

Exploring the possibilities of public-led environmental deliberative democratic processes

The Loomio and Generation Zero case study

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1 INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant transitions over the past decades with regards to environmental decision-making has been the ‘deliberative turn’ which refers to the move towards the use of deliberative processes to inform and legitimize decisions (Hobson, 2009; Munton, 2003; Rodela, 2012). Deliberative democratic processes are currently the preferred mechanisms to deal with environmental problems, often referred to in the literature as ‘wicked problems’ – a term used to describe uncertain and complex issues with intertwined interests (social, political and economic) and where the ‘right’ answer depends on the framing of the problem (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Thus, critical democratic theorists and political ecologists have argued that holistic approaches and institutions that foster dialogue, public engagement, and social learning are required in order to improve the quality, legitimacy and transparency of environmental decision-making. The concept of deliberative democracy is understood as an informed public dialogue based on ‘reasoned argument’ (Habermas, 1984; 1987), focused on the public good, and which concludes with a collective decision. The process of a public dialogue is meant to be inclusive of a plurality of voices, values, interests and knowledges in order to improve the quality and legitimacy of environmental decisions. Deliberative processes encourage trust building between policy-makers and citizens, and extend accountability to a broader public. Deliberative democracy is meant to address the limitations of representative models of democracy that rely solely on technocratic approaches, transitory political will, and that ultimately privilege powerful stakeholders. Deliberative democratic institutional frameworks complement representative models of democracy by allowing citizens to participate, deliberate and be represented in decisions that affect them (Lidskog & Elander, 2007). Consequently, over the past few decades, there has been extensive experimentation with deliberative inclusionary processes (DIPs) in environmental policy-making, particularly at the local and national levels (Holmes & Scoones, 2000). Previous research suggests that extensive public consultation and deliberation presents a better chance to reach agreed or consensual solutions amongst a variety of stakeholders, more so than if the solutions were imposed based on market fixes or expert advice (Munton, 2003). DIPs require the key qualities of equality, inclusivity and unconstrained dialogue in a power-free environment to foster genuine deliberation. Participants should be free to modify their positions based on a process of reasoned dialogue that can lead to an agreed collective decision. Environmental DIPs have included citizen forums, stakeholder consultations, and referendums, amongst others. Furthermore, current Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and the internet have enabled

the development of virtual deliberative mechanisms and consultation processes that have served to overcome the material limitations of space, time, and cost that emerge in face-to-face deliberation. Government institutions have experimented with online open dockets, citizen forums, opinion polling and referenda for public consultation. Deliberative mechanisms are meant to provide citizens the opportunity to participate meaningfully and take ownership of the policy outcomes, as well as being part of the process of implementation, in partnership with the private and political sectors. Nevertheless, state-led deliberative mechanisms have been heavily criticized due to critical methodological limitations and the obvious presence of power-relations. The core arguments have been that state-led deliberative processes tend to limit lay participation and ultimately benefit influential stakeholders. Thus, there is a gap between the theory and the actual practice of deliberative democracy for environmental decision-making (Hobson, 2009; Munton, 2003; Smith, 2003). Critical theoretical contributions suggest that the autonomous and authentic processes of deliberation can only take place in the public sphere and that deliberative democratic processes can emerge from within civil society (Benhabib, 1996; Dryzek, 2002; Habermas, 1996). Dryzek (2002: 169; 2002) emphasized, “the only way to learn civility and reciprocity is through practice in deliberation itself”. Autonomous geographies are a good example of this in ‘modern’ societies as they function by holding ongoing deliberative democratic practices and use online tools to coordinate action (Pickerill & Chatterton, 2006). These associations in civil society have internalized socio-environmental values and aim to extend deliberative democratic rights in the broader public to achieve socio-environmental goals for the common good.

1.1 Research overview

This dissertation will provide qualitative information based on a case study of autonomous deliberative practices led by Generation Zero, a youth network of climate change activists in New Zealand. It will focus on the use of an online software tool called ‘Loomio’ which is currently utilized to make collaborative and informed campaign decisions to move New Zealand towards carbon zero by 2050. Loomio is open-source software, which was designed and developed by previous Occupy activists who are now founders of the social enterprise, Loomio Co-operative Ltd. It has been described as being a combination of Yammer, Quora, and SurveyMonkey (McKenzie, 2013), and as easy to use as Twitter (Goh, 2012). The Loomio tool was developed to build ‘shared understanding’ within groups, communities and networks as well as allowing the weaving of arguments in a purposeful way that can lead to collaborative decisions and transparent outcomes (Loomio, 2013).

Firstly, the research will examine the design characteristics of the Loomio tool in order to evaluate the key qualities required to foster genuine deliberation. Secondly, the study intends to map the actual process of deliberation, mediation and decision-making in the Loomio group of Generation Zero. The idea is to investigate the extent to which discussions are unconstrained, reflective and exhibit reciprocity, and to determine how often consensual decisions are reached. Lastly, the research explores some of the outcomes that emerge from autonomous deliberative democratic practices in the public sphere.

1.2 Report structure

The dissertation is composed of six chapters, including this introductory chapter. Chapter two lays out the theoretical dimensions of environmental decision-making, deliberative democracy and autonomous geographies, and presents the research questions of the study. The third chapter describes the methodology used, the methods for data collection and analysis, and ethical considerations. Chapter four provides the context and background information about the case study, examines the design characteristics of the Loomio tool, and analyses the process of democratic deliberation in the Loomio group of Generation Zero. It also looks at how Generation Zero complements online deliberation and decision-making with face-to-face practices. Chapter five examines some of the outcomes within the public sphere that emerged from an autonomous process of democratic deliberation led by Generation Zero. Chapter six provides a discussion of the findings, the limitations of the study, and the concluding remarks.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews previous literature in the areas of environmental decision-making, deliberative democracy and autonomous geographies. It begins by discussing the complexity of environmental problems, the emergence of a democratic deficit, and some of the reasons why liberal representative forms of democracy have so far failed to provide lasting solutions. The chapter continues with theoretical arguments that advocate for deliberative democracy as a way to improve the quality, legitimacy, and accountability of environmental decisions. It goes on to describe critical interpretations of deliberative democracy—what Dryzek terms discursive democracy. Then a brief description of deliberative mechanisms that have been used by state institutions is given. The next section outlines the theory of autonomous geographies and describes the possibilities of public-led deliberative democratic processes; and the chapter concludes with the aims and research questions of the current study.

2.1 Environmental complexity and the democratic deficit

Modern environmental threats such as climate change, resource depletion and biodiversity loss have highlighted the limitations of liberal socio-political institutions to make complex representative democratic institutions in the areas of “space, time, species and knowledge” (Lidskog & Elander, 2007: 77). Environmental problems are known to be transnational, inter-generational, and to affect global eco-systems. They are “ill-defined, tightly coupled with other sectors [...] and reliant upon elusive and transitory political agreement for their resolution” (Coenana et al., 1998, cited in Munton, 2003: 113). Environmental decisions are complex because they tend to be entangled with social and economic interests and intertwined with political, moral, and ethical values (Dobson, 1995; Lidskog & Elander, 2007; Munton, 2003). Critics of liberal democratic models of representation highlight the current democratic deficit in environmental decision-making because citizens are not represented in decisions that affect them and decision-makers remain distant from the public’s perspectives. Additionally, the democratic deficit extends beyond citizenship because future generations, nature, and non-citizens tend to be misrepresented (Dobson, 1995; Eckersley, 2000; Smith, 2003). Liberal democratic institutions were not designed to engage with a plurality of voices and values. Political parties compete for citizen votes and are unwilling to make contentious environmental decisions that are directly linked to social, economic and political interests (Lidskog & Elander, 2007; Warren, 1996a).

The limitations of nation-state representative democracies and international institutions have made critical democratic theorists wonder if current liberal socio-political systems could be transformed to deal with the complexity of environmental issues or if new institutions need to be developed instead. Environmental problems involve different levels of decision-making that cannot be assimilated by nation-states. In Dryzek's words "Endangered species protection, wilderness preservation (especially when the wilderness contains valuable extractive resources), animal rights (especially when the profits of companies relying on animal testing or factory farming are threatened), and deep ecological conceptions of how to live in relation to nature are some of the aspects of environmentalism not easily assimilated" (Dryzek, 2002: 99).

Transnational environmental problems have been dealt with through international negotiation regimes generally via a process of convention ratification by UN member states. However, the regime system still does not address the issue of accountability, there are no authorities accountable for environmental problems that citizens can turn to. Furthermore, the level of participation and representation of civil society in the UN system is questionable. Thus, some have argued in favor of a 'post-national policy' that goes beyond the nation-state to include the private and public spheres (Dobson, 1995; Eckersley, 2004; Lidskog & Elander, 2007). In terms of knowledge, scientific and expert knowledge are influential in shaping environmental policy but the complexity of environmental problems requires a move beyond technocratic approaches to include different types of knowledge like lay and local knowledge (ibid). Munton (2003) argues that inclusive processes are required to deal with the complexity of environmental decision-making, where debate, adaptation, learning, and consent are encouraged. The current democratic deficit in environmental decision-making stresses the need to address issues of representation, participation, and deliberation in political institutional frameworks (Lidskog & Elander, 2007).

2.2 Deliberative democracy and environmental decision-making

Critical democratic theorists and political ecologists argue that holistic approaches and institutions that foster dialogue and engagement are required in order to improve the quality of environmental decisions. They suggest that deliberative arrangements would enrich representative democratic institutions. Deliberative processes would allow for different voices to be heard and a plurality of interests and values to be included. The expectation is that decisions that emerge from critical engagements both enhance the legitimacy of decisions and extend accountability to a broader public (Dobson, 1995; Dryzek, 2002; Munton, 2003; Smith, 2003). This type of democracy has been termed deliberative

democracy and critical theorists argue that this is the preferred democratic model to deal with complex environmental issues because it “has the potential to strike a balance between democracy’s emphasis on the process (‘the right’) and ecology’s focus on the result (‘the good’). Democracy then, becomes a method for developing and defending green values and environmental goals” (Lidskog & Elander, 2007: 89).

Deliberative democracy emerged to overcome the limitations of aggregative liberal democratic models because the process of deliberation, not mere voting, gives legitimacy to a decision. The roots of democratic deliberation are found in the ancestral Athenian model of democracy, which featured discussion and argumentation prior to decision-making. Dryzek (1990: 10) explains that Aristotle “grounded practical reason in collective life [...] for rationality was a product of collective interaction.” Behabib notes:

“according to the deliberative model of democracy, it is a necessary condition for attaining legitimacy and rationality with regard to collective decision making processes in a polity, that the institutions of this polity are so arranged that what is considered in the common interest of all results from processes of collective deliberation conducted rationally and fairly among free and equal individuals” (1996: 69).

In this context ‘reasoned argument’ is free from ideologies and dogmas (Dryzek, 2005). Deliberation enables citizens to understand different points of view and reach a ‘rational’ compromise or ideally, consensus through ‘communicative reason.’ The right answer will emerge through reasoned argument amongst participants (Habermas, 1996). The process of deliberation enables actors to share their ‘real’ concerns in an open dialogue and modify their positions, concluding in a decision that is acceptable for all parties (Dryzek, 1990; 2002; Habermas, 1996). Deliberative democratic theorists share a common conviction that public deliberation can help to “overcome the fragmentation and stratification that characterizes modern life” (Ryfe, 2002: 359).

Deliberative democracy creates a space where a variety of environmental, political and economic values can be integrated. Participants have the opportunity to reflect on a diversity of perspectives, and acknowledge the variety of values and interests. Environmentalists and political ecologists have the opportunity to speak for nature and future generations and participants are more likely to internalize ecological knowledge (Goodin, 1996). Democratic deliberation may serve to overcome the issue of representation and participation that is missing in aggregative models of democracy (Lidskog & Elander, 2007). Most importantly, the quality of decisions improve because information flows in a deliberative democratic setting which can generate ‘multiplicatively’ (Fearon, 1998) meaning that a collective solution has added value that individual solutions lack. Based on evidence from experimental game theory, Dryzek (1987) argues that discussion prior to decision-

making can serve to promote cooperation, coordination, and collective action. Deliberation also promotes social learning and stimulates the public sphere by making it part of the system of governance (Habermas, cited in Munton, 2003: 121).

