

The Lodur Project

Envisioning participatory decision making

Design Specification: Plug, v. 1.0



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Pitch

The questions of how much public participation is ideal and how much is manageable in any decision making body are fundamental issues of democratic systems. The answers to those questions vary with each individual system and school of thought.

We will not attempt to make a philosophical argument about where maximum participation yields the best results and where controlled participation is ideal. There are certainly situations where restricting access to decision making power is both appropriate and necessary.

However, we will assert that all strong systems are built on strong communication, and issues of participation are in essence issues of communication. Decision makers can always benefit from having a clearer understanding of the needs and concerns of all parties involved. A system that supports a dialogue between different users and user groups, and allows them to learn more about each other, will have a beneficial impact on how decisions are made and received.

A successful system for group participation allows users with different needs and responsibilities to effectively find their voice, and to communicate, as needed, across the full spectrum of the system.

People

From some of our earliest discussions about the structure of current systems for participation, we identified three primary user groups.

1. **Decision makers:** The people with the power to make direct decisions on specific issues. These users serve the administrative functions in existing systems.
2. **Organizers:** These users do not have direct decision making power within the current system, but are individuals with an interest in advocating their positions on specific issues, and trying to get others to join or support their cause or causes.
3. **Organizees:** This role represents all other members of the system who have neither the power to make decisions or an interest in getting others involved. They may or may not have an interest in being involved in issues themselves. This is the pool of users from which organizers attempt to draw support, and which the decision makers are supposed to be serving.

The systems we are speaking of are communities. The definition of a community is widely scalable, and there can be communities within communities. However, at each level of community, these three roles should be present.

This is a broad characterization of the groups present within any specific community. In studying the residence hall system, we found that these three user groups are manifested in concrete power positions. The hundreds of residents who live in each hall serve as the organizees. Each floor in a hall has one, or several, resident mentors. Mentors are also students, but are charged with representing the hall staff to the other residents, and vice versa. The mentors function as the organizers. They are the ones who call meetings on their floor, participate in larger hall government discussions, organize hall events, and interact directly with the hall staff. This staff, primarily hall directors and assistant hall directors, serves as decision makers. They are the ones who ultimately make implementation decisions such as setting the hall rules and deciding how to distribute hall funds.

Let us note that the user groups do not necessarily fit into clearly defined user roles, but those roles have a certain fluidity. A number of the user roles within the residence hall system are currently performed by members of more than one user group. The mentors, for example, perform many of the actions of both the hall directors and the students. Our system will attempt to create even more opportunity for users to play a variety of roles, and will give average students a greater ability to take part in some of the functions currently reserved for community leaders.

This fluidity of user roles may or may not be present in other systems. While the three primary user groups we've identified above are present in most communities, the user roles performed by those groups is likely to vary.

Different user roles equate to specific actions within the system. As you can see from the list below, many of the actions in the residence hall community flow from one user group to the next. The mentors often act as a channel for information moving both up and down the ladder.

1. Students: raise an issue, participate in a discussion, attend an event, vote, give feedback
2. Resident Mentors: raise an issue, organize a meeting, make an announcement, participate in a discussion, make a decision, solicit feedback, give feedback
3. Hall Director: make a decision, solicit feedback, listen to feedback, make an announcement, organize a meeting

Problems

The most immediate concern with the existing power structure is the lack of contact between decision makers and the community at large. Even in small-scale communities such as the residence halls, typical residents do not interact with the hall directors on a regular basis, if at all.

This issue is only magnified as the size of the community

grows. At the university level, most students never have an opportunity to voice their concerns directly to the president or Board of Trustees. At the national level, citizens have virtually no contact with congressional leaders or federal officials.

Summary

Existing community participation structures are fraught with problems.

- Direct contact between residents and decision makers is rare
- Parties do not have time to engage each other in person
- There is no uniform system for distributing information, dealing with issues
- Hard to create power in numbers
- Communication of information isn't always effective

This problem is often an issue of time. Decision makers, with their busy schedules, often simply do not have the time to deal with every issue on an individual basis. This is a two-way problem as well, as many average citizens have busy schedules of their own. At the residence hall level, students have such a hard time juggling their schedules that hall and floor meetings are held late at night, when most people are free to attend.

Of course, not every issue needs to be dealt with through face to face interaction between decision makers and organizers or organizees. But many issues do require some form of direct communication, and in the current scenario, avenues for that communication to happen are either not widely known or do not exist, and many important issues end up falling through the cracks. Some things are never dealt with because they are simply ignored or never heard by the people who have the ability to make a difference.

Traditionally, the way grassroots campaigns have gotten the attention of people in power is by creating enough noise around an issue. But getting a large group of people behind an issue is extremely hard to do, and requires tireless effort, often by numerous parties. Large-scale grassroots efforts tend to organize only around the most pressing and politically-charged issues. In speaking with local activists in the Lansing area, they said getting people involved and interested in the issues is one of their biggest challenges.

