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## Democracy Squared: Designing On-Line Political Communities to Accommodate Conflicting Interests

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# Democracy Squared

## Designing On-Line Political Communities to Accommodate Conflicting Interests

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**Abstract.** On-line political communities, such as the Norwegian site Demokratitorget (Democracy Square), are often designed according to a set of un-reflected assumptions about the political interests of their potential members. In political science, democracy is not taken as given in this way, but can be represented by different models which characterize different relationships between politicians and the citizens they represent. This paper uses quantitative and qualitative content analysis to analyze the communication mediated by the Democracy Square discussion forum in the first ten months of its life. In the quantitative analysis, citizens' and politicians' contributions are analyzed against four different democracy models: Consumer, Demo-Elitist, Neo-Republican and Cyber-Democratic. Whereas politicians' contributions mainly reflected the Demo-Elitist model, citizens' contributions tended to reflect the Neo-Republican model. In the qualitative analysis the discourse is analysed as repeating genres—patterns in the communication form which also reflect the conflict of interest between citizens and politicians. Though the analysis gives insight into the nature of the discourse the site supports, little is known about translating this kind of insight into better site design. We match

the site's communication genres with known features of E-democracy sites to generate tentative design improvement possibilities.

*Key words:* e-democracy, e-community, e-participation, system design, democracy model, genre

## 1 Introduction

In the Norwegian local election in 2003, 58,8% of the electorate voted—the lowest turnout since 1922 (Statistics 2003). Voter turnout in western democracies is especially low among young people (Briony 2003). Low voting rates are often associated with a general disengagement from the democratic process which undermines the political mandate, and politically active members of the affected societies accept that engaging people in important community issues and in political and democratic processes is an important challenge (Hague 1999). New technology (particularly the rapid development of the internet) is changing conditions for communication and co-ordination (Van Dijk 2000), and has led to an increased interest in technology support for participation in the political process (often assumed to be an attractive form of expression for younger people). This is reflected in action plans such as eEurope 2005 (European-communities 2002) and eNorge 2005 (Government-Norway 2002). One particular form of technology mediated intervention is the on-line political forum, a virtual meeting place where citizens and politicians can discuss issues of local or national importance and their political expression and resolution. Such web sites now exist in all of the Scandinavian countries (usually in the form of experiments sponsored by government agencies).

Whereas there is a reasonably extensive theoretical discussion of internet democracy (one common way of addressing this topic through democracy models is elaborated in the next section), “comprehensive empirical studies of concrete initiatives has been sparse” (Jensen 2003, p. 30). Empirical studies are important in order to learn about the nature of the current experiments, which are far from universally successful, and to gain the insights necessary to improve them. There are a number of case studies of internet political participation (e.g., Ranerup 2000; Stanley and Weare 2004), but very few studies of internet-enabled political discourse (an exception is Jensen 2003), and we suggest that this type of analysis is valuable in providing potentially generalisable understandings of the communication forms that political forums support. We were unable to find any studies which linked these empirical understand-

ings to website design issues. A web-site designed to support a virtual political community is a form of communication media, but rather little is known about the communication or discourse that these sites enable, and less about the relationship between the design of the site and the communication it supports. Common sense would suggest that a communication media should be designed in the light of the discourses it enables, but this is not a common information system design principle. There are many ways of analysing communication (for example discourse analysis, content analysis, genre studies, hermeneutic studies, discourse analysis) but these are seldom focused on web-enabled political discourse, or linked to information system design. Genre is recognised as extremely important in the evolution of web design practice, and web designers are known to work extensively from their understandings of genre (Crowston and Williams 2000), but, to our knowledge, no descriptions of how to do this exist. Classic genre texts in the IS literature (Yates and Orlikowski 1992; Orlikowski and Yates 1994) relate genre studies to organisational analysis, not to software design work. Methodological support for genre analysis in an information support context is also targeted at organisational analysis, and falls short of providing software design guidelines (Spinuzzi 2003). Conventional system development methods base design work on user requirements, not communication analysis, making them hard to adapt. The language action school contains many examples of analysis based on linguistic and organisational semiotics theories, including full blown information system design methodologies (Liu 2000), but usually link these to an older conventional system development paradigm, which is poorly adapted to modern web design. Web design methodologies (Scharl 2000; Vidgen et al. 2002) are heavily dependent on older system development paradigm work practice analysis and user requirement analysis (here less relevant).

The project studied in this paper was designed to encourage political participation in Norway. The principal feature of Demokratitorget (Democracy Square) site is its discussion board, where citizens and politicians can initiate and participate in themed debates. The site initially flourished, with many contributions at the time of the Norwegian election, but later fell into decline and its future is now uncertain. Understandably, the project focused largely on the technical construction of the site, taking for granted that underlying conceptions of democracy, participation and the political process were shared and well-understood, and that the discussion forum was a suitable and un-problematic communication infrastructure for the type of discourse envisaged. We set out to: (1) understand the nature of the discourse on the site, and (2) find out whether suggestions for design improvements could be made on the basis of that understanding.

The paper uses content and genre analysis to analyze the discourse at Democracy Square against a democracy model theoretical framework which is commonly used in the e-democracy literature. The contributions of citizens and politicians are publicly available on the web-site, and are here treated as a text suitable for hermeneutic analysis. The analysis shows that the two groups consistently display adherence to a different model of democracy, and that the genres that they use to communicate also reflect this difference. Generating suggestions for design improvements to the site based on this analysis is a non-trivial research task, because of the absence of models for this kind of work. Here we tentatively adopt the approach of matching web site features and technologies commonly used in these types of site, with the genres and democratic models identified in the analysis.

## 2 Models of Democracy

Democracy is an important topic in the field of political science. A common way of characterizing different forms of democracy is the 'democracy model.' Democracy models introduce coherent presentations of the characteristics of different democracy forms (which may either appear in practice, or be worked towards as ideal types). The models make it possible to compare different empirical situations, or different stakeholder perceptions. In this research, the models enable a theoretically based investigation of the expectation, motivations and interests of two stakeholder groups (citizens and politicians) taking part in web-facilitated politically oriented discourse.

Many different democracy models can be found. In a discursive deliberation model, (Eriksen and Weigård 1999) the importance of legitimising public action in an active communicative society is highlighted. In an aggregative democracy politics is the resolution of conflicting individual interests. Politicians are responsible for aggregating those interests as they occur via elections. (Eriksen and Weigård 1999). The role of participation has been highlighted in the participatory democracy model where equal rights can only be achieved in a participatory society which fosters a sense of political efficacy (Pateman 1970; Held 1996). A related model is the deliberative model (Lively 1975; Eriksen and Weigård 1999; Gimmler 2001). This theory highlights the role of open discussion, the importance of citizen participation, and the existence of a well-functioning public sphere. The models above are all founded on representative democracy, whereas the direct democracy model represents a radical alternative. In a direct democracy, network-based groups

and individuals take over the role of traditional institutions (Held 1996; Belamy 2000; Lynne 2004).

