Chapter V

TexTales:
Creating Interactive Forums with Urban Publics

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we describe the design and installation of a new kind of public opinion forum—TexTales, a public, large-scale interactive projection screen—to demonstrate how public city spaces can become sites for collective expression and public opinions can be considered social constructions. Each TexTales installation involved different groups of European young people taking photographs of everyday city events and controversial public issues, and then using custom software to invite general public passers-by in urban spaces to annotate the photos with SMS text messages. We analyze the design and implementation of these installations and identify a number of interaction design elements critical for designing expressive urban spaces: starting “intermodal” conversations; authoring for nomadic, unfamiliar audiences; distributing public discourse across mediated and physical space; and editing and censoring dialog to ensure that it reflects the norms and values of forum designers. TexTales is essentially an experiment in understanding how city spaces can be more than venues in which to take public opinion snapshots; instead they might be places that nurture and reveal collaborative, public expression.
INTRODUCTION

Public forums are spaces where individual perspectives come together to reflect and shape political discourse. Designers of such forums become facilitators whose products can help or hinder different voices, constrain or afford certain kinds of discourse and, ultimately, help people to examine and develop their own opinions and the thinking that gives rise to them. We consider the roles of community members—particularly young people—as co-designers, as citizens who express their views on issues of public concern and as learners who become aware of their own ways of forming opinions.

The question of how to discern peoples' public opinions and civic attitudes has long been a topic of research. Downs (1956) argues that individuals are “rationally ignorant” of current affairs and policy options because they think it is unlikely that their perspectives will influence large-scale civic issues. Converse (1970) suggests that most people have “non-attitudes” and questions opinion polls’ ability to identify well-formed thoughts, arguing that people usually offer “top-of-the-head” answers to pollsters’ questions to avoid appearing ignorant.

These conditions, if true, would be antithetical to democratic life. Several political scientists and technologists are researching ways to counteract such potential deficiencies. Fishkin et al.’s Deliberative Polls argue that deliberation among a random sample of voters can “produce better-reasoned preferences grounded in evidence about the complexities of controversial public issues” (Fishkin et al., 2000, p. 665). In essence, people who better understand difficult issues will give less arbitrary and more reasoned answers to poll questions. Wyatt et al. (2000) focus on understanding political deliberations that already occur in everyday conversation. After examining how freely and how often Americans engaged in casual political conversations in common spaces, they proposed a conversational model of democracy, arguing that “informal conversation among people who largely agree with each other plays a more vital role in democratic processes than is usually recognized” (Wyatt et al., 2000, p. 72).

Different models of public opinion underly these approaches. Schoenbach and Becker (1995) review various writers’ definitions of public opinion: Habermas (1962) considers it as “public reasoning by those who have the intellectual capabilities to arrive at socially useful beliefs and attitudes and to discuss them publicly” (Schoenbach & Becker, 1995, p. 324). This emphasis on the processes by which people arrive at public opinions is consistent with our view of opinion-forming as a development in thinking and therefore a kind of learning. However we question the presumptions about intellectual abilities and social utilities. Aside from being difficult to enact, identifying and excluding those deemed not to have appropriate intellectual capabilities would raise serious questions about hegemony. Requiring citizens to pass standardized tests that evaluate their intellectual capabilities before admitting them to public forums runs counter to an inclusive and participatory model of democracy (Barber, 1984). Further, those advocating preliminary screening misunderstand the nature of democratic forums: participating in such forums supports individual development, serving “educative functions” vital to the construction of an informed and active citizenry (Mansbridge, 1999; Pateman, 1970).

De Sola Pool (1973) sees public opinion as the “opinion held by a majority of citizens,” invoking a simplistic model of majority-rule democracy that does not adequately account for the role of dissent in the public exchanges. In contrast, Price (1992) considers public opinion as the result of a kind of collective epistemology that helps us to consider our own viewpoints and those of our fellow citizens. In this model, both as individuals and as members of collective forums, we separate judgment from fact but may not explicitly resolve differences between them. Price characterizes
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