The existing systems do not support means of voicing concerns in a way that is easy and effective. Even the current gold standard of grassroots political action on the web, moveon.org, only offers its users a limited amount of functionality and interaction, as most campaigns consist of little more than pressing a button or two. Any real means of assuring that the concerns being heard are

representative of those held by the larger community is nonexistent. There is no way to show support for issues without a significant investment of time and/or energy. In a nutshell, creating power in numbers is exceedingly hard.

Within the residence hall community, the single largest obstacle to effective participation is that there is no uniform structure present in the system for community members to either receive up-to-date information about their community or to get involved.

Much of the information sharing within the community is done through word of mouth. A variety of other techniques such as bulletin board postings, mailed fliers, and e-mail reminders are used, but there is no consistency to these methods. Without direct face-to-face contact with other community members an individual doesn't necessarily know where to turn with a query or concern.

This is not a unique issue to dorm communities, and is actually present in the university-wide community. There is no forum for open participation and discussion at the university level that involves members of all three user groups.

Promise

The World Wide Web has presented us with an effective means of engaging in asynchronous interaction. The ability of the internet to allow people to communicate who are not in the same place, or even working at the same time, helps solve the most restrictive problems caused by lack of direct contact between parties and the inability to coordinate schedules.

Summary

Plug provides a wide range of functionalities and opportunities in a single interface.

- Is asynchronous
- Supplements the middleman user roles
- Create uniform structure for sharing issues, information
- Asserts power in numbers
- View is not category-specific, but instead driven by pertinence of information
- Shows interrelationships between different categories

Our system, Plug, takes advantage of the affordances of web technology to allow users to participate at their own convenience. The investment of time and energy that was required to be an effective participant in the past is lessened by the ability of users to interact on their own time, at their own computer, in the privacy of their own home. What if a concerned individual could raise an issue as they had a cup of coffee in the morning, thousands of others could voice their support throughout the course of the day, and the President of the United States could personally read that concern before turning in to bed? That type of low-impact participation could make a powerful difference.

In the context of the residence hall community, our proposed system would supplement many of the middleman responsibilities of the resident mentor, as it

would allow for a decision maker to easily see the issues that people are concerned with, and would give residents access to the thinking of those decision makers. This is true of any existing community that relies on intermediate actors to relay information.

The proposed system asserts the power of large numbers, as it gives individuals the ability to attach themselves to specific issues or groups. Decision makers will be more likely to view and respond to issues that gain a large amount of support. But unlike current grassroots campaigns, that support can be drummed up without an enormous amount of dedication by those involved. The system allows users to decide their own level of involvement, whether that may be raising a new issue and soliciting support for it through virtual “reach outs,” responding to an existing issue, giving a group endorsement to an issue, or even doing something as simple as viewing a page.

Our system solves the pressing residence hall problem of users who don’t know where to turn. Plug serves as a one-stop shop for information about the community of interest, interaction with other community members and even decision makers, and a personal space for individuals to spread the word about things they care about.

Plug is a dashboard that acts as a bulletin board, a calendar, a message board, an organizer, a clubhouse, a platform, and most importantly, a finger on the pulse of the community. Simply by providing that forum, our prototype offers a valuable tool for public participation.

Issue-based architecture

The fundamental building blocks of the system are issues. Plug recognizes that communities do not act in isolated, unconnected manners. Much of the activity that happens in a community, whether that may be discussions, events, or announcements, happens around issues that are of particular concern to that community. So residence hall communities don’t have alcohol education nights just for the sake of giving residents something to do on a Tuesday — they have such an event because alcohol and alcohol abuse are important issues to their college-aged residents.

Categorizing content by issues provides an opportunity to show relationships between discrete entries. In that way, users can draw connections between things that have interested them in the past and things that may interest them in the future. This functionality is especially important to organizers, who can garner attention for their entries, which we will call “plugs,” by attaching them to larger issues. In this way, plugs are not just random additions to the content of the system, but part of a larger design and structure.

The issues people take interest in are no more random, and Plug is organized in a fashion that content is sorted by its relevance to individual users, groups, and

