

## **Moderating Censorship? Government-run Online Discussion Forums**

### **Introduction**

Governments are seeking new methods to communicate with citizens both to aggregate their preferences and to influence the policy-making process in a more deliberative manner. To this end, government agencies at all levels, and across many continents, have developed (or at least adopted) online discussion forums. These vary greatly in structure and can, allegedly, encourage a two-way link between government and people and/or help to create a form of virtual public sphere. It is held that such forums can, because of their asynchronous<sup>1</sup> structure, facilitate the kind of large-scale discussion often considered unrealistic, and thus they have the potential to facilitate a new form of broader-based interactive policy-making. (Coleman and Gotze 2001: 16-17) According to Tsagarousianou, ‘new technologies clearly have the potential to sustain such spaces [public spheres] as they enable both deliberation (citizen to citizen communication) and “hearing” (citizen to authority communication).’ (Tsagarousianou 1999: 195-6)

New technologies do not, however, deterministically produce idealised conditions for discussion: there are many potential problems. One danger is that ‘discussions via the internet are more likely to be as narrow or perhaps even narrower than those across the backyard fence. Those with differing views gravitate to their own

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<sup>1</sup> Online discussion boards are typically asynchronous. This means that people have time the time to go away and think about messages unlike most face-to-face interactions, in which, communication is structured as a synchronous conversation.

discussion groups.’ (Davis and Owen 1998: 124) Charles McGrath (1996: 84) has criticized the internet as a ‘cacophony rather than wisdom, a form of expression that follows not parliamentary principles but the Hobbesian law of the boring dinner party: it belongs, that is, to the person who talks loudest, logs on most often.’ This suggests that if online discussion forums are to be of value in the policy-making process, they must be well designed and structured.

Moderators, it is suggested, are crucial to shaping the democratic potential of online discussion because they can help to mitigate many of the problems by actively intervening in the debates (Edwards 2002; Coleman and Gotze 2001). There is, however, a great deal of confusion about exactly what roles moderators should, and do, perform. This, in turn, leads to disputes about the nomenclature for such activities: are they moderators, facilitators, or censors? The reality is that moderators can perform all of these roles; the exact role of the moderator is (or should be) dependent on the aims and context for the discussion forum.

There is a particular concern with the censorial power of moderators. In relation to online forums Beth Noveck (2004: 22) has argued that: ‘To be deliberative, the conversation must be free from censorship’ and this ‘includes any distortion or restraint of speech that would hinder the independence of the discussion or cause participants to self-censor.’<sup>2</sup>

Censorship is a very prickly issue for governmental agencies: being accused of even

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<sup>2</sup> Despite such an unequivocal statement against censoring discussions, the Unchat software, which was designed in relation to the values listed, contained a number of flexible censorship tools, potentially open to both individual participants and site administrators.

“justifiable” censorship can create a public relations quagmire, and thus the cost/benefit ratio of operating online forums must be carefully thought through. In contradiction to Novack, I argue that we must be very careful not to automatically demonise the censorial role of the moderator: there are legitimate reasons for censoring the content of online discussion forums. This is because in the online world constitutive (and/or self) censorship<sup>3</sup> is arguably weakened by the (often falsely) perceived anonymity: the moral and social cues that shape speech acts are missing, and this gives people greater freedom to use profanity. To offset this problem, rules of discussion can be developed by the institution and enforced by moderators.<sup>4</sup> The fear, however, is that the power to moderate the content of online forums will be abused. This could be done by setting overly restrictive rules or by ignoring “fair” rules and deleting messages that are critical of the authority involved. It is, thus, necessary to draw a line between legitimate and illegitimate censorship.

Determining what constitutes legitimate censorship is dependent on the context and ones personal judgement, and is thus very hard to define except in broad terms. It can be said that legitimate censorship occurs when messages are deleted that do not meet specific, and open, rules for debate that have been discussed and agreed upon by a range of stakeholders. Illegitimate censorship occurs when either the rules are too restrictive (normally because they were not openly discussed or visible), or if the rules are ignored

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<sup>3</sup> Constitutive censorship relates to the latent, taken-for-granted rules by which discourse is structured (McGuigan 1996: 155).

<sup>4</sup> Curry Jansen argues that you cannot legislate for constitutive censorship. In this case, however, it is not formally a legislative act but a shaping one – and this relates to McGuigan’s (1996: 156) concerns about ‘how regulative modes of censorship touch upon the deep mechanisms of constituent censorship’.

by the moderator. To avoid the inherent value judgements involved in the former, the analysis here will concentrate on whether or not the given rules are being enforced.

In this paper, I will develop two models that take account of the different roles that moderators perform, dependent on the style and aims of forum. Two case studies will then be presented and analysed of national government online discussion forums that are approximate to these models. The first is the Downing Street website. This was a large-scale, content-moderated discussion forum. The second is the E-democracy Forum from Citizen Space. This was a smaller, policy-linked forum with interactive moderation. The case studies will highlight both the practical positives and negatives of two forms of moderation and lead to the generation of a series of policy suggestions about how the e-discussion agenda can be taken forward.

### **The Necessity of Moderation**

Moderation is generally considered to be significant (and positive) in shaping the quality and usefulness of online debates (Hron and Friedrich 2003: 74), particularly for government-run discussions ‘which might otherwise be chaotic, non-deliberative and disrespectful.’ (Linaa Jensen 2003: 350) As Kearns *et al* (2002: 26) argue: ‘The use of moderators is important in keeping citizen engagement focused and in consequently ensuring that such engagement adds value to services, to policy, and to citizens.’

