The value of using local political online forums to reverse political disengagement.

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Abstract

There has been a growing concern regarding political disengagement among citizens within liberal thin democracies. This concern has brought about calls for local political online forums to be used to support participatory and deliberative democracy online to reverse this trend. However, little empirical investigation has been conducted into what such forums can support in terms of participatory and deliberative democracy. After an extensive review of the E-Democracy literature three research questions were developed to examine the value of using online forums to reverse political disengagement. A two pronged methodological approach consisting of qualitative and two-phase quantitative methods was used to examine these research questions, and to test specific recommendations on how to build online forums.

It was found that, firstly, local political online forums cannot support direct or full-participatory democracy and such forums are mainly situated within liberal thin democratic models. Secondly, forums which are placed within local government websites have a greater chance of being inactive. Finally, non-government supported forums can support a type of discussion which increases citizens’ participation in local political discussions.

These results taken together mean that local political online forums will not reverse political disengagement. They do not fail because of some inherent design fault, but because political disengagement is tied to citizens’ dislike of liberal thin democracy.
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1 Introduction

‘The death of democracy is not likely to be an assassination from ambush. It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference, and undernourishment’. (Robert Maynard Hutchins, 1899-1977, http://www.quoteland.com)

The quote by Hutchins, a philosopher of education, highlights a growing concern regarding political disengagement (the reduction in voter turnout in general elections) among citizens within liberal western representative democracies. This concern has brought about calls for information communication technologies (ICT) to be used to support participatory and deliberative democracy online to reverse this trend. This process has become known as E-Democracy which is defined here as: an electronic decision making mechanism that allows citizens to make or influence decisions online about the rules under which they are going to live. There are many ICT tools available to use to provide a platform for E-Democracy; this thesis has chosen one of these to study - a local political online forum, which is a web based forum that has a threaded asynchronous platform for discussion open to all individuals within a local area to discuss local political issues from a non-consensual position.

Local political online forums were heralded as new forms of citizen engagement, which would help reverse political disengagement. However, are the arguments that support the potential of local political online forums’ ability to address political disengagement only focusing on half of the battle? There is no doubt that ICT can create easier channels of access for citizens to participate (in varying degrees) within government decision making
i.e. citizens can input into government consultations from the comfort of their armchairs. But, what if lack of convenience is not the main thrust of political disengagement, what if the political model itself is causing political disengagement within liberal western representative democracies? If the latter is true, then implementing local political online forums to tackle political disengagement is only dealing with half the problem i.e. convenience for citizens. The rest of this chapter will introduce the purpose and scope of the thesis, and conclude by providing a short synopsis of each chapter within.

1.1 Aims of thesis

There are two main objectives to this thesis, the first, will examine the value of using local political online forums to reverse political disengagement. Some E-Democracy advocates such as Riley et al (2003) suggest that ICT could contribute to a renewed faith in government and democracy by the creation of interactive government rooted in dialogue with citizens. Arguments are also made that ICT can widen public political participation within decision making and encourage deliberation (Stanley et al 2002, Jensen et al 2002, Kavanaugh et al 2005, Mulgan et al 1997). In contrast others argue that the internet will not upset the traditional political power structures between citizens and government over decision making (Davis, 1999).

It is unclear from the existing E-Democracy literature whether local political online forums can support the various types of participation and categories of deliberation and address political disengagement. It is important to fill these gaps within the literature because instead of talking abstractly about what can and cannot be supported, clarity
needs to be brought to the debate on the types of discussion, political models and
participatory mechanisms such online forums can actually support. Furthermore, in trying
to reverse political disengagement the literature is unclear on whether it is beneficial to
build forums in conjunction with local government support. If the purpose of
implementing a forum is to allow citizens to influence local government policy, then an
immediate question that arises is should forums be built in conjunction with local policy
decision makers?

The value of using local political online forums to reverse political disengagement will be
established by answering the following questions:

1. What types of participatory and democratic models can local political online
   forums support?

2. Can local political online forums support all categories of deliberation?

3. Is it beneficial to build local political online forums in conjunction with local
government?

The second objective of this thesis is to examine if local political online forums can be
built to be successful. That is to say this thesis will test if the E-Democracy.org’s Local
Issues Forum Guidebook recommendations on how to build a successful forum work. It
is important to test these recommendations because without empirical evidence of their effect E-Democracy promoters could be implementing misleading recommendations.

1.2 Scope of thesis

A two pronged methodological approach consisting of both a qualitative inductive method, and a two-phased quantitative deductive method was used in this research to answer the three research questions above. The first deductive approach used the E-Democracy.org’s ‘Local Issues Forum Guidebook’ recommendations and produced a local political online forum in conjunction with a local government within the UK – Guildford Borough Council (GBC). The secondary purpose of this experiment was to test these recommendations to see if they could produce a successful online forum. The second deductive approach systematically examined the three research questions again and tested the E-Democracy.org’s Local Issues Forum recommendations again but in this second approach it was decided to focus on a sample of local political online forums from around the world.

1.3 Chapters in brief

This dissertation is presented in two main parts. Firstly a review of E-Democracy, communications and political science literature can be found in chapter two through to chapter four. The second part of the thesis presents the empirical findings of this research.
**Chapters two and three**
E-democracy advocates use terms such as participatory democracy and deliberative
democracy when discussing E-Democracy in relation to reversing political
disengagement (Riley, et al, 2003). Democracy, participation, and deliberation are
sometimes used in a vague and ambiguous manner within the literature (Barber 1984,
Coleman & Blumer 2001, Stanley et al 2002, Jensen et al 2002). These chapters will
clarify some of the political science terminology used in relation to E-Democracy. This
will allow the later analysis chapters within this thesis to be precise in terms of examining
the value of using local political online forums to reverse political disengagement.

**Chapter four**
This chapter will show that political disengagement is occurring within Britain, and that it
is a symptom of liberal thin democracy. An argument will be made for the use of
participation and deliberation to address this disengagement. The chapter’s main purpose
is to examine the E-Democracy literature in relation to using local political online forums
to support participation and deliberation to tackle political disengagement, the chapter
concludes detailing the three main research questions within this thesis.

**Chapter five**
Methodological chapter, please see ‘Scope of Thesis’ section above.

**Chapter six**
This chapter will present the findings from an experiment that set up a local political
online forum in conjunction with a local government in the UK. The first purpose of this
chapter is to test the E-Democracy.org’s Local Issues Forum recommendations to see if they can produce a successful forum. The second purpose of this chapter examines the results of this experiment in relation to the three research questions within this thesis.

**Chapter seven**
In order to examine if the results in the last chapter above were confirmed, this chapter systematically examines the three research questions and tests the E-Democracy.org’s Local Issues Forum recommendations again across a bigger sample of 138 local political online forums from around the world.

**Chapter eight**
The last two chapters above could not determine whether all categories of deliberation were present within the sample of forums. This chapter will examine (via a qualitative analytic inductive methodology) if the different categories of deliberation can exist within forums and if not, detail the type of discussion that is present within local political online forums.

**Chapter nine**
This chapter will present the research findings of this thesis, and discuss the implications of these findings in relation to the field of E-Democracy. Some recommendations will also be provided for others interested in implementing E-Democracy with local government.
2 Democracy and its participatory capabilities

E-democracy advocates use terms such as participatory democracy and deliberative democracy when discussing E-Democracy in relation to reversing political disengagement. Democracy, participation, and deliberation are sometimes used in a vague and ambiguous manner within the literature (Barber 1984, Coleman & Blumer 2001, Stanley et al 2002, Jensen et al 2002). When discussing E-Democracy politicians and E-Democracy advocates often fail to recognize that there are variations and subtypes of democracy, participation and deliberation. This chapter and the following chapter will clarify some of the political science terminology used in relation to E-Democracy. This will allow the later analysis chapters within this thesis to be precise in terms of examining the value of using local political online forums to reverse political disengagement.

This chapter will firstly show that democracy is not an undivided concept, and indeed has many sub-categories. Secondly, the different types of participatory mechanisms that can be implemented within these sub-categories will be presented; the concept of deliberation will be discussed in the following chapter.

2.1 Defining democracy

Defining a concept such as democracy is a hard task, if not impossible. The concept of democracy has its roots in ancient Greece (500BC), the Greek term *demos kratos* means rule of the people (mob) or power of the people (Arblaster, 1987). In modern times western democracy has come to mean many things, and is seen as satisfying certain conditions: ‘Democracy, we are told, is government of the people by the people, and for
the people. Government for the people is the idea that the government exists for the sake of its citizens, not for the benefit of the rulers. Democratic governments rule in the interests of the governed’ (Wolff, 1996, p68).

Modern western democracy today is sometimes used as a political statement that encompasses all that is good (Gutmann 1993). Gutmann provides justifications for democracy which include: citizens require a system that arrives at a binding decision that takes everybody’s interests into account; citizens are best suited to judge their own interests; democracy produces equal citizenship rights which protects everyone’s interests; where matters need to be decided collectively there is no better way to distribute political power than to distribute it equally; democracy expresses and pushes forward the autonomy and self-determination of citizens under social interdependence; democracy is instrumental for citizen development; and democracy is a fair compromise on the common good.

Modern western democracy is mainly identified with majority rule (Gutmann 1993) and universal suffrage, but as will be shown in chapter four some political theorists disagree with universal suffrage - John Stuart Mill in Representative Government (Ryan 1974). There are many debates within democratic theory on how to implement free and fair ballots within a majority rule system: an independent judiciary; constitution; legislative; free speech; right to protest; secret ballots; majority rule versus individual rights; and suitable voting mechanisms e.g. first past the post versus proportional representation (Wolff, 1996). Wolff (1996) argues democracy as an instrumental mechanism achieves
the common good for society; and democracy as an ideal develops certain values such as freedom, human rights, and equality (all citizens allowed to take part in decision making).

However, how is it possible for one political concept (democracy) to achieve all of the above? The answer is that it cannot, as a political term democracy is a normative ideal (Gastil, 2000). ‘Rather than conceive of democracy as one form of best practice, or even as an ideal type to which imperfect political systems strive, therefore, it is necessary to see democracy as a complex set of values and principles which interact in different ways in various contexts’ (Pratchett, 2006, p326). Swift (2001) argues that concepts such as equality, freedom (liberty), and justice are distinct entities from democracy, which consists of “the people as a whole having the power to make decisions about the rules under which they are going to live” (Swift, 2001). In defining democracy as a decision making mechanism this research argues that democracy can be implemented in many different ways; and thus can produce many different values, objectives and political systems. The sub-categories of democracy will be defined in the next section.

2.2 Subcategories of democracy

In defining democracy as a decision making mechanism it becomes possible to view it in its various subcategories. This section will now describe five subcategories of democracy, which have elements of political participation, a term widely used in E-Democracy in relation to reversing political disengagement. The five categories are: liberal thin democracy, liberal plural thin democracy, unitary democracy, direct democracy, and strong democracy.
2.2.1 Liberal thin democracy

Liberal thin democracy is the political system used within Great Britain, and it comprises of representative democracy and liberalism. To begin with let us look at representative democracy, ‘The people elect representatives who then both make laws and put them into practice. This is the idea of representative democracy, as defended by Mill... for Mill representative democracy is the only means by which democracy can survive in the modern world’ (Wolff, 1996, p103). Mansbridge (1983) provides a description of representative democracy, which she calls adversary democracy. According to her, representative democracy consists of: conflicting interests, equal voting, equal protection of interests, majority rule within decision making, and secret ballot voting.

Representative democracy implies a primary concern with equal protection of interests. Citizens can choose decision makers for a period, and then replace them. Pateman (1970), using the theories of Schumpeter, Berelson, Dahl, Satori and Eckstein also gives us a further definition of this concept, which she calls a contemporary theory of democracy. This form of democracy consists of a set of institutional arrangements at national level, where elite groups compete for votes at ‘periodic free elections’ and universal suffrage is implemented.

In terms of liberalism, Hayek (1949) says individualism is ‘primarily a theory of society, an attempt to understand the forces which determine the social life of man, and only in the second instance a set of political maxims derived from this view of society...’ (Hayek, 1949, p6). Liberalism is the collection of these political maxims, and Hayek’s political
theories contain core elements of liberalism. Hayek is an advocate of a free market economy, which is an unregulated market where buyers and sellers arrange prices of services and goods through competition. He says such an unregulated system should be used as a form of social organisation. He argues for limited government involvement within social affairs, where majority rule infringements on individual liberties and freedoms should be prevented (Tomlinson, 1990).

Liberals such as Hayek do not favour communitarian ideals, because liberals are primarily concerned with the freedom and the autonomy of individuals to pursue their own version of what is good (Swift, 2001). Liberalism’s main concern is with freedom and autonomy of the individual to pursue their own concept of what they deem is good within a free market. The liberal position argues that individuals choose to regulate society for their own individual benefits (self-interest) and state agencies are created to maximise individual benefit (Swift, 2001).

Liberalism and representative democracy have merged within Great Britain. However, it is not a stable merger, because liberalism tries to restrain government involvement into individuals’ affairs, while at the same time representative democracy requires majority rule through general elections. The contradiction at the heart of liberalisms’ connection to democracy is that liberty cannot survive without political power, however political power removes liberty i.e. a liberal state induces fear of coercion in its citizens to make them obey the law, and in return for socially acceptable behaviour it protects them from coercion (Barber, 1984).
Barber (1984) argues that liberalism has produced a thin system of democracy, which has undone democratic institutions i.e. liberalism has produced citizens’ cynicism about voting, and citizens’ alienation and preference for private interests; and as a concept it goes against democratic ideals such as: equality; citizenship; participation; public good; and civic virtue – all of which are products of common thinking and common living (Barber, 1984). Western representative democracy is becoming interlinked with capitalism and the free market. Under this model democracy is adapted and selected to achieve liberal ends (Barber 1984). Barber argues that liberal ideals such as self-interest have given rise to citizen apathy, alienation, and the use of bargaining mechanisms within western representative democracies. We shall call this political model liberal thin democracy.

2.2.2 Liberal plural thin democracy
Before detailing the wider theory of pluralism, Dahl’s (1971) concept of polyarchy will be examined. Essentially a polyarchy is a form of representative democracy, and Dahl (1971) says there are two necessary characteristics for a polyarchy to function. One, a political system where opposition political parties can organize in order to oppose, and compete with an incumbent representative government in free and fair elections. Two, a political system whose government is responsive to the preferences of citizens who are political equals.
Dahl argues that for this second characteristic to be fulfilled all citizens must have unimpaired opportunities: to develop their own preferences; to indicate their preference to government by autonomous individual / collective action; and to have their preferences weighed equally by government. A polyarchy consists of: governing representatives; free elections; inclusive participation; the right to contest elections in opposition; organizational independence; and the right to independent alternative information.

Dahl’s theories are more commonly known as pluralism. Dahl (1982) says pluralism consists of organizations (subsystems) which are independent and autonomous within the state. Such organizations minimize government coercion; however, he argues such organizations need some control as they may increase injustice. He also notes that not all plural systems are democratic, and autonomous organizations can exist in undemocratic regimes. Pluralism is a theory which views western democracies such as the United States as political systems which are not governed by all citizens that live within them, but are governed by a multitude of groups within them (Reynolds, 1996). Such groups include: trade unions, environmentalists, and financial lobbyist and so on.

In this system citizens cannot change policies directly or indirectly, and public policy is formed from competition among groups i.e. public policy is made by groups of individuals with similar interests working together to influence governments to adopt their policies. Here, power is concentrated in the hands of a few, and because the political system of pluralism functions within a polyarchy (representative democracy) the
same arguments within the last section regarding liberal ideals prevailing (Barber, 1984) can also be applied to pluralism. We shall call this model liberal plural thin democracy.

### 2.2.3 Unitary democracy

A unitary democracy consists of people coming face to face to make decisions by consensus – such a model of democracy does not come from equality or liberty, but is developed from fraternity, solidarity, community and sisterhood/brotherhood (Mansbridge, 1983). Throughout a unitary groups’ existence the individuals within have common interests, and values. Mansbridge notes that unitary democracy begins with the informal gathering of friends who treat each other as equals – this friendship is extended to the political realm. The group than becomes more formal by taking on a name, admitting new members, and turning its informal procedures of decision making into rules. Unitary democracy encourages members to identify with one another and with a group as a whole. This process of identification helps develop common interest without formal power. The use of consensus means that decisions are unanimous and because conflicts of interests do not arise bargaining is not required. Voting does not occur in this process. She argues that unitary democracy does contain elements of conflict, which can be seen when groups argue things through to reach agreement.

Within a unitary democracy citizens have the same interests, and such citizens do not require equal power to protect their interests against one another, because each individual will protect the interests of all the others (Mansbridge, 1983). However, what citizens do require is equal respect or equal status i.e. unitary democracy requires a rough equality of
respect among its members in order to preserve a bond of friendship. Such close relations produce a common interest. We shall call this political model unitary democracy.

### 2.2.4 Direct democracy

Direct democracy uses referenda and does not contain face-to-face deliberation or public debate; and individuals generate their interest at home and not in a public sphere (Mansbridge, 1983). In a direct democracy citizens choose between political party choices via referenda. Critics of this system say that: the loudest voices, the more prejudice voices, and private interests nearly always sway the vote. Fung and Wright (2003) call this type of decision making: *aggregative voting*, citizens’ vote for their own self-interest i.e. they vote in isolation from the opinions of others for a policy option or representative without concern for the common good. In this system a citizen without real knowledge of the issues votes for policies (Barber, 1984). We shall call this model direct democracy.

### 2.2.5 Strong Democracy

Unlike unitary democracy, strong democracy does not require individuals to have common interests, and unlike direct democracy it embraces deliberation. Strong democracy is not always direct, and consists of deliberation and participation (Barber, 1984). In this system citizens within a multicultural society engage with local and national government and consider deliberation a high priority in settling disputes and attaining common ground. Citizens participate in governing, in some matters, at least some of the time.
‘It rests on the idea of a self-governing community of citizens who are united less by homogenous interests than by civic education and who are made capable by common purpose and mutual action by virtue of their civic attitudes and participatory institutions than their altruism or their good nature. Strong democracy is consonant with – indeed it depends upon – the politics of conflict, the sociology of pluralism, and the separation of private and public realms of action’ (Barber, 1984, p117). Strong democracy does not envision politics as a way of life, but it does view it as a way of living i.e. humans with competing and overlapping interests can live together for their mutual advantage and to the ‘advantage of their mutuality’. Barber states that transformation is at the centre of a strong democracy. Strong democracy confronts conflict and competing private interests. This is in contrast to liberal thin democracy, which tries to eliminate, repress, or tolerate conflict; strong democracy tries to transform conflict by creating a public language that transforms private interests, which are susceptible to ‘public accommodation’ (Barber, 1984). It transforms conflict into cooperation, private into public, and dependency into interdependency.

According to Barber strong democracy accounts for and responds to the basic conditions that give rise to politics (see the discussion of the conditions of politics in the fourth chapter and political criteria in the methodology chapter for more detail) - ‘politics in the participatory mode where conflict is resolved in the absence of an independent ground through a participatory process of ongoing, proximate self-legislation and the creation of a political community capable of transforming dependent, private individuals into free
citizens and partial and private interests into public goods’ (Barber, 1984, p132). We shall call this model strong democracy.

The five sub-categories of democracy detailed above are not mutually exclusive and they do overlap. This crossover will be explored within the typology detailed below. Now that the subcategories of democracy have been defined we will examine what participatory mechanisms (a term used widely within E-Democracy in relation to political disengagement) they can support.

2.3 Participation
Participation is a term used widely within E-Democracy in relation to political disengagement. Thus, it important to clarify this concept before examining the value of local political online forums to support it, and address political disengagement. Political participation is a mechanism by which citizens express their political attitudes, beliefs, opinions, and attempt to influence goals or implement policies (Clarke et al, 2004). In attempting to influence decision making participation can take many forms - voting, demonstrating, canvassing, and engaging in community activities. Within this section a general definition of political participation will be provided, and secondly, using Pateman’s (1970) work, a categorization of the concept in relation to decision making will be detailed. Finally, a typology will be constructed detailing the ability of the various subcategories of democracy discussed above to support the different participatory types below.
2.3.1 A general theory of political participation

E-Democracy advocates use the term participation (in relation to reversing political disengagement online) in a general sense when in fact it has many sub-meanings.

Pateman (1970) points out that over the years the classical theorists were misrepresented and confused. She argues that there are two different theories within the classical theory of democracy. The first set of theorists, including Bentham (1843) and James Mill (1937) view participation as a protective device. According to Pateman the second set of theorists within the classical theory of democracy consist of Rousseau (1968 {1762}), J.S Mill (1861,{2004}), and Cole (1920) and it is their theories which form the basis of her categorization of participatory democracy. Before detailing Pateman’s categorization of participation according to its impact on decision making, her general summary of Rousseau’s (Rousseau, (1968 {1762}) theory of participatory democracy will be detailed in the six points below.

Firstly, within a participatory democracy each citizen is involved in political decision making; therefore they can take part in decisions about their own life and welfare.

Secondly, participatory democracy like representative government has the function of ensuring good government i.e. it has a protective function.

Thirdly, participation does not just perform a protective function for a set of institutional arrangements, but it has a psychological impact on participants. This impact occurs via an interrelationship between institutions and the social / political attitudes and characters of citizens. This is the educational function of participation, it educates citizens to vote for the ‘general will’ i.e. the common interest or common good, and not their own private
Within a participatory democracy an individual must get cooperation from others if s/he is to get an action accepted. An individual learns that s/he must take into account wider matters than his/her own private interests, and that public and private interests are linked. Within a participatory democracy an educated citizen can distinguish between his or her own private desires, and s/he learns to be a public as well as a private citizen. Eventually, via this education an individual sees no conflict between public and private interests. Once a participatory system is set up it becomes self-sustaining i.e. the qualities required for such a system to work are those that the process of participation develop and foster. The more one participates the better able one is to do so in the future. The educative effects on citizens that result from participation include: development of a sense of political efficacy (a sense of political competence in performing civic duties); broadening of citizens’ outlooks and interests; the development of an appreciation of connection between public and private interests; an increase in familiarity with democratic procedures, and the learning of democratic skills.

Fourthly, within a participatory democracy citizens have political equality. Every citizen has the opportunity to participate in decision making. Within this system certain economic conditions are required: economic equality and economic independence. This does not mean absolute equality, but that the differences that do exist should not lead to political inequality; a certain amount of economic equality is required to give citizens independence and security. This is the basis on which political equality and political independence are secured.
However, within a participatory democracy citizens need to be interdependent, this being necessary if independence and equality are to be assured i.e. one needs the cooperation of others to push forward an agenda. Only policies which offer equal benefit or equal hardship will be accepted - ‘there would be an equal dependence of each individual on all the others viewed collectively as so, and independent participation is the mechanism whereby this interdependence is enforced’ (Pateman, 1970, p23). In a participatory democracy citizens are independent equals and are equally dependent on each other, and all are equally subject to the law. All citizens accept such laws because such laws were arrived at through a participatory collective decision - participation gives citizens control over their life and surrounding environment.

Fifthly, Pateman argues that because of the interrelationship between the authority of the institution and the psychological orientation of individuals, participatory institutions cannot be a threat to freedom. Rousseau defines freedom as ‘obedience to a law one prescribes to oneself’ (Rousseau, 1968 {1762}). The final function of a participatory system is integration. This function increases the feeling among citizens that they belong within a community.

Pateman acknowledges that differences do exist between J.S Mill (1861,{2004}) and Cole (1920) and Rousseau’s theories of participation. However, there are similarities which she uses to reinforce aspects of Rousseau’s theory to give us a general picture of participation situated in a modern political system:
‘The existence of representative institutions at national level is not sufficient for democracy; for maximum participation by all the people at that level of socialisation, or “social training”, for democracy must take place in other spheres in order that the necessary individual attitudes and psychological qualities can be developed. This development takes place through the process of participation itself’ (Pateman, 1970, p 42).

As we can see from this quote one of the functions of participation is education. This educative function takes two roles, one is psychological, and the other is citizen training in democratic procedures and skills. Rousseau’s system is self-sustaining, it fosters the qualities necessary for its implementation i.e. the more one participates the better one becomes at participating (Pateman, 1970). Within participation assemblies social decisions are developed as are the social and political capabilities of participants. Pateman says that this process integrates people and assists in their acceptance of collective decisions. Thus participation refers to ‘equal participation in the making of decisions, and political equality refers to equality of power in determining the outcome of decisions’ (Pateman, 1970, p43). The next section will categorize this general theory of participation into a typology according to its impact on decision making.

2.3.2 A categorization of participation
Pateman’s (1970) seminal work provides us with an applied categorization of political participation according to its impact on decision making processes. The categories to be discussed here are: Full-participation, Partial participation, and Pseudo participation.
Full-participation means that there is only one group of individuals, and each member of the decision making body has equal power to determine the outcomes of decisions. Such a group is unsupervised, and is self-regulating. Here, citizens must have the necessary information on which they can base their decision.

This model can be summed up as: 'In a participatory democracy, decision-making is the process whereby people propose, discuss, plan, and implement those decisions that affect their lives. This requires that the decision making process be continuous and significant, direct rather than through representatives, and organized around issues instead of personalities' (Benello and Roussopoulos, 2005, p6). The authors argue that participatory democracy does not lessen efficiency in policy making. A participatory system in contrast to self-serving elites is committed to full dissemination of power. Participatory democracy is built from the ground up and decision making power is decentralized to local neighbourhoods. We shall call this form of model, ‘full-participation’. Pateman breaks down full participation into different sub categories according to degree of participation within decision-making.

Partial participation is a process where two groups can influence each other in making policy decisions. There is no equality of power in determining the outcome of decisions. The superior group has the power to decide, whereas the subordinate group does not participate in the making of decisions – national governments use partial participation for
consultation exercises. In order for partial participation to work citizens must have the necessary information on which they can base their influence.

Pseudo participation is a process were information is passed to a citizen regarding a decision before it is executed. When such a decision is made the citizen in question is not present, or if s/he is, s/he has no influence on the decision. In such a scenario a local or national official allows citizens to question him /her about a policy decision instead of just implementing a decision. First the official uses participation to get his/her decision accepted i.e. here the decision is already made (but not executed) and participation is used as a form of persuasion. We shall call this mode of participation, ‘pseudo participation’.