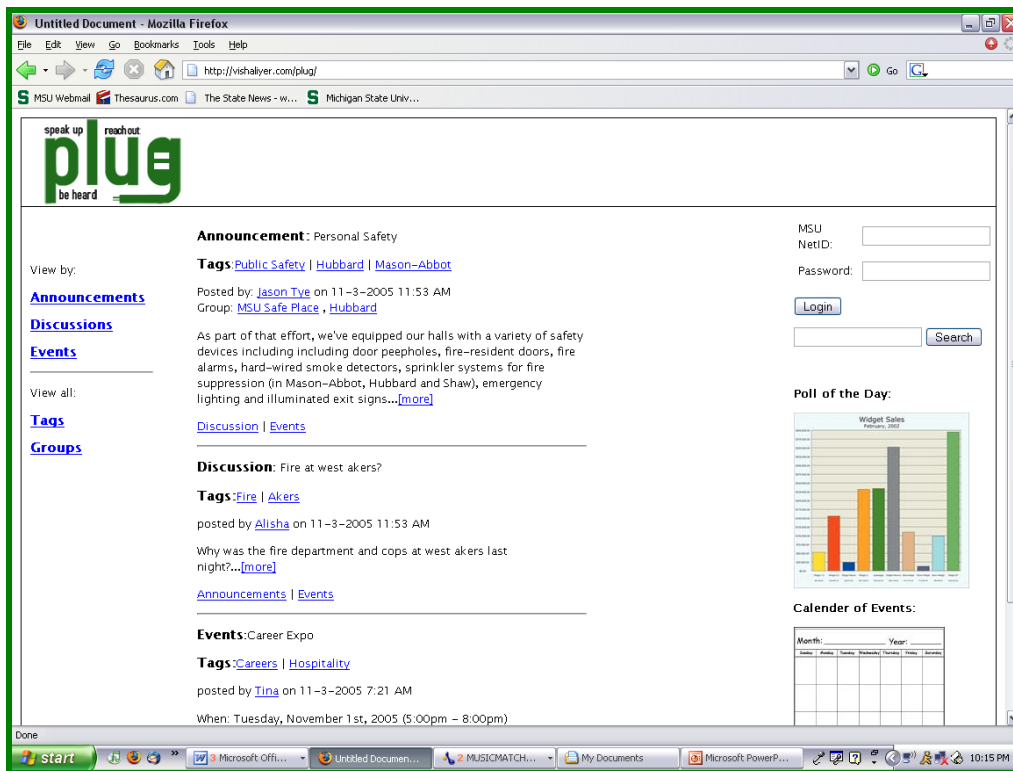
sub-communities. A user doesn't necessarily see all the events coming up on the calendar, but instead sees those events that are of a personal interest to him.

Plug

Our system is named Plug, because it plugs users into their communities, gives them the power to plug issues they care about, and like an electric socket, gives power to those who use it.

Default views

I. Homepage



All users will see the same initial view when they first hit the Plug homepage. This is necessary because the system requires users to identify themselves by logging in before they are able to participate.

The organization of the content on the screen is meant to be very traditional, so as not to confuse users. We don't want people have to relearn the ways they interact with web-based systems in order to use ours. The navigation and placement of content should seem familiar to anyone who has used systems such as online discussion forums.

It is also important to note that the organization changes very little from page to page. Only the content changes. The primary elements can be found in the same places from view to view.

Right-hand content

Familiar items such as a daily poll and an events calendar deviate from the issue-based architecture, but present a high level of usefulness for specific functionalities. Some users may simply want to take a look at the upcoming calendar. We wanted to provide easy access to that kind of familiar and frequent use. A poll is one piece of content users will be able to create when they start a new “plug.” The poll of the day displayed on the home page will be the poll that has received the most response in the past 24 hours, and will be updated automatically every day.

The log-in fields have been displayed prominently to encourage users to log on to the system.

A search function is another convenience feature we have provided to give users quick access to specific issues or plugs of interest.

Left-hand navigation

The navigation on the left side of the screen is primarily for sorting. The “announcements,” “discussions,” and “events” links allow users to sort plugs into more specific categories.

The “tags” and “groups” links bring users to an index of all the tags and groups in the system. Since these are the building blocks of the system, we want to encourage users to navigate through them.

Center content

The plugs displayed in the center of the page act somewhat as headlines.