Overall the deliberative democratic model promises “more trustworthy and legitimate forms of political authority based on inclusive and unconstrained dialogue, more informed political judgments and decisions, and a more active account of citizenship. It promises a political environment within which the plurality of environmental values can be effectively and sensitively assessed and considered in decision-making processes” (Smith, 2003: 61). The deliberative democratic model offers the opportunity to move from ‘communicative reason’ to ‘ecological reason’ where nature and future generations are considered in the process of deliberation (Dryzek, 1987; Eckersley, 2004).

2.3 Deliberative democracy a.k.a. discursive democracy

The qualities of equality, inclusivity and unconstrained dialogue need to be present in deliberative democratic processes in order to facilitate genuine deliberation (Benhabib, 1996; Dryzek, 2002; Habermas, 1984; 1987). Benhabib (1996: 70) further expands on this:

- 1) Participation in such deliberation is governed by the norms of equality and symmetry; all have the same chances to initiate speech acts, to question, to interrogate and to open debate
- 2) All have the right to question the assigned topics of conversation
- 3) All have the right to initiate reflexive arguments about the very rules of the discourse procedure and the way in which they are applied or carried out. There are no prima facie rules limiting the agenda of the conversation, or the identity of the participants, as long as each excluded person or group can justifiably show that they are relevantly affected by the proposed norm under question

The deliberative process is meant to be “non-coercive and oriented towards broadening the understanding and perspective of participants” (Smith, 2003: 58) in order to meet the desired outcomes of ‘communicative reason’ and ‘communicative action’ theorized by Habermas (1984; 1987). Critics have developed arguments in regards to the absence of the above qualities in the deliberative processes led by state institutions as well as the actual policy outcomes. They argue that the qualities of equality and inclusivity in the political sphere cannot be assumed. Free and equal exchange between individuals is unrealistic because power relations are a fact of political life. Stakeholders hold on to their interests and the outcomes of deliberation are more likely to be achieved through negotiation or persuasion rather than consensus (Mouffe, 1999). Further criticisms have been made in regards to the assumption that deliberation always leads to cooperation when it could also lead to internal exclusion, anxiety, misunderstanding and conflict (Warren, 1996b).

From a critical theoretical perspective of deliberative democracy, the liberal democratic state is constrained by 'instrumental rationality' and power struggles (Dryzek, 1990; Habermas, 1984). Thus, critical democratic theorists have argued that genuine democratic deliberation is more likely to take place in the public sphere where 'free and unconstrained' deliberation takes place (Benhabib, 1996: 67). The public sphere is the site of egalitarian and decentralised practices, where opinions and discourses are formed and negotiated (Dryzek, 1990; Habermas, 1987). Communicative rationality is fostered through a process of socialization in circumstances 'free from deception, self-deception, strategic behavior, and domination through the exercise of power' (Dryzek, 1990: 13).

Dryzek (1990) renamed deliberative democracy as 'discursive democracy' with the purpose to return to its critical roots. Discursive interactions in the public sphere can lead to the contestation of discourses and the creation of public opinion. Furthermore, discursive practices in the public sphere can lead to emancipatory action-oriented decision-making or 'communicative action' (Habermas, 1984; 1987) that in turn has the power to influence public policy, transform state institutions or lead to the creation of new institutions (Dryzek, 1990; 2002; Habermas, 1996). Discursive practices in the public sphere can shift the power of decision-making from the state and markets back to civil society. The public sphere enables civil society not only to confront the state but also generate 'para-governmental' action (Dryzek, 2002).

2.4 State-led democratic deliberation

There are a variety of deliberative mechanisms or deliberative inclusionary processes (DIPs) that have been developed in order to translate deliberative democracy into practice (Holmes & Scoones, 2000). DIPs are meant to address the limitations of representative democracy and move towards more participatory processes that involve citizens and communities, in other words they are intended to 'democratize democracy' (Munton, 2003: 113). There has been a plurality of DIPs that have been used over the past two decades since 'Agenda 21' the action plan for sustainable development agreed at the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio, 1992. Agenda 21 had a clear focus on local public involvement in processes of environmental policy-making (Holmes & Scoones, 2000). DIPs have included consensus conferences, focus groups, facilitated workshops, deliberative opinion polls, visioning and multi-criteria mapping, referendums, citizen forums, and mediation (Holmes & Scoones, 2000; Smith, 2003). Smith (2003) suggests that mediation, citizen forums, and referendums have been particularly useful for environmental policy-making.

Mediation, or stakeholder consultation, relies on the participation of 'stakeholders' or specific 'publics' that are representative of affected groups; in this model a mediator assists stakeholders in the process for the parties to reach agreement. Citizen forums—deliberative polling, citizen juries, consensus conferences—generally include a random sample of citizens, who discuss issues of public concern; the sample tries to be representative of a broader public and the outcomes of deliberation serve to inform policy. Referendums or citizen initiatives involve public voting on constitutional, legislative or policy issues (ibid: 80). National governments have used stakeholder consultations to inform policy-making on issues such as air pollution, GM food, conservation and environmental planning (Dryzek & Tucker, 2008; Hanson, 2012; Holmes & Scoones, 2000). Local governments have used citizen forums to inform local policy in regards to natural resource management, waste management and recycling amongst other issues (Bull, Petts, & Evans, 2010; John, Smith, & Stoker, 2009; Rodela, 2012). Environmentalists have used citizen initiatives to include contentious issues such as land use, nuclear power plants and nuclear free zones on the political agenda (Smith, 2003).

Experimentation with deliberative mechanisms has been focused at the local or national levels. However, complex environmental problems need trans-boundary coordination. Goodin (2003) explained that the main challenge is the infeasibility of adapting face-to-face discussion to larger scales. Empirical evidence suggests that deliberative mechanisms also come with material limitations, such as cost, time and space. Financial resources are required to pay for the costs of planning, coordinating and implementing DIPs. It is also acknowledged that deliberation is a slow process that requires time commitment. Participants who are at times geographically separated, are required to come together in a common physical space (John et al., 2009; Munton, 2003; Smith, 2003).

The material limitations of face-to-face democratic deliberation have been partially overcome by the use of internet and information and communication technologies (ICT), which have facilitated the development of online deliberative mechanisms in recent decades. ICT and online discussion forums can help to overcome the time and space limitations of traditional face-to-face deliberation and enable asynchronous discussions with reduced transaction costs. Thus, opening spaces for citizen deliberation and citizen-government communication (Coleman & Gotze, 2001; Papacharissi, 2004; Wright & Street, 2007). Government agencies are currently using online open dockets, policy forums, opinion polling and online referenda as faster and lower-cost alternatives for public consultation. Environmental agencies for example, have been using electronic dockets and online forums for citizen participation in policy-making (Romsdahl, 2005; Schlosberg &

Zavestoski, 2009; Schlosberg, Zavestoski, & Shulman, 2008; Wright & Street, 2007; Zavestoski, 2006).

In Vincent Price's study of citizen online deliberation, he found that they "produced reasonably coherent political discussions; showed willingness to debate and engage their opponents; responded favorably to their online experiences; developed opinions and grasped arguments for and against those views; and came away a bit more trusting and civically engaged" (2006: 17). However, a number of academics are not fully convinced on the benefits of state-led citizen online deliberation. Their concerns are in regards to the actual role that citizens play in the process and their influence in the actual policy outcomes. They fear that online deliberation can be used to offer lip service and symbolic participation instead of real democratic deliberation (Noveck, 2004a; Schlosberg et al., 2008; Schlosberg & Dryzek, 2002; Schlosberg & Zavestoski, 2009). Some even argue that state-led approaches in online policy-making are replacing genuine public deliberation with a shallow preference aggregation of the masses (Dryzek, 2002; Fishkin, 2000; Wilhelm, 2000).

Critics of democratic deliberative settings online as well as offline have questioned the methodological limitations of deliberative mechanisms and the issue of power. In regards to the methodological limitations, the main concern is about "who convenes the process, who defines the questions, and how are multiple forms of expertise accommodated" (Holmes & Scoones, 2000: 1). The common pattern online as well as offline has been that groups of civil society are consulted on specific issues but the process relies on government bureaucrats to make the final decisions (Holmes & Scoones, 2000; Smith, 2003). Beth Noveck highlighted that state-led mechanisms are counterproductive for autonomous deliberation and argued that "in the bureaucratic state the public must be kept at bay near enough to be consulted when necessary but far enough to limit its direct participation" (2004b: 451). After all deliberative democracy or discursive democracy comes with the promise of emancipation "inclusion and deliberative practice are designed to redistribute power" (Munton, 2003: 112) and those who hold it might not be willing to redistribute it.

2.5 Public-led democratic deliberation

Dryzek explains that authentic democratic deliberation is not necessarily state-led:

"a polity with a high degree of authentic, inclusive, and consequential deliberation will have an effective deliberative system [...] For example, Poland in the early 1980s featured no legislature with any deliberative capacity. But the country did have a flourishing public sphere associated with the

Solidarity movement, in which deliberation was practiced and deliberative capacity built” (Dryzek, 2009: 1383).

The public sphere is where “perspectives and ideas are generated, policy decisions are questioned, and citizen competences are developed” (ibid). Public-led deliberative settings can serve to engage communities providing an alternative to mainstream political practices (Papacharissi, 2004). Democratic deliberation offers the opportunity to translate ‘communicative reason’ into ‘communicative power’ (Habermas, 1996), in other words to have an influence on state practices and institutions. Benhabib suggests, “communicative power springs from the interactions between legally institutionalized will-formation and culturally mobilized publics” (Benhabib, 1996: 29).

There is a well-known example of an effective deliberative and participatory mechanism that can illustrate the power that emerges from ‘communicative action’ in the public sphere –this is the participatory budgeting mechanism in Porto Alegre, Brazil; where citizens exercise their right to have a voice and a vote in local investment. This mechanism emerged from practices in civil society and so far research suggests that participatory budgeting has re-invigorated the public sphere, made the process of decision-making more transparent and created a sense of solidarity within and outside neighborhoods (John et al., 2009). The balanced state-society relationship was the result of a long history of radical mobilization. Discourses and public opinion that emerged from the public sphere were influential in changing institutional practices in favour of genuine public participation (Baiocchi, Braathen, & Teixeira, 2012).

In a similar line the trans-boundary environmental justice movement that emerged in the U.S. exemplified deliberative democratic practices within a network structure that had different centers. This example suggests that environmental decision-making can take place at different levels and coordination of actions do not necessarily need to be organized through state institutions (Dryzek, 2002; Dryzek, et al., 2003). Social movements in previous decades and current ICT have paved the way for the growth and coordination of transnational movements. The most recent example is the Occupy Movement (Occupy), which was characterized by principles of autonomy, deliberative democracy, international solidarity, and occupation of public space (Katsiaficas & Rénique, 2012). Occupy confirmed claims made by Dryzek two decades earlier, in regards to the possibility of extending discursive practices beyond the local level through transnational networks (Dryzek, 1990: 49). Occupy complemented discursive practices with other types of communication such as protests, sit-ins, and the use of new media (Katsiaficas & Rénique, 2012).

This type of civil society, who have internalized social/environmental values and that are actively steering their way towards a new kind of society has been theorized as 'autonomous geographies' (Pickerill & Chatterton, 2006). Autonomous geographies are described as 'spaces of hope' where civil society tries to create an alternative reality through experimentation and activism with a focus on shared social/environmental goals (ibid). The concept aims to capture a collective sense of hope, creativity and urgency felt by participants in these realms. The pillars that sustain their autonomy are "political ownership and control; cultural and media literacy; the self-determination of organizational forms; and economic self-reliance" (ibid: 735). Their flexible networked structures enable activists to tackle issues at the appropriate scale extending from local to global scales. Their core principles are "freedom with connection" and "confrontation with proposition" (ibid: 735). Participants show a commitment for collectivism, democratic deliberation, freedom, diversity and decentralisation. These geographies are connected locally and transnationally through 'creative networks of solidarity' (ibid: 739).

Autonomous geographies are in a constant process of experimentation trying to enact practical changes in daily life. They believe that revolutionary changes in society are possible through "workable alternatives" outside the state, for the larger social good (ibid: 737). Some examples of autonomous projects are independent media, social-enterprises, social centers and open-source software to name a few. The projects, as they are not commercially driven, tend to survive on a shoestring so members are bounded to share resources, skills and knowledge (Pickerill, 2007; Pickerill & Chatterton, 2006). Participants are characterized by their 'do it yourself' ethic and goal-oriented actions. They use the internet to maintain their extra-local networks, coordination of actions and information sharing (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2008). However, some of their main limitations are the scarcity of resources and time constrains. The politics within autonomous geographies are not conflict free and the issues of informal hierarchies, alpha male domination during meetings, and meeting fatigue do emerge in face-to-face deliberative processes. Thus, even within these geographies the appropriate mechanisms to hold deliberative democratic processes are essential (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2008; Pickerill, 2007).

