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by Adrian Bua

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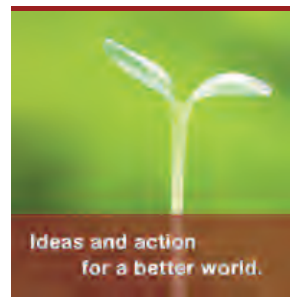
Realising Online Democracy: A Critical Appraisal of “Online Civic Commons”

by Adrian Bua

“A Lippmannesque caricature of the public has prevailed for too long. We tend to regard disengaged citizens as deserving whatever they get in return for their apathy and engaged citizens as busybodies who want too much. Digital technologies alone will not change these attitudes; but they can be used as tools to facilitate a more involving and porous democratic culture”

Stephen Coleman

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Realising Online Democracy:

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Introduction

The essential elements of Habermas's focus upon the negative effects of Capitalism's development upon the "public sphere" echo in the work of many media scholars and democratic theorists (c.f. Habermas 1984, McChesney 1999, Chomsky & Herman 1988) Blumler and Coleman (2001) accept that whilst political spin and the focus upon scandal and personality over substance in the media is creating scepticism and increasing apathy, commercial competition is driving broadcasting standards down and creating circulation wars in the press. The cumulative effect of these and more ills lead the "erosion of democratic values such as "opportunities for committed advocacy, rounded dialogue, sustained deliberation, and especially incentives for citizens to learn, choose and become involved in, rather than to merely follow or kibbutz over, the political process" (Blumler & Coleman 2001: 8)

Moreover, for much of the twentieth century, mainstream debate upon levels of citizen participation in the democratic process became limited to "elitist" notions spawned by Lippmann (1922) and Schumpeter (1943) and the liberal pluralism expanded upon in the 20th century most notably by Dahl (1956). This confined the mainstream power debate to the dispute between C.W. Mills' (1956) contention that government is directed by a narrow "power elite" and Dahl's "politics of autonomous groups" in which a plurality of elites, in conflict with one another to influence policy, create a "harmony of interests". In any case, the role for citizen participation in government is limited to voting at elections. Putnam's "Bowling Alone" (2000) incorporated the perceived "degeneration" of American democracy into a theory contending that the phenomena discussed above led to a

decline in "social capital". Those akin to the Schumpeterian and (to a lesser but still considerable extent) the pluralist tradition would not be too concerned about this due to the perceived incompetence on the part of the general public to engage in matters of policy. What others would term as a "democratic deficit" is here viewed as a natural and desirable state of affairs.

Nevertheless, a nascent literature 'loosely' within the liberal democratic tradition challenges this notion. Increased citizen participation is increasingly coined as the answer to the weakness of modern liberal democracies. Most notably the works of Habermas (1981) and Rawls (1993) turned away from a "passive" role towards a participative, deliberative role for citizens in democracy, regarding quality opinion formation as the best provider of consent and legitimacy. The recent "internet revolution" massively increased the credibility of these initial notions of "deliberative democracy". This new medium for communication is said to offer a space with far more potential than any other to allow citizens, unrestricted by distance or "one-way" flows of information on the "old media" to communicate with each other and with Government.

"Internet romanticists" even talk of direct e-democracy. However, due to space constraints the essay shall not consider such views, suffice it to say that research has shown that "information seekers are mostly after porn and pulp...even on the handful of serious websites that can be found, what is available is mostly superficial information" (Barber in Dahlberg 2001: 2) This could even lead to a rejection of the internet's deliberative potential and therefore discredits the notion that the internet can presently replace representative democracy. Moreover "support for direct democracy is positively correlated with dissatisfaction with institutions of representative democracy. Therefore, perhaps the successful implementation of deliberative institutions and processes may curtail the appeal of "techno-populism" (Coleman & Gotze 2002: 5)

Instead, the essay shall be informed by the view that the new media has vulnerable potential to improve the democratic process. The aim of the essay is to analyse the ability of Blumler and Coleman's proposal for an online deliberative space with links to the political process to fulfill this potential. The ability to undertake a comprehensive analysis with finite recommendations is hampered by space constraints. However, through the analysis of certain empirical and theoretical studies into existing deliberative forums and deliberative democracy (Coleman 2002, Dahlberg 2001, Tucker 2008, Wright 2007, Young 2001) the essay aims to make a few first steps towards this end.

