
Escaping the Echo Chamber: Ideologically and Geographically Diverse Discussions about Politics

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Abstract

In the days and months following the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, everyone from peers to public figures like the President and the Pope called for unity and dialogue among diverse Americans. However, social and geographic barriers often prevent citizens from engaging in political conversations with those who have different perspectives. This brief paper explores the design of political discussions and introduces a variant of the Talkabout discussion platform to support synchronous, online small-group discussions about politics with diverse citizens. We share learnings from an initial deployment shortly after the 2016 U.S. Election and discuss opportunities for systems to support political dialogue.

Author Keywords

political engagement; peer learning; video discussions.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.3 [Group and Organization Interfaces]: Computer supported cooperative work

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Figure 1: Google Trends for the search term “echo chamber” at two different timescales. Within a 90-day window encompassing Election Day 2016, the search term hit its peak popularity on November 11, 3 days after the election (Top). Below, the trend graph for the same term since 2004.

Virtual town hall: Structured, small-group discussions on politics open to the public

In his farewell address on January 10, 2017, President Obama encouraged Americans to become more politically engaged, suggesting “If you’re tired of arguing with strangers on the internet, try to talk with one in real life.” His exhortation encouraged the creation of bonds and empathy in the wake of a divisive election. Are political discussions best conducted on the internet or offline? Among strangers or acquaintances?

The rise of the “echo chamber” effect poses a significant challenge to fostering political dialogue among individuals with diverse perspectives. The term, which refers to the tendency for the broadcast and social media that an individual consumes to reflect and reinforce their existing beliefs, entered the popular lexicon following the 2016 Presidential Election as a

Political affiliation	Homogeneous	Heterogeneous	
Familiarity	Strangers	Acquaintances	
Discussion Size	Pair	Group	
Location	Collocated	Distributed	
Temporality	Synchronous	Asynchronous	
Modality	Text	Videoconference	In-person
Moderation	Moderated	Unmoderated	Passively moderated
Structure	Free-form	Scaffolded	Highly Structured

Figure 2: Key dimensions of the political discussion design space. Many popular social media platforms such as Facebook and Reddit enable asynchronous, text-based communication, which can be prone to trolling and flaming. Political discussions on Talkabout (in green) take place through a more high-bandwidth channel, which may encourage more prosocial behavior between strangers.

means of explaining the election’s outcome (Figure 1). Two main factors mediate the echo chamber effect. First, geography strongly influences social ties: people tend to form homogeneous communities, which in turn affects engagement with diverse groups [5]. Second, social networks tend to reinforce one’s own beliefs [1]. How might we overcome the boundaries imposed by geography and social networks to promote political dialogue?

In an effort to build empathy and enable productive conversations between individuals who hold different political beliefs, we extended Talkabout (<https://talkaboutlearning.in/election>), a tool for coordinating and supporting small-group discussions over videoconference [3]. Originally designed for educational purposes, to date over 6,000 learners from more than two dozen online courses (MOOCs) have discussed topics ranging from social psychology to songwriting through the platform. This work presents the first attempt to offer a “general interest” discussion on Talkabout outside of the context of an online course.

A design space of political conversation

By repurposing the existing Talkabout infrastructure, we were able to capitalize on the widespread interest in politics following the election and rapidly prototype one approach for geographically and ideologically diverse discussions. In what follows, we explore several of the key design dimensions for promoting political dialogue (Figure 2) and discuss how they relate to the affordances of Talkabout’s design.

Familiarity & political affiliation: Optimizing for diversity

The degree to which discussion partners are familiar with one another has implications not just on the

Confirm Session

Thanks for joining a discussion

Mark your calendar! You've signed up for the discussion on
Friday, January 20 at 6:30 am in Pacific Time (US & Canada) (PST)

Made a mistake? Go back and [change discussion session](#)

What political point of view will you represent in your discussion group?

Liberal Conservative
 Independent or Other

We use this information to try and form more balanced groups

Talkabout Discussion Pledge

Here are the ground rules for Talkabout discussions. We ask everyone who participates to agree to these guidelines so the conversation is engaging.

Keep an open mind I will listen to what my peers have to say and assume everyone has good intentions.

Share, don't convince I will express my thoughts in a way that seeks to build understanding rather than to criticize or convince others of my opinion.

Be good I will show respect, kindness, and tolerance towards my discussion partners, even if the beliefs they express differ from my own.

Get ready for your discussion

Talking about politics can be tough, especially when speaking with those who hold different perspectives than your own. Before your discussion, please take the time to watch the following thought-provoking animated video on the importance of empathy and the power of "outrospection."

Preview discussion questions

Here are some suggested discussion topics to guide your conversation. No need to discuss every question on this agenda! You and your group can decide what to focus on in the moment. This guide will be displayed within your Hangout, so feel free to use these questions or bring up new ones of your own.

Introductions

- In less than a minute, share a bit with the group about who you are and where you are from. Focus on the personal and avoid rather than the political. There will be plenty of time for politics later in the discussion. As your discussion partners share their stories of their background and personal histories, picture yourself in their shoes. What would it be like to experience life through their perspective?