Ranking system

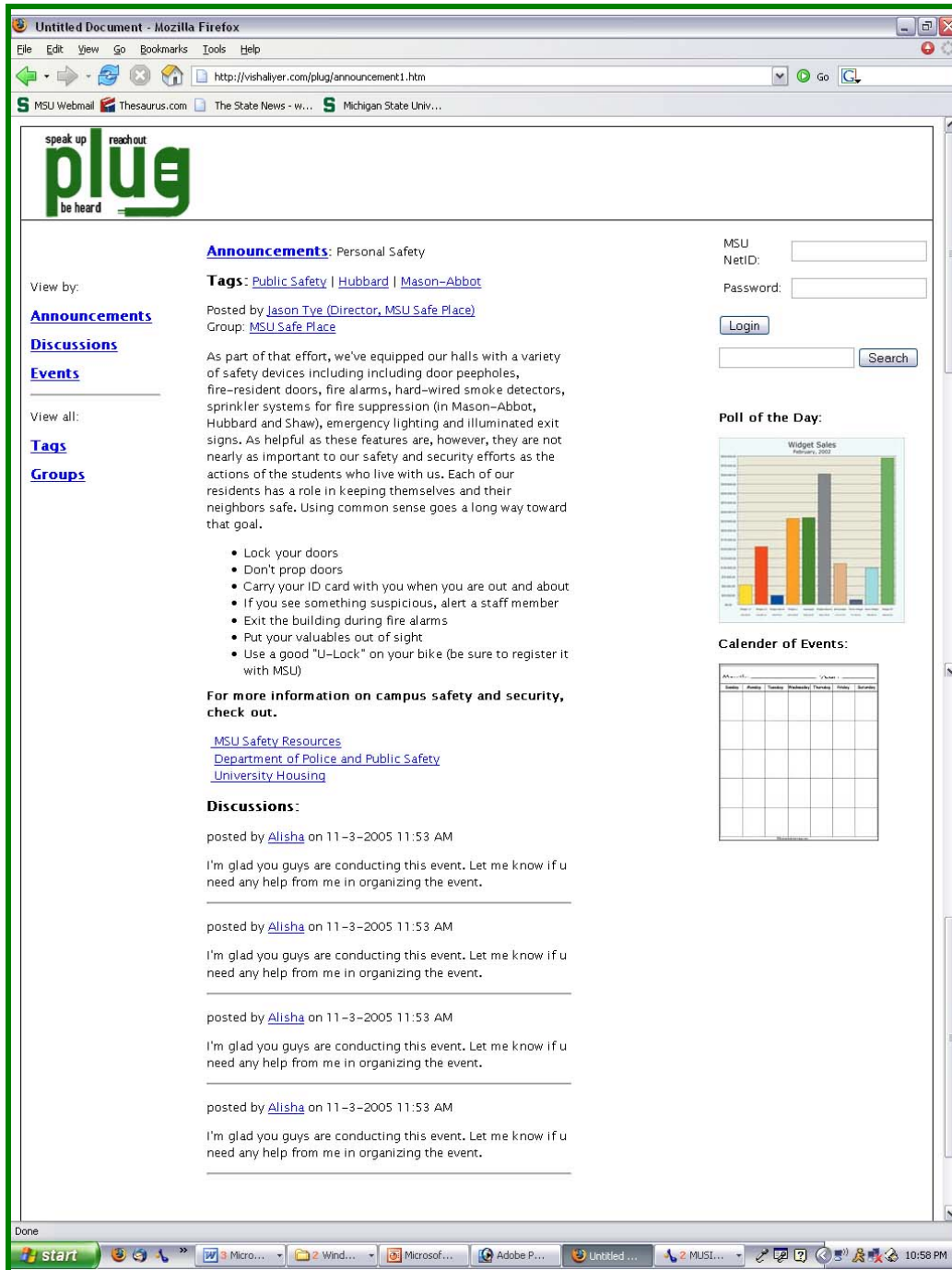
The importance and relevance of any individual plug is ranked on a number of conditions.

The computer algorithm weights each of the following criteria, listed in order from most weight to least weight.

1. Time created (least weight): More recent plugs are rated higher.
2. Creator: Each user has an individual community rating. That rating is determined by status in the community (decision makers have a higher rating by default), activity within the community, and response to that activity. So a decision maker gets a high ranking when they are logged on in their official capacity, because we want the other users to be able to hear what they have to say, and respond. Users who participate frequently earn a higher rating. To ensure the quality and relevance of that participation, the amount of response to and feedback from plugs will be considered in the rating algorithm. This should help eliminate spam from being highly ranked.
3. Number of views: Highly viewed pages will get a boost in the rankings, and as time passes, plugs that continue to be viewed frequently will stay high in the rankings, while as page views decline, plugs drop in ranking.
4. Number of responses (Most important): Plugs that receive the most response in the form of discussion posts, issue tags, and group endorsements, will shoot to the top of the rankings.

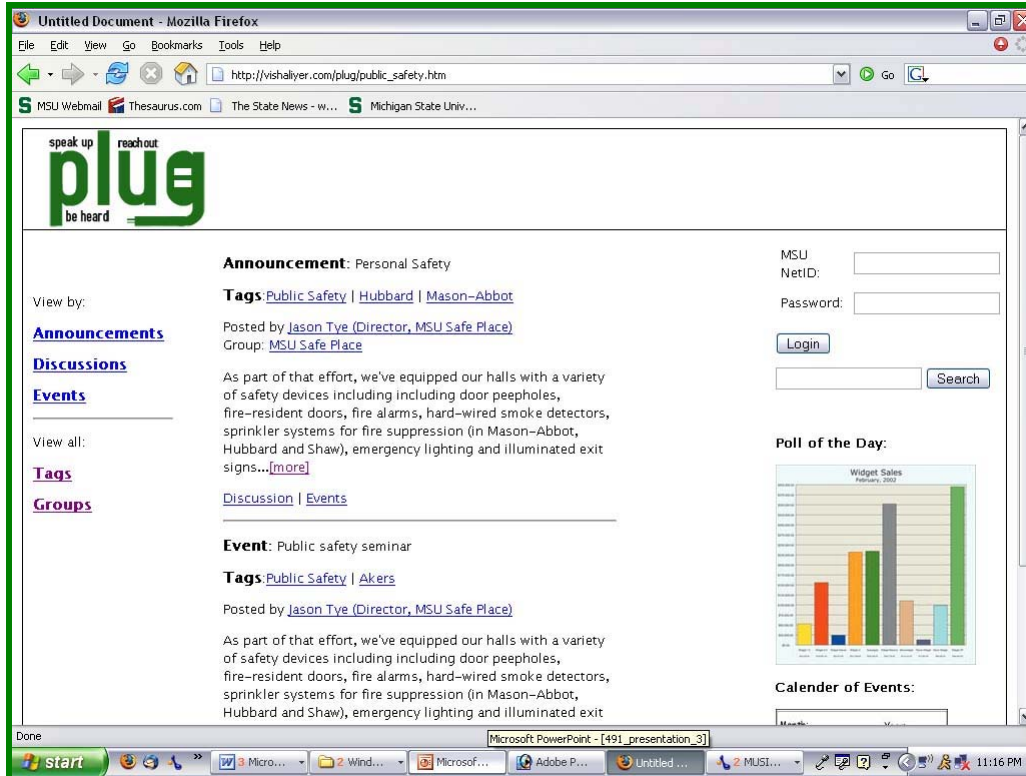
You are given the title of the specific plug and a summary of what it is. The plugs displayed are determined by a computer algorithm ranking system. The top-ranked plugs are shown in order.