A 'Public Sphere' in the Internet?

Simply put, Habermas suggested a separation of political life into the "political sphere" for policy formulators and the "public sphere" of citizens which should "not only detect and identify problems but also convincingly and influentially thematize them, furnish them with possible solutions and dramatize them in such a way that they are taken up and dealt with by parliamentary procedures" (Habermas in Wright: forthcoming). Prima facie, the internet provides an ideal space for a supposedly causal relationship between opinion formation amongst the public and will formation amongst the decision makers. This could transcend the barriers imposed by the "old" media, thus improving responsiveness and representation. The internet is a medium of active users ; its ability to involve large numbers of users in discussion simultaneously gives it huge discursive potential. The ability for the internet to satisfy "reflexivity", one of Habermas' normative conditions for a public sphere, adds to this (Dahlberg 2001: 2) Users can reflect upon arguments made with massive and instantly accessible resources of information.

However, it is misleading to think that the internet is fulfilling its potential in this respect. The internet's potential is "vulnerable" to pejorative influences such



as commercialization (Blumler & Coleman 2001, Dahlberg 2001). In the past, such influences have degenerated the “starry eyed” visions of potential improvements bought about by new technology such as cable television. Apart from this, as noted above, the internet is overwhelmingly used for apolitical purposes and many people remain generally apathetic. Such apathy makes the separation of the “political” and “public” spheres problematic, it seems under such conditions a quality public would never emerge. Thus, Blumler and Coleman (2001) argue that citizen deliberation must be encouraged by new institutions. However this could corrupt the essence of Habermas’s idealised, independent “public sphere”. Eriksen’s (in Wright 2007: 1170) categorisation of “publics” into informal “weak” publics which are independent from the state (a necessity in Habermasian thought) “strong” publics with direct relations to decision makers and “segmented” publics which form part of the administration can be useful to categorize “publics”.

Coleman (2005) has suggested that internet blogs have some potential to become a general/weak public sphere. However, Wright (forthcoming) notes that it is almost impossible for politicians to “make sense of, and listen to this vast cacophonous blogosphere”. The anarchic nature of internet interaction limits coherent opinion formation and interpretation. Moreover, apathy renders the independent formation of high quality “general publics” unlikely. It is not surprising therefore that attempts to bring public deliberation into the decision making process analysed in this essay (mainly in Europe) have been “strong publics”, led by the relevant political administration (Wright 2007, Tucker 2008) A notable exception to be analysed in this essay is the Minnesota E-democracy initiative (Dahlberg 2001) With regard to this issue, it must be considered whether government initiation of deliberative fora violates the first of Habermas’ normative conditions of the public sphere - “autonomy from state and economic power” (Habermas in Dahlberg 2001: 2)

and if it does, whether this damages the democratising potential of online fora.

An Online “Civic Commons”

Blumler and Coleman (2001) would argue that government institution building does not necessarily translate into control over those institutions. Following this thought, their suggestion for an independent but government funded “civic commons in cyberspace”, to initiate mass scale policy deliberation on the internet, is attractive considering that influential “weak/general publics” such as Minnesota are few and far between, have a limited membership and are very heterogeneous in nature (Coleman & Gotze 2002)

Thus, Blumler and Coleman note that if mistakes of the past are not to be repeated and the internet’s potential is not to be surrendered to economic interests, we should not expect or wait for “abstract” notions for the ideal conditions of “public sphere” to be realised. Instead, a deliberative space within new media should be created through “imaginative and visionary” institution building, clearly defining its societal role, constitutional status and defining “links to the political process” (Blumler and Coleman 2001: 19). This would lead to a “civic commons”, responsible for “eliciting, gathering and coordinating citizens’ deliberations upon and reactions to problems faced and proposals issued by public bodies ... which would be expected to react formally to whatever emerges from the public discussion” (Ibid: 16)

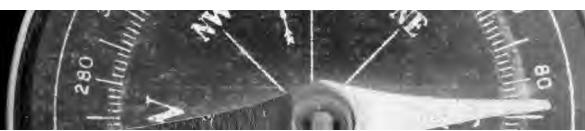
Considering a project of this nature has never been undertaken, the activities of this online commons are to be conceived as a “cumulative civic learning exercise”. It is seen as crucial that this new space does not degenerate into a “talking shop”, effectively making it a “weak” public, but it is also important that its influence upon the political process is not exaggerated, creating false expectations amongst participants.

