

ESF - Short Visit Grant - Final Report

Within the framework of the ESF Activity entitled 'Towards Electronic Democracy: internet based complex decision support'. (Reference No. 530)

Douglas Schuler, July 1, 2005

The purpose of my visit to CNR IMATI was to share research findings and explore possibilities for future collaboration with European e-Government and citizen participation researchers.

During the visit, I presented a seminar entitled "Beyond Community Networks: New Tools for Supporting Civic Intelligence" and discussed those findings with Fabrizio Ruggeri (CNR IMATI), TED Steering Committee and Fiorella De Cindio (University of Milano and Milan City Network), Fabrizio Ruggeri's partner in various E-participation projects. I also reported on the Online Deliberation conference at Stanford which I attended May 20-22, 2005.

There were two important results that were obtained from the visit. The first result was a clearer understanding of the potential relationship between community networks and deliberative systems. Although the discussion, access to information and information publishing capabilities currently provided by community networks are critical for democratic societies, support for deliberation (and other collaborative work) is needed to help secure full and genuine citizenship. The second result was the development of a practical set of tasks that we will undertake to begin the integration of the e-Liberate system with the Milano Community Network. The two main aspects of this initial step are: (1) internationalization of e-Liberate via a "Language Pack" designed and implemented by one of my students at The Evergreen State College; and (2) approaches to a redesign of e-Liberate in order to accommodate a variety of collaborative activities in addition to the fairly rigid "Roberts Rules of Order" upon which e-Liberate is based.

We are hoping to continue collaborating over a longer period of time but this will depend to some degree on funding. We hope to approach the European Science Foundation as well as the (US) National Science Foundation. Currently there are nine people working on this project, 7 within the US and 2 within the EU. One of Fiorella De Cindio's students (Antonio De Marco) is working on a localization of e-Liberate and is exploring options for additional collaborative modules. In conjunction with The Evergreen State College and the Public Sphere Project, several people in the states are assisting De Marco's work.

There may also be opportunities for future cooperation between Fabrizio Ruggeri, Fiorella De Cindio and myself, including, possibly working within the framework of the e21 Project. This could include the development of an evaluation study to see how community deliberation works in practice, with an eye toward further deployment within the EU.

We have discussed the idea of submitting a paper on the design decisions that lie at the core of a flexible community deliberative system and an outline of these issues has been developed. Some of these issues include online representations of meetings and related elements (participants, for example), legal issues (such as verifying participant identity) and technological issues (additional "clients" such as IM or mobile telephones). Funding again, will likely decide, whether this writing project goes ahead.

We are hoping for additional support for a short visit for me for next summer to evaluate our progress thus far and consider additional transatlantic collaboration.