Using examples from industry Pateman says that both partial participatory democracy and full- participatory democracy can happen at higher or lower levels within for example a workplace. Lower level decisions are based on shop floor decisions; and higher level decisions are based on wider company decisions.

By citizens’ engaging in all modes of participation discussed here, Pateman argues there is some form of increase in citizens’ political efficacy (citizens’ familiarity with democratic procedures and their democratic skills). Furthermore, she argues that the development of a sense of political efficacy is only one aspect of the educative function of participation. For the attainment of all areas of the educative function higher level participation would be required. In this process higher level participation allows citizens
see decisions impact on wider social and political spheres. In terms of the state lower level participation involves citizens participating in a process of engagement discussing how to implement local policy decisions already made; whereas higher level participation means citizens participate in actual policy decision making for the local area.

Rousseau’s theory of complete state participatory democracy in full is an ideal. However, Pateman argues that where a participatory organisation allows both higher and lower levels of participation, then an individual could directly participate in many decisions while still remaining within a representative system—one does not exclude the other, they can co-exist. However, she notes such a system would need to introduce lower level participation first to give citizens the skills to engage with higher level participation.

2.4 Conclusion and typology 1
The typology in table 2.1 was developed to show graphically which participatory mechanisms are supported by each subcategory of democracy. For the purpose of the analysis chapters this research has added one more category to this typology, called Non-participation. This category indicates that citizens have no impact whatsoever on a decision making process or decision makers.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Democratic models</th>
<th>Participatory capability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal thin democracy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liberal plural thin democracy</td>
<td>✗</td>
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<tr>
<td>Direct democracy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unitary democracy</td>
<td>✗</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strong Democracy (Higher level / Lower level)</td>
<td>✗</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Under the concept of strong democracy Barber uses the term participation in a general manner. As can be seen from the typology above participation can take many forms, and as a concept it is not confined to strong democracy. Next this research will define deliberation, a term widely used within E-Democracy circles in relation to political disengagement.
3 Deliberation

It will be argued here in contrast to Barber (1984) that there are various types of deliberation. Deliberation is a term used widely within E-Democracy in relation to political disengagement. Thus, it important to clarify this concept before examining the value of local political online forums to support it, and address political disengagement. Deliberation is not a uniform concept and within the literature it falls into three main categories, which this research has named: mixed discourses and modes of communication; rational deliberation redefined; and non-rational, non-consensual deliberation. These forms of deliberation will be explored in this chapter; however, to begin with, deliberation’s common features across all subcategories will be explored.

3.1.1 A general view of deliberation
Deliberation consists of: ‘institutional contexts and practices that promote open dialogue and encourage the emergence of shared solutions through the creation of new knowledge and understanding’ (Gutmann and Thompson, 1996, 16).

Burkhalter et al (2002) provide a holistic view of deliberation: as a process which (a) involves the attentive weighing of information and views (analysis of problems and solutions), (b) an egalitarian process with adequate speaking time for participants and attentive listening by participants (here discussions become democratic), and (c) dialogue that bridges differences among participants’ different ways of knowing and speaking i.e. it develops a shared language (common ground)- ‘Public deliberation is a combination of’
careful problem analysis and an egalitarian process in which participants have adequate speaking opportunities and engage in attentive listening or dialogue that bridges divergent ways of speaking and knowing’ (Burkhalter et al, 2002, 398). Fishkin et al (2004b) state that the main attribute of deliberation is weighing, and this can be individual, collective or both, and can involve reflection, discussion or both. The authors say that deliberation weighs competing considerations via discussions which are informed, balanced, conscientious, substantive, and comprehensive.

A minimalist view of deliberation is provided by Mutz’s (2006) research ‘I draw on political theory for my expectations, but I study political talk as it occurs (or does not occur) naturally in American social life. Thus rather than examine per se, that is, a large package of variables all rolled into one concept, I focus on one necessary, though not sufficient, in almost all definitions of deliberation: that is: that people be exposed to oppositional political perspectives through political talk.’ (Mutz, 2006, p6). Mutz acknowledges that this falls far below all the requisites of most theories of deliberation (detailed below) and that is why she calls it ‘cross cutting exposure’ so as not to suggest more than is involved.

The common features of many definitions of deliberation are that deliberation is: transformative (turns private interests into public opinion); involves exposure to different views (Mutz, 2006); reflective (weighs opinions), egalitarian, and produces new knowledge and shared solutions. Thus deliberation is a process; however, there is disagreement on what this process should include and what its outcomes are. Button and
Ryfe (2005) argue that deliberation can be supported by many different types of structures: national issues forums, deliberative polling and citizen juries etc. Deliberation is therefore not a uniform concept and it can take many forms depending on who initiates it (e.g. civic association, nongovernmental association, or government organization) and who participates within it (e.g. self-selection, random selection, or stakeholder selection) (Button and Ryfe, 2005). The structure of a deliberative forum can affect the type of participation it produces, for example a civic organization cannot guarantee that its result will affect decision makers. The three broad categorizations of deliberation will be presented in the following sections.

3.1.2 First category: Mixed discourses and modes of communication

Dryzek (2000) details a concept of deliberation, which he calls “discursive democracy”. This concept is quite similar to Barber’s strong democracy concept detailed above, and we shall call it “Mixed discourses and modes of communication”. Dryzek argues that the essence of democracy is deliberation, and within deliberation reflection occurs i.e. citizens’ preferences are transformed without the use of coercion or other bargaining characteristics such as propaganda, expression of self-interest or deception. Instead of imposing strict limits on what can be seen as deliberative, Dryzek and Mansbridge (2003) say deliberation should go beyond reason giving and incorporate rhetoric, emotion and storytelling. Thus authentic deliberation’s only condition is that communication induces reflection on citizens’ preferences in a non-coercive environment i.e. free contestation of discourses by competent citizens within a public arena. Dryzek links this concept of authentic democracy to critical theory (discussed below) and calls it discursive
democracy. Discursive democracy is transnational, ecological, dynamic and is a form of deliberation ‘which should be pluralistic in embracing the necessity to communicate across difference without erasing difference, reflexive in its question orientation to established traditions’ (Dryzek, 2000, p 3).

Dryzek’s (2000) discursive democracy is similar to Barber’s concept of strong democracy, except Dryzek emphasizes the presence of conflict and the presence of other forms of discourse such as storytelling within the deliberative process. Polletta and Lee (2004) take up this latter point and argue that traditional forums of deliberation, which emphasise reason giving as core to deliberative democracy need to accept other forms of discourse such as personal storytelling, rhetoric, and narrative into the debate because narrative firstly, allows for excluded groups to register difference and secondly, allows for agreement to be formed across difference.

Discursive democracy is built on the following elements:

- It mainly consists of rational argument, but storytelling and greeting are also used in discursive democracy. However, rational argument is noted as the dominant mode of communication.
- Dryzek says that all forms of discourse and communications (racist, uncivil, un-reciprocal) should be permitted within deliberation.
- Not all argument needs to be nested in public interest; private interests and bargaining can be introduced and treated to the mechanisms of deliberation.
• Within a plural state, consensus (unanimous agreement on a course of action and reasons for that action) is unattainable. Thus within such a state deliberation consists of citizens agreeing on a course of action and having different reasons for choosing it.

• Deliberation should take place within public spheres within civil society, and such public spheres should have a transmission mechanism into the state’s institutions.

The second category of deliberation (Rational deliberation redefined) to be discussed below places supreme importance on rational debate over and above any other form of communication. Before we examine this second category let us, firstly explore the origin of rational deliberation redefined in Habermas’ theories, and secondly, examine what the critics of Habermas have to say on his theories.

3.1.3 Habermas and rational deliberation
One cannot discuss rational deliberation without looking at Habermas’ theories on communicative action and the public sphere. Habermas (1984, 1987) distinguishes two social worlds: the system and the life world. The system is the world of economic structures, the institutions of a state, and the instrumental rationality of science. The life world is the world of social communication from the perspective of subjects within it.

Habermas (2000) defines the public sphere as a domain where public opinion is formed through rational discussions by citizens, who are not influenced or constrained by the system. Habermas’ public sphere is an arena for public discourse and association, which is distinct from the apparatus of the state and economic markets (Fraser 1992).
Habermas’ (1989) ontological claim is that the public sphere has three elements: firstly it is inclusive of all citizens, secondly issues are discussed that affect all citizens, and finally deliberation is unrestricted by social class, and other outside influences e.g. political or private power. However, he argues that the public sphere within contemporary society is no longer an arena of rational debate and he argues that the instrumental rationality of the ‘system’ has encroached on the reason (communicative action) of the ‘life world’. People within the life world cannot imagine (think critically about the political system they live in) another political system, and thus representative democracy as it stands only puts forward the interests of the ‘system’ not the will of the people. Habermas calls this the distortion of communication in the life-world.

For Habermas (1984, 1987), communicative action consists of personal exchanges via communication beyond power, money and personal interests. He argues that an agreement achieved through communication has a rational basis and such communication is a universal condition. He calls this process ‘communicative action’, which is both a process of reaching an understanding, and a process of reaching agreement among speaking and acting individuals. Rationality within communicative action is achieved via inter-subjective deliberation which is aimed at consensus. As part of communicative action, different arguments are proposed and participants justify such arguments as valid by using external links to empirical situations. Within communicative action speech is understandable, spoken truthfully and spoken legitimately i.e. a medical physician speaking about the possible treatment for a disease.
An agreement through communicative action cannot be induced by outside forces, or by violence, because it has to be accepted as valid by participating individuals, which gives it legitimacy. Such agreements are reached on ‘common convictions’, and according to Habermas (1984, 1987) the ability to conduct communicative action is inherent within all humans. Everyone who can use language intuitively knows what good deliberation is, and every speaker/communicator can tell digression from this ‘ideal speech situation’.

For Habermas (1984), the ‘ideal speech situation’ means that only good argument and not outside forces (external power, lack of time, lack of knowledge and distorted information) determine the outcome of deliberation (discourse). He further argues that by using communication action it is possible to obtain consensus on political issues.

According to Wright (2005) ‘reciprocity’, mutual trust, accord with other participants and shared knowledge occurs during ideal speech between participants. Communicative action as presented by Wright not only produces the goal of understanding, but coordinates the goal directed activities of different subjects and also works as a medium in the socialization of subjects. Wright (2005) argues communicative action is based on the legitimacy of universal consensus. During discourse if everyone strives to achieve universal conditions (for example reciprocal understanding and mutual accommodation), and by these means arrives at a decision, then this decision must be acted upon for the good of society because all citizens were involved in its development, this is what’s called a consensual agreement.
Habermas (1984) notes four conditions for obtaining ideal speech: 1), quality - this means participants stay engaged on the topic at hand; 2), all participants involved in discourse have the opportunity to challenge issues discussed, giving rise to diverse patterns of conversation. Participants are free to shape their own political talk free from constraints of others (freedom of speech); 3), equal distribution of voice, all participants have an equal say, and they make their private interests known; 4), individuals that engage in discourse do so in a way which opens it up to questions. This is reciprocity – one gains knowledge through the perspective of others (two way conversation). Huttunen (2000) argues that the first and fourth conditions allow discourse in general to exist, and the second and third conditions ensure that the best argument overrides all others.

3.1.4 Critics of Habermas

Habermas’ public sphere and communicative action concepts have been severely criticized over the years. Fraser (1992) argues the public sphere is a normative ideal, because for it to exist, all social inequalities would have to be eliminated within society. There have been other criticisms levelled against Habermas. Firstly, communicative action is ethnocentric, because Habermas ‘attempts to discern normalcy from a particular historical instance’ (Brown and Goodman, 2001, p213). Different cultures use many different ways to communicate, to choose one method of communicating as universal is to exclude other non-western methods of communicating.

Secondly, Habermas believed that to understand a communication means taking a stand on its validity claims, in other words, using speech to transmit and critically examine an
assertion of validity; however, Brown and Goodman (2001) argue that ‘traditional norms’ and non-rational ‘sentiments’ integrate society much more than validity claims, and they further argue that there is no evidence to suggest a historical move away from traditional norms to Habermas’ communicative action. They argue that all one can say is that presently, liberal thin democracies prefer communicative action as a mode of political discourse over and above system integration and traditional norms. Thus, today within liberal thin democracies conditions such as reciprocity are preferred by individuals. Brown and Goodman (2001) further argue that in such cases where communication is likely to take the form of ‘validity claims’ such conditions as inclusivity do not appear to be necessary e.g. within scientific debates the science community exclude lay people from scientific discussions.

Thirdly, Brown and Goodman (2001) present post-modern arguments against Habermas, and in particular Lyotard (1984) who argues that Habermas defines communicative action in such a way (universal conditions) as to de-legitimate other forms of language and communication. Even if ideal speech transcends local contexts and is universal, it will still be different in different cultures (Brown and Goodman, 2001). Habermas’ concepts are too vague, and if one tries to make them practical, they become narrow e.g. to accept a mode of rational communication as a universal condition within an online forum means excluding certain groups of people who use storytelling as a mode of dialogue, thus the condition becomes un-universal (Brown and Goodman, 2001). Finally, it is very hard to see how within post modernity one group of individuals can claim their mode of speech alone is truth. No one or no one mode of communication owns truth; and
no one individual or group has the capacity to transmit truth to others in a pure form (Wright, 2005).

As we can see from Habermas’ critics, his theories on the public sphere and communicative action are normative and are unattainable in the real world of political talk especially within an online forum. Such strict controls on only allowing ‘rational talk’ within discussions do not produce a finite truth, but alienate many other ways individuals talk e.g. personal narrative. Habermas’ communicative action is not even a good yardstick to measure the quality of deliberation, because it could be argued that the method of speech in the system is the same method of speech in the Life world, however, instead of speech infected with rational power and status as in the system, the public sphere of the Life world discussions are exerting power by excluding other methods of talk which are non rational. As will be shown below in the second category of deliberation (Rational deliberation redefined), communicative theorists have used aspects of Habermas’ theories to justify rationality as a central component of deliberation without sticking rigidly to Habermas’ criteria noted above.

3.1.5 Second category: Rational deliberation redefined

Benhabib (1996), Cohen (1996), and Gutman (1996) do not subscribe in full to Habermas’s theory of communicative action; however, they do claim that rationality is central to deliberation. The various theories that support this claim have been labelled by this research rational deliberation redefined. This section will now detail these theories, and conclude by presenting some empirical investigations of rational deliberation
redefined. Benhabib (1996) calls for de-centred public spheres where deliberation informs people; causes citizens to reflect critically; and contains practical rationality (people support opinions by giving good reasons). Such deliberation is procedural in that it emphasizes certain institutional procedures for attaining decisions binding for all. It also allows conflicts of interests to be articulated under conditions of social cooperation mutually acceptable to everyone. And finally, such deliberation cannot exist on a mass scale within assemblies; instead it exists in a plural democracy i.e. an interlocking net of organizations and associations. Cohen (1996) also views a core aspect of deliberation as reason giving. Within Cohen’s concept, citizens find reasons that are compelling to others; and acknowledge other citizens as equals. Here again deliberation is seen as procedural.

Mendelberg notes that ‘Many theorists (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Habermas 1989; and Rawls 1996) emphasize that during true deliberation, people rely on reasons that speak to the needs or principles of everyone affected by the matter at hand’ (2002, p153). Fung and Wright (2003) also argue that the most important procedure within deliberation is that citizens find and accept reasons for collective actions.

Elster (1998, p1) also sees rationality as a core aspect to deliberation - ‘democracy revolves around the transformation rather than simply the aggregation of preferences’. He defines deliberative democracy as ‘decision making by discussion among free and equal citizens’ (Elster, 1998, p1). Elster points out that there are two concepts (democracy and deliberation) within Habermas’ theories. Deliberative democracy is a
collective debating decision making process, which includes all the participants the
decision affects. In this process he argues the second concept occurs i.e. arguments are
placed by participants who are committed to values such as rationality and impartiality
(deliberation), and it is these rational principles that guide debate. In the midst of this
deliberation Elster argues that participants try and find flaws in other participants’
arguments, and the truth will emerge as a set of propositions which have been fully
challenged.

Elster argues that when citizens who are equal try and make a decision which concerns
them all, and they cannot reach a consensus, they can use three different procedures to
assist them in reaching that decision: 1), arguing (a form of communicating), 2)
bargaining (a form of communicating) and, 3) voting. A decision can be reached by using
one, two or all three procedures. He further states that this trichotomy is related to
another one. In the process of collective decision making citizens’ preferences are
subjected to three processes: aggregation (voting, and bargaining), transformation
(transformation of preferences via rational deliberation), and misrepresentation (any one
of the three procedures can induce this). Elster also provides a third trichotomy, which
involves the motives of citizens within a group, including reason, interest and passion.
Reason he argues is impartial, disinterested and dispassionate i.e. arguing is connected to
reason, an arguer must appeal to impartial values, and this appeal may or may not be a
misrepresentation.
To sum up this second category of deliberation practical methodological examples of how rational deliberation redefined has been investigated previously will be presented. Content analyse has been the most widely used tool to analysis deliberation within online forums; and, where it has been used it has been the sole tool used {e.g. Trenel (2004), Stromer-Gally (2005), Hill and Hughes (1998), Davis (1999) and Jensen (2002)}. All these studies used content analysis to analyze posts within online forums. They have a lot in common in their methods and findings. They developed coding schemes built on previous quantitative empirical research and theoretical literature, and used indicators such as: equality (discussion includes all individuals that the final decision affects; and all participants are on an equal footing within the debate); rational expression, reasoned argument (validity claims supported by reason, and framed in favour of the common good); achievement of consensus; respect (no use of foul language or insults); use of external sources (reference to external objective debate sources); agreement; disagreement (non-consensual i.e. participants have distinct views on a particular subject); flaming (personal attacks on other participants); interactivity (reciprocity, and the use of dialogue not monologue); non-involvement; reflexivity (participants talk about the communication process itself); and sincerity (participants make their interests and motives known to other participants).

All these studies assume that the presence of ranting, personal attack, personal narrative, non-listening, and the lack of attitude change by citizens in the face of good evidence are signs of non-deliberation. What constitutes non-deliberation will be taken up in the next section.
3.1.6 Third category: Non-rational, non-consensual deliberation
Within the Mixed discourses, and modes of communication section, Barber, Dryzek and Mansbridge provide a model of deliberation in which different forms of communication come into harmonious contact with one another. Is it possible, for example, for a consultation exercise on child care provision policies involving policy makers using rational discourses and lone parents using personal experiences to find consensus? Mouffe (2000) says that the latter is not possible, because forms of communication within deliberation such as rationality and testimony are always going to be in conflict with each other. Her arguments form the basis of the third and final category of deliberation to be discussed. Because this third category is anti-deliberative (anti in the sense that it views the rationalist attribute of deliberation mentioned in previous two categories as an act of power and not a form of consensus building) this research has called it non-rational, non-consensual deliberation.

Habermas argued for the use of rational deliberation and said that it should be possible to overcome the conflict between equality and liberty and achieve consensus within a public sphere by using deliberation (see Rational Deliberation section). However, deliberation cannot give rise to consensus, because consensus leaves a paradox at the centre of modern democracies (individual rights versus majority rule) and such consensus equals hegemony which results in exclusion (Mouffe, 2000). Mouffe argues that hegemony gives rise to conflict and antagonism. She points out that if society is not whole, and cannot be made whole then there are many truths within one political decision e.g. within
society there maybe many opinions (truths) on one particular issue, thus one political
decision on such an issue cannot achieve consensus.

Mouffe’s (2000) argument is that social objectivity is set up by ‘acts of power’. She
points out that social objectivity is political and uses exclusion to govern – she calls this
‘hegemony’. Power and objectivity do not exist externally to human discussions and
human identities, but form such identities through dialogue. Discourse is an arena in
which fluid subjective group identities are in conflict for hegemony (dominance over
other groups, and avoidance of domination by others). Such a form of conflictual
discourse produces objects and arenas for discussion.

‘a radical democracy, or, in other words, in a form of politics which is founded not upon
dogmatic postulation of any ‘essence’ of the social, but, on the contrary, on affirmation
of the contingency and ambiguity of every ‘essence’, and on the constitutive character of
social division and antagonism…the field of the political as the space for a game which is
never ‘zero-sum’, because the rules and the players are never fully explicit. This game,
which eludes the concept, does at least have a name: hegemony’ ” (Laclau and Mouffe,
2001, p193).

Mouffe argues that Habermas’s ideal that people can achieve agreement via
communicative action is false and, conflict and division are inherent to politics and
political discourse. Understanding and resolution cannot be achieved or made real by the
unity of all citizens. Thus, consensus (objectivity and enlightenment rationality) is not
achievable, and if it is pushed forward as a mode of democracy it will give rise to ‘hegemony’. Objectivity is developed via acts of political power, and this gives rise to exclusion and constituted identities. Hegemony means that each discourse vies for control and domination within deliberations. She argues that deliberation cannot produce consensus, because consensus as an act excludes other possibilities. In this light it is impossible to achieve consensus without exclusion – Mouffe calls this ‘Agonistic Pluralism’. However, she makes a distinction ‘By “the political”, I refer to the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in human relations, antagonism that can take many forms and emerge in different types of social relations. Politics on the other side, indicates the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions, which seek to establish a certain order and organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimension of “the political”.’ (Mouffe, 2000, p101).

An example of how an online forum excluded certain groups through use of rational discourse can be found in Hine’s (2002) research, which examined the use of an online forum for the discussion of laboratory science. In terms of discussing laboratory science the online forum did little in terms of dissolving boundaries between lay people and scientists, and the same discursive barriers that exist offline excluded the general public again online.

Wright (2005) presents Laclau and Mouffe’s (2001) position, a debate is not a process where its rational success can be measured in its ability to be finalized, but a system
which is endlessly, fluid, heterogeneous, conflict ridden, and paradoxical ‘hegemony’.

Thus Mouffe and Laclau argue for a democratic system not based on consensus but dissensus. Pickerill (2005), using examples of anti-capitalist, anti-war, and environmentalist movements’ use of ICT, depicts dissensus as a multiplicity, fluid, non-hierarchical celebration of difference.

Wright argues consensus is an abuse of democracy, whereas dissensus is vital for it. Wright argues that when people discuss politics it is discursively violent before it is calm. Wright also notes that viewing power as productive of its own forms of resistance enables one to see its ubiquitous effects, which allows one to see the agonistic kernel of radical democracy.

3.1.7 Typology 2
Deliberation like participation is not a uniform concept, and it is argued here that it can be broken down into three general categories in relation to how each category views and uses rational debate. Mixed discourses and modes of communication mainly consists of rational argument, however, storytelling, emotion and personal experience are also used within this deliberative process. On the other hand, rational deliberation redefined places utmost importance on rational debate over and above other forms of communication. Deliberation is only said to exist within rational deliberation redefined when participants use rational debate, and in this model other forms of communication are transformed to become rational or excluded. Finally, non-rational, non-consensual deliberation contests the possibility of rational debate achieving consensus, and argues that rationality is an act
of power which (via hegemony) excludes other forms of communication such as storytelling. The typology within table 3.1 provides a more detailed breakdown of the different categories of deliberation.

Table 3.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deliberative category</th>
<th>Attributes</th>
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| Mixed discourses and modes of communication. | • Citizens united by civic education, common purpose, and mutual action / advantage. In the absence of independent common ground conflict and self-interest are transformed into public, cooperative interdependency. Deliberation, publicness, choice, necessity, and reasonableness are all attributes of this system.  
• Reflection (weighing) occurs  
• No communication is excluded, rational argument is the superseding communication, however, rhetoric, emotion, storytelling, are also permitted entry to allow for communication across difference.  
• Consensus unattainable  
• Venue for public sphere should exist within civil society.  
• Communication is framed within common good  
• Informal representation can occur  
• Participants’ experience: an increase of political knowledge, opinion change, and a rise in political efficacy.  
• Within deliberation opinion variance and opinion polarization decrease. Also mutual understanding and empathy rise between citizens.  
• One group may have more access to public sphere |
| Rational deliberation redefined | • Equality of opportunity to participate  
• Conflicts of interest are articulated and resolved under conditions of social cooperation that are mutually acceptable to all citizens. Within this process of deliberation: participants are equals, and they experience a broadening of their own sense of interest; all citizens that a decision affects are included within the debate  
• Deliberation is: limited to rational debate, reflective, procedural, reciprocal, empathic, directed towards consensus, subject to criticism, respectful, framed in common good, and informs participants.  
• Deliberation here is transformative rather than the aggregative of citizens’ private preferences. However, it can involve the aggregates and reconcilement of predetermined interests because |
when rational argument breaks down bargaining and voting maybe used to resolve differences. Thus citizens may be left unchanged by this deliberation.

| Non-rational, non-consensual deliberation. | • Understanding and resolution cannot be achieved, because division is inherent within political discourse.  
• A system of dissensus which is: hegemonic, antagonistic, exclusionary, endless, fluid, heterogeneous, and conflict ridden.  
• Apart from rational debate many forms of communication are used i.e. conflict and strategic action.  
• Within this system: many truths exist at decision making time, which leaves a false consensus. |

### 3.2 Conclusion

For clarity within the discipline of E-Democracy this chapter has produced typologies of both participation and deliberation and discussed the different participatory elements within the subcategories of democracy. Democracy can be instrumentally implemented in many different ways; its subcategories are: liberal thin democracy, liberal plural thin democracy, direct democracy, unitary, and strong democracy. Within the literature review certain theorists (Barber 1984, Coleman & Blumer 2001, Stanley et al 2002, Jensen et al 2002) discuss participation and deliberation as uniform concepts. In contrast, this research has argued that firstly, political participation is not a uniform concept and can be broken down into four types: full-participation, partial participation, pseudo participation, and non participation. Secondly, deliberation is also not a uniform concept and its three broad categorizations are mixed discourses and modes of communication; rational deliberation redefined; and non-rational, non-consensual deliberation. To note, in the following two chapters where the terms participation and deliberation are used they are referring generically to their corresponding typologies above. The use of the specific categorizations within the typologies will become relevant in later three analysis chapters.
Typology one, and typology two were developed because both participation and deliberation are used within the field of E-Democracy in relation to reversing political disengagement. As the next chapter wishes to examine the ability of local political online forums to support participation, and deliberation to tackle political disengagement it was important to firstly clarify both these concepts.
4 Local political online forums, and reversing political disengagement

‘By far the most dangerous foe we have to fight is apathy - indifference from whatever cause, not from a lack of knowledge, but from carelessness, from absorption in other pursuits, from a contempt bred of self satisfaction’. (William Osler, 1849-1919, http://www.quoteland.com)

The quote above by Osler, a renowned physician in his time, hints that self-interest is the cause of apathy and political disengagement. However, the question that must be asked is what causes this self-interest and resulting political disengagement. This chapter will firstly show that political disengagement is occurring within Britain, and argue that it is a symptom of liberal thin democracy. Secondly, an argument will be made for use of participation and deliberation to address political disengagement. Thirdly, both E-Democracy and local political online forums will be defined and a short history of such forums provided. Finally, the E-Democracy literature will be explored to examine the value of using local political online forums to support participation and deliberation to tackle political disengagement.