These models evolved as the individual projects of groups of societal commentators, and are therefore described in differing ways, making direct comparison difficult. However, a secondary literature analyses the different models and summarizes them according to shared characteristics—thus enabling comparison. Thus Held's (Held 1996) well-known ideal types comprise four historical models (Classical Athenian, Republicanism, Liberal and Direct Marxism) and four contemporary models (Competitive Elitist, Pluralism, Legal and Participatory). In the classical (Athenian) democracy citizens had political equality and were free to rule and be ruled in turn. Personal liberty was dependent on political participation in Republicanism, and the objective was to balance power between people, aristocracy and monarchy. Liberal democracy was characterised by a representative government. Citizens were involved as voters, as representatives at the local level and as participators in public debate. The last historical model, the direct-democracy model, highlights the importance of bringing power to the people. Decisions were justified by consensus (communism), or by frequent elections giving mandates to government personnel (socialism). Competitive elitism represent Held's first modern democracy model. Experts representing (or claiming to represent) different interests in society act in policy networks. These political experts represent the elite, who are intensively involved in the formation of policy and definition of public services. In a pluralism democracy, a competitive electoral system with at least two parties secures government by majority and political liberty. The political system balances between legislature, executive, judiciary and administrative bureaucracy. The majority principle protects individuals from arbitrary government in a legal democracy. Effective political leadership is guided by liberal principles, and there is a minimum of state intervention in civil society and private life. Lastly, in a participatory democracy equal rights are achieved through a participatory process where a knowledgeable citizenry takes sustained interest in the governing process.

Held's framework forms the background for theoretical work relating information and communication technologies (ICT) and forms of political organisation (so-called Digital Democracy). Thus van Dijk (van Dijk 2000) drops the obviously less relevant historical models, and analyses the role of ICT in relation to Held's four modern democracy models (Pluralist, Participatory, Legalist and Competitive Democracy). He considers the models to be primarily distinguished by (1) whether the primary goal of democracy is opinion forming or decision making, and (2) whether the primary means of democracy is through representatives, or directly enacted by citizens. He describes

four roles for ICT: allocation (one way distribution of information), consultation, registration (central collection of information including balloting) and conversation. He also adds a fifth model (libertarian) which emphasizes “autonomous politics by citizens in their own associations using the horizontal communication capabilities of the internet” (van Dijk 2000, p. 45).

A related, but simpler system of four democracy models is introduced by Bellamy (Bellamy 2000). Whereas van Dijk discusses the role of ICT as a supplement to traditional communication mechanisms, Bellamy adds a coherent post-Internet Democracy model (Cyberdemocracy) where the Internet no longer represents a supplement to traditional communication channels, but emerges as a crucial pre-condition for democracy. Bellamy’s scheme is therefore the most technologically up-to-date, and has the virtues of relative simplicity, and explicit relevance to the digital democracy debate. It has been used before for various analytical purposes in this literature (Hoff et al. 2003). Therefore Bellamy’s framework forms the basis for our quantitative content analysis.

The four Bellamy models (consumer, demo-elitist, neo-republican, cyber-democratic) serve as “logically coherent constructs abstracted from specific social settings or from competing political values” (Bellamy 2000, p. 33). They seek to “ground electronic democracy in a set of rival discourses connecting democratic values to technological change” (Bellamy 2000, p. 33). The Consumer model focuses on the role of citizens as consumers of public services, whilst accepting well-established features of democracy such as parliamentary institutions, elections and parties. The main democratic value is the legal right to services, and the model seeks to re-focus democracy around the efficient provision of these services: value for money. The input part of the parliamentary chain of command is assumed to be un-problematical, so the democratic process is centred on the feedback and control mechanisms which allow citizens to monitor and influence politicians (service organizers): freedom of choice, freedom of information, influence and complaints procedures. Competent consumers also need to be well-informed; implying an important role for information systems. Better informed citizens are able to play a more effective role in controlling the bureaucracy (service providers) and choosing the right (service efficient) representatives. However citizen consumers limit their role in the democratic process to protecting their individual service entitlements and to voting. Politicians and administrators seek to legitimate their role as effective surveyors of consumer opinion and efficient service providers.

Demo-Elitist democracy also accepts traditional institutional features as the basis for democracy. Citizens’ main interests in life are again assumed to

lie outside serious politics, being focused on services and economic prosperity. This leads to the delegation of the political process to an elite of specialists and experts, whose task is to mediate conflicting interests and claims. Experts representing (or claiming to represent) different interests in society act in extended policy networks, forming the elite which is effectively involved in the formation of consensus, the articulation of policy and the defining of services. Such elites may easily become self-serving and self-replacing, in a clear degeneration of democracy (Hoff et al. 2003). Critical in the avoidance of such degeneration is openness and transparency in information. Information supply is vertical (for example between representatives and voters) and often uni-directional; that is the elite disseminate information to their different constituencies. Citizens primarily act by voting, whereas the elite seek to re-legitimize their position by displaying superior knowledge and abilities

Neo-Republican democracy focuses on the quality of citizen's participation and involvement, drawing inspiration from the classical republican (Athenian) model and Habermas' notion of the public sphere, the rational domain of political discourse. Citizens are assumed to be active, especially at micro- and local levels, with their citizenship contributing both to the emancipation of the political arena and to their own moral, social and intellectual development (e.g. Held's Developmental model). The model is rooted in radical assumptions of shared social rights and responsibilities, where the revitalizing of civic spirit is a central objective. ICT facilitates an increased number of participants, higher quality discussion and social inclusion in decision-making—a kind of ICT-mediated virtual public sphere which is in stark contrast to traditional interpretations of mass media. In this model politicians and citizens have a shared interest in dialogues and discourse leading to the formation of political opinion, with politicians playing first a facilitating role in the dialogue and later the role of professional policy formulators and executors.

The Cyber-Democratic model represents the most radical change to traditional democratic institutions and features. Traditional institutions lose power and influence to network-based groups forging identities for alienated individuals across society, nation, race and class. This virtual society of networks is dependent on the use of the self-organizing internet communities. In this post-modern vision (or nightmare) of extended pluralism escaping the bounds of cultural hegemony, but struggling to retain social cohesion and collective political will, ICT is no longer a supplement to traditional communication channels, but a condition for democracy. Political discourse and decisions are localized, fragmented, virtual, but executed primarily by citizens, and power is decentralized away from traditional institutions.



<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Consumer</i>	<i>Demo-Elitist</i>	<i>Neo-Republican</i>	<i>Cyber-Democratic</i>
Dominant democratic value	Freedom of choice	Effectiveness	Deliberation and participation	Community, acceptance of diversity
Citizen's role	Voting for representatives, (less active between elections)	Voting for representatives, (less active between elections)	Active citizens as opinion formers.	Active citizens as decision makers
Central form of political participation	Choice of public services	Consensus, creation, lobbying	Public debate, associations	Virtual debate, virtual and real actions
Political nexus	Producer/consumer relation	Expert discourse	Public sphere, media	Electronic discussion (Internet)
Main political intermediary	Service declarations, consumption data	Negotiation and campaign institutions	Meetings, hearings (real and virtual)	Electronic networks, electronic communities
Typical ICT application	Websites, citizen cards, databases	Websites, mail, information systems, voter compasses	Geographically located and moderated discussion groups	Self-organized discussion groups (virtual communities)
Main objectives for the use of ICT	Disseminating high quality information to citizens	Supporting vertical relations, transparency	Quality of discussion and bi-directional information	Strengthening the essential network
Dominant political issues	Data security, privacy, service delivery	Re-legitimation and re-orientation of governance.	Increasing participation, improving the quality of discussions	Increasing political reflexivity competences and autonomy

Table 1: Emerging models of democracy for the information age: applications, issues and ambiguities (adapted from (Tops et al. 2000))

The characteristics of the different models are summarized in table 1 which is adapted from (Tops et al. 2000).