Lessons from Existing Fora

Though Coleman and Gotze’s “global case studies” of online public engagement in policy making (2002) are limited in their scope, a few noteworthy patterns emerge within them. Most importantly, out of the 12 cases, 10 were “strong” suggesting that deliberative fora tend to emerge from policy making elites far more often than through spontaneous, grassroots movements. Arguably, this vindicates Blumler and Coleman’s contention that without public policy intervention the internet shall remain a source of untapped potential for democracy.

However, though Coleman and Gotze do not evaluate just how much practical influence the fora had in every case, only 1 forum – the Estonian TOM website – proposed policy which was actually implemented by relevant government departments. On the other hand, the experience in Esslingen (Germany) echoes throughout the case studies. Here there was an “awareness” that the policy being discussed was going to take place regardless and leading many participants to “doubt the authenticity of the project from the outset ... (because)... the outcome was severely embedded in the political process” (Coleman & Gotze 2002) Finally, as is made explicit by the researchers, anyone interested in studying the possibility to increase online public engagement in decision making will “come up against three unavoidable truths;

1. There are very few examples in any country of the internet being used to involve citizens in policy deliberation.
2. Where examples can be found, they are of an experimental nature; online public participation is clearly still in its infancy
3. Almost all of the cases one finds are frustrated by the same two problems;
 - (i) Too few people know about them
 - (ii) Governments fail to integrate them in the policy process or respond to them effectively”



This is to be expected from the internet in its infancy. Rather than discrediting notions of online engagement Coleman and Gotze note that this calls for further study into online participation. After all, “models of public service do not evolve spontaneously” (Ibid)

Elite Dominance?

Tucker analyses a French online “citizens panel”, deliberating on genetically modified food following a out-break in BSE which decreased the French people’s “natural deference to elite, technocratic decision making” (2008: 139) The experience in Esslingen is repeated. The decision being discussed – whether to accept new GM maize – had already been taken by the policy making elite. Thus, the only likely motivation behind the use of online fora was not genuine deliberation but an attempt to “educate” the “irrational” public and agree with the policy making elite, legitimizing their actions.

The “steering committee” (debate managers) was made up of pro GMF academics and bureaucrats whose complex arguments in Genetic Science went largely unchallenged. Even the contentious presentation of GM as a progressive and logical continuation of a 6000 years long history of plant domestication found minimal opposition (Ibid: 140) Despite such bias, the conclusions of the participants turned out to be more hostile to GMF than the policy making elite had anticipated, with no influence upon the GM maize policy.

In New Hampshire, USA deliberative fora discussing GMF were not initiated by government but by independent NGO’s and lobbying groups (such as LOKA, Washington) As the debate progressed it was deemed that the only way to promote “reasonableness” was to guide debate using a steering committee similar to the French citizens panel to avoid “anarchy” (Ibid: 142). However, unlike France, the steering committee was made up of anti-GMF activists and “dissident” genetic scientists. Out of the fora examined (in USA, France, Denmark, UK,

Germany, Switzerland) deliberations in New Hampshire developed the most radical anti-GMF conclusions. In this case, Tucker notes, “the close correlation between the opinions of the members of the steering committee and the conclusions of the conference seem to reflect an educational process and biases in the selection and self selection of the panel” (Ibid: 143)

The motives behind the French deliberations and the results in New Hampshire have damaging implications for online deliberative fora. According to Tucker, they provide a space for educated, dogmatic elites to attempt to influence the participants. The removal of unwanted influences from participation, the control of the flow of information and the structure of deliberations can be managed to produce the desired outcome. As in France, this may not always happen, however, such sinister influences lead Tucker to conclude that online fora suffer from “oligarchic tendencies” and are vulnerable to “manipulative intended use” (Ibid) Moreover it seems clear in Tucker’s analysis that the steering committees were generally made up of people who thought alike (whether they’re anti-GMF activists opposed or pro-GMF state bureaucrats) suggesting that “opposed elites” avoid each other. Thus, deliberation between opposing views tends not to occur. Instead, intransigent elites reinforce their own views whilst attempting to “educate” the bewildered participants.

