Making Digital Polity Spaces: Encoding Democracy into Information Systems

by

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Abstract

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This paper examines how democratic constructs are encoded into information systems through the design process. Specifically, I examine how designers conceived of their project goals in creating Budget Talks, a platform launched by the Ontario government to solicit citizen input in the run-up to the yearly budget. Using ethnographic methods, such as interviews and examination of internal documents, I explore how the goals of Budget Talks were conceived of organizationally and by designers. I then examine how specific design choices about commenting, posting, voting, etc, contribute to a value-laden environment. This analysis allows me to discuss how design decisions represented choices between values, many of which harken to known problems in deliberative and democratic theory. Finally, I explore how the structure of Budget Talks creates a relationship between government and public that instantiates a specific conception of the citizen; in particular, one that is based on the importance of individual experience and knowledge, rather than one that emphasizes the formation of collaborative publics.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

“I thought I could organize freedom // How Scandinavian of me!”

Björk, Hunter (1997)

1.1 Overview

In this thesis I explore how values are transcoded into information systems through the choices of those involved in the software design process. To examine how designers, managers, copy writers, and others coded democratic values into an information system, I chose the specific case of Budget Talks, a government sponsored attempt to create a more robust participatory environment for citizens, designed and deployed by Cabinet Office Digital (Digital). As governments increasingly seek to manage social complexity and the perceived failures of neoliberal democracy\(^1\), they have increasingly turned to information communications technologies to facilitate greater democratic engagement with citizens. As such, it is important to remain constructively critical of these attempts,

\(^1\)A term by which I refer to a specific sort of liberalism, whose primary administrative duty (and legitimating act) is to secure the continuation of capitalist reproduction by managing the economy [Habermas, 2005]. Neoliberals are convinced that self-organizing, profit-driven markets are the most effective ways of managing global complexity. Neoliberal governments work toward market stability by allowing the transactionalist logics of profit-driven firms to direct social life [Treanor, 2005] and by configuring their own organizational structure to match those of corporate entities [Kurki, 2010].
and to interrogate the values that are communicated to citizens.

To accomplish this research, I used theoretical research from multiple disciplines: values-in-design, human computer interaction, and other critical design methodologies as well as political theory: in particular that of democratic theory. I used ethnographic and speculative methods including the analysis of internal documents, interviews with Digital staff about their understanding of the purpose and goals of Budget Talks, as well as an in depth analysis of the software mechanics itself. Analysing Budget Talks involved creating a model of the design mechanics, including commenting, voting, and posting. Using interviews with Digital team members, I sought a sense of why they had made specific design choices, and then by using theoretical research and comparative analysis, I observe how they constitute a coherent system of discourse.

My findings indicate that team members operationalized a liberal, or neoliberal understanding of citizenship in BudgetTalks. This contrasts somewhat with their stated goals of accessibility and increasing political legitimacy, which might have been better served by attempting to create a more deliberative process, or by revising their organizational goals. As Budget Talks currently stands, my findings indicate that it does have potentials for allow citizens to perform their public commitments as under an agonistic model, rather than one with a coherent institutional commitment.

1.2 Research Frame

People conduct their lives embedded within extensive networks of invisible, and essential infrastructures that have systematized the perpetuation of material life [Star, 1999]. Water is pumped to houses, trucks deliver food to stores for purchase, and resources are extracted and refined in far off places to make the goods that fill our shelves. These systems support our lives at a distance and up close, providing us with the means to connect to each other in physical space, and mediating our interactions with each other through
our vocabularies, norms, and beliefs. Modern conditions of life have made humans more powerful and self-actualizing, but have also increased our interdependence and reliance on esoteric knowledge practises, like designing a nuclear reactor, or maintaining large systems of communicating servers and network enable devices.

The lives of people around the world area increasingly influenced by the presence of ubiquitous computing systems. Throughout their everyday experience, networked information and communications technologies influence the ways that people make decisions, transactions, and constitute their social lives. These systems now connect the devices that people carry with them, the things they buy, and the groups to which they belong. The trend toward a technologically mediated way of life shows little signs of abating, even as the environment, economies, and political structures around the world are in constant upheaval. Perhaps that is because compared to the alienating distance of these systemic symphonies, we so easily see ourselves in our technologies.

People are not strictly immanent to the information systems they use to help them navigate their worlds. In many cases, they are active participants in the life of a system, creating objects to be shared with others, accepting responsibilities and completing tasks. People are also passive participants, constituting the statistical-analytic realities of an information system through the minutiae of their online activities. These technology supported communities have lead to more diverse avenues of self expression and communal interaction, and are now hugely influential forces in the landscape of our social realities [Ratto and Boler, 2014, Noveck, 2005, Fish et al., 2011]. This cooperation not only helps people to understand the world around them, but through speculative design can create images and goals positing possible worlds “outside of ordinary life... in order to continually develop culture” [Nardi, 2015]. Just as possibilities are built into physical infrastructure, they are designed into the virtual experiences of information systems. By abstracting from the contingencies of the material world, the design of information systems crystallizes and catalogues the elements of our everyday lives and represent them
to us as understandable and logical sets of relations [Mingers, 2001].

The internal rationalities of these systems are no less contingent than the realities that they represent, but are often taken for granted. The contexts in which people find themselves help to define their actions and thoughts by giving them roles to inhabit and the identities to perform [Muhlberger, 2005, Brey, 2003]. Often we fulfil the expectations of these contests without reflection [Heidegger, 2010]. One way of studying of how these contexts affect the way that people perform tasks, alone or together, is activity theory. Activity theory examines how people use tools and organizational structure to accomplish specific tasks embedded within systems of norms and values; the complexity of these contexts inevitably leading to tensions that contribute to the constant development of activities and their products [Kuutti, 1996]. These relations often seem straightforward and benign, because they conform to the mental models that we already use to understand our world, and because the convenience that immanence to these logics can bring in ameliorating the absurdity of deciding what we ought to do. Certainly habit and social conditioning play a role; the organization of information systems constitutes a shared exercise in meaning making, by providing common activities and tools for tasks [Phillips, 2009].

Designing information systems is often about the presentation of a context containing elements for communal use that direct the actions of a user toward the accomplishment of tasks. In the context of design, we often talk about affordances and constraints: the actions that users take within a system’s boundaries that are either encouraged or discouraged through the design of the system [Norman, 2013]. The constitution of these virtual contexts is a product of the ways that team members understand and model the problems they want to solve, the goals they want to accomplish, the norms they have internalized, and the tools that they have at their disposal. The act of design is in this way an act of reification\(^2\) of concepts and desires, constrained by the context that team

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\(^2\)The Marxian connotations of this word is convenient, given that information systems, like those referred to under the umbrella concepts of “social media” or “the sharing economy” explicitly seek to
members themselves occupy.

Technological systems are not designed in a vacuum, but by people who make decisions based on their own beliefs and understandings of assigned roles. The technologies they design are no more neutral, concepts are transcoded\(^3\) into systems and communicated to users, explicitly or not. A great degree of scholarship has been devoted to showing how values can be read into and out of designed objects. Numerous methods have emerged, including those that attempt to involve the team members themselves in the process of analysis and design, and those that demonstrate the process of subliminal reification through the act of designing technologies that are critical of the ideas they represent [Ratto, 2007, Ratto et al., 2014, Purpura et al., 2011]. The key supposition is clearly expressed by Helen Nissenbaum: “Values affect the shape of technologies...the values that systems and devices embody are not simply a function of their objective shapes. We must also study the complex interplay between the system or device, those who built it, what they had in mind, its conditions of use, and the natural, cultural, social, and political context in which it is embedded- for all these factors may feature in an account of the values embodied in it” [Nissenbaum, 2001, p.117].

Values have normative force; they suppose states and actions that are considered to be more or less desirable than others. People might share values about what constitutes a good, smart, or just action, or they may disagree. According to Ludwig Wittgenstein, the roots of conflicts about values are not about real features of the world, but of linguistic models that stabilize relations. In cases where people do not share the same basic beliefs about the world, they might be unable to agree on how to value states, things, or actions. However, since these beliefs are themselves linguistic constructs (like supposition that human life has intrinsic value, or that God is the only party qualified to dispense justice), they cannot be disproved, and “at the end of reasons comes persuasion” [Wittgenstein, 1969]. These tensions between people about ways of life and custom

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\(^3\)Moved between one format and another, as between .txt and .md, or a white board and a prototype.
are what Chantal Mouffe calls the domain of “the political” [Mouffe, 1999]. To mediate political tensions, humans have created institutions and practises that claim to be legitimate ways of coercing people to live in some ways, but not others. Through specified institutions, practises and discourse, the state is the organization that reserves the right to decide between un-decidable values and enforce those rights through the activity of politics and the making of law [Badion, 2011].

Societies where it is thought that the citizens living under states ought to have their ways of life protected by their states, and ought to play a role in deciding what their laws look like are called democratic. Democratic institutions, like elections and debates, are supported by the communicative technologies of the day—by radio, television, the internet, and by vocabularies. These technologies frame political issues and define how citizens interact with issues, as does the design of the institutions that collect and interpret their will [Dantec and DiSalvo, 2013]. While the act of free choice by citizens is theoretically supported, in practice the concept is not so objective. Citizens must constantly sift through and reflect on a glut of information if they wish to make informed choices, and this information is presented to them in forms that are value-laden [Reed and Boyd, 2016]. The technologies that make politics possible in large societies may be more or less democratic than they claim, but they are always a cite of struggle for power and emancipation within democratic societies [Feenberg, 1992].

Along with many other new ways of being, the Internet has played a key role in changing the way that people realize their political agency: how they act as citizens of a democratic society. There are many places on the Internet where people can engage in substantive discussion about their beliefs, organize around shared interest, and act to change the configuration of government institutions. These too are value-laden, subject to the social and economic power relations of their time. The idea that the Internet ought to be able to, or already has, expanded or increased the richness of democratic franchise is not a new one. Neither is the assertion that ICTs must be used to counter
a presumed democratic deficit, where institutions have failed to adequately increase the involvement of citizens based on their increased capacities and the possibilities afforded by technology [Shane, 2004b].

Governments have indeed attempted to use technologies to innovate on and change the way that democratic institutions are structured and put to practice. There a number of different forms these can take, but often they are influenced by the existing framing of the potentials for ICTs, most visible through the offerings of large technology companies. Information communications technologies (ICTs) have been very successfully integrated into service driven capitalism, and governments often attempt to emulate these logics by using ICTs (often sourced from the same corporate vendors) to enhance their own service delivery [Bekkers and Homburg, 2007]. These technologies might in some cases make the task of governance more effective, but it is debatable whether they evolve democratic practice. Other technologies and practises seek to enhance democracy by reconfiguring the relationship between citizens and their governments. These technologies often fall under the moniker of “Open” Government, because they often involve changes to government processes that make their information and policies more transparent to citizens, thereby facilitating engagement with those institutions.

1.3 Motivations and Methods

My own interest in electronically supported democracy (eDemocracy\textsuperscript{4}) has been motivated by my belief that technologies can indeed expand the ways that citizens can interact with political causes and the policy-making procedures of their governments. Although among committed democrats, there are those that believe that state power

\textsuperscript{4}Terminology around technologies that capture the of ways that people and governments have sought to integrate information systems is about as diverse and governed by trends as the technologies themselves. I have chosen the term eDemocracy over terms like eParticipation, Open Government, and Digital Governance because they reflect my own abstract ideological commitments to the expansion of direct and participatory democratic franchise without necessarily including adjacent discourses, like those around Open Data, or the use of ICTs to deliver government services.
itself is anathema to democratic self-governance [CrimethInc., 2016], this report takes a more moderate approach that greater democratic freedom can be found by engaging with existing institutions of power [Mouffe, 2013].

When discussing practises that seek to involve citizens in the decision making procedures of organizations, I often use the catch-all term “consultation”. There are several good examples within Canada of explicit attempts to consult citizens that are based on deliberative axes, among them the Citizen’s Assemblies of British Columbia, the Ontario Citizen’s Assembly on Electoral Reform, and the numerous Civic Lotteries and Reference Panels conducted by MASS LBP. These are very intriguing processes, but I was more concerned about how internet-supported information systems could be used to create spaces for democratic performance. I formulated my initial research questions thusly:

**Initial Research Questions:**

Q₁ How are traditional metrics for democracy transcoded into information systems that create spaces for citizen polity?

Q₂ How are democratic values mediated by the software used to deploy the spaces, and designer’s conceptual models of democratic citizenship?

Q₃ How does this analysis compare with the traditional metrics of democracy in digital spaces, and what can it teach us about creating more democratic information systems?

Throughout my research, I was guided by Charmaz’s understanding of grounded theory [Charmaz, 2014]. Accordingly, I let my research questions form my understanding of how and what data I would gather, and what methods I would employ to gather this data.

Within democratic theory, there has been an attempt to understand the modalities of modern democratic institutions. Of these models, three are especially important: liberal democracy, deliberative democracy, and agnostic democracy. Liberal democracy rep-
Chapter 1. Introduction

presents the present day status quo for democratic societies, where democracy is to be realized through state sponsored, procedural institutions, such as parliaments and elections [Kurki, 2010]. Liberal democracies are primarily focussed on protecting the rights and freedoms of individuals, especially with regards to personal interactions and financial transactions [Macnamara, 2010]. Liberalism can be traced back to political theorists like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and John Stewart Mill, who saw the state as facilitating individual freedom and security. Modern political liberalism is premised on creating a political metalanguage for the freedom of individuals to be reconciled under conditions of pluralism, where differing ways of life must all be considered valid. The most prominent theorist of political liberalism is John Rawls [Rawls, 1995, Rawls, 1997]. Deliberative democracies are those that demand a more involved role for citizens, where the legitimacy of the state is secured not through its ability to dispense force when citizens finances or security are threatened, but through the direct involvement of governed citizens with the process of government [Macnamara, 2010]. Deliberative (or Republican) democracies are culturally legitimated, where citizens to perform their citizenship be engaging in ongoing rational-critical debate with their peers about matters of public concern [Kurki, 2010]. These debates occur within what Habermas calls the ‘public sphere’ and the reconciliation of pluralistic conceptions of the public good is assured by attempting to adhere to ideal standards of communications [Habermas, 2006, Habermas, 2005, Habermas, 1989]. The agonistic model of democracy elaborated by political theorist Chantal Mouffe in response to her criticisms of the failures of both liberal and deliberative theories. In particular, Mouffe denies the assumptions that state institutions can reconcile concepts arising in pluralistic society. Rather, Mouffe argues that conflict between views and the struggle for hegemonic power, what she calls ‘agonism’, is an inevitable consequence of democracy and must be supported through institutions [Mouffe, 1999, Mouffe, 2013].