### 3 Democracy Square

The project was initiated by Kristiansand city, East- and West-Agder regional municipalities in southern Norway early spring 2003, with support from the Norwegian government. One of the authors was a member of the project team and attended the development meetings. The project document describes a background of falling voter participation, reduced involvement in political parties and diminished local self-governance. Internet, mails and text messages were seen as means to increase contact between politicians and electors. The communication process was assumed to be simplified and improved by not being dependent on direct synchronous communication. These technologies were intended to increase knowledge of political alternatives and thereby increase political engagement and strengthen local democracy. The project's objectives were to increase availability to information, democratic openness, and contact between citizens and politicians, and to improve citizens' engagement in the political process through ICT and web-technology. The target user groups for the project were citizens, especially young people, and politicians. A representative from a local software firm took part in the project group from the beginning, contributing knowledge of design and contracting issues. The software firm is one of the largest public sector suppliers in Norway and their head office is located in the project area. One of their focus areas is e-democracy software. The project group signed a contract for the development of the site with this firm without a formal call for tenders. The result was Democracy Square ([www.demokratitorget.no](http://www.demokratitorget.no)). The site offered links to the many local and national political parties, a (little used) notice board and some textual information about e-democracy, but its principle interest is the discussion board.

The forum was set up with 25 discussion categories reflecting subjects of expected local political interest (see figure 1). The categorisation was made by the developers in the software firm and later discussed in the project group. Contributors could initiate sub-threads in the categories. All users had to register; but aliases were permitted to disguise identity if desired, and politicians were asked to submit the name of their party (but not all of them do). There were no further checks of identity. The site opened on 20.08.03 and activity peaked at the local election on 15.09.03 declining to little or nothing thereafter. In the 26 days between the opening and the election 525 contributions were added whereas 68 contributions were made in the 269 day from the elections to the data-gathering ended (17.06.04). In the period of our survey (from 20.08.03 until 17.06.04) there were 593 contributions made by 102 contributors. Contributors posted on average 5,81 messages. Less than one out of three contributors (31 out of 102) was a politician, however the politicians were

The screenshot shows the website 'demokratitorget.no' for Kristiansand, Vest-Agder, and Aust-Agder. It features a navigation menu with 'Partiene og politikerne', 'Aktuelt nå', 'Om E demokrati', 'Diskuter!', and 'Om demokratitorget'. A 'Logg inn' (Log in) section is visible on the right with fields for E-post and Passord, and a 'Logg inn' button. Below the login section, there is a link for 'Glemt passord?' and a note about registration. The main content area is titled 'Kategorier:' and lists various topics such as 'Barnehager (1)', 'Ungdom generelt (8)', 'Omsorg (5)', etc. Below this is a section 'De 5 mest aktive diskusjoner' (The 5 most active discussions) with a table listing the most active discussions.

Opprettet	Navn	Innlegg	Siste innlegg
09.02.2004 kl 13:52	<a href="#">Kommunesammenslåing</a>	6	<a href="#">alfred fiermeros (27) Når får vi sammenslåing?</a>
31.10.2003 kl 13:31	<a href="#">Debattfora for Vest-Agder fylkeskommune</a>	2	<a href="#">Åse Birgitte Skjærli (26) alternativ energi</a>
13.10.2003 kl 12:18	<a href="#">Debattfora for Kristiansand kommune</a>	2	<a href="#">Ulf Sverre Andersen (43) Sv:Personvalg</a>
22.09.2003 kl 07:15	<a href="#">ETTER VALGET</a>	3	<a href="#">torstein vold (61) Sv: Krfr, et politisk parti?</a>
20.08.2003 kl 17:18	<a href="#">Økonomi og kommunale avgifter</a>	26	<a href="#">Ulf Sverre Andersen (43) Lanatidsbudsjett - NEI TIL ØKTE LÅN</a>

Figure 1. Categorization of the debates at the Democracy Square (www.demokratitorget.no)

most active; half of the contributions were posted by this group (294 out of 593). Males represent 65% of users, while 46% were below 30 years old. Contributors used the 24/7 aspect of the forum, and many entries were posted whilst the majority of Norway's population were asleep.

The politically themed debates mainly concerned issues of local and national interest, but one discussion targeted democracy and the internet itself. Contributors agreed that dialog was important, but one very early commentator neatly summed up one of the forum's dilemmas:

I agree with Esben that dialog is important. However there will be a problem if it turns out that the political candidates don't take it (Democracy Square) seriously, but just consider it a kind of exercise in democracy. (Nickname 15-08-03) (all quotations are translated from the original Norwegian)

Some of the early debate in this forum concerned the practical operation of the forum, both at the technical level (some complaints about navigation speed) and at the level of use policy and social convention. One contributor was

enraged that some of his critical comments were posted but never displayed – he assumed they had been censored. The board moderators denied this (while retaining the right to censor ‘inappropriate’ material). It remained unclear what happened to the offending messages. An etiquette question arose over the question of how challenging, rude or offensive a contribution could be, and many contributions tried to impose limits - often replying to an offender with a direct reference to those limits:

I can't really say that I appreciate your way of making your point, but ... (Full name (Progress party), 20-08-03)

A convention that was built into the site, along with hierarchical threads, was the question and answer principle. A direct response to an earlier contribution was labelled ‘Answer’ by the software irrespective of its actual role in the dialogue. Contributors took up this principle and formulated many of their postings in this form; however using it for many different ends: sometimes to encourage new contributions, sometimes to change the subject, sometimes to close down an uncomfortable subject. A further difficulty was getting the right people to participate, with various contributors complaining about the absence of: politicians in general, contributors from one particular region, the young, and the more senior elected local politicians.

The project was evaluated in the autumn of 2003. The decision-makers seemed generally to believe in the future and potential of the site; but at the end of August 2004 the discussion board was suspended because of inadequate usage. It is at present unclear whether the site will be developed further.

## 4 Research Method

Entries in Democracy Square are exclusively textual and in principle form a document which can be analyzed by any recognized form of textual analysis. In addition the contributions show many of the characteristics of conversation, such as question and answer, thematic grouping, ordering, and obvious conversational devices such as reference to the previous contribution and changing the subject. The text is therefore suited to qualitative analysis within a philosophical framework of hermeneutics, and genre analysis. Foucauldian discourse analysis, deconstruction (Derrida 1982), semiotics, document analysis, and conversation analysis are suitable candidate analysis methods. Klein and Myers (1999) set out the principles of interpretive research (based on hermeneutics) as: the hermeneutic circle, contextualization, interaction between researchers and subjects, abstraction and generalization, dialogical reasoning, multiple interpretation and suspicion. These principles (with the exception of

interaction between researchers and subjects which is not available in text-based analysis) form the basis for our qualitative analysis. Content analysis (Berelson 1952; Silverman 2001) is chosen as the analysis method because the theoretical model outlined above offers clear initial analysis categories. However, in the analysis of the Democracy Square document, many other considerations relevant to the other forms of qualitative analysis are also taken into consideration. For instance the web-site has many genre-like features which concern its purpose, visibility, the structure of the contributions, the organisation of thematic threads and the question and answer form of individual contributions. Web-sites can be analysed as genres, and genre is known to be particularly important in the evolution and design of web sites (Crowston and Willams 2000). The discourse is not independent of its meta-discourse (Alveson and Karreman 2000), but relates to the wider political discourse in Norway, and knowledge of the wider debate (such as the knowledge that a particular party has no realistic chance of attaining any political power) also colours the interpretation of contributions. Many observable features of formalized conversations in political discourse (the political interview, for instance) can also be found in the document, and recognized by relation to the hermeneutic whole or context.

In this study quantitative content analysis based on categories derived from Bellamy's democracy models is primarily used to analyze the purposes and interests of citizens and politicians, whereas a more grounded approach using qualitative content analysis and genre analysis is used to study the communication forms in which these purposes and interests are expressed. Suggestions for site design improvements are generated by a process of matching web technologies (derived from the relevant literature and study of relevant sites) to resulting genres.