4.1 Political disengagement, a reality, and a symptom of Liberalism

This section will show that political disengagement is occurring within Britain and it is caused by liberalism. Political disengagement is defined within this research as the reduction in voter turnout in general elections. This definition was chosen because liberal thin democracy’s justification and indeed continued existence rests on citizens exerting
their franchise as opposed to engaging in other forms of political participation such as demonstrating, canvassing and community activities. There are two contrasting debates as to why political disengagement exists; before these debates are examined let us look at some of the statistics surrounding political disengagement. Clarke et al (2004) note that voter turnout in Britain has gradually declined since reaching a high of 84% in the 1950s, however they note that this decline has been an irregular trend, because as recently as 1992 seventy-eight percent voted. They further argue that voter turnouts in 1997 (72%) and 2001 (59%) have fallen to levels not seen since before the Second World War. In the general election in 2005 there was a modest increase to 61.4%, however, there has been a sharp decline in voter participation in Britain in recent years – see Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1

(Data taken from Electoral Commission report Turnout – 2005a)
The Electoral Commission website acknowledges this recent sharp decline in the mid 1990’s and a further decline in local elections ‘Over recent years, there has been a decline in the level of participation in elections across the UK. Turnout at the 2001 general election was only 59.4%, and is even lower at local elections {29.6%}. This trend is reflected in other western democracies.’ (Electoral commission, 2005).

The electoral commission (2005a) Election Turnout report found that ‘people were reporting difficulties in deciding who to vote for, in part because of weakening political alignments but also because of the perceived similarities between the main parties... There was also a perception that voting would make little difference, either because the result was a foregone conclusion or because ‘nothing will change’.... At the same time, survey data suggest that short-term factors offer a better explanation for why turnout in 2005 did not reach the previous pre-2001 ‘norm’. While this implies that the steep decline in general election turnouts since 1997 is not irreversible, the apparent beginnings of a cohort effect with younger age groups carrying forward the habit of non-voting into older age, suggests a very real risk that it will be even harder to mobilise turnout next time’ (Electoral Commission, 2005, p38).

Clarke et al (2004) present the results of the 2001 British Election Study which highlights the various other ways apart from voting that citizens participate in politics. The study reveals people were more likely to contemplate voting than participate in other forms of politics i.e. demonstrating; canvassing; and community activities. Furthermore, ‘voting
and other forms of political participation in Britain occur along multiple, interrelated dimensions’ (Clarke et al, 2004, p223). In other words the study found that individuals who do not vote are also unlikely to be involved in other political participatory activities.

Clarke et al (2004) investigated why people do not vote, and provide two theories, the “Individual rationality framework theory” and the “Participatory citizenship theory” to explain political disengagement. The first, the individual rationality framework’s standard model (as laid out by Clarke et al 2004) has three features. One, Pivotality is the calculated probability a citizen makes of casting a deciding vote to place the most utility providing party in power; two, benefits refers to the difference between political parties. If there is little difference between political party policies, voters may abstain as both parities will provide the same utility benefit whichever gains power; three, interacts refers to the costs of voting i.e. the effort a citizen must make to gain information on political parties versus the benefit in return - ‘When voting is costly, its costs may outweigh its returns, so abstention can be rational even for citizens with party preferences. In fact the returns from voting are usually so low that even small costs may cause many voters to abstain’ (Downs, 1957, p274).

With the above said why do citizens then vote in a liberal thin democracy? Clarke et al (2004) presents three models motivated by the individual rationality framework which explain why individuals might vote i.e. act irrationally. The first model is cognitive mobilization - individuals vote because they are more educated (in present times) then they were previously and have cheaper means (media) to access political information.
With this knowledge they become more aware of government policy which they are not in favour of and become dissatisfied, which prompts them to vote in opposition parties. The second model is minimal rational choice - as in Pivotality within the standard model, an individuals’ ability to influence election results comes into play, however within this model a person’s sense of acting within a group may make them believe they have a greater chance of influencing policy and thus vote. The third model is called general incentives - individuals vote because political parties say they will benefit above the cost of voting. And among other incentives social norms may also make individuals vote.

The individual rationality framework holds that citizen disengagement is not a reaction by citizens against the liberal thin democratic system, but it is a rational citizen reaction to a decision making process in terms of maximizing utility. A liberal thin democratic system does not require all citizens, or even a high proportion of citizens to partake in elections for it to work. As long as enough citizens vote (ballots could be as low as less than half of the electoral population) in elections then the system of liberal thin democracy is sound.

The second theory in this debate is participatory citizenship or, as Barber (1984) calls it, strong democracy, which is detailed in chapter two. Participatory citizenship advocates argue that political disengagement is growing because modern democracies do not support strong democracy. In contrast to the Individual rationality framework, democrats such as Barber (1984) argue that political disengagement is a disease of the liberal thin
democratic model i.e. the liberal thin democratic model creates citizens who are liberal consumers who have no interest in engaging in politics.

In order to establish which theory is correct let us now look at some empirical findings that show why people are turning away from liberal thin democracy. Pattie et al (2004) present empirical evidence that overall in Britain civic obligations like obedience to the state are strong, but civic obligations for political undertakings are low e.g. British citizens have a strong civic duty to pay taxes and obey the law but have weak obligations in terms of being politically active in their local communities. Furthermore, this lack of involvement by citizens in their local communities has been increasing over the years. In 1959, 70% of respondents believed citizens had a duty to be active in their local communities, but by 2000, only 44% of respondents thought citizens should get involved. The authors argue that citizens view political participation as individualistic rather than collective organised action. They argue that more than one in three respondents has no interest in domestic, local or regional politics. Their empirical evidence suggests one in three citizens are dissatisfied with the British democratic system, and one of the reasons for this is that citizens believe politicians are unresponsive to their opinions.

Henn et al (2002) argue young people are ‘engaged sceptics’- young people do have an interest in British political affairs but are sceptical of representatives and Westminster politics, and it is this that accounts for political disengagement and low voter turnout among the cohort. Even though previous empirical studies state that young people, as opposed to their older contemporaries, are less inclined towards representative politics, the
authors argue that this does not mean young people are a generation apart, because young people prefer participatory and direct forms of politics (Henn et al, 2005).

Coleman (2005) quotes the Electoral Commission Report (2004) which found that only 14% of people in 2003 identified with any political party in Britain; and 70% of the UK population said they didn’t trust politicians. He argues that citizen disengagement is stemming from a break in the connection between citizens and representatives. His 2005 survey found that 72% of British people felt disconnected from parliament. The survey also found that people did not feel in touch with their local MP, with only 11% feeling connected.

As can be seen in figure 4.1 there has been a decline in voter participation in Britain which is represented in the tail off in 1990’s/2000’s period. Citizens are dissatisfied with the political system (liberal thin democracy) and are turning away from it because representatives are unresponsive to them (Pattie et al 2004, Coleman 2005); the political system does not support any form of direct democracy; and liberal ideals such as self-interest have given rise to citizen apathy (Barber, 1984). As was shown above, individuals are not interested in politics because they do not identify with political parties or trust politicians (Coleman, 2005). The question remains whether participation and deliberation are appropriate tools to re-engage citizens, and address political disengagement.
4.1.1 Reversing disengagement - the benefits of participation & deliberation

This section will argue for the use of political participation and deliberation to engage citizens and address political disengagement. However firstly, we need to address whether participation and deliberation are incompatible.

Mutz’s (2006) work on social networking survey data (1992 – 2000) found that exposure to diverse political views in politics gives citizens a better understanding of other individuals’ views on issues, but it discourages political participation especially among people averse to conflict. She argues that deliberation makes people hesitant to participate, while participation makes people want to stay in similar networks with like minded people. ‘Many conceptions of civil society blend participatory democracy with deliberative democracy in a seamless fashion, suggesting that the two goals are almost the same … But based on my findings, it is doubtful that an extremely active political culture can be a highly deliberative one’ (Mutz, 2006,p3). It is reiterated that deliberation and participation are distinct concepts, but she goes further saying that they are incompatible and undermine each other.

To begin with, the arguments against the use of participation and deliberation will be presented here. An important question that arises is whether citizen participation within political decision making is necessarily a good thing. Plato in his Republic argues that it is not and democracy is rule by the mob. He uses a ‘craft analogy’ (Wolff 1996), suggesting that one would not consult the passengers to navigate the seas. Plato argues for guardians (expert philosophers) to run the state. Here Plato views the captain of the ship (craft) as the Athenian people and argues that they know nothing of navigation or
sailing, and they are short-sighted and partly deaf in terms of ruling a state (Cross and Woozely, 1964). Plato says that the Athenian people could never become philosophers because as a group they will always respond to the desires of the masses, and implement policies without really knowing what is right or wrong for society (Cross and Woozely, 1964).

Theorists such as Berelson, Dahl, Sartori and Eckstein view increased citizen participation within political system as a bad thing (Pateman, 1970). As discussed earlier Pateman’s (1970) contemporary theory of democracy (liberal thin democracy) encapsulates the views of all these four writers above. In order for this system to remain stable, the participation of the majority must not rise higher than the minimum required for the electoral process to work. According to Pateman, advocates of the contemporary theory of democracy argue that if non-democratic attitudes exist and are commonly found in non-participants, then any increase in participation by non-participants ‘would weaken the consensus on the norms of the democratic method’ (Pateman, 1970, p14).

Even with limited political participation such as voting for representative, theorists such as John Stuart Mill in Representative Government (Ryan 1974) argue that government should improve citizens from an early age by educating them to have a public duty, but in order to protect democracy Mill calls for the exclusion of certain ‘uneducated’ groups from voting.
Liberal thin democratic advocates fear that if citizen participation is increased it will lead to totalitarianism or fascism (Pateman 1970). Theorists also question the public’s ability to handle the job of governments ‘Democracy entails rule by the people. But the public is unable to rule itself directly because it lacks the time, inclination and (sometimes) cognition or competence to arrive at judgments about the vast array of complex policy issues involved in governance’ (Coleman, 2005a, p96). In terms of equipping citizens for political participation, Scheufele et al (2002) argue that political ignorance and lack of issue awareness exists among the general public; and certain contemporary politicians believe that direct democracy may give rise to ‘technopopulism’ i.e. the loudest and the most prejudiced voices will dominate political discussions (Coleman & Gotze, 2001).

In contrast to the arguments of the critics above there are those who suggest that there are far more benefits to the introduction of participation and deliberation into democracy than the reverse. Increased citizen participation is not a dangerous populist anti-democratic mechanism (Pateman, 1970). Pateman provides empirical data which shows that political participation has an educative function on citizens. She presents evidence that political participation increases citizens’ political efficacy i.e. an increase in citizens’ familiarity with democratic procedures, and an increase in their democratic skills. She also provides evidence that at a higher level of political participation a psychological impact occurs on citizens. This induces citizens to vote for the common good and increases citizens’ sense of belonging to a community. As was argued earlier by Pateman once a participatory system is set up it becomes self-sustaining. The qualities required for such a system to work are those that the process of participation develops and fosters, in other words
participation induces participation and is a worthwhile mechanism to be used to reverse political disengagement.

Research has also shown that citizens can understand complex policy issues. Doble et al’s (1992) study found that citizens with brief exposure to information on complex issues and after debating such issues could assess complex scientific policy issues, and make informed choices. Doble’s study selected random samples of citizens and scientists. Citizens were shown information on two complex issues “solid waste disposal and the threat of global warming” and asked to discuss them, they were also asked to fill out questions before and after this process. Finally, citizens were asked to answer policy questions on the topics. The scientists were asked the same policy questions through interviews. The citizens’ and scientists’ responses to the policy questions were similar, but more importantly it was found that citizens could assess complex policy issues.

Another objection is that citizens don’t have an interest in participating in politics. Coleman and Gotze (2001) argue that citizens if given the opportunity would like to participate within policy deliberation. Coleman (2005) using statistics from the Electoral Commission Report (2004) shows that 75% of UK people want to have a say in how the country is run, however, the latter statistics must be considered cautiously because ‘people may like the idea rather than the reality of participating’ (Lowndes, Pratchett, and Stoker, 2001, p450). The reason for this is because other factors need to be present that encourage participation. Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker (2006) developed a diagnostic tool for assessing initiatives aimed at encouraging political participation
among citizens. The diagnostic tool (a theoretical model) was based on factors (that the authors considered) that promoted political participation. The model argues that individuals participate when they: have the resources and knowledge to do so; have strong community ties; are enabled to participate through strong civic groups and networks; and their inputs are responded to by decision makers.

Advocates of deliberation (e.g. Button and Ryfe, 2005) call on communities to embrace deliberation because it is an alternative to liberal and plural democracies; and produces wiser, better, and more legitimate public policies. Deliberation can enhance the quality of democracy and make better citizens. “Better” in this context has two meanings first, deliberation increases citizens’ understanding of their own interests, and second, deliberation may make citizens more public spirited (Fishkin et al 2003). Their findings show that deliberation increases citizen participation in politics and makes citizens more tolerant, supportive of democracy, informed, trusting, and efficacious. Thus deliberation is a worthwhile mechanism to be used to address political disengagement.

Mendelberg (2002) states that deliberation is desirable because it produces cooperation for the greater good and decreases citizens’ self-interest. He uses Gutmann & Thompson (1996) and makes certain arguments for deliberation: 1), citizens become more engaged and active in civic affairs; 2), citizens become tolerant of opposing opinions; 3), citizens improve their understandings of their own preferences, and can justify such preferences with better arguments; 4), adversarial politics will be put aside because citizens will understand their fate is interlinked with everyone else’s; 5), citizens become empowered;
6), community decisions become more reasoned and informed; 7), a community’s social capital rises; 8), the legitimacy of a community’s constitutional order will rise because citizens will understand it more and will have a say in it. Finally, Button and Ryfe (2005) see deliberation as a process of legitimacy i.e. the outcomes of deliberation can be seen as legitimate because the process of decision making is voluntary, cooperative, equal, reasoned and inclusive.

These arguments about the effects of deliberation are supported by empirical research. Fishkin and Luskin (2004b), Fishkin (1991), and Fishkin, Jowell & Luskin (2002) show that deliberation changes citizens’ opinions; they become more knowledgeable on political issues; preferences do not polarize, nor do they become homogenous, and citizens’ political efficacy rises. Fishkin et al.’s (2004a) research shows that both online and face to face deliberation produce similar results. These findings were obtained by modelling deliberation with deliberative opinion polls, ‘a mechanism for combining political equality with deliberation’ (Fishkin, 1991, p1). Deliberative opinion polls model what citizens would think if they had the opportunity to consider certain issues. Deliberative polling consists of giving participants literature on a particular issue, allowing them to deliberate on that issue, and then surveying participants’ pre- and post-deliberation.

As has been shown above, both deliberation and increased citizen participation may not only be beneficial for the creation of politically educated public spirited citizens but they also may contribute to a more robust and vibrant democracy with better policy decisions.
for society at large (Button and Ryfe 2005, Mendelberg 2002). Furthermore, citizens can assess complex policy issues (Doble et al, 1992), and there is a desire among citizens to participate within policy decision making (Coleman and Gotze, 2001, Coleman, 2005), although, this rests on the fact that other factors need to be present (Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker, 2006). Moreover, participation increases citizens’ sense of belonging to a community, their political efficacy and their participation in decision making (Pateman, 1970); and deliberation increases citizen participation in politics (Fishkin et al 2003). Thus, a case has been made here that it is worthwhile to use participation and deliberation to reverse political disengagement. However, both participation and deliberation are distinct concepts, and they may not be compatible with each other (Mutz, 2006). With the advent of ICT so came calls for participatory and deliberative mechanisms to be placed online in order to address political disengagement. It was believed that placing these mechanisms online would allow citizens (with limited available time) the convenience to participate in local government at a time that suited them. This has become known as E-Democracy, and it was believed it would bring easier access for citizens into policy making processes and thus reverse political disengagement.

4.2 E-Democracy
Below both E-Democracy and local political online forums will be defined, this will be followed by a short history of such forums within UK and US, and a description of some current European initiatives. Finally, the ability of local political online forums to reverse political disengagement by supporting participation and deliberation will be investigated.

The E-Democracy National UK project website (www.edemocracy.gov.uk) defines E-Democracy as, ‘Harnessing the power of new technology to encourage citizen participation in local decision-making’. Most definitions of E-Democracy revolve around citizens using ICT to interact or have a two way conversation with government and local government. Using the definition of democracy given earlier, E-democracy is defined here as: an electronic decision making mechanism that allows citizens to make or influence decisions online about the rules under which they are going to live. There are many ICT tools available to use to provide a platform for E-Democracy; this thesis has chosen one of these– a local political online forum, the next section will now define and give the reasons for choosing this tool.
4.2.1 Local political online forums
Local political online forums are also sometimes called: internet forums, issues forums, discussion boards, bulletin boards or local forums. The term used in this research is local political online forum, and as this term contains the word political it is this aspect of the term that will be defined firstly.

There are basic theoretical conditions that give rise to politics - ‘that impose a necessity for public action, and thus for reasonable public choice, in the presence of conflict, and in the absence of independent grounds for judgment...a political question thus takes the form: what shall we do when something has to be done that affects us all, we wish to be reasonable, yet we disagree on means and ends and are without independent grounds for making the choice?’ (Barber, 1984, p120). ‘The need for politics arises when some action of public consequence becomes necessary and when men must thus make a public choice that is reasonable in the face of conflict despite the absence of an independent ground of judgment’ (Barber, 1984, p123). These conditions are spelt out below:

- Action – doing or not doing something i.e. building or not building a hospital.

- Publicness – determining whether gold is a useful monetary standard is a public choice with public consequences. Whether gold is useful for fillings in teeth is a private matter.

- Necessity- Necessary action is required. Here not taking action also produces public consequences.
• Choice- a political citizen deliberates and decides.

• Reasonableness – In the absence of truth norms politics occurs. Politics is the search for choices that are not arbitrary, even though they are not perfectly true. Reasonableness is common sense, it is not necessarily rational but it is: deliberate, non-random, un-coercive, and fair. In this system there is no common ground and differences are reformulated and resolved in a way that takes into account a citizen’s private interest and the community’s interest.

• Conflict – where there is natural consensus there is no conflict or power.

• Absence of an independent ground – to act politically is to choose and act responsibly, reasonably, and publicly without the direction of consensual norms. Politics is only concerned with areas where truth is not known i.e. we do not vote on the ideal polio vaccine. Where consensus or metaphysics ends politics starts.

The second part of the term to be defined now is online forum. E-Democracy.org (2005) says that an online forum is like a public council meeting or consultation exercise online where any citizen, journalist or elected official can do a range of things such as post questions or input into policy formation. The goal of online forums is ‘to give everyone a greater voice in local decisions and encourage more citizen participation in local public policy making’ (E-Democracy.org, 2005, p4).
Online forums contain a structure which is called threaded. This type of structure has topics broken down into different subject folders where individuals can post (type) messages in. Most forums are asynchronous, which means that two individuals do not have to be present within the forum at the same time to have a discussion i.e. individuals can post a reply message anytime they wish. Certain forums also provide: a registration process; a moderator; and a daily digest email message service.

Thus, taking the two definitions above into account a local political online forum is a web based forum which has a threaded asynchronous platform for discussion open to all individuals within a local area to discuss local political issues from a non-consensual position. However, why choose this one aspect of E-Democracy? Pratchett (2006) notes that those who are involved in implementing E-Democracy at the local level must provide good justification for using certain E-Tools; table 4.1 below shows a whole range of such E-Tools.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Table 4.1</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Political blog</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Listserve</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Webcasting</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>e-consultation</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>e-petition</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Wiki page</strong></td>
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A key concept investigated by this research is deliberation, in order to investigate this concept an E-Democracy tool that could facilitate it was required. Political blogs contain monologues rather than dialogues. Where discussions do occur within blogs they are biased, because discussions are mainly initiated by the interests of the blogger, and the general public have very little scope to bring up their own topics. The discussions within Listserves are transmitted via email lists and there is no record of dialogue to analyse. Webcasting, again contain no discussions as participants email their questions to the webcaster while watching the stream on the web. E-consultations have little room for deliberation and participants email their suggestions to organizers. E-petitions have no form of dialogue and consist mainly of individuals signing a petition via email. And finally, Wiki pages allow users to work together collaboratively and share their knowledge to develop a web page. The discussions regarding the collaboration are not recorded only the finished web page is.

Local political online forums on the other hand allow citizens to: receive access to government information via email notification, share information amongst themselves, engage in political discourse and indirectly input into government pre-legislative public policy preference formation; and they enhance the representative democratic process by facilitating discussions between community groups, the citizenry, government institutions, and government representatives (Clift, 2000 & 2002, Coleman and Blumer, 2001). Such discussions are recorded in threads and posts. Thus, local political online forums were chosen because they are the best form of E-Democracy for encouraging deliberation. Figure 4.2 shows the home page of a local political online forum, while
figure 4.3 shows the asynchronous threaded format these forums have, and finally figure 4.4 shows the layout of posted messages within a thread.
### Fig 4.3

#### Oxfordshire Forums - Abingdon - Microsoft Internet Explorer

**Address:** [https://www.oxfordshireforums.com/Abingdon/](https://www.oxfordshireforums.com/Abingdon/)

**Log In / Report 1**

- **Save Password**
- **Forgot your Password?**

#### Forums
- **News from your town**
- **Abingdon**

**New Topic**

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<tr>
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<th>Replies</th>
<th>Read</th>
<th>Last Post</th>
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<td>704</td>
<td>29 Oct 2006 10:21:42 by <strong>TU Developer</strong></td>
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<td>721</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>30 Jun 2007 02:48:20 by <strong>akabondor</strong></td>
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<td>50</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>07 Jun 2007 15:30:09 by <strong>sho097</strong></td>
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</table>
4.2.2 A brief history of local political online forums

One of the first promoters of local political online forum was E-Democracy.Org/Minnesota E-Democracy, which was established in 1994 as an American election orientated website. The organization has now expanded its role to encompass all E-Democracy activities. Their mission statement is ‘Expanded participation and stronger democracies and communities through the power of information and communication technologies and strategies’ (http://www.e-democracy.org/); and one of their goals is ‘Engagement: Strengthen, expand, and diversify engagement through effective and meaningful online discussions and information exchange on public issues’ (http://www.e-democracy.org/). They have helped communities in the UK and US set up local political online forums.
Brauer (2004) presents an example of how an online forum within the US supported by E-Democracy.Org impacted on a public policy decision. He refers to the ‘Dairy Queen’ incident in Minneapolis. ‘The directly elected Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, which governs the city’s chain of lakes, considered contracting its concessions out to a corporation, Dairy Queen. Previously, the Park Board ran the concessions themselves, not always making money. In tight budget times, it was searching for new ways to improve their balance sheet’ (Brauer, 2004, p 8). An elected official contacted the online issues forum looking for citizen feedback on the issue. A lively discussion ensued, where most of the participants voiced opinions against a corporation entering the advertisement free parks. After a month of discussions, the Park Board voted against doing a deal with Dairy Queen Corporation.

Coleman (2001 c) provides a short history of online forums within the UK. The UK’s first two attempts at E-Democracy were the UK Citizens Online Democracy (UKCOD) which was an online forum set up for national debate, and the UK Communities Online (UKCO) which was set up to encourage a network of community projects. The Hansard Society also ran online consultation exercises between UK citizens and parliamentary committees – groups included everyone from engineers to survivors of domestic violence. In Scotland one major promoter of E-Democracy is the International Teledemocracy Centre (ITC) in Edinburgh - ‘It aims to develop a body of ICT, supporting skills, tools and techniques, designed specifically to facilitate the use of advanced, creative and multi-faceted methods of electronic communication, capable of

Two other attempts to introduce E-Democracy forums in Britain have had mixed results - the Downing Street Website (2000), which was set up as a policy forum to allow citizens to feed into the British policy making, and Coleman’s E-Democracy forum, which was a small policy forum linked to the British government and moderated by the Hansard Society. Both of these forums were set up to encourage two way conversations between policy makers and UK citizens. Wright (2006) criticized the Downing Street website for being unresponsive, unduly censored (which led to messages and threads being deleted), and a space in which government officials did not listen to participants. Wright (2006) also criticizes Coleman’s E-Democracy forum for having too few posts (427); the benefits not out-weighing the costs of the forum; producing no evidence that the traditionally un-engaged participated; and being unclear as to how the forum affected policy. Messages were analyzed by central government but it was unclear if policies were developed out of this process.

The Office of The Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) funded a local E-Government strategy in 2004. The twenty two national projects funded under this initiative offered county councils strategies to develop E-Services for their councils, and their citizens. The ODPM strategy aimed to assist English local authorities develop E-Government by the end of 2005. One of these projects was called the local E-Democracy national project, which aimed to use new ICT to encourage citizen participation in local decision making.
The OPDM also set up the International Centre for Excellence in Local eDemocracy (ICELE) to continue the work of the local e-democracy national project – the aim of ICELE is to support e-participation within local authorities in the UK. There has been little evaluation of the impact of ICELE, although a paper on the benefits of ICELE, if any will be published at the beginning of 2008.

The European Union has been funding research into the knowledge society for years through the European Commission’s fifth and sixth Framework Research Information Society Technologies (IST) Research programmes. The most recent funding for E-Participation (E-Democracy) is the DEMO-Net project. “The overarching objective of DEMO-net is to strengthen scientific, technological and social research excellence in eParticipation by integrating the research capacities of individuals and organisations spread across Europe” (Demo-net, 2008). The ePractice.eu is another EU commission initiative aimed at (among other things) providing the professional community of E-Government an arena to discuss and influence policy making and open government.