Many scholars have attempted to study how ICTs have interacted with the goals of democratic institutions, including citizen engagement and participation [Shane, 2004a,
Hindman, 2009, Hilbert, 2009, Bekkers and Homburg, 2007, Kurki, 2010, Smith, 2013, Johnson, 2007]. Some have used an approach that is rooted within deliberative democratic theory, a view that democratic legitimacy is premised on the involvement of citizens in institutions that embody certain values. One approach to this task is to attempt to codify these deliberative institutional values in such a way that systems can be analyzed based on coherence to these norms [Froomkin, 2004, Witschge, 2004, Bohman, 2004, Goodin and Dryzek, 2006, Wojcieszak et al., 2010, Delborne et al., 2011].

Further scholarship has taken these theoretical understandings and applied them to information systems, advancing understanding around how the mechanics of an information system contribute to an environment where democratic performance can be better realized [Beierle, 2004, Markaki et al., 2012, Steibel and Estevez, 2015, Wright, 2006, Lodge and Wegrich, 2012, Stromer-Galley et al., 2010]. Others have focussed not on the analysis of technologies that enable participation, engagement, or consultation with democratic institutions, but on the design of these processes themselves. Scholars such as Bryson and Quick, Street and Wright, as well as Macnamara, have identified key design strategies and goals for governments or other organizations who wish to elicit public participation in decision making processes [Bryson and Quick, 2013, Macnamara, 2010, Wright and Street, 2007].

Carl DiSalvo and others have contributed to this discourse by offering critical perspectives on deliberative and institutional approaches by problematizing their theoretical underpinnings [DiSalvo, 2012, Wright, 2012, Reed and Boyd, 2016] In a related vein, Deen Freelon and Warren Sack have pushed harder on the idea that information systems create definable environments for citizenship to be performed, articulating the concept of a “discourse architecture” – a set of norms that was a direct consequence of design, but that did not assume deliberation as a necessary or sufficient condition for the performance of citizenship [Sack, 2005, Freelon, 2010, Freelon, 2015].

Others such as James Fishkin have been instrumental in bridging the divide
between theory and practice, working to catalogue types of participation and design consultation processes that cohere with theoretical best practises [Fishkin and Luskin, 2005, Fishkin, 2010, Fishkin, 2011]. Some scholars have adopted a method similar to what Matt Ratto calls “Critical Making”, which involves the act of design that is motivated by and critical of the values that it embodies [Ratto, 2011]. Studies by A. Christie Hurrell, Cyril Velikanov, and Kim Strandberg and colleagues designed different consultation systems to learn how using design to facilitate deliberative practises among participants could improve the functioning of a consultation process [Hurrell, 2005, Strandberg, 2015]. Beth Simon Noveck attempted to re-adapt the deliberative model into a uniquely virtual experience by writing the UnChat application, which was conscious of how its mechanics facilitated citizen expression [Noveck, 2004].

The short answer to Q1 then, is through the design mechanics of the site, by which I mean the points of contact and interaction between users and a system. As seen in 3.1, I take a broad understanding of mechanics—not only as the straightforwardly interactive elements of a site like commenting, searching, and registration, but also other attributes of a system that might communicate values, like moderation and the copy of the site.

While my review of the literature turned up a lot of great research on how mechanics could embody values, they did not focus on the role of software and team members as intermediaries and interpreters of those values and priorities. So, while other research was primarily driven by textual analysis and critical making, I wanted to supplement my analysis with ethnographic methods. As far as Q2 was concerned, I needed a definitive object of analysis, a system and process to study. Fortunately, I had the opportunity to analyze an ongoing project of the Ontario Governments developing Digital office, an in house technology shop focussed on redesigning and modernizing government services. Their flagship project, Budget Talks (BT), was just the sort of system my analysis could target—an online reinterpretation of other pre-budget consultations that was designed to source and integrate citizen ideas into Ontario’s yearly budget.
To get an understanding of how the Ontario government understood BT at an organizational level, I analyzed internal documents, such as technical specifications, business requirements, slide decks, and reports. I also needed to get a sense of how team members had interpreted these directives, as well as their own thoughts about the design choices they made when designing the system. I conducted a series of confidential interviews with team members and staff that were involved in the software design process. These people (which I uniformly refer to as “team members”) included strategy and management staff, developers, and more policy focussed roles. References to these interviews, verbatim and paraphrased, are cited in-text, and specific team members are referenced by the pseudonyms Sal, Taylor, Andy, Vanja, Charlie, Muisto, Diamante, Jamie, Hitomi, Gabby, and Indigo. I conducted some further ethnography by virtue of my presence in the office, and was even invited to a “Retrospective” meeting, where team members read the final analytics and assessment report, and reflected on what had and hadn’t gone well with this years iteration of BT. Although I had originally intended to conduct a “group interview” where I led a reflective discussion on a similar subject, this was not possible due to time and scheduling constraints. Fortunately, I think my conversations with team members were sufficiently reflective, as was the Retrospective meeting. The entire staff at Digital was very open to the idea that BT could be an object of academic interest, and made great efforts to assist me in my research.

In constructing an interview instrument, I did not want to approach team members and interrogate them about theoretical concepts like deliberation and equality that they might not have understood as important in their day to day work. Naturally, since I was trying to read out values that were implicit in the design of BT, I was most interested in how participants articulated their own understandings of the project. Following along with Charmaz, I used a semi-structured interview script, where I asked broad questions and followed up based on what participants felt was important to tell me. In these interviews, I used BT itself as a focal point. I asked about the participant’s role in the
design process, what they thought the purpose or goal of BT was, how it had changed over time, and how they might imagine it changing in the future. I also asked them to recollect stories about choices they had made and their rationales, and how they saw those choices as impacting the consultation process. I was also interested in how team members, as public servants, saw BT as fitting into the existing democratic institutions; I asked them to describe what value citizen ideas could bring to government, and what a good idea might look like. Keeping with Charmaz’s guidance, I transcribed interviews, and coded them multiple times. For this task, I used TAMS Analyzer, a free and open source qualitative data analysis software.

I also conducted a sustained analysis of the BT consultation system, considering as I went the interactions between the goals of the organization and those of team members and the choices made to facilitate those goals. To answer Q3, I sought to create an understanding of the type of democratic values that was communicated by BT, comparing and contrast ing it to existing research. In this stage, I was looking to bring out the tensions and contingencies of the design choices, and how they might have supported one type of democratic performance over another. As much as I was motivated by ambitious standards of democracy, which informed my critical analysis of BT. As an example of iterated and agile design, both BT and Digital are well suited for constructive criticism, especially insofar as it can help team members to expand their understandings of the problems and goals that BT speaks to and to continually iterate and improve the system. Because my frame included asking about the speculative elements of BT, how it could be, I was also led to entertain some of the possibilities for the development of the platform, as they were described to me by designers and as my analysis revealed them.
Chapter 2

The Case

2.1 Key Parties and Project History

Internal to the government, there are three major stakeholders involved in the Budget Talks (BT) project. The government of Ontario can be roughly divided into two types of operative. First, the political side, which consists of party staff and elected officials that compose government. As elected representatives, these people attempt to carry out the mandate of the citizens who elected them, and are the public-facing side of day-to-day governance. Second, there are public servants—bureaucrats and professional government employees who oversee the day to day tasks of implementing and administering policy. These people are fully accountable to elected representatives, and are bound by ethical codes of conduct to avoid making substantive policy decisions in place of the elected representatives. These two functional halves of government intersect at the top of the organizational hierarchy, where ministers on the political side interface with deputy ministers who manage the ministries of public servants below them.

The Premier’s Office (PO) was the main political side champion for developing BT. On the public service side is Cabinet Office Digital (Digital), an in-house IT shop in charge of the mechanical design and implementation of BT. Within the organizational
structure of the public service, Digital has to-date been located within the Treasury Board Secretariat, and has additional tasks such as centralizing and modernizing government web content, and opening and conducting inventory of government data sets.

Straddling the political and public service side is the Ministry of Finance (MOF), the ministry (headed by a minister) that is tasked with creating Ontario’s Budget, a document which not only details the fiscal state-of-affairs for the province, but is the main point of branding and political agenda setting for the government of the day. MOF is also in charge of running pre-budget consultations (PBCs) in the run up to the release of the budget, in an attempt to get input from citizens and organized groups on what ought to be included in the province’s mandate. These PBCs include in person town-hall style meetings, tele-town halls, and an online form where formal submissions can be made to the MOF.

In the 2014-2015 fiscal year, PO approached Digital and asked them to design a system to supplement the existing battery of MOF run PBCs, which were underused, and to replace a web applet designed by a third party vendor that allowed citizens to complete a survey designed to allocate different portions of funds to different areas of the budget. The turnaround for the project was two weeks, and Digital used technology that was already on-hand to accomplish this task (Team Members Diamante, Jamie). The end result of this first development cycle was BT, referred to in documents as a “digital town hall” where citizens could submit their ideas for the budget, as well as comment and vote on the ideas of others. Nearly 1000 ideas were submitted and the success of the project lead to another iteration of it (BT2.0) being launched in 2015-2016. This second iteration included features such as the ability to log in using a social media account, a refined aesthetic, and a greater commitment on the part of politicians and public servants to read, process, and react to the views expressed on the platform.

After its second run (which is the default period for this study), BT continues to be touted as a success, and will likely return in 2016-2017 with improvements based on this
years’s performance. In addition, the success of BT as a system has lead to increased interest by other ministries in conducting their own consultations. Already, the success of BT has lead to spin-offs devoted to public consultation on the topics of cultural funding, climate change, and regulations across sectors. In the future, BT may only be part of a larger consultation service offered on a talks.ontario platform—a programmable suite of mechanics that can be customized to fit the needs of the client ministries and the publics that they wish to consult.

2.2 Project Goals

This section examines how key stakeholder groups on the political side and technology/design side of the government expressed their perceptions of the purpose and goals of BT, and how they defined their work in relation to the relationship between citizens and government. Interviews and documents related to the project revealed a variety of different understandings of the purpose and goals of BT. While the PO was focussed on adding another layer of legitimacy to their budget, Digital was focussed on providing a more accessible way for citizens to participate in the process of budget-making over the Internet. These two goals were complementary, although not without tension; in implementing the product, there was an ambiguity in how BT, as an information gathering system, could best realize these goals while also striving to embody democratic values.

2.2.1 Political Goals

As the main political side driver for BT, PO was focussed on increasing the legitimacy of the budget making process, and wanted to use digital mechanisms to accomplish this strategic goal. In this way, they saw BT as bolstering and improving existing pre-budget consultations.

Increasing legitimacy in the budget-making process was couched in terms of increasing
transparency of the budget making process (BMP) (Team Member Indigo). The budget is an important keystone in government priorities, and represents not only the current state of affairs in the province, but also the priorities and commitments that will define the agenda and future actions for the regional government.

PO conceived of increasing transparency by seeking to ensure that citizens and groups could directly connect the content of BT (and other PBC submissions) to the budget. Using BT, citizens submit their ideas, the government reads them, and then reports on what they have received and how they have taken the ideas into account (Team Members Muisto, Indigo). In order to accomplish this, numerous changes had to occur within the BMP, reflecting the commitment of PO, the MOF as well as Digital, the de facto front line for online consultations.

PO measurements of legitimacy were firmly based upon reporting; making mention of Budget Talks in the final budget document, such that citizens could see their ideas had been read, as well as reporting on the effectiveness of BT itself. The 2016 Budget [MOF, 2016] contained a section in the introduction explaining the role of BT in fostering “collaboration” between citizens, and government, to generate “ideas”. In total, over 1700 ideas were collected in the run of BT2.0, almost doubling the number of the previous run. This increased interest from citizens needed to be supported by an measure of responsiveness from government.

Throughout the Budget, seven references were made to BT to show alignment between platform content and Budget Priorities [MOF, 2016, p.7,20,104,120,126,133,173]. Some connections between BT ideas and the budget were more robust than others: while there were several ideas about increasing affordability of post-secondary education that had many votes and comments, a proposal to increase funding for hospice care matched with only one idea submitted about hospice care, that received only 3 (+2/-1) votes. Cases like the latter provide credence to some of the more cynical voices on BT that believe that the government was using BT to selectively confirm policies that had been created in
advance. Public service staff was cognisant of this cynicism and expressed a commitment to transparency by storing and standardizing budget talks data mandated by their Open Data Directive (Team Member Hitomi). When the data will be released in a usable format is not known. Citizens that responded to a self-selected exit-survey did think that the government would use their ideas. Among exit survey respondents, there is interest and trust in the talks.ontario consultation process at its inception—a key facet in the legitimacy of democratic processes [Gray, 2016].

Government and citizens have used BT to create a dialogue outside of older PBCs, one that may represent an expansion of democracy beyond the feedback that occurs in elections. On talks.ontario, the relationship between the citizen and government grows based on the sustained and iterated implementations of the institutions- and software that mediate it. The question of political will - the desire to continually engage in consultation on the part of politicians and public service has demonstrably met with a growing interest in participation on the part of citizens.

### 2.2.2 Design Goals

Digital Office approached BT, and later talks.ontario, from a different perspective than PO, focusing primarily on accessibility and increasing participation with the BMP. As the main in-house, public-facing technology shop, Digital was in charge of designing and implementing BT, collecting and coding the ideas, moderating the forum, as well as reporting on the success of the platform itself. Whereas PO viewed BT as an instrument for increasing transparency of the government agenda, Digital staff conceived of BT as a tool for open government and increased participation in the BMP as “an act of citizenship...[that] demonstrates the public’s desire to be heard and to be consulted” (Team member Andy). From a design standpoint the main goal was to make the BMP more accessible to all citizens (Team member Muisto).