Your views on the candidates

- What candidate did you support in this election, and what was the top reason you supported that candidate? Why was that reason so important to you?
- What is something that you don't like about the candidate you voted for?

Figure 3a - 3d: Upon enrolling, the system guides participants through a series of steps to prepare them for discussion. From top to bottom, participants (a) indicate the political preference they plan to represent, (b) agree to a discussion pledge, (c) watch a brief video on empathy and perspective taking, (d) preview the discussion topics

dynamics of political conversations, but also on the perspectives represented.

Familiarity influences trust and rapport. Individuals who know each other may enter the conversation with more trust towards their discussion partners than those talking with strangers. However, this sense of connection among familiar discussion partners may also restrict the dialogue in critical ways. Individuals might withhold their beliefs for the sake of preserving a relationship [7]. While discussion groups comprised of strangers might lack initial rapport, such discussions may enable participants to freely share their perspectives without fear of retribution.

Relying upon personal connections often limits exposure to diverse political perspectives. Prior to the election, 47% of Clinton supporters and 31% of Trump supporters indicated that they had no close friends who supported the other candidate [6]. Those findings are consistent with a 2015 Facebook study, which found that the platform shows partisan users content that is mostly consistent with their political beliefs [1]. Taken together, this suggests that social networks (whether in person or online) may be an insufficient source of ideological diversity.

Talkabout leverages the particular affordances of video discussion by optimizing for political diversity within groups. Upon signing up for a discussion time, Talkabout asks the participant to indicate whether they will represent a "Liberal," "Conservative," or "Independent or Other" point of view in their discussion (Figure 3a). If an individual does not indicate their political leaning upon signing up for a discussion, the platform considers them as "Independent or Other."

The group assignment algorithm ensures that each discussion group is composed of individuals with diverse political leanings. Since there are no restrictions on or guarantees about how many participants of each political leaning will sign up for and attend a discussion, the pool of potential discussion participants may be imbalanced. Election discussions on Talkabout maximize the diversity of perspectives by forming small groups with political representation that is roughly proportional to the overall political representation of participants who signed up overall.

Discussion size: Small-group dynamics potentially self-regulate and allow different degrees of engagement

One-on-one conversations may encourage a more balanced dynamic in which each individual has equal opportunity to voice their viewpoints. In contrast, group settings run the risk that individuals feel singled out if they hold a minority opinion. At the same time, small-group discussions may self-regulate; the presence of peer observers in a conversation could serve to inhibit anti-social behavior. Small-group discussions also enable a more lightweight form of interaction in which individuals can act as "spectators" rather than active participants [3].

On Talkabout, anyone can register for a discussion about the election. Though discussions take place in small groups over Google Hangouts, each discussion time has an infinite sign-up capacity. When a participant returns to the platform at their scheduled discussion time, the system assigns them in real-time to a Google Hangout with up to six others.

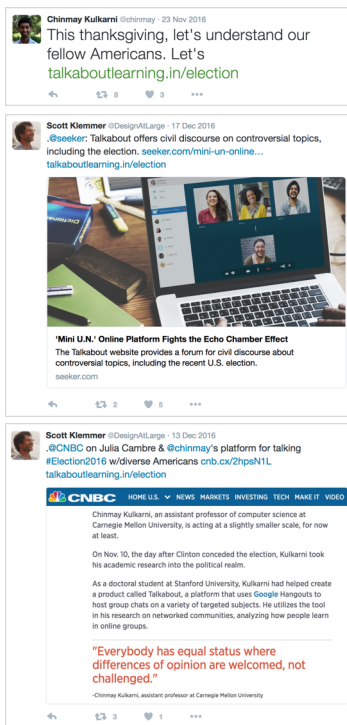


Figure 4: The research team publicized the Talkabout election discussions through social media. The initiative also received coverage from two media organizations, CNBC and Seeker.

Location, Temporality, and Modality: High-bandwidth channel may reduce the risk of antisocial behavior

The Internet is an increasingly popular avenue for political debate. However, many common channels for political conversation rely on asynchronous, text-based communication which offer few social cues, and can be prone to flaming and trolling, particularly when participation is anonymous [4]. Because Talkabout discussions happen over video, there are many more social cues available, which can reduce the risk of antisocial behavior like trolling and flaming.

Additionally, Talkabout seeks to establish norms for productive discussion. Unlike Talkabout discussions offered in conjunction with an online course, participants in political discussions lack social context on how to engage with their peers. The Talkabout system encourages discussion norms in three ways. First, we ask that all participants agree to a discussion code of conduct, which distills three basic principles for respectful, open dialogue (Figure 3b). Second, we invite participants to watch a 10-minute animated video on the importance of empathy entitled “The Power of Outrospection” from RSA Animate (Figure 3c). This serves as common material for reflection prior to the discussion and advocates for the importance of listening to diverse perspectives with an open mind. Third, we provide learners with 15 guiding questions to serve as a starting point for conversation (Figure 3d). For example: “What candidate did you support in this election, and what was the top reason you supported that candidate? Why was that reason so important to you?”