In terms of local political online forums there are mixed results, and unclear research findings from the various past online forums implemented within the UK, and US. The question unanswered by such initiatives is whether local political online forums can support participation and deliberation and in a small way address political disengagement.
4.3 The value of using online forums to reverse political disengagement

E-Democracy advocates and politicians alike discuss online forums being able to reverse political disengagement by supporting participatory and deliberative mechanisms.

Matthew Taylor, the then head of the previous Prime Minister’s (Tony Blair) Strategy Unit and the previous Prime Minister’s chief strategist told an international conference ‘Online engagement could help renew the relationship between government and the public, providing forums where honest and open discussions could improve our understanding of the limits of public policy... The challenge for e-democracy is to bypass traditional media, building links between government and the public based on realistic discussions of policy issues at both national and local levels.’ (Authority, 2006).

Furthermore, Hazel Blears (the British secretary of State) at a recent International e-Participation Symposium in London (February 2008) said the internet has the potential to create a new kind of politics that gives citizens new ways to have a meaningful say on issues that matter to them (Blears, 2008).

The question to be explored within this section is whether local political online forums can support the various types of participation and deliberation and in a small way address political disengagement. Firstly, some of what is known within the existing E-Democracy literature about the ability of forums to support participation will be examined; secondly, this will be followed by a similar examination of the ability of forums to support deliberation. The final part of this section will focus on whether local government support should be used in implementing local political online forums to reverse political disengagement?
4.3.1 Local political online forums, participation, and democratic models

This section will explore the ability of local political online forums to support participation. Clift (2000a) argues for local political online forums to be set up as non-profit, issue-neutral organizations whose mission is to promote participation in democracy through the use of information networks. He argues online forums require a good mix of individuals who not only discuss politics but actually practice politics. Steven Clift, via his website (www.publicus.net) argues for the establishment of new ICT such as online forums that bring an end to partisan politics via greater citizen participation in government decision-making structures.

However, there is a growing body of theorists such as Margolis and Resnick (2000), who argue that the advent of ICT has produced ‘politics as usual’ and not brought forth new forms of participatory democracy to representative systems but instead has normalised the political process online. Margolis and Resnick (2000) point out that the web is dominated by commercial interests not information exchange, and reinforces current political patterns of representative democracy. Politics on the net is conducted by familiar parties where candidates and interest groups still dominate and the general citizenry still have little interest in participating in political and civic affairs. This normalization theory holds that elite groups and the traditional politically engaged will continue to dominate political engagement online, and bring with them all of the existing biases of the current political system to the detriment of ‘pluralistic democracy’ online (Gibson et al, 2003). Indeed, Gibson et al (2002), and Jensen et al (2002) provide empirical evidence which highlights the characteristics of online politically active individuals as those that are traditionally engaged in politics offline; well educated; from higher socio-economic
status; middle aged males; IT literate and are IT enabled. Thus, the questions that remains are what types of participation and democratic models can local political online forums actually support?

4.3.2 Local political online forums and deliberation

The ability of online forums to support deliberation will be explored here. Riley et al (2003) suggest that ICT including forums could contribute to a renewed faith in government and democracy by the creation of interactive government rooted in deliberation with the citizenry; they argue that such ICT could take western democracies into new interactive democracies. The online deliberative system (online forum) proposed in Coleman & Blumer (2001) aims to increase citizen participation by providing citizens with access to balanced information; an open political agenda for revision; time for citizens to reflect; independence from persuasive parties; a rule based framework within which to operate; and public internet access points for the digitally excluded. This is a system of two-way governance, which includes forms of online communication consisting of government – citizen, citizen – government and citizen – citizen deliberation.

However, research has found that online forums maybe able to create types of public spheres, but such spheres are weak at supporting communicative action (Dahlberg 2001, Sassi 2001, Schneider 1997, and Malina 1999). In an examination of online forums’ (Usenet) postings the following was discovered ‘only about 20 percent of messages were actually addressed to other message posters, suggesting that sustained dialogue among
all participants on a single topic or line of inquiry is uncommon. Emerging teletechnologies thus undermine severely the rhythm of democratic discourse, and this new appropriation of politics at the hands of technoeconomic powers bodes ill for the future of deliberative democracy in the years to come’ (Wilhem, 2000, p101). Wilhelm’s (1999) work on political forums shows that people within such forums are mainly information providers; similarly to Rheingold’s research (1993) which found that within many gathering places individuals might appear to be engaged in conversations but his findings suggest that people are “talking” more than they are listening. It is likely that some forums contain mainly information providers, however, it remains to be seen how prolific this is?

In a similar vain to Mutz’s (2006) argument regarding individuals wishing to join networks that contain like minded people, the findings of Wilhelm (1999), and Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995), and Witschge (2002) show that group homogeneity exists within forums – individuals ‘tend to seek out those individual (and affiliations) with whom they agree’ (Wilhelm, 1999, p171). These arguments may be true of certain forums, but not all. Forums can create a space in which citizens can encounter beliefs which are in opposition to their own (Kelly et al’s, 2005). The findings of a PEW Internet report backs up this assertion ‘The worry that the internet might channel people into informational warrens of one-sided arguments is not borne out by the data in this report’ (Horrigan et al, 2004, p33). This thesis wishes to investigate the proportion of forums which have heterogeneous political environments.
Wilhelm (2000) found that his random sample of messages resembled one aspect of Habermas’ (1984) communicative action i.e. rational argument. In this study three out of four messages validated their arguments, and posters providing reasons to justify their remarks. As was argued in chapter three rational deliberation redefined is not the only form of deliberation, with this in mind it needs to be examined if online forums have the ability to facilitate all categories of deliberation?

Finally, it must be noted here that the digital divide (‘the patterns of unequal access to information technology based on income, race, ethnicity, gender, age, and geography’ (Mossberger, Tolbert, and Stansbury 2003, P1)) may have an impact on the ability of local political online forums to support deliberation. The digital divide does not only mean certain groups have no access to the internet, but lack of IT knowledge, cost of IT and technophobia all play a part. The digital divide affects many groups such as the elderly, those with a disability and those from a disadvantaged socioeconomic background; and if such groups’ voices are not included within forums than their ability to support deliberation diminishes. Norris argues, ‘the digital divide is understood as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing three distinct aspects. The global divide refers to the divergence of Internet access between industrialised and developed societies. The social divide concerns the gap between information rich and poor in each nation. And finally within the online community, the democratic divide signifies the difference between those who do, and do not, use the panoply of digital resources to engage, mobilize, and participate in public life’ (Norris, 2001, p4).
4.3.3 Local government support

If the purpose of implementing a forum is to reverse political disengagement by allowing citizens to influence local government policy, then an immediate question that arises is: should such a forum be built in conjunction with local government. This question is not examined in any great detail within the E-Democracy literature, and in terms of supporting participation and deliberation online it is a crucial question that requires exploration.

Here the arguments by the proponents of using local government support to build a forum will be presented. Coleman, Hall, and Howell (2002) call on local government to link into local E-Democracy projects. The E-Democracy.org ‘Local Issues Forum Guidebook’ calls on local government officials to become members of the forum’s steering committees. However, neither group have empirical evidence to back up their claims.

In examining whether the Internet could make political debate more inclusive, Albrecht (2006) conducted an online deliberative experiment in Hamburg and discovered the following - ‘the fact that the debate was organized under the auspices of the city’s government, and that there was competition of ideas and feedback into the political process, framed the debate as a serious political experiment. A loosely structured forum based on a newsgroup, for example, with little guidance from either political institutions or moderators, presumably would have attracted participants with more internet experience, but less interest in local politics ’ (Albrecht, 2006, p76). What is unclear from this study is whether it was the support of the city council or the fact that the forum was moderated that produced active relevant debate. Similarly, Jensen (2003) looked at
whether government supported web forums are more successful than non government ones for creating conditions for dialogue. In contrasting two case studies he observed that government sponsored forums were more successful at creating openness and deliberation. Incorporating all his findings he suggests moderation and a rules based framework are essential in achieving this. However, there is one contradictory finding within his report. Seventy percent of threads within the government sponsored forum he looked at contained dialogue (replies to posts) whereas 84% of threads within the non-government forum contained dialogue. Moreover, as noted by Jensen himself it maybe regulation (moderation) rather than government sponsorship that leads to such success within his study’s government-sponsored forum. Whether or not local government support is beneficial in terms of building forums to reverse political disengagement requires further investigation.

4.4 Conclusion
As was shown in chapter two western representative democracies have become interlinked with liberalism (Barber 1984). It is clear from the statistics provided in this chapter that there has been a decline in voter participation in Britain, and this is more evident in the tail off in 1990’s/2000’s period. One of the reasons for this is that citizens are turned off by the nature of the British political system (Pattie et al 2004). That is to say citizens are dissatisfied with liberal thin democracy and are turning away from it because representatives are unresponsive to them (Pattie et al 2004, Coleman 2005); the political system does not support any form of direct democracy; and liberal ideals such as self-interest have given rise to citizen apathy, citizens’ cynicism about voting, and
citizens’ alienation, and preference for private interests (Barber, 1984). A case has been made here that it is worthwhile to use participation and deliberation to reverse political disengagement, however a caveat comes with this claim as both concepts may not be compatible (Mutz, 2006).

It is unclear from the existing E-Democracy literature whether local political online forums can support the various types of participation and categories of deliberation and address political disengagement. Will the normalization theory hold through for online forums (Margolis and Resnick, 2000); and will the same groups engaging in politics offline engage online (Gibson et al, 2002; and Jensen et al, 2002); Or are forums homogenous sites with little or no diverse opinion (Wilhelm, 1999) consisting mainly of information providers (Wilhelm, 1999; Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995; Witschge, 2002; Mutz, 2006). And what impact if any, does the digital divide have on online deliberations? Finally, in trying to reverse political disengagement is it beneficial to build forums in conjunction with local government support?

The value of using local political online forums to reverse political disengagement will be established by answering the following three questions:

1. What types of participatory and democratic models can local political online forums support?

2. Can local political online forums support all categories of deliberation?
3. Is it beneficial to build local political online forums in conjunction with local government?

The methodological approach by which these questions were answered will be detailed in the next chapter.
5 Methodology

In discussing using online and virtual methods Hine (2005) calls on researchers to use reflexivity on such methods and develop new innovative research designs which also keep focus on the resources, and ethical frameworks of traditional well established methods. With this in mind this research (in answering the three research questions within this thesis) used a two pronged methodological approach consisting of both a qualitative inductive method, and a two-phased quantitative deductive method. The first deductive approach used the E-Democracy.org's ‘Local Issues Forum Guidebook’ recommendations (detailed below) and produced a local political online forum in conjunction with a local government within the UK – Guildford Borough Council (GBC). The secondary purpose of this experiment was also to test these recommendations as well to see if they could produce a successful online forum. The second deductive approach systematically examined the three research questions and the E-Democracy.org’s Local Issues Forum recommendations again but in this second approach it was decided to focus on a sample of local political online forums from around the world.

A deductive approach was used because it’s ‘aim is to develop valid and reliable ways of collecting facts about society’ (Clarke, 2004, P32). Such facts are statistically analyzed to produce explanations of social phenomena. Bryman (2004) details deductive research as the examination of the nature of the relationship between theory and social research. The process begins with a theory and development of hypotheses. A research design is implemented which includes the development of: indicators for concepts; a sample, data...
collection / analysis processes. However, at the end of this type of research a small inductive process occurs in which the research findings add to the body of theory.

A deductive methodological approach was appropriate for this research for two reasons. Firstly, in terms of the first deductive methodological approach a forum was set up with a local government in the UK (purpose detailed above). The steps involved with quantitative deductive research as described by Bryman (2004) above fitted exactly with what this research aimed to do i.e. what was known within the theoretical body of E-Democracy about creating successful online forums was tested. Apart from looking at existing forums from around the world which was done in the second deductive methodological approach there was no other way of examining if indeed the E-Democracy.org’s ‘Local Issues Forum Guidebook’ recommendations produced a successful forum apart from actually setting up a forum in conjunction with local government. This experimental case study, along with its implications, will be dealt with in chapter six. A qualitative methodology could not have facilitated this aspect of the research. Secondly, the same process facilitated the experiment with second deductive methodological approach which used the same three research questions within this thesis and theoretical recommendations mentioned above but tested them within a bigger sample of 138 forums from around the world.

The two deductive methodical approaches will be detailed firstly below. The latter part of this chapter will detail, and provide an explanation as to why a qualitative inductive approach was required after the completion of the two deductive approaches, however it
is sufficient to say here that researchers use qualitative analysis ‘because the crucial elements of sociological theory are often found best with a qualitative method, that is, from data on the structural conditions, consequences, deviances, norms, processes, patterns and systems’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1968, p18).

5.1 First deductive methodological approach
A local political online forum was set up in conjunction with a local government within the UK. The purpose of this approach was both to answer the three research questions within this thesis and examine if indeed the theoretical recommendations (as laid out below) and in particular the E-Democracy.org’s ‘Local Issues Forum Guidebook’ recommendations produced a successful forum.

Below the theoretical recommendations that were used to build a forum in conjunction with Guildford Borough Council (GBC) will be introduced. These recommendations are collated here under three headings: technology; developing a set of rules, objectives and promotion; and moderation. The fourth heading below (Democracy.org’s ‘Local Issues Forum Guidebook’ recommendations) provides a synthesis of this learning. The final two sections will present the access negotiations conducted with GBC to build a forum in conjunction with them.

5.1.1 Technology
Edwards (2004), E-Democracy.org, and Street & Wright (2007) among others say that by using certain recommendations local political online forums can be built to be successful and support participation and deliberation. Coleman and Gotze (2001) argue that
successful online engagement is mainly related to social, cultural and organisational issues; whereas technology is only of secondary importance. However, the authors note that appropriate technologies are still of fundamental importance to the success of online public engagement. Online deliberative models engaging the public should make digital technologies ‘people friendly’. Such issues include accessibility, usability, reliability and security (Coleman et al 2001; Noveck, 2004). The Online Consultation Technologies Centre of Expertise re-emphasizes accessibility, whereas Preece (2000) suggests online engagement should have registration processes, and good security measures.

The OECD (2003) report *Promise and Problems of E-Democracy* presents research findings (from a survey, geographic case studies, and national expert opinion) which calls for E-Engagement systems to have easy navigation e.g. don’t overload the home page with text, and high usability e.g. all images should be given tags with a text description. Finally, drawing on case studies and online empirical research into constructing government run forums Street and Wright (2007) and Lukensmeyer et al (2006) argue that deliberation is also encouraged by developing forums which are asynchronous and threaded.

### 5.1.2 Developing a set of rules, objectives and promotion.

Trenel (2004) says that for online forums to be able to enhance the effectiveness of their outcomes, they must have at their heart equality and respect between citizens, and these are achieved by implementing a set of rules. Coleman and Gotze (2001) and Burkhalter et al (2002) argue that citizens within online and offline deliberative models need to be
protected by constitutional rights (a set of rules) in order that they can participate as equal partners in such models. Without rules such forums become anarchic (Davis, 1999, and Jensen, 2002, 2003). Others also state that online consultations and discussions should have a clear purpose, and a recruitment drive (Coleman, Hall, and Howell 2002; Ferguson 2006; Office of e-Government 2005). The OECD (2003) report Promise and Problems of E-Democracy calls for online engagement to have good recruitment and promotion campaigns, and clear objectives.

Forums and online events should also contain a set of goals, and an agenda (Kleiber, Holt, Swenson, 2007; Online Consultation Technologies Centre of Expertise 2004; White 2002). Furthermore, the Online Consultation Technologies Centre of Expertise (2004) suggests clear channels of communication need to be set up between online forums and decision makers.

5.1.3 Moderation
Within the E-Democracy literature there is consensus that online forums require a trusted independent moderator / facilitator (Coleman and Gotze 2001; Beierle 2004; Steven Clift, www.publicus.net; Trenel 2005, Fulwider 2006). Jensen (2002, 2003) claims that structured online forums are more deliberative than USENET forums which are unstructured i.e. forums without rules or a moderator. Indeed Davis (1999) says that forums which have no moderator become un-deliberative and anarchic.
Edwards (2004) argues moderators can contribute to interactivity and openness of discussions as long as they are independent. Edwards’ (2002) empirical study found that a facilitator within online discussions provides a much greater function than merely that of a filter. Edwards identifies a facilitator as a democratic intermediary, whose presence can enhance the quality of discussions within a forum. He points out that facilitators manage key discussions, and contribute to interactivity, and openness of discussions, but he argues for facilitators to be independent third parties, so citizens don’t feel ‘Under the shadow of control’ of the state.

5.1.4 E-Democracy.org’s ‘Local Issues Forum Guidebook’ recommendations. A key document in terms of developing a successful local political online forum is the E-Democracy.org’s Local Issues Forum Guidebook, which is to-do list for those interested in establishing local political online forums. This guidebook provides the most comprehensive recommendations in terms of setting up an online political forum. The guidebook provides a great synthesis of all the learning and recommendations detailed above. E-Democracy.org has produced these recommendations from learning accumulated through the experiences of its volunteers in implementing and managing online forums. Table 5.1 is a summary of these forum development guidelines.

* An organization previously known as the Minnesota web forum which has over ten years experience of promoting E-Democracy and online forums
Table 5.1

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<tr>
<th>Forum design qualities</th>
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<tr>
<td>Steering committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>Independent Moderator</td>
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<tr>
<td>Set of rules which includes promotion of equality and respect</td>
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<tr>
<td>Technology that supports both email list and web forum technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Launch and publicized forum</td>
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<tr>
<td>Make forum: accessible; secure; asynchronous; and threaded.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Create mission &amp; goals for forum</td>
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<tr>
<td>Forum should be set up for local geographic area</td>
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<tr>
<td>All posts signed by author’s full and actual name.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Forum should not be exclusive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants must register</td>
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<td>Site should be user friendly</td>
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</table>

The recommendations set forth within E-Democracy.org’s Local Issues Forum recommendations were used to build a forum in conjunction with GBC to both answer the three questions within this research and test the relevance of such recommendations. The process of accessing negotiations to build a forum with GBC will be shown next.

5.1.5 Access negotiations

The process of gaining permission to set up a local political online forum within GBC’s website will be shown here. In March 2005 two proposals were developed to create two distinct online forums for two local government councils within the UK, Guildford Borough Council was one, and Brighton & Hove County Council was the other (see Appendix A). Two proposals were developed so that if one was rejected the research still
had a second avenue to pursue. The Brighton & Hove council already received funding under the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister’s local E-Democracy national project. The Brighton & Hove county council proposal was emailed to the supervisor in charge of this strategy. In terms of the GBC proposal, it took some time to contact the relevant GBC officer. Table 5.2 below details the steps taken in relation to gaining access to set up a forum with GBC.

Table 5.2

<table>
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<th>Date</th>
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<td>01/04/05</td>
<td>Foster (1996) argues that because access negotiations play a significant role within the entire research project it is extremely important to get such negotiations right at the beginning. After many emails and phone conversations with GBC officials and councillors throughout April 2005 contact was made with the head of communications within the GBC. This officer subsequently became the research’s ‘Gate Keeper’ within the GBC, and the research proposal was emailed to her. <em>Gatekeepers usually have positions of authority within the group or institution and can grant or withhold permission to hold research in their particular sphere of authority</em> (Foster, 1996, p67).</td>
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<tr>
<td>18/04/05 &amp; 26/04/05</td>
<td>Two meetings were arranged with GBC councillors to discuss the GBC proposal. One difficulty soon became apparent, the GBC proposal requested that one or more GBC councillors vote in line with the preference formed by citizens within the online forum prior to</td>
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deliberations. Both councillors had reservations on this issue (discussed below), and they requested that I contact them once access to the council had been negotiated.

| 28/04/05 | A meeting was set up with the GBC gatekeeper to discuss the research proposal. The gatekeeper suggested choosing issues for the online forum from either the GBC’s Local Development Framework 2005 (a consultation document, implying that no direct decisions would be taken for some time) or the council’s Forward Plan of Key Decisions document. The issues in the Key Decisions document are voted on frequently by the GBC executive decision making body, and the GBC were interested in using the proposed online forum as part of a wider consultation on some of the issues within this document. It was for these reasons that the Key Decisions document was chosen to source topics for the forum.

Overall the gatekeeper said the proposal was workable but informed me that the proposal needed to be cleared with both the GBC IT department and the GBC democratic services department. ‘Gatekeepers will be concerned to protect their own interests and the interest of the group members from any threat posed by the research’ (Foster: 1996:67). The gatekeeper did note that there may be an issue with me taking the role as the forum moderator. The gatekeeper said that if access were to be granted to the GBC she would let me know by the 11/05/05. However
this did not happen.

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<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>20/05/05</td>
<td>The GBC IT department agreed to the research proposal.</td>
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<tr>
<td>31/05/05</td>
<td>The head of democratic services within GBC also agreed to the research proposal. At this time, the GBC gatekeeper emailed me to inform me that another meeting was required to discuss the research proposal.</td>
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<tr>
<td>02/06/05</td>
<td>A second meeting with the GBC occurred, GBC attendees included: the research’s gatekeeper, a local councillor involved with E-Government within the council, and the leader of the council. At this meeting access was negotiated to develop an online forum on the Department of Sociology’s (University of Surrey) server for Guildford Borough Council’s website with me as the moderator. The University’s server was used to allow the moderator to administer the forum and edit its design. Secondly, the researcher was granted access to select one issue from the council’s ‘Forward Plan of Key Decisions’ document to place within the forum. Thirdly, GBC agreed to assist in both promoting, and setting up a steering committee for the forum. However, the leader of the council made it clear that GBC councillors would not (in advance) agree to vote in line with the preferences formed within the online forum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07/06/05</td>
<td>The gatekeeper requested that the research proposal be revised and emailed to her for clarification. At this stage Brighton &amp; Hove county council were contacted to say other avenues of research had been agreed,</td>
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and they were thanked for their time.

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<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>11/07/05</td>
<td>The GBC gatekeeper informally agreed to the revised research proposal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/07/05</td>
<td>The research was formally given the go ahead.</td>
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<tr>
<td>22/08/05</td>
<td>A meeting was set up with the GBC gatekeeper to discuss the use of a topic that had been chosen for the online forum. At this meeting it was made clear that I was not permitted to choose GBC topics on my own accord. It was suggested that individual GBC officers be directly emailed in relation to using ‘Forward Plan of Key Decisions’ topics (under their remit) within the forum. The researcher could have set up an independent forum with all issues from the ‘Forward Plan of Key Decisions’ topics within it; however, the researcher agreed to the gatekeeper’s proposal because he wanted to answer the third question within this research i.e. is it beneficial to build local political online forums in conjunction with local government.</td>
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<tr>
<td>05/09/05</td>
<td>After some consideration it was decided that the forum required more than one GBC topic for debate. There was a danger that if only one topic was chosen and citizens had no interest in this topic, no debate would occur within the forum. The GBC was requested to use more than one topic from the GBC ‘Forward Plan of Key decisions’ –permission was granted to do this.</td>
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Forward Plan of Key Decision topics were chosen using two criteria, 1, the topic was either interesting or contentious, and 2, the GBC executive were the sole decision making
body for the topic. Other topics under the decision making authority of various GBC committees were bound with a lot of regulations and red tape, and furthermore the GBC executive was the only real decision making authority with power within the council. The majority of local issues debated by the GBC council and GBC committees go to the GBC executive for decision making. Initially sixteen topics were chosen (examples of two are: what is the public’s view on the redevelopment of Guildford railway station; and where was the best location for new housing in Guildford) and eight GBC officers were emailed and asked if the topics under their responsibility were suitable for the forum. GBC officers were also asked: whether the decision making timeframe of their particular topic was sufficient for placement within the forum; to transform the topics into questions for the forum; and to forward all relevant electronic documentation for the forum. It took from 23/08/05 to 29/09/05 to get five GBC topics approved, transformed into questions, and their relevant documentation placed within the forum. Table 5.3 provides details of the six topics chosen – please see appendix B for complete questions.

Table 5.3

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Guildford museum</strong></td>
<td>How can Guildford Borough Council develop an improved Museum Service?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Open space</strong></td>
<td>Please use this subtopic to discuss other local government issues which are important to you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>New housing development</strong></td>
<td>Where is the best location for new housing in Guildford?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Smoke free Guildford</strong></td>
<td>Do you expect licensees of pubs and clubs to take steps to control tobacco smoke before the introduction of the proposed national controls?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Robson (1993) points out that access negotiation can take time, and such negotiations are a continuing process rather than a single event. This particularly holds with implementing E-Democracy with local government. As can be seen from the chronological order of events above it takes quite a lot of time and effort to reassure a local government about implementing a local political online forum on their website.

5.1.6 Second Round of Access negotiations
Between 01/10/05 - 01/11/05 very little activity took place within the forum. Only sixteen citizens registered as users to the forum, and only five messages were posted to the forum. On the basis of these results it was decided to negotiate permission to place more contentious GBC issues within the forum. The September 2005 edition of the GBC ‘forward plan of key decisions’ was analyzed on 01/11/05 and new issues were chosen. Relevant GBC officers were contacted, and asked for permission to place these new issues within forum. The process of access negotiations finished on the 29/01/05; Table 5.4 provides details of the six topics chosen – please see appendix C for complete questions. On 28/11/05 a note was placed on the forum informing participants that due to low participation rates within the forum no voting was going to take place on the first set of GBC issues. On 02/12/05 all previous issues were pulled from the forum and new issues introduced.
As was shown earlier the GBC gatekeeper did not permit me to choose topics for the forum, I had to go through individual GBC officers to seek permission. This prolonged the start up of the project as it took a long time to get topics cleared by relevant GBC officers for the forum. The gatekeeper, who had a keen interest in citizen consultation and E-Democracy, along with her department of communications, and one Borough council who sat on the steering committee (E-Champion within council) were helpful and proficient in setting up this online forum. On the other hand, the different GBC officers and their respective departments took some time to clear issues for the forum. During the first period of access negotiations (23/08/05 - 29/09/05) it took more than a month to get all GBC topics approved, transformed into questions, and relevant documentation placed within the online forum. During this time many phone calls, emails and meetings were set up with relevant GBC officers. The majority of officers denied the use of ‘Forward Plan
of Key Decisions’ topics under their responsibility. The reasons for their refusals ranged from: timeframe issues; that their topics were not suitable for citizen consultation; and that decisions had already been made on the topics. One particular problem in this process was that GBC officers agreed to topics, and then after some time back tracked on their decision, and there was no reason given for these actions. Furthermore other GBC officers were extremely busy and could not reply to email and phone queries, causing problems in terms of both promoting and launching the online forum.