## 4.1 Content Analysis

Content analysis provides "a relatively systematically and comprehensive summary or overview of the dataset as a whole" (Wilkinson 1997, p. 182). It operates by observing repeating themes, and categorizing them using a coding system. Categories can be elicited in a grounded way (built up from the data) or come from some external source (in this case a theoretical model). Simple quantitative content analysis produces counts of the respective frequency of occurrence of the categories, with the inference that higher counts imply some form of significance. Since these simple counting methods divorce occurrences from their context, much information relevant to the interpretation of the source material is inevitably lost. This can be somewhat rectified by add-

ing qualitative content analysis (Wilkinson 1997): a form of discourse analysis where the thematic categories are studied in their location in the source text, where the addition of context can help to identify additional relevant factors such as irony and sub-textual meanings

## 4.2 Genre Analysis

A genre is “a recognizable communicative event, characterized by a set of communicative purposes identified and mutually understood by the members of the community in which it regularly occurs” (Bhatia 1993, p. 13). Genres are patterns of communicative acts (such as a menu in a restaurant) sharing similarities of structure, content, style, intended audience, purpose, form and functionality. They have genre rules which are socially decided and enacted, often without the participants being conscious of them (Yates and Orlikowski 1992). Digital or cyber genres can also be observed (home page, digital newspaper). Genre analysis is a form of discourse analysis where genres and sub genres are identified and their characteristics, relationship and evolution described, often with a communications, media, linguistic, sociological or psychological backdrop.

## 4.3 Data Collection

The document analyzed represents the complete set of contributions to the discussion forum (Demokratitorget, 2004) from its launch in 20.08.03 to the data-capture date 17.06.04. Discussion forum contributions were pasted into a Word document in such a way as to maintain all the visible data and the thematic ordering.

## 4.4 Data Analysis Strategy

The thematic analysis of the data was performed using ATLAS.ti®, a conventional qualitative analysis tool. The analysis took two approaches, one theoretical, one grounded. In the theoretical analysis, the text was analyzed against headings taken from Bellamy’s ‘Models of Democracy’ (table 1). The column ‘typical ICT application’ was ignored since the debate forum technology is known and the same. The forum contributors were divided into politicians and citizens. The principle purpose of this analysis is to discover which models of democracy underpin the forum discourse, and whether there are differences between politicians and citizens. Contributions or text passages typically

require some interpretation before they can be allocated to a category and this interpretation process is described so that it is open to inspection. Multiple allocations, i.e., allocation to more than one category, were allowed. Simple counts of frequency of the categories offer a measure of which democracy models predominate.

The grounded analysis is of a more qualitative character. Here we examined the text in detail, first for more specific textual evidence of adherence to the political models and second for repeating types of contributions and interactions. Since a debate board is a part of a wider discourse, it can be expected that the conventions and structures of the wider discourse be at least partly adopted, and it is well understood that patterns and structures can be observed such discourse. These are often analyzed at the level of register, grammar, rhetoric or interaction (Bhatia 1993); however we choose to describe the repeating patterns as mini-genres. Mini-genres were here derived in a grounded manner from the text (rather than from a theoretical source), giving the opportunity for a more qualitative style of detailed analysis designed to display important features of the interaction. The resultant genres were then iteratively used as thematic categories and the text recoded, so that their frequency could also be counted. Since the genres themselves can also be related to the democracy models, this analysis both triangulates the earlier theoretical analysis, and exposes some more detailed ways in which the interactions operate.

## 5 The Debate at Democracy Square

### 5.1 Quantitative Content Analysis

In the time period studied, 593 contributions were posted to Democracy Square, organized into 147 different debates and made by 102 different authors. The quantitative part of the analysis sorts the contributions first by whether they are made by politicians (not all of the politicians identified themselves as such and some were identified by the researchers through contextual references) or citizens. The contributions are then sorted by which of the democracy models the contribution best relates to (each of the squares in the theoretical table is allotted a code). This requires some interpretation on the part of the researchers, because the contributors themselves do not refer directly to democracy models. Multiple coding for the same contribution was allowed if it significantly changed focus. To illustrate the categorization process, two contributions and how they are interpreted are presented in Table 2. In

the interpretation, the main focus is on distinguishing between democracy models, illustrated by the columns in table 3. Distinguishing between democracy model characteristics (the rows) proved to be difficult, both because of the multi-faceted nature of the contributions and the degree of interpretation required, and because of lack of precision in Bellamy's framework. The illustrative examples in table 2 also reveal difficulties in dividing contributions into precise cells. From our point of view, however, focus on the interests and motivations of contributors and aggregate democracy models is sufficient to

<i>Contribution</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>	<i>Coding</i>
"This is one of the very few forums where each voter has the opportunity to ask critical questions and get answers from the politicians in the municipality. If Democracy is to survive, it is important that electors engaged themselves in important issues and use their power in elections instead of being disenfranchised by not using their right to vote (Politician, full name and party)"	Focus on the citizen-politician connection with questions and answers. However the citizens are asking the questions, and the specialist/expert politicians have the answers. Citizens' primary task is confined to voting and thereby indirectly influencing politics. Citizen engagement is seen as the route to participation in elections	Demo-Elitist: Citizens role and form of Political participation
"I think all Norwegian citizens should have free medical, dental and other necessary health care in Norway (cosmetic or other prosperity things should be paid for. This will obviously cost money and should be introduced gradually. We'll start with free for everyone under 20 and over 65 (more suggestions for the organisation and introduction of free health care)" (Citizen, given name)"	Suggestions for socialite improvements from a citizen expressed in debate forum. Implied desire to engage in political process and influence decision-making through agenda-setting and idea generation. Implication that public debate forums are an important part of political process and political opinion forming.	Neo-Republican: Political participation

Table 2: Examples of coding

further the study (this also means that there is no particular significance to blank cells in the analysis in table 3). All conclusions drawn from the quantitative analysis are based on the democracy model level, and qualitative content analysis is introduced for interpretations at a more detailed level.

In table 3, the contributions are sorted according to Bellamy's (Bellamy, 2000) models of democracy.



<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Consumer</i>		<i>Demo-Elitist</i>		<i>Neo-Republican</i>		<i>Cyber-Democratic</i>	
	<i>Politician</i>	<i>Citizen</i>	<i>Politician</i>	<i>Citizen</i>	<i>Politician</i>	<i>Citizen</i>	<i>Politician</i>	<i>Citizen</i>
<i>Democratic value</i>	0	0	23	18	3	6	0	0
<i>Citizen's role</i>	0	1	7	2	0	2	0	0
<i>Form of political participation</i>	0	1	76	8	65	260	0	0
<i>Political nexus</i>	1	1	133	37	1	4	0	0
<i>Main political intermediary</i>	18	7	2	0	2	3	0	0
<i>Main objectives for use of ICT</i>	6	2	7	2	8	5	0	0
<i>Dominant political issues</i>	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	2
<b><i>Sum: contribution</i></b>	<b>26</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>250</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>280</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>

Table 3: Contributions to the discussion board classified by models of democracy

The analysis shows that the Cyber-Democratic model is hardly represented in the forum, and the Consumer model also attracts little support. Politicians overwhelmingly adopt the Demo-Elitist model, whereas citizens overwhelmingly adopt the Neo-Republican model. A majority (133) of the politicians' contributions are coded under "political nexus" indicating that they relate to an expert discourse, in which political decision-making is carried out by the elite; a majority of the citizens' contributions (260) are coded under "form of political participation" indicating that they hope to contribute to the political debate as opinion-formers.