II. Individual plug view



The headlines on the homepage provide a summary, but when clicked on, the full content for a specific plug is shown. This content includes a description of the

IV. Issue view



When users click on an issue tag, they are brought to an issue page, which is essentially an additional means of sorting content.

The issue view displays all plugs related to that issue, according to the ranking of each plug.

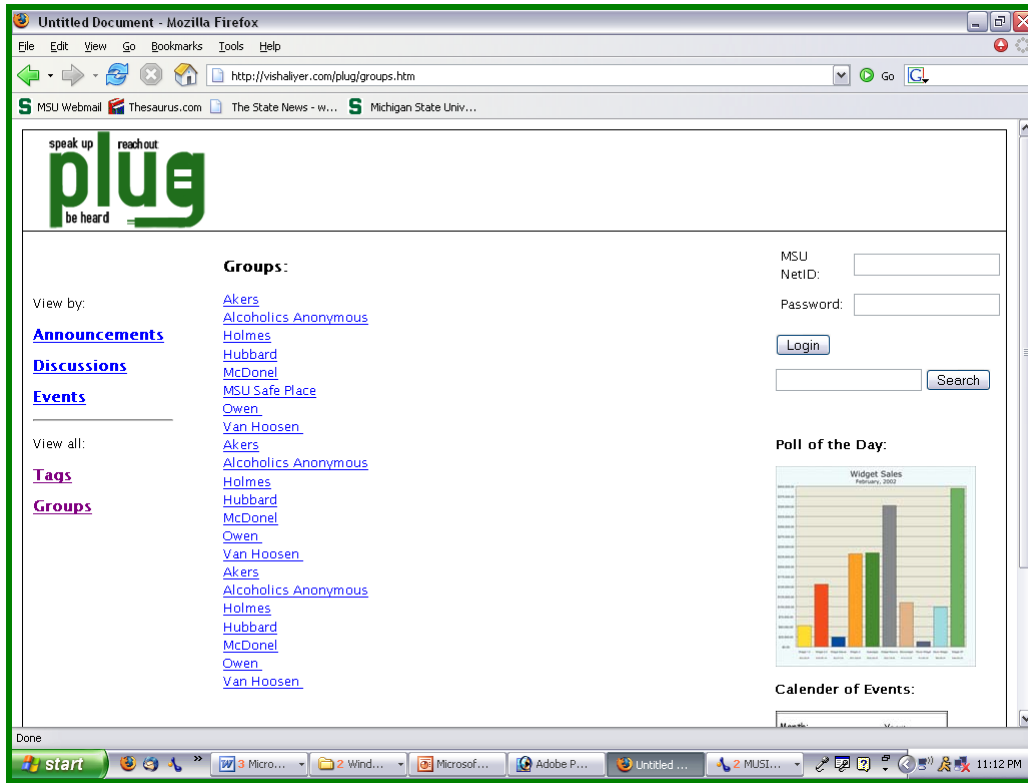
For example, the public safety issue page will display all plugs that have been tagged “public safety.”

Issue tags

Plugs within the system are organized around issue tags. These tags function in the same way tags are used in online communities such as Flickr and del.icio.us. For example, if a plug is tagged “public safety,” it is related to the issue of public safety. If it is tagged “Gilchrest Hall,” it is relevant to people who live in Gilchrest Hall, or are interested in Gilchrest Hall. Within the residence hall structure, dorms are the only entity that can function as both an issue tag and a group within the system.

