H2O: Building Communities around Ideas

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1. Abstract

This demonstration will showcase the H2O project at the Berkman Center for Internet & Society in general and the H2O Rotisserie discussion tool specifically. H2O is a nonprofit software development project that develops innovative educational tools designed not only to improve the academic educational experience but also to export the best parts of that experience outside of the academy. The Rotisserie is the most successful tool developed by the H2O project: a structured discussion tool that solves many of the problems of using an online discussion system to facilitate productive, meaningful discourse. The Berkman Center has successfully used H2O tools to promote productive civic discussion about pressing Internet and law issues.

2. H2O and The Berkman Center

The H2O project is a nonprofit software development project hosted at the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard Law School. The vision of the H2O project is to encourage the growth of a more open, connected set of intellectual communities than those currently in existence through the use of innovative new teaching technologies. In particular, we focus on introducing inventive methods of interaction that allow these communities to form in new ways. H2O encourages communities to develop around ideas, not institutions. Rather than segregating users based on which school they happen to attend or, indeed, whether they happen to attend school at all, the system encourages users to interact with one another in focused ways based on the specific ideas they are addressing at the time: users from a cross-section of communities can gather to address the details of a recently passed piece of legislation or the implications of a particular news item, rather around local communities of school or ideology.

The Internet has been built out with special attention and success to schools across the country and around the world. Yet mainstream educational software has progressed little beyond either online workbooks with flat multiple choice drills or an amalgam of chat rooms, static Web pages, and threaded bulletin board messaging made available to students under the umbrella of a given class or school. Classrooms and dormitories are linked to the Net, and those seeking educational applications say: "Now what?" Traditional educational research projects, likewise, have largely failed to establish network effects and, as one consequence, have not resulted in the integration of helpful new teaching technologies into mainstream usage within schools, much less between schools and other intellectual communities. We believe that, with the right structure, the global Net can become indispensable to a variety of teaching environments—and we have tested this belief through a series of pilot projects implemented at Harvard Law School and elsewhere. These projects seek to answer the surprisingly difficult question of how to help teachers, unobtrusively but effectively, inspire and lead their students through the use of networked technologies, fostering online intellectual communities with innovative tools that fundamentally differ from existing educational systems.

Core to the mission of the Berkman Center is the education of the public about technologies that have deep effects on society and about societal laws that have deep effects on technologies. Since its founding, the Berkman Center has experimented with the use of H2O tools to encourage the public to educate themselves about and involve themselves with Internet and law issues. To this end, the Berkman Center has hosted a number of online lecture and discussion series freely accessible to the public. These series have addressed a wide range of Internet and law issues, including privacy, the digital divide, Internet name dispute policy, and violence against women on the Internet. The Berkman Center also hosts

its Internet Law conference twice a year, through which it educates professionals about the current state of Internet law through both online and in person sessions. And the Berkman Center has actively sought to include the public in Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) deliberations by webcasting and providing online forums for discussions of ICANN meetings.

3. The Rotisserie

The most ambitious and successful tool developed by the H2O project has been the Rotisserie structured discussion tool. The Rotisserie provides a unique platform for civic discussion that facilitates discourse that is more thoughtful, more democratic, and less balkanized that discussions hosted by traditional threaded messaging systems.

The Rotisserie implements an innovative approach to online discussion that encourages measured, thoughtful discourse in a way that traditional, threaded messaging systems cannot. In contrast to the completely asynchronous, broadcast-to-broadcast mode of existing threaded messaging systems, the Rotisserie adds structure to both the timing and the flow of the discussion. The timing of the discussion is broken into semi-synchronous rounds. Users are allowed to post responses at any time, but their responses are not published to other users until the deadline for the current round passes. Traditional threaded messaging systems foster a bias for posting quickly, since the users who post first are most likely to be read by the greatest number of participants and therefore most likely to generate responses. The Rotisserie eliminates this bias, allowing users to take the time to craft their responses thoughtfully rather than competing with other participants to post quickly.

Moreover, this timing structure provides the opportunity for the system to control the flow of the discussion by distributing responses to specific users for further discussion at the end of each round, ensuring that every post is distributed to at least one other user for comment and that each user has exactly one post to which to respond. By controlling the flow of discussion, the Rotisserie democratizes the discussions, performing the same function that a careful seminar teacher does -- making sure everyone gets a chance to participate by encouraging garrulous students to contribute less and shy students to contribute more. Unlike a seminar teacher, the Rotisserie can scale to hundreds and even thousands of users, since it requires no manual intervention to make these assignments.

Lastly, the Rotisserie system includes support for discussion not only within a given community, but also between many different communities at once, allowing, for instance, an Internet law class at Harvard Law School to participate in a discussion about digital rights management with an engineering course at MIT, a local radio show audience that has just listened to a show on the topic, and a public Internet & society discussion forum. This last feature is perhaps the most important for civic discussion, since it encourages participation based on a specific topic rather than on community affiliation. Traditional threaded messaging systems often balkanize Internet users into communities of ideology, which function more as support groups for people with similar beliefs than as centers for meaningful discourse. By facilitating discussion between different communities as well as within them, the Rotisserie encourages thoughtful, productive discussions between people who do not share the same central assumptions and ideologies.

4. Resources

The following links provide more information about the Berkman Center and the H2O project:

H2O Rotisserie
>http://h2o.law.harvard.edu

H2O Project
>http://h2oproject.law.harvard.edu

Berkman Center Home Page:
>http://cyber.law.harvard.edu

Berkman Online Lecture and Discussion Series:
>http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/online

Berkman Center ICANN Meeting Archives
>http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/icann