In the second round of access negotiations (01/11/05) the same difficulties that arose with the first period of access negotiations arose again with GBC officers e.g. due to being busy officers could not return the researcher’s phone calls and emails, and in one particular case one officer guaranteed access to an issue, and gave this research the go ahead to develop advertisement literature (newspaper advert and leaflets) listing this issue. However, once the time came for the topic to be included in the forum the officer did not get back in touch. At this stage the advertisement literature had gone to press, and this left the project in an awkward position. Subsequently, the issue was written up into a question and placed on the forum by the forum moderator before the advertisement literature was in the public domain.

5.2 Second deductive methodological approach
Once the first deductive methodological approach was completed it was decided to systematically examine the three research questions within this thesis and test the E-Democracy.org’s Local Issues Forum recommendations again but in this second
approach it was decided to focus on a sample of local political online forums from around the world. This second deductive approach was taken to see if the results from the first experiment were also present in a wider population of local political online forums. For clarity chapter seven details the second deductive methodological approach as well as its findings i.e. the process by which a sample of 138 local political online forums were selected, collected, and analyzed.

5.3 Qualitative inductive methodology
At the end of the two deductive methodological approaches the second research question (Can local political online forums support all categories of deliberation?) was not answered fully. Both deductive approaches could not answer this question because both approaches were aimed at theory testing not theory building. A qualitative inductive methodology was chosen because theory building is the outcome of research (Bryman, 2004). In order to examine if the categories of deliberation, or other types of discussion were present within forums this research required a methodology which could create generalizeable inferences from observations within the threads of a sample of 138 forums.

The second research question within this thesis was developed into a hypothesis. This was done because the two deductive methodologies showed that local political online forums were weak at supporting rational deliberation redefined. On the basis of these findings it was decided to develop the following alternative hypothesis:
• Alternative hypothesis - local political online forums cannot support rational deliberation redefined.

An approach was required that could generate a theory from the data within the sample to test this hypothesis. A qualitative approach was chosen because systematic qualitative analysis is an inductive process. Silverman (2000) argues that qualitative researchers share a belief that they can provide a deeper understanding of social phenomenon over and above quantitative methods. Silverman does not argue that certain quantitative methods such as statistics are biased, but he suggests that there are areas within social reality that statistics cannot work.

There are various ways of conducting qualitative inductive research, however, this research required an inductive approach that used hypotheses as part of its theory generation i.e. this research required a process that generated theory and also conducted theory testing. Analytic induction was chosen to do this because Ratcliff (2006) argues that analytic induction is the best methodology to test hypotheses qualitatively. ‘Analytic induction is an approach to the analysis of data in which the research seeks universal explanations of phenomena by pursuing the collection of data until no cases that are inconsistent with a hypothetical explanation (deviant or negative cases) of a phenomena are found’ (Bryman, 2004. p400). Bryman (2004) says that this process is “iterative” in that there is “a repetitive interplay” between data collection and analysis. Analytic induction was chosen for this research because it provided a mechanism to test the hypothesis developed earlier, and it was chosen because it can be combined with quantitative approaches to give a more holistic view of a phenomenon (Ratcliff, 2006).
Ratcliff (2006) argues that the goal of analytic induction is “making universal statements that may need to be modified later if exceptions are discovered, but ultimately can reflect fairly exhaustively knowledge of what is researched. Causation is a potential goal of such knowledge, although it is causation that can include numerous exceptions. Those exceptions, however, add to the base of knowledge as the generalizability of the construct is determined, and a new more comprehensive law of behaviour can be generated that accounts for the exception.”

Robinson (1951) uses Cressey’s (1950) work to provide a procedure for conducting analytic induction: 1, define the phenomenon to be explained (research question); 2, formulate a hypothetical explanation of the phenomenon; 3, one case is studied to see if the hypothesis fits the facts; 4, if the hypothesis is not consistent with the facts, “either the hypothesis is reformulated or the phenomenon to be explained is redefined, so that the case is excluded. 5, practical certainty may be attained after a small number of cases has been examined, but the discovery by the investigator of a single negative case disproves the explanation and requires a re-formulation”. (Robinson, 1951, p813); 6, the procedure of examining cases, redefining a hypothesis and reformulating the hypothesis continues until a ‘universal relationship’ is established.

Analytic induction does not produce statistical description of characteristics or focus on correlations. Analytic induction’s aim is to find a general theory through a causal process (Lindesmith, 1947). Robinson (1951) further emphasizes this point “Analytic Induction
gives us universal statements, of the form ‘All S are P’, instead of mere correlations to which there are always exceptions” (Robinson, 1951, p812). In terms of generalizing from causal propositions within analytic induction, Robinson argues that such generalizations do not imply an absolute truth, because such generalizations should be accepted as provisional as long as no better theory is found or no contradictory evidence exists.

In terms of the criticisms levelled at analytic induction, Ratcliff (2006) notes Znaniecki’s (1934) concern that analytic induction only provides the necessary conditions for a phenomena but not the sufficient conditions for its presence i.e. analytic induction cannot predict phenomenon occurring with certainty, it can only provide a partial explanation for phenomena. However, Ratcliff (2006) states that this partial explanation can be supplemented by enumerating (correlations & statistical relationships) data to provide a fuller explanation –this was done in this research. Finally, unlike grounded theory analytic induction does not provide useful guidelines, especially in terms of how many cases should be investigated when no negative cases have arisen (Bryman 2004). In chapter eight this research details how saturation of themes was reached and how the decision was taken to cease examining cases. Cressey’s (1950) approach to analytic induction was adapted to test the hypothesis above.
5.4 Conclusion
The following three chapters show the analysis resulting from this two pronged methodological approach. The next chapter presents the first deductive methodological approach which set up a local political online forum in conjunction with GBC to answer the three research questions within this thesis and test E-Democracy.org’s Local Issues Forum recommendations. Chapter seven details the second deductive methodological approach, which again answers the three research questions within this thesis and tests E-Democracy.org’s Local Issues Forum recommendations but in this case focuses on a bigger sample of forums from around the world. Chapter eight encapsulates the results from the qualitative inductive methodology and tests the alternative hypothesis above.
6 Guildford Borough Council online forum

This chapter will present the findings from an experiment that set up a local political online forum in conjunction with a local government in the UK. The entire process of setting up a local political online forum in conjunction with local government will be presented in this chapter. The first purpose of this chapter is to detail how the E-Democracy.org’s Local Issues Forum recommendations were followed to their fullest in this case study. This was done to examine if they could produce a successful forum, and to detail lessons learnt from the process in order to provide new recommendations for others interested in building forums in conjunction with local government. The second purpose of this chapter examines the results of this experiment in relation to the three research questions within this thesis.

6.1 Implementing the forum
To ensure that the GBC online forum’s design in itself did not hamper deliberation or participation, the online forum was developed on lessons already learnt. The GBC forum was built in accordance with E-Democracy.org’s Local Issues Forum recommendations. This section will present the steps taken in implementing these recommendations which include: promotion; steering committee; second round of advertising; technology used; pre-moderation; pilot case study; study population & ethical considerations and finally how the forum operated will be detailed.
6.1.1 Promotion
E-Democracy.org’s Local Issues Forum Guidebook states that local online forums need to be extensively advertised. The following section details all the publicity and promotion generated for the GBC online forum. The E-Democracy.org’s Local Issues Forum recommendations were followed to their fullest, and this is why a detailed account of how this forum was publicized is shown below. As can be seen a lot of time, money and effort went into promoting the GBC online forum in period from 10/05/05 – 17/11/05.

A Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures & Commerce (RSA) Guildford branch “coffee house” public debate on democratic reform was attended. At this debate the possibility arose for this research to receive funding for advertising and promoting the online forum within Guildford. A promotional presentation of the online forum was made at a second RSA “coffee house” debate. The RSA then awarded a research grant of £1000 to promote and advertise the online forum. The RSA press office along with Cohn & Wolfe (public relations agency) secured media coverage of the award.

Various community voluntary organizations in Guildford were emailed on 11/08/05 requesting them to join the online forum’s steering committee. These organizations were contacted through a GBC list of such organizations, and via the University of Surrey’s Student Union’s V-Project database of such organizations. The response to this email was poor but one individual, a community development worker with the Healthy Living Programme became a member of the GBC steering committee.
A meeting was set up with the GBC gatekeeper on 22/08/05 to discuss advertising the online forum. The GBC gatekeeper said the council could promote the forum on their own website as well as via their newsletter ‘About Guildford’. The Guildford Citizens’ Advice Bureau (CAB) also promoted the forum to citizens, and placed a poster in a room used by its clients who include: Surrey Business Advice, Surrey Law Centre and The Rape & Sexual Abuse Crisis Centre.

On the 30/09/05 the online forum was launched in the Mayor’s office. At this event pictures were taken of the forum moderator along with the mayor, and a University of Surrey undergraduate student using the forum. Please see appendix D for all promotional material. The majority of advertising and promotion of the forum took place on 30/09/05. This included: an article for ‘About Guildford’ newsletter (delivered to all houses in Guildford in November); a short piece and accompanying web-link was produced for the GBC website, and was put on the council homepage; a promotional email was developed and sent to both GBC’s parish council and tenant association email lists; a second promotional email was also developed and sent both to the RSA in Guildford, and community / voluntary organizations in Surrey (these organisations included groups traditionally associated with the digital divide such as: Age Concern Surrey, Surrey Alcohol and Drug Advisory Service, Surrey Council for Voluntary Youth Services, Surrey Healthy Living Program, Surrey Community Action, Guildford Refugee Action Group).
A meeting was set up with the press office within the marketing department in University of Surrey to discuss promoting the online forum within the local media in Guildford. The press officer agreed to assist in promoting and advertising the project locally, and said that both the Surrey Advertiser (local Surrey newspaper) and Eagle local radio station were interested in promoting the online forum. Subsequently, a promotional piece was developed and emailed to the press officer along with URL of the online forum, and an article about the online forum appeared in the Surrey Advertiser on 07/10/05.

A pre-recorded interview (conducted with me) was aired by Eagle FM (local commercial radio station for Surrey & Hampshire). The online forum was also promoted within the University of Surrey, articles appeared in the: students’ newsletter Bare Facts, UniSlife, and the University of Surrey’s alumni newsletter. A promotional email was also sent to all postgraduates within the university, and a web-link was placed on the Students Union and Post Graduate Association websites. Finally on the 17/11/05 an advertisement about the forum appeared in the Friary and St. Nicolas Community Safety Update Newsletter.

6.1.2 Steering committee
E-Democracy.org ‘Local Issues Forum Guidebook’ argues that a steering committee is useful for setting up a successful local political online forum. This section will provide reasons for using a steering committee, and explain its role within the forum. A steering committee was set up for the GBC online forum, to serve as a non-partisan, non-profit, trusted host for the online forum and its issues. The steering committee oversaw the ongoing development of the forum. In short the role of the steering committee was to
prevent one individual or organization censoring the forum or limiting the discussion within the forum. The forum moderator was also held accountable to this steering committee. The steering committee included local representatives (cross party), community representatives and academics (see appendix E for members).

Between 01/05/05 - 04/11/05 local and national political representatives were banned from participating (posting and voting) within the forum. The reason for this was to create a public sphere (online forum) free from politicisation. On the 01/11/05 the research gatekeeper emailed the forum moderator to say that GBC councillors wanted to contribute to the online forum. This issue was raised at the first steering committee meeting of the GBC forum held on 03/11/05. At this meeting it was decided to allow local and national representatives to participate within the forum. It was considered exclusionary to prevent certain citizens, namely political representatives from participating within the forum. However, politicians were not allowed to contribute directly. Politicians had to email the forum moderator directly, and the moderator then posted the messages on the forum noting the politician’s name. This was done to prevent politicians taking control of debates within the forum or flooding the forum with posts.

Other actions that were decided upon at this steering committee meeting included: placement of a prominent web link on the GBC home page; development of promotional leaflets for distributed to the GBC reception, Guildford library, and Guildford’s supermarkets and coffee shops. It was also decided (due to low participation rates) to
develop an advertisement for a local newspaper; and place more controversial issues such as increasing council tax within the forum.

The use of a steering committee in the process of running a local political online forum in conjunction with local government proved useful. The committee was particularly helpful in suggesting alternate avenues of advertising, and assisting in gaining access to place certain topics within the forum.

6.1.3 Second round of advertising
Between 01/10/05 - 01/11/05 very little activity took place within the forum. Following a discussion on this at the steering committee meeting (03/11/05) it was decided to conduct another round of access negotiations with GBC officers (please see methodology for full access negotiations), and re-advertise the forum. This section represents promotional activities that took place between 15/11/05 – 14/02/06 following the steering committee meeting that took place on 03/11/05. To note, GBC never replaced the link that was on their website with a more prominent web link.

A description of the online forum and web link was placed on BBC Action Network website. Following this a promotional article was written for the BBC action network’s 'Take Action Week'. This ‘Action Week’ consisted of launching a call for facilitators for the 2006 Coffeehouse Challenge project. The BBC action network generated publicity via the BBC website, and through BBC News Online, BBC Breakfast and BBC Five Live.
On 30/12/05 an advertisement regarding the forum appeared in Surrey Advertiser – see appendix F, and a follow-up article about the online forum appeared in the Surrey Advertiser on 13/01/06 (see Appendix G).

On 04/01/06 two hundred leaflets advertising the forum were printed and distributed to: Guildford Library; GBC’s reception area; two supermarkets; the community & voluntary sector via the Healthy Living Programme; and Cafes throughout Guildford – See appendix H for leaflet.

The GBC could have been more helpful in terms of advertising the online forum. As shown above the researcher did the majority of promotion for the forum. During the first round of promotion (20/09/05) the research’s gatekeeper agreed to place an advertisement about the forum within the GBC’s newsletter ‘About Guildford’. The advertisement was placed in a non-prominent position in the back pages of the newsletter. In the second round of promotion (01/01/06) the gatekeeper was asked to place another advertisement in the January 2006 edition of the GBC’s newsletter ‘About Guildford’. The gatekeeper said that there was no January edition of the newsletter, and the next available edition was in March. Subsequently, the GBC published an edition of ‘About Guildford’ newsletter in January 2006.
6.1.4 Technology used
This section will detail the software used and the reasons for choosing it. GroupServer was the first software employed to build the GBC online forum for this research. GroupServer software was chosen because it combined web forum and email list technology, which is supposed to induce deliberation and promote convenience for users (E-Democracy.org’s Local Issues Forum Guidebook). Convenience here means participants do not need to visit a web forum to participate, they can do so via their inbox. GroupServer software was promoted by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) and prominent E-Democracy advocate Steven Clift - ‘GroupServer is the best social software platform we’ve seen to date for online communities that average citizens actually use’ (Clift, 2006). The UK local E-Democracy National project (via ODPM) provided funds to support the ‘GNU General Public License’ (GPL) open source release of GroupServer software. GroupServer software is written in Zope, advanced XML standards and Python. However, many technical difficulties arose in setting up GroupServer on the Department of Sociology’s (University of Surrey) web server. These technical difficulties continued, and with the timeframe allowed it was decided to find other software.

Market research was conducted in order to rate different forum and bulletin board software products against certain required criteria; please see appendix I for the summary report. The software chosen was DiscusWare (www.discusware.com) Freeware software. However, Discus Freeware like the other applications had no self registration mechanism, no message queue system and no registration form for capturing demographic
information – all of which were required for the research project. In order to obtain these facilities it was decided to upgrade to Discus Professional for a cost of $149.95.

Furthermore, Discus Professional had no poll feature, and the process of including such a feature in the software was arduous. Thus it was decided to source external poll software. It became apparent that pasting a HTML poll code into the site directory would take a lot of time to achieve, this was because the HTML poll code had to be configured to Discus Professional formatting. It was decided to source a poll website that generated a URL link directly between its website and the online forum. After reviewing many such sites (Ballot-box.net, www.pollhost.com, and freepolls.com), Sparklit Gold Poll software (webpoll.sparklit.com) was chosen because it contained such features as: email verification; advertisement blocking; cookie blocker (prevents users voting twice from the same pc); IP blocking (prevents users voting twice from the same IP address); voter logs (logs person’s vote, IP address and email address); and hide results (prevents users from viewing poll results during the vote). In terms of security especially in relation to the voting arena within the forum, the Electoral Commission report Modernising Elections (2002) argues that E-Voting advocates are a long way from re-assuring the general public on security fears, and a lot more is required to make such systems safe – this also held for the voting mechanisms within this forum.

To ensure accessibility, usability, reliability and security the GBC online forum was built and designed using the following web design texts and web sites: Nielsen (www.useit.com/alertbox), (1999), (2003), (2004); McClung-Genevese (2005);
Makrevski (2004); CSUS (2002); Lynch & Horton (2004); Lengel (2002); and Ericksen (1999). The GBC online forum was also developed using the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0, and E-Government Unit UK Cabinet Office (2002) report. Moreover, the forum was developed with limited graphics, and the graphics that were used had text descriptions. The website was also passed through Bobby software (webxact.watchfire.com) and its quality, and accessibility was assured.

6.1.5 Pre-Moderation
Lukensmeyer et al (2006) argue that forums should be pre-moderated, this entails previewing all messages before allowing them to be posted within a forum; and post moderation means reviewing messages after they have been posted. Pre-moderation was chosen to prevent libellous messages being posted on the forum. This was done because the moderator under UK law would have been held liable for allowing defamatory messages to be posted within the forum. The arguments put forward in chapter five for moderation (Edwards 2004, Davis 1999, Edwards 2002, Trenel 2005, Fulwider 2006) were employed as part of this research. Pre-moderation was used to filter all the posted messages and make sure they complied with the forum’s rules (see appendix J). As forum moderator I did not have any allegiances nor belong to any British political party. In this light the research was conducted impartially and independent of any political persuasions. The forum moderator’s duties included: enforcing the rules of the forum; responding to participants’ questions; providing basic technical support to users; focusing discussions within the forum; and compiling the results of the votes at the end of the forum.
Messages which transgressed the forum’s rules were prevented from being posted. During the GBC online forum’s existence only one post was prevented from being posted. The post was libellous towards a businessman within the Guildford town area.

Edwards (2004) argues that what a moderator deletes or deems irrelevant is a biased subjective process, and it is impossible for a moderator to be unbiased. However it is possible as a moderator not to un-duly censor posts. This was the approach taken within the GBC forum. As the forum was not active it was quite easy to pre-moderate all posted messages, and this was done quickly to allow discussions to flow. However, if the forum had been more active it would have been more difficult to pre-moderate all members’ messages.

6.1.6 Pilot case study
As the forum was developed it was continually tested. The forum was piloted on three different study groups comprising of five or more participants – all test groups ran during September 2005. All difficulties noted by test groups were addressed. Issues included: for the logos on the homepage to have URL links; for text to be curtailed on the homepage; and to clarify and justify the registration section of the forum. Finally, meta-tags were added to the forum’s description to enhance hits through various search engines.

6.1.7 Study population & ethical considerations
The following section details firstly, who this project was targeted at, and secondly some of the ethical considerations that needed to be heeded as part of this research. The study
population of this research comprised of private citizens living in the Guildford area. Arber (2001) defines a population - ‘a sample is studied to learn something about the larger grouping of which it is part; this larger grouping is called the population or universe of enquiry...’ (Arber, 2001, p 59). Citizens the world over could contribute to the debates within the forum, but only those individuals who were: eighteen years of age and over; lived within the Guildford area; and were British, Commonwealth, or European citizens could vote within the GBC online forum. These criteria were used as they were the eligibility criteria used for voting within local borough elections.

Bulmer (1982) argues that ‘researchers have always to take account of the effects of their actions upon those subjects and act in such a way as to preserve their rights and integrity as human beings. Such behaviour is ethical behaviour’ (Bulmer, 2003:46). He further argues that ‘ethics is a principled sensitivity to the rights of others. Being ethical limits the choices we can make in the pursuit of truth’ (Bulmer, 1982:3).

The online forum explicitly informed participants about the purpose and nature of its existence, and the subsequent use of the posts for a PhD thesis. Participants were also made aware that the results of the votes within the forum were to be presented to the GBC executive. Participants to this research could not be guaranteed confidentiality, because real names had to be used on posts within the forum (see table 5.1 in chapter five). However, once deliberations and voting were completed the forum was locked down. Furthermore, all real names of local government officers, steering committee members and media officers were removed from this doctoral thesis. The name of the local government involved was kept within this doctoral thesis. The justification for this
was that the findings within this doctoral thesis had no major risk for the council and its officers; and moreover, the GBC agreed to the forum and its use for a doctoral thesis.

On 07/11/05 a member of the public queried whether the forum was in breach of the law. The individual in question said that s/he registered for the forum and s/he was asked for his/her email address. This individual noted that there was no opt-in question asking him/her whether they were happy to receive third party emails, s/he claimed it was now legally binding to ask such a question. The Joint Information Systems Committee Legal Information Service (JISC Legal) were immediately contacted, who said that if one collects email addresses with intent to pass them to third parties one should be in compliance with the Data Protection Act 1998. At this stage clearer text was placed on the registration section of the forum stating that if a participant selected email notification as part of their registration, this would mean third parties would be able to email them. The text within the registration section which made participants aware that they could hide their email address from other users was also made more explicit. All previous registered users were emailed to highlight this issue. Finally, the data protection and information compliance officer was consulted at the University of Surrey, who after completing the registration process of the forum said that the website fulfilled the information requirements of the Data Protection Act. However, he noted that it would be prudent to amend the registration page and tell participants what the project intended to do with all email addresses in relation to the research – this was done. Thus, it is important when implementing any E-Democracy mechanism to become fully aware of all
6.1.8 How the forum operated

The format of discussion and voting mechanisms within the GBC forum will be presented here. A statement of aims and objectives were devised for the forum along with a set of rules, and participants had to register on the GBC online forum by agreeing to abide by these rules. After this they could enter the online forum with a username and confidential password. The general public could read all posts within the forum, but users had to be registered to post within the forum. At registration participants were asked for some demographic information. Discus Professional allowed citizens to post to the forum in two ways: 1, via the forum’s website; and 2, by replying to an email from the forum. Each message posted to the forum was threaded under a GBC sub-topic. Discus Professional software’s interface allowed the moderator to manage the content within the forum, and place documents within for sharing. If a participant posted a message on the forum it was emailed onto all other members who had enabled email notification within their registration. Apart from the sub-topics chosen from the GBC Forward Plan of Key Decisions document, the forum had two other fixed subtopics: one, the voting arena and two, a discussion space for citizens to discuss other local issues not set by the moderator. Each sub-topic had either a web-link or attached document providing background information for participants. Figure 6.1 below shows a thread taken from the GBC forum on new housing developments within Guildford. Discussions within the forum began on 1st of October 2005. Once the discussion period on a particular issue had finished
participants could vote on that particular issue. However, the results of votes on only two separate issues were presented to the GBC executive; please see section below for results of these votes. Furthermore, the GBC executive was under no obligation to vote in line with the preference formed by this online forum.

Figure 6.1

Forum:

New Housing Development

Context:
Guildford is the second largest borough in Surrey, and it has the highest population in the county. The Government requires the GBC to build 4,750 new houses within the borough between 2001 and 2016. The council is confident that the urban areas of Guildford town, Ash and Tongham and the existing villages can accommodate the new growth. At the same time as the borough council is preparing its Local Development Framework, new Regional Planning Guidance is being prepared to plan up to 2016. This will be likely to increase the number of new homes to be provided in the Borough. However, at this stage the GBC does not know how many. The Government requires local authorities to build at densities of between 30 and 50 homes per hectare and higher at sites with good public transport accessibility.

Issue:
Where is the best location for new housing? If the GBC were required to accommodate additional housing, above 4,750, where should it be? The overwhelming response to a previous consultation by the GBC in summer 2002 was...
that there was no public support for an extension into the Green Belt to provide new homes. Is this still the case?

**Relevant website:**

(Message edited by admin on September 29, 2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Junior Member</th>
<th>Username:</th>
<th>Post Number: 1</th>
<th>Registered: 09-2005</th>
<th>Posted From: 212.85.230.225</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Posted on Friday, September 30, 2005 - 09:21 am:**

There is a strong argument for including a high percentage of so called 'affordable homes' in the many planned new developments in the TOWN CENTRE. This re-populates our town centre, making it safer and likely to express a greater cosmopolitan feel. However, careful consideration must be given to important community facilities such as recreational space (especially for children), access to medical services, and parking. Remember also that more cars will be coming in and out of the town centre.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Junior Member</th>
<th>Username:</th>
<th>Post Number: 1</th>
<th>Registered: 10-2005</th>
<th>Posted From: 81.179.110.57</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Posted on Monday, October 03, 2005 - 11:25 am:**

Could the council determine how much of the greenbelt is in fact grassy scrub and small old fallow fields and wasteland by the sides of roads? and how much real biodiversity is found therein?

There is greenbelt and greenbelt- some of which, may be better for development and proper management and others which should never be touched.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Junior Member</th>
<th>Username:</th>
<th>Post Number: 1</th>
<th>Registered: 11-2005</th>
<th>Posted From: 81.179.251.61</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Posted on Thursday, November 17, 2005 - 10:59 pm:**

With regard to *****'s comment about more traffic in and out of the town centre: what about more environmentally friendly measures such as car pools (Toyota Prius or Smart cars maybe?) to reduce the need for residents' parking? And an improvement in cycling provisions - more cycle lanes to encourage more people to pedal rather than drive around the town. New homes should not necessarily mean old approaches to transport and I think Guildford should bd f
be doing more to move away from its current car culture.

This is a very difficult question. On the one hand, Guildford is suffering from a lack of genuinely affordable accommodation for support staff - on the other hand, Guildford only has a finite amount of infrastructure and sites.

There are areas on the fringes of the town that, in general terms, would affect the landscape amenity of Guildford very little if developed (likely to be contested by NIMBY - not-in-my-back-yard objectors). There are also areas in the urban envelope that could accommodate a higher density of housing if properly used.