Deliberative practices and grassroots democracy have the potential to be enhanced online. ICT and the internet have opened up a variety of avenues for online discussion such as forums, blogs, bulletin boards, CoWebs and Wikis amongst others. Online forums and the internet enable citizens to have quick access to information and be exposed to a variety of views (Papacharissi, 2004; Romsdahl, 2005; Schlosberg & Zavestoski, 2009; Wright & Street, 2007). From a critical perspective online deliberative settings are meant to be

autonomous from state and market interests (Fishkin, 2000; Schlosberg & Dryzek, 2002; Wilhelm, 2000). Public-led online mechanisms are more likely to achieve the expected outcomes of deliberative democracy because they enable citizens to convene the process, define the questions, and remain engaged throughout the process. Communicative interactions online have the potential to serve to refine discourses that in turn have an effect on public opinion and collective action (ibid). Thus, public-led deliberative mechanisms can provide the means for civil society to 'do democracy' (Noveck, 2004a: 217), meaning an authentic and reflexive process of deliberation that serves to enhance offline participatory democratic practices.

In regards to environmental decision-making public-led deliberation can be useful to balance the political and scientific bias in current policy-making "public participation foregrounds the fact that environmental decision-making entails multiple stakeholders negotiating an ecological reality. Conflicting scientific perspectives, government agendas, economic interests, and citizen preferences are forced to confront and engage one another" (Zavestoski, 2006: 389). Public-led online deliberation and direct action could have a deeper impact on environmental and social policy outcomes (Schlosberg & Dryzek, 2002).

Previous research on citizen online forums has found that discussions tend to be more egalitarian, open and reflective than face-to-face interactions because of the anonymity of individuals (Price, 2006). However, other authors have argued that the potential of ICT and online deliberative democracy remain uncertain. Wilhelm (2000) argues that socio-political limitations offline are reproduced online as not every citizen can afford to participate in 'digital democracy' due to economic and technological limitations.¹ Furthermore, his research on online forums suggests that discussions resemble monologues rather than deliberation because views are reinforced instead of exchanged and opinions are not always well informed (ibid). The qualities of equality, inclusivity and unconstrained dialogue necessary for democratic deliberation have not been fully met in current online settings. Furthermore, building interpersonal trust, group cohesion and reciprocity between participants are extra challenges in online deliberative settings (Price, 2006; Romsdahl, 2005; Schlosberg & Dryzek, 2002; Wilhelm, 2000).

Recent research suggests that to a certain extent the software design of online mechanisms can account for the presence or lack of deliberation in online forums. The design of online mechanisms needs to be crafted to 'shape' the form of discussion that takes place in a forum (Noveck, 2004a; Schlosberg et al., 2008; Wright & Street, 2007). The

¹ See Wilhelm, 2000 for an extensive discussion on digital inequality and suggested solutions to overcome it.

design characteristic of an online mechanism should take into account the key characteristics of equality, inclusivity, unconstrained dialogue, reciprocity and transparent rules for decisions in order to foster ‘communicative reason’. In other words the design characteristics of online mechanisms “can ‘code’ greater participation and deliberation” (Noveck, 2004b: 440). The format of online forums could include mediators, graphical aids and organized information to promote genuine deliberation (ibid). It has to be said though that the design characteristics do not guarantee ‘communicative reason’ and the potential of online tools will be determined in the end by how it is used by the public. However, the presence of deliberative online mechanisms or ‘digital green spaces’ (Wilhelm, 2000: 11) can facilitate genuine deliberative democratic processes and offline emancipatory practices in civil society (Noveck, 2004a; Wright & Street, 2007).

2.6 The current study

The current study aims to contribute towards the ‘project’ of deliberative democracy and add to the scarce literature of public-led processes. The research intends to examine possibilities from a grassroots perspective and return to the critical roots of deliberative democracy. Thus, empirical information is analyzed through a combination of theoretical lenses, namely, political ecology, critical democratic theory and autonomous geographies. Dobson’s (1995) writings on political ecology and sustainable decentralized societies, Habermas’ (1984; 1987) influential ideas in his *Theory of Communicative Action*, Dryzek’s (1990) discursive democracy, as well as Pickerill and Chatterton’s (2006) theory on autonomous geographies provide the theoretical framework that serves to examine the emancipatory actions that emerge from critical engagements led by civil society in the public sphere

2.6.1 Research questions

The current study aims to determine the extent to which the assemblage of an autonomous geography and an autonomous online tool (free from political and market influence), can facilitate a public led process of democratic deliberation.

More specifically, the research questions are:

- RQ1.** To what extent do the design characteristics of the Loomio tool take into account the key qualities (equality, inclusivity, unconstrained dialogue, transparent rules) required for democratic deliberation?
- RQ2.** To what extent can the discussions and decision making in a Loomio group be considered deliberative and democratic?

RQ3. To what extent do autonomous deliberative democratic processes, initiated within Loomio, generate public engagement, social learning, para-governmental action and/or communicative power?

3 METHODOLOGY

The dissertation follows a critical research approach. It provides qualitative information that is empirically grounded in order to examine if the theoretical aims of deliberative democracy can be better met by the assemblage of autonomous geographies and autonomous deliberative tools. In order to address the research questions of the dissertation, the methodology used is a two-fold case study. The case study examines the autonomous tool Loomio, used for democratic deliberation, and looks at how this tool is used by an autonomous geography—Generation Zero.

3.1 Methods of data collection

Online participant observation, interviews, and review of online materials (video, social media, and blogs) were used to obtain data. Although participant observation is useful to “observe events and the behavior of people by taking part in the activity” (Kitchin & Tate, 2000: 221), the role of the observer in this study remained passive in order to not interfere in processes of deliberation or decision-making. Interviews were also used to complement personal observations of the online discussions. Informal online interviews with a member of Loomio Co-operative Ltd. and two members of Generation Zero were made in early June via Skype. The online participant observation was conducted over two months, between June and July 2013. A digital diary was maintained to record observations and a spreadsheet was used to note the quantitative information of the Loomio messages. Semi-structured, open-ended interviews followed in mid July 2013, with one of the creators of Loomio and two members of Generation Zero. The interviews were semi-structured in order to focus on the process of democratic deliberation, and the questions were open-ended as these “better reflect a person’s own thinking” (ibid: 213). Kitchin & Tate (2000: 219-220) explain, “Interviews are self-reports of experiences, opinions and feelings, whereas observation relies on the observer’s ability to interpret what is happening and why” so in order to differentiate between personal observations and answers from the interviewees, the information gathered from personal observations will not be referenced whereas the information provided by interviewees will be referenced with the appropriate interviewee code (see Appendix B). The Generation Zero and Loomio websites as well as Facebook pages were also used for data collection.

3.2 Methods of data analysis

The methods of content analysis and building themes were used to analyse the data. Content analysis “which seeks objectively and quantifiably to identify patterns within the text” (Kitchin & Tate: 225) was useful to analyse more objectively the process of online deliberation and decision-making. Loomio messages were coded in order to examine the level of reciprocity and interactivity, as well as to determine the extent of which the discussions were ‘reasoned’, inclusive and unconstrained. Previous research on citizens’ online forums and state-led online open dockets for rule-making used content analysis to examine political and environmental online deliberation (Papacharissi, 2004; Wilhelm, 2000; Zavestoski, 2006).

Content analysis was a method used by Wilhelm (2000) in order to ascertain the extent to which genuine deliberation was displayed within the Usenet and the AOL Washington Connection citizen forums. He developed a coding scheme (Table 1) based on Habermas’ (1984, 1987, 1996) and Fishkin’s (1992) conditions for deliberation. Wright and Street (2007) used Wilhelm’s coding scheme to analyze Futurum - the EU online forum on constitutional process. Wilhelm’s coding scheme was similarly used in the current study to systematically and objectively analyse the process of deliberation on Generation Zero’s Loomio community. However, an extra layer of categories focused on the decision-making process was developed in this study, as the Loomio tool can also be used for that purpose (Table 3). Content analysis was carried out on all threads in the Generation Zero Loomio community. Content analysis was used in order to objectively measure the extent to which Loomio can hold genuine deliberation and transparent decision-making. The quantitative technique of content analysis was also complemented with the qualitative elements from participatory observation and interviews.

The aim of combining quantitative and qualitative methods for data analysis had the intention of increasing the objectivity of the research without losing “the richness of the data to just numbers” (Kitchin & Tate, 2000: 256). The qualitative element of the online participant observation includes an analysis of the deliberative interactions and the presence of mediators. In order to improve the analysis and interpretation of data further, key details and initial conclusions drawn from observation and content analysis were corroborated with answers from interviewees as well as triangulated with other interviews or written material available online. The corroboration of data and the combination of methods was chosen with the aim of enhancing the integrity and validity of this research. The interviews provided feedback in regards to the gains and limitations of online

deliberation and decision-making, as well as how the Loomio tool complements other deliberative practices. The interviews were made via Skype, digitally recorded and transcribed. The transcribed interviews were read numerous times and key themes which emerged were highlighted and organized for the qualitative analysis.

3.3 Ethical considerations

This research followed the general principles and standards of the UCL Research Ethics Framework 2013. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research by email and during the informal interview sessions. Consent to record the Skype interviews was also obtained. Report transcripts of the interviews were forwarded to each interviewee by email with an invitation to reply with any issues or concerns with regards to the content of the report. The names of the interviewees were kept confidential and a code was assigned to each of the participants (Appendix B). It was agreed that some of the comments from Loomio would be used in this research while keeping the anonymity of the participants. It was also agreed that the research would be shared with both Generation Zero and Loomio Co-operative Ltd.

4 ASSEMBLAGE OF AUTONOMOUS GEOGRAPHY AND AUTONOMOUS TOOL

This section provides the background information on the case study and addresses Research Questions 1 and 2. It starts by providing some context about Generation Zero, the organizational structure, their goals, and the reasons why they need an autonomous online tool for deliberation. The chapter continues by providing the context and background information about the Loomio tool, its history, and includes images and the main features of the Loomio platform. The chapter continues with the content analysis of Loomio messages of Generation Zero, followed by an analysis of Loomio's design characteristic, and finally expands on the deliberative democratic practices followed by Generation Zero.

4.1 Autonomous geography: Generation Zero

Generation Zero (GZ) is a youth-led organisation and nation-wide network of climate change activists who are campaigning to steer New Zealand (NZ) towards achieving zero carbon emissions by 2050 (*Generation Zero*, 2013). GZ began in 2011 after some members from the NZ Youth Delegation to the United Nations Climate Change Conferences in 2009/2010 were disappointed by the lack of political will towards reducing global emissions and decided to build a national movement that inspires their generation on taking action. Their goal is to steer NZ towards zero carbon by 2050 and serve as an international example of transitions towards a zero carbon future. In two years the GZ network grew from 7 members to over 3000 members across the country (GZ1). Their campaigns seek to foster a deep cultural change and influence the political landscape in regards to emissions reduction (*ibid*). They actively engage with youth from schools and universities to raise awareness on climate change and encourage them to take action. Generation Zero also engages with politicians, government institutions, academics, researchers, other environmental organisations, and the private sector to build partnerships and work on practical solutions to reduce emissions.

The network is non-partisan and works on promoting purposeful conversations and actions to make sure that “today’s carbon bills get paid today” (*Generation Zero*, 2013). Some of their campaigns have strongly focused on transport as this sector represents 40 per cent of New Zealand’s CO₂ emissions (Horne, 2012). Thus, some of their campaigns call for smart/green transport options, smart urban planning and smart transport spending. However, other campaigns have focused on smart and clean energy like the 100% possible

campaign in collaboration with 350 Aotearoa and supported by WWF (*Generation Zero*, 2013; *GenerationZeroFacebook*, 2013).