Coleman and Gotze (2001: 17) state that: ‘mechanisms of moderation and mediation are crucial to the success of many-to-many, asynchronous dialogue’ because, as Blumler and

Coleman (2001: 17-18) argue, 'Free speech without regulation becomes just noise; democracy without procedure would be in danger of degenerating into a tyranny of the loudest shouter – or, in the case of e-democracy, the most obsessive, loquacious poster.' Similarly, Wilhelm (2000: 140) believes that the 'moderation of online political forums is critical to their success as agents of decision making or as amplifying issues to be addressed by policy makers. In building bridges – whether it be resolving conflicts, planning neighborhood futures, collaborative problem solving, or prioritizing issues – a skilled and trusted facilitator is often necessary to manage the forum and to create order out of potential chaos.' This is because democratic debate requires a minimum level of respect, civility, and goodwill (Carter 1999).

Arthur Edwards has undertaken a systematic analysis of the role of moderators, counselling against models that conceive them primarily as censors. He argues that the 'the moderator can be characterized as a democratic intermediary and that this role is an important clue for our assessment of the Internet discussions as (incipient) forms of deliberative democracy.' (Edwards 2002: 5) This leads him to emphasise whether moderation enhances deliberation over the concerns of free speech, what he terms a management approach, with three primary functions. The first is a strategic function. This shapes the boundaries for discussion by determining aims and objectives, and embeds it (or not) in a political and organisational environment. The second is a conditioning function which is to effectively enrich the discussion by providing information and attracting participants. The third is a process function. This sets and enforces the goals for the discussion; the agenda and schedule for discussion; the rules to be followed; and

general house-keeping functions such as culling old threads. A subsequent comparative analysis found this to be the most prominent activity of moderators. He concludes that if moderators are to truly enhance deliberativeness, there needs to be ‘Independent, “third party” moderation (...) especially in government-initiated Internet discussions that are always under a certain “shadow of control”.’ (Edwards 2004: 19)

In practice, the first and third functions have many similarities, and the two could be more clearly demarcated between policy/aim functions and the subsequent enforcement of these. This would help distinguish between the roles of the moderator, and the role of the people who initially organize the debates in deciding the rules by which moderators act (this problem is highlighted by the empirical study). A further weakness of Edwards’ study is that, although the model does take account of the possibility for discussion forums having differing aims, he does not discuss how a forum that is not intended to affect decisions might necessitate different moderation activities, and thus alter subsequent stages of his model; his analysis works from the assumption that they are policy-making devices when this is not necessarily the case. For example, in a discussion forum where many thousands of messages are expected, post-moderation may be the only viable option if the flow of discussions is not to be inhibited. This multi-role account of the functions of a moderator means that more nuanced models must be given, taking account of different aims, levels of funding and forum designs.

Jay Blumler and Stephen Coleman have provided concrete proposals of how to take Edwards’ arguments forward by limiting the “shadow of control” and solving the

quandary that is, in effect, the position of (particularly large-scale) government-run online forums as institutionalised civic commons. They argue that for a civic commons to be created in cyberspace, it must be organised – or at least under the umbrella of – ‘a new kind of public agency, designed to forge fresh links between communication and politics and to connect the voice of the people more meaningfully to the daily activities of democratic institutions. The organisation would be publicly funded but be independent from government.’ (Blumler and Coleman 2001: 16) As they rightly point out, such a proposal has many potential benefits. There are, however, two weaknesses. Firstly, there is a lack of detail given as to exactly how the summaries produced by such a body would be fed into political processes and what is meant, in practice, by the requirement that public bodies would ‘be expected to react formally to whatever emerges from the discussion.’ (ibid.) Secondly, following on from the criticism of Edwards’ model, there is the problem of how an overarching body would take account of difference. The structure and design of discussion forums are dependent on the aims of the project. While such a body could produce macro-level principles for moderation, specific rules would need to be determined at the micro-level, so that the context can be taken into account. A similar concern relates to the production of reports<sup>5</sup>: could an over-arching, independent, body fully understand the nuances of particular policies across such a vast spectrum of issues?

### **The Fear of Moderation**

There is neither an acceptance of moderators as enhancing democracy, nor of what activities a moderator should perform. It is worth remembering that moderation does not

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<sup>5</sup> And, potentially, many other functions of the moderator (see below) such as guiding discussions into particular policy areas.

come without potential costs if it is poorly structured, and can be very counter-productive. For example, a study by the Hansard Society (2002) showed that a policy of silent moderation on a Home Office discussion board infuriated users and created a conspiratorial atmosphere. The development and enforcement of moderation rules must be seen as fair, which some have suggested might not be possible: both the moderator and participants in Amsterdam's Digital City 'expressed the need for (and at the same time see the practical impossibility of) detailed and reasonable criteria for moderating the content of the debate...'. (Francissen and Brants 1998: p33)

There is a persistent fear that governments will abuse their power and unduly restrict freedom of discussion.<sup>6</sup> There is, of course, a fine line between moderation and censorship, and creating rules for what is, and is not, acceptable – and the interpretation of how these are enforced. A great deal of trust has to be placed in the judgment of the moderator to not unduly censor messages: censorship is highly subjective. This raises the question of who should moderate the discussions: specialist, independent trained moderators; relevant policy experts concerned with the topic under discussion; or “unbiased” software?<sup>7</sup> This is all the more complicated because it is very difficult to know when and why messages are actually being censored – and this leads to conspiracy theories that may, or may not, be justified.

