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**Title:**

Online Forums as an Arena for Political Discussion: What Politicians and Activists Can Learn From Teachers

**Abstract:**

As the use of IT-based communication medium such as email, listserv, web-board, web-blog, and pod-cast becomes the new social norm in recent years, speculations about the possibilities of a democratic renewal have also emerged. By reducing the distance and barriers between citizens, politicians and civic groups, it is argued that the diffusion of these new media technologies will facilitate the level civic participation, revitalize political deliberation and resulting in a more “direct” democratic system.

Increasingly, these technologies play a critical role in political campaigns, fundraising, grass-root mobilization, and various social movements around the world. However, despite a growing number of researches and literatures on this subject matter, scholars remain divided on the real political impact of new media technologies – a difference of opinion often attributed to methodological variations and also to the changing nature of a developing medium. One of the ways to gauge the political potential of new media technologies is to measure whether they can be used to generate political knowledge, as political action should *ideally* stem from a sound understanding of the issue at hand.

The purpose of this study is to cast various “e-democratic” practices in light of the lessons learned from the field of education. As politicians and civic groups attempt to reach out to the tech-savvy youth of today with new media technologies, educators have also been using these technologies to facilitate teaching and learning for the same population. The similarities and differences between these two disciplines are therefore worthy of further exploration.

As a starting point, this paper discusses one of the most popular web-based technologies commonly used by politicians, activists, and teachers alike – online discussion forums. The guiding research question for this study is: *to what extent does online discussion forum reflect the ideal conditions of an online learning environment?* Informed by two entwined theoretical frameworks: the notion of electronic democracy and the role of public sphere in a computer-mediated communication environment, the author presents findings from a content analysis of two discussion forums maintained by a government and a civic group. These results are then analyzed with a conceptual framework derived from a review of literature on the use of new media technologies in an educational setting.