For Digital accessibility for regular citizens was directly served by having a public,
online process, or space for soliciting ideas (Team member Andy, Hitomi). One thought was that an online platform would overcome some of the spatio-temporal boundaries associated with in person PBCs by allowing non-expert citizens to communicate asynchronously with each other and to collaboratively decide which ideas they would like to see represented in the budget (Team member Vanja, Charlie). Lowering barriers to entry was a common theme throughout interviews with team members, and was reflected throughout the design of the product; for example BT copy was written for a grade 6 reading level (many students reach this level by \( \approx 11 \text{ years} \)), and all content and design were optimized for use with screen readers (for the visually impaired) so that “anybody can do it” (Team member Muisto).

Team members believed that an online platform would meet citizens where they were used to engaging–through their computers and mobile devices on social platforms, rather than overly formalized, byzantine and black-boxed (or back-room) channels for interacting with legislators. Unfortunately for some citizens, BT might only replace one inaccessible process with another. BT is definitely an accessible platform for those that are accustomed to interacting with computer systems. However, as Leslie Regan Shade points out, connecting to BT is only one dimension of accessing the discourse. Users must also have the digital literacy to perform socially and intellectually. The barriers to acquiring these skills are most felt by people who suffer the consequences of other structural inequalities: those that are unemployed, lower income, non-English, cultural or visible minorities, or women [Shade, 2010]. People who participated on Budget Talks and self-reported their demographics were generally employed and educated. Incidentally, women were also well-represented [MOF, 2016]. Several Digital staff also expressed their hopes that an online consultation would increase turnout among under-represented groups–especially young people and people living in rural and northern areas. No data was collected on location, and the ages of participants seemed to suggest that youth were not engaged with BT: three quarters of participants were older than thirty-five. These
disconnects betray an equivocation between two equally important understandings of who accessible design is for: people who experience disabilities and people who are excluded from political processes because of other socially disadvantageous circumstances.

Though relying on stricter accessibility standards than the private sector Digital took a lot of usable design inspiration from social media. The logic of BT itself tracks closely to sites like reddit, which several team members cited as an influence on the project, through its threaded commenting and the logic of up-voting and down-voting posts (Team members Sal, Andy, Vanja Muisto, Diamante, Gabby).

Karen Smith has demonstrated the usefulness of the social web in allowing citizens to mobilize around issues and to pressure politicians for action. By contrast, BT is not a bottom-up push by citizens to have their concerns heard, but represents an acknowledgement by government of how online discussion on social media has been used by citizens serve political ends, and to, in effect, channel that energy into a controllable environment.

Throughout the run of BT 2.0, social media played a valuable role in marketing on twitter, facebook, reddit, etc. These front line media outposts were useful in getting users onto BT itself, but OPS staff did not think that social media was an appropriate avenue for the kind of discussion BT aimed for (Team member Vanja). There are several reasons that this might be:

1. Surveillance practices on social media sites do not meet government legal standards, which allows only minimal data collection about engagement with government run sites. Even adding social media logins to the BT site was risky: large chunks of the third-party libraries had to be removed to avoid collecting personal information that went beyond the notice of collection.

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1The term ‘social web’ is used by Smith to describe “digital interfaces, which facilitate individuals sharing data or content with other people through screen based interfaces on devices including computers, tablets and mobile phones.” [Smith, 2013, p.16-17]. When discussing a broader ecosystem of information and communications technology, the term ‘social web’ is preferable to ‘social media’, which often explicitly evokes (as it does in this document) the popular, proprietary social networking information systems of the day.
2. Without consistent government branding throughout the consultation process and platform, users may not conceive of their actions as occurring within a formal, government process. Throughout the BT process, one moderator noted that social media posts often acted as a filter, with the most vitriolic criticisms of the government ending up in Facebook comments, rather than on BT (Team member Gabby).

3. Without control of the site design, there is little that can be done to iterate on the system to provide better outcomes, based on the needs that arise during the consultation process. Hosting their own information systems gives the government more power to aggregate and perform analytics, and makes the information much more interoperable with their existing information management practises.

Although corporate social media was not an ideal site for democratic engagement, it did serve as an example of best practise for user experience, and provided numerous specific mechanical configurations, such as threaded commenting, up and down voting, and the ranking and display of ideas, including the use of a decay algorithm.

While accessibility was approached through design features that would allow (almost) anyone to use the site regardless of their abilities, Digital also opted to design BT in such a way that only minimum engagement with the platform was required. Although slightly stricter than in previous years, users could create an account, or log in with an existing corporate social media account. Allowing users to quickly authenticate was seen as a crucial win, and keeping BT up to current industry best practises and lowering the friction for new users so that they would be more inclined to login and participate. Allowing people to make accounts on BT itself also served accessibility goals inadvertently by allowing people to make throwaway accounts that would be difficult to link to other accounts. This was seen as providing some necessary measure of privacy to those who were anxious about using a government system, while also making BT more open to alternative points of view (Team member Hitomi, Gabby).
The progress towards Digital’s goals were measured with quantifiable analytics and reporting mechanisms: numbers of participants, their demographics, and information about their time on BT. In terms of supplementing the existing, offline PBC process, gains were absolute; contributions to BT dwarfed other channels, and many participants had not participated in any other form of government consultation. Of course, as Digital staff have repeatedly stressed, each year must been seen in the context of an iterative design process (Team member Taylor, Charlie, Muisto, Gabby).

Another goal of Digital Office, in the BT project and beyond, is shared with the PO: the modernization of government services and overcoming internal scepticism about cooperative and federated online service delivery (Team member Andy, Vanja, Gabby). BT served this goal somewhat indirectly—although the initial push came from PO, upon the completion of the first run, many ministries have since approached Digital Office requesting their own spin-off consultations. Besides giving BT more legitimacy by recasting it as the ‘talks platform’, this development converges the goals of Digital and PO (Team member Vanja, Diamante, Gabby). If more areas of government are seeking active dialogue with the public under the auspices of the talks platform, the question remains of how the value of that information to decision-making processes can be maintained, to avoid the delegitimzation scenario that one designer described as “consultation as a communications exercise” (Team member Gabby).
2.3 System Outcomes

The goals of key stakeholders, PO and Digital, are contingent on the informational results of BT: the ideas, comments and votes that citizens contribute to the system. For PO the goal is legitimacy, which is dependant on reciprocal action (in the form of references to BT and policy) based on BT content. For Digital too, the goal of accessible participation is only served if citizens contribute something. So what are citizens actually contributing? Or, in other words- what does BT do? Project design goals are often distinct from the stakeholder goals they support, and are often overlooked [Bryson and Quick, 2013]. When analysing a system, its purpose can be obscured, embedded in the claims, plans, and goals of those with influence over it. However, I believe we can get a good sense of what a system (in this case, BT) is attempting to do, and the values that it communicates, by looking at what it actually produces[Meadows and Wright, 2008]. BT, as a process, produces four discrete kinds of information:

- ideas, original submissions made by citizens
- comments made by citizens about other ideas
- votes (either up or down)
- meta-data about the consultation: self-reported demographics, as well as analytics tracking time on page, pages visited, etc.)

Content and copy was phrased in a way that left the guidance for potential submissions relatively broad. The landing page invited participants to “Have [their] say,” but also contained a few guiding principles. These were also broad, and reflected government priorities: investing in skilled labour, improving infrastructure, nurturing private business, and improving public service [Ontario.ca, 2016b]. The only conceptual constraints that the consultation posed (the “House Rules”) were that users ought to try for: respectful interactions (through the comment policy), consideration of the realism of their ideas, coherence with the government’s mandate, and avoidance of “major changes
to revenue and taxation.” Ideas varied hugely in their subject matter, scope, and the amount of attention they received.

In an attempt to understand how BT was being designed to produce information while delivering on the key values of legitimacy and accessibility, team members were asked about what they considered an ‘ideal submission’, and what they thought that citizens could contribute to the budget making process. Although it was a recurring idea that any citizen contribution was worthwhile in itself (Team member Muisto), there was a sense that some ideas were more valuable than others—especially those that were:

1. Realistic policy responses to the guiding questions, within the government mandate (Team members Charlie, Muisto)

2. Easy wins, through reforming public service processes (Team members Taylor, Charlie, Muisto, Jamie)

3. Situated knowledges from a person or community that help humanize or provide a qualitative, narrative account of policy outcomes (Team members Sal, Andy, Vanja, Muisto, Jamie)

These types of information are those that governments might expect to gather by consulting with citizens[Goodin and Dryzek, 2006]. In aggregate form, this information could be quite valuable, especially if it was associable with demographic trends. However, insofar as government must process and use the information gathered from BT, there was some confusion on the part of team members about the value of these kinds of information for MOF, who writes the budget (Team members Andy, Muisto). This is due to the fact that the budget making process itself remains, even for Digital, a black box (as in they have no insight into how it is done). Thus, the scope of BT as an information gathering system remains amorphous. The next section examines the conditions under which that information was gathered, the motivations for those choices, and the ramifications on the spaces and relationships created by these arrangements.
Chapter 3

Designing Democracy: Priorities, Tradeoffs and Mechanics

3.1 System Mechanics

All activity that occurs on an information system like BT takes place within a predefined context of mechanics that govern how information can be accessed, shared and retrieved. In the selection of mechanical elements, team members make decisions that encourage or discourage different types of behaviour. The interactions within the system (and thus the outcomes of the consultation) are direct consequences of these arrangements. Choices about system mechanics are normative choices that relate the behaviour of users to goals of the system’s makers. This section examines the main interactive elements of BT, exploring how they connected the priorities of team members to the behaviour of users, and the ramifications this had on the values encoded into the system itself, and those excluded.
3.1.1 Registration and Identity

As of BT 2.0, citizens had to create accounts in order to interact with BT. They had a number of options of how to do so.

Citizens could use a supported social media account, carrying over their existing username–or, where the third-party required it (such as in the case of Facebook), their real name. This account name was not automatically hyperlinked with the users’ social media profiles, although manual searches can associate two accounts. Alternatively, citizens could create an account native to BT, selecting their own username, using only an email address.

Users did not have viewable profiles associated with their accounts, so their history of posts, votes, and comments were visible only to site administrators. By not having an intelligible history of activity (as on some other forum sites), it was nearly impossible for others to easily track their activities. Users could render themselves anonymous to other users, have their posts associated with their usual online handles (operating pseudonymously), or their ‘real names’.

Team Members thought that a range of authentication options would lower the barriers to participation by minimizing the amount of webforms that users would need to fill out (Team Members Hitomi, Gabby). Since login was mandatory even to vote, team members were cognizant of the need to eliminate points in the user experience where users experienced friction and abandoned contribution–such as a prompt to register or login. Many users came to the platform via social media posts, and the social media login feature was very popular among users, suggesting its success [Gray, 2016].

Choices about user logins and registration also represented commitments to privacy. First, legal limitations on the collection of personal characteristics were strict. Citizens could volunteer demographic information, but the government only collected IP addresses automatically for security and analytics purposes. Second, it was thought by some team members that participants would be less likely to participate on a government run forum.
if they had to expose their identities to government employees.

The idea that anonymity for citizens supports freer political activity is not a new one, and there are several supporting arguments. Along with lowering the risk of participation among citizens concerned about interacting with the government, anonymity can also help to efface differences in social status [Strandberg, 2015]. Even when participants are pseudonymous, using the same user name for all their posts, or using their real names, text-based asynchronous communications allegedly helps to obscure some social status symbols [Strandberg, 2015]. What anonymity does not obscure, however, are the differences in styles of argumentation—be they confrontational, deliberative, Socratic, intellectual, compromising, and so on.

Optional anonymity can also work toward promoting the autonomy of the discussion, so that users can voice their critical or controversial opinions without fear of repercussions [Witschge, 2004]. On BT, users could make accounts with little fear that anyone would know who was posting. The ability to freely make throwaway accounts and operate anonymously also poses risks to the civility of discussion and the accountability of speakers [Strandberg, 2015, Noveck, 2004, Wojcieszak et al., 2010]. In some cases strict anonymity can be counter productive to discussion, as it is often linked with polarization of opinions, people taking uncompromising stances, and hostile conversations [Witschge, 2004]. Pseudonymity has also been linked to atmospheres of discussion that promotes self-righteous monologuing, as users seek to gain a reputation without being directly accountable for their comments [Freelon, 2015]. As users like “Liberal-know-it-all” demonstrated, this was a very possible outcome of BT’s registration mechanics.

### 3.1.2 Voting

The most popular way that users interacted with BT was by voting on ideas. Similar to other sites based around popular user-generated content, submissions could be either voted up or down. Citizens were instructed to: “up vote the ideas you support and down...
vote the ideas you don’t” [Ontario.ca, 2016b]. For team members, voting on ideas was a way of maximizing the accessibility of the consultation, by requiring only minimal input from citizens (beyond reading ideas, but this was not guaranteed). Voting was also seen as a way of gathering quantifiable data about preferences—although there was no commitment on the part of government to do anything specific with the most popular ideas.

The reliability of voting is somewhat specious. Hayes et al. note that ‘paradigital affordances’, one click mechanics such as likes and votes, can be interpreted in a number of ways depending on the platform, sender, and receiver [Hayes et al., 2016]. Even the straightforward equivocation between voting and support can be ambiguous. What, for example, does it mean to support an idea that is factually incorrect, does not take into account the consequences of its hypothetical implementation, or is logically incoherent? Even when the content of a post seems straightforward, it may be unclear what supporting it means.

The use of voting as an indicator for citizen engagement is also somewhat contentious, especially because of the reliability and integrity of the information. On BT, voters react to ideas with a simple binary response: Up, or Down. However, many of the policies and positions posted to BT represent complex debates where even those that agree on some points might have substantive disagreements around others [Venturini et al., 2015]. Within the literature of democratic theory, voting, even in elections, is generally considered to acquire low quality information. Voting does not ask citizens to reflect on why they might support an idea, or how they might respond to dissenting views [Fishkin, 2011, Hilbert, 2009].

The popularity of voting can be understood from the perspective of the user: not only was it the most afforded behaviour on BT, but it was also the most tangible signifier on BT. By voting for ideas, citizens made ideas more popular, and more popular ideas were those that others sought out most readily. This suggests that voting was valuable
because it increased the publicity of an idea, the potential of an idea to be the site of public discussion and contestation.