Arguably, these problems could be avoided by the OCC. Summarised debates and deliberations could be aired on television and other media, providing a crucial source of scrutiny. This would decrease the chances of the manipulation witnessed by Tucker, encouraging wider participation amongst the population and specialised elites to challenge the dominant or emerging synthesis.

Opposing elites would not pass on the opportunity to air their views in an institution with clearly defined links to the political process and media. It could be argued that the high profile nature of this

institution would increase the quality of involvement, debate and scrutiny.

Moderation and ‘Solidarity’

Fair moderation would be crucial in this respect, seeking to increase deliberation amongst participants, limiting dogmatism and intransigence. However, if it can be expected that debates within the OCC will be led by “interested parties” opposing one another, dogmatism and intransigence could become unavoidable in some cases. In a debate between proponents of animal rights and those in favour of fox hunting, for example, entrenched positions may become the norm. Dahlberg’s research into Minnesota E-Democracy found that “typical dogmatic squabbles between pre-set left and right ideologies” had occurred quite often. However, he is positive that the internet’s ability to increase reflexivity does lead to the “moulding of opinions”. Even if this is a slow process where it generally takes “three or four months for someone participating to actually change their mindset from ‘I’m just going to tell you what I think’ to ‘boy there are a lot of opinions out there, maybe I’ll just listen and think a bit more before I reply’” (Cliff in Dahlberg: 7)

However, if the OCC is to be effective, the process of reflection within individuals would have to be accelerated, something which is not likely to happen. Moreover, it is possible that instead of promoting reflection, the internet can reinforce bias through the increased ability to self-select information, decreasing exposure to other points of view and increasing dogmatism (Sunstein 2001). Experiences in Minnesota E-Democracy project show that though “unrelenting rants” do occur, “with time and encouragement the perpetrators begin to tone down their dogmatic posting style and show greater respect for other positions” (Dahlberg 2001: 7) Though this is an encouraging sign, it appears that it only came about in Minnesota through eventual self-censorship after a feeling of “participant collective ownership” had been fostered (Ibid p 4)



The anarchic nature of some many other much larger debating fora such as "Use-Net" suggests this solidarised atmosphere is hard to create. In Minnesota it was necessary to "codify the rules and institutionalise the procedure for removing list participants unable to accept the rules" (Atkens in Dahlberg 2001: 4) Productive participation was encouraged whilst overtly dogmatic, insulting and pernicious contributors were punished with up to a 6 month ban. Anonymous posts were forbidden as people had to register to contribute. Arguably, this bought into online interaction some of the "rules" of "self censorship" that govern face-to-face interaction. These rules and guidelines eliminated the necessity to edit the contributions, instead a "list manager" steered debate in productive directions using email to warn people personally of abusive posts, before taking disciplinary action. In fact, Coleman and Gotze set similar goals for the "moderators and mediators" of the OCC;

1. Set out clear and transparent rules for participants, e.g. maximum message length, maximum frequency, attitudes to offensive language and defamation
2. Regulate the discussion, both by implementing agreed rules and adhering to ethical principles such as data privacy, neutrality and non-coercion
3. Moderate discussion messages, ensuring that nay participant with a point receives a fair hearing
4. Help discussion participants to reach conclusions rather than incessantly rehashing old arguments
5. Summarise the deliberation so that key points of evidence and main conclusions are set out in an accessible and balanced form
6. Seek to ensure that there is feedback to participants

It seems the role of the moderators in the OCC would lie somewhere between "project manager" and "social host" types, similar to the "list manager" in Minnesota. Considering the high levels of participation

(compared to Minnesota) in the OCC, this would be a mammoth task. One of the main reasons given for the success of the Minnesota forum when implementing rules of a similar ilk was that membership was limited to those living in the area. It focused "deliberations on 'real problems' faced by those living within a particular geographically bounded political jurisdiction ... these common problems make discussions particularly meaningful and motivate sustained deliberations and active listening" (Dahlberg 2001: 8). This begs the question 'would a civic commons addressing the whole of the UK lack this communal mentality?'. Perhaps a system modelled on 'facebook' would personalize discussion, eliminate anonymity thus increasing a sense of responsibility in one's posts. Arguably dogmatism and inflammatory speech would decrease. Nevertheless, it seems that a 'sense of solidarity' would be harder to achieve at a national level. Perhaps the notion of an "online civic commons" needs to be refocused towards local issues. It could still be initiated by public policy and work within the same website. Participants could choose between contributing to a debate in national policy or one in their constituency, but be excluded from participating in other constituencies, providing the basis for deliberative/participative "micro" democratic processes. Further research is required in this field.

