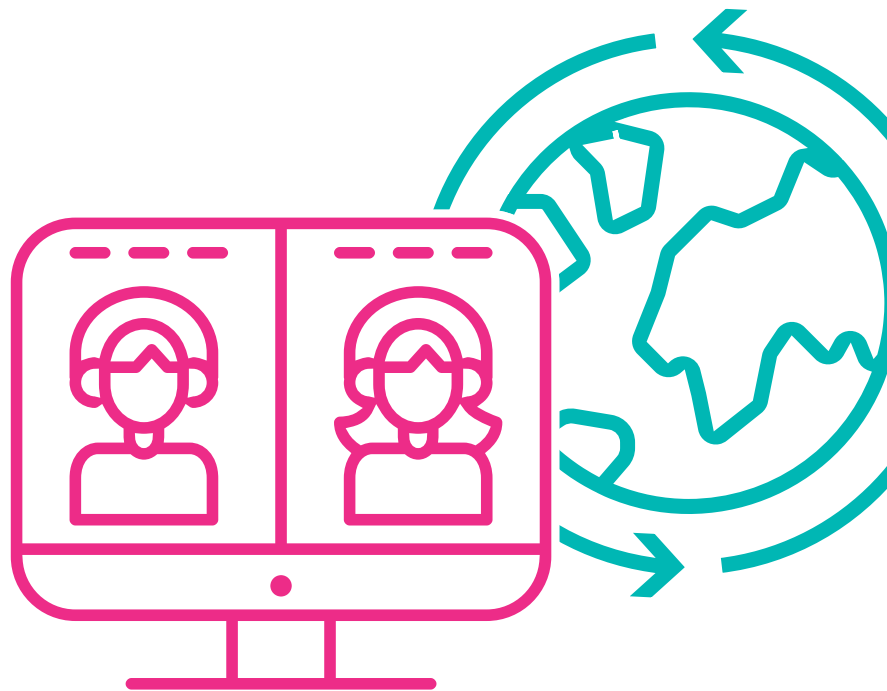
continue to think about how inclusion runs through the research process as a whole; how can we expand the range of voices which can influence the type of research we do, define research priorities and decide what good research and deliberation looks like?

Hybridity

One way in which we might better allow for this is by expanding how people can engage in deliberations and taking a hybrid approach could hold value as a means to do this.

Such an approach involves using both on and offline techniques and activities to engage participants beyond the traditional real time group discussion, for example by asking them to read certain resources or keep a diary in between online sessions. There are an increasing number of processes that are exploring these approaches and with a potential return to in person events in the not too distant future, we may be able to better see how a blend of online and face-to-face work might add another dimension to what we can achieve with deliberation.

In opening up opportunities for participants to engage in

deliberation and express their views in a variety of ways, hybrid approaches could contribute to creating more inclusive deliberative spaces, whilst allowing us to benefit from the scale and reach that online offers.

Looking forward

In the UK at least, we are now in the position of having an increasing understanding of best practice in designing and supporting deliberations online. This has mostly developed out of a need to rapidly adapt what we already know, rather than approaching the opportunities – and potentially unique benefits – of online spaces in their own right.

NatCen want to look at what can be usefully distilled from the existing evidence base and what is needed distinct to the online context. This would help make the case for effective and meaningful online deliberation that, in its own right, can contribute to democratic and social change and our understanding of public attitudes.

In doing so, three things will be important:

- Demonstrating effective conditions for online deliberations and finding ways to do so in lieu of comparative face-to-face work
- Maintaining the distinction between deliberation in processes of public participation (tied to policy processes) and the use of deliberative research in exploring public attitudes
- Positioning this field as one with its own potential and strengths – rather than as a poor relation to, or substitute for, face-to-face arrangements.

Big societal challenges demand more of a citizen voice and we know that deliberative approaches can make real contributions to topics such as climate change, post-COVID recovery and populism, and in doing so connect to wider efforts of deliberative democracy. Deliberative research remains an important strand of NatCen's work, and we will continue to champion innovations in social research in developing the evidence base for these methods.

To find out more about the Centre for Deliberative Research, visit **natcen.ac.uk/deliberative-research**

Acknowledgements

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