### 3.1.3 Commenting

The main way that BT supported deliberation was through the use of threaded commenting, which allowed users to give their opinions about ideas so that others could respond to them. This was BT’s least popular feature, with most of the comments being concentrated on only a few ideas, and most ideas receiving only one or two comments.

Karlsson et al. conducted a study of twenty-eight different forums and found that voting and deliberation (through commenting) were not significantly related (i.e., people did not vote instead of commenting), although commenting was related to sustained engagement of participants [Karlsson, 2011]. They measured engagement by comparing the number of unique users with the number of posts: fewer users making more posts was a sign that users were more engaged. On BT, the average idea had 2.5, and the majority of sustained commenting activity was centred around only a few ideas [Gray, 2016]. The most commented upon ideas had a high number of landings from social media, and were often very controversial and topical issues. In these threads, users would post and debate the merits of ideas—a precondition for deliberation. While Karlsson et al.’s findings have to do with the weak relationship between voting and commenting behaviours, I maintain that the way voting on BT was designed placed substantive constraints on participant deliberation.

The primary conflict between voting and deliberation is visible in trade-offs made on behalf of the informational integrity of a submission. Submitted ideas were not changed between the time of their submission and the end of the consultation—no one except moderators could edit the content of a post once it was made. Apart from a few requests to moderators to correct typos or delete duplicate ideas, the substance of ideas remained the same. Without a function for editing, the potential for deliberative activity is limited;
no matter what may come up in discussions, no matter how open people may be to trying to find optimal solutions to political issues, they are constrained to debating their ideas as they were originally typed out. This contributes to a discussion where the original poster of an idea is committed to its truth as it was laid out in the original submission. Due to the fact that there is no room for compromise, the original poster may feel that comments address them as much as their idea.

Editing was disabled to protect the sanctity of votes. Team Members identified a the potential for a ‘bait and switch’ case where the content and normative thrust of an idea was changed only after it had become popular (Team Member Sal). This change would have invalidated the intention of voters and rendered the data unreliable, demonstrating a concrete trade-off between deliberative outcomes and voting.

Another less direct relationship between voting and deliberative commenting has to with the low cost of engagement of voting and the ability of groups to mobilize large numbers of supporters. Organized interests with a concrete agenda already have the communications expertise and influence to mobilize large groups of people to influence aggregative processes, like polls or petitions [Fishkin, 2010] (and see 3.2.2). As a political act, voting can take as much effort as carefully considering the options, or as little as “somebody saying: ‘this person over here has put an idea forth that is contradictory to what I want. So we need to mobilize against this’ ” (Team Member Muisto). Whereas voting can represent a reactive, “top-of-the-head” opinion, deliberation and commenting requires significantly more time, patience, and ability [Fishkin, 2011].

At the end of BT, participants may see little value in commenting if their contributions would not be read by other participants, or if it would not influence the ideas that were handed off to the government. Citizens would have been partly right in undervaluing comments—voting was not only the most visible and simple indicator of an ideas quality, but also perhaps of its perceived likelihood to be considered by government. If BT wants to increase its deliberative outcomes, this behaviour must be incentivized further by the
platform itself, and ways must be found to engage citizens repeatedly throughout the design process.

3.1.4 BT Branding

As the first point of contact between users, the copy and branding of a platform is the primary way for political values to be conveyed to citizens [Wright and Street, 2007]. In the case of BT, team members also noted that it was a primary vector for partisan manipulation, through the representation of government messaging. Team Members actively attempted to ensure that the platform appeared more as a creature of the public service than of the elected government, which might have dissuaded dissenting opinions from appearing on the site, or weighed down the process with boring content and legalese (Team Member Taylor). BT’s guiding questions, for example, were a key site for political messaging to ‘monkey with’ citizen perceptions (Team Member Muisto). Even so, the content and branding of BT communicated democratic values, and pre-empted outcomes—particularly through the clear focus on the role of individual insights. The landing page’s “Have your say” is a clear call for individuals to say their piece, rather than to engage in a cooperative and enduring endeavour. Indeed, the branding and structure of BT evokes a neoliberal conception of the citizen that values individual achievement and innovation rather than the cooperative efforts of groups.

Even though the goal of generating ideas through BT seemed somewhat secondary to establishing a relationship of trust, accessibility and legitimacy between citizens and government, there was still a sense that valuable information could be provided by citizens. The key visual symbol of this conception is the light bulb (see 3.1), one of the
only persistent visual cues on BT, present globally as a banner. The light bulb was an 
apt analogy for the value of BT submissions, and reflected both the conceptions of team 
members and the output of the consultation.

When asked about what citizens could contribute to the budget making process, and 
what made a submission good, team members responded that engaging directly with cit-
izens could reap “outside the box, fresher ideas” (Team Member Muisto). The freshness 
of these ideas was juxtaposed with the processes and frameworks that government staff 
use to form their conceptual models and approach problems—a frequently rigid structure 
that one team member referred to as a “box” (Team Member Taylor).

This drive for outsider knowledge can be aligned with paradigms of progress based 
around innovation and disruption, where individuals, especially in the technology com-
unity, are credited with huge impacts on social organization or the delivery of services. 
For civil servants, looking for these kind of ideas was like looking for working bulbs on 
a string of dead bulbs—on in the words of one team member, similar to “panning for 
gold” (Team Member Gabby). The branding of BT itself may have played a role in this, 
couching valuable knowledge within the personal experiences of citizens.

Due to the enormous bureaucratic machinery that must be put to task in generating 
policy, only the most targeted of submissions would have proven even somewhat feasible 
(assuming that it was compatible with the government mandate and that logistics and 
spending were not issues). Other innovations that team members thought citizens could 
contribute through BT were what they described as ‘easy-wins’: that is, simple changes 
to bureaucratic processes, elimination of duplicate, redundant or outdated laws that 
would be apparent to citizens with first hand experience but perhaps unnoticed by public 
servants (Team Member Charlie, Muisto). Using citizens as a sensor in this way is less a 
democratic exercise than one in getting feedback from users.

The end results of this conception of citizen contributions were not favourable to the 
integrity of the consultation. Despite a gentle suggestion to search for similar ideas,
many participants did not spend much time browsing or commenting. Instead, they posted ideas that were very similar to what had already been posted. Later on in the BT process, this would pose serious issues for coders, who struggled to determine whether ideas could be aggregated, or had to be reported separately even if the differences between them were minor. This also compounds some of the problems with ambiguity in voting discussed above (3.1.2), as it was unclear as to whether support for one idea would have carried over to similar ideas–those that were better written or researched, or those that represented more moderate, compromising positions. It became a serious ethical issue confronting those public servants coding the ideas as to whether to group ideas together, insofar as they were taking license to change the views of a submitting citizen in order to get a more stable view of the sentiments expressed on BT.

3.1.5 Information Seeking

The concentration and scarcity of commenting was also directly related to the design of the BT process: the procedure for conducting the consultation. BT consulted citizens over a period of two months, after which the informational outputs were processed and submitted to MOF and BS. The temporality of BT had the biggest effects on design in information seeking behaviour, but also information quality and citizen engagement.

Every idea on BT could be voted up or down, and was accorded a net “vote score”, and a total number of votes on the idea. This meant that over time, older ideas became more and more popular—they accrued more votes and were more likely to be seen by citizens as a result. There were several attempts to counteract this, and to expose participants to more ideas. Team Members implemented a decay algorithm in the vein of those used on reddit, meaning that over time, older votes would count for less than new votes in determining the popularity of a post, however, in hindsight they believed it ought to have been even stronger. Team Members also made “random” the default search filter and displayed the “most recent” ideas on the landing page.
Why try to expose viewers to random, or recent ideas? If voting was an actual signifier of what the government was going to speak to or act on, it would make more sense for citizen to cast their lot into a popular submission thread than to vote on any unpopular ideas, even if those ideas were better. The main reason given for the random-by-default search results was that having citizens search for more popular ideas lead to citizens interacting with ideas that were already popular (Team Member Jamie). This is another choice in favour of individualist expression. Team Members prioritized the submission of ideas by trying to ensure that users who posted had their ideas heard, even if it made more sense for others to skip right to the popular ideas—which they did more often than not, with “Popular” being by far the filter of choice\(^1\).

Some research suggests that “participants should be helped in the tasks of finding similar or compatible ideas in their initial proposals, and of merging and further advancing those proposals” [Velikanov, 2010]. To further facilitate idea seeking, ideas were indexed through tags that users added to posts, known as a folksonomy. During BT2.0, it had not been determined how information was to be organized during the coding process, and team members could not provide tags for users. Information seeking based on tags was frustrated by a lack of understanding on the part of citizens on what exactly to do with the tags, using them ironically, miscategorizing ideas, or not using tags at all.

### 3.2 Commitments and Tradeoffs

The choices that team members made in designing BT contributed to its functioning as a system that affords and constrains the activities of users, and shapes the outcomes of BT. Whether team members were aware of it or not, many of these decisions involved encoded and contestable normative claims about how users should perform while using

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\(^1\)Besides “Random” and “Popular”, BT offered filters to show “Old” and “New” ideas, and ideas with the “Most Votes” and “Least Votes”. These last two ranked ideas by the number of upvotes and downvotes, not their total votes, sometimes leading to perverse outcomes: the idea returned by searching for the one with the least votes is actually the idea with the highest total number of votes on BT.
Chapter 3. Designing Democracy: Priorities, Tradeoffs and Mechanics

BT [Wright and Street, 2007]. The sum total of these design decisions, and the values that they express, constitute BT in its most recent iteration. Internal to BT then, is an environment where users can interact in varied but definite ways; the way that the design shapes the environment is what Warren Sack termed the “discourse architecture” of a system [Sack, 2005, Freelon, 2015]. In this section, I examine how design consequences have shifted throughout the life cycle of BT, and how these decisions have led to trade-offs between possible configurations and outcomes for BT.

3.2.1 Collaboration and Deliberation on Budget Talks

In contrast to societies where elected representatives make decisions on behalf of their constituents, societies where citizens play an active role in the construction of policy through institutionalized collaborative decision-making process are known as deliberative democracies. Concisely put, a deliberative process is one where a conclusion is reached (either in consensus or otherwise) only after a dialogue has occurred between participants, where all members of the group voice their own views, consider the views and perspectives of others [Witschge, 2004, Bohman, 2004]. Decisions are made on the basis of a common interest—rather than the private interests of individuals or organized groups [Shane, 2004b, Weinstock and Kahane, 2010]. Deliberative democratic represents a key understanding of democratic legitimacy in modern political theory, therefore, the role that deliberation plays in BT is important not only in understanding what kind of information is developed, but also in conceptualizing the relationship that it fosters between individual citizens, and between citizens and their governments.

There is some evidence to suggest that the frame of BT included deliberation between citizens: the landing page coaches citizens to search and discuss other ideas and to share their ideas on social media to increase traffic, and Ontario.ca’s Public Engagement Framework [Ontario.ca, 2016a] cites BT as its example of a deliberative mechanism. In some cases, team members expressed the opinion that they considered the presence of
discussion between participants to be a success for the consultation, indicating increased 
quality of citizen engagement and potentially increasing the quality of ideas (Team Mem-
ber Sal, Andy, Muisto). The submission guidelines also suggest collaborating outside of 
the boundaries of BT, and provides a link to tools for collaborative writing and editing. 
However, these supports for collaboration all put the onus for action on the user, and the 
design of the platform only supports them indirectly, through the search function and 
integrated functions for sharing on social media.

The question remains: were citizens using BT to deliberate and collaborate on pro-
posals? Largely not— as one team member noted: “the primary kind of interaction for 
users was to show up on the site to post an idea and then to leave. Or to show up on the 
site, post an idea vote for a couple of ideas and then to leave. You know there wasn’t 
a sustained engagement. You know the average time on site was three minutes” (Team 
Member Andy).

In terms of total site activity, there were 1,732 ideas submitted, 53,402 votes and 
4,340 comments [Ontario.ca, 2016b]. However, many of the comments, were clustered 
around a small number of popular and controversial ideas. Most ideas had very few 
comments, and the average time on-site was very low, corroborating the experiences of 
team members. The lack of deliberation was compounded by the fact that users were 
unlikely to visit the site more than once—dramatically limiting opportunities for citizens 
to confront and engage with opposing views.

Although very little deliberation occurred on BT, there was nonetheless a substantial 
amount of activity on the site. How are we to make sense of this? Deen Freelon argues 
that a focus on deliberative interactions in studying online engagement neglects different, 
but still valid norms of political activity. These are given as: liberal individualism, 
where users say their piece without responding to others; communitarianism, where users 
collaborate with others sharing similar views to advance a position, and deliberation—
where users confront opposing views and may change their own [Freelon, 2015]. Perhaps
not surprisingly, we can find indicators of all three of these norms within BT. Nonetheless, the idea that design features (specifically mechanical accordances and constraints) can impact the behavioural trajectories of information systems remains appealing.

However, as shown above (see 3.1.3), the way that BT was designed privileged personal and aggregative contributions (posting and voting) above commenting, the primary vector for deliberation. This has important consequences for the system, as there is more incentive for users to post their own idea, even if it is similar to another idea that already exists, or to simply vote for ideas rather than attempt to engage in discussion with others.

Additionally, BT cannot be considered a deliberative exercise because it does not attempt to motivate citizens to come to any sort of agreement, or to deliver a final product. Government responses to BT information are in a way justifiably arbitrary, since the design of the platform does not lead citizens to come up with actionable or well-thought out ideas, simply popular ones.

3.2.2 Citizens vs Groups

One of the key design goals for BT was to facilitate the direct engagement of individual citizens with the budget making process. It was thought that by modelling interactions off familiar social websites and keeping the process relatively informal, citizens would have more opportunity to share their ideas and opinions with the government. Indeed, many citizens did use BT to share issues that were salient to their communities, or to voice their opinions on government services and mandates.

BT was intended to register their voices on the record of PBCs, so that these could be later traced to budget priorities. By contrast, it was thought that organized groups, such as business lobbies, religious groups, etc. were already well represented in the PBC process. Often times, these groups submit well researched and detailed reports on the priorities they would like to see represented in the budget, and they may meet directly with government officials to discuss these priorities as well. However, organized groups,
who already have communications networks established over other networks, such as social media, were also well situated to lever their power onto BT as well. As such, designing BT in such a way that minimized the potential for the system to be exploited by such groups became a key issue for team members.