Discursive Equality and Inclusion

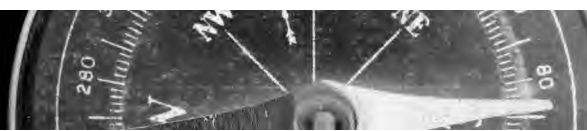
Perhaps one of the biggest challenges facing the OCC is to adequately satisfy Habermas's principle of "discursive equality and inclusion" (Dahlberg 2001: 10) Even if Blumler and Coleman dismiss "abstract notions" of a public sphere, they would surely be keen for the OCC to adhere to this principle as much as possible. The problems of language noted by Wright when analysing debate on Futurum (2007) would not be as severe in the case of the OCC. English would be the lingua franca in national discussion. However, if discussion in local policy is facilitated, the right of the Welsh and Scottish

communities for their linguistic heritage to be upheld should be respected and catered for:

The Minnesota project found it useful to implement a daily maximum of two contributions to stop users from "flooding". However, though this did stop "flooding" it did not stop a minority from dominating discussions. Dahlberg reports ten percent of participants posted 75% of all messages. Moreover, only 50% of participants posted at all, with the other half opting for what is called "lurking" (Dahlberg 2001: 11). Over-posting was identified as a problem by Wright also, who noted a Turkish contributor made 495 posts. More than half of the total posts coming from Turkey. Moreover, 76.5% of participants started just one thread with the three most repetitive contributors (out of 871) writing 20.1% of all messages. Not surprisingly, Wright concludes that a "minority did influence the overall shape of the discussion" (Wright 2007: 1175-6)

Blumler and Coleman (2001) and Coleman and Gotze (2002) admit that inclusion in the OCC, like all other deliberative fora in existence, would be hindered by social and cultural inequalities. Dahlberg makes a point of stressing that participants in Minnesota where overwhelmingly well educated, with a large number employed in information sectors (2001: 11) However, they argue this should not lead to the dismissal of the idea, but for Britain to strive for universal internet access, pointing to a series of initiatives led by the Scottish Parliament and sponsored by British Telecom in Scotland which could be amplified to deal with these issues nationally.

Demographically, the most obvious possible disparity in the OCC could be that of gender: Nevertheless, only Dahlberg focuses upon this point. Just 20% of the posters in the Minnesota forum from May-August 1998 were female (Dahlberg 2001: 11) Dahlberg uses research by Herring (1993, 1996, 1999) Sikup (1999) and Savicki (1996) to answer



this discrepancy. It was demonstrated that an “assertive, authoritative, adversarial, sarcastic and self-promoting” male-style dominates online communication whereas the “shorter, personally orientated, questioning, tentative, apologetic and supportive” female style becomes subservient (Dahlberg 2001: 12)

The upshot of this in Minnesota was women failing to post, leaving the list altogether or attempting to form women-only groups. It seems women were consistently patronised and even ignored in discussion. A female participant notes “most of the time women’s comments are stepped over... they’re called ‘cute’ or encouraged to go back to lurking” (Jensen in Dahlberg 2001: 12) Clearly, in the proposed OCC – an official deliberative institution with clear links to the political process – such explicit or even implied sexism should be dealt with swiftly and strictly. Clear rules should be in place, curtailing “incendiary” forms of discourse. The elimination of patriarchal features from discourse in the OCC may prove to be a harder task than overcoming social restrictions on internet access. It is inevitable that rules will be violated at times, but they should be clearly codified nonetheless to enable such violations to be reported and dealt with more efficiently. If patriarchal gender relations dominate deliberation in the OCC it would corrupt its democratic credentials as much as the perceived “democratic deficit”, which it proposes to solve, corrupts democracy today, it is imperative that a balance is struck in this respect.

