

e-Liberate Technology Demonstration

Douglas Schuler
Public Sphere Project
douglas@publicsphereproject.org
<http://www.publicsphere.org/>
<http://publicsphereproject.org/e-liberate/>

Democracy and the Internet

Since its inception the Internet has been touted as a medium with revolutionary potential for democratic communication. Although other media including television and radio have not lived up to their democratic potential, it is too early to dismiss the Internet as being predominantly a tool for the powerful. Certainly civil society has been extraordinarily creative in using the Internet for positive social change.

Deliberation and the Internet

Although a very large number of communication venues exist in cyberspace, one critical function — deliberation — seems to have been omitted. The need for computer support for online deliberation can be shown by the fact that many online discussions seem to have no resolution at all; they often dribble off into nothingness, often leaving more confusion in their wake than before the discussion began. Worse, many online discussions degenerate into "flame wars" where online feuds make it difficult for the non-feuders to get any work done.

Roberts Rules of Order

Motivated by a desire to help make online discussions more productive — particularly among civil society groups who are striving to create more "civic intelligence" in our society — Doug Schuler proposed in his 1996 book *New Community Networks: Wired for Change* (MIT Press) that Roberts Rules of Order could be used as a basis for online deliberation. Roberts Rules of Order was developed by Henry Robert in the late 1800s to describe an orderly process for people meeting together face-to-face to make decisions fairly. One of the most important criterion was that although every attendee would have opportunities to make his or her ideas heard the minority could not prevent the majority from making decisions. Robert labored over his "rules" for 30 years, which, along with their variants, are now in daily use by tens of thousands of deliberative bodies worldwide. One of the most intriguing aspects of Roberts Rules is that the process seems to scale up: small groups of 5 or so can use as can groups numbering in the hundreds.

Development of e-Liberate

In 1999 a team of students at The Evergreen State College developed the first prototype of an online version of Roberts Rules of Order. This was later presented at CPSR's DIAC 2000 symposium by John Adams and Matt Powell. In 2003 Evergreen student Nathan Clinton, working with Schuler, designed and implemented the system which has still only been sporadically tested with actual users. Clinton and Schuler named the system e-Liberate, which rhymes with deliberate (the verb). Version 2.0 is now slowly becoming a reality. The new version will allow modification of rules through a standalone and editable representation of the protocol (the "rules") and a "protocol engine" for interpreting the rules and thus guiding the meeting. Clinton has recently modified the system using AJAX so that the page refreshes are not necessary to show a new event or statement in the meeting.

We of course hope that e-Liberate will prove as versatile as the original Roberts Rules. E-Liberate is intended to be easy to use. It employs a straightforward user interface which is educational as well as facilitative. The interface shows, for example, only the legal actions that are available to the user at that specific time in the meeting. (A user can't second a motion when there is no motion to second!) At any time an "about" button can be clicked to explain what each particular action will accomplish thus providing useful cues that aren't available in face-to-face meetings. The user interface is shown in the screen shot below. A transcript of an actual session (a fragment of which is visible in the figure below) is available for inspection at <http://publicsphereproject.org/e-liberate/meetings/main.php?MeetingID=7>.

Testing e-Liberate

We at CPSR's Public Sphere Project are now beginning to work with groups who are interested in trying the system to support actual meetings. We believe that face-to-face meetings are still very important but appropriate use of e-Liberate can help organizations with limited resources. Our hope is that non-profit groups will use e-Liberate to save time and money on travel and use the resources they save on other activities that promote their core objectives. We are enthusiastic about the system but we are well aware that the system as it stands may have problems that need fixing. It is for that reason that we plan to host a small number of meetings over the next few months and gather feedback from attendees. After that we plan to make e-Liberate freely available for online meetings and to release the software under a free software license.

The screenshot displays the e-Liberate online deliberation interface. At the top, there are three globe icons and the text "e-Liberation online deliberation". Below this is a navigation bar with links for "attend a meeting", "meeting archives", and "about e-Liberate". On the right side, there are links for "LOGOFF" and "ADMINISTRATION". The main content area is divided into two columns. The left column contains a transcript of a meeting session, and the right column contains an "Order of Business" list.

The Chairperson opens agenda item:
Opening Statements
Douglas Schuler states:
Good morning. I'd like to call this meeting to order.

I'm glad that all of you could make it today. It's sunny here -- not at all typical for Seattle but we're enjoying it while we can. I hope that you are all enjoying the weather wherever you might be today!

Douglas Schuler states:
We're here to discuss the next phase of the Public Sphere Project. It should be noted here that this is not an actual board meeting and these discussions and decisions, although quite reasonable, aren't binding. We are using the e-Liberate software that Nathan has written for the Public Sphere Project -- and beyond!

There will be three orders of business in this meeting: (1) our immediate plans regarding e-Liberate; (2) Our plans for the pattern language project; and (3) our plans for other activities including civic intelligence exploration, our upcoming meeting in January and funding. This meeting will take between 1.5 and 2 hours.

[Note: we are recording this pseudo-meeting so that people who are interested in using e-Liberate can get a feel for what a session would be like. This "meeting" contains three orders of business and five motions. Three of the motions are passed, one is defeated and one dies for lack of a second.]

I am now opening up the floor for open discussion.

The chairperson has opened the floor to free debate.
Douglas Schuler states:
After hearing (reading?) no comments during this time, I will close the floor to free debate. There of

Order of Business

- [Opening Statements](#)
- [Immediate plans regarding e-Liberate](#)
- [Plans for the pattern language project](#)
- [Plans for other activities including civic intelligence exploration, our upcoming meeting in January and funding](#)

Fig. 1. Transcript of e-Liberate Session

The transcript shows the meeting while in progress and provides a written record when it's over.

Parameters

The system in its current form can support meetings that take place in real-time over an hour or so and, also, meetings that are more asynchronous (and leisurely), meetings that could, in theory, span a year or so, making it necessary for meeting attendees to log in to e-Liberate once or twice a week to check for recent developments and perhaps vote or make a motion. Moving a real-time, non-virtual deliberation protocol into an online environment raises a variety of critical issues like those above that warrant investigation. It is an interesting question as to why Roberts Rules of Order, arguably the most commonly used protocol for deliberation in meetings has received so little attention. Over the next several months we hope to study a variety of online meetings in order to adjust the system and to develop heuristics for the use of the system.

Using e-Liberate

It is our intent to make e-Liberate easy to use. E-Liberate provides cues to permissible actions and provides online help for all features. The Use of e-Liberate intended to be educational; meeting attendees should become more knowledgeable about Roberts Rules and the use of e-Liberate over time through normal use of the system. Having said that, however, it is still important to acknowledge that some knowledge of — and experience with — Roberts Rules is critical to successful participation in online meetings. Groups intending to use e-Liberate should work to ensure that all meeting attendees have basic understanding of the various motions and the basic rules and we have developed an online manual for that purpose. Additionally, the meeting chair should be prepared to assist attendees whenever possible. Finally, the developers will also be available to assist even though everybody currently working on this project is volunteering their time.

Thank you!

Thank you very much for your interest in e-Liberate! We hope that it will help you and your organization as you strive to build a better tomorrow. Please let us know if you have any questions, concerns or ideas related to e-Liberate.