## 5.2 Qualitative Content Analysis

In this analysis the debate text is studied in more detail. Questions of structure, tone, style, intended audience, relation to context (particularly the text's position in relation to the question/answer debate form) are investigated with a focus on the citizen/politician relationship and the tension revealed in the previous quantitative analysis.

### Excerpt 1

*Ans(wer) Is there anything that works in Kristiansand?*

*Date: 04-09-03, 07:38*

*Author: (nickname)*

*(nickname) thinks:*

*Policing doesn't work in Kristiansand, Technical Service doesn't work in Kristiansand, Environmental Health (the health municipality) doesn't work in Kristiansand and the minor civil court doesn't work in Kristiansand, just to name a few things. Therefore yours truly isn't a bit surprised to find that demokratitorget doesn't work either, that could even be the point, that it's not supposed to work. Kristiansand municipality must be one of the biggest sheltered workshops in the country, in my opinion. My suggestion: vote against the present leader of Kristiansand (named politician), Conservative. She has shown herself unfit for the job in my opinion, let's look for new talent. (Named politician) is only interested in (named politician), that's fine in other contexts, but not for a city leader? Those of us unlucky enough to live in Kristiansand deserve someone better than (named politician) and the conservatives! Use Your Votes! yours (nickname)*

*Ans (wer)There's a lot that works in Kristiansand*

*Date: 04-09-03, 08:53*

*Author:(name given) (Conservative)*

*(name given) thinks:*

*Nursery schools work in Kristiansand. During the last five years, the Conservatives have helped set up about 500 new nursery school places in the town. Kristiansand now has full nursery coverage. We also plan to built a further 600 places in the next term. Schools work in Kristiansand. Kristiansand tops the country in school investments. During the last 4 years we invested about 500 million crowns. A further 700 million crowns are earmarked in the budget up to 2006. Sports work in Kristiansand. (Other things that work in Kristiansand with examples of what the Conservatives have done). These work in any case, just to name a few. I can name many more. The Conservatives have governed Kristiansand for many years. In this period, Kristiansand has grown to be one of the country's largest, and I would say, best cities. Those of us living in Kristiansand are lucky. I think most people agree with this! There's no reason to change something that's working and will build an even better city. (Named politician) has without doubt been a benefit for Kristiansand, and nobody should be in doubt that it is the people of the city, and only the people of the city she is interested in.*

**Analysis, Excerpt 1: Challenge and Riposte:** Here a citizen (whose identity is concealed behind an alias) makes a wide-ranging attack against the govern-

ing political party. The basis of the attacks is subjective experience (“in my opinion”), and no supporting facts, arguments or evidence are offered. The tone is cynical (suggesting a conspiracy theory type policy towards Democracy Square) and disrespectful towards politicians, even aggressive. There is a personal attack on a named politician (the municipality leader), on the basis of her personality rather than her policies. A repeating rhetorical device is used to focus attention (“doesn’t work”). Speech use is a little colloquial and a few punctuation mistakes suggest limited education. The contributor addresses fellow citizens (not politicians) as if from a podium at a rally, making a speech rather than seeking information or raising a subject for debate. The intention is clearly to affect voting in the coming election.

The Conservative politician rebuts the attack point for point, echoing the rhetorical devices, but turning them to his advantage, and following exactly the structure of the citizen’s contribution. However, the politician adds facts and statistics to his arguments, indicating that the rebuttal is reasoned and factual (thus emphasising both his status as expert and the subjective nature of the attack). The politician writes more formally and correctly in style, picking up the devices of the attacker, but using each of them subtly better to demonstrate intellectual or literary superiority—membership of the elite. The rhetorical devices of the attacker are thus turned against him. The politician ignores any substance behind the argument (whether the police and technical services are actually working), and shows no evidence of considering seriously the attacker’s position or altering his own opinions. The challenge is simply rebutted.

## Excerpt 2

*Most people are concerned about*

*Date: 21-08-03, 04:52*

*Author: (name given) (Coast party)*

*(name given) thinks:*

*having enough nursery school places: Most families with small children have no chance of surviving on one income (despite the fantastic cashhelp) even if they wanted to. Cashhelp hasn’t made the choice of one parent staying home with the children easy for most people. We need more nursery school places, and we need prices that most can afford. The consequence is that municipality funds must be earmarked—at least for a period. The Coast Party is concerned to work for families. The Coast party focuses on the protection of the families. Children’s security and development are dependent on, amongst other things, that family finances are healthy enough for parents to manage their commit-*

*ments. Greetings. (first name) (Nr X candidate, Coast party to the regional municipality in East Agder)*

**Analysis, Excerpt 2: Political Manifesto:** A politician initiates a debate about a possible vote-winning issue. The politician stresses her political affiliation (the Coast party is a small local party with real little hope of winning the election), at the end of her contribution (though affiliations are already signalled in the author field). She also speaks in the name of the party (“the coast party is concerned...”), giving the party’s stance on the issue and their policy if elected (earmarking funds). She emphasises her empathy with the voters through sarcasm (“fantastic cashhelp”) and uses a familiar greeting and her first name to sign off. Although the contribution starts a new debate, there is no request for information, question, or invitation to others to contribute, and the contribution is clearly aimed at the audience of voters.

### **Excerpt 3**

*Date 24-08-03, 01:54*

*Author: (name given 1) (politician Christian Peoples Party)*

*(Name given 1) thinks:*

*Statnett is planning a big cable connection to England. That interests us in Agder because we have lost our European cable connection. More foreign cable connections will clearly benefit the supply situation in the long run, even if it doesn't solve next years' energy needs. But a relevant question from us in Sørlandet (name of the region) is why lay a 600 km long cable from Vestlandet (name of another region) to England when the distance to Denmark is a fifth, 120 km? That doesn't mean the price will be a fifth, but probably significantly cheaper, with a correspondingly lower net rental. (continues with details of latest regional energy net developments and plans, analysis of previous energy supply problems, possible connection points in Denmark and pollution consequences)*

*Ans(wer): Energy cable to and from foreign countries.*

*Date: 27-08-03, 10:33*

*Author: (name given 2) (politician, Centre Party)*

*(Name given 2) thinks:*

*The energy world is difficult to understand. My question to (name given 1) is: could Norway become a net exporter of energy? My experience is that Denmark runs its energy plants full out so that we can buy energy from them at a cheap time of day. So can coal-fired electricity be used to pump out own 'water power' up again in the cylinders to give clean electricity the next morning. Then coal-fired electronic power can be used to pump our own 'water power'*

*back into the water magazine once again in order to give clean electronic energy the next morning. Greetings (name given 2) Centre Party*

*Ans (wer): Use gas as well as water power in Norway!*

*Date: 31-08-03, 11:18*

*Author: (name given 3) (politician Labour Party)*

*(Name given 3) thinks:*

*The debate about power/energy supply can be approached from many angles. (Name given 1) brings up building small water power stations and talks about a cable to Denmark I'm surprised that when the environment is considered gas isn't mentioned, but only coal-fired energy in Europe.....which mean that we suffer the pollution effects. In Germany...(continues with discussion of German gas-fired plants and recommends similar policy for exploitation of Norwegian gas reserves) Have a good election: (name given 3) nr. 7 AP's list*

*(Two more contributions from same contributors with statistics of power production and technical details)*

**Analysis, Excerpt 3: Rational Issue Debate:** Three politicians debate an issue. The debate is entirely factual, displaying extensive knowledge of both Norwegian and foreign energy policies, and relying on many examples, facts and statistics. Political name-calling or in-fighting is avoided, with the politicians referring to each other politely, even in a friendly way (“have a good election”) by name. Logical argumentation is emphasised, with the contributors summarising and developing each others points. The style is measured and considered, even polished. The conversation resembles a rather learned debate, but since the forum is rather an inefficient way of conducting such a conversation, it may be better to assume that the politicians are showing off their skills as specialists and experts in front of an audience of potential voters. The citizens do not join in the debate—possibly because the entry level is high and those without statistics are liable to look ignorant.