As far as traffic is concerned, it is usually the case that traffic is exacerbated by inadequate provision of spaces or signage for car parking - it is not yet feasible to expect everyone to leave his/her car at home and use public transport (however much we may idealise such a concept). New developments must allocate sufficient parking so as to avoid increasing the on-street parking problems the town already faces.

It's not just parking that can be a problem. Traffic congestion isn't caused by a lack of parking spaces but by cars finding a space or leaving a space. As any Guildfordian knows, a lot of congestion is caused parents taking their children to and from school. What about free public transport for all under 18's?!

Whilst I recognise the issues **** sets out, I don't believe that providing free public transport on the network we have today will make much difference to under 18's and their parents transporting them to and from school.

Sarah's comment about car pooling for school runs probably stands more chance of getting off the ground - although I'm not too sure how to incentivise


6.2 Result of the GBC experiment
The result of the GBC experiment, and lessons learned from the case study will be detailed here. By implementing the GBC online forum Guildford Borough Council fulfilled a part of their obligations to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister’s strategy for local E-Government, and further implemented their E-Government priority outcomes for 2005. GBC used the online forum to complement its other offline consultations activities; the problem with this approach was that it limited the online forum to what the borough council already did i.e. it was an add-on to existing services and did not change the way the council interacted with the borough (Pratchett, 2006). As a result the GBC forum did little in terms of addressing political disengagement in Guildford.

After all that was implemented above and done in accordance with the E-Democracy.org’s Local Issues Forum recommendations the forum failed and citizens did not participate in it. In order to increase participation among citizens, two contentious local government issues were placed in the forum. These were: whether Guildford should have a casino license; and what level of council tax would the citizens of Guildford accept. However, despite the placement of these two issues within the forum, participation was still almost non-existent.
Between 01/10/05 and 22/01/06 hardly any activity took place within the forum, only 58 users registered for the forum and the forum only received 28 posts. Appendix K details a monthly and weekly report of logs to the website. An interesting finding here was that more people looked at the website than registered, posted or voted within it. The GBC online forum closed on the 29/03/06 with only 68 registered users and 58 posted messages; and as can be seen in figure 6.2 and figure 6.3 very few people took part in the voting processes within the forum.

In this case study the use of E-Democracy.org’s Local Issues Forum recommendations failed to produce a successful active forum. The concluding section below will examine the results of this experiment in relation to the three research questions within this thesis. However, before that some lessons learnt by conducting this experiment will be detailed.

Fig 6.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What level of council tax increase would you accept? [21 votes total]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A reduction in council tax (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No change to rate of council tax (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A rise lower than 2.5% (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A 2.5% rise (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A rise higher then 2.5% (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spoil your vote (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fig 6.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GBC poll</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Would you support the issuing of casino licenses in Guildford? [58 votes total]</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes (7)</th>
<th>12%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No (51)</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spoil your vote (0)</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6.2.1 Lessons learned

The purpose of this section is to detail the lessons learned from implementing the E-Democracy.org’s Local Issues Forum recommendations, and provide new recommendations for others interested in building forums in conjunction with local government. In terms of forum technology, Street and Wright (2007) argue that software developers design people out of participation e.g. an individual working within a community development project with limited IT know-how would not be able to set up a forum using GroupServer. This software which was advocated by E-Democracy.org, Steven Clift, and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister was extremely difficult to set up technically. E-Democracy software should be easy to install, and set up and manage because all the effort that goes into making such software usable, reliable and accessible
for citizens will be lost as managers of E-Democracy projects will source software that is
easier to manage and set-up. Central government should fund the open source release of
such software, and not fund the open release of complex systems like GroupServer.

Other recommendations for anyone interested in setting up a local political online forum
in conjunction with local government include:

1. It takes quite a lot of time and effort to reassure local government about
   implementing E-Democracy, so be prepared for many meetings with different
   local government officers and representatives.

2. As soon as is possible within the process get a gatekeeper within local
government on board.

3. Allow enough time to set the forum up. In this case it took 7 months from drafting
   the initial proposal to the launch of the forum.

4. Be prepared to spend time and money on promoting the forum. However, where
   possible use free publicity e.g. local newspapers are always looking for interesting
   projects to write about.

5. The use of a steering committee in the process of running a local political online
   forum in conjunction with local government proved useful. Such committees
   (especially made up of representatives from local government) are helpful in
   assisting projects gain access to certain local government topics for the forum,
   and pushing E-Democracy agendas within the local government.
6. The bureaucracy within local government means it takes time to get approval so leave enough time to get access to local government issues. It took this research five weeks to get all GBC topics approved, transformed into questions, and relevant documentation placed within the online forum. In this process be prepared to chase up individual local government officers.

7. It is important when implementing any E-Democracy mechanism to become fully aware of all legal implications of such mechanisms.

6.3 Conclusion
As was shown above the use of E-Democracy.org’s Local Issues Forum recommendations (including the use of moderation and a steering committee) did not produce an active successful forum in this case study. However, it was useful to set up a steering committee (made up of representatives from local government) to assist in pushing forward E-Democracy project agendas within local government, but this had no impact on the success of the forum. Within this section the results of the above experiment will be explored in relation to the three research questions within this thesis:

1. What types of participatory and democratic models can local political online forums support?

2. Can local political online forums support all categories of deliberation?
3. Is it beneficial to build local political online forums in conjunction with local government?

In terms of the first and second research questions the GBC experiment showed that the GBC online forum supported a liberal thin democratic model, and partial participatory democracy. The GBC did not permit the forum to become a direct democratic model, and due to GBC concerns the online forum was not permitted to support full-participatory democracy. The forum was an add-on to existing services and did not change the way the council interacted with the borough (Pratchett, 2006). Furthermore, no substantial discussion let alone deliberation occurred within the forum.

The third research question within this thesis could not be answered here. There are various reasons apart from the project receiving local government support as to why this experiment may have failed. Firstly, it could have failed because citizens within Guildford may have not heard about the forum; however this is unlikely to have been the case because, as was shown above, the forum was extensively advertised throughout the borough. Secondly, the forum could have failed because of a lack of internet access, but Guildford is located in a high internet access area. 61% of households in Britain have internet access, and 65% of households in the south east of England (where Guildford is located) have internet access (National statistics office, 2007). Furthermore, a promotional email was sent to groups who are affected by the digital divide such as: Age Concern Surrey, Surrey Alcohol and Drug Advisory Service, Surrey Council for Voluntary Youth Services, Surrey Healthy Living Program, Surrey Community Action,
Guildford Refugee Action Group etc. Moreover, various community voluntary organizations in Guildford were emailed requesting them to join the online forum’s steering committee. Finally, citizens may have not participated within the forum because Guildford is an affluent middle class borough (see appendix L for Guildford’s demographic profile) where local government issues have no importance. However, this was not the case because only 56% of residents in a 2005 MORI poll of 1000 residents were satisfied with the way GBC ran things in the Borough (GBC, March 2006, p3).

Even though these other possible reasons for failure have been eliminated it cannot be said for definite that a forum built in conjunction with local government will be inactive. The forum could have still failed without local government support caused by some other unknown reason. However ‘Institutional design plays an important role in determining whether groups of citizens are able to gain access to decision-making’ (Lowndes and Wilson, 2001, p641). Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker’s (2006) research on participatory activities within six English localities shows that while community ties (social capital) and the socio-economic position of citizens within communities shapes levels of political engagement they do not determine them. They argue that the way institutions of local government work, and how their members and officials view participation mechanisms also influences whether people participate or not. Levels of participation are ‘found to be related to the openness of the political system, [and] the presence of a public value orientation among local government managers (Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker, 2006 b, p539) – this latter point will be taken up in the next chapter.
Within this chapter the three research questions within this thesis were only examined in relation to one local political online forum. The next chapter will systematically examine the three research questions and test the E-Democracy.org’s Local Issues Forum recommendations again across a bigger sample of 138 local political online forums from around the world to see if the results here are confirmed, and further explore question three.
7 Forums from around the world

In order to examine if the results in the last chapter are confirmed, and further explore question three, this chapter will systematically examine the three research questions and test the E-Democracy.org’s Local Issues Forum recommendations again across a bigger sample of 138 local political online forums from around the world. This chapter consists of four main sections, the first of which will detail how a sample of 138 local political online forums was selected. Secondly, it will be examined what political models, participatory types and deliberative forms can be supported within the sample. Thirdly, whether it is beneficial to build local political online forums in conjunction with local government will be explored; and finally, the E-Democracy.org’s Local Issues Forum recommendations will be tested again.

7.1 How the sample of forums was selected
This section will focus on detailing the process by which a sample of 138 local political online forums were selected, collected, and analyzed. Below the criteria devised; the sampling and collection processes used; and the ethical issues encountered in this second deductive approach will be spelt out.
7.1.1 Criteria

Two sets of criteria were used to select a sample of local political online forums. Firstly, the online forum criteria will be examined. This research consisted of examining local political online forums located anywhere on the World Wide Web that dealt with local political issues. As the researcher could only speak English, forums which were English speaking were only collected. To save on time local political online forums which did not require registration were also only examined. This could have been a limitation but it was not, because the research only came across three forums which had such a feature. Forums were also selected that allowed anyone to join (non-exclusionary) and allowed anyone to run them. Moderated and un-moderated forums were also chosen, however, only forums which had a rules based framework were selected. This latter criterion was chosen to select forums because as can be seen within the methodology consensus exists within the E-Democracy literature that forums without a set of rules have little chance of providing a platform for deliberation and tend to be anarchic.

Secondly, forums were also selected that were focused on local political issues. Political selection criteria were developed on Barber’s (1984) basic theoretical conditions that give rise to politics – these theoretical conditions were used to define local political online forums in chapter four. Table 7.1 provides the criteria by which local political online forums were chosen for the sample list. These criteria were used systematically to identify relevant political online forums using the search engine Google. The steps in this process will be explained next.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political criteria</th>
<th>Online forums criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Necessary public action required</td>
<td>Situated on the English speaking World Wide Web.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 There has to be public choice on local issues.</td>
<td>Do not require registration to read posts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Absence of independent ground i.e. conflicting viewpoints</td>
<td>The general layout is not that of a blog or a listserv or email list (unless list has achieved threads). There must be (the potential for) more than one contributor, each providing distinct, signed input, which remains on a message / discussion / bulletin threaded board.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Issues which affect all participants</td>
<td>Moderated or un-moderated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Forums which are exclusionary i.e. the republicans’ forum will not be collected. Nor will forums which are set up for one single issue e.g. environmentalism.</td>
<td>A rules based framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 There must be a thread dedicated to a village, town or city; not just threads for province, state or international issues. However, forums set up exclusively for local issues may contain some wider issues.</td>
<td>In the most general sense provides a format for citizens to participate in local / national decision making or input into policy formation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>All citizens, private organisations and government officials must be allowed to participate within forum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Can be independently, privately or governmentally run.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
7.1.2 Sampling strategy

A social book-marking website called Delicious (http://del.icio.us/) was used as a data collection tool. Delicious enabled the researcher to store bookmarks online, and to categorize and organize bookmarks with the use of tags. Data collection began by requesting experts in field of E-Democracy and deliberation to email the researcher any online forum population lists they had, upon which samples could be drawn. These practitioners said no such databases existed. As there was no population list from which to draw a sample of local political forums it was decided to create a sample of forums from the internet. Below is a description of the sampling strategy used.

The sampling strategy began with the development of five search phrases (see table 7.2 below). These search phrases were used within the search engine Google. The search phrases were used individually across the internet as a whole, and not searched through geographically specific areas. Google’s most relevant search result pages were only examined, Google’s omitted results pages were not. Google’s omitted results feature incorporates less relevant web-links in the search results, this feature was not used as it produced duplicative and irrelevant results (please see the next section for how Google searches and ranks pages). All pages and forums which appeared in the search result pages were examined and selected if they fell within the search criteria (noted above).

The above sampling strategy was found to be the best strategy to conduct this research. Other strategies were also tried and tested but were inferior to the one chosen above. For example the search phrases were used across specific geographic regions in Google and a
random sample was taken across all regions; however, at the end of this process the sample of forums was too small to analyse.

The search phrases were also used alongside cluster sampling i.e. clustering by location. This sampling strategy consisted of using random numbers and selecting samples within each geographic region within Google. This strategy used Google’s omitted results feature. Cluster sampling did not work because the strategy could not choose clusters randomly. Furthermore, a stratified random sampling strategy would also not work because the different forum types were not known pre-data collection.

The final strategy which failed aimed to use random numbers to select a random sample from Google’s most relevant search result pages (not including omitted results). This method focused on the internet as a whole and was not geographically specific. However, this strategy did not work because the process of using random numbers did not produce a big enough sample. This strategy was re-developed except in this second attempt Google’s omitted results (this produced a bigger population from which to draw random numbers) were included. However, the majority of the results from these pages were not useful, and again the sample was too small.

7.1.3 Data collection procedure
Before the sampling strategy proper began, a sub-sample of sites was examined for keywords. A selection of political online forums’ meta-tags (the website keywords used by web developers for search engines) was examined. On the bases of this exercise five
search phrases were developed. All the search phrases and the amount of websites and forums explored during data collection are represented below in table 7.2. After the completion of search phrases one and two a total of 51 forums had been selected, the majority of which came from search phrase two; after the completion of search phrases three and four a total of 113 forums had been captured. The sample itself at the end of the data-collection process contained 148 forums. This data-collection process took five months to complete.

Table 7.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phrase</th>
<th>Number of forums</th>
<th>Number of Google pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Online political discussion forum</td>
<td>814</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Local politics discussion forum</td>
<td>440</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Community online discussion forum</td>
<td>859</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Local government council online forum</td>
<td>780</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Local politics message board</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>3393</strong></td>
<td><strong>340</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data entry began on the 16/11/06, and took two months to complete. The data collection and data entry processes took seven arduous months to be completed - the process was very repetitive. Data entry consisted of examining each of the 148 forums and categorizing them across variables within SPSS. The variables and the coding system used can be seen in table 7.3

Table 7.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moderated</td>
<td>Whether forum had a moderator or not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active</td>
<td>If forum had no posts registered within it for a month it was noted as inactive.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
However, a forum was also noted as inactive if it had a recent post and the main body of other posts were more than a month old. Forums were also noted as inactive if the forum had a recent post situated in a forum with little or no other posts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who commissioned a forum</th>
<th>Forums were coded in terms of who set them up (media, community, or local government).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What software was used variable</td>
<td>The software that was used to build each forum was coded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whether a select group of members did all the postings within a forum</td>
<td>This variable coded whether just a select group of forum participants posted the majority of messages within a forum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whether there was evidence of conversations on political representatives, political disengagement or voting</td>
<td>Here forums were coded as having such debate or not.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participatory</td>
<td>Codes included: Non-participatory which was categorized as a forum having no formal connection to a local government website. Pseudo participatory was coded when a forum was present on a government website. Partial participatory was coded when a forum was used as part of a government consultation. Full participatory was coded by local government decision making processes being placed in the hands of citizens within a forum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deliberative</td>
<td>Forums with a majority of single posts were coded as having no capacity for deliberation; and forums with a majority of two or more posts were coded as having a capacity for deliberation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political model</td>
<td>Forums were categorized according to the typology of participatory political models detailed in chapter two.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Whether the forum had relevant debate | The codes here included: majority relevant debate, minority relevant debate, and non-relevant debate.

Location variable | Coded the geographic region of forums.

Posts, threads and users | Figures were captured on the number of posts, threads and users within forums.

As can be seen from chapters 2-4 the indicators above were produced after an extensive review of the political science and communications literatures. They were also designed to tap the elementary condition of each concept e.g. the deliberation variable does not try and tap the concept deliberation, but tries to examine if there is a capacity for deliberation. Furthermore these indicators were applied consistently across all forums and can easily (for the purpose of reliability) be transferred to another study. At the end of this process certain forums had to be removed from the sample because they were no longer available or they were captured twice, this left a total sample of 138 forums.

Once data entry was complete a quality assurance (QA) exercise was carried out on 10% of the forums to make sure the data was correct. Within 10% of the forums there were only two erroneous entries within 196 entries, which is a 4% discrepancy. In terms of replication, if another researcher took the exact same forums for their sample as was used in this research then their results may vary slightly to what is here. The reason for this is that some forums may change over time, and become active or be shut down. In other words online data is variable - ‘The internet is so fluid as to be rendered meaningless as a storage medium; it is never constant, never fixed no matter that the textual traces left there seem to give it some form’ (Jones, 1999, p12).
Furthermore, by using the search engine Google the data and results here are slightly unrepresentative. Google ranks search pages on its own software which is called PageRank™ and it “relies on the uniquely democratic nature of the web by using its vast link structure as an indicator of an individual page's value. In essence, Google interprets a link from page A to page B as a vote, by page A, for page B. But, Google looks at considerably more than the sheer volume of votes, or links a page receives; for example, it also analyzes the page that casts the vote. Votes cast by pages that are themselves "important" weigh more heavily and help to make other pages "important." Using these and other factors, Google provides its views on pages' relative importance...Google combines PageRank with sophisticated text-matching techniques to find pages that are both important and relevant to your search. Google goes far beyond the number of times a term appears on a page and examines dozens of aspects of the page's content (and the content of the pages linking to it) to determine if it's a good match for your query” (Google, 2008).

Thus, Google's complex automated structure makes external tampering on search results extremely difficult, and furthermore, Google does not place advertisements within the results (Google, 2008). However, forums which have less links to them have a weaker chance of being selected by the search engine Google. In terms of this research this does not bias the results of this study to any great extent, because the research was more concerned with popular and active forums rather than inactive unpopular forums. However, it is acknowledged that this sampling strategy has an under representation of sites with few links to them. Finally, once data entry was completed some missing data
remained. Forums from the sample were emailed to attain missing data not present on their websites. Table 7.4 provides details of the missing data left at the end of this exercise.

Table 7.4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Missing cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whether a select group of members did all the postings within a forum</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deliberative</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posts</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threads</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Users</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7.1.4 Ethical considerations

Data analysis consisted of statistical procedures such as frequency tests, descriptive mean analysis, cross-tabulations and logistic regression (all results are shown in the next sections). However, some analysis was conducted on the posted messages within the forums. All posted messages used from the sample of 138 forums were already in the public domain, thus when a participant posted a message to any of these forums their message was there for anyone with internet access to view. With this said and to ensure ethical principles were not breached, DeVaus’ (2002) principles, which include preventing harm to participants, preventing invasion of privacy and deception, and informing participants regarding the research were applied to this research. A copy of the Statement of Ethical Practice by the British Sociological Association was also consulted.
prior to undertaking this research. Within this chapter and the subsequent chapters there are various screen shots of forum’s threads and posts. The names of the posters within these have been removed or obscured to ensure poster confidentiality.

### 7.2 What is supported

The results of the GBC experiment showed (through one case study) that a forum built in conjunction with a local government supports a liberal thin democratic model, and partial participatory democracy. The GBC did not permit the forum to become a direct democratic model, and due to GBC concerns the online forum was not permitted to support full-participatory democracy; and no deliberation occurred. The following will detail the various political models; participatory types; and deliberative forms the forums within this bigger sample of 138 support. However, firstly the basic features of the forums within the sample will be detailed.

#### 7.2.1 Basic features

This section will summarise the basic features of the forums within the sample of 138 forums. Within the sample of forums the average number of posts within a forum is 3,333, and the average number of threads is 385, with an average of 1400 registered users. In terms of geographic location 62% are based in the US, while 30% are based in the UK. No clear reason was established as to why so few forums from other English speaking countries (Canada, New Zealand, Republic of Ireland, and Australia) were present in the sample only that these counties have lower populations than that of the US and the UK. Twenty-nine percent of forums are supported by small independent software
companies, and this is followed by the use of PhpBB (22%). Forty-two percent of forums are commissioned by independent communities or individuals, 30% by media organisations, and 22% by local government. 61% of sites have a majority of relevant debate occurring within them; and 62% of forums have a thread debating political participation, public representatives or voting. Finally, seventy-seven percent of forums are moderated and the majority of these are run by independent communities.

7.2.2 Political model
Neither liberal plural thin democratic models nor unitary democratic models are entities that are political as defined by this research. As defined in the criteria section above political means to consider options in the face of opposition without common ground. Individuals within both these democratic groups are all said to have the same objectives / opinions. Thus, both liberal plural thin democratic forums and unitary forums (Mansbridge 1983) were not selected as part of this study as they fell outside the political selection criteria.

The GBC experiment showed that the GBC online forum supported a liberal thin democratic model; and Wojcik’s (2007) examination of deliberation within 30 forums supported by local French government found that such forums did not impact on decision making processes within local government. The empirical findings of this chapter found something similar, in that no direct democratic models or strong democratic models were present within this sample. In fact, all forums within the sample conform to the liberal thin democratic model.
7.2.3 Participatory categories
All pseudo and partial participatory forums are local government forums; and, non-participatory forums are either commissioned by independent individuals /communities or media organisations. Only 10% of forums within the sample have a formal influence on local government, that is to say they are partial participatory (e.g. the GBC forum); 12% are pseudo participatory; and 78% are non-participatory. None of the forums are full participatory.

On the other hand, this research has found that three non-participatory forums (Cape Ann, Loganville, and Warrington speak free) did manage to influence local government directly. This was discovered by emailing all forum moderators within the sample and asking them if they had any examples of how their forums influenced local government. This backs up claims made by Clift (2000 & 2002) that online forums are agenda setting tools and an example of this (the ‘Dairy Queen’ incident) can be found in chapter four.

7.2.4 Deliberative form
Thirty four percent of the forums have participants talking (monologue) more than they are listening (dialogue) i.e. a third of forums have a majority of single posted messages, rather than posts with two or more replies. Thus, Wilhelm’s (1999, 2000) arguments about forum participants being mainly information providers is to a certain extent true.
In terms of forums with more than two replies to posts i.e. forums with an ability to support deliberation, the following was discovered. 66% of forums have a majority of replied-to posts as opposed to single posted messages; and 58% of forums have a core group of posters i.e. the majority of threads within a forum consist of 5-10 participants talking amongst themselves.

However, three quarters of forums that have a majority of two or more replied-to posts have a core group of posters. This research, in agreement with Dahlberg (2001) and Sassi (2001) argues that Habermas’ communicative action cannot occur within this sub set of forums because they are not inclusive of all citizens. Adding to this, the digital divide prevents many groups of people engaging within these forums. Within the UK 39% of households do not have internet access (National statistics office, 2007). Norris (2005) argues that the internet in the context of the digital divide is unlikely to strengthen democracy, or support deliberation; and is more likely to expand social divisions within society and strengthen established elite positions (Norris, 2001).

Rational Deliberation Redefined is also not occurring within these forums, because the debating processes within these forums also do not include all participants that the decision affects. This is to say a core group of posters (5-10) are mainly engaged in dialogue within these forums. For Rational Deliberation Redefined to occur all citizens that a decision affects must be included or at least their opinions represented in sufficient scale. Please see Figure 7.1 below for thread from Warrington forum which has a majority of two or more replied-to posts and a core group of posters.
Think we should make this a sticky topic that stays at the top of the list!

Read in the Guardian today that the council are considering de-criminalisation of car parking in Warrington. It’s claimed that this will raise money in terms of clamping fines and leave the police free to fight real crime.

Apparently this has already been done by loads of other councils right across the country including our immediate neighbours Manchester and Liverpool. So if we want to know how its working we just have to ask. Don’t we???

Well actually no. It seems the council’s Island Warrington mentality comes into play yet again. They want to pay some fat cat advisor £100,000 of our money to tell them if it’s a good idea. Still it’s only money why should we care? Probably get a nice big report for that with loads of nice new words.

---

**Re: Council madness**

Agree, the consultatnts fee is down right daft, If however they propose matching Manchester with free parking on Saturday pm's and Sundays and reduce parking fees to a nominal level that will get people coming into town OK I have no problem, however I think all that is just a pipe dream and I shall continue to shop out town where I dont pay for parking (or if I do its a pittance)

---

**Re: Council madness**

Don’t think they were on about parking type parking more the illegal parking that gets you a ticket. I’ve allways thought it was daft given the police are so thin on the ground to make this their responsibility. I know people hate the private clampers and wardens but at least they certainly do solve the problem. I suppose this goes to show that if the rules are enforced rigouresly then people think twice about breaking the law. Perhaps they should go one step further and use private companies to do carry out other duties that the police don't seem able to do.
I always thought we had traffic wardens to do that job any way. Aren't they run by the council?

Warrington on the Web

No they or be be more correct I beleive "he" works out of the police station at the moment

I suppose the question is, does "he" now become a real copper of is he made redundant?

Is it true there's only one traffic warden for all of Warrington?

Either way, you don't seem to see any of them unless of course you park wrong then they seem to appear like magic. I think they do come under the control of the police.

Just thinking about this. If it's now going to be run as a business, if the business does its job too well (by clamping down on illegal parking 😞) then people will stop doing it and they may go out of business. Hmmmm interesting thought.

I dont go into Warrington much, no free parking, few shops of interest, but I have been told by someone who goes in every day they are down to one traffic warden

I don't know about one traffic warden, I just know that the buggers are around whenever you DONT need them! My Husband, ****, parked at the back of the White Hart Hotel a couple of years ago, and was booked. I went to the Police Station and reported this incident,
and was told that although **** had parked at the back of an empty shop, it was still a "reportable offence". My Husband was very, very ill at that time, and although I went to the police station and reported this load of rubbish, my Hubby was still fined £60. Don't talk to me about the police, I have no time for them.

(30/11/03 11:54 pm)  
Reply

Re: Council madness

Just doing a bit of reading and it looks like the cost of doing this is more nearer quarter of a million pounds. It really annoys me to think that so much of the money that is made available from the government these days can't be used for real and tangible things. Instead the money is often offered in a form of discount against courses where so called experts swap their expertise for your grant dosh. Half the time it's bloody obvious what needs doing yet we seem to prefer to pay others to make the decision for us.

What I can't understand is how we seem to have evolved into this grants mentality. I get sick to death of hearing how our council has been successful in "bidding" for grants. Surely to goodness, government dosh should be shared out pretty much equally between all towns rather than relying on our councilors ability to bullshit their way through some selection process.