With some qualifications, citizens are relatively free to use computer-mediated collaborative tools to rally around around specific issues. In Canada, situations where this occurred has been documented by Smith, who catalogues some of the ways that citizen-led initiatives have coalesced on social platforms to influence the policy making process in Ontario. The growing strength of this relationship is one that is supported through official government policy and statements but also by citizens, who have recognized the need to organize and pressure the government on important issues [Smith, 2013]. While there was nothing native to the BT platform for facilitating organization of citizens, the nature of BT as embedded within other virtual communities and adjacent to sets of tools for collaboration and organization was well understood. BT’s role in facilitation was actively encouraged by team members, who thought that the opportunity to voice opinions through BT might itself lead to engagement between citizens: “there is a levelling of the playing field where the citizen can get together... you know citizen X can get together with a bunch of other people and create a mailing list and get their idea seen... and they don’t need to able to score a meeting with the minister” (Team Member Muisto).

The porosity of BT to external organization and activity did incentivize a lot of specific considerations in the system’s design and implementation, and was identified as one of the key sites of change between the 2015 and 2016 iterations. Specifically, these considerations manifested in the interactions between registration, voting, popularity, and display.

In its first recognizable iteration (BT 2015), Digital decided to allow users to vote without registration, and require registration by using an email (any will do) only to post a comment or submit an idea. This was done out of consideration for users, and served
Chapter 3. Designing Democracy: Priorities, Tradeoffs and Mechanics

their priorities of accessibility by lowering the barriers to participation. This had two related consequences. Firstly, there were legitimate worries about vote bombing, where automated scripts could vote for ideas and rig the results (Team Member Diamante). To counteract this type of fraud, team members hashed the voting buttons to prevent them from being targeted by scripts, and required an email address to register and vote. While this does not mean that someone could not create multiple throwaway accounts (which did happen, although without a systematic attempt at distorting the results of any votes), it did make it more difficult. To offset this, BT 2016 allowed users to authenticate themselves through social media, a mechanic which proved popular, although some users still reported problems logging in [Gray, 2016].

Second, organized groups could use their existing communications networks to share ideas posted on BT and rally to vote them up and opposing ideas down, a common foible of internet-based polls [Fishkin, 2010]. This behaviour is somewhat common on reddit (which also requires registration to vote), and is sometimes referred to as “brigading” [wimali_stebox, 2014]. Brigading occurs when a group of users flocks to a post in order to up-vote or down-vote it. Brigading is often considered to be a form of vote manipulation, which distorts the discussion by bringing in voices from outside the community (in reddit’s case, regular subscribers to a subreddit) who by the sheer force of their voting and commenting numbers, quell objective and individual discussion [lagadu, 2015]. Team Members worried that when mobilized groups contributed many votes it “dirtied a lot of the data” (Team Member Jamie)—presumably because organized groups do not represent an informed public that represents both sides of an issue.

It my have been the binary choice between up-voting and down-voting which opened the possibility for heated competition for popularity to occur on BT. Team Members noticed that apart from mobilization around promoting ideas, organized interests would also urge their supporters to down-vote ideas that they disagree with (Team Member Muisto). Other social web sites have more constrained voting mechanics, especially around down-
voting: Dell’s Idea Storm has no option to ‘demote’ ideas, and the /r/PoliticalDiscussion subreddit reminds users with a mouseover pop-up that only posts that are off-topic are to be down-voted.

It is unclear, however, if brigading and competition runs counter to the objectives of BT, which does not have an established community, and which, by its own admission, is attempting to maximize engagement with citizens. Voting was by far the most common and accessible type of engagement on BT. Most citizens do not have informed opinions on most issues [Fishkin, 2011], and many may also lack the digital and political literacy to submit a coherent and robust idea. In the interest of maximizing participation, it makes more sense for these citizens to contribute to BT through votes.

Citizens organize into groups freely to allow their opinions to gain greater coherence, and to combine their skills and capacities for greater effect [Noveck, 2005]. Citizens also coalesce into groups because they are rarely alone in the issues that affect them, and often times issues hit communities or groups of people. One might ask, in response to team member’s fears that group activity on BT might distort the process: were they looking for some kind of representative ideal public to speak to an issue or encouraging citizens to express their shared interests using the political tools available to them? It may be true that some groups already have a large amount of power over the political process, but what of groups that have political causes but lack the influence that money and lobbyists can secure?

We might see examples of brigading as one of BT’s great successes, and one of its most authentic sources of democratic data. Although insofar as BT’s design, like those many democratic institutions (such as voting), locates the kernel of democratic politics in individual choice and expression, the power and importance of group interest was decisively brought to the government’s platform by the sheer aggregative force of BT’s voting wars— even if government made no response [Noveck, 2005]. As long as these citizens were legitimate parties to the online PBC, i.e. they were residents of Ontario, it
is unclear how they can be criticized from voting en masse for ideas they support or do not, something that BT team members encouraged.
3.3 Knowledge and Democratic Franchise

Throughout interviews with team members, one of the consistent laments when discussing the ideas submitted through BT was a lack of base knowledge on the part of citizens (Team Member Hitomi, Gabby). Citizens did not know what fell within provincial jurisdiction, did not understand how policy was made, or what policies were already in place. Throughout democratic theory, deliberative or not, the problem of basic knowledge among citizens is a recurring obstacle to citizen-driven policy-making. This lack of understanding is neither surprising nor very discouraging (unless one is a public servant) and reflects the growing complexity and professionalism of government processes and the public service–organizational arrangements that privilege esoteric and bureaucratic ways of making decisions that are not intended to be accessible to laypeople [Noveck, 2015].

There is little question that the amount of knowledge generated through the administration of states, and required to form conceptual models of problems is enormously complex and specialized. As within other hierarchical organizations, the most powerful decision making roles are often exposed only to the most condensed and processed information—the executive summaries of reports, briefings, etc. When it comes to the understanding of citizens, many of us have little incentive to be very informed about complicated issues that do not affect people in their day to day activity, a phenomenon referred to as “rational ignorance” [Richardson, 2010, Stromer-Galley et al., 2010]. This is one of the key arguments for representative, rather than deliberative democracy: by electing politicians to represent their interests, citizens can safely outsource the intellectual labour of understanding political issues and the care of their judicious decision.

What separates this form of government from simple technocracy is a “public sphere”, a constellation of semi-official, but no less professionalized institutions: media outlets, organized lobby groups, academics. This public sphere is a proxy for public deliberation that citizens can tune in to when they need to know what the experts think and form their own opinions.
This arrangement is not without criticism. Muhlberger argues that new digital media and communications have failed to compensate for the decline of traditional political institutions, including print media and coherent political blocs, and have led to the derision of effective public discussion for citizens [Muhlberger, 2005]. Information overload is a major characteristic of digital media, and the accompanying anxiety, uncertainty, and self-reflexivity about political issues make citizens less likely to motivate themselves to engage in political participation. That the business models of new and digital media have had a tangible and deleterious effect on the ideal of a rational, deliberative public sphere is well argued by McChesney [McChesney, 2013]. In order to stimulate traffic in a saturated media market, businesses often position citizens as consumers of information within an “economy of attention” [Muhlberger, 2005]. The preconditions of substantive political deliberation on behalf of citizens are undermined by the commodification of information communications networks, including social media as well as news media. Johnson argues that as a commodified space geared toward entertainment, advertising and consumption, the internet cannot reliably prop up publics sufficiently motivated or informed enough to meet the preconditions for political contribution [Johnson, 2007].

There are alternative trends that counter the somewhat elitist view that citizens do not have the political will or the knowledge to engage in democratic institutions. Populist political movements have been effective in mobilizing citizens to participate in political campaigns throughout Europe and North America. Often, however, these movements are reactionary, and rely on appeals to identity and disenfranchisement. In some cases, populist movements arguably do not help citizens overcome knowledge deficits, or to confront opposing views in a pluralist society. These movements may instead rely on misinformation and emotional appeals which are frequently more effective, as they do not carry a significant cognitive burden for people who are not accustomed to reasoning in the same terms as political agents. Some fear, justly so, that improper development of eDemocratic institutions might embolden these groups, leading to tyranny rather than
Concerns about requisite knowledge needed to engage in policy making are potent, and played a role in the historical development of BT. In 2014, a precursor to BT was launched that also sought to source citizen opinion on budget priorities, although with a much different process. Originally designed by a third-party firm, and now defunct, it was an interactive survey that allowed citizens to allocate the provinces spending priorities. Team Members were sceptical of the utility of this kind of exercise. In the words of one team member: “it’s a lot easier for me to manage my credit card debt than it is for a government to manage deficit and debt of hundreds of millions of dollars, being able to issue bonds, being able to manage and carry a debt because your economy is diversified and sufficiently strong for you to hold... when you just have a budget simulator tool it completely removes all of that complexity” (Team Member Vanja). To give the wrong sense of the scope and scale of government work not only does a disservice to the work of public servants, but might also create a greater divide between citizens and government—especially if the former does not understand why the budget can’t simply be balanced, and that spending cannot simply be cut.

Technocratic arguments against direct democracy often rely on the argument that empowering citizens can lead to rash policy commitments. Team Members of BT reported these fears within the public service, but argued a need to push back against calcified procedures for procedures like drafting the budget in the service of modernizing services more in-tune with the needs of citizens. When asked about the main obstacles to the development of BT as a participatory political tool, organizational culture (what Rousseau called the “corporate will”) was often invoked: “the dangers are cultural; people will get afraid and try to stop it. They’ll start to push back on it and go, ‘Well the integrity of our process is more important that citizen input’” (Team Member Vanja). The use of entrenched procedural methodologies is explicitly at odds with pushes towards more direct democratic governance, which is a direct threat to the legitimacy of institutions
themselves. As representatives and public servants, admitting that their processes need to be changed involves questioning their certainty; and if the typical procedures are not reliable methods for making the best possible policy recommendations, then how can the public conceive of their recommendations as legitimate?

On the other hand, new models of citizenship are also emerging. Sometimes referred to as DIY citizenship, ways of engaging with and improving communities, especially through the use of technology, are becoming more relevant in today’s political climate [Ratto and Boler, 2014]. These types of citizenship focus on cooperative practise, design, and production, to directly address a politically salient issue or to meet the needs and interests of the community. For those focussed on issues that are already decidedly political, these may be groups focussed on constructing objects to ameliorate and enhance the political experience, or to show dissensus and to contest power imbalances, what DiSalvo calls “design for politics” and “political design” respectively [DiSalvo, 2012]. Citizens can bring substantial amounts of subject matter expertise to bear on problems, and employ methods, such as user-centred and participatory design, that are new to government and their vendors of record. Alongside other mechanisms of communication between citizens and government, such as Open Data, these types of practises represent a promising movement toward democracy. As Digital staff noted when they highlighted the value of experiential submissions to BT, citizen-led initiatives are best suited to overcome the alienation of quantitative and bureaucratic rationalizations by counter-posing these models to the incomputability of everyday experience. Moderators and other Digital team members that read through ideas noted that some ideas even demonstrated a significant amount of background knowledge of specific issues (Team Member Hitomi).

Some members of the public service were enthusiastic about the innovation that greater contact with the public could bring. After the initial rounds of BT, external ministries showed a great deal of enthusiasm for implementing consultations of their own, prompting Digital to begin work on constituting BT as a platform, and working
on their tool-kit for targeting consultations to the information needs of internal clients. Some BT proposals came from public servants themselves, who used BT as a way of breaking out of institutional hierarchy to propose innovations in areas which they have intimate an applicable knowledge (Team Member Andy). Public servants (identified by their government IPs) were more likely to read more ideas on BT, and more likely to return to the platform, supporting the belief that lack of knowledge was a significant barrier to entry for citizens. Assuming the continuation of a mandate for a democracy that empowers citizens to play a direct role in crafting the laws they live under, how can citizens overcome this knowledge gap? Or, in the case of BT, how can citizens write a good submission, given that they may come to the table with scant knowledge of relevant issues?

As it stands, team members have not pursued the educative aspect of BT—although this did come up throughout interviews. The educational component of the platform could become increasingly important if they want to elicit and implement ideas from individual citizens. The claim that ideas need to be ‘feasible’ in order to catch the ear of professional public servants, contradicts the goals of accessibility that drove team members to design the platform as they did. On the one hand, team members wanted to lower barriers to participation, but on the other hand, the lack of an educative aspect to the design meant that only citizens with adequate background knowledge could hope to submit ideas that would be meaningful to those that were evaluating them.

Fortunately, consultative processes can serve as an excellent opportunity to actively foster educated publics [Steibel and Estevez, 2015]. Many consultative processes, especially deliberative ones, are specifically intended to create the conditions in which a group of citizens can reach a baseline of knowledge using commonly accessible information to discuss an issue and come to some concluding recommendation [Goodin and Dryzek, 2006, Fishkin, 2011, Bohman, 2004]. These informational requirements need to feature into the design of consultative information systems like BT—although they often imply a signifi-
cant rethink of the scope of consultation, or a restructuring of government communica-
tions. There are a number of methods to attempt this, each with certain benefits and
drawbacks:

- Providing resources on selected topics can serve the goal of establishing a common
  baseline of knowledge for discussion, grounding arguments in information that all
  have access to. This, however, places the onus of learning squarely on citizens, and
  thus lowers the accessibility of consultations. Additionally, if there is scepticism
  about the legitimacy of the process, citizens may be concerned that the informa-
tion provided to them is being used to control the discussion, subordinating it to
  institutional discourses [Velikanov, 2010].