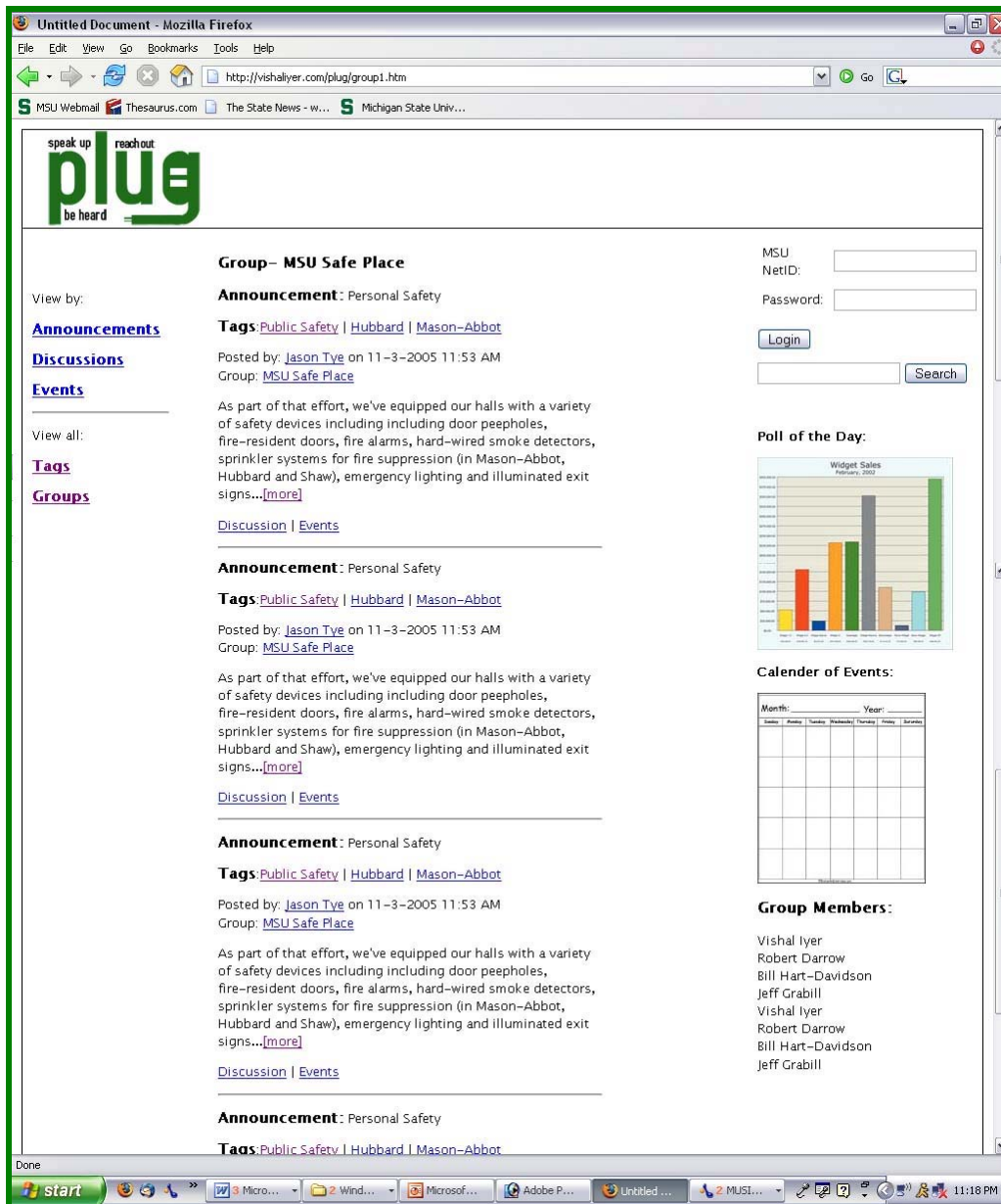
Issue tags can be clicked on to show an entire index of specific plugs and groups tied to the issue.

V. Group index view



When users click on “groups” from the home page, they are brought to an index of all groups in the system. Here we see the existing groups displayed in an alphabetical index.

VI. Group page view



When users click on a group tag, they are brought to the page of that group. On the page, plugs that the group has endorsed are displayed.

In addition, all members of the group are listed along the right-hand side of the window, with the creator's name listed first.

Logged-in views

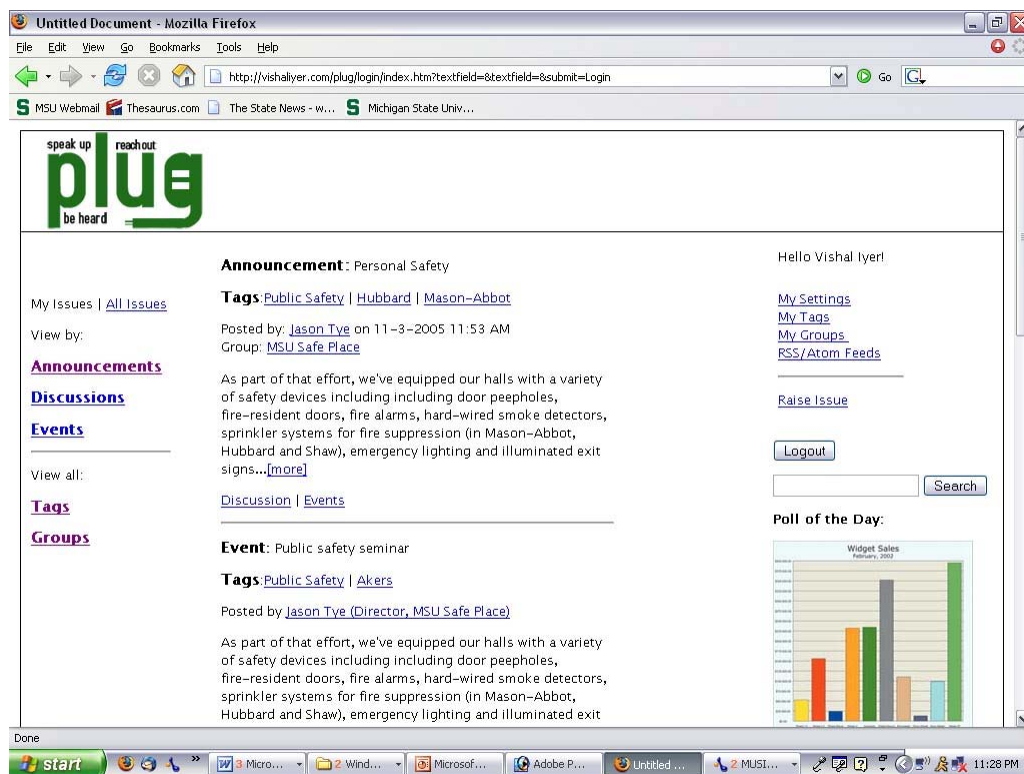
Each user of the system is given a username and password. This aspect is necessary because it prevents people who are not members of the community