7.3 Developing forums in conjunction with local government

This section will attempt to answer the third research question within this thesis which the preceding chapter failed to do, and establish if it is beneficial to build local political online forums in conjunction with local government. All pseudo and partial participatory forums within the sample are local government forums; whereas, non-participatory forums are either commissioned by independent individuals /communities or media organizations. Just under half of the forums (43%) within the sample are inactive. Only 10% of forums have a formal influence on local government i.e. the forums were used as part of a government consultation, but 86% of these forums are inactive. And 12% of forums were pseudo participatory i.e. the forums were present on a government website,
and 53% of these forums are inactive. Thus, the majority of non-participatory forums are active whereas the majority of local government forums are inactive.

Put another way, 71% of forums commissioned by media organizations are active. 64% of forums commissioned by independent communities / individuals are active; and only 31% of local government forums are active. Furthermore through the logistic regression analysis in the next section we can see that non-participatory forums are four times more likely to be active than local government commissioned forums, and media commissioned ones are five times more likely to be active than local government ones, and forums commissioned by independent individuals or communities are four times more likely to be active than local government forums. Thus, forums which are placed within local government websites have a greater chance of being inactive, and it is not beneficial to build local political online forums in conjunction with local government.

One possible reason for this inactivity within government run forums is that forums which have a majority of two or more replied-to posts are more likely to be active and have a thread debating political participation, public representatives or voting. There is a greater chance of a thread debating political participation, public representatives or voting occurring (49.4%) within a forum commissioned by independent communities / individuals. Moreover, there is a greater chance of such a thread not occurring (38.9%) within a forum commissioned by local government. The logistic regression exercise in the next section will show forums which have such a thread are five times more likely to be active than those without such a thread. The next section will investigate further why
forums built in conjunction with local government have a greater chance of being inactive.

7.3.1 Why forums built in conjunction with local government are inactive
This section by establishing the characteristics of active forums will try and determine why forums built in conjunction with local government have a greater chance of being inactive. In order to analyze the characteristics of active forums, logistic regression was used to examine if active forums could be predicted by looking at other forum criteria (variables) to see if a correlation could be found between active forums and other variables? Logistic regression was the most appropriate tool to do this. Like linear regression, logistic regression measures influence of independent variables on a dependent variable, except with logistic regression the dependent variable is binary, in this case it is whether a forum is inactive or active (0 = not active, 1 = active).

In order to measure the strength of the relationship between two variables a measure of association (coefficient) must be computed. In table 7.5 below Exp(B) (relative odds) is such a measure. This means that we can interpret an Exp(B) in terms of the relative odds of scoring 1 on the dependent variable, compared with the reference categories for each independent variable. For example, if we take one independent variable and set low saliency as the reference category (the category of the variable with least influence), and got an Exp(B) for the high saliency group (the category of the variable with most influence) of 1.4, it would mean that a high saliency forum would be 1.4 times as likely to be active as a non-salient forum. The Sig. values within tables 7.5 and 7.6 detail the
significance level of the predicted Exp(B) value, with a significant value indicating that the observed relationship is unlikely to be the result of chance. Any Exp(B) value with a Sig. value lower than 0.05 is generally considered to be statistically significant, however because this dataset is quite small (n=138) Sig. values lower than 0.10 will be treated as evidence of a significant relationship. Table 7.5 represents the bivariate logistic regression analyses conducted to examine the correlation (effect) of each variable individually on whether a forum is inactive or active.

Table 7.5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable: Is forum inactive or active.</th>
<th>* = P&lt;(0.05). ** = P&lt;(0.10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exp(B)</td>
<td>Sig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deliberation (ref: Forums with a majority of single posts)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forums with a majority of two or more replied posts</td>
<td>13.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there thread within forum on political participation, public representatives or voting? (ref: No)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>5.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participatory type (ref: Pseudo / Partial)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non participatory</td>
<td>3.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there a core group of posters (ref: No)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commissioner of forum (ref: Local Government)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent community/individual</td>
<td>3.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>5.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of relevant debate (ref: Non-relevant / Minority relevant debate)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority relevant debate</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderation (ref: Yes)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>1.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No data</td>
<td>2.63</td>
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<td>Location of forum (ref: 0 UK)</td>
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<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>2.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In terms of the statistically significant results in table 7.5 above we can see that forums which have a majority of two or more replied-to posts (1st category) are estimated to be approximately fourteen times more likely than forums with a majority of single posts (reference category) to be active. In the second block we see that when a forum has a thread on political participation, public representatives or voting (1st category) it is five times more likely to be active than a forum without such a thread (reference category) - this result confirms earlier findings in the introduction of this section. There are a further two interesting and statistically significant findings here which confirm earlier findings in the introduction of this section, firstly, non-participatory forums are shown to be four times more likely to be active than government run (pseudo / partial) forums; secondly, forums which are commissioned by media organisations are five times more likely to be active than local government forums, and forums commissioned by independent individuals are four times more likely to be active than government commissioned forums are. Finally, US forums are three times more likely to be active than UK based forums.

A logistic regression model was then constructed to see if placing the independent variables together had an accumulative effect on producing active forums i.e. the model was built to try and establish what minimum characteristics are required that make a forum active. Within table 7.6 below each independent variable’s influence on the dependent variable is controlled in blocks (stages); in Block 8 all variables are controlled for. As the two variables: deliberation, and is there thread within forum on political participation, public representatives or voting were the more statistically significant in the
bivariate regressions above and throughout each reordering of the model they were placed first in the model below. Participatory type was placed after these two variables because among the other variables it was the only variable to become significant within this position within the model. The model was also tested to see how well it fitted the data. The Hosmer and Lemeshow test was used on blocks 1-8. The Hosmer and Lemeshow test tests the null hypothesis that the models fit the data. If the significance of the test is lower than 0.05 on a model than that model is said not fit the data. In all tests performed the significance level was larger than .05, which means all models fitted the data.
Table 7.6
Dependent variable: Is forum inactive or active.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Block 1</th>
<th>Block 2</th>
<th>Block 3</th>
<th>Block 4</th>
<th>Block 5</th>
<th>Block 6</th>
<th>Block 7</th>
<th>Block 8</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exp(B)</td>
<td>Sig</td>
<td>Exp(B)</td>
<td>Sig</td>
<td>Exp(B)</td>
<td>Sig</td>
<td>Exp(B)</td>
<td>Sig</td>
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<td>Deliberation (ref: Forums with a majority of single posts)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Forums with a majority of two or more replied posts</td>
<td>6.84 0.00*</td>
<td>5.56 0.00*</td>
<td>8.35 0.00*</td>
<td>8.24 0.00*</td>
<td>7.93 0.00*</td>
<td>8.42 0.00*</td>
<td>8.66 0.00*</td>
<td>9.92 0.00*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3.51 0.01*</td>
<td>2.27 0.10**</td>
<td>2.28 0.10**</td>
<td>2.42 0.08**</td>
<td>3.20 0.04*</td>
<td>3.09 0.05**</td>
<td>2.97 0.07**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participatory type (ref: Pseudo / Partial)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non participatory</td>
<td>4.80 0.01*</td>
<td>4.71 0.01*</td>
<td>2.35 0.45</td>
<td>1.91 0.56</td>
<td>1.80 0.60</td>
<td>0.74 0.81</td>
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<td>Is there a core group of posters (ref: No)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1.10 0.85</td>
<td>1.05 0.93</td>
<td>0.98 0.96</td>
<td>1.00 1.00</td>
<td>0.98 0.97</td>
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<td>Commissioner of forum (ref: Local Government)</td>
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<td>Independent community/individual</td>
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<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>1.81 0.57</td>
<td>1.92 0.52</td>
<td>2.04 0.50</td>
<td>2.67 0.34</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Presence of relevant debate (ref: Non-relevant / Minority relevant debate)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Majority relevant debate</td>
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<td>0.48 0.22</td>
<td>0.51 0.27</td>
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<td>Location of forum (ref: 0 UK)</td>
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In terms of the statistically significant data in blocks 1-7 above we can see that in block 1 forums which have a majority of two or more replied-to posts (1st category) are seven times more likely than forums with a majority of single posts (reference category) to be active. Furthermore, with the exception of slight fluctuations within blocks two, four and five, as other variables are controlled in blocks 1 -7 the relative odds of this 1st category rise greater than that of the reference category. In the second block we see that when a forum has a thread on political participation, public representatives or voting (1st category) it is three and a half times more likely to be active than a forum without such a thread (reference category). In the subsequent blocks this 1st category’s relative odds fluctuates slightly but remains on average about three times more likely than the reference category. In blocks three and four non-participatory forums are shown to be five times more likely to be active then government run (pseudo / partial – reference category) forums, however, the relative odds of this 1st category do not become significant in the subsequent blocks. Thus, the best fit model is from blocks 1 - 4. In the latter we can see that non-participatory forums, which have a majority of two or more posts and contain a thread on political participation, public representative or voting are more likely to be active than other types of forums.

After block four there are a lot of non-significant values. This is likely to be because too much is being asked of the model based on such a small dataset. Although, when other variables are introduced in blocks 5-8 the effect of forums which have a majority of two or more replied-to posts and forums with a thread on political participation, public
representatives or voting still remains significant. In block eight where all variables are controlled we see that forums which have a majority of two or more replied-to posts are ten times more likely than forums with a majority of single posts to be active. Also we see that when a forum has a thread on political participation, public representatives or voting it is 3 times more likely to be active than a forum without such a thread. Thus these two categories are the strongest predictors of active forums.

To sum up, forums are more likely to be active if they firstly, have a majority of two or more replied-to posts, secondly have a thread on political participation, public representatives or voting within them, and finally are non government supported. These results tell us that it is not beneficial to build forums in conjunction with local government because such forums are more likely to be inactive than non-government supported forums. The reason for this is government supported forums are weaker than non-government supported forums at supporting a majority of two or more replied-to posts, and threads on political participation, public representatives or voting. The next section will explain the cause of this inactivity among government supported forums.

7.3.2 Explaining inactive government forums
As was shown earlier young people prefer participatory and direct forms of politics to representative politics (Henn et al, 2005). Coleman (2005) shows some interesting findings from the Electoral Commission Report (2004) - 75% of UK people want to have a say in how the country is run, but 40% disagreed with: “when people like me get involved in politics, they really can change the way that the UK is run”; and 69% said
“any views I express will make little difference to how Britain is governed.” Coleman and Gotze (2001) present De Montfort University’s (1998) UK survey results of local authorities and their view of government participatory activities – 40% of respondents (council officials) said that such initiatives had little impact on policies. Coleman and Gotze (2001) argue that many citizens currently feel their political views are not taken into account by the political system, and if given the opportunity citizens would indeed like to participate within online policy deliberation although, as was detailed earlier such interest in participation rests on the fact that other factors need to be in place (Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker, 2006).

This is also replicated online; both the Brighton & Hove and Newham forums are two independent local forums which were set up using E.Democracy.org’s Local Issues Forum Guidebook (detailed in next chapter). These two forums belong to a network of similar forums associated with E-Democracy.org, and received funding under the ODPM’s local e-democracy national project (please see the brief history of local political online forums section). As both forums have no formal links with their respective councils (local governments) it is unclear how they will connect with local policy decision making process. Yet in interviews conducted with project managers and citizens the following was found ‘there is a general expectation expressed by many of the interviewees that the LIF [online forum] must influence council decision-making in some way if it is to be taken seriously... Citizens will lose interest in the LIF if they are not impacting or influencing local policy and decision-making. At this stage it is hard to see how the LIF in Brighton and Newham will be connected to local decision-making
processes. This is clearly an empirical question for future research’ (Coleman, 2006, p15). Indeed, Wojcik’s (2007) examination of deliberation within 30 forums (supported by French local government) found that forums within her sample did not impact on decision making processes within local government.

So why are local governments’ not permitting online forums to impact on decision making? Street and Wright (2007) argue that when local governments develop public participation mechanisms they tend to commission sites that maintain existing institutional and cultural practices of the councils (Street and Wright 2007). Maintaining such cultural practices creates barriers for E-Democracy because “the majority of local government officers are working in more traditional, risk-averse, institutional environments and therefore face a considerable number of cultural and personal barriers to embracing e-democracy...According to the OECD the UK now "leads the field" in outsourcing public services. This is no different in the democratic engagement field, where government consultations, citizens’ juries and e-democracy are very often delivered by external contractors” (Casey and Wilson, 2008). These authors argue that when democratic services (online and off) are outsourced the culture change that their effectiveness depends on is also outsourced; without such cultural change (in government) no democratic mechanisms ICT or otherwise will be effective in promoting E-Democracy.

Margette & Dunleavy (2002) reemphasize this point by arguing that there are many cultural obstacles / barriers present within government institutions for the development of
E-Government. Some of these barriers include: organizational negative culture towards ICT, which stems from government officials’ previous bad experiences of failed and over budget ICT initiatives; organizational barriers, which come from the view that ICT will threaten hierarchy within government departments; and channel rivalry, which entails public services not wanting to imperil their position by implementing a new way of doing things via ICT.

In a closer examination of such barriers involving local government and E-Democracy Pratchett, Wingfield, and Karakaya-Polat (2006) explored what local governments in England were doing to enhance E-Democracy. In this process they analyzed all local government websites in England and assessed their democratic qualities. This analysis showed that the potential of E-Democracy was not being fully realized by local government. The authors then (through in-depth interviews with members and officials from local government) examined the barriers faced by local governments in terms of implementing E-Democracy initiatives.

Four barrier types were identified in the research, the first being “democratic understanding”, which has to do with the limited conceptual understanding local government members / officers have of local democracy, its problems and the best potential E-Democratic solutions for these problems. This has implications for using E-Democracy, because weak ambitions within local government for E-Democracy (reinforcing existing practices) will produce limited E-Democratic initiatives which will do little to reverse political disengagement (Pratchett, Wingfield, and Karakaya-Polat
The problem with this barrier is that “it involves challenging existing understanding of the way in which democracy works and, possibly, challenging embedded structures of political power in communities. It is important to ensure that e-democracy does not simply reinforce existing structures of politics and, particularly, does not become a tokenistic form of engagement that rubber stamps political decisions taken elsewhere” (Pratchett, et al, 2006, p35)

The second is “organisational constraints” and these barriers involve both practical problems such as lack of finance, closed political system, and conceptual problems such as the lack of will among members / officers to promote E-Democracy within local government. Thirdly, “Structural limitations” revolve around external barriers such as the impact of central government reform polices on local government workings. Finally, “Citizen restraints” consists of the digital divide and the extent to which there is a desire within communities for E-Democracy. Overcoming these barriers will not be easy and the authors provide solutions to some of the barriers, Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker (2006) argue that if local government want to make participation work then they can, by changing the attitudes of its members / officers, and by developing a good institutional set of rules (open political and managerial structure). However, they argue that E-Democracy in itself will not change or influence local democratic services within local government, such change and the future of E-Democracy is linked to wider local government democratic reform processes. In other words, the role of national government limits the role local government has in changing the framework of local democracy (Pratchett, 2006).
As was shown in chapter five it took quite a lot of time and effort to reassure GBC about implementing E-Democracy. The bureaucracy within GBC meant it took time to get approval for the forum. The reason for this was that, although the GBC members had a genuine will for E-Democracy its officials did not. GBC council also had a closed political system, and its members and officials had a weak conceptual understanding of local democracy. However, more importantly, the GBC did not have the ability to implement a direct democratic online forum with full-participatory mechanisms because the power for such democratic change lies with central government. Thus, local political online forums built in conjunction with local government are more likely to be inactive because citizens expect to have a say on local policy decision making in local government supported forums (as opposed to non-government supported forums) but such forums are not facilitating citizens to impact on policy decision making and they are perpetuating the status quo (liberal thin democracy) which is what citizens are dissatisfied with in the first place (Barber, 1984).

7.4 E-Democracy.org’s recommendations revisited
Looking at a wider population of forums it will be examined if E-Democracy.org’s ‘Local Issues Forum’ recommendations (which failed to produce a successful forum in the GBC experiment) can produce successful forums. To note, successful is defined here as forums which: are active; do not have a core group of posters, have a capacity for deliberation; and contain (on the majority) relevant debate. Table 7.7 below lists a sub-set of forums from the research’s main sample of 138. Forums with reference numbers 1-7
are those that comply with all E-Democracy.org’s ‘Local Issues Forum’ recommendations (including moderation and setting up a steering committee) as outlined in table 5.1 chapter five. As can be seen both the Darebin and Guildford (GBC online forum from the last chapter) forums are inactive; and even though they have a capacity for deliberation this is set among a core group of posters, which means rational deliberation redefined cannot occur, because such forums are not inclusive of all citizens’ voices (please see What is Supported section above). Here, we have two forums which fulfil all E-Democracy.org’s ‘Local Issues Forum Guidebook’ recommendations and are still unsuccessful.

Forums with reference numbers 8-15 are forums which fulfil some, but not all of the E-Democracy.org’s ‘Local Issues Forum’ recommendations i.e. they are not supported by a steering committee. All these forums are inactive, have a core group of posters, and do not have a capacity for deliberation. Also, York talk, Seacoast, and Langunatic have a majority of non-relevant debate occurring within them. Although these forums fulfil a majority of the E.Democracy.org’s ‘Local Issues Forum Guidebook’ recommendations they are all unsuccessful.

Forums in table 7.7 below with reference numbers 16-21 are forums which in part do not comply with all E-Democracy.org’s ‘Local Issues Forum’ recommendations i.e. these are forums which are not moderated – an essential criterion for successful forum development according to E-Democracy advocates. Here we can see six forums which
are successful i.e. forums which are: active, have no core group of posters, have a capacity for deliberation, and have majority relevant debate occurring within them.

Table 7.7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ref No.</th>
<th>Forum</th>
<th>Active</th>
<th>Core Group of posters</th>
<th>Participatory type</th>
<th>Capacity for deliberation</th>
<th>Relevant debate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Darebin</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Pseudo</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Majority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>St Paul</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Non</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Majority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Roseville</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Non</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Majority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Minneapolis</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Non</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Majority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Newham</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Non</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Majority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Guildford</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Partial</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Majority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Brighton/ Hove</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Non</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Majority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>York talk</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Non</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Non relevant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Ottawa Sublet</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Non</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Buena Park</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Non</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Majority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Seacoast</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Non</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Non relevant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Pittsburgh Live</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Non</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Majority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>OC</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Non</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Majority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Langunatic</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Non</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Non relevant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Knowsley</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Non</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Majority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Onmilwaukee</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Non</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Majority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Northsuncoast</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Non</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Majority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Dayton Daily News</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Non</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Majority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Greenville</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Non</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Majority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>The Star Press</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Non</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Majority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Kildare Community Network</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Pseudo</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Minority</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
7.5 Conclusion
In terms of the first research question within this thesis (What types of participatory and democratic models can local political online forums support?) the following was found.

All forums within the sample conform to the liberal thin democratic model. No direct democratic models were present within the sample, and no forums supported full participatory democracy. It is unlikely that online forums (due to their lack of connection to local government decision making processes) will be able to support full-participation or direct democracy, and they are always situated within liberal thin democratic models. On the other hand they are able to support non-participatory, partial participatory, and pseudo participatory engagement mechanisms.

In terms of the second research question (Can local political online forums support all categories of deliberation?) the following was found. Wilhelm’s (1999, 2000) arguments about forum participants being mainly information providers is true in a minority of cases. Thirty-four percent of forums within the sample have participants talking more than they are listening, and as deliberation requires two participants to be in dialogue, these forums do not support mixed discourses and modes of communication, rational deliberation redefined, and non-rational, non consensual deliberation.

Sixty-six percent of forums within the sample have a majority of replied-to posts as opposed to single posted messages. However, three quarters of forums that have a majority of two or more replied-to posts have a core group of posters, this coupled with the digital divide means these forums cannot support rational deliberation redefined, because all citizens’ opinions are not represented in sufficient scale; and the debating
processes within these forums also do not include all participants that the decision affects. As these results show, and indeed the results of the GBC, it seems online forums are weak at supporting rational deliberation redefined. With this evidence the following alternative hypothesis was developed – local political online forums cannot support rational deliberation redefined. The next chapter will test this alternative hypothesis on the remaining one quarter of forums which have a majority of two or more replied-to posts and don’t have a core group of posters, to see if rational deliberation redefined or mixed discourses and modes of communication are supported. The following chapter will also examine if non-rational, non consensual deliberation (along with the other two types of deliberation) is occurring in any of the forums within this sample.

In terms of the third research question (Is it beneficial to build local political online forums in conjunction with local government?) the following was found. It has been shown here that it is not beneficial to build forums in conjunction with local government because they are more likely to be inactive. The reasons for this is that government backed forums are weaker than non-government backed forums at supporting a majority of two or more replied-to posts, and threads on political participation, public representatives or voting; and this is because citizens expect to have a say on local policy decision making in local government supported forums (as opposed to non-government supported forums) but such forums are not facilitating citizens to impact on policy decision making (due to internal and external cultural and institutional barriers) and they are perpetuating the status quo (liberal thin democracy) which is what citizens are dissatisfied with in the first place (Barber, 1984).
Finally, as was shown with the GBC forum in chapter six the use of E-Democracy.org’s Local Issues Forum recommendations (including the use of moderation and a steering committee) did not produce an active successful forum in this case study. These results were confirmed in this chapter. As can be seen in table 7.7 above there are two forums within the sample which fulfil all of the E-Democracy.org’s ‘Local Issues Forum’ recommendations (e.g. forums which are moderated / and have steering committee) and they are still unsuccessful i.e. are non-active; and cannot support rational deliberation redefined, although they maybe able to support other categories of deliberation – the next chapter will investigate this. There are eight forums which fulfil a majority of the E-Democracy.org’s ‘Local Issues Forum’ recommendations including moderation but again are unsuccessful i.e. non-active, all have a core group of posters, and none have a capacity for deliberation; and three forums have a majority of non-relevant debate occurring within them. Finally, there are six forums within the sample, which do not comply with the majority of the E-Democracy.org’s ‘Local Issues Forum’ recommendations and are successful i.e. forums which: are active, have no core group of posters, have a capacity for deliberation, and have a majority relevant debate occurring within them. This research argues (like the GBC experiment findings) that the E-Democracy.org’s ‘Local Issues Forum Guidebook’ recommendations (moderation and the setting up of a steering committee) in all cases do not produce successful forums, that is to say forums which: are active; do not have a core group of posters, have a capacity for deliberation; and contain on the majority relevant debate. This research has found that moderation and the use of a steering committee are not essential recommendations for the
development of successful local political online forums, in fact un-moderated forums can produce active forums; thus, the E-Democracy.org’s ‘Local Issues Forum’ recommendations require revision.
8 Type of discussion

As was argued in the previous chapter rational deliberation redefined is not occurring in the three quarters of forums which have a majority of two or more replied-to posts and have a core group of posters. This chapter will firstly explore the remaining one quarter of forums which have a majority of two or more replied-to posts and don’t have a core group of posters, to see if they support either rational deliberation redefined or mixed discourses and modes of communication. Secondly, it will be determined if mixed discourses and modes of communication are occurring within forums with a core group of posters. Also as rational deliberation redefined was already disproved in forums (which have a majority of two or more replied-to posts and have a core group of posters) it will be determined if elements of it are present within such forums. Finally, it will be examined if non-rational, non consensual deliberation is occurring in forums with and without a core group of posters and having a majority of two or more replied-to posts.

8.1 Analytic inductive analysis

In order to test the alternative hypothesis (local political online forums cannot support rational deliberation redefined) this section uses an adaptation of analytical induction to explore patterns in the data (posted messages from threads) within the sample of 138 forums. The forums within tables 8.1, 8.2, and 8.3 below have been randomly taken from the main sample population list, and their threads are used to examine the type of discussion present in the sample of forums. Both inactive and single post forums were excluded from selection in these sub-samples. Within these tables the attributes of each deliberative type (noted in typology 2 within chapter three) were coded, and these codes
are present within the columns in the tables below. The analytic inductive process consisted of analyzing threads and noting the presence of these attributes within the different forms of deliberation. Three threads from each forum were analyzed, and after 60 threads were examined it was decided to stop exploring threads because a saturation of themes within the data was reached. To note, within this section when a forum is said to have a deliberative attribute it means it either supports that attribute in one, two, or all three threads. Therefore, when, for example a forum is said to support mixed discourses and modes of communication it means the forum itself not a specific thread supports it.

Furthermore, for clarity, the following definitions have been provided. Where “rationality” is mentioned below it refers to when a poster backs up his/her arguments with external references or provides an external web-link. “Reflection” refers to a situation when a poster (in the face of argumentation from another poster) revises or clarifies their earlier position (post) – this does not mean that they change their position; when the latter occurs it is coded as a “transformation”.

8.1.1 The ability of forums without a core group of posters to support the first and second categories of deliberation

Using table 8.1 we will examine if the one quarter of forums that have a majority of replied to posts and are without a core group of posters can support either rational deliberation redefined or mixed discourses and modes of communication. Rational deliberation redefined consists of the following attributes: Rational debate, transformation, reflection, reciprocity, and equality of opportunity to participate and
Mixed discourses and modes of communication consist of the following attributes: Rational debate, transformation, conflict, reflection, and personal experience.

Within table 8.1 we can see that Mixed discourses and modes of communication is not occurring in full, and the sample of forums mainly consists of rational debate, personal experience along with some reflection. The conflict attribute of mixed discourses and modes of communication will be dealt with later. Rational deliberation redefined is also not occurring in full and mainly consists of conversations which are rational, reciprocal and reflective. Here reciprocal means a shared mutual knowledge, that is to say one gains knowledge through the perspective of others. As these forums have a majority of two or more replied-to posts and the majority of threads within have differing opinions (disagreement) they have been treated as reciprocal. It was also found that apart from three forums (Oxfordshire, Madison, and MTPleasantdc) all other forums in table 8.1 had digression occurring in at least one of their threads. The existence of the digital divide means that all forums within the World Wide Web have no equality of opportunity, thus all forums within the tables below have been treated as having no equality of opportunity for citizens to participate within.
Table 8.1
Forums without a core of posters - Mixed discourses and modes of communication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forum</th>
<th>Rational debate</th>
<th>Transformation</th>
<th>Reflection</th>
<th>Personal experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tomatopages</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenville</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxfordshire forums</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madison</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>StPaul</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>onMilwaukee</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IWight</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MT Pleasant dc</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kildare/discussion</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huntington-Babylon</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Forums without a core of posters - Rational deliberation redefined

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forum</th>
<th>Rational debate</th>
<th>Transformation</th>
<th>Reflection</th>
<th>Reciprocal</th>
<th>Equality of opportunity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tomatopages</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenville</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxfordshire forums</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madison</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>StPaul</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>onMilwaukee</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IWight</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MT Pleasant dc</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kildare/discussion</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huntington-Babylon</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Y – Yes there is presence of attribute in thread. A blank space indicates no presence of attribute.