Conclusion

It may be that government initiation of online deliberative fora compromises Habermas’s idealised condition of ‘complete autonomy from state and economic power’. However, considering the rapidly advancing commercialization and privatization of cyberspace, driven by huge mergers such as between AOL/Time Warner and Vodafone/Hammersman, public intervention could be the only realistic way to save the internet’s democratic potential from privatized and

individualized forms of interaction. Blumler and Coleman (2001) make a connection between the OCC and the early days of the BBC. For all its faults, including increased potential government influence, research has demonstrated a positive correlation between the availability of public broadcasting services and levels of “political knowledge” (Holtz & Norris 2001). With hindsight, it can be argued that public service broadcasting has been very beneficial, setting the expected standards for communication and arguably preventing anarchic market forces from exercising their pejorative influences (Habermas 1989, McChesney 1999, Putnam 2000) completely.

Most debating spaces, such as Use-net, are rife with dogmatism, intransigence and fiery, undemocratic forms of discourse. Here deliberation is minimal, with users preferring to incessantly rant at each other. Unfortunately, high quality deliberative fora originating from the “grassroots”, such as Minnesota E-Democracy are few and far between. Thus Blumler and Coleman are correct to point out that “visionary and imaginative” institution building is required to create a space within the internet which will enable it to satisfy the democratic potential so many have correctly identified within it.

Tucker would be sceptical of such an initiative. His work on deliberative fora has suggested “oligarchic tendencies” which could ultimately corrupt the OCC. However, the OCC would not be as likely to suffer from elitism as the small, elite-led, “mini-publics” analysed by Tucker. Participation would be much more widespread, other media would provide a valuable source of scrutiny and competing groups within the forum would ensure that all reasonable views are aired and considered. Clearly, in order to do this effectively, solidarity engendered by a feeling of “participant collective ownership” has to be encouraged. Minnesota shows this can be done through the structural and functional nature of the institution. Dahlberg’s conclusion that the development of solidarity and self moderation in

Minnesota was facilitated by a “focus of issues shared by those living within a particular geographically bounded area” (Dahlberg 2001: 13) could be problematic for the OCC. Perhaps Blumler and Coleman should rethink their proposal towards a less ambitious deliberative institution involving people mainly in local issues; a deliberative “micro” democratic institution. Optimal performance at a constituency level would justify its extension to deliberate on national issues. Matters of great importance in national and foreign policy could be put to debate. Investigation into existing statutory frameworks which look to involve citizens at a local level and directly increase their influence upon councils through the formation of a web of civil associations like the UK’s Sustainable Communities Act could provide an adequate “egg” for the OCC to “hatch” from. Blumler and Coleman’s suggestion that in its infancy the OCC would be of an “exploratory nature” makes this proposal logical. More research is required here as well as in the exploration of the internet’s potential as a tool to promote and organise campaigns between localised civil associations to form coalitions on a regional or national level.

It is clear that waiting for “abstract” notions of an ideal public sphere to be realized will not solve the perceived problems of modern democracy. However, nor can the OCC be expected to provide a “miracle” solution. In fact, as long as entrenched structural inequalities remain unchallenged in modern society, democracy (deliberative or representative) will remain corrupted (Young 2001) The OCC will not change the political economy of capitalism. From this perspective, changes in governing methods are superficial as long as the base features of society remain undemocratic. As Adam Przeworski (1990: 103) famously noted “to discuss democracy without considering the economy in which that democracy must operate is an endeavour worthy of an ostrich”. Those who incorporate this into their analysis of the OCC add a healthy dose of realism. Blumler and Coleman may not subscribe to the



Marxist relation between structure and superstructure, however; it would be harsh to discard them as “ostriches” for this. After all, their proposal is born out of the realisation that the free market has demonstrated its inability to allow media to fulfill its democratic role adequately, the internet would be no exception. Instead we should look to “visionary and imaginative” institution building to secure the internet’s “vulnerable potential” and bring about an improvement in governing process. Blumler and Coleman’s proposal for an Online Civic Commons can realistically fulfill this goal.

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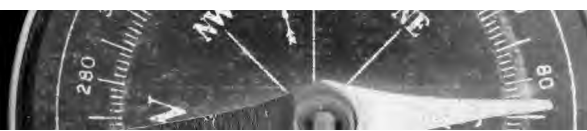
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