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<sup>6</sup> A further fear is that they will monitor what participants say and do in a big brother/panoptic manner. Indeed, intelligence services have been given even greater legal freedom to use surveillance since the 9/11 terrorist attacks. However, this is not the main focus of the analysis here, but it should, nevertheless, be borne in mind. See Lyon (1994).

<sup>7</sup> The Hansard Society offers courses to train people how to moderate discussion forums. However, the IPPR found that only 2 of its 10 survey respondents had trained their moderator, and this was an informal process. (Kearns, Bend, and Stern 2002: 27).

This raises legal concerns about what level of censorship is permissible. Weber, for example, has highlighted more than 20 potential legal problems with various moderation techniques. He went on to argue that these can generally be mitigated if the exercise is carefully designed and clearly laid out, but still recommended that moderators should be independent of government (Weber 2004: 329). These concerns have occurred in practice: Docter and Dutton (1998) noted that administrators on Santa Monica's Public Electronic Network (PEN) were very reluctant to moderate discussions for fear that they would breach Americans' constitutional right to free speech.

### **The Form of Moderation**

Moderators can perform a range of different duties. There are a number of tools and techniques (roles) which, *potentially*, can be deployed. These are shaped by the administration's aims; the technology used; the institutional context in which a discussion forum operates; the funding given to support the moderator; and by the agency of the moderator who, ultimately, can decide whether they follow these rules to a greater or lesser extent.

The list of potential roles, presented below, can, thus, be used interchangeably by moderators depending on the structural situation and their perceived autonomy to act independently:

- Greeter: making people feel welcome

- Conversation Stimulator: posing new questions and topics, playing devils advocate in existing conversations
- Conflict resolution: mediating conflicts towards collective agreements (or agreeing to disagree)
- Writing summaries of debates: either for participants or for civil servants and politicians
- Problem Solver: directs questions and comments to relevant people for response
- Bringing in external information to enrich debates, support arguments
- Bringing in new speakers: these can be citizens or politicians/civil servants
- “Cybrarians”: moderators who are also experts on particular topics
- Open Censor: deleting messages that are deemed inappropriate, normally against predefined rules and criteria. Feedback is given to explain why, and an opportunity to re-write is provided
- Covert Censor: deleting messages deemed inappropriate, but with out explaining why
- Cleaner: removing or closing dead threads, hiving off sub-discussions into separate threads

Two models have been developed that take account of the potential forms of moderation, and the techniques used. These are not meant to be fixed models: the reality is that moderation policies evolve and change in response to events. They are, thus, intended as guides. A third possible model is un-moderated forums, typically associated with Usenet. I have not developed this as a model because I could not find a single government-run

online forum that used this method. A further independent variable is the use of mechanised moderation on top of human moderation.

Mechanised moderation is an electronic filter that blocks messages containing words that have been added to a dictionary of excluded ones. It is also possible for individual users to control the content that is made visible to them through kill-files on some forums.

These block messages on particular topics or from specific people.<sup>8</sup> Mechanical moderation is crude because it will block all messages that, for example, use the words “Dick” without consideration of the context or other content (e.g. Dick Turpin).

### **Content Moderation**

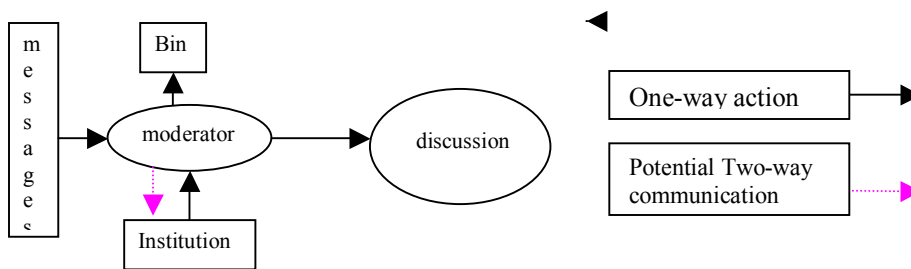
The first model is human-based content moderation. The rules for moderation are set by the institution. As outlined in the diagram, this is a silent form of moderation because no feedback is given either to posters or to the institution. As noted previously, failing to explain deletions can create a conspiratorial atmosphere. This is exacerbated when debates are not fed into the decision making process. Stephen Coleman (2001: 120) describes this as “tokenism”, arguing that it is very counter-productive because: ‘rational citizens seek outcomes from their participation and meaningful outcomes often depend upon there being a link between the virtual world of open discussion and the physical world of complex political relationships and institutions.’ The Downing Street website’s online discussion forum differed from this model in two important ways. Firstly, it used post-moderation and this means that the messages went straight onto the discussion

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<sup>8</sup> Individualised moderation raises important democratic considerations, and harks back to Sunstein’s (2001) argument that the internet will lead to the production of a “Daily Me”, in which materials are selected by users that reinforce their perspective rather than challenge it.

forum before being moderated. Secondly, at least during the early stages of the forum, a mechanical filter was used in combination with human moderation.