The GZ network includes a core team of members, volunteers and supporters that commit varying amounts of time. The core team is composed of around 30 members that dedicate 15+ hours per week, around 30 volunteers that commit between 5 to 10+ hours per week and the rest of the network who provide support during the campaigns, one-off events or financially (GZ1, GZ2). The core members of the organisation form the National Leadership Team (NLT). The positions within the NLT are made by appointment for a period of a year by a select committee, which is composed by 'elder' figures and a number of GZ long-term members (GZ1, GZ2). The NLT has three branches, namely: the National Support Crew (NSC) that coordinates the execution of campaigns across the country, the Direction Setting Team (DST) in charge of long-term planning and the Strategy Team (ST) in charge of research and analysis to inform strategy (*Generation Zero*, 2013).



Figure 1. Generation Zero Assembly (*Generation Zero*, 2013)

The core members and volunteers previously made decisions at biannual national meetings but as the network grew they started using the Loomio tool as a common online space to deliberate and make collective decisions on an ongoing basis. One of the members explained that they are currently using Loomio to “create shared understanding between people who have irregular communication [...] and support [their] given culture of consensus” (GZ1). Currently there are sixty members in their Loomio online group composed of core members and the most committed volunteers (GZ1, GZ2, GZ3). However, any person who wants to increase their level of commitment and gain access to Loomio can do so (guidelines document). The way they utilize Loomio has changed over

time, however, currently they have a general Loomio group for the sixty members and three subgroups. Participation within the sub-groups is exclusive to members of the sub-group but the conversations and decisions are visible to all members. The key principle that all sub-groups follow is that any decision or discussion that may affect the overall group needs to be posted to the general Loomio group (GZ2). Loomio is used for brain-storming, testing ideas, decision making, obtaining feedback specific to projects, FYIs for future activities and posting issues/concerns that may arise. Decisions that are made on Loomio serve to inform their national campaigns and events that are in turn communicated to the rest of the network through social media (GZ1, GZ2).

4.2 Autonomous tool: Loomio

The Loomio web tool is free open-source software that was designed to help groups, communities and networks to deliberate and make collective decisions about issues that affect them (L1). The idea of this tool emerged after three Occupy activists experienced first hand the empowering properties of deliberative democracy during the ‘general assemblies’ of the Occupy movement in Wellington, New Zealand in 2011. Over the past two years they have been working with other collaborators and volunteers developing the Loomio tool in order to replicate the empowering elements of face-to-face deliberation, while overcoming the limitations of space, time and the alpha-male domination of large scale face-to-face deliberation (Goh, 2012; McKenzie, 2013; Sifry, 2013). The figure below shows what the Loomio platform looks like ²

² See “How it works” 2 minute video at <https://www.Loomio.org/about#how-it-works>

loomio Groups Notifications Give us feedback Matthew Bartlett

Home Loomio Community Features

Deleting user accounts

There is much to be said for formal meeting protocols. For Loomio users a single proposal per discussion is limiting, but multiple proposals would be confusing and counter-productive - as discussed in "Suggest an alternative".

Formal meetings get around this as follows: An alternative or separate motion is not allowed until the current one is carried and becomes a resolution (or is lost). However, an amendment to the motion can be "put" by a...

[Edit discussion context](#)
 Started 3 months ago by Richard D. Bartlett
 Last edited about 3 months ago by Richard D. Bartlett
[See revision history](#)

[Show More](#)

Discussion

Say something...

Post comment

Uma Holla agreed. 18 hours ago

Yago Abati agreed. 3 days ago

Aaron Thornton agreed. 6 days ago

UH Uma Holla
 From analytics point of view, we should keep members records.
 We can have user records - his name using anonymization and his activity like how many comments, new discussions and likes, etc. But we need not have to store what he discussed in past.
 6 days ago · Like
 Liked by Richard D. Bartlett

Nicolas Wormser
 Good first step though I'm convinced some users won't feel comfortable using loomio unless they have the ability to remove all of their contributions.
 I also understand the need for comprehensive archives, but maybe that would be something only admins can do and one could remove all its comment from the discussions, but they would still be kept in the archives...
 But then the user has to be aware of this.
 6 days ago · Like

Nicolas Wormser agreed: *Good first step...* 6 days ago

Benjamin Knight (Loomio) agreed: *Feels like a sensible interim solution* 6 days ago

Richard D. Bartlett agreed: *I don't feel great about this as a long-term solution, but I do feel great about it as an interim step. It's not particularly high priority so don't want to expend too much energy on it right now.* 7 days ago

Alanna Krause agreed (previously disagreed): *I think this is a good solution but I don't like the idea in the comments about encouraging users to change their username and delete all their comments, when we don't have a good archiving/download feature yet. But that's separate.* 7 days ago

Alanna Krause
 Because if I'm an admin and I'm relying on Loomio to be a record of what my group has decided and who said what, but I don't have any facility to download/archive discussions, a member could decide to change their name and delete all their comments and then go inactive.
 Actually now that I think about it, they can do all that anyway

Current decision

Give users the option to de-activate their account

Closing in 5 hours
 Proposed 7 days ago by Jon Lammon

- User clicks "De-activate account" on the account settings page
- A pop-up informs the user that: They will no longer receive emails. They won't be able to log in. It will say "de-activated"...

[Show More](#)

19% of members have stated their position (9/47)

Positions

Matthew Bartlett [edit](#)

Jon Lammon
 I think this is a good solution for now. Let's try it out and see how it works for us.

Alanna Krause
 I think this is a good solution but I don't like the idea in the comments about encouraging users to change their username and delete all their comments, when we don't have a good archiving/download feature yet. But that's separate.

Richard D. Bartlett
 I don't feel great about this as a long-term solution, but I do feel great about it as an interim step. It's not particularly high priority so don't want to expend too much energy on it right now.

Benjamin Knight (Loomio)
 Feels like a sensible interim solution

Nicolas Wormser
 Good first step...

Aaron Thornton

Yago Abati

Uma Holla
 [Show users who have not yet decided]

Previous decisions

? Give users the option to anonymize their name when they...
 Closed 7 days ago

Figure 2. Loomio platform (Loomio.org, 2013)

The theme and background information of the discussion remains at the top of the page to keep the group focused on the issue at hand. Any member from a Loomio group is able to start a discussion and all members may comment, share links and provide relevant information pertaining to the topic at hand. The discussion remains organized in a dated

thread on the left-hand side of the page. During the discussion members can ‘like’ each other’s comments to concur, and ‘tag’ each other when responding or requesting further information from a specific person. As the discussion evolves, any member from the group can make a proposal (decision-making pie chart) on the right-hand side of the page suggesting a course of action that the rest of the members can vote on. When voting, members are prompted to add a comment in regards to their decision (*Loomio*, 2013). Members can agree, abstain, disagree or block a proposal as the figure below show:

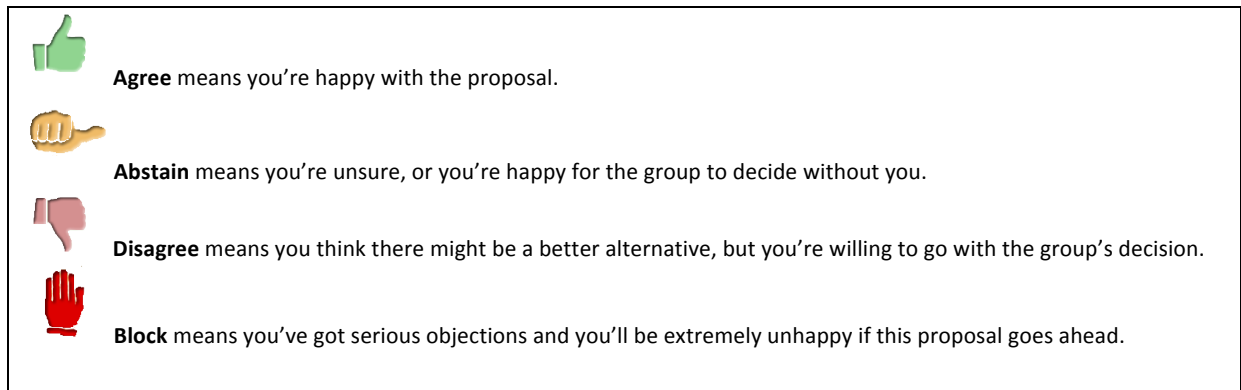


Figure 3. Have your say (Loomio.org, 2013)

Participants can change their positions as many times as they need before the proposal closes. Voting comments are included in the discussion thread so that they can be taken into consideration. The pie graph on the right of the page gives a clear indication of how members think about a specific proposal and provides a percentage of the people who cast a vote. If participants are not happy with a proposal any member can suggest a new proposal to vote on. Previous proposals are shown on the bottom-right hand corner of the page (ibid). The ideal outcome would be to see the pie graph turn green meaning that consensus was reached. The name Loomio emerged from the word ‘loom’ meaning ‘weaving’ or “Tying up loose threads” (Goh, 2012) into a clear collective outcome or turning “a messy discussion into a clear picture of how the group feels” (*Introducing Loomio*, 2012). The figure below gives a glimpse of how Loomio works

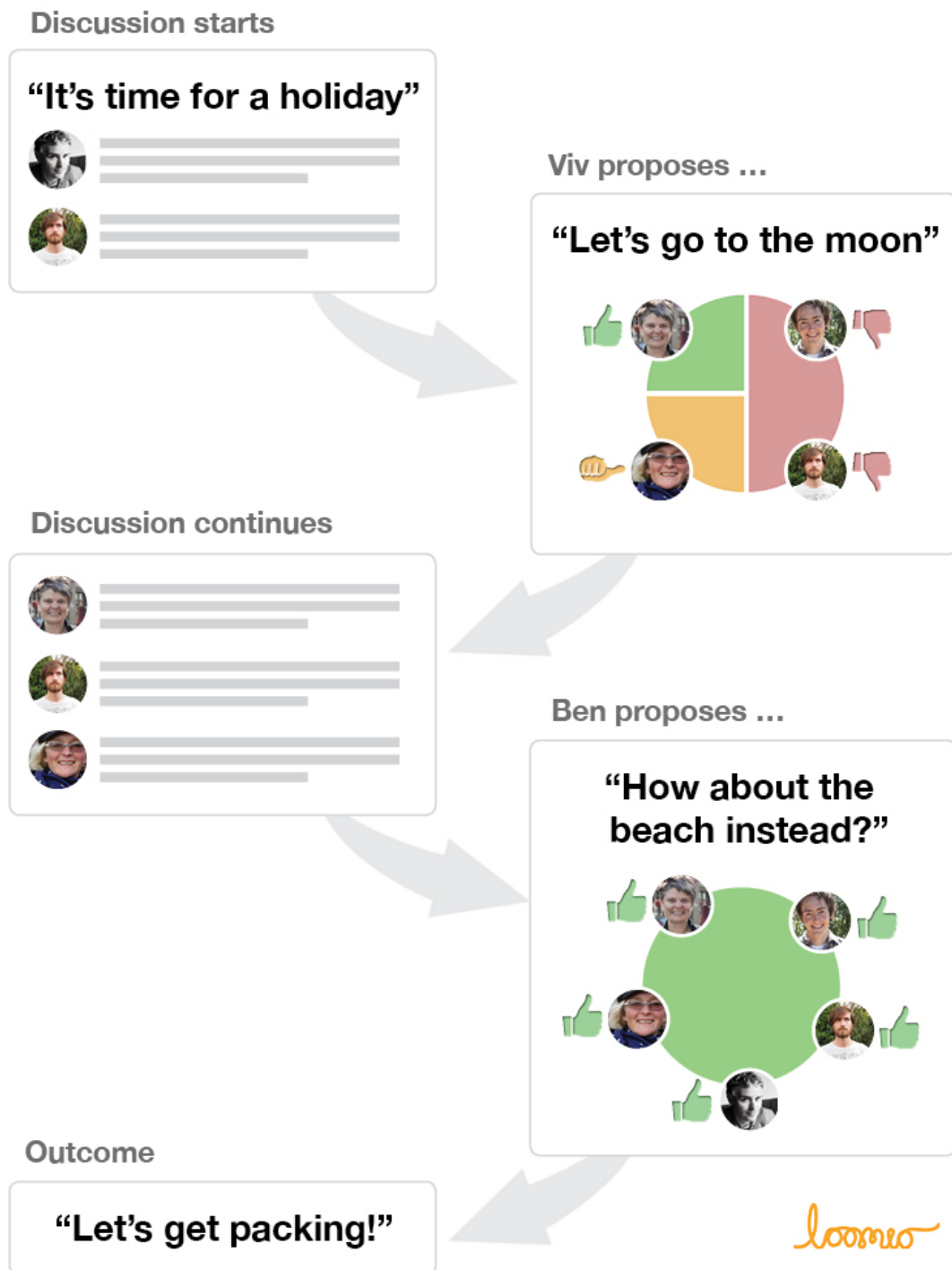


Figure 4. How Loomio works (Bartlett, 2013)

The design of the tool is user friendly and email integrated. Users can choose to receive email notifications to keep updated on any new discussions, new proposals, closing proposals and when they have been tagged in a discussion. At the moment around a thousand groups in twenty different countries are using Loomio, and the tool has been translated into six different languages (L1). Some of the groups currently using Loomio

include children student councils, activists, social enterprises and the Wellington City Council (L1). The default number of members is set to 50 per group but this can be increased if required. Currently, the largest groups have between 200 to 250 members. Loomio enables groups to create sub-groups and keep the conversations private or public to the larger group. Groups that can afford it, make a monthly or one-off contribution, which helps towards providing the tool for free to those groups that are not able to afford it. The Loomio team has raised funds through crowd funding and they hope to be able to support themselves in the future while remaining autonomous and true to their core purpose of “making participatory democracy a part of everyday life” (L1).