- Collaborative filtering and other automated processes can be used to direct citi-
zens to areas of conversation where their experience and expertise are most needed,
allowing them to bring their own experiences to the table. This becomes more of
a problem when a consultation is self-selected, and unlikely to be representative–
especially since online systems in general limit who participates and how partici-
pation is allowed [Velikanov, 2010, Delborne et al., 2011]

- Active facilitation is often considered key to informed and productive deliberation
[Wright and Street, 2007, Bryson and Quick, 2013, Noveck, 2004]. Facilitation can
also help provide information and to clarify government positions, although care
must be taken to make facilitators accountable to citizens, or the process opens
itself up to allegations of censorship and manipulation [Wright, 2006]. Depending
on the scope of consultations, facilitation may require a lot of government staff
to be mobilized to provide responses on their areas of expertise. Digital already
noted that although the community was relatively civil and there was no response
capacity, moderation was a demanding job that required after-hours work.
Chapter 4

Discussion

4.1 Scope, Agenda-setting and Power

The legitimacy of the space that BT created was not supported by a prescribed procedure for consolidating and acting on the ideas of citizens, but by the promise that government was listening and read every submission. This premise is in line with a more pragmatic vein within deliberative democratic theory that believes that authentic democratic citizenship can be achieved not only by participating in highly structured institutions, but also through informal dialogue [Wright, 2012]. Since spaces for informal political discussion already exist outside of government, how could citizens conceptualize their democratic performance on BT, and how was that realized through design?

On team member made the following comment, which was particularly ripe for analysis:

“I wanna say it’s like a coffee shop but it’s not. It’s like...a really big town...no it’s bigger than...you know how you have governments, or rulers that would have office hours? Where you could come in and petition the King. Right? I’m thinking of a model where an average citizen—they don’t have some kind of credential, they’re not necessarily a wealthy landowner or whatever, you could just go in and you would be in the King’s court, and you could say “I have this problem.” And they would hear you. So that’s what I think. We can’t do that any more with millions of people because the line
up... not everyone could get in, there would be a huge line and I'm sure that would be a logistical nightmare; some people take too long to explain their problem and then fifty other people wouldn't actually... like just imagine the nightmare of doing that in the tyranny of physical space. Whereas again, you have this platform where you can do that—where anyone can just show up. And we will read what they say. And will consider it—right? And then and again things like voting actually help us filter and think “okay there’s there’s a lot of people who seem interested in this idea, or most commented... If you post, we’ll read it! I’ve read every single thing. Right? And there’s other people in government who read every single thing— I think it’s important to just do that. So that’s what I think: that’s what that space is.”

—(Team Member Vanja)

It is unsurprising to see coffee houses such as those describes by Habermas, where (middle class, or conformant petty-bourgeois) citizens could come together to discuss matters of public importance, a handy and enduring analogy of the informal public sphere, and a historical symbol for the democratization of political and public discussion by laypeople [Habermas, 1989]. There are credible criticisms of Internet-based discourses as being homogeneous and exclusive, a systemic consequence supported not only by the propensity of users to find what they like, but also directly linked to the design of consumptive media companies [Pariser, 2011]. At least on BT, users of all stripes are welcome—perhaps one of the hidden advantages of there being no established community of regulars. The ability to participate is decided by citizens access to the internet as well as digital literacy, of which citizens hopefully needed only very little to use functions like login and voting.

However, BT is not quite like a coffee shop. BT is not based in the “tyranny of physical space,” citizens can communicate over distances and with greater time between contributions. Nor are coffee shops institutionalized in the way that BT is. Even as team members took a somewhat casual approach to idea submission and discussion, there is a degree of formality implied by the mere observation of state representatives that cannot be overlooked.

The image of a “King’s court” conjures images of a splendid monarch atop a dais,
Chapter 4. Discussion

approached one by one by meek subjects. Not all of the submissions to BT were as meek as they might have been if put to a monarch, after all, even the most critical and all but the most violent ideas were protected by free speech provisions of the Canadian Charter. The King’s court is defined by the synchronous face-to-face interaction between the citizen and the embodiment of power, and perhaps the background presence of the listening multitude.

The King’s court is perhaps an apt, albeit simplified analogy for the uptake of ideas from BT. BT’s unstructured “have your say” approach left the space open for citizens to decide what they want to talk about—surely liberating, but not always productive or impactful on policy [Wright, 2006]. There should be a major distinction between the citizens of a democratic regime and serfs whose fates are beholden to their monarch. The King’s court is characterized by the power imbalance between the subject who pleads their case, and the absolute power of the monarch. In a democracy, institutions and laws codify the terms of a relationship where government represents the interest of citizens. Serfs might plead for relief from taxation after their crops were wrought by drought, or protection from the brigands haunting their roads, but governments do not grant personal recompense. Governments, unlike kings, deal in general laws and targeted initiatives—not proclamations. Is BT a place for citizens to make their pleas, and for the government to wave its figurative sceptre and decree—“Let us convene a committee to study whether the police have been adequately policing your neighbourhood”?

Monarchs could be benevolent or malicious, but it makes little theoretical difference if their exercises of power ameliorate or perpetuate the sufferings and frustrations of citizens. What is important is the power imbalance between them: in a monarchy, subjects live in bondage at the whim of their lord, and in democracy governments and politicians are in power only at the behest of their citizens, and are legally constrained and accountable.

Capricious exercise of state power is perhaps the greatest threat to all eDemocratic
projects, BT included. The idea the government could merely choose not to listen to the results of a democratic exercise catastrophically delegitimates the decision making process. Even when the stakes are low, as they were when British citizens voted to name a research ship “Boaty McBoatface”, the failure to follow through erodes trust in democratic exercises by revealing that all along, power remained in the hands of political elites with their own values separate from those of the poll [BBC News, 2016]. A situation where politicians do not trust citizens to make decisions and where citizens do not trust their elected representatives to take their views seriously is hardly a fertile environment for democracy. With this in mind, we might forgive British citizens who a month later voted in a referendum to leave the EU because they “didn’t think [their votes] would count [Cockroft, 2016]. Those living under western democratic regimes are nonetheless privileged that this is what constitutes a good example of capricious state power; for others it means ignoring the results of elections and the staging of political coups.

Even the idea that government could select which ideas it would consider represents an arbitrariness to power that does not do justice to the goal of engaging citizens to participate in decision making processes. Without a defined criterion for uptake of the results of democratic processes, the state must always base its decision on its own contingent normative claims, rather than those generated by the consultation. In the case where reasons for selecting some ideas over others are unclear, we ought to ask who is and is not being served by the policies, when money could have been spent on citizens who suffer the consequences of structural inequalities and colonial injustices. However, what is worth considering is if the contingency of BT’s outcomes be positioned such that it was focussed on allowing communities and individuals who are underserved or marginalized by political states of affairs to make their claims in a public space, so that government might seek to assist them, even if they represented a minority of citizens. This would reinforce the relationship supposed by the King’s Court, and run counter to both procedural understandings of democracy and potentially the aggregative logic of
publicity posited by BT’s voting system. That is, unless the majority of citizens saw it as a matter of public good to help those in need, a strange recasting of the King’s Court where the citizens are both benevolent multitude and sovereign.

Team Members described some consultations as a “communications exercise”, where government would consult citizens merely to give the appearance of having been consulted, its actions spuriously connected with results, and the main intention to be able to make press releases citing the fact of consultation. They were also quick to explain how this somewhat circular use of BT would break down citizen trust, and their own reticence to deploy the software if they thought it might be used in this way (Team Member Gabby).

Communicative consultations do not necessarily mean arbitrary exercise of power: consultations that do not have prescribed and actionable outcomes might serve to meet legal requirements, inform the public about future and present decisions, or to generate support for those decisions [Bryson and Quick, 2013]. However, there is not much evidence to suggest that any stakeholders really saw their work in this way, nor did BT really frame citizen contributions as such. Within Bryson and Quick’s categorization of consultative goals, BT tracks closer to loftier, democratic goals, where arbitrary response would be a destabilizing to the outcome of the process. Citizens themselves articulated the need for more robust accounts of what was done with the information collected on BT; the third most popular idea, with a net score of 280 votes (+297/-7) was about getting more robust feedback on ideas. This was also the most popular idea to be implemented by government, which did indeed publish a report-back in the Budget. If this is taken to be evidence of anything, it should be a willingness on the part of both parties to continue and explore the kinds of citizenship and democracy that BT represents and facilitates.

Situating BT within the literature of consultation design can help us to clarify the democratic relationships that BT constructs. Bryson and Quick’s taxonomy of consulta-
Figure 4.1: BT comment demonstrating that the accountability of government to the BT process was a top priority for citizens.

Design of the platform may have fallen short of some of the considerations for these goals, like actively engaging publics that have already formed around issues, engaging in responsive dialogue, and promoting opportunities for citizens to share information and change their views (which was discouraged by BT’s design). There is some evidence to suggest that BT did mobilize existing publics around mainstream political issues. As BT ages, hopefully along with its climate of trust and legitimacy, there is potential that other publics might coalesce around BT to gain support and publicity.

James Fishkin also provides a concise matrix of consultative types (4.2), by examining whether the process is representative of some presumed ‘public’\footnote{Groups that statistically represent the demographics of relevant citizens constitute what some could call a ‘minipublic’[Goodin and Dryzek, 2006]}, and those that produce ‘raw’ or ‘refined’ information. Within this schema, BT is a self selected listener opinion poll (SLOP). BT is not representative, because participants are self-selecting, and the consultation’s placement may unintentionally “select out” people who are not...
already connected to Government initiatives, social media presences, have easy internet access, or that do not possess the digital literacy required for them to take part [Delborne et al., 2011]. SLOPS tend to elicit people who are already primed for political discussion, are intensely motivated, or who can be mobilized by grassroots movements [Fishkin, 2010]. Nor is BT deliberative, as it lacks the dialectical components of deliberation where citizens must confront opposing views based on merit, and are challenged to examine their own views in turn. It is possible that BT could push itself further on the spectrum to a deliberative platform, the “discussion group”, by encouraging citizens to generate more robust proposals—although there is disagreement within the literature about whether text-based asynchronous discussion in general allows people to better formulate their views, or rather excludes people who rely on non-verbal cues, or who are not used to writing our their thoughts [Strandberg, 2015].

Through the analytics lens of deliberative democratic theory, we can trace the theoretical contours of BT’s process, but without a definitive sense of how the information is taken up by government, it is difficult to solidify the democratic relationship that BT creates. How can the actual importance of citizen ideas in generating the budget—and thus the legitimacy of the consultation—be conceived of? In a sense, it cannot, because after the coded ideas have been passed over to the people making the budget, the trail runs cold. BT ideas re-emerge as references in the budget that cite high level coherence between ideas submitted on BT and those with focus in the budget. The relationship

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<th>Eight forms of public consultation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Method of selection</td>
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<td>A. Raw</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Self-selection</td>
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<td>2. Non-random</td>
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<td>3. Random sample</td>
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<td>4. “Everyone”</td>
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Figure 4.2: Fishkin’s 8 Types of Public Consultation [Fishkin, 2010, p.199]
between citizens and government that BT in its current form creates is less about direct
democratic participation, and more about creating a channel of communication around
government action. This result might seem underwhelming for those interesting in im-
mediate and substantive expansion of democratic institutions, but I would argue that
BT needs to be examined as an ongoing and dynamic exercise, one that can, and likely
will change over time.

Outside of canonical democratic theory, there is a dearth of literature that can pro-
vide insights in how to understand the relationship between citizens and government that
BT creates. One such way of examining BT uses logics taken from the private sector—
where team members themselves took a lot of their own influence. On particular model
is particularly apt at explaining what kind of space BT constitutes, that of the “user
innovation community” (UIC). UICs are internet-supported discussion forums that are
set up by organizations, often enterprises, where end users submit “business ideas to
be reviewed, discussed, and voted upon” [Di Gangi and Wasko, 2009]. Though organiza-
tions might encourage and host UICs, they are under no commitment to adopt ideas that
meet specific standards or thresholds, as they may be obligated in a similar democratic
practise. Rather, organizations adopt ideas from UICs based on their own internal logics
and structures.

Di Gangi and Wasko conducted a study of Dell’s UIC, Idea Storm, which at the time of
its launch in 2007, was a huge innovation in user engagement [Di Gangi and Wasko, 2009].
The Idea Storm platform is very similar in form and functionality to BT: users can submit
ideas, comment and vote on ideas (at the time of Di Gangi and Wasko’s study ideas could
be up-voted or down-voted, but down-voting appears to have been disabled). Idea Storm
was even identified by one team member as being influential in the conceptual stage of
product design, which supports my study’s analysis of BT as seeking targeted, actionable
information from citizens—the ‘end users’ of government services (Team Member Sal).

Interestingly, Di Gangi and Wasko found that adoption of ideas was linked not to
Figure 4.3: Screenshots showing comparison between BT (left [Ontario.ca, 2016c]) and other systems that influenced its design: reddit (centre, [reddit, 2016]) and Idea Storm (right, [Dell, 2016]).

their hypthesised criteria for adoption: relative advantage of adoption (superiority to the superseded status quo), compatibility with existing organizational values, and popularity within the UIC. Rather, these measures were frustrated by the organization’s “absorptive capacity... [its] the ability to understand the often times complex user innovations to sufficiently address user concerns” [Di Gangi and Wasko, 2009, p.304]. This is in line with an earlier derived hypothesis about BT: that the ability for governments to enact ideas submitted from citizens is reliant on their ability to understand and organized ideas into their own internal decision-making processes. If this is so, it invites a host for further research into how bureaucracies might be configured as to consider these heterogeneous and unstructured types of information into their decision making processes.

Until then, it is still worth examining how the other three factors (relative advantage, compatibility and popularity) might have factored into implementing BT ideas. Team Members also cited ‘feasability’ and ‘realism’ as a component of good ideas (Team Member Sal, Taylor, Andy, Muisto, Diamante), which are at least semantically linked to relative advantage, complexity, and trialability, identified as primary and secondary factors for innovation adoption [Di Gangi and Wasko, 2009].

A later study of Idea Storm found that ideas connected to other ideas on the platform were less likely to be implemented [Hossain and Islam, 2015]. Linked and nuanced ideas, that are connected by goals and reasons increase the complexity of decision making by
revealing the heterogeneity of publics [Venturini et al., 2015]. Given the relatively short turnover between the close of BT and the release of the budget, there would have been little opportunity to begin even preliminary investigations into complex and politically charged ideas.

Popularity on BT was also not a reliable indicator that the idea would be represented in the budget: many of the most popular ideas were those that government had already decided would not be considered—such as reneging on the sale of Hydro One, and the amalgamation of the Catholic School board. The popularity of these ideas outweighed neither the complexity of their implementation, nor their incompatibility with the government defined priorities. Indeed, reticence about confronting controversial political issues was written into the platform—the House Rules made it clear that ideas would only be considered if they were compatible with the government’s existing mandate, which is to say, only if the government could have come up with the idea itself, and implementing it is relatively straightforward but with a good value-added for citizens: an easy win.