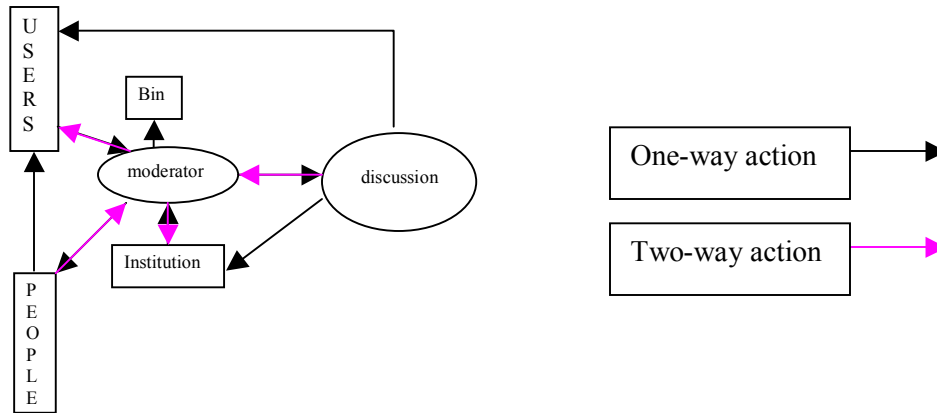
Content Moderation:



### **(Inter)active Moderation**

The second model is that of (inter)active moderation. In this model, the communication is two-way and the moderator is far more interventionist. This model is approximate to Edwards' conceptualisation of the moderator as a democratic intermediary. The moderator brings both new citizens and political institutions into the discussion; encourages existing users to respond; moderates the content of messages and attempt to maintain civility, where possible, by persuasion and not censorship; frames the debate and sets sub-topics; provides feedback to the institution; and participates in the debates.

Interactive Moderation:



To highlight both the practical problems and possibilities with these models, two case studies will be presented. Firstly, the Downing Street website. This featured a content-moderated forum. Secondly, the E-democracy Forum, which featured an interactively-moderated forum.

### **The Downing Street Website: a content-moderated Forum**

The Downing Street website, [www.number-10.gov.uk](http://www.number-10.gov.uk), was one of the earliest attempts to create an online presence for a head of a government, and is regarded as one of ‘the most influential’ central government websites. (Dunleavy *et al* 2002: 55) The website was redesigned on the 10<sup>th</sup> February 2000, at a cost to the tax-payer of £75,000 (and £133,000 pa running costs).<sup>9</sup> Two discussion forums were added in an attempt to create a ‘two-way link between government and people’.<sup>10</sup> These were the “Speaker’s Corner” and the “Policy Forum”. Speaker’s Corner was, according to the web team, designed ‘to express views more generally, on a much wider range of topics’.<sup>11</sup> The Policy Forums ‘were set

<sup>9</sup> Statistics from the Downing Street web team. The site was very popular, receiving some 130,189,734 hits and 23,604,656 page impressions in its first year, an average of 356,684 and 64,670 per day respectively.

<sup>10</sup> This quote forms part of the original stated aim of the site.

<sup>11</sup> Taken from e-mail by the Downing Street web-team, 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2001.

up to feed into the policy-making process.’<sup>12</sup> They featured ongoing official responses, and at the end of the discussion an overall official response was provided by a Minister or senior official.<sup>13</sup> It was, thus, primarily the moderator’s role to create the ‘two-way link’ and this suggests a much more interactive form of moderation. In contradiction to the stated aim, however, limited resources meant that only a selection of posts received Official Responses: around 0.27% in the Speaker’s Corner and these were primarily to questions about the discussion board itself. (Wright 2002) This is unsurprising as the website team moderated the forums rather than people with a direct policy-making background. Every message was read to ensure the content was acceptable though, and summaries were allegedly produced for the Prime Minister. However, an anonymous respondent quoted by Needham (2004: 56) stated that this claim was ‘nonsense’.

A second role of the moderator is to try and ensure that the discussions are not dominated by a small minority. In total, 110,258 posts were made to the Your Say area of the site by 6781 registered users, an average of 16.26 each.<sup>14</sup> This is something of a distorted figure though, as one person made 1450 posts and 163 people made over 100. The top 10 posters to the discussions made 9.32% of the posts. Given the huge number of messages and participants involved, and the fact that many people left less than 10 messages, the minority can be said to have had an influence on the discussions.

### **Moderation or Censorship?**

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<sup>12</sup> Taken from e-mail by the Downing Street web-team, 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Taken from e-mail by the Downing Street web-team, 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2001.

<sup>14</sup> This does not necessarily mean that there were 6781 different users though as it is quite common for the same person to have more than one registered nickname. Statistics from: <http://no10.quiscustodiet.net/no10latest.php3>.

The primary task of the moderators on the Downing Street website appears to have been moderating the content of messages. Determining whether messages breach posting rules is subjective: one person might consider the word “prat” to be acceptable terminology while another might not. The degree of subjectivity can be limited by having clear and detailed guidelines. In this case, the rules were quite vague. Initially, the site carried only a warning not to swear because children may visit the site. These were subsequently strengthened, in line with government guidelines: ‘Please do not make inappropriate postings, including those containing offensive, defamatory or libellous comments.’<sup>15</sup> Some users did complain about an abusive minority. Kevin Webster, the Chairman of the site’s Independent Users Group, noted that the Downing Street discussion forum had ‘become a haven for people to post offensive and meaningless messages’. Perceived abuse is an inherent problem of open access discussion forums because banned people can simply re-register with a different username.