4.3 Content analysis of Generation Zero’s Loomio group

Noveck argued that the design of an online deliberative tool “can ‘code’ greater participation and deliberation” (Noveck, 2004b: 440) and for that purpose online mechanisms need to be designed taking into account the qualities of equality, inclusivity and unconstrained dialogue in order to hold genuine deliberation (Wright & Street, 2007). Wilhelm (2000) developed a coding scheme to analyse the degree to which citizen discussions in online forums could be considered deliberative. The coding scheme includes a number of categories, which were developed based on Habermas’ and Fishkin’s writings. The categories in turn intend to facilitate the analysis of the levels of interactivity, reciprocity and rationality of discussions. The following table shows Wilhelm’s coding scheme:

Table 1. Wilhelm's deliberation coding scheme (Wilhelm, 2000)

PROVIDE: a message that is solely providing information from other participants in the form of facts, opinions and the like

SEEK: a message that includes evidence of information seeking in the form of queries, open-ended remarks, and the like

SEED: a message that plants a seed for discussion, usually providing the groundwork for a topic, always the first in a series of reply messages

INCORPORATE: a message, which incorporates opinions or ideas drawn from others, whether they be experts or other citizens but not those who are participants in the exchange in question

REPLY: a message that is the response or reply to another message previously posted

VALIDATE: an expression which is subject criticism and grounding assessed in light of the internal relations between the semantic content of these expressions, their conditions of validity and the reasons (which could be provided, if necessary) for the truth of statements or for the effectiveness of actions

NOVALID: an expression which presents neither conditions of validity nor reasons for the truth of the statement instead, appeals are made largely to personal prejudice, emotion, or aesthetic judgment

The tags PROVIDE and SEEK intend to analyse the interactivity of messages in an online forum. The SEED tag intends to account for the messages that generated new discussions. The tags INCORPORATE and REPLY intend to analyse the reciprocity of exchange within a forum, thus reciprocity is measured in terms of replying to messages or incorporating information from external sources. The validity of messages in the coding scheme is based on Habermas' (1984) condition of rationality in semantic expressions. Participants in a deliberative process need to provide reasons for their arguments (Wilhelm, 2000: 90). The coding scheme operationalizes Habermas' principle of 'reasoned argument' with the VALIDATE and NOVALID tags. The tag VALIDATE is given to messages that provide reasons for statements and NOVALID to those messages that lack reasons (ibid: 93-95).³

The methodology used to analyse the discussions in the GZ Loomio community was different from the one used by Wilhelm (2000). Firstly, he coded a percentage of the total amount of messages from the forums he was analysing but in this research it was possible to code all of the messages in the general group and three sub-groups.⁴ Secondly, the coding system differed from Wilhelm's in regards to the coding of SEED and REPLY messages. While Wilhelm coded SEED throughout discussion, in the current study SEED was only coded for those messages that were posted in the discussion box at the top of the Loomio page. This is because the Loomio tool is designed to focus on the SEED message for rigorous comment. The SEED messages in most of the GZ discussions provided background information to a specific issue, relevant web links, and explained the purpose of the discussion as well as asking something specific from members—either to comment on a proposed document, generate ideas for specific campaigns, offer opinions in regards to a strategy, or comment on a specific organisational issue.

In Wilhelm's (2000) study, comments were coded with REPLY when they were a response to a previous message. In the current study, all posts in a thread were replies to the SEED, therefore, instead of coding all of the messages as replies, the messages that provided information from within the GZ group (for example making reference to previous conversations, previous strategies, previous campaigns, or posting messages that were copied from email conversations between GZ members), were coded as PROVIDE. If a message was a reply to the SEED message but also raised a question or query to a specific member or the overall group, the message was coded as SEEK. If a message provided

³ The coding scheme also included the HOMOGENEOUS tag to analyse the extent of political affiliation in an online forum. This tag was not included in this research since the case study is a group of 'like minded' youth activists that hold similar values and meet for a shared purpose.

⁴ There were only five threads that were not coded. The 5 threads were a repeat of a previous thread and the author of the threads explained that they were 'dud' threads and were to be ignored.

information from outside sources, either web links, online articles, or comments from experts or citizens that were not GZ members, the message was coded as INCORPORATE. Only messages that were a reply to the seed message but were not providing/incorporating information or seeking further information were coded as REPLY. Similarly to Wilhelm’s coding, only those messages that provided a reason for their comment were coded as VALID, which meant that those messages that were either a short comment or a question with no further explanation were coded as NOVALID. The results from the content analysis in GZ Loomio groups are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Deliberation in Generation Zero Loomio groups

| Content Categories | General Group | General Group % | Sub-groups | Sub-groups % |
|--------------------|---------------|-----------------|------------|--------------|
| SEED | 54 | 8.67% | 9 | 8.18% |
| PROVIDE | 73 | 11.72% | 6 | 5.45% |
| SEEK | 134 | 21.51% | 34 | 30.91% |
| INCORPORATE | 42 | 6.74% | 6 | 5.45% |
| REPLY | 320 | 51.36% | 55 | 50.00% |
| Total Messages | 623 | 100% | 110 | 100% |
| VALIDATE | 511 | 82.02% | 95 | 86.36% |
| NOVALID | 112 | 17.98% | 15 | 13.64% |

It is clear from the table that more than half of the total number of messages were a direct reply to the seed message. In the general group, 21.51 per cent of messages were members who were seeking further information either from specific members of the group or posting a general query to the overall group to bring more clarity to the discussion, whilst 18.46 per cent of messages were providing information from inside or outside sources. Messages were infrequently coded as NOVALID as most messages were relevant to the thread. Occasionally it was a single question or a comment that said ‘I agree’ or ‘thumbs up’. However, it is interesting to note that 82.02 per cent of messages did contain reasons that validated arguments.

The sub-groups followed a similar pattern but with two key differences, firstly there were fewer messages providing information (10.9 per cent) and more messages seeking further information (30.91 per cent). Secondly, the messages that provided reasons for their comments were slightly higher than the ones provided in the general group. Discussions lasted approximately a month, there were some threads that lasted two months and others that lasted a few days. Generally, the discussions that lasted longer were about strategy or organisational issues, whereas discussion about financial issues for campaigns that

required immediate action had a shorter time frame, and in most cases financial matters developed into a proposal for the group to make a decision.

GZ is also using Loomio to make collaborative decisions. The following coding scheme (Table 3) was developed to analyse the process of decision-making, when a discussion thread in the general group or sub-groups led to a proposal (decision-making chart) that required members to cast a vote

Table 3. Decision-making coding scheme

| |
|--|
| VOTE: the average percentage of members that submitted a vote from the total number of proposals |
| CONSENSUS: the number of times that consensus was reached |
| MAJORITY: the number of times that a decision was made following the majority vote |
| BLOCK: the number of times that a decision did not go through because a member blocked the proposal |
| CHANGED: the number of times the decision was updated to take into account people's comments |
| AUTHOR1: the number of authors that started the discussion as well as the proposal |
| AUTHOR2: the number of authors that started the proposal but not the discussion |

The tag VOTE intended to take into account the average percentage of votes from the total number of decisions that had been made. It was observed that not all members voted, and the tag aimed to gather an average of the voting rates. The tag CONSENSUS was given when a proposal was agreed by all of the members that cast a vote. The MAJORITY tag was given to a proposal that passed when most votes were 'agree' and some votes were 'abstained'. The tag BLOCK was given when a member of the group cast a 'block' vote, meaning that they had serious concerns about the proposal. The tag CHANGE was given to those proposals that had to be changed because a significant number of members cast a 'disagree' vote, which meant that the proposal had to be transformed into a new proposal that took into account the comments or concerns that were raised by members. The tag AUTHOR1 intended to analyse the number of times that the author that posted the proposal was the same author that posted the SEED message in the discussion, whereas the tag AUTHOR2 was used to analyse the number of times the author that suggested the proposal was different than the one who started the discussion. The results were the following:

Table 4. Decision making in Generation Zero Loomio groups

| Content Categories | General Group | General Group % | Sub-groups | Sub-groups % |
|--------------------|---------------|-----------------|------------|--------------|
| DECISIONS | 15/54 | 28% | 4/9 | 44% |
| VOTES | N/A | 23.2% | N/A | 36.5% |
| CONSENSUS | 13 | 86% | 2 | 50% |
| MAJORITY | 1 | 6.66% | 1 | 25% |
| BLOCK | 0 | 0% | 1 | 25% |
| CHANGE | 1 | 6.66% | 0 | 0% |
| AUTHOR1 | 9 | 60% | 2 | 50% |
| AUTHOR2 | 6 | 40% | 2 | 50% |

The total number of proposals in the general Loomio group was fifteen out of the fifty-four threads, meaning that 28 per cent of the total number of threads led to a decision-making process. Most of the decisions made were in regards to financial and organisational matters, and to a lesser extent, on strategy and campaigning. The average percentage of votes was 23.3 per cent from the total number of proposals, meaning that the voting rates on average are low. Most of the decisions were passed based on consensus except for one decision that was related to the budget when a few members expressed that they had not sufficient knowledge or context to make a fully informed decision but that they trusted the team working on the budget to make the right decision. There was only one case where 30 per cent of members that cast a vote disagreed with the proposal and made comments for it to be amended. The proposal was about campaign funding applications and the concerns were taken into account, the document was changed and the outcome was an amended funding application process document. Looking at the decision-making processes in the sub-groups, there were a total of four proposals out of nine discussions threads. The voting rates within sub-groups were slightly higher than the general group, but still considerably low with 36.5 per cent on average. Two decisions were passed with consensus, one with the majority and one proposal was blocked. The member who blocked the proposal explained that going ahead with the proposal could have legal repercussions on some members of the group. The author of the discussion realised that the issue raised was genuine and that it should be addressed so the proposal did not go through.

Based on Wilhelm's (2000) model, the content analysis indicates that the discussions in the GZ Loomio general group and the subgroups are interactive, rational and exhibit reciprocity. This suggests that the discussions and the process of decision-making using the Loomio tool can be considered genuinely deliberative and democratic.