Moderation & structure: Discussion support infrastructure

Talkabout discussions are not formally moderated. This design choice promotes a balanced discussion space free of hierarchy, and also ensures that discussion groups can scale to any number of participants. Rather than assigning a moderator or discussion leader to each discussion group, Talkabout scaffolds the discussion experience using a custom application embedded within the Google Hangout. The Hangout application displays the agenda directly alongside the video feed for easy reference. It also allows participants to file a “Misconduct” request if the conversation becomes uncomfortable, so an on-call Talkabout team member can step in for assistance.

Early roll-out: high enthusiasm, limited engagement

We announced plans to host election-related Talkabout discussions via Facebook and Twitter on November 23, roughly two weeks after Election Day (Figure 4). Beyond social media, the Talkabout election discussions received coverage in two research lab newsletters and online popular press articles from CNBC and Seeker.com.

The first discussions were held on November 27, 2016 with a total of 11 discussion times offered over the 3 weeks that followed. Participants signed up for eight of these times. Across these initial discussion offerings, 13 participants attended, of the 36 who signed up. This follow-through rate is similar to Talkabout discussions in courses that do not incentivize participation with extra credit [2]. Political parties were unequally represented. Of the 30 participants who indicated which political party they planned to represent during the

discussion, 12 chose “liberal,” 16 chose “independent or other,” and 2 chose “conservative.”

Due to low attendance, discussion groups were smaller and less politically diverse than the system aspired to accommodate, with most groups comprised of two to three individuals. Nevertheless, most individuals expressed satisfaction with the experience: in a post-discussion survey, 4 of the 5 respondents agreed with the statement “I enjoyed the discussion we had in this group.” One individual shared: “[T]here were just two of us and of similar views on the election - that was slightly [sic] disappointing, although my partner was very interesting to talk to! I found interesting the fact that in Kentucky where he comes from the main cause of death is opioid, and that he is hopeful about Trump dealing with corruption.” Another participant said: “It was interesting to compare how much voluntary political and racial segregation there was for all of us, regardless of whether we were surrounded by people of similar politics/race in our local environment or not.”

Strong emotions and preconceived notions about political discussions

To understand why participation in Talkabout election discussions was lower than anticipated, we conducted a series of informal interviews with individuals who expressed interest, but did not sign up for a discussion.

Several voiced skepticism that conversations with those who voted for the opposite candidate would be productive. For example, one individual who voted for Trump shared their belief that those who voted for Clinton were “still too emotional” to discuss politics. A Clinton voter similarly said, “I don’t know if you’re going to learn anything from the people who are

opposed to you” and anticipated that political discussions on Talkabout would be a “frustrating vent session.”

The platform’s inability to provide information about conversation partners ahead of the discussion also turned away potential participants. One individual felt dissuaded because “you don’t know if people are going to be nice or not.” Another noted, “discussions might be more interesting if you wait for the slots to fill up.”

Keeping the conversation going

While our initial deployment did not garner enough participation to draw robust conclusions, our pilot suggests the following opportunities for future investigation into the political discussion design space.

Focus discussion on narrower, topically relevant issues

We advertised Talkabout as a venue for general discussion about the 2016 Election intended to appeal to the broadest possible audience. As such, the discussion questions provided did not mention specific policies or recent news stories. However, the open-ended nature of these discussions may have inadvertently dampened participation: most political talk happens naturalistically in informal conversations rather than in contexts that are explicitly political in nature [7]. Future offerings may shift towards more specialized discussions dedicated to specific events or trending topics of interest.

Increase the sense of moderation

In prior Talkabout discussions offerings, one participant often informally took on the role of a moderator for the group [3]. For discussions around especially sensitive topics, participants may feel more comfortable if there

is a designated moderator in each group, whether it be a staff member or community volunteer.

Build trust and community prior to discussion

Communicating with strangers in an online setting can be perceived as intimidating or dangerous. Video chat may heighten this perception. The real-time nature of group formation makes it difficult to introduce participants to one another prior to the discussion time. In the absence of a community hosted on a second platform like those formed within MOOCs, Talkabout discussions open to the general public should find ways to increase the perceived sense of connection and trust within the general community of discussion participants. For example, future iterations of a discussion platform could allow participants to enroll with a friend, ensuring that the pair is always placed into the same discussion group. Alternatively, a private, lower-bandwidth channel like text chat could encourage community formation and serve as a gateway towards higher bandwidth communication with community members over videoconference.

Challenges in designing for political discourse

In addition to design opportunities, our experience building a tool for political discussions made the challenges of the task salient. We provide two examples: First, we asked participants for their political affiliation to create diverse discussions, but it is possible that reminding participants for their affiliation encouraged them to further entrench their beliefs. Second, as system designers we tried to remain impartial to views and set a respectful, empathetic tone for discussion. Still, in hindsight, we acknowledge such a tone could privilege certain arguments. Readers may

find other design decisions that are similarly “political.” While these are of course challenging problems, our experience suggests that just as technology can inadvertently exacerbate the ‘echo chamber’ phenomenon, deliberate design has the potential to alleviate it. More broadly, we hope our experience encourages colleagues in the CHI community to explore technology’s role in civic discussion in the years to come.

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