There are pragmatic reasons why the government would position itself in this way, especially given the early phase of the BT project. As discussed above, BT was a platform that allowed for significant agonism among citizens to manifest and allowed for unfettered criticism of the government, without necessarily being representative of widely held opinions. That same government already nominally represents the will of the majority of citizens, who in effect set the government’s agenda by affirming their platform through elections. By using BT to look for small scale, implementable policies, government increases its ability to respond to those that elected it, as well as those who did not.

In interviews, team members and political operatives mentioned that in the future they might move to make it more explicit to participants what exactly was on the table, and work to improve the generation of feasible ideas through active facilitation. This would be a step away from the current standing of BT, and but would be substantive
supplement to their current citizen participation initiatives. Team Members made many choices that were intended to preserve citizen autonomy, and although pre-populating the platform with more specific topics (and information about them) would have better enabled BT to educate citizens about specific areas of interest and work on solutions [Bryson and Quick, 2013], it may have dissuaded dissenting views who thought that the government was trying to control the ideas that were permitted [Hilbert, 2009]. Instead, BT was open to all comers, and welcomed all kinds of ideas, putting the onus on government to sort through them and report on their findings.

What BT has been used for, more than getting ideas from citizens or providing new information to policy makers, was showing alignment (or lack thereof) between government priorities, as espoused by the budget, and citizen interests. This is not necessarily an expansion of the democratic institutions of the province, but as it evolves, as the design of the platform tightens, it will continue to provide another layer of accountability for government decisions—assuming that data is made available so citizens can also easily analyse the ideas and their follow through to budget priorities.

### 4.2 Neoliberal Citizenship in a User-Centred Political Space

The course of the BT design process, apart from being an exercise in modernizing the technologies and institutions of democratic governance, was also interesting in that it brought to the fore changes within the way that Ontario’s government was using and developing information communications technology in service of these goals. The role of Digital as an in-house technology shop influenced not only the technologies government delivered, such as the talks platform, but also the way that the government is approaching software development. Digital team members repeatedly emphasized their user-centred design approach, which had implications for how BT was developed, and how it might
change in the future (Team Member Sal, Vanja, Charlie). This challenges the traditional relationships between political operatives and their public service, and may lead to arrangements that are able to develop more technologies to enhance the offerings of government. As the team members of BT rightly mentioned, this relationship is also cheaper and faster than outsourcing contracts to private vendors.

The user-centred nature of BT was at the core of how team members understood their goals for BT—to create a space where users could interact with government and give their views with only minimal technical ability. In interviews, team members would often mention archetypes of these sorts of users—their mothers, single parents who were very busy (Team Member Sal), working class citizens, people living in rural and northern areas (Team Member Hitomi), or simply “everyman/everywomen” (Team Member Muisto). These types of users were thought to have valuable, situated experiences that contrasted with the ‘ivory tower’ knowledge of experts, public servants, and civil society members that were already empowered by the formal, off-line PBCs (Team Member Vanja). Some degree of populism was also evident in the way that team members touted the value of receiving user stories and life experiences—one opined: “I think policy should be about numbers. But I think numbers don’t tell you the whole story. People stories tell you the whole story,” (Team Member Muisto) expressing a belief that a focus on the unstructured, situated experiences of individuals could counter the institutional emphasis on rational quantification and calculation [Baack, 2015, Purpura et al., 2011]. One team member insightfully pointed out that this was the kind of information that politicians are regularly exposed to when they interact directly with citizens, although they are also inundated with many other types of information.

Digital has had success in applying user-centred design methods to other projects—notably to the Ontario.ca website, which is continually improved on the basis of direct user testing, feedback and analytics. Designing a website to facilitate user experience is different than developing an eDemocratic platform. For one, the former is used primarily
for information seeking and filling forms, where user needs and business goals are generally clear cut (either citizens easily locate what they need or they do not) and consistent with each other. As discussed, the political and design goals of BT did not necessarily carry through to the ultimate outcomes of the platform, thus generating information and user experience that is ambiguously valuable.

Unlike more structured and strategic interactions with websites, where users have concrete goals at the outset of the process, the ends of BT were purposefully left open ended. Even so, the deployment of the system does communicate values to citizens, and it asks them to inhabit certain roles in their use of the system [Phillips, 2009]. Mechanical features of the site, such as the ability to operate under a pseudonym, the ability to vote and comment, determine the context that structures the agency of users qua citizens as they use BT [Muhlberger, 2005]. The user-centred approach to BT was influenced by an understanding that barriers to participation should be lowered wherever possible, and that citizens would determine the content of their contributions insofar as they were largely un-primed for specific discussion topics, through the subordinate role of the landing page, submission guidelines, and the random-by-default search results.

By allowing users to login via social media, to vote on ideas as on reddit, and perhaps to read some inconsequential comments as on a news article, BT has attempted to integrate itself with the context and behaviours of its users. This integration with other systems is an example of “seamless design”, where the cognitive load of entering and navigating a digital space is taken up by the system itself, and “the erasure of the marks and boundaries between separate systems thereby [creates] an infrastructure whose individual parts blend transparently–without seams” [Ratto, 2007]. In packaging BT in a way that integrates and mimics other experiential contexts that citizens might have in their everyday experiences on the internet, BT attempts to sublimate the habitual behaviours of users into content that the government can consume and digest.

The visible membrane separating BT and the rest of the internet is a matter of front
end-design: style, branding and interface, but it is instrumental in breaking down the theoretical divide between private and public reasoning, performance and interaction that is under interrogation. Throughout democratic theory, there is a sense that to act or reason in the capacity of a citizen is not the same as acting as a private individual. Jean Jacques Rousseau was an early proponent of state legitimation through participatory methods—but he was also concerned that for deliberation on the public good to occur, it had to be phrased as such. When citizens interact with government in a way that is reflexive enough that they can offer opinions on what policies would be in the general interest for people or the province—rather than what benefits them [Rousseau, 1988]. For a public sphere to exist on the internet, consultation must go “beyond the mere aggregation of its users, it must be constituted ... [as] concerned with its publicness” [Bohman, 2004]. Citizens are granted their publicity as soon as they connect to talks.ontario.ca.

But how does BT condition citizens to act in a public context? Richardson details three kinds of discipline which are required in processes of designing policy: fiscal (making responsible spending commitments), pragmatic (to do with planning and coordinating) and social (taking into account the views of others and reaching compromises). Richardson argues that without these types of discipline, citizen generated ideas are basically “wishes” [Richardson, 2010]. Indeed, even Fishkin (whom Richardson criticises) agrees that without an involved process, simple collection of citizen ideas reaches mostly “top-of-the-head opinions that approach being non-attitudes” [Fishkin, 2011].

The belief that citizens must reason from an explicitly political framework is well represented in liberal political theory. John Rawls asserts that strict political liberalism “leaves untouched all kinds of doctrines, religious, metaphysical, and moral... and presents itself as freestanding” [Rawls, 1995]. In this view, citizens arguing as such must formulate their arguments in terms of demonstrable political positions—such as constitutional rights, or ones that specifically speak to the good of the public. Only outside of political institutions (which stabilize the types of interaction citizens can have about
political matters [DiSalvo, 2012]) can citizens reconfigure their metaphysical, moral and religious beliefs to contest or cohere with the politics of the day. For many policy-makers, this separation of contexts should be familiar: they often justify their decisions explicitly in terms of their political mandate as the public’s elected representatives, and would take serious criticism if they began to reason from other, more personal grounds. This distinction between types of reasoning is not uncontested. On one hand, many citizen’s conceptions of a good life are intimately tied up with their cultural, religious and moral beliefs. Asking them to sacrifice these views to engage with the liberal state in some cases asks them to alienate that which they struggle most committedly for. On the other hand, even the will of the majority is just that: a representation of the current political status quo.

In asking citizens to have their say when it comes to budget priorities, team members ask them to explicitly occupy a conceptual context that is value-laden and necessarily outside of their everyday experience. This adds additional cognitive burden to participation, and is one of the reasons why clearly framing the importance of citizen’s input and using design to facilitate good information is essential for consultation design [Richardson, 2010, Fishkin, 2011]. Even so, it is understandable how seamless and accessible design can fail to condition the perspective of citizens in this way. External information systems, such as social media, forums, news comments, amongst others, have conditioned citizens to certain modes of behaviour through their own discourse architecture and social physics [Sack, 2005, Noveck, 2005]. If design of a system minimizes the seam between informal political discussion and formalized democratic performance, team members risk importing the norms of systems they have based their design on.

To overcome the subtle yet important distinction between the role of reflexive citizen and unreflexive internet user, attention needs to be paid by team members to show the spaces between activities inside and outside of BT [Ratto, 2007]. The design of BT does reveal these seams to some degree, through consistent branding, look and feel with the
rest of Ontario.ca (although this is a somewhat downplayed), and through the ‘house rules’ which provide high-level topics for framing ideas.

The degree of conditioning required to establish deliberative activity on BT runs counter to the user-centred way that team members conceived of their work, and reflects a tension within democratic theory. In particular it evokes tensions in the understandings of democratic citizenship traditionally drawn between republican and liberal citizenship. Republican conceptions assert that the experiences of democratic citizenship ought to be ubiquitous, and theorists like Rousseau, believe that participation in political decision making is a necessary condition for a polity to actualize their role as the sovereign power, rather than as subjects to a state. Proponents of deliberative, republican democracy reject the conception of citizenship as a passive and occasional capacity on the ground and argue that it leads to a citizenry unable to participate in discussions about the public good [Smith and Wales, 2000]. By contrast, ‘liberal’ conceptions of citizenship understand the role as a legal category, realized through state sanctioned private interactions with each other, or through limited contact with state power (in courts or elections, for example) [Leydet, 2014]. Liberal conceptions are often traced back to thinkers like John Locke, among others, who relegate the role of governance to the enforcement of contracts and provision of some services—lest it lead to moral tyranny. This distinction between identities is closely tied to the types of institutional arrangements that support them—be they procedural/electoral democracies that administrate liberal citizens and are accountable in specific instances, or cultural democracies, where citizens take an active responsibility in contributing to governance [Kurki, 2010].

The way that BT has been implemented as a consultative process communicates a generally liberal understanding of citizenship, where citizens contribute their opinions based on their own private needs and the government responds by meeting those needs. The ideal interaction on BT is transactional: a citizen articulates a need, and the government

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2This term is admittedly overloaded.
abides. Paradoxically, BT as an institution tracks theoretically closer to deliberative, republican accounts of citizenship rooting the political goals of BT in legitimacy through a more direct relationship with citizens. While the abstract and strategic goals of BT can be seen as republican, the articulated response to user abilities and needs was squarely liberal. Furthermore, based on the kinds of ideas that receive attention from the government, the platform is a continuation of neoliberal thinking about internet-facilitated governance—that the primary task of government technology is to deliver services to citizens [Kurki, 2010].

4.3 BT and the Design of Agonistic Publics

The understanding of BT as serving a neoliberal conception of citizenship does not have to be the end of analysis. Creating the conditions and capacities where citizens and governments can interact with each other to make decisions involves the constitution of an ongoing, stable, and productive relationship between the two parties. This is as much an exercise in design as it is in democracy, and involves building and maintaining social and material dependencies upon which attachments can form—a process known as infrastructuring [Dantec and DiSalvo, 2013]. As a speculative object, BT is an intermediary in the ongoing relationship between citizens and their government. This section explores the role that BT plays as a mediator of communication between governments and publics, and how that relationship might be best understood.

As a platform for consultations, BT attempts both to support increased interaction between the government and citizens, and to standardize the the ways that that interaction can take place [Gillespie, 2010]. BT’s uses are not limited to cases where single citizens to offer their ideas, opinions and wishes, but through its public facing and collaborative suite of mechanics does in fact help citizens to cooperate and organize around issues they find important. In other words, BT can be construed not only as consulting
individuals, but publics.

Understandings of what a “public” is are often traced back to Habermas, who rooted his conception of a public in a sphere of formal, but unofficial discourse around matters that are phrased in relation to the public good. Contestation of matters of public good is the very substance of the political, and thus the essence of citizenship [DiSalvo, 2012]. This tracks closely to the threshold of the political in Rawl’s liberalism, which is a coming-to-grips with competing understandings of forms of life, while admitting that many different, often mutually exclusive, conceptions have competing claims about what that might be (known as the fact of reasonable pluralism) [Rawls, 1995]. What makes these tensions between discursive, normative claims political is that they are, through the practise of democracy, elevated to be matters of public discussion.

That the core of all democratic societies is open debate and contestation between suppositions of freedom and coercion is an idea that can be traced back to Rousseau, Hegel, Mill, and others. Rousseau believed that the public good could be institutionally reified in ideal conditions, although after this idea was taken to logically extreme conclusions in the French Revolution, philosopher G.W.F. Hegel revealed that the contingency and complexity of ideals, interests and reality that this idea could only end in Terror and bloodshed. Modern liberal and deliberative theorists like Rawls and Habermas posit the role of democratic institutions (respectively) as one of reconciling pluralism through the meta-language of politics or through striving for communicative recognition between groups at odds.

The fact of pluralism in democratic societies at once presupposes and problematizes the notion of a public. On the one hand, the fact that governments administer on behalf of some supposed entity necessitates a concept to name those who they represent—the public [Dewey, 2012]. On the other hand, trying to reason about the public good quickly becomes incoherent. Most, if not all, decisions by governments involve taking normative stances that appease some and aggrieve others. Every act to include citizens
excludes others, and every expenditure of scarce resources ameliorates some at the neglect of others. In some cases, politicians who use the public good as justification might act in ways that reinforce social relations that not only privilege very few people, but disenfranchise and alienate very many. Even the public itself cannot be expected to act as its name suggests—people often do not frame or make decisions as citizens concerned with the common good even if they claim to, but are instead motivated by their own interests, values and motivations [Mouffe, 1999].