#### **Excerpt 4**

*Date: 19-08-03, 05:44*

*Author (name given 1)*

*(name given) thinks:*

*Shouldn't someone do something for the many students with a technical education that can't get an apprenticeship because there aren't enough places for everyone????*

*Ans(wer): apprenticeships*

*Date: 20-08-03, 07:14*

*Author: (Name given 2) (Coast Party)*

*(Name given 2) thinks:*

*The intake of apprentices is first and foremost dependent on the situation in the job market. The politician's role should be to plan. In the building sector where I work, we have for some years had difficulties finding enough apprentices from the technical courses. In these times there is no need to encourage firms to accept apprentices. The situation was different in the first half of the 90's – there was a depression and few available apprenticeships. When this is the picture, politicians must priorities enough resources to stimulate the intake of apprentices. My personal experience.....(some more details and conclusions). Yours (first name) (Nr.(X).candidate Coast Party West-Agder)*

*Ans(wer): apprenticeships*

*Date: 20-08-03, 10:39*

*Author: (name given 3) (Centre Party)*

*(name given 3) thinks:*

*I agree that it's wrong that there aren't enough apprenticeships. Vest Agder municipality, who together with the business community are responsible for these workplaces are actually the best in the country when it comes to available apprenticeships. One can likewise say at there ought to be an apprenticeship for everyone that needs one. It seems some businesses don't priorities it highly enough. It would probably help if the students pressurised the businesses they know to set up apprenticeships. In the last resort it's the politicians' responsibility and they should get their fingers out.*

*Yours (name given 3), Nr.(X).candidate Kristiansand Centre Party.*

Two more contributions from a citizen expanding the debate and encouraging name given 3 to take action ('get your finger out')

**Analysis, excerpt 4: Respectful Question and Answer:** This excerpt takes the form of a question posed in a polite way by a citizen. The question is agenda setting for the politicians, still contains an element of critique with its slightly exaggerated question form and multiple question marks (“shouldn't anyone.....????”), but is not overtly aggressive. It invites responses both from citizens and politicians. The politicians who reply adopt the demo-elitist expert tone (but without displaying or showing off so much) and focus on the issue which they also clearly consider important and accept responsibility for. They also sign with their political affiliations and make political points (“.....best in the country”), but without crowding the debate with party political competition. Citizens are not excluded and also take part in the debate. Contributions leave the debate open rather than trying to close it down. “Name given 3” is an established politician likely to be re-elected (and the last contri-

bution targets him as the politician who should take action), so it is also likely that the debate has contributed in some degree to political opinion forming and decision-making, and to future engagement of the neo-republican citizens involved.

#### **Excerpt 5**

*Date:* 07-09-03, 12:28

*Author:* (name given)

(name given) *thinks:*

*Care for the weakest in society has shown itself to vary more and more between municipalities. The group I know best is handicapped children, since I myself have a handicapped daughter. Families end up moving to a different municipality more and more often to get a care offer that is satisfactory or acceptable. This is a painful experience that underlines that your child isn't 'economic'. Kristiansand county, where I live, is at the moment, a municipality that such families like to move TO. The question is whether it is really OK that a municipality tries to avoid responsibility for children that, from birth, aren't 'economic', and in this way forces families to move to a more responsible municipality.*

No further contributions

**Analysis, Excerpt 5: Unanswered Question:** Here a citizen initiates a debate on a sensitive topic. The citizen gives his name, rather than choosing to use an alias. He clearly speaks from personal experience, making him a kind of expert in the field, but is restrained in his descriptions, making no accusations or judgments (though the judgements are implied) and speaking with dignity about what is clearly painful and difficult in his life. He carefully generalizes the problem to a group of families, thus avoiding an over-emotional statement about his own situation (which is easy to dismiss), and becoming the spokesman for a group of parents. He respectfully sticks to the debate question and answer format, formally posing a question (“is it really OK.....?”) for others to respond to, though making it clear what his position is. The question becomes, however a rhetorical question which it is hard to reply ‘yes’ to. The issue is familiar to everyone who lives in a developed welfare society, and clearly a real political difficulty worthy of discussion, pointing at the tension between the two political duties of care and financial accountability. However it attracts no further contributions. Perhaps the citizens feel that the issue is already well-expressed, and they risk interfering with a personal sorrow, perhaps the politicians feel that the issue is a hot-potato, a no-win situation where they can never be the expert in relation to the contributor’s personal experi-

<i>Genre name</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Principal democracy model</i>	<i>Example</i>	<i>Occurrence</i>
The Challenge and Riposte	Criticism of, or concern about political events, decisions or persons voiced by citizens who express their opinions using a challenging, sometimes aggressive tone. The expressed opinion is often followed by a more or less controversial, sometimes rhetorical question. Politicians rebut or deny the criticism using rational argument and factual examples (emphasising their role as elite/specialists). In addition they often comment on the citizens' tone – suggesting that it should be more reasoned, un-emotional, concrete or factual. They often try to close the debate, offering no questions or invitations for further suggestions.	Citizens: Neo-Republican Politicians: Demo-Elitist	Excerpt 1	303
The Political Manifesto	Politicians act as explicit spokespersons for their party, giving the party's message for the solution to a political problem or debate. No invitation to continue the debate is offered, and the debate often closes.	Demo-Elitist	Excerpt 2	96
The Rational Issue Debate	Politicians discuss an issue (as if in front of an audience of citizens). The tone is rational, using reasoned argument, and introduces many factual examples and expert knowledge (effectively excluding the average citizen). The politicians refer to each other's points and political affiliations, using first names, giving the impression of an elite club.	Demo-Elitist	Excerpt 3	80

Table 4: Genres in the debate forum: characteristics and frequency of occurrence



The Respectful Question and Answer	Citizens generate questions about issues of concern (agenda setting) but use a respectful tone which acknowledges the expert status of the politician. The politicians reply in a factual way. The answer often includes a description of what the party has done or will do to fix the problem. This genre can also be framed the other way round, with politicians asking for information or opinions from citizens in order to help frame their (expert) judgments.	Citizens: Neo-Republican  Politicians: Demo-Elitist	Excerpt 4	48
The Unanswered Question	A citizen formulates a (respectful) question in order to set an issue (which they consider important) on the agenda, but no politician comes forward to answer it, and the debate ends.	Neo-Republican	Excerpt 5	23

Table 4: Genres in the debate forum: characteristics and frequency of occurrence

ence and whatever they respond is liable to be interpreted negatively. Or perhaps nobody saw the contribution.

The excerpts discussed in the previous section are representative of their type in the text, and illustrate the next analysis, where mini-genres of contributions are inductively derived from the qualitative analysis, and then used as categories in the re-coding of the text. These genre categories are counted to give a rough indication of their significance in the text, and their relationship to the democracy models highlighted in table 4.

It can be seen that the genres identified in this analysis can be seen to further the differing interests of politicians and citizens in different ways. These interests can also be related to the original democracy models. Demo-elitist interests of politicians are supported by political manifestos and rational issue debates, neo-republican interests of citizens by unanswered questions, but not necessarily in ways which are particularly productive for the evolution and engagement of the community as a whole. Challenge and ripostes were predominant, but here the differing interests seemed mainly to conflict, frequently leading to termination of the debate. Only in the respectful question and answer debates could both democratic models find sufficient common ground to serve the ends of both groups.

