

Beth Noveck projects

My research is what you might describe as activist social science. The goal is not only to study conditions in the lab but to “experiment” with the re-design of complex social processes in institutions. This demands an approach that combines law, policy, technology together to make change happen in the world.

Some recent projects and writing have included:

- **Unchat.** Early experiments with real-time, group-based deliberation where we used the screen to mirror the rules of the group back to itself and allow the group to choose and change its own rules for inter-personal communication. We used Unchat in a variety of educational and civic contexts. I wrote a piece about this work called “Designing Deliberative Democracy in Cyberspace.”
- **Cairns.** This is a tool designed to help participants visually map the assets of a group in order to understand what made the collaboration function or fail and to help groups find others to learn from. I designed the taxonomy of questions to get at what made the group work. It also incorporated the idea of the visual wiki where participants could layer their responses in order to visualize consensus and disagreement in answer to these questions. The theory behind Cairns was the subject of “A Democracy of Groups,” which appeared in First Monday and a book chapter called “Visual Deliberation”. And legal scholarship I did about the future of citizen participation in electronic rulemaking.
- **SoPA and Democracy Island.** Around 2003, we acquired one of the first islands in Second Life and subsequently built a campus (State of Play Academy) in There.com to gain a better understanding of how the interface of the virtual world impacts what groups are able to do in virtual worlds, in particular for learning. I wrote a piece about collective action and virtual worlds for a book I edited on virtual worlds called, The State of Play (NYU Press). I ran the first three virtual worlds research conferences and have co-organized the last two. There are plans afoot to do the next one in Chicago sponsored by the MacArthur Foundation and a sixth research meeting in London. Chicago will focus on next-generation philanthropy and social change and ask how this technology can make us more effective in the world. London will, I hope, focus on the role of these technologies in producing innovation in real not just virtual space.
- **Libyan E-Democracy.** Last year I traveled to Tripoli (four times!) to design and test software for citizen participation in legislative deliberation. These tools were designed, not for individual participation, but for communities and groups, including citizen juries based on self-selection and expertise, to refine ideas together, using the screen (in face-to-face meetings and online) to reflect their own work back to themselves. While I have not written yet about Libya, specifically, my recent article on Wiki-Government in the Democracy Journal was informed by this work.

- **Peer-to-Patent, Peer-to-Issued-Patents and The Defender.** Peer-to-Patent is the first project of its kind to tie the work of Web 2.0 social networks to a government decision-making process, namely the review of pending patent applications. We are expanding the initial project to look at how to structure the requests for information to make such groupings useful to litigators in defense of open source software, not only useful to the patent office. I have written about this in another legal journal article as well as several popular publications. It is also the main case study for the book I am currently undertaking.
- **Identity and Reputation Economy.** I have also written a piece entitled “Who Owns My Avatar?” that focuses on the role of social networks in creating reputation on the Net and explores the implications for our legal treatment of reputation. A new draft of a piece that is tentatively entitled "In Groups We Trust: Enabling On-line Collaboration with Group-backed Reputation” puts forward a theory of reputation for groups and suggests mechanisms for groups to bond their members and each other in order to foster greater online commerce and the ability of people to embed themselves in multiple social groups.

My goal in the coming year is to understand better how visual representations of the life of the group help to improve its effectiveness. And to translate this learning into re-design of closed and static institutions, employing social networking technology to create new kinds of on-line communities based on expertise and interest that can be empowered to make legitimate decisions.

Here are a few thoughts about what this might translate into in terms of specific projects:

- This means more use of virtual worlds technologies to construct experiments with self-reflective groups and teams that will help us better understand how to structure online groups for different purposes. And resuscitating Unchat and Cairns to do the social science that we never really got to do to understand how to use and improve these interfaces.
- Expansion of Peer-to-Patent to create a generic tool-kit to help every interested community create a knowledge base about patents in its arena. For example, the synthetic biology community at MIT and I have been in conversation about how its researchers can become more effective as a community at gathering information and making the decision about when to bring a legal challenge.
- Launching a new project to get a government entity outside the patent arena in this country or abroad to delegate government practices like fact gathering and analysis to collaborative, on-line groups. This means getting governmental authorities to communicate their needs to citizens so that people understand what is being asked of them and can supply information to government in manageable and useful ways.
- Working on the “Virtual Company” project that I have undertaken with a colleague. He’s working on changing the law in the State of Vermont to allow for the formation

of purely online companies that can own bank accounts and take out insurance among members who have never met face-to-face. That bill looks set to pass in early 2008. We have done some initial work on the interface design for how to help these companies work together by enabling them to see themselves better through the screen. IBM has pledged support for Virtual Company. We are still in conversation about the design work (which might be accelerated if MIT were involved) but I have a promise of funding support from IBM to do a paper on the relationship between intellectual property law and collaboration, looking at the ways in which current IP doctrine undermines collaborative creativity. The Virtual Company is a solution to the IP project because it replaces IP law with more effective on-line contracting made intelligible through the interface.

- Finally, there is another more political project that we might undertake to draft an executive order for the next President to mandate that every government agency develop a 21st century government plan to engage citizens in its decision-making practices and report to OMB and to Congress on its progress.