from influencing the community discussion, and presents a certain level of accountability (although the ability to add content anonymously can be built into the system to encourage users to discuss sensitive issues).

Allowing the system to recognize individual users also has the benefit of providing users with content tailored to them and their interests.

Within the residence hall system, and even in a university-wide community, this username and password aspect is conveniently already present, as users could simply use their MSU ID and password.

VII. Personal homepage view



As soon as a user logs in, he is brought to his personal homepage. This page looks roughly the same as the default homepage, except all the content has now been tailored specifically to the individual user, and new functionalities are now present.

Right-hand content

The right side of the window now has a welcome message, letting the user know that the system recognizes him. Below that welcome message are some new functionalities.

The first is “my settings,” which allows the user to change the administrative settings of his page.

“My tags” and “My groups” allow the user to specifically view issue tags that he has created or bookmarked, and groups he is a member of. By default, users in the residence hall system are members of one group — the hall they live in — and have one issue tag listed under my issues — the tag for that hall. Users can join other groups and bookmark issues as they please.

The “RSS and Atom feeds” is a functionality that has not yet been added to the system, but could be considered in the future as a means of pushing content out to the user without requiring them to actually visit the Plug site.

“Raise an issue” allows users to start a new plug or create an issue tag.

The “logout” button allows the user to logout of their personal page and return to the default view.

The poll displayed is now one that comes directly from a plug included in the issues the user has indicated an interest in.

Left-hand navigation

The navigation remains the same as in the default view, but now if the sorting categories are clicked on, the headline plugs displayed are those tied to the user’s issues and groups.

If “tags” or “groups” is clicked on, the user sees an index of his issues and his groups.

At the top of the navigation there is now a tab, which allows the user to switch back and forth between his personal view and the default view everyone sees.

Interest algorithm

The system determines a user is interested in issues or specific plugs in the following ways:

- Plugs the user has responded to
- Plugs or issue tags the user has bookmarked
- Plugs endorsed by groups the user is a member of

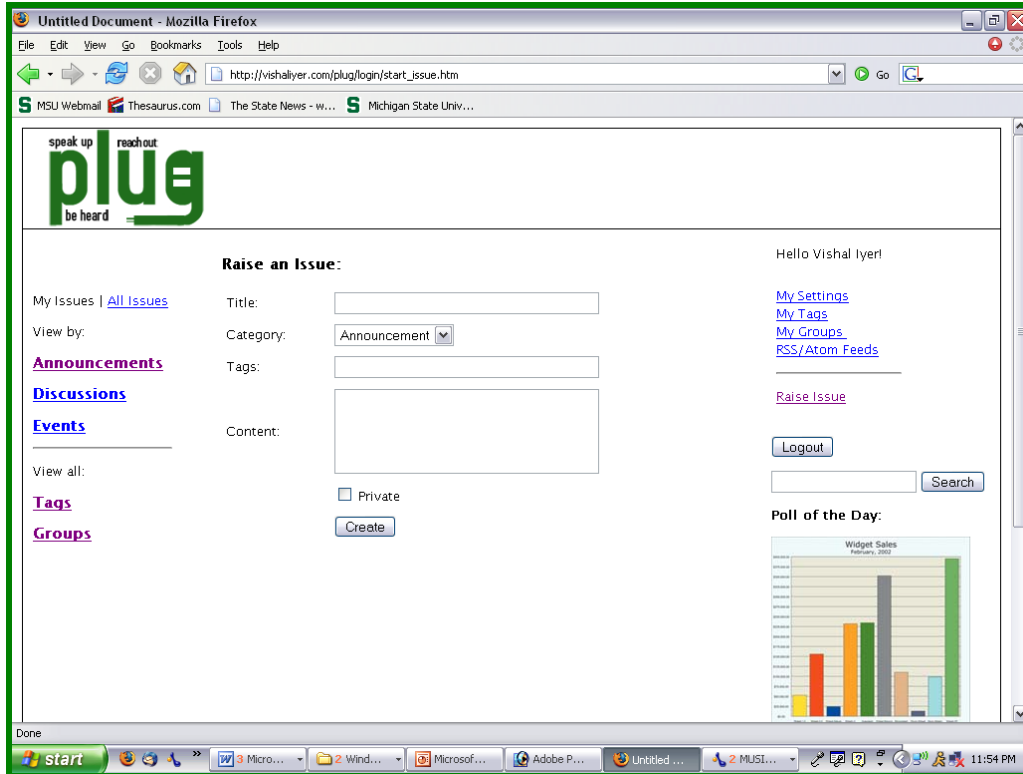
Center content.