4.4 Loomio's design characteristics

In terms of inclusivity, Loomio is available to any group that has the need to deliberate and make collective decisions, thus members of a Loomio group tend to already belong to a group or be already committed with a cause (L1). The Loomio tool provides a neutral (advertising free), secure space for members of a group to deliberate and make decisions freely (GZ1, L1). In terms of decision-making, Loomio gives members the option to make decisions in an inclusive way but it depends on how the group uses the tool as to whether it is fully inclusive (GZ2, GZ3). Loomio does open a space for all members to have a voice and to make everybody “feel like equals” (GZ1) but social dynamics do take place in a group (GZ2).⁵ Dryzek notes “the process of deliberation enables actors to share their ‘real’ concerns in an open dialogue” (1990: 17). In this regard it was said that Loomio “can keep people from very different perspectives deeply engaged ... from radicals to more mainstream” and make people feel that they can share their true opinions (GZ1). The level of participation in the GZ Loomio group varied depending on the issue discussed, and time constraints can impose limits to the process of deliberation. However, the process of deliberation in general terms was unconstrained; for example, a member blocking a proposal to express a serious concern, or members showing disagreement with a previous comment or seeking further information. The recurrent trend was that when members expressed disagreement they would also provide reasons for their argument and ‘tag’ a person if a message was a specific reply to another person’s argument. In this regard the discussions exhibited reciprocity “communicating in terms that others can accept” (Dryzek, 2009: 1381) and ‘reasoned argument’ grounded on information available at the time. It was also observed that members changed their votes as the discussion progressed showing reflexivity. Previous research suggests that reaching consensus is not always possible (Benhabib, 1996; Dryzek, 2002; Mouffe, 1999) and although it was observed that GZ did reach consensus in most decisions, there were times that proposals did not go through or that had to be changed. However, what proved to be more important was that the process was inclusive and transparent as some comments from GZ Loomio members illustrate the point:

“Great work team, love the way we used Loomio before proposal made, feels cool”

“Agree with a lot of what has gone before, and feel so happy that we have gone about making this decision in a really inclusive way”

⁵ This point is developed further in the next section

GZ uses Loomio more for deliberation than decision-making as the content analysis revealed. The process of deliberation enables participants to test ideas, get a feel about how members of the group think about an specific issue, and bring some 'clarity' to specific issues discussed (GZ1) as the following comments from the GZ group suggests:

“Even though we’ve ended up in the same place I personally feel way more clarity about how it is going to be used, and I feel more confident about the areas where we need to focus our eye more”

“Wow, cool to see some awesome clarity appearing here [...].”

“Awesome to see the feedback coming in, yay Loomio!”

The process of deliberation within Loomio is meant to help groups “build shared understanding” and take into account different points of view (L1, GZ1). Smith describes this as ‘enlarged mentality’ or “broadening the understanding and perspective of participants” (2003: 58). According to Loomio users, this tool as an online platform has the potential to meet the qualities necessary to foster genuine deliberative democratic processes (GZ1, GZ2, GZ3). Media theorist Douglas Rushkoff also acknowledged this potential and stated “I’m excited about Loomio because it finally unleashes the Internet’s potential to bring people towards consensus greater than the sum of its parts, rather than debate and polarised discussion that reduces public discourse to the lowest common denominator.” (Rushkoff in Scoop, 2013). It appears that Loomio was ‘coded’ to ‘code’ deliberation and collective decision-making but in the end it will depend on how the groups utilize it to exploit that potential (GZ1, GZ2, GZ3).

4.5 Democratic deliberative practices in Generation Zero

Members of GZ explained that deliberation and decision-making take place in different places and are not limited to Loomio, for example, numerous decisions that happen within regions, working groups and project teams are either made in person, via Skype or email (GZ1, GZ2). However, Loomio has become the decision-making tool for the most important decisions or “a Loomio decision” (GZ1) meaning a decision that requires the participation of the entire group. GZ members hold ongoing regional deliberative practices and they continue to hold offline national gatherings biannually to bring core members and volunteers together. Loomio provides a shared space where discussions that occur in various places can be brought back to continue in a common shared space (GZ1, GZ3). It was also acknowledged that resourcing and awareness are essential in order to hold wholly deliberative and inclusive processes (GZ1, GZ2, GZ3). Previous research suggests that the

process of deliberation needs to be nurtured with appropriate norms and procedures in order to foster participation (John et al., 2009; Smith, 2003; Wilhelm, 2000). Although Loomio exhibits the necessary conditions to enable deliberation, users need to invest time and effort to hold a fully deliberative and democratic process. Members in GZ for example, take turns to administer Loomio, which includes creating sub-groups, updating guidelines and sending extra reminders for key discussions and decisions that require input from the rest of the group (GZ2). The issue of participation in Loomio is complex because as a tool it provides the opportunity for everybody to be included and have an equal voice but “lots of dynamics come into play” (GZ2) that seem to be related to levels of delegation and trust between members and time commitment.

It was observed that the levels of participation in discussions and proposals varied, some discussions had more participation than others. Similarly some proposals had more votes than others. However, it was interesting to notice that people who were not making comments or voting were using the option ‘like’ when they liked a comment, as a member explained “I suppose people don’t comment or vote but that doesn’t necessarily mean that they don’t keep up with what is going on” (GZ2). It was observed that different people participated in different discussions, which could be related to the levels of delegation, different working groups, projects and regions. In some proposals some members made comments acknowledging that they did not know enough about a specific issue and for that reason they would rather abstain, as a member explained “... abstain means that either you don’t have an opinion or you agree with what is happening. Abstain doesn’t necessarily mean a lack of ownership but sometimes can hint that they are delegating their authority to somebody else” (GZ1). This suggests that there are high levels of trust within GZ as an organisation and members trust other members to make the right decisions in the work that they are doing. Thus, sometimes members do not comment or vote because they feel adequately represented (GZ1). The other key issue in regards to participation is time. Members need to consciously log onto Loomio knowing that they are expected to read the discussion threads and provide well thought-out critical comment, which takes time (GZ1). However, “tagging has been the notification revolution” (GZ1) and members pay more attention to discussions that they have been tagged in, and in order to increase the levels of participation for urgent matters a useful measure has been to send extra ‘prompts’ (GZ1, GZ2).

It was observed that generally the person who starts a discussion thread also holds the role of mediator/facilitator in that discussion. Loomio does not have a ‘mediation’ function but mediation is essential for discussions to be deliberative (GZ2, L1). Previous research

suggests that 'active' mediation can be useful to nurture the process of deliberation (Smith, 2003; Wilhelm, 2000). The mediator/facilitator is the person that "establishes initial lines of communication between parties, disseminates information, and helps set the rules for engagement" (Smith, 2003: 84). The mediator should promote "fairness, inclusiveness, openness and endurance" (Dukes, 1996: 176). The common pattern in GZ Loomio group is that the person who starts the discussion tends to stimulate discussion, test assumptions and be the caretaker of that discussion (GZ1, GZ2). However, the group also has members that display intrinsic skills for mediation/facilitation, and they are good at summarising the key ideas from a discussion and suggesting proposals (GZ1, GZ2).

Pickerill & Chatterton (2008; Pickerill, 2007) in their study of autonomous geographies noticed that some members show more commitment than others, which in turn creates internal hierarchies. In this regard the 'core members' in GZ makes reference to members that have been involved for a long time or have high levels of responsibility (GZ1, GZ2). The 'core' members tend to do a lot of the work within the network and tend to start the discussions and proposals in Loomio (GZ2). However, the purpose is for them to 'role model' (GZ1) a democratic culture where everybody feels that they can participate in a similar way.

5 AUTONOMOUS PUBLIC-LED DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

Dryzek (1990; 2002) argues that the benefits of democratic deliberation, such as better and more legitimate decisions, the extension of accountability to the broader public, and the promotion of social learning can only be achieved in an autonomous environment, without market or political influence. He states that an autonomous public sphere engaged in deliberation or ‘reasoned argument’ is more likely to find the best solutions for the public good. ICT and online mechanisms in the digital age can serve to facilitate public-led democratic deliberative processes, as well as ongoing engagement and social learning in the public sphere (Noveck, 2004a; Schlosberg & Dryzek, 2002; Wright & Street, 2007). The following section, which addresses Research Question 3, is based on the case study and illustrates a public-led deliberative democratic process that was able to generate ‘para-governmental’ action, ‘deliberative capacity,’ and to a certain extent ‘communicative power.’

5.1 Autonomous public-led deliberation

Smith suggests that deliberative democratic processes “need to be inclusive, foster unconstrained dialogue, be sensitive to a plurality of values, [and] take into account specific contextual conditions” (Smith, 2003: 80-81). It was observed that the discussions in the GZ Loomio group and the solutions proposed referenced current science, expert advice, current international examples and took into account New Zealand’s political and economic context. For example, one of their current campaigns focuses on greening the transport system and the threads that informed their campaign made reference to solutions that could actually be implemented. The threads showed a preference for a move towards carbon free transportation like Dutch-style cycling infrastructure and improving regional public transport systems. The threads included information on current NZ transport policy; the transport budget and current threats to green transport systems like the government’s plans to build the Roads of National Significance (RoNS), a costly motorways project. GZ members looked at the economic arguments from the government to invest on the RoNS project and found that “the benefit-cost ratio is 0.2, that means [...] \$127 million of value for the \$635 million” (GZ in Green, 2013). Furthermore, GZ argued that previous research suggests “that public transport creates more jobs per dollar invested than motorways” (ibid) so a few members worked on the possibilities available for greener and smarter transport investment and shared it with the public (see Scoop, 2012). GZ members seemed to be

aware that they run the risk of being perceived as ‘young-idealists’ who are ‘anti-development’ and narrowly focused on the transport issue as the following comments suggest:

“My reservations are: “Kicking up a fuss” [...] risks making GZ look like radical, backward greenies who are anti-development.”

“[...] we don’t want to be dismissed in the debate next year as ‘young idealists’, we want to use our youth in an inspiring way. We don’t want people to get the idea that we’re anti-Govt [...]”

“The risk that GZ gets tied to the issue of transport [...] Obviously transport is huge, but it’s also one part of an extensive puzzle.”

However in the end the group decided to go forward with the campaign making sure that their focus is on generating ‘climate talk’ and alternative development solutions as some of the Loomio comments indicate:

“[...] our end goal should be to steer the debate in a direction that focuses on bad climate decisions/bad future decisions/‘alternative development’ solutions.”

“[...] we should only view this as the means to the end goal of generating climate talk.”

“[...] while our actions may dissuade some ‘mainstreamers’, it could alternately serve to make taking action and getting creative on these issues more mainstream [...] Green light from me.”

It was clear from the threads that their approach did not have the intention of being confrontational, but instead their campaigns aimed to engage with the public and the political sector on purposeful discussion, based on facts and practical solutions. Critical theorists suggested that public-led deliberative processes are more likely to achieve genuine deliberative democracy because citizens would be engaged throughout the process (Fishkin, 2000; Noveck, 2004a; 2004b; Schlosberg & Dryzek, 2002). In this regard GZ’s internal deliberative democratic practices have so far served to inform their national campaigns and in turn led the debate on inter-generational climate justice in New Zealand.

5.2 Para-governmental action and building deliberative capacity

Dryzek 2(2002) and Benhabib (1996) suggest that ‘para-governmental action’ is likely to emerge from critical deliberative engagements in the public sphere. GZ as a network is focused on taking action on reducing emissions and they have ongoing projects in partnership with different sectors. For example, the GZ Auckland regional team has been working with the Auckland Transport Blog on a ‘congestion free network’ to improve public transport and reduce emissions from the excessive use of cars in Auckland. They are now working in partnership with the Auckland City Council to implement this plan. Another example involves the Dunedin regional team, who have a youth-led sustainable housing

project working in partnership with the Dunedin City Council to reduce emissions from energy consumption while they also improve student accommodation (*Generation Zero*, 2013; *GenerationZeroFacebook*, 2013).⁶ GZ's ongoing internal deliberative practices have also extended offline in the broader public generating 'deliberative capacity' which Dryzek defines as "the extent to which a political system possesses structures to host deliberation that is authentic, inclusive, and consequential" (2009: 1382). Dryzek explains that the presence of 'deliberative capacity' in society is important as deliberation is a core component of democracy and "the more authentic, inclusive, and consequential political deliberation is, the more democratic a political system is" (Ibid: 1380). GZ's internal deliberative democratic practices have focused on generating external 'climate talk' in the public and political spheres. Their campaigns, events and stunts were intended to "generate more participation ... [and] create an environment where people can have democratic input' (GZ1) in regards to inter-generational climate justice. GZ has organized a number of events to get experts, politicians, and youth talking about climate change and reducing emissions.⁷ The most recent example was the GZ Speaking Tour "What's the holdup? Getting NZ moving on climate change" that was held from 15 July to 12 August 2013.⁸ The Speaking Tour was composed of fourteen regional free-entry events across New Zealand where youth climate-change activists, high profile experts on climate-change and sustainable energy, academics, politicians, journalists and green business leaders met with members of the public and deliberated about the possibilities to move New Zealand beyond fossil fuels. The Speaking Tour was supported by the international green organisations WWF and 350.org (*Generation Zero*, 2013). The events spawned discussions about the current obstacles to move beyond fossil fuels and featured current opportunities to do so. The key theme, messaging, imagery, budget, and guest speakers were organized by GZ on Loomio months before the events took place, and then each regional team helped with organising and coordinating the events.