Figure 8.1 provides an example of both personal experience and rationality within a section of a thread from the St Paul forum (a forum without a core group of posters).

Yellow highlighted sections indicate a participant using personal experiences and red highlighted sections indicate a participant using rational debate.
I was out enjoying the nice weather last weekend and noticed significant damage to some trees on the banks of the Mississippi adjacent to the Xcel High Bridge plant. It appears that some beavers are trying to build a dam downtown with some huge trees. Does anyone know who's jurisdiction it is to protect trees along this stretch of river? St Paul Parks? Met Council? DNR? These are beautiful trees that have been destroyed and several others are significantly damaged. Others are likely to be next. I am not a beaver hater, but I would hate to lose these trees. I have see other areas nearby that beavers have killed almost all trees in the area - many of the trees were very large. If anyone has any ideas on who to contact, please let me know - I would appreciate it...

"Box Spring Beach" is Xcel property. For now! Mwmmm-haaaa-haa-haa-ha-ha!!!

I know the trees you type of. It's sad, but what can ya do except plant more trees? (Speaking of which, dozens of young trees along Shepard Road have been ill-hewn by wandering motorists. Had they been full-grown trees, there would be quite a few new organ donors out there.)

Well, we could put stairs down to the beach, clean up the ton of garbage, and hang out down there so the beavers go to your side of the river. There's a lot of potential at that spot, especially when you consider the Island Station Lagoon and Nude Bluebirdwatchers.

I talked to the homeless people just upstream and they said they wouldn't mind a few more thousand campers next fall, as long as they take it easy on the patchoulli and bring plenty of 40's.

I have not been to the site you discuss so I can't say for sure, but I would bet you're talking about cottonwood trees. While I agree it always seems a shame for larger trees to die, it really couldn't happen to a better tree. By which I mean...if those are cottonwoods, they are a floodplain species and grow really fast. They have been selected by flooding to grow fast and to expect great disturbance. They also have a dynamic response to herbivory. Say beavers girdle a large main trunk. The tree may well respond with a profusion of juvenile shoots loaded with herbivory deterring toxic chemicals. In any case, even if the main trunk dies, it then provides habitat value for countless other species--beetles, woodpeckers, mice, etc. Even when beavers do bring it down, it will create a niche for sun-loving species to colonize. It is also hard to imagine the carefully chiselled stumps left by beavers are not in themselves a desirable aesthetic of a riparian habitat. Spend some time with those beaver-gnawed stumps, fingering the grooves they've left, wondering at why this tree rather than that, and it may turn out that beavers are as worthy of protection as the trees.

Riparian habitats are characterized by dynamism. These are not static, slowly successional zones. It would be probably be a mistake to protect trees from beavers without significant evidence that the beavers themselves were somehow perverting the natural function of this system.
I was thinking the very same thing along with the fact that most other tree species that aren’t adapted to emergent wetland get pretty stressed there. Still, if ****** thinks the beaver are a problem, the DNR has a solution:

"Population and management
"In its range, there are 0.6 beaver colonies (less than one) per river mile. During the winter, a beaver colony will include the two adults, their spring babies, and often year-old beavers. Minnesota has a regulated beaver trapping season, but there are not enough trappers to keep some beaver populations small enough to prevent problems."

Matthew must become a West Side trapper. Perhaps ****** will cover the East Bank. If you are uneasy about going into the fur business, the DNR also says this:

"The beaver is a renewable resource. In contrast, synthetic furs are made from nonrenewable resources, primarily petroleum."

Now I’m not certain about any different trapping regulations within the city limits (you must be careful not to trap dogs, they say), but I think all you need is a small game license for $19, a trapping license for $20, your traps and snares, the rules, and you can help to stem the beaver menace from late October through mid-May (there is no daily bag limit). Now maybe someone from the DNR can clear things up after all my muddling.

From: Date: 2007-03-31 17:06
Use of traps in the City of Saint Paul isn’t as easy as getting a state license. In general, it is prohibited, except for household rodents, rats, moles, voles, etc.

Beaver trapping on the Mississippi River in Saint Paul would be prohibited in most circumstances.

Here is the link to Saint Paul’s law:

http://www.ci.stpaul.mn.us/code/lc196.html

Councilmember Leonard Levine authored this ordinance in 1978 or so and it passed unanimously.

......was there when it was passed, actually!

8.1.2 The ability of forums with a core group of posters to support the first and second categories of deliberation

Using table 8.2 it will be determined if mixed discourses and modes of communication is occurring within forums with a core group of posters. Also it will be determined if elements of rational deliberation redefined are present within such forums. As can be seen within table 8.2, forums which have a core group of posters are not necessarily homogenous; and for the most part such forums consist of rational debate, digression and personal experiences.
Below, reciprocal has the same meaning as noted earlier; the only forum below which is not reciprocal is Portglasgow. Labbock, and Roseville contain reflection, whereas Santacruzsentinel is the only forum below to contain both reflection and transformation.

Table 8.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forum</th>
<th>Homogeneous (All agree)</th>
<th>Rational debate</th>
<th>Personal experience</th>
<th>Digression</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>StLouie</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roanoke</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portglasgow</td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santacruzsentinel</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brighton &amp; Hove</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cincinnati</td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labbock</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bloomington</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roseville</td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warrington</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Y – Yes there is presence of attribute in thread. A blank space indicators no presence of attribute.

8.1.3 The ability of forums with and without a core group of posters to support the third category of deliberation.

It will be examined if non-rational, non-consensual deliberation is occurring in forums with and without a core group of posters and have a majority of two or more replied-to posts. Non-rational, non-consensual deliberation consists of the following attributes: conflict / division, domination, exclusion via social objectivity & rationalism, and heterogeneous opinions. As can be seen in table 8.3, Non-rational, non-consensual deliberation is not occurring in full. On the whole, both forums with and without a core group of voters are mainly heterogeneous (individuals have differing opinions) and they
contain conflict e.g. posters are insulting one another and, or mocking topics within forum.

Table 8.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forums without a core group of posters</th>
<th>Heterogeneous (Disagreement)</th>
<th>conflict</th>
<th>exclusion</th>
<th>domination</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tomatopages</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenville</td>
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<tr>
<th>Forums with a core group of posters</th>
<th>Heterogeneous (Disagreement)</th>
<th>Conflict</th>
<th>exclusion</th>
<th>domination</th>
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<td>Portglasgow</td>
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<tr>
<td>Santacruzsentinel</td>
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<td>Y</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brighton &amp; Hove</td>
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Y – Yes there is presence of attribute in thread. A blank space indicators no presence of attribute.

Fig 8.2 provides an example of both disagreement and conflict within a section of a thread from the Madison forum (a forum without a core group of posters). Yellow
The city will be trying out new parking meters that take credit card and debit cards, as well as coins. They also can be programmed to have different rates at different times of the day. These meters cost $10,000 each. I thought the city was on a tight budget(?)

**Quote:** “MADISON, Wis. No quarters for the parking meter? If you're in Madison next month, that might not be a problem. The Madison Parking Utility will be testing new parking meters that accept credit and debit cards. The experiment will start May First and last for 90 days at two downtown locations near the Capitol. Drivers will still be able to use coins if they prefer. Instead of a line of gray meters, the new system will use a single battery-powered box that controls up to 14 spaces. Each system costs ten-thousand dollars but the city hopes to recoup those costs with collection and maintenance savings. The spaces will cost one-dollar-25-cents per hour but the city could change the rates at different times of the day depending on demand”.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Duh - if the meters MAKE MONEY then they will IMPROVE the city's tight budget.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How long will it take?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What difference does that make? They either make money or they don't.</td>
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</table>

If the city is paying $10,000 for new meters, they'd better make money! But the easiest thing to do is just use the ones we have, then we won't be out the $10,000/meter.

In other words, $10,000 per fourteen parking spaces, or $714 per space. There's a difference. Even at only 8 hours use per day per parking space, at the rate of $1.25/hour, each space could generate enough money for the system to pay for itself within the trial time frame. Since the new system takes credit/debit cards in addition to coin/cash -- like a few of the downtown ramps -- that may be a better enticement to motorists to choose metered street parking, especially if they are low on coins.

No, they aren't paying for themselves at this rate. The old meters would still be making that money. To pay for themselves they have to make more money than the old meters.

It's always cheaper to use the ramps - $1/hour or less. And they can change the amount charged on the new meters at different times of the day, so who knows how much you'll have to pay? AND it always costs more to use a credit card - there's fees, etc.

Any meter that charges more than $.25 is going to make ME laugh. Consider how many people are not paying their meter fare ANYWAYS. And stab me for being one of them. I am never parked ANYWHERE more that 15-20 minutes-- and I've never been "meter-maided" for it. In fact, with the amount they are spending on new meters (which will be JUST AS EFFECTIVE-- just cost more) couldn't they just hire a couple new meter maids? Wouldn't that, in fact, solve the problem better? In other
words, aren't saps like you guys paying MORE for jackholes like me?

How do you get away with that? I've had meters run out and gotten a ticket when just 5 minutes has passed. 😁 The UW is really strict. At the Union parking lot they ticket pretty often. And if you have more than 3 outstanding tickets with them, they tow your car. I remember sitting by the windows near the parking lot and watching cars being towed.

8.2 Conclusion
This research argues that rational deliberation redefined is not occurring within these forums because there is no equality of opportunity for citizens to participate (forums do not contain all citizens’ opinions that debate affects); no transformation is occurring; and no agreement “consensus” is obtained. Thus, as rational deliberation redefined is not occurring within the forums the alternative hypothesis (local political online forums cannot support rational deliberation redefined) was confirmed.

There is one forum Santacruzsentinel that supports mixed discourses and modes of communication. This forum has the following attributes: rational debate, personal experience, reciprocity, conflict, reflection and transformation. As mixed discourses and modes of communication does not require equality of opportunity for citizens to participate, or consensus, it is argued here that there is the potential for it to exist within local political online forums. However, this does not mean that Santacruzsentinel (a non-participatory forum which supports a category of deliberation) supports strong democracy. Strong democracy does not require direct democracy (Barber, 1984), but it should contain some form of participation i.e. partial participatory or pseudo participatory and Santacruzsentinel does not.
In terms of non-rational, non-consensual deliberation we can see in tables 8.1 and 8.2 personal experience and rational debate are present in forums and as we see in table 8.3 there is a lot of conflict which suggests that personal experience and rational debate are not co-existing comfortably with one another which results in agreement (consensus) not being attained. With the latter said it can only be suggested that non-rational, non-consensual deliberation is occurring within these forums, because, it was not possible to prove if participants’ personal experiences (via conflict) were excluded by rational debate and thus dominated (hegemony) within these forums. Without this proof the potential for mixed discourses and modes of communication occurring within forums is confirmed, however, another form of discussion present within these forums was identified.

8.2.1 Cross cutting discussion
In looking at all the tables above we can say that discussions within forums (which support a majority of two or more replied to posts) without a core group of posters are: Heterogeneous; conflict ridden; rational; reflective; reciprocal; digressive; contains personal experiences and have no equality of opportunity. Within forums (which support a majority of two or more replied to posts) with a core group of posters discussion is: surprisingly heterogeneous and not homogenous; unsurprisingly it is less conflict ridden than forums without a core group; and such discussions contain rational debate; digression; personal experience; reciprocity; reflection and have no equality of opportunity. Thus discussions within forums with and without a core group of posters are almost the same.
Fulwider (2006) notes deliberation occurs in heterogeneous groups and not homogenous groups. Kelly et al’s (2005) argument that forums can create a space in which citizens can encounter beliefs which are in opposition to their own was found in both forums with and without a core group of posters. Thus, Wilhelm’s (1999) argument that individuals ‘tend to seek out those individual’s (and affiliations) with whom they agree’ (Wilhelm, 1999, p171) and Mutz’s (2006) argument that individuals only wish to join networks that contain like minded people is wrong in this case.

Discussions within forums (which support a majority of two or more replied to posts) with and without a core group of posters is almost the same. Within this sample local political online forums are able to support two way conversations within a heterogeneous environment, which contain a mixture of mixed discourses and modes of communication, rational deliberation redefined, and non-rational, non consensual deliberation. This research has named this discussion cross cutting discussion because it represents Mutz’s (2006) minimalist view of deliberation which she calls ‘cross cutting exposure’ i.e. participants’ exposure to different political views and opinions. As the logistic regression exercise showed in the last chapter forums which support cross cutting discussion (forums which support a majority of two or more replied to posts) are fourteen times more likely to be active than those that do not support it. Thus, in contrast to Mutz’s (2006) argument that political participation and ‘cross cutting exposure’ discussions are incompatible offline, this research has shown that online they are compatible. Forums which produce ‘cross cutting exposure’ discussion are more likely to be active and induce individuals to participate.
9 Conclusion

This chapter will summarize the literature that was reviewed in chapters 2, 3 and 4, and recapitulate the research questions and methodological approaches taken. The research findings of this thesis will then be presented, and the implications of these findings will be explored in relation to the field of E-Democracy. Some recommendations will also be provided for others interested in implementing E-Democracy with local government.

9.1 Research questions

For clarity within the discipline of E-Democracy this thesis has produced typologies of both participation and deliberation and discussed the different participatory elements within the subcategories of democracy. Democracy can be instrumentally implemented online in many different ways, liberal thin democracy, direct democracy, and strong democracy. This research argues that firstly, political participation is not a uniform concept and can be broken down into four types: full-participation, partial participation, pseudo participation, and non participation (thus not confined to strong democracy). Secondly, deliberation is also not a uniform concept and its three broad categorizations are mixed discourses and modes of communication; rational deliberation redefined; and non-rational, non-consensual deliberation. As this thesis wished to examine the ability of local political online forums to support participation, and deliberation to tackle political disengagement it was important to firstly clarify both these concepts.
Political disengagement is occurring within Britain and one of the reasons for this is that citizens are dissatisfied with liberal thin democracy. Citizens are disengaging from liberal thin democracy because the political system does not support any form of direct democracy; and liberal ideals such as self-interest have given rise to citizen apathy, and cynicism about voting. This thesis has argued that it is worthwhile to use participation and deliberation to reverse this political disengagement.

However, it is unclear from the existing E-Democracy literature whether local political online forums can support the various types of participation and categories of deliberation and address political disengagement; furthermore, it is not examined in any great detail within the literature if there is any benefit in building such forums in conjunction with local government? In order to examine the value of using local political online forums to reverse political disengagement the following questions were developed:

1. What types of participatory and democratic models can local political online forums support?

2. Can local political online forums support all categories of deliberation?

3. Is it beneficial to build local political online forums in conjunction with local government?
In answering these questions this research used a two pronged methodological approach consisting of both a qualitative inductive method, and a two-phased quantitative deductive method. The first deductive approach used the E-Democracy.org’s ‘Local Issues Forum Guidebook’ recommendations and produced a local political online forum in conjunction with a local government within the UK – Guildford Borough Council (GBC). The secondary purpose of this experiment was also to test these recommendations as well to see if they could produce a successful online forum. The second deductive approach systematically examined the three research questions and the E-Democracy.org’s Local Issues Forum recommendations again but in this second approach it was decided to focus on a larger sample of local political online forums (n=138) from around the world. At the end of the two deductive methodological approaches the second research question was not fully answered. This second research question was redeveloped into an alternative hypothesis (local political online forums cannot support rational deliberation redefined) and analytic induction, a qualitative methodology was used to test it.

9.2 Findings

The GBC experiment showed that an online forum could support a liberal thin democratic model, and partial participatory democracy. The examination of the sample of forums from around the world confirmed this in that all the forums within sample only supported liberal thin democracy, however, these forums could support other participatory engagement mechanisms such as: non-participatory, partial participatory, and pseudo participatory.
The GBC online forum failed and was inactive, and the sample of forums from around the world showed that it is not beneficial to build forums in conjunction with local government because such forums are more likely to be inactive than non-government supported forums.

In terms of deliberation this thesis has argued that it can be broken down into three general categories in relation to how each category views and uses rational debate. Mixed discourses and modes of communication uses a mixture of rational argument and other forms of communication such as personal experience, and it consists of the following attributes: rational debate, transformation, conflict, reflection, and personal experience. Rational deliberation redefined places utmost importance on rational debate over and above other forms of communication, and it consists of the following attributes: rational debate, transformation, reflection, reciprocity, and equality of opportunity to participate and speak. Non-rational, non-consensual deliberation views rational debate as a form of hegemony which excludes other forms of communication from a deliberative process, and it consists of the following attributes: conflict / division, domination, exclusion via social objectivity & rationalism, and heterogeneous opinions.

The analysis of discussions within the forums showed that the GBC online forum, because of inactivity did not support any category of deliberation, and a third of forums within the sample of forums from around the world mainly consisted of information providers and thus could also not support any form of deliberation. The qualitative
analytic induction exercise showed that local political online forums could not support rational deliberation redefined, but the potential for forums to support mixed discourses and modes of communication was discovered. However, a fourth category of deliberation was identified as part of this research named cross cutting discussion. This discussion is present in forums (with or without a core group of posters) which support a majority of two or more replied to posts. Cross cutting discussion consists of a heterogeneous environment (citizens can encounter beliefs which are in opposition to their own); conflict (to a lesser extent within forums with a core group); rational debate; reflexivity; reciprocity; digression; personal experiences and no equality of opportunity for citizens to participate in.

Cross cutting discussion occurs in forums which are able to support two way conversations within a heterogeneous environment, which contains a mixture of mixed discourses and modes of communication, rational deliberation redefined, and non-rational, non consensual deliberation. However, unlike mixed discourses and modes of communication it does not have rigid criteria in terms of what it calls discussion, that is to say it does not require the transformation of political views within itself; and in terms of rational deliberation redefined it does not require equality of opportunity to participate. Furthermore, cross cutting discussion unlike rational deliberation is not exclusionary i.e. it does not deny a whole range of ways of communicating from entering discussions.

Advocates of non-rational, non-consensual deliberative would argue against the possibility of personal experience and rational debate sitting harmoniously side by side
within a forum, and chapter eight suggests that there is a possibility that this is true because of the presence of so much conflict within the sample, however as was also noted in chapter eight no proof of participants’ personal experiences being dominated and excluded by rational debate was found.

Cross cutting discussion’s main criterion is that participants are exposed to differing political opinions. The implications of this for reversing political disengagement through implementing forums will be dealt with in the final section below entitled ‘The Value of Using Online Forums to Reverse Political Disengagement’. However, it is sufficient to say here that forums which support this type of discussion are fourteen times more likely to be active (induce participation) than those that do not. Moreover, as this type of discussion does not have the ability to transform political views it would need to be situated within full-participatory online forums where the educative function of direct democracy would facilitate the transformation of private opinions into public ones. Thus, unlike the other forms of deliberation cross cutting discussion relies on direct democracy rather than deliberation in itself for the transformation of private opinions into public ones.

Cross cutting discussion was discovered through the analytic induction exercise within chapter eight. In this process twenty forums were randomly chosen from a sample of 69 forums; inactive and forums with a majority of single posts were excluded from this sample list. After the analysis of sixty threads across this sample a saturation of themes occurred. The sample size of twenty forums maybe small but cross cutting discussion’s
attributes (noted above) were the most prevalent of all criteria discovered. However, in saying that, further research should be conducted on a larger sample size to affirm these findings. Before we explore the implications of these research findings for the field of E-Democracy, an evaluation of E-Democracy.org’s Local Issues Forum recommendations will be detailed.

9.3 Evaluating the E-Democracy.org’s recommendations

The use of E-Democracy.org’s Local Issues Forum recommendations (including the use of moderation and a steering committee) did not produce an active successful forum in GBC case study. These results were confirmed within the findings of the analysis of the sample of forums from around the world. These findings showed that in certain cases forums which fulfilled all of the E-Democracy.org’s recommendations (including forums which were moderated, and had a steering committee) were unsuccessful. The findings also showed forums which fulfilled a majority of the E-Democracy.org’s ‘Local Issues Forum’ recommendations including moderation were also unsuccessful.

This research identified forums which did not comply with the majority of the E-Democracy.org’s ‘Local Issues Forum’ recommendations and were successful. This research argues that the E-Democracy.org’s ‘Local Issues Forum Guidebook’ recommendations (moderation and the setting up of a steering committee) in all cases do not produce successful forums, in fact un-moderated forums can produce active forums. Thus, the E-Democracy.org’s ‘Local Issues Forum’ recommendations require revision.
9.3.1 **New recommendations**

The GroupServer forum software advocated by E-Democracy.org and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister was extremely difficult to set up technically. This research recommends for those interested in setting up an online forum to source alternative forum software that is easy to install, set-up and manage. Other recommendations for anyone interested in setting up a local political online forum in conjunction with local government include:

1. Moderation is not essential in terms of building a successful local political online forum. However, it is recommended that pre-moderation be used to protect the developers of online forums from libel actions.

2. It takes quite a lot of time and effort to reassure local government about implementing E-Democracy, so be prepared for many meetings with different local government officers and representatives.

3. As soon as is possible within the process get a gatekeeper within local government on board.

4. Allow enough time to set a forum up. In the case of the GBC it took seven months from drafting the initial proposal to the launch of the forum.

5. Be prepared to spend time and money on promoting the forum. However, where possible use free publicity e.g. local newspapers are always looking for interesting projects to write about.

6. Even though the results above show that the use of steering committees had no impact on the success of forums, the use of one in the process of running the GBC
forum proved useful. Such committees (especially made up of representatives from local government) are helpful in assisting projects gain access to certain local government topics for the forum, and pushing E-Democracy agendas within the local government.

7. The bureaucracy within local government means it takes time to get approval so leave enough time to get access to local government issues. It took this research five weeks to get all GBC topics approved, transformed into questions, and relevant documentation placed within the forum. In this process be prepared to chase up individual local government officers.

8. It is important when implementing any E-Democracy mechanism to become fully aware of all legal implications of such mechanisms.

9.4 The value of using online forums to reverse political disengagement

The implications of the research findings above will now be explored in relation to the field of E-Democracy and in particular to the value of using local political online forums to reverse political disengagement.

GBC used the online forum as an additional component to existing consultation services and did not permit the forum to become a direct democratic model, and due to GBC concerns the online forum was not permitted to support full-participatory democracy. No direct democratic models were present within the sample of forums from around the world, and no forums supported full participatory democracy. It is unlikely that online
forums (due to their lack of connection to local government decision making processes) will be able to support full-participation or direct democracy.

It has been shown in this research that it is not beneficial to build forums in conjunction with local government because they are more likely to be inactive. The reasons for this is that citizens expect to have a say on local policy decision making in local government supported forums (as opposed to non-government supported forums) but such forums are not facilitating citizens to impact on policy decision making and are perpetuating the status quo (liberal thin democracy) which is what citizens are dissatisfied with in the first place.

Only one example of mixed discourses and modes of communication was present in a forum within the sample, so there is the potential for forums to support this. Also, even though this research suggests that non-rational, non-consensual deliberation might be able to occur within forums, no definitive proof of exclusion and domination was found within the sample. However, another form of online discussion was identified within these forums called cross cutting discussion. This research has found that forums which can support this kind of discussion are more likely to be active; thus participation and cross cutting discussion are compatible within online forums, and cross cutting discussion can induce participation.
9.4.1 What this means for use of online forums and E-Democracy

Local political online forums do not fail to address political disengagement because of some inherent fault. Forums fail to reverse political disengagement because, apart from the already stated arguments about the digital divide and the normalization theory within the literature review chapters, citizens do wish to have a say in local policy decision making but forums do not facilitate citizens to do this. Such forums for the most part are not connected to local decision making (direct or full participatory democracy) and when they are connected to local government websites they have a greater chance of being inactive because they are perpetuating the status quo (liberal thin democracy) which is what citizens are dissatisfied with in the first place. However, there are two aspects of online forums that can help address political disengagement. Firstly, they provide convenience for citizens with limited time to engage in politics. Secondly, non-government supported forums can support cross cutting discussion which increases citizens’ participation in local political discussions. Thus, in terms of reversing political disengagement local political online forums are only fighting half the battle.

To increase the potential of online forums to reverse political disengagement, two things need to occur. The internal local government cultural, institutional and conceptual barriers mentioned in chapter seven needs to be addressed and Pratchett, Wingfield, and Karakaya-Polat (2006) provide recommendations on how to achieve this.

However, more importantly, in order to tackle disengagement the framework of local democracy needs to be changed and this can only be done by central government via
local government democratic reform processes. In the past within Britain such reform processes and devolution acts (the Local Government Act of 1972, the Local Government Act of 1992, the Scotland Act 1998, the Wales Act 1998, the Local Government Act 2000, the creation of the Greater London Authority) have, among many other things, tried to encourage citizens to engage more with local democracy by making it more accountable, less remote, and less constrained by central government. Indeed the local government Act 1972 made it possible for small numbers of individuals (as low as ten citizens) in English and Welsh parishes to ask district councils to organise parish level referenda, however, the results of these referenda are not legally binding. In 2006 an online forum (localvisionforum.net) was set up to allow citizens to discuss the future of local government. The British government by implementing this forum wanted to gather the views of citizens and stakeholders on restructuring local government for its Local Government White Paper - Strong and prosperous communities (2006). Another purpose of the forum was to focus discussions on ‘devolving decision making and empowering communities at a grass root level’ (Egovmonitor, 2006). The latter needs to be pursued, local authority power should be devolved to smaller areas such as local parishes because it will bring decision-making closer to citizens and more relevant to citizens. If this happens it would make it easier to justify the introduction of direct democracy (in-part) in such reform processes; that is to say it would be easier to make an argument for devolving certain decision making powers from a smaller representative body to a small parish population. With such reforms full-participatory online forums in the true Rousseau sense which support cross cutting discussion can then be used to reverse political disengagement.
10 REFERENCES


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11 Appendices

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