

Collaborative Filters for Community and Governance: “Can We All Now Finally Talk At Once?”

This seminar is specifically exploring the role of collaborative filtering as a technical means to enable large and dynamic communities of users to collaboratively brain storm, generate many proposals; and reach decisions through aggregated preferences and ratings of the group. This is a new application of a well established technology, and will require creative thinking to fit the needs of governance rather than commerce, e-mail management, publishing and chat – the areas where filters are typically used (for more background, see:

http://directory.google.com/Top/Reference/Knowledge_Management/Information_Overload/Relevanc

The types of collaborative filters specifically explored in this seminar find their genesis in such sites as slashdot.com and netslaves.com. These sites regenerate themselves according to automated “filters” that collected and map the demonstrated interest of their user populations. In addition, sites such as Amazon.com have successfully used a type of collaborative filter to suggest books that may be of interest to you based upon an automated lookup of the books that were also of interest to other users who purchased the same book that you did. This very simple algorithm is quite effective. In addition, the eBay.com site uses a type of collaborative filter whereby purchases rate their experience with sellers. Over time, these ratings become a very important source of information about a communities experience and judgment with individuals. As with the Amazon filters, this automated information is at once very simple yet quite effective and predictive.

The design of a collaboratively filtered site supporting self-governance and participatory democracy will use the technology to facilitate generation of ideas; discussion; determination of which ideas are popular and worthy enough to proceed to a formal decision; and finally to actually come to decision on any ideas requiring action – such as a budget, a policy statement, or a contract. In the corporate governance arena, the types of decisions requiring group agreement are usually determined by a Board of Directors or by the larger community of Shareholders. In the case of a government with legislative powers (such as a Massachusetts Town Meeting, a state or national chamber), the voting members could also use this system to create ordinances, zoning bylaws, statutes, advice/consent or declarations.

The technologies supporting collaborative filtering, when applied in the self-governance context, may more aptly be deemed “Community Filtering” (a term coined by Professor Michael Froomkin, of the Miami School of Law) or “Governance Filtering” (coined at the MIT eCommerce Architecture Program). For purposes of this seminar, the system has been designed to operate in two basic phases (described above). The first phase, where ideas are generated and discussed and brainstorming occurs, is best described as “Community Filtering”. This phrase connotes the broad, general and potentially open-ended dialogs that can happen in any community at large. The second phase, in which only those matters requiring a formal and binding decision by eligible voting members of the group; is best described as “Governance Filtering”. Different types of filtering and ratings occur at each phase, because the context and objectives vary according to where in the life-cycle of a discussion the community exists.