⁶ See <http://www.congestionfree.co.nz/who-are-we/> and <http://www.3news.co.nz/The-health-effects-of-a-cold-home/tabid/817/articleID/308023/Default.aspx>

⁷ See events in <https://www.facebook.com/GenerationZero/events>

⁸ See this 3 minute video about GZ Speaking Tour http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F_KqbM6Mrbl

The key ideas that GZ offered on the Speaking Tour were focused on their own green/smart transport and 100% possible campaigns, which were further transmitted through national newspapers, radio, TV, online blogs and Facebook.⁹ However, the different speakers provided a variety of ideas and current practices to move beyond fossil fuels, featuring local and national examples of smart transport investment, smart energy, clean energy, sustainable housing and current measures being taken by green businesses to reduce emissions. The events were informative as well as interactive to get the lay public and representatives from different sectors to talk to each other, build partnerships and work towards a collective strategy (GenerationZeroFacebook, 2013).

5.3 Communicative power

Wilhelm suggests that associations in civil society tend to organize to fill un-met political needs and that the public sphere provides online/offline channels for active citizens and groups to “become informed about issues, discuss and debate these issues autonomously, and ultimately have an impact on policy agendas” (2000: 9). The GZ Speaking Tour had two aims, firstly to get New Zealanders from various backgrounds and different generations to meet and talk about the alternatives and to take an active role in making it happen. The second aim was to call for a ‘climate friendly government’ that plans and invests on a zero carbon future and reflects this vision on climate friendly policies (GenerationZeroFacebook, 2013). During the Speaking Tour GZ members collected thousands of pledge cards from the public that said “I will if you will” in regards to taking action on reducing emissions and collectively move towards a ‘low carbon future’. The pledge cards were planted on the parliament lawn for the culmination of the Speaking Tour and MPs from different political parties joined to ‘pull the plug’ on outdated policies that are detrimental for building a low carbon future (See Figure 5)

⁹ See Generation Zero's transport vision on The New Zealand Herald http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10905025, and <http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/AK1307/S00267/youth-call-for-investment-in-congestion-free-network.htm>; The Congestion Free Network proposal on TV3 News <http://www.3news.co.nz/The-Congestion-Free-Network-proposal/tabid/817/articleID/307118/Default.aspx>, <http://www.3news.co.nz/Youth-support-Auckland-congestion-tax/tabid/423/articleID/296203/Default.aspx>; Wellington Transport Plans <http://www.3news.co.nz/Mixed-reaction-to-Wgtn-transport-plans/tabid/423/articleID/301905/Default.aspx>; Transport Blog <http://transportblog.co.nz/2013/07/30/congestion-free-network-in-the-herald/>; on climate change at Radio New Zealand <http://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/ourchangingworld/audio/2556953/climate-change-and-generation-zero>, and moving beyond fossil fuels <http://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/afternoons/audio/2556509/our-changing-world-generation-zero>.



Figure 5. MPs ceremoniously 'pulling the plug' on dinosaur/outdated climate thinking (Generation ZeroFacebook, 2013)

In order to ensure that politicians were committed to their pledge, GZ members are engaging with youth voters and examining candidates stances on climate change and

emissions reduction for the up-coming local body elections in 2013 and national elections in 2014. GZ members are aware that “New Zealand has no credible emissions reduction plan [...] according to a recent UN report, the plans currently in place will achieve only one third of the emissions reductions required to meet the Government’s own 2020 target.” (GZ in *Positive News*, 2011). They are also aware that numbers are on their side; some members looked at youth voting statistics and in a Loomio thread commented:

Of those aged 18 to 29 years, one in four are not enrolled to vote. That is more than 177,000 young people—almost the population of Wellington city.

GZ members are actively promoting youth voters to enrol to vote and choose a climate friendly government because they know that collectively they have better chances to actually pursue politicians to reflect a low-carbon vision on policy. If critical theorists are right when they say that ‘communicative action’ can transform into ‘communicative power’ (Habermas, 1996; Dryzek, 2002; Benhabib, 1996) New Zealand in the near future might have public policies that reflect a move towards carbon zero by 2050.

The findings of this chapter indicate that the internal deliberative democratic processes within GZ were able to facilitate a public led deliberative democratic process. Furthermore, the process generated para-governmental action, extended deliberative capacity, and had some influence in the political sphere. These are outcomes theorized to emerge from deliberative critical engagements (see Dryzek, 2002; Benhabib, 1996; Habermas, 1996).

6 DISCUSSION

6.1 Discussion on autonomous public-led democratic deliberation

Dryzek and Schlosberg have argued that online deliberative mechanisms need to be authentic not symbolic where “reasoned discourse rather than mere preference aggregation” (2002: 332) is exercised. The Loomio tool was designed to reflect a genuine deliberative democratic process like a community assembly so that it facilitates participants ‘building shared understanding’ (L1) or what Smith (2003) calls an ‘enlarged mentality’ as well as ‘unlocking the collective wisdom’ (L1) or ‘multiplicatively’ effect (Fearon, 1998) in collective decision-making. The content analysis on the GZ Loomio group, which addressed Research Questions 1 and 2, revealed that the deliberative process exhibited the qualities of inclusivity, equality, unconstrained dialogue, interactivity, reciprocity and ‘reasoned argument.’ The format of the tool keeps the discussion focused on the topic and the process of decision-making is transparent. The tool has facilitated purposeful discussions across regional distance, action-oriented decision-making. This is what Habermas (1984, 1987) terms ‘communicative action’ which he describes as one of the key outcomes of a deliberative democratic process.

Loomio appears to address the material limitations of space and the cost of face-to-face democratic deliberation, but only partially overcomes the issue of time as participants are required to invest time in order to hold genuine deliberation. Furthermore, Loomio does not replace the need for face-to-face contact, instead it provides an extra space where spontaneous discussions that happen in different places can be brought back to a collective online space. Thus, It allows for ongoing discursive democratic practices or ‘everyday democracy’ (L1). The issues of building trust and social cohesion online did not emerge in the case study because the group was a ‘knowing group’ (L1) with a collective purpose.

Generation Zero uses Loomio to complement face-to-face deliberation and decision-making. The combination of online and offline deliberative democratic practices were focused on finding solutions based on current science, available information, and taking into account the national socio-political and economic context. The discussions and decisions that were made on Loomio were in turn transformed into campaigns, events and stunts to generate ‘climate talk’ and their message was extended to the broader public through media and social media. Their ongoing deliberative practices have promoted social learning and para-governmental action at the local and national level and these actions are

also linked to a transnational call to reduce global carbon emissions (Research Question 3). Generation Zero's approach is focused on transformation of practices and building partnerships. However, they do realize the power of their message and the power of their numbers and intend to use it as leverage or 'communicative power' to influence policy. The outcomes of their deliberative democratic practices have not only promoted social learning but also generated grassroots engagement, which will be essential for the actual process of implementing any solution.

6.2 Limitations

One of the limitations of the study is that it was based on a population of individuals who are well educated, and that have the means and the skills to deliberate online. This makes it difficult to generalize findings of the study to other populations. Wilhelm (2000) argues that not everybody can participate in 'digital democracy' and the most marginalized sectors of the population might not be able or afford to deliberate online. However, Wilhelm's research also addresses this issue and provides some solutions to overcome the digital inequality. Another limitation is the degree of subjectivity in the content analysis attributed to personal interpretation while coding the Loomio messages. Content analysis intends to make participatory observation more objective by systematically categorizing comments in a quantitative manner but as suggested by Wright and Street "there is an element of subjectivity when making qualitative judgments" (2007: 862). To overcome this issue, the research has tried to confirm the core findings with the opinions of interviewees. A third limitation was that due to time constraints and geographical distance the online study was not complemented with offline observations, which might have been beneficial in order to fully understand how autonomous geographies complement offline and online deliberative practices.

6.3 Concluding remarks

This study has examined an alternative to standard state-led environmental deliberative mechanisms. It has demonstrated that autonomous informed publics with autonomous deliberative online tools are able to foster an ongoing deliberative democratic process that can better hold grassroots engagement and move beyond technocratic approaches. The findings suggest that autonomous geographies with the right tools can be instrumental in extending deliberative practices in the public sphere.

Munton asked "... assuming that [citizens] wish to make their voices heard, how have they gone about it and how easy is it for them to overcome the institutional obstacles that

frequently constrain their full participation?” (2003: 109). Autonomous geographies in New Zealand have done this by focusing on their own actions and the power that emerges from building an internal democratic culture, a collective message, and a collective purpose. The findings in this study suggest that autonomous informed publics with the use of autonomous deliberative online tools are able to hold genuine deliberative democratic processes.

Furthermore, their critical engagements can in turn generate social learning, ‘para-governmental action’ and extend deliberative capacity in the public sphere; and to a certain extent exert influence in the political sphere. Public-led democratic deliberation could be instrumental in increasing the influence of civil-society in environmental policy-making. However, this would still require the development of institutions that effectively reflect the collective decisions of citizens’ critical engagements. Citizens should be able to exercise their right to have a voice and a vote in environmental decision-making. Some immediate possibilities at the local level would be the use of autonomous deliberative tools like Loomio for environmental neighborhood planning, community resource management, community conservation programmes and local sustainable housing projects. Further research needs to be done to establish the actual possibilities of this type of engagement led by the public in partnership with political and private sectors.

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APPENDIX A

Research Proposal

Sustainable Communities and Online Deliberation

KATHERINE DESPOT BELMONTE

Purpose of study

Green theory has a strong focus on the potential of sustainable communities to serve as emancipatory frameworks that would better reflect a balanced life between humans and nature (Dobson, 2007). Sustainable communities are meant to foster democratic deliberation, work/life balance, and innovation as well as having a socio-environmental focus (Dobson, 2007; Haughton and Hunter, 1994). Linked to the idea of sustainable communities is the role of individuals and their “full, free, active participation [...] in democratically shaping their personal and social circumstances” (Dobson, 2007: 108). However, there is an acknowledged gap between the green prescriptions and the means to build sustainable communities. Many people have wondered if the sense of community and direct democracy can be recreated in ‘modern’ societies as they were in ancestral close-knit communities (Dobson, 2007).

This study would seek to provide an empirical example of how a sustainable community might look like in a ‘modern’ society and analyse the process of democratic deliberation within the community. I would take as an example *Enspiral*, a social community enterprise based in New Zealand which is expanding to Australia and Hong Kong (Kerr, 2012). This enterprise has a socio-environmental focus and a flat decentralised structure. Members aim to keep the flow of information constant and decision-making consensus based (Kerr, 2012; Ekovivo, 2012; Beecroft, 2012; Enspiral Blog, 2013). The process of deliberation is based online by using a platform called *Loomio*, which was developed by a few *Enspiral* members for the purpose of deliberation (Goh, 2012; Brockmeir, 2012; *Loomio*, 2013).

The dissertation would aim to examine the characteristics of a sustainable community in a ‘modern’ society. The main focus would be on the process of deliberation; more specifically, I would intend to evaluate the role that online platforms play in fostering direct democracy within a community.

Some of the key research questions:

- To what extent do online deliberation platforms foster democratic deliberation?
- To what extent online deliberation platforms can be used for environmental deliberation?

Relevant Literature

My research will analyse the empirical case study through a combination of theoretical lenses, namely, green theory, deliberative democracy theory, and assemblage theory.

Green theory would provide the theoretical framework to develop the idea of sustainable communities and their role in the broader context of environmental sustainability. Robyn Eckersley’s idea of “homo communitas” would be essential to connect the theory to the particular empirical case study. Eckersley also develops ideas of agency and community responsibility in revolutionary structures that would be useful for this study. Some of the key authors in the subject to be used in the literature review are the following:

- Dobson, A., 2007. *Green Political Thought*. New York: Routledge.
- Eckersley, R. 2004. *The Green State: Rethinking Democracy and Sovereignty*. London: MIT Press.
- Porritt, J. 1984. *Seeing Green*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Deliberative democracy theory suggests that public participation processes are an essential element for decision-making in decentralised societies. The following are the key authors on this topic

- Dryzek, J. S., & Berejikian, J. (1993). Reconstructive democratic theory. *American Political Science Review*, 87, 48-60.
- Dryzek J. S., Tucker A (2008) Deliberative innovation to different effect: Consensus conferences in Denmark, France, and the United States *Public Administration Review* 68(5) 864-876
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- Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society* (T. Burger, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. (Original work published 1962)

- Ryfe, D. M. (2005). Does deliberative democracy work? *Annual Review of Political Science*, 8, 49-71.

