NSF Project Highlights: Policy Made Public: Technologies of Deliberation and Representation in Rebuilding Lower Manhattan

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In this paper we discuss how new digital technologies have figured critically in the process of deciding the future of Lower Manhattan after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack. Digital technologies have not only supplied the infrastructure for soliciting public input into planning decisions, but have opened new channels of communication between citizens, designers, advocacy groups, and decision-makers. Our research combines multiple lines of investigation to assess whether and how these new technologies are restructuring the landscape of civic participation. In these highlights, we report on only one line of ongoing investigation and focus on one set of findings.

Public deliberation about the future of Lower Manhattan has offered a unique opportunity to tackle these questions. Among the many forums held to solicit public input into the design process, *Listening to the City,* which was sponsored by a coalition of civic groups and rebuilding officials, brought 4,500 people to a midtown convention center in July 2002 to weigh in on preliminary plans for the site via personal voting keypads and linked computer networks. It was followed by an online forum, in which 818 participants discussed rebuilding options and priorities over the course of two weeks. Online dialogue participants'

preferences were periodically polled and forwarded to rebuilding officials. The fact that in-person and online *Listening to the City* dialogues followed the same agenda made it possible for us to compare participants in the two forums in terms of demographic characteristics as well as their kinds and levels of prior political involvement and their kinds and levels of prior computer use. We have also tracked participants' levels of interest in and satisfaction with the Lower Manhattan rebuilding process in the wake of the forums based on follow-up surveys, and we are currently investigating the impacts of the forums on decisionmakers.

In recent years, democratic theorists have argued that offering people the chance to deliberate with their fellow citizens about issues of mutual concern can reinvigorate American political institutions. However, empirical research on public deliberation has been slow to catch up with the ambitious claims made for it. This is especially true of online public deliberation. Champions have seen in its low cost, geographic reach, and anonymity the possibility for truly democratic participation in policymaking. But we still do not have the comparative data to determine whether these features make for more diverse and egalitarian decisionmaking or whether systematic disparities in people's access to the internet and the lack of face-to-face contact in online deliberation make it less inclusive. Nor do we know much about when and how deliberative forums actually influence policymaking and what kinds of impacts they have on participants themselves. Finally, we know little about the organizational and discursive conditions for successful deliberation.

We focus here on the question of what makes for good deliberation. In one line of investigation, we are studying the conditions for *informed* deliberation, that is, the discursive and organizational conditions in which participants tend to seek out and share outside information in their discussions online. In a second line of investigation, we are studying whether personal storytelling aids or undermines good deliberation. The question has divided democratic theorists. Some have argued that storytelling can counter the elitist bias of classical reason-giving, making for more egalitarian decisionmaking. Others argue that personal stories are too subjective, ambiguous in their policy implications, and emotional to foster good deliberation. To date, however, there has been no empirical study of personal storytelling and reason-giving in an actual instance of public deliberation. Our analysis, which is based on a systematic coding of the messages exchanged in twelve *Listening to the City* online

dialogue groups, has already generated interesting findings, which we report briefly here.

The discussions were asynchronous and were limited to group members (typically, about twelve were active participants). Over the course of the dialogue, organizers introduced a series of dialogue headings on issues related to the rebuilding process, including transportation, housing, and economic development, and memorial options, and invited participants to discuss them and summarize group conclusions. We coded all the messages exchanged by twelve groups, a total of 5,345 messages. In each message, we identified all *narrative claims*, that is, preferences or opinions advanced by way of a story, and *non-narrative* claims, that is, preferences or opinions advanced by way of a reason. The vast majority of stories were in the first person and they covered a variety of topics.

We found that groups traditionally viewed as disadvantaged were, in general, no more likely to turn to stories rather than reasons to back up their opinions and preferences. However, women were significantly more likely than men to tell stories. An even stronger finding had to do not with the kinds of people who advanced opinions by way of stories but the kinds of opinions advanced by way of stories. Members of all demographic groups who saw themselves as having opinions or experiences that they believed were unlikely to be shared were more than five times as likely to tell stories to make their points as to give reasons. For disadvantaged groups, then, there seems to be good precedent for using personal stories to convey marginalized needs and priorities—since personal stories are already being used by all groups for just that purpose.

Does personal storytelling work? Our analysis found that participants were more likely to respond to narrative claims than non-narrative ones and they were more likely to *engage* narrative claims: to request clarification or further elaboration of a point, expand on it, question its generalizability or relevance, agree or disagree with it, or acknowledge its impact on their opinions. In other words, participants did more than simply express their appreciation. Their tendency to *corroborate* narrative claims, often with stories of their own, was an especially interesting response. We draw on a qualitative analysis of storytelling exchanges to show how narrative's openness to interpretation allowed deliberators to advance compromise and third positions without antagonizing anyone. In sum, personal stories fostered the kind of give and take that we expect of deliberation.

However, participants were much more likely to tell stories when they were invited by organizers to do so and when they were talking about broad themes in rebuilding. They tended not to recount personal experiences in discussions of policy such as transportation, housing, and economic development. This was despite the fact that doing so could have served to forge understanding across polarized positions. Policy discussions seem to have been considered inappropriate occasions for storytelling. In conjunction with an analysis of how participants talked explicitly about the virtues and liabilities of storytelling in the dialogues, these findings suggest that a popular view of storytelling as normatively powerful but as politically unserious may limit its capacity to contribute to egalitarian decisionmaking.