

## SYMPOSIUM

# Online Deliberation and #CivicTech: A Symposium

Weiyu Zhang\*, Todd Davies† and Anna Przybylska‡

Online deliberation is one important instance of civic tech that is both for and by the citizens, through engaging citizens in Internet-supported deliberative discussions on public issues. This article explains the origins of a set of symposium articles in this journal issue based on the 2017 ‘International Conference on Deliberation and Decision Making: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Civic Tech’ held in Singapore. Symposium articles are presented in a sequence that flows from designing decision making systems to platforms to specific technological nudges.

**Keywords:** platform; nudge; e-deliberation; gov tech; civic tech; online deliberation

‘Civic technology’ and ‘digital civics’ are often used to refer to technological innovations aimed ‘for the public good’ (Stempeck, Sifry, & Simpson, 2016). A Knight Foundation report (2013) emphasized ‘promoting civic outcomes’ as an important criterion to identify #CivicTech projects. The report listed a wide range of technologies, including e-government (e.g., for public decision making) and community participation (e.g., neighborhood forums), as forming the spectrum (Boehner & DiSalvo, 2016). An emerging debate centers on whether government-centric technologies should belong to a separate genre of #GovTech (Saldivar et al., 2019). Zhang and her colleagues (2020) pointed out that civic tech needs to not only serve the citizens (i.e., for the citizens) but also engage citizens in its design and implementation (i.e., by the citizens).

Online deliberation is one important instance of civic tech that is both for and by the citizens, through engaging citizens in Internet-supported deliberative discussions on public issues. From the early days of online deliberation as a field of study and practice, both social scientists and computer scientists have been well represented in the literature. A number of international and multidisciplinary conferences, workshops, and seminars focusing on online deliberation have been held since the initial gathering at Carnegie Mellon University in 2003, more recently in a Special Interest Group (SIG) meeting as part of the ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing (CHI) in Seoul in 2015, and the Conference on New Perspectives for Dialogue: ICT and Inclusive Decision Making in Warsaw in 2016. The articles from this symposium are based on a conference most recently held in Singapore: the 2017

International Conference on Deliberation and Decision Making: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Civic Tech.

This symposium is organized in a sequence that flows from designing decision making systems to platforms to specific technological nudges (Menon, Zhang, & Perrault, 2020). **Gastil’s** piece is a visionary discussion about an online civic engagement system, ‘a democracy machine’ so to speak. **Chang and Zhang’s** work emphasizes the defining feature of such systems, ‘procedural justice’, and tests its influence using data obtained from an online deliberation platform developed in Singapore (i.e., OD\_SG). While the Singapore project put citizens front and center in the deliberation, **Przybylska** describes the design process of a platform known as ‘inDialogue’ that heavily involved institutional partners, explaining how the tool was developed cooperatively with public administrators to support their decision making process. Developing online deliberation platforms is only one way to imagine #CivicTech. **Rossini’s** piece provides an analysis of news websites and Facebook in Brazil, in terms of affording deliberative and non-deliberative ‘disagreement’ in political talk. This study exemplifies how reality differs from deliberation’s ideals, and adds insights into using existing platforms for deliberation. **Yang, Wang and Zhang’s** study reports on an interface design based on the concept of ‘intrapersonal deliberation’ and examines how knowledge and reflection within individuals can influence attitude change.

Through this collection of studies that focus on various aspects of #CivicTech design (Manosevitch, 2014), the authors in this symposium contribute to the ongoing building of an interdisciplinary and international community of scholars focused on deliberation and decision making in the age of the Internet. Although social scientists do not always build computer technologies, they do contribute to understanding the mechanisms behind how technologies work, as well as attempting to provide

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\* National University of Singapore, SG

† Stanford University, US

‡ University of Warsaw, PL

Corresponding author: Weiyu Zhang ([weiyu.zhang@nus.edu.sg](mailto:weiyu.zhang@nus.edu.sg))

social, and more often, hybrid (social plus technological) designs to address civic challenges (Perrault & Zhang, 2019). By seeing deliberation through the lens of #CivicTech, we can evaluate existing deliberation technologies (broadly defined) as well as advocate for innovatively designed tools and processes. Echoing Strandberg and Grönlund's call for more analyses of 'the communicative process of online deliberation' (2018: 370), the authors go beyond describing these deliberation designs to provide theory-driven empirical tests of mechanisms that are often hidden in the 'black boxes' of deliberation and decision making. Seeing deliberation in relation to civic tech allows us to admit that there is both good and bad design, and both functional and dysfunctional practice, done in the name of civic and public purposes.

Looking forward, we call for a broadening of our understanding of design, through the formation of a #CivicTech community with a deliberative focus. When we see deliberative discussion and decision making as types of civic tech, we should not limit our imagination to online technologies. Innovations using face to face methods, or mixed methods of both online and offline technologies, need to be encouraged. Additionally, we should adopt an expansive definition of deliberation that includes other civic technologies, including other coordination components than mere discussions. Deliberation must be incorporated into existing decision making systems if it is to have a real impact on civic life.

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### Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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