To give an idea of the number of abusive messages, and thus highlight exactly why content moderation was necessary, a search for various offensive words was conducted on a random sample of forums from the second version of the discussion board.<sup>16</sup> The results are presented in the table below:

Forum	Shit	Prat	Fuck	Nigger	Wanker	Cunt	Prick
housing	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Europe	16	12	2	2	1	0	1

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/moderngov/download/modgov.pdf>, p26.

<sup>16</sup> The discussion board collapsed on 12<sup>th</sup> May 2000 after the message number field exceeded 32767. The site designers took this opportunity to improve the software. Unfortunately, all the messages that were made to the forum before this crash were lost – except for the <http://no10.quivcustodiet.net/> cache, which had copies of all the messages that were sent to the forum.

Globalisation	2	0	4	0	0	0	0
Crime	56	27	20	5	2	36	4
Countryside	5	5	0	1	0	0	0
Home Affairs	5	4	0	1	0	0	0
Taxation	17	15	7	0	3	0	2

Number of messages (not times words appear) containing offensive words

The findings suggest that the government was justified in moderating the content of the discussions as there were numerous offensive messages – although arguably the use of profanity was surprisingly small given the volume of messages involved. The problem for Downing Street was drawing the line between “abuse” and legitimate criticism of the government. The site was, after all, designed to make government more transparent and accountable, and to encourage freedom of speech. The three civil servants working on the site faced particular problems when moderating the content of the discussions because this was the personal website of the Prime Minister. It performed a different role than most central government websites, and did not have a direct link to policy-making. The website team itself noted that: ‘it is often a difficult line to tread to ensure that the debate is kept as open as possible, while removing inappropriate postings. The emotive topics which are discussed on this forum make that task particularly challenging.’<sup>17</sup> On a number of occasions they did recognise that mistakes had been made in deleting messages, highlighting again the difficulties involved. For example, in one official response it was stated that: ‘The posting you refer to was deleted because of the reference to a weapons training school. Please accept our apologies this was a misinterpretation of the intention behind florriedonoghue's posting.’<sup>18</sup> Similarly: ‘The Magna Carta was

<sup>17</sup> [http://no10.quivcustodiet.net/cgi-bin/show\\_archive2?fid=47&mid=53060](http://no10.quivcustodiet.net/cgi-bin/show_archive2?fid=47&mid=53060)

<sup>18</sup> [http://no10.quivcustodiet.net/cgi-bin/show\\_archive2?fid=47&mid=53060](http://no10.quivcustodiet.net/cgi-bin/show_archive2?fid=47&mid=53060)

deleted in error, I know that it has caused a lot of irritation and please accept my apologies for the mistake.<sup>19</sup>

We have seen that censoring the content of online discussion is necessary if debates are not to be fractured by rude language. There is still a fear that moderators might be tempted to abuse this power and censor messages for the sole reason that they criticised the Prime Minister or government on his personal website. In fact, the influential Government on the Web report stated that there was a perception amongst officials in other departments that the Downing Street website's team 'does its own thing'.

(Dunleavy *et al* 2002: 52)

### **Undue Censorship?**

The fear that there was undue, politically motivated censorship would *appear* to have been at least partially upheld. There were numerous claims that Downing Street officials censored discussions inappropriately, particularly in the first incarnation of the forum. The IR35 discussion forum was particularly heated, and at one point many of the critical messages 'magically disappeared overnight'.<sup>20</sup> Other erased posts were on subjects such as the Ken Livingstone London mayoral campaign and genetically modified food.<sup>21</sup> This created bad publicity for the government, leading to accusations of control-freakery and censorship in the Times, and technological naivety in The Observer. According to Ros Coward in the Observer: 'the Downing Street chat room, as any Internet buff could have

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<sup>19</sup> [http://no10.quiscustodiet.net/cgi-bin/show\\_archive2?fid=13&mid=31968](http://no10.quiscustodiet.net/cgi-bin/show_archive2?fid=13&mid=31968)

<sup>20</sup> See posts in the IR 35 Forum 15/03/2000 (IR 35 refers to income taxation and the self-employed). Archived at: <http://no10.quiscustodiet.net/cgi-bin/archive2?fid=73>.

<sup>21</sup> Baldwin, T., 'No 10 "censors" website' *The Times*, March 18<sup>th</sup> 2000.

warned them, is fast becoming a rallying point for all the jokers, pranksters and paranoiacs' because this is a 'naturally mischievous medium'.<sup>22</sup>

The examples of deleted messages presented below were from the first incarnation of the forum at the time by the Quiscodiet team, and used as evidence for The Times article.<sup>23</sup>

Firstly, a message about Ken Livingstone's Mayoral campaign:

the party leadership talk of livingstone's perceived lack of loyalty'. well how about seeing some 'loyalty' FROM the leadership - such as loyalty to fundamental (and, i had assumed, shared) ideas such as free political choice and democracy? or loyalty to the millions of Londoners who voted labour at the last election, and who would clearly prefer to see livingstone as the party's candidate? Or loyalty to the thousands of london labour party members and activists who have served and worked for the party for years, and who have explicitly expressed their preference (by a massive majority) for livingstone? Instead the leadership have chosen to blatantly insult and ignore the collective intelligence, and capacity for independent thought, of not only labour party supporters, but ALL londoners. their actions in rigging what should have been a democratic ballot are not only arrogantly offensive, but also stupid, naive, and ultimately counter-productive; and, by the way, 'conservative' rather than 'progressive' (please consult a political dictionary if you are unsure of the precise meaning of these terms Tony)<sup>24</sup>

Two further examples of censored messages relate to the website itself:

Shouldn't this website be independent of any particular party? It definitely tries to give the impression that the labour party and the government are the same thing whereas they are merely the current "majority shareholders". Is there an independent alternative to this site?