For some, the idea of a continual and irreconcilable dialectic between interests, values and beliefs is anathema to a conception of democracy that focusses on productive deliberation and republican citizenship. For others, however, this agonism constitutes the very core of democracy: citizens are always already occupying the contentious and contingent positions that constitute society, and it is the acknowledgement of this fact as a matter of public concern and open conflict that constitutes democratic practise [DiSalvo, 2012, Mouffe, 1999].

BT advertises itself as a way for individuals, conceived of as pre-political agents, to offer outside innovation to public servants, but it can be recast as a far more radical democratic space. BT has succeeded in constituting a space where citizens can explicitly perform in a public capacity. In this way, it has the potential to expand the role of people used to acting liberal citizens in a ways that “puts the emphasis on the types of practices and not the forms of argumentation,” by creating a two month long, officially sanctioned performance of citizenship [Mouffe, 1999]. This performance, which can be characterized by competition for votes, the prestige of submitting ideas, and the struggle to best your political adversaries is an example of what Mouffe calls “agonistic pluralism”, a political arrangement where contestation between adversarial claims to resources and ways of life characterizes the actions of citizens qua citizens, organizing themselves into publics. Though DiSalvo is ambiguous on the possibility of such a category, BT can be interpreted as representing a form of design for adversarial politics. Through BT failings
as a deliberative democratic tool—where consensus cannot be reached, and government avoids deciding between the most contentious political issues, BT creates a stage for publics to engage in agonistic democracy instead. Ironically, BT might be at its best when citizens vote and brigade, a sign that publics have crystallized around the platform.
Chapter 5

Concluding Remarks and Trajectories

Through analysis of the mechanics of BT, I have demonstrated the ways in which they often express value laden choices between modes of interaction. Throughout, we explored the democratic conceptions and goals of team members, tracing them to the mechanical choices they made. We have also seen how these tradeoffs in the design processes track many of the problems of canonical democratic theory. Interestingly enough, I have also demonstrated that in many ways, traditional understandings of democratic processes failed to adequately model the space and dialogue that BT creates between citizens and government, but and how it make more sense to analyse BT by comparing it to other virtual communities, democratic or not. Finally, I have given an account of how the conceptions of team members inscribed particular, neoliberal conceptions of citizenship and democratic performance, and how BT and its participants failed to cohere with those conceptions, by articulating the possible-worlds that the design of BT allows us to imagine.

Team Members themselves had a lot of ideas about how BT could overcome the challenges it faced this year, ranging from including active facilitation, to reconfiguring
BT as an always-on petitions site. If the goal of BT remains to develop a system that expands the practise of deliberative democratic citizenship, an educational angle to BT is promising. Working with citizens to develop an understanding of what government is doing and how it can do better through structured deliberative practises would require a keen insight into where structured citizen input would be most valuable, and the patience of trained facilitators to guide them in this process. It would also likely involve reconfiguring BT as a staged process, perhaps one that blended the advantages of collaboration and deliberation with the quantifiable measurements of voting. One team member also suggested that BT could serve as an educational opportunity for students to engage with civic issues, an exercise that would help young citizens develop their democratic capacities and contribute to a political culture primed for democratic performance (Team Member Andy) [Muhlberger, 2005].

BT’s democratic potential will also be enriched by technological improvements to the site. With more time to develop, team members could eliminate the technical debt caused by their chronically short development cycle. This would make BT more legible for outsiders, and make it a serious contribution to the idea of open source political institutions. Team Members also entertained the idea of changing the technology that underlay BT altogether, moving from a Drupal instance running on a Linux/Apache/MySQL/PHP (LAMP) stack to a MongoDB/Express.js/AngularJS/Node.js (MEAN) stack (Team Member Jamie). This change would mean BT could offer citizens more dynamic interactions by updating them on activity on the site in real time, giving them a more potent sense of the presence and momentum of others citizens on BT. Technological solutions will also be essential in finding ways to get citizens to look at more ideas, such as through a dashboard, infinite scrolling, or the use of collaborative filtering. This is one case where looking to other information systems that make significant and repeated demands for user attention might be valuable. New advances in automated natural language processing might also help public servants to code ideas and suggest tags for users, reducing the
amount of duplicate ideas and redundant information [Stromer-Galley et al., 2010].

The future of BT is impossible to predict, but I hope that it trends to the radical, agonistic, and subversive over the procedural, banal and transactional. To conclude in this vein, I would like to offer some further speculative remarks about the trajectory of BT.

5.1 Speculative Design: Free and Open Source Institutions

Throughout interviews, participants continually spoke in terms of the iterated nature of the BT project as one of its main innovations as a piece of government technology (Team Member Charlie, Muisto). Their approach to designing and implementing BT has had tangible effects on the way the project is situated within government, and the politics of the platform itself.

Digital was focussed on creating a lean product for the BT project, based on agile practises—in particular the deployment of BT as a minimum viable product (MVP) that undergoes successive iterations. Agile design practises are those that seek to continually revisit the assumptions, progress, and trajectories of work throughout the development of a product, in this case the development of BT. This later formed the basis for the talks platform, which is intended to be a configurable tool for ministries to easily launch their own consultations tailored to their needs.

Creation of the original requirements for BT involved a process that was novel to political-side staff, the internal clients for BT. In contrast with other projects that rely on developing information technology, either sourced internally or from an external vendor, development of BT saw team members working more closely with political staff. Within the organizational structure of the government of Ontario, IT is usually positioned deep within the bureaucracy, such that communications between team members and political
stakeholders occurred only indirectly (most chilling was that power point decks were apparently the choice medium for communication). To design BT, Digital managers met with PO and MOF representative to discuss the possibilities, goals and directions of BT.

Digital also launched two additional consultations that year—albeit with less success: Climate Talks and Culture Talks. Although these consultations did not feature strongly in interviews (I did not ask about them specifically), some team members were candid about the role that failure played in learning about the problems that talks systems were designed to address. The reasons given for the failure of these consultations were an inability to connect with important stakeholders on the issues—both culture funding and climate planning are areas that require a lot of background expertise—the kind more suited to formalized consultation procedures. The broad scope of BT was better suited to reaching people with areas that directly impacted them, like healthcare and education.

The implementation of BT supports learning through focus on iterations that revise the understandings and design motivations of talks consultations. Digital used a rough prototype built using Drupal\(^1\) and incorporating many different mechanics to launch the first iteration of BT in 2015. The first BT was very much an MVP, built in under two weeks out of an assemblage of Drupal modules: portions of code that are communally maintained and enable developers to expand the functionality of their sites.

The use of free and open source software (FOSS) has important implications for the politics and performance of BT. By using technology which is widely known by outside developers, Digital can capitalize on the wealth of knowledge and labour committed by outside parties in expanding Drupal. This means that consultations can continually be reconfigured to meet specific needs, and to address problems with each successive iteration. Using FOSS means that the consultations are not beholden to the proprietary software or expertise of external vendors, whose distance from the project makes communication and learning difficult. As staff changes, Digital can more easily bring in

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\(^1\)Drupal is a free and open-source (released under a GNU General Public Lisence) web content management system which provides, at its most basic, support for blogs and comments.
developers with an established expertise in the field: thousands of programmers have committed to Drupal, and many thousands more are adept at using it.

The use of FOSS also has ramifications for the democratic politics of the platform. As long as the knowledge taken to produce and administer BT is organized around a community of practice, the project can be sustained across changes in government, so long as the documentation of the code is legible. One cannot seal the architect into the tomb, as it were. As time goes on, the politics of the talks platform will become an important consideration—is BT a tool of the current government, or is it on the way to becoming a tool for the state, the public service and its publics?

For security reasons, talks.ontario has yet to be released as open source, meaning that the code dealing with everything from data collection to voting and sorting cannot be properly vetted. That being said, there is push within the organization to make more parts of BT open to public scrutiny and input, and these decisions could have enormous impacts on the interface between government and organized publics.

By opening the source code when the platform is sufficiently stable, BT makes itself available to other governments and to researchers. This could allow other governments to implement BT-like systems within their own jurisdiction, and to begin situated learning processes around their own constituencies. It also allows scholars and researchers to vet the code itself, and perhaps to reveal even deeper assumptions within the algorithms. This even opens up the possibility for technology oriented civil society groups to improve upon the product in ways that the government may not have the resources to do.

By publishing the information (i.e. the ideas, comments and votes, as well as analytics) gathered through BT as Open Data\(^2\), these contributions become part of a public record of conversations, and the relations that may exist within the data are available for analysis and discussion. Just as with the ideas themselves, not all of these relations will be productive or in good taste, but they will all be open to critique by making the

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\(^2\) i.e. data that anyone can access in a free and open file format and freely put to use under an open and free license [OKF, 2016]
biases of data and their analysis more transparent [Baack, 2015].

Perhaps most importantly, by opening the process through which the information is processed by public servants and integrated into the budget of the day, BT can attempt to realize its goals of participation, legitimacy and accountability. This collaborative development process is rooted within the tenets of deliberative democracy, but also within hacker and FOSS culture—where “everybody who wants to participate in the decision-making process of a particular issue should have the opportunity to do so in a meaningful way” [Baack, 2015, p.5]. This also makes the publicity of the platform a more tangible resource.

Opening code, data and process can make BT more democratic not only because they expose the layered logics of legislation to the public, but by opening new avenues of participation—a term that is growing as fast as the tools for interaction are developing, occurring wherever groups interact with some undefined group of people [Fish et al., 2011]. By constituting BT as a platform open to public input not only through contribution of content, but to the maintenance and development of the platform itself, BT could become a much more powerful object of democracy.

As a state hosted information system, BT can blur the line between citizen and government. Fish writes that through the use of internet-mediated technologies, “distinguishing publics and organizations is becoming harder... organizations take on some of the qualities of publics, such as submitting themselves to more direct and uncontrolled critique... publics appear more and more organized, and less ephemeral... [with] some of the capacities once reserved for organizations” [Fish et al., 2011, p.161]. Taken to a more radical conclusion, BT seems not only like what Gillespie describes as a platform: a programmable and standardized toolkit that institutes a certain way for government to consult citizens [Gillespie, 2010], but also as a virtual interface that connects citizens to government. The democratic potentials for BT are in the interfacing itself—not necessarily the actionable information gathered from the top-down, ministry-led consulta-
tions around specific issues, but in the institutionalization of communication between the publics and governmental organizations.

At its current stage, BT has already performed as a platform for allowing publics to engage in acts of agonistic democracy. Seen as an institution, BT is both separate from and connected to government: it does not produce normative positions that bind legislators or bureaucrats, but it does disintermediate the performance of citizenship and the administration of public affairs.

This relation is somewhat similar to what Fish describes as the early constitution of a relationship between Free Social Enterprise (BT itself— not necessarily government) and Organized Publics (BT users and the publics they participate in). Within the process shown in 5.1, BT is currently in the second stage, where organized publics can coalesce and express their interests on the platform. BT will grow if it acknowledges and fosters the power of these citizens and groups to compete for the resources that BT’s mechanics generate: publicity. The design of BT already implies the need for citizens to constitute organized publics: to mobilize the discursive abilities of their members in argument through comments and idea submission, through their suggestions that groups ought to mobilize and collaborate outside of BT, and through the primacy of vote-based competition.
5.2 Beyond Budget Talks

I have shown how the choices made by developers communicate values into an online consultation system, corroborating the understanding that consultation design needs to be concretely linked with informational and organizational goals [Bryson and Quick, 2013]. The conceptions of those designing the consultation might be about legitimacy or participation, but as Meadows reminds us, these claims must always be examined alongside the outcomes of a system [Meadows and Wright, 2008]. Examining the process of consultation, through its design and implementation can take us beyond discursive claims about democracy, which are co-dependent on the informational outcomes that actually maintain the legitimacy of a democratic institution.

As Wright suggests, BT and other online consultations do not represent a revolutionary break from the framework of traditional democratic theory nor are they mere continuations of traditional politics [Wright, 2012]. Rather, the use of digital tools for consultation represents a growing practice across many areas, including democratic governments. Consultation design involves tradeoffs between values and outcomes that track well known issues in democratic theory, and the technologies used to mediate consultation bring their own challenges. Online consultations can be pretentious and exclusive in ways similar to traditional political institutions—even when team members want to lower barriers to participation. Even so, BT remains a good example of an online consultation tailored to meet citizen capacities, rather than government information needs. BT’s user-centered approach to consultation design could likely be emulated depending on consultation scope—although it may lead us to conclude that not all consultations are most effectively conducted online, and that online consultation itself may not be a sustainable model in the long-run.

By opening the consultative process up and making procedural changes, governments may create path dependencies leading them to improve and reinforce their existing democratic institutions. At least in the case of UICs, Di Gangi and Wasko pointed out that
the more successful these communities are in organizing themselves and proposing ideas, the more pressure is put on their organizational companions to strengthen the role of the community in decisions [Di Gangi and Wasko, 2009]. Perhaps as governments seek more information from citizens, they will become cognizant of the need to reciprocate and cede power. In this case, the role of design for politics becomes one of eliciting publics and creating an ongoing and open relationship with citizens.

If, as in the case of BT, there is no guaranteed procedure for acting upon consultation recommendations, is there still a point? Simone Chambers recently argued that democratic discourse involves divisions of labour between citizens, especially between the tasks of advocacy and deliberation [Chambers, 2013]. This division can perhaps legitimate BT as a space for agonistic politics, where citizens can perform their citizenship by interacting with those that agree and disagree with them. Believing a consultation is legitimate and empowering is essential for citizens, but can this be achieved by the government’s role as audience to citizen performance? Creating a stage for agonistic interactions might help citizens politicize their everyday life, and it may give greater publicity to publics seeking exposure and support, but unless governments can find a way to turn that engagement into action, interest will surely flounder.

By and large, we ought to avoid technologically deterministic, or even utopian frames when studying online consultation. Although it is worth asking whether an online consultation supports deliberation, involves the ceding of state power, or leads to concrete legislative action. We need new frameworks to not only understand the diversity of contributions that citizens can make, but to see how these contributions are being integrated with the consulting organizations. Equally important is understanding the way that people relate to government and consultations. Internet based technologies do have the potential to increase the effectiveness of information gathering, and provide challenging opportunities for scholars to reevaluate democratic norms. For everyone involved in the design of a consultation, a critical stance is essential; institution building presents a
constrained subjectivity to citizens and articulates a relationship of power between them and the state.
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