Some of the current work in regards to online deliberation to be used would be the following:

- Fishkin, J. S. (2000). Virtual democratic possibilities: Prospects for Internet democracy. Presented to the conference on "Internet, Democracy and Public Goods," Belo Horizonte, Brazil, November.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2004). Democracy online: Civility, politeness, and the democratic potential of online political discussion groups. *New Media and Society*, 6, 259- 284.
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Assemblage theory will be used to analyse the complex decentralised structure of the *Enspiral* social enterprise, who describe themselves as an "eco-system of 98 people and 12 companies" (*Enspiral*, 2013)

- De Landa, Manuel (2006) *A New Philosophy of Society: assemblage theory and social complexity*, London & New York: Continuum

Methodology

The study will use online interviews, an online ethnographic study in the *Enspiral* network, and literature-based research of primary sources. The interviews will be via Skype with *Enspiral* and *Loomio* key members. The online ethnographic study will be done using the *Enspiral* intranet, *Loomio* and Yammer platforms. I currently have access to all of these networks. There are online published interviews, videos, and articles about *Enspiral* and *Loomio* that will be used in the study.

Interviews would be transcribed and analysed using ATLAS-ti. An ethnographic diary will be kept for a period of two months to provide an in-depth systematic observation record that aids in the analysis of the role that the different members play in the process of deliberation.

Time Frame

| Part 1 (7 April to 22 May) | Part 2 (7 April to 7 June) | Part 3 (7 June to 9 September) |
|---|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make corrections to research proposal • Write the literature review • Complete risk assessment • Apply for ethics approval to do interviews • Start online ethnographic study | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete ethnographic study • Complete online Interviews • Complete online research • Analyse findings | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submit draft by 30 June • Make corrections • Submit dissertation |

Potential Outcomes, Rationale and Value of Research

The rationale behind this study is to examine a real life example of a sustainable community and the process of deliberation. I believe that this study could contribute to the existing body of literature in this area by providing an empirical example that helps bridge the gap between green theoretical prescriptions and practice. This study could also contribute to the emerging literature about online deliberation. I would aim to determine the challenges, opportunities, and achievements of implementing online deliberation processes in networked communities.

A potential limitation of the study is that it may be difficult to make conclusions and generalisations based on the data collected, due to the fact that *Enspiral* is a new social enterprise which is constantly changing. Also, due to the flat-decentralised nature of the enterprise, it might be hard to predict future deliberation processes. However, based on how quickly the organisation is growing and how it deals with constant change, there might be useful lessons that can be applied to other networked communities or organisations.

APPENDIX B

| Date | Organisation | Role in the Organisation | Interviewee Code |
|-------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------|
| 22/07/2013 | Generation Zero | Direction Setting Team Member | GZ1 |
| 20/07/2013 | Generation Zero | National Support Crew Member | GZ2 |
| 06/06/2013 | Generation Zero | National Support Crew Member | GZ3 |
| 23/07/2013 | Loomio Co-operative Ltd. | Loomio Founder | L1 |

APPENDIX C

Interview with GZ1

Date: 22 of July 2013

Duration: 60 min

INT: Why do you use loomio?

RES: GZ uses loomio because we are an organisation, which is distributed geographically, and there are decisions that need to be made across that distance so it's a matter of using it to create shared understanding between people that have irregular communication and support our given culture of consensus. The other main reason why we use loomio is because it is a way to engage people that are less involved in participating in decision-making that might affect them, so people who may be volunteering to a lesser degree and showing citizenship still but within the compounds of their daily routine or a full-time job or study they can still have ownership of that active citizenship and is not just that they were asked to do something but it was a decision that they felt compelled to be a part of in a more authentic way.

INT: How does GZ use loomio?

RES: A great deal of our decisions happens within our emails still because they need to be made much faster than within loomio, which perhaps there is that fear that a particular person at that time might not check it in time. Primarily the key deviations from the use of loomio are email for private decisions that don't need to be consulted on and the other alternative would be decisions made in person which are then either put into loomio or everyone was in person who was affected by the decision anyway but if it does happen in person and it does affect others then it goes on loomio to check what others think.

INT: Do you have other meeting spaces where people deliberate and make decisions?

RES: There are three types of Facebook groups that we have per city, we have one page for between 5 to 15 organisers per city, then there is a group which is more public which has regular volunteers probably a group of around 80 per city and then a public group. Some decisions are made in the Facebook page of the organisers if decisions need to be made really fast.

INT: What do you think loomio provides that other tools don't provide?

RES: It provides rigor, other mediums are implicitly less rigorous, when I sit down to use loomio I log on knowing that I'm about to spend an hour or half an hour reading through what others deep concerns are or what their rationalised concerns are, so it's value is that it really owns the space of decision-making and it means that when you log in you are thinking about participating really constructively. I think that is a benefit because it means that you put serious decisions there and people think 'ah this is a loomio decision' and it has more gravity and you participate in a more intense way.

INT: Do you think loomio keeps people informed and engaged?

RES: I believe so. There are limitations to the tool in terms of how regular people use it. I think that it does offer something unique. As a software tool it's not very smoothly integrated in other mediums. From a participatory governance perspective, I think the quality of participation it's the winning factor. You just couldn't make such complex decisions without it, an email chain would be just terrible and Facebook is just far too short attention spam to hold the weighty decisions. The tools and the technology need to be right for what you need so loomio will be good for some things but not everything yet.

INT: Do you think loomio helps a group of people to refine discourses?

RES: Yes I think so. I think you can do that but GZ doesn't tend to do that often, other loomio groups might do it but GZ has a culture of bringing a really well thought idea for very rigorous comment. For example in Enspiral it has been used for generation ideas but it depends on your organising culture.

INT: Do you think loomio helps making action-oriented decisions?

RES: All decisions are action-orientated but depends on the degree, most of our loomio is used for less practical more theoretical complicated questions around what the organisations trajectory is or how to approach certain things or conceptual questions.

INT: Do you think the conversations you have in loomio helps GZ to achieve their core goals?

RES: Yes. In transitioning towards a carbon zero society we need to be very community engaged and make all of our activities very realistic and you create small pockets of culture if you meet in person. Loomio means that we can keep people from very different perspectives deeply engaged – from radicals to more mainstream – and it's a mutual platform where people can openly and honestly say their true opinions. People have an equal opportunity to voice their opinion whereas other platform would lack that openness or inclusivity. Loomio exhibits neutrality, which is very helpful.

INT: What are the benefits of having sub-groups?

RES: Sub-groups make it clearer what to discuss where and it also makes it clearer who is expected to participate in those particular discussions. Is directed to a team instead of the whole group. It makes the process a bit more efficient and focused. All the conversations in sub-groups are open to the larger group to see.

INT: Why does only 60 people from the 3000 people network has access to loomio?

RES: We have surveyed this. When we decided what loomio is for we surveyed all of our memberships and we have asked them what kind of participation they have, and asked what sort of participation they wanted to have in decision-making and we've tried to find where people wanted to really engage in decisions and where people just wanted to help sometimes, so it's about frequency of engagement. In loomio there are reasonably hard questions so somebody that has come to events occasionally or maybe been to one meeting or a film night probably will not have enough information or organisational understanding they would probably won't make constructive comments, they would probably slow things down a little bit. We do have the bar sort of high so it keeps things moving.

INT: Do you think the role of a mediator or facilitator within loomio is important?

RES: Yes. GZ overall has found that is more effective to have the person who has posted the discussion in the first place to invigorate the discussion and to test people's assumptions etc. In that end is useful to have a facilitator.

INT: Why do you think the proposal voting rates tend to be low?

RES: We have people lurking around in loomio but everyone has the opportunity to have an input and all the information is available, so personally I have no issue with the fact that there is generally a 33% participation rate, like I have done it that I have read all of the loomio discussions and I haven't said anything because I just feel like I'm already represented.

INT: Do you think the people that participate are the ones that will be more involved with the outcome of that decision?

RES: Yes, I agree.

- INT:** **Would the decision go forward if some people abstained?**
- RES:** Yes, abstain means that either you don't have an opinion or you agree with what is happening. Abstain doesn't necessarily mean a lack of ownership but sometimes can hint that they are delegating their authority to somebody else.
- INT:** **Could decisions that have been made in the past change overtime depending on the outcomes?**
- RES:** It is possible but the decisions are pretty rigorous they don't really get changed willy-nilly
- INT:** **Overall do you think that loomio helps making better decisions?**
- RES:** Yes.
- INT:** **Do you think loomio is designed to be inclusive?**
- RES:** Yes definitely. I think it is interesting because people do need to choose to be in there so it's not necessarily all inclusive but I think is good because when you are in a loomio group you do think about why you are there and then you participate better but it is definitely neutral, everyone feels like equals.
- INT:** **Do you think that in practice the processes within GZ loomio group are inclusive?**
- RES:** I think if we had more capacity as in if people had more time to administer loomio and more facilitation it would be more inclusive, but I think we are reasonably good at using loomio in the way that is supposed to be used.
- INT:** **Do you think the people that participate the most are the ones that have been involved in GZ for longer?**
- RES:** Yes or they are new but have great responsibility or high level of commitment.
- INT:** **Who does the research about the best ways to move NZ towards carbon zero?**
- RES:** The solutions team.
- INT:** **Who elects people to represent them on the National Leadership Teams?**
- RES:** It's not elected it's appointed by the Advisory Board, which is made up of people who has offered expert advice on certain topics and provide some of the elder figures for us as they are generally older people, they don't have decision-making power except over the selecting of people. They appoint the DST from application and the DST with the Advisory Board and founding members appoint the NSC.

APPENDIX D

Dissertation Diary

- 13/03/13** Discussion of literature with supervisor
- Jose advised to read literature about deliberation and representation
 - The idea of deliberation in close-knit communities would be interesting.
- 20/03/13** Discussion of dissertation proposal with supervisor
- Jose advised to refine proposal and focus on the aims, objectives and questions. And also start thinking about the methodology.
 - Meet again on 3/04/12 at 5:00pm
 - Check literature on autonomous geographies.
- 11/04/13** Discussion of research questions with supervisor
22/04/13 Supervisor advised to update main question to make it more specific
- The research question is good but I need to make it more specific to link the online platform loomio with environmental decision-making
 - I also need to work on the theoretical background of deliberative democracy and online deliberation
 - I also need to work on the research objectives
 - Update research proposal by the 1st of May.
- 1/05/13** Met supervisor to discuss research questions, methods and presentation
- Jose advised to work on the presentation so that I address the key points within 10 minutes
 - Updated research questions
- 3/05/13** Dissertation presentation
- I need to reflect on how I would link the analysis of ethnographic study with the bigger issue of environmental governance – how am I going to make that leap?
 - Do the risk assessment and get it signed by supervisor
- 23/05/13** Discussion about Literature Review and Methodology
- I need to focus on the key themes on the Literature Review – don't have to cover a lot of topics just the important ones for the dissertation
 - I need to work on the methodology
 - Have as much written as possible by 31 of May so that Jose can look at it before our appointment on 6th of June
 - Start ethnographic study
- 6/06/13** Discussion about Methodology
- Literature review probably will be updated after ethnographic study to focus on key themes
 - Methodology needs more work. I need to be clearer about the objectives and the methods and the reasons behind it.
- 6/06/13** Interview with two members of Generation Zero

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| 31/06/13 | Updated Methodology and set up formal interviews <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Updated methodology • Arranged interview times with 3 Generation Zero members and one of the loomio founders • Continuing ethnographic study in Generation Zero loomio platform • Started ethnographic study in Generation Zero website, Youtube and Facebook page |
| 8/07/13 | Prepared open questions for Interviews with loomio and Generation Zero |
| 17/07/13 | Completed context information about loomio |
| 20/07/13 | Interview with GZ member |
| 22/07/13 | Interview with GZ member |
| 23/07/13 | Interview with loomio founder |
| 28/07/13 | Completed context information about Generation Zero |
| 5/08/13 | Completed content analysis of GZ loomio threads |
| 12/08/13 | Worked on analysis section |
| 19/08/13 | Updated literature review |
| 26/08/13 | Updated analysis section |
| 31/08/13 | Started working on conclusions |
| 3/09/13 | Started working on the introduction |
| 9/09/13 | Editing draft document |
| 12/09/13 | Adding references |