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<sup>22</sup> Coward, R. 'No 10 censors hacked off by e-hecklers', *The Observer*, February 20<sup>th</sup> 2000.

<sup>23</sup> A systematic analysis of censorship during the first incarnation is not possible because of the way the data was stored, and because the sudden crash meant that it was not possible to compare the messages with what were left visible.

<sup>24</sup> Statistics produced a cache of messages controlled by Simon Banton of <http://no10.quiscustodiet.net> and <http://www.novacaster.com>.

And:

What is the point of this web site if the points made and questions posed are not responded to by government?

If we cannot expect some level of response we may as well make the point with a paint can on the nearest wall!! Government must do more than just provide the "wall" and then pretend they are a listening open government because they opened a web site.

As noted above, making a judgment on whether a message should be permitted is subjective, but the rules do guide civil servants in making such decisions. In the light of these rules, it is difficult to explain why these messages were deleted. Removing them *appears* to be politically motivated as they criticise the government/website without the use of foul, racist, libellous or offensive language.

The concerns about censorship were also noted by Kevin Webster, Chair of the site's Independent Users Group. He asked users to: 'Please be aware that any serious criticism of government policy on employment will be censored in this topic. If I do not receive a satisfactory explanation from the Webmaster within 24 hours to a complaint made earlier concerning rejected postings, I shall be contacting the national press.'<sup>25</sup>

However, moderators do not just delete messages because of their content. As previously noted, moderators also perform house-keeping functions such as deleting stale threads to speed up response times. Such apparently legitimate activities heavily shape the discussions: some 53.90% of all messages sent to the Downing Street website were not

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<sup>25</sup> [http://no10.quivcustodiet.net/cgi-bin/show\\_archive?fid=41&mid=9493](http://no10.quivcustodiet.net/cgi-bin/show_archive?fid=41&mid=9493)

visible at the end. The most heavily moderated forums were: Welfare Reform, Defence, and International. Although undoubtedly the majority of these deletions were legitimate, there was still the potential for this to lead to accusations of censorship, at least in relation to the given moderation rules. For example, the length of time that threads were left visible varied from one subject to the next. This was not related to the volume of posts and created some controversy.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, if a message did not receive a reply within three days it was automatically deleted. Although this was explained in some official replies, it was not made clear in the rules and created confusion and exacerbated the perception of censorship.

The most questionable moderation policy – again not listed in the moderation rules but noted by the website team in Official Responses – was that messages that replied to a deleted message were also deleted in an attempt to maintain the coherence of the discussions. However, this meant that, in contradiction to the moderation rules, many perfectly legitimate messages were deleted. One would assume that this would explain much of the controversy about political censorship, and also means that it is not possible to say for certain that political censorship was occurring.

What we can be certain of is that the moderator's house-keeping activities significantly shaped the content of the forum. This is because messages were not transferred to a separate archive. While the 'removal of stale postings can be done automatically, even-handedly, and based on non-discretionary, objective criteria' (Weber 2004: 358) the rules by which deletions were conducted was not made clear, and this left them open to

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<sup>26</sup> [http://no10.quiscustodiet.net/cgi-bin/show\\_archive2?fid=73&mid=33923](http://no10.quiscustodiet.net/cgi-bin/show_archive2?fid=73&mid=33923)

accusations of censorship: namely using “house-keeping” as a rouse for removing threads that were critical of the government.

The accusations of political censorship were further complicated by the use a language filter that operated on the first version of the site.<sup>27</sup> The precise words subject to censorship changed during the running of the forum. It was initially set to block messages that contained words such as bomb, anarchy, fairy, and dick. This created considerable concern amongst users who felt that such censorship fell outside of the guidelines and the range of words being automatically censored was significantly reduced. In an Official Posting, the web team stated that the technology ‘seemed to cause more problems than it solved’ and the facility was apparently removed from the second version.<sup>28</sup>

### **The E-democracy Forum**

The E-democracy forum, hosted on Citizen Space, was a small-scale, policy-linked discussion board. In total, there were only 427 posts in 73 separate threads, an average of 4.85 replies per thread. A system of interactive pre-moderation was adopted, and, although labour-intensive, this mitigated the problem of inappropriate posts being aired publicly before being removed. It also gave moderators the chance to suggest that alterations be made to posts to make them more suitable; that a post be made in a different section; or that the respondent might like to read a previous message first. The downside was that this was relatively slow and expensive, and may not, thus, be appropriate for a large-scale forum such as on the Downing Street website.

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<sup>27</sup> [http://no10.quivcustodiet.net/cgi-bin/show\\_archive2?fid=13&mid=33800](http://no10.quivcustodiet.net/cgi-bin/show_archive2?fid=13&mid=33800)

<sup>28</sup> [http://no10.quivcustodiet.net/cgi-bin/show\\_archive2?fid=13&mid=33800](http://no10.quivcustodiet.net/cgi-bin/show_archive2?fid=13&mid=33800)

The moderators were provided by the Hansard Society, and had a background in e-democracy and e-moderation.<sup>29</sup> Moderators gave ongoing feedback and guided the discussions. Questions were raised about the neutrality of the moderators, though this was more for clarity than a claim that they were being unfair. It was suggested that people who worked for the Hansard Society E-democracy programme had a vested interest in its success, which was accepted by the moderators, but they suggested that if people felt they were being unfair at any time then people should say something.