## 6 Discussion: Design Considerations for Democracy Square

At Democracy Square, notes from the project meetings suggest that the project and design team shared an uncritical enthusiasm for the new-internet-mediated political meeting place which might be characterised as cyber-democratic (however we made no formal analysis here, and lack sufficient evidence to demonstrate this). They imposed only a minimal structure upon the discussion board and assumed that the virtual community would (first) come to the site, and (second) self-organise into effective discussion forums communicating in meaningful ways and contributing in some effective way to the political process, perhaps also contributing to changing that process. However, several factors suggest that Democracy Square is not an unqualified success. Since the election, activity at the site has been limited, with many discussions fizzling out in unanswered questions, and the discussion board is now suspended. There can be many factors affecting the success or failure of on-line communities, including marketing, the existence of competing sites, the achievement of critical mass, and the funding model. In addition it may be natural to expect a cyclical pattern of higher participation around election times. However, in this section we focus on site design issues; asking the question “how can the site be improved through the insights delivered by in the preceding analysis?” We first summarize the analysis conclusions, then point at the underlying design problem, and finally discuss some design suggestions for the site.

### 6.1 Analysis Conclusions

Our democracy model analysis of the discourse at Democracy Square raises a problem for the design and management of on-line political communities. The problem could broadly be described as a conflict of interest between politicians and citizens. Politicians’ demo-elitist interests can be described as demonstrating their specialist/elite abilities through rational argumentation to a broad range of voters in order to be (re)elected. Citizens neo-republican interests can be described as engaging politicians in discourse in order to set agendas and influence political decision making, as well as affecting the result of elections. It seems possible, (without having conducted any study to investigate) that such a conflict of interest between politicians and politically active citizens is both a persistent and widespread feature of western style democratic discourse, which is unlikely to be changed in the near future by the emergence of the internet.

If democracy model analysis helps to establish the nature of the political discourse at Democracy Square, then genre analysis establishes that the communicative interactions of politicians and citizens are not random, but fall into identifiable repeating patterns (which can also be related to genres in the wider political discourse). The different interests of politicians and citizens are enacted through these patterned communicative interactions. Many of the conversations at Democracy Square could be analyzed as partly or wholly unsatisfactory (not successfully promoting their interest) for one group or for both. In challenge and riposte conversations (the most extensively apparent genre), the citizen tries to influence the political agenda but is simply rebutted by the politician. The citizen's aim is clearly not achieved, but the politician's argument is unlikely to impress the challenger, and it is very unclear whether there is any larger audience of potential voters, so the politician is likely to end up equally dissatisfied. Political manifestos and rational issue debates serve politicians' demo-elitist ends, but do not engage citizens, and are therefore broadcast to small numbers of already committed voters. These type of contributions were typically made by less well-established politicians (or parties unlikely to be elected), presumably as a low cost (but low impact) type of campaigning. Unanswered questions typically raise citizens' issues for consideration in the political arena, but politicians do not choose to consider them. One genre where both sides seem at least partly to meet is in the respectful question and answer. Here citizens raise an issue of concern, but also bow to the politician's status as specialist/expert, allowing the politician to make a genuine attempt to remedy the problem or take the issue up for further consideration in the political arena. This genre (though a minority genre) seems to serve both politicians' and citizens' interests, and may genuinely contribute in a small way to the political process and the engagement of citizens in the manner that the project team envisaged.

## 6.2 The Design Problem

The next obvious question is whether such an understanding of the political discourse at Democracy Square can lead to better practice in the design and management of the site, and to the establishment of a thriving virtual political community. Such practice improvements would accommodate the democratic conflict, perhaps by offering better tailored possibilities for both sides to express their interests, and support communicative interaction genres which help the community to function well. Such a discussion has two interlinking components: (1) the design of the site, and (2) the development and management of the virtual community; however here we primarily focus on site

design. As discussed in the introduction, relating communication and discourse analysis to web-design is a non-trivial research problem, without much in the way of guidance, methodological help or prior research to help.

In the absence of reliable knowledge about the translation of democratic and genre understandings to software design, the suggestions that we make for design improvements will of necessity be exploratory.

### 6.3 Design Considerations

The relationship between the design of a discussion forum and the patterns of communicative interaction that the discussion forum mediates is not known. In the case of Democracy Square, we could hypothesize that *design features (forced categorization of users as politicians and citizens, structuring of all contributions as questions and answers) might contribute to the predominance of challenge and riposte type interactions, which leave users frustrated and contribute to the death of the forum.* However we would have to conduct another piece of research to discover how likely this was. Neither are we able to categorize some kinds of interactions as ‘good’ and others as ‘bad’ (though we suspect that interactions which serve the interests of neither citizens nor politicians are not very profitable), or suggest that one democracy model is preferable to another. Therefore the criterion we use for design modifications should simply be those of viability, critical mass and sustainability. Any design improvement which users are happy with, which leads to more users making more interactions, which therefore leads to continued support for the survival of the site, is desirable. Web technologies are extremely varied, and limited largely by imagination and cost, which means that it is possible to conceive of a wide range of features which could be used to develop Democracy Square. The principle we use to make design suggestions is to match web technology features with: (1) demo-elitist interests of politicians and neo-republican interests of citizens, and (2) identified mini genres. The web technologies are primarily derived from study of the digital democracy literature. This can lead to design improvement suggestions which can later be evaluated, costed and prioritized.

### 6.4 Design Suggestions for Democracy Square

Opportunities for development of the Democracy Square site are given in table 5. The suggested web features are taken from reports of similar sites in the literature and the examination of sites on the web. In each case the web-

feature is matched with the democracy model and genre that it could help to support.

Demo-Elitist features enhance politicians' ability to broadcast their messages and display their skills to multiple voters (broadcast and display). Neo-Republican features enhance citizens' capacity to exert influence in the political process, sometimes by enabling them to act together (join forces and pressurize). Some features are able to advance both groups' interests. Each of the suggestions is related to a mini-genre, facilitating discussion of the types of interaction users are engaging in, the strengths and weaknesses of those interaction types and strategies for developing the web-site to support particular types of interaction.

Though we are able to generate suggestions for improvements to Democracy Square by this analytical matching process, it's hard to further prioritise the suggestions. Many political, strategic and resource questions are involved which can better be resolved by the site's sponsors, developers and users.

## 7 Conclusions

In this article we set out to: (1) understand the nature of the discourse at Democracy Square, and (2) make suggestions for site design improvements on the basis of that understanding. To these ends we studied the contributions made to the political on-line forum Democracy Square, which were treated as a text and submitted to textual analysis. Whereas quantitative content analysis based on categories derived from Bellamy's democracy models offered us insight into the *purposes and interests* of citizens and politicians, a more grounded approach using qualitative content analysis and genre analysis allowed us to specify the *communication forms* in which these purposes and interests are expressed. The analysis showed that politicians usually adopted a Demo-Elitist model whereas citizens usually adopted a Neo-Republican model. Politicians set out to demonstrate their specialist/elite abilities through rational argumentation and to broadcast their policies to a broad range of voters in order to be (re)elected. Citizens engaged politicians in discourse in order to set agendas and influence political decision making. This basic conflict of viewpoints and interests was underlined by the analysis of the communication forms through qualitative content analysis, which revealed repeating mini-genres in the discourse: challenge and riposte, political manifesto, rational issue debate, respectful question and answer, and unanswered question. These mini-genres also reflected the different interests of citizens and politicians. Our commonsense heuristic suggests that these insights obtained by textual

and discourse analysis should help the design process (a communications medium should be designed in the light of the communications it enables), but we were unable to find good normative theory to help us with this particular design task. We adopted instead a matching process, where we supported stakeholder purposes and interests, and the communication forms they used (here represented by democratic models and mini-genres) with known technology features of political web-sites. This allowed us to generate possible design improvements for the site. The matching was an exploratory research process, which we were not able to take further without the involvement of the Democracy Square project members and sponsors.