The plugs displayed in the center of the page are now the highest ranked plugs from the groups or issues the system determines the user is interested in.

When the user clicks on a specific plug, he is brought to the plug page, and now has the ability to respond to the plug or bookmark the plug.

When the user clicks on a group page, they will see a “join” button, which allows them to apply for membership in the group.

VIII. Raise issue view



When users click on “raise issue,” they are brought to a screen that displays the necessary fields to create a new plug.

Users are prompted to give the issue or plug a title, to specify its category, and to fill in text content they would like displayed with the plug. They are given the ability to list issue tags they would like associated with the plug. To prevent spammers from attaching their plug to hundreds of issues, or users from attaching their plug to large numbers of issues that are not relevant, users will be limited to adding three issue tags when they create a plug. Additional tags must be added by outside individuals or groups who view the plug.

Users are also provided with the option of labeling a plug as private, which would restrict access to the plug to the individual or, if the plug is created by a group administrator, to members of the group.

IX. Create a group view

Similarly, users could also create a new group. Although this functionality is not displayed in our current prototype, it is a functionality that would be provided by the final system.

The “create a group” link would be placed directly under the “raise issue” link on the homepage.

X. Group administrator view

When logged on as a group administrator, a new functionality labeled “endorse” appears on plug pages next to the “respond” button on plug pages. Group administrators are allowed to give a plug the group’s endorsement in that manner.

The group page will also display a list of users desiring to join the group, which the administrators can then accept or reject.

On the group page, the group administrator sees a “group settings” link on the right-hand side of the window. Clicking on that link allows the administrator to manage the members of the group and the privileges of those members. Administrators have the power to accept new members to the group, remove members from the group, or give other members administrator privileges. The group’s creator is initially the only member with administrator privileges, but he may assign those privileges to other members if he chooses.

In the “group settings” view, administrators can also bookmark issues the group is interested in, and label the group as either public or private. Private groups do not appear in the group index, and their endorsements are not displayed in plug page views.

Finally, the “group settings” view includes an option to “invite.” Administrators can invite individual community members to join their group. These invitations will show up on the user’s personal homepage. That user will then have the option of accepting or rejecting the invitation.

In general, the process for joining a group works much like Facebook’s process for adding friends.

Possibilities

Uses

We envision Plug as an online medium for community participation in the political process, and a means of getting the community’s voice to the ears of decision makers.

But we understand that systems are rarely used only for their intended purposes. In addition to providing a powerful political action tool, Plug offers a social networking functionality through its groups. It also functions as an important bulletin board and message board. The real value of plug is much broader, but

we don't want to deny that these functionalities are present, and if users want to carry on message boards or post announcements with this tool, they can. In the broadest sense, Plug is an online community. As we've already mentioned, it allows community members, and hopefully community leaders, to keep attuned to the needs, concerns, and interests of their community.

Markets

This product has an immediate use in the residence hall community. Campus residence halls are lacking a uniform means of distributing information or soliciting feedback. If the system were implemented and residents were made aware that this was the one place they could go to learn the most up-to-date information about their halls and the dorm community at large, it would be an enormously effective tool in getting more students — who suffer more than anything else from being uninformed — involved in community issues and activities.

But the scope of Plug is not limited to the residence halls. We would like to see Plug put into place across the university. Many students lack the tools to go out and find information about issues they are interested in. Students who want to organize other students don't have effective methods for doing so. Administrators — and we tell you this as a sad and almost inexcusable fact — rarely ever solicit feedback from students before making decisions, and when they do, the methods they employ are not capable of reaching a widespread group. Decision makers need to hear the voices of the public, not just randomly assembled focus groups, or student government leadership. The opinions that come out of those groups are not always representative of the larger student body. On the other end, the average student never sees the interaction that occurs between student leadership and the administration. Students need a means of seeing that their voices are being represented. Most students are under the impression that the administration simply does not care what they think.

Having a system like Plug as a tool at the disposal of both the administration and the student body could lead to positive communication and interaction at levels currently not even dreamed of. It would help students have a better sense of what is going on at their university, and a direct line to hear what administrators are thinking. It would give the administration a snapshot of student concerns. Those two things alone would make this university a better place.

There is really no limit to the range and scale of communities in which Plug could be used. It would only take the efforts of a handful of interested individuals and the support of decision makers to get this project off the ground all over the country. If we believe in democracy, we need to give people the tools to participate in it.

As the saying goes, where there's a will there's a way. We're showing you a way.