The content of the forums could be described, overall, as relevant and informed. They were also discursive: 58.74% of individual posts occurred in threads with more than 10 messages. The moderators played a crucial role in this because they actively tried to facilitate discussion, and not without success. For example, after one user suggested a more direct form of democracy, Stephen Coleman suggested that people ‘explore this one further. How do you think a direct democracy would work?’<sup>30</sup> This generated six responses, which had passion and verve – and not inconsiderable knowledge. To give a guide to the moderators’ success in generating discussion<sup>31</sup>, the number of responses to initiated posts was analysed. This analysis also shows who set the agenda. Although Stephen Coleman initiated the most new threads, these topics also produced the most responses. Coleman’s seed posts generated 31.85% of all discussion. The topics initiated

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<sup>29</sup> The Hansard Society runs courses to train people in the art of moderation. The courses emphasise more interactive forms of moderation, and are primarily taught by academics with a background in moderation.

<sup>30</sup> [http://www.ukonline.gov.uk/Discussions/DSMessageIndexTree/1,1821,-4e1d81~fs~en~~~~~5,00.html?category=2&group=248&archive=1&parentID=0&messageID=28451&highlight\\_messageID=28451&iIsTree=0](http://www.ukonline.gov.uk/Discussions/DSMessageIndexTree/1,1821,-4e1d81~fs~en~~~~~5,00.html?category=2&group=248&archive=1&parentID=0&messageID=28451&highlight_messageID=28451&iIsTree=0)

<sup>31</sup> This is only a rough guideline because it does not take into account the number of initiated topics. Secondly, discussions within a topic tend to have a life on their own and move on from the initial post and thus people are often not responding to the initial post.

by users also generated responses, but not at the same level. The closest were BethPorter (7.03%) and summersmr (6.79%). The results suggest that any agenda setting dominance was from the moderators themselves. As they were tasked with precisely this role, this was a legitimate part of the discursive/consultative process.

There was some evidence of a dominant minority on the forum. If we do not include Coleman, (whose role necessitated making numerous posts) the top 5 posters made 26.7% of the total. However, this does not really describe the true situation as there was a great disparity in usage. The reality is that 58.91% of users made only 1 post. Nevertheless, people were more than twice as likely to make a second post as what was found in the Hansard Society's (2002) analysis of the original Citizen Space (Wright 2005). This suggests that interactive moderation positively affected the likelihood of people engaging in debate. The moderator appears to have been successful in getting external experts, such as Professor Jay Blumler, to participate in the debates – as well as MPs, Graham Allen (former Spokesperson on Constitutional Affairs) and Richard Allan (Spokesperson for Information Technology and member of the All Party Internet group). However, 43.8% of users only posted new topics without making any replies whatsoever.

Considering the time and resources invested in pre-moderation, the results could be considered sketchy: the benefits do not appear to have out-weighed the costs as the success in getting surfers to become active users appears minimal. This point is supported by the consultation report. It noted that: 'There was little evidence to suggest that people who would not normally have participated in the consultation process did so via the

discussion forum.’<sup>32</sup> Similarly, the report found that it was ‘not possible to conclude that the provision of the consultation on the Internet significantly increased the number of people included or the spread of the e-democracy debate.’<sup>33</sup>

As noted previously, the discussion forum was linked to the In the Service of Democracy consultation. However, it is not clear what effect either the forum, or the consultation, had. A consultation report was developed, and this shows that messages were analysed at some length.<sup>34</sup> However, this does not appear to have been used in the creation of an e-democracy policy: while a link with policy-makers was created, there is no guarantee (or obligation) that they will *listen* to this. The lack of specific results based out of the consultation thus far may be because of the many issues raised (and this could itself be considered a result of the consultation). It is perhaps also somewhat naïve to assume that such changes would occur quickly; Ian Johnson of the Cabinet Office’s E-government Unit has suggested that developments will now occur in a slower, organic manner – and thus the forum may have greater policy influence in the future.<sup>35</sup>

### **Moderated Censorship?**

In line with the aims of the forum, the moderators adopted a stricter set of rules and regulations than found on the Downing Street website – such as not posting messages that

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<sup>32</sup> [http://www.edemocracy.gov.uk/downloads/your\\_response\\_report.doc](http://www.edemocracy.gov.uk/downloads/your_response_report.doc)

<sup>33</sup> [http://www.edemocracy.gov.uk/downloads/your\\_response\\_report.doc](http://www.edemocracy.gov.uk/downloads/your_response_report.doc) The online provision was, however, ‘particularly successful in distributing the consultation document’ with 22,000 copies of the main document being downloaded and about 18,500 copies of the background and summary

<sup>34</sup> Although the report argued that there were lessons to be learnt, when compared with the critiques provided by the various submissions the conclusion that: ‘The majority of the replies are supportive of the Government’s efforts to develop an e-democracy policy although many important and serious issues were raised that will require detailed analysis and consideration’ would appear to be something of an understatement.