The project group responsible for Democracy Square apparently (and understandably) took for granted that underlying conceptions of democracy, participation and the political process were shared and well-understood, and that the discussion forum was a suitable and un-problematic communication infrastructure for the type of discourse envisaged. Our analysis shows that this was not the case, and we suspect (but cannot demonstrate) that interests conflicts and difficulties with the communication forms are partly responsible for the decline in usage of the site. We also think that the site could be designed (and managed) differently, in a manner that allows both politicians and citizens to achieve their interests and purposes, and express them in communication forms which do not necessarily end in conflict or disillusion. We showed some of the technology features which could be employed to support different communication forms. Such interest conflicts between politicians and politically active citizens might be seen as reasonably fundamental to advanced democracies, and we would expect these kinds of research results to be generalisable and to be replicated in future studies. Neither is the advent of the Internet likely to change this relationship in the foreseeable future, even though Bellamy's cyber-democracy model envisages this possibility. This does not mean that democracy sites are doomed to failure any more than it means that the wider political discourse cannot function; however it does mean that naïve democracy site design which assumes that political debate will automatically flourish on the web is likely to run into problems. Scandinavian democracy site promoters need to acknowledge interest conflicts as something which should be explicitly attended to in the design and management of on-line communities. They need to accommodate (or square) both sets of interests.

The establishment of a well-functioning democratic virtual community has many aspects, but we chose to focus in this article on the design of the website. The implication of this research is that understanding of the democracy interests of different stakeholder groups, and the different genres they use to

Genre name: The Challenge and Riposte Principal democracy model: Demo-Elitist and Neo Republican		
<i>Web-features</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Literature source</i>
<i>Chat-rooms</i>	Chat-rooms encourage spontaneity, less formal and well-considered contributions than discussion threads.	(Hill and Hughes 1998; Docter et al. 1999)
<i>E-docket/ Dialogue system</i>	Focused docket (short summary) for particular timely political issues; facilitates easy review of discussion threads and attracts new stakeholders into debate.	(Aidemark 2003; Stanley and Weare 2004)
<i>Anti-campaign sites</i>	Under election anti-campaign sites may occur, spoofing real campaign sites. The tone is often less formal and more aggressive than in a regular discussion forum.	(Hurwitz 1999)
<i>Virtual petitions</i>	Citizens join forces at the forum to articulate a challenge or complaint which is harder for politicians to rebut.	(Macintosh 2004)
<i>On-line voting</i>	Voting- for instance on specific issues as the culmination of a debate, makes it harder for politicians to neglect citizen opinion.	(Borins 2002; Aidemark 2003; Grönlund 2003; Biasiotti and Nannucci 2004)
Genre name: The Political Manifesto Principal democracy model: Demo-Elitist		
<i>Web-features</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Literature source</i>
<i>Party websites</i>	Parties are able to express their opinion without being interrupted by other stakeholders.	(Heidar and Saglie 2003; Hoff et al. 2003)
<i>Inquiring information</i>	Adds the opportunity for a citizen to inquire political documents.	(Hurwitz 1999)
<i>Super-sites</i>	On-line different candidates can be presented and compared during/before an election.	(Hurwitz 1999)
<i>Voter Compasses</i>	Match citizen's preferences on an issue to the best-corresponding party or politician.	(not identified)
<i>Campaign sites</i>	Campaign sites may have e-mail feedback capabilities, polling mechanisms & fundraising forms etc.	(Hurwitz 1999; Borins 2002; Hoff et al. 2003)
<i>Web logging</i>	An online diary where politicians and citizens can express more personally their opinions.	(Macintosh et al. 2005)
<i>Politicians corner</i>	Introduction to an issue debate where each party sets out its position.	(Gross 2000)

Table 5: Opportunities for development of Democracy Square based on known web technology features

<i>Broadcast opportunity</i>	Any opportunity a politician has to deliver a message to multiple voters: home page, email lists, pop-up message and so on.	(not identified)
<i>City Halls</i>	Developing service-oriented interactive city halls, highlighting informing about services, access to information and the web.	(Riedel, Dresel et al. 1998; Ho and Ni 2004; Myles 2004)
Genre name: The Rational Issue Debate Principal democracy model: Demo-Elitist		
<i>Web-features</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Literature source</i>
<i>Round table discussions</i>	Introduction to an issue debate where each party set's out its one position.	(Stanley and Weare 2004)
<i>Broadcast meetings</i>	Provide on-line transmissions of meetings. It is also possible to add opportunities to interact via the web.	(Aidemark 2003)
Genre name: The Respectful Question and Answer Principal democracy model: Demo-Elitist and Neo Republican		
<i>Web-features</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Literature source</i>
<i>Develop Netiquette/ User agreements</i>	Discussion rules and etiquette need to be discussed and agreed by the users	(Jensen 2003; Stanley and Weare 2004)
<i>E-debates via mail and online posting</i>	Political debate focusing on a specific topic addressed to specific politicians through email. The content and tone may be more formal a chat room	(Aikens 1998)
<i>Citizen Panel</i>	New proposals/decisions are tested against the opinions of a citizen panel.	(Aidemark 2003)
<i>Contact information for politicians</i>	Information on how to get in touch to ask the politicians.	(not identified)
<i>Web-meetings with politicians</i>	Arrange meeting on-line with politicians. Citizens may pose questions beforehand or during the meeting and can have direct response to their questions	(Gross 2000)
Genre name: The Unanswered Question Principal democracy model: Neo Republican		
<i>Web-features</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Literature source</i>
<i>Directory for further action</i>	Add information on what to do and how to contact the right person when your issue is not adopted for debate, or not taken seriously.	(not identified)
<i>Identify who is responsible for responding</i>	By stipulating who's responsible for responding, users can increase pressure for an answer.	(not identified)

Table 5: Opportunities for development of Democracy Square based on known web technology features

express those interests in on-line political communities might help in more realistic and user-focused design and development of web-sites. This trans-



lates into a more general principle: the design of a communication medium should reflect the nature of the communication it supports. However translation of theoretically derived democracy, discourse and genre insights into concrete design suggestions is a non-trivial research problem. Web-site designers intuitively use democracy and genre understandings to help them in their work, but there is no commonly understood design method or principle to help with this. If analysis of discourse and communication can be used to support the design of communication-oriented websites, then how can this be done? Our exploratory research process raises more research questions that it answers. Which of the many available communications analysis methods are suitable? Is a theoretical foundation (e.g., democracy models) necessary, or can the analysis be grounded? How can it operate in a green field (new development) situation where there is no existing discourse to analyse? How can the link between analysis and design be made in a convincing way? How can theoretical styles of analysis be made accessible and useable for practitioners?

Despite these questions and reservations, we conclude that it is possible to use communications analysis to design more innovative democracy sites which explicitly support different interests and modes of expression, and will thus be attractive to users. However little is currently known about how this can be done, either theoretically or practically, and this will be the subject of future research. A wider research implication is that it might be possible to incorporate theoretical analysis, content analysis, and genre study iteratively into the design of internet mediated communication media.

We hope that this research agenda will further contribute to the development of well-functioning virtual political communities where different, but legitimate political interests can be accommodated - democracy squared.

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