<sup>35</sup> Johnson, I., Director of the E-democracy Program within the E-government Unit, 26<sup>th</sup> May 2004.

were considered off topic. Despite the more stringent constraints, fewer messages were censored on the e-democracy forum, 26.25% (152 of 579 total). These were censored either because messages were repeats, used foul or abusive language, had inappropriate web-links, or were considered off-topic.<sup>36</sup> The lower levels of censorship can probably be explained by its lower profile; if the Downing Street website had enforced these rules many more messages would have been deleted! The most controversial moderating decision related to criticism of the decision to remove the original Citizenspace discussion forum. On this topic, moderators allowed such comments once or twice before deeming further messages off-topic and instead tried to push discussions toward the shaping of a future forum.<sup>37</sup> The final summary noted that this decision ‘exacerbated a sense of cynicism and paranoia amongst these few contributors who genuinely felt that the Government was determined to ignore them.’<sup>38</sup>

The general lack of controversy may have been because the subject matter was less emotive than political asylum and other similar issues, and because the participants were, as noted above, the already active minority rather than the general public. This is also encouraged by pre-moderating messages as revisions could be suggested, and explanations sent. Moreover, because inappropriate messages were never made visible, unaffected users were neither aware of the censorship, nor had the chance to respond to the messages – thus the flow of discussions was maintained.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>36</sup> [http://www.edemocracy.gov.uk/feedback/responses/edemocracy\\_discussion\\_final\\_summary.doc](http://www.edemocracy.gov.uk/feedback/responses/edemocracy_discussion_final_summary.doc)

<sup>37</sup> [http://www.edemocracy.gov.uk/feedback/responses/edemocracy\\_discussion\\_final\\_summary.doc](http://www.edemocracy.gov.uk/feedback/responses/edemocracy_discussion_final_summary.doc)

<sup>38</sup> [http://www.edemocracy.gov.uk/feedback/responses/edemocracy\\_discussion\\_final\\_summary.doc](http://www.edemocracy.gov.uk/feedback/responses/edemocracy_discussion_final_summary.doc)

This analysis has highlighted both the problems and possibilities with government-run online discussion forums. The analysis has suggested that a clearly designed and structured participative process must be developed. Positive findings include that people were willing to participate in large numbers through such mechanisms, even if this does not guarantee that the already vocal minority do not dominate. The analysis has also highlighted that online discussion can be discursive, and that the moderator can have a positive role in promoting both the levels of discussion and bringing in users from outside. The model of an interactive moderator is, thus, both practical and can produce democratic/discursive benefits. The extent to which the benefits outweigh the financial costs is dependent on the aims and size of the discussion: the value of this model decreases for larger-scale discussion forums.

On the downside, numerous problems were discovered with the practice of government-run online discussion forums, particularly with the large-scale, content-moderated Downing Street website. Most prominent was the allegations of censorship that dogged the forum. The analysis has shown that this was primarily a structural problem caused by poorly designed and advertised rules. The decision to delete all messages that replied to one which was deleted was particularly counter-productive. It is, however, difficult to envisage a situation where allegations of political censorship would not occur when legitimate moderation is taking place: such decisions are inherently subjective, and, as Edwards noted, there is a 'shadow of control' that hangs over government-driven censorship.

My analysis of the problems experienced has led to two main policy proposals (with several sub points) for the future structuring of government-run online discussion forums. Firstly, I would argue that governments must not attempt to do what is technologically achievable, but instead develop clear aims and use these to structure the style of discussion board and moderation policy that is adopted. In particular, the usefulness of large-scale<sup>39</sup>, government-run online discussion forums is limited as they do not have a direct policy link. Indeed, they can be counter productive if people are left feeling ignored or censored. Large-scale forums are akin to a general public sphere and this puts them in a contradictory position. (Wright 2005) Following Coleman's, and Blumler and Coleman's arguments, it would appear that an organisation like the BBC might be better placed to host such debates (Coleman 2004: 19-20; Coleman and Blumler 2001; Wright 2005). This is not to claim that there isn't a role for government-run online discussion forums – there is – but these are most fruitful when smaller in scale and linked to specific policies.

Secondly, I would argue that with forums organised along these lines, it would be beneficial to separate the roles of the moderator into two clearly defined areas. The censorial power of the moderator would most fruitfully be enforced by an independent person or group following detailed (and openly available) rules set by the institution in negotiation with a range of stakeholders. This proposal, thus, has similarities with the one

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<sup>39</sup> This raises the question of how to determine what is a large-scale forum? Thomas Beierle, for example, has analysed an online discussion forum sponsored by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which attracted 1,166 people. Beierle (2004: 165) describes this as a large-scale forum, and concludes positively that online forums 'can fill a niche in the public participation tool box by bringing together large groups of people in an interactive process of exchanging information.' However, although undoubtedly the forum attracted a large number of people, it is on a different scale, and has a different structure, to the Downing Street website. His case-study was on a policy-forum, similar to the E-democracy forum – and thus due care must be taken when characterising debates.

put forward by Blumler and Coleman, but includes a degree of contextual flexibility. Where there was to be a link with policy-making (i.e. the interactive model), this could then be supplemented by a civil servant (or civil servants if the discussion covered a range of policy areas) acting as the facilitator. This would stop the facilitator being tainted by accusations of censorship while limiting the damage that any claims of censorship might cause the government. This also means that the facilitator would have direct experience of, and links with, the governmental body concerned – mitigating both the problems experienced on the Downing Street website where it was moderated by the website team itself, and the problem with Blumler and Coleman’s model, where the summariser would not have any direct experience of the policy being discussed. Ideally, both the facilitator and the censor would be trained in the art of moderation. The problems can, thus, be overcome, and the democratic/deliberative potential turned into a political reality.

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