

# **Use of Internet Relay Chat (IRC) in Distributed Consensus Forming**

by

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## **Abstract**

The growing popularity of the internet has profound implications for engineering education. This paper describes a two and a half year study of the potential for using one aspect of the internet, Internet Relay Chat (IRC), for merging the opinions of people distributed over the United States. In principle a similar strategy could be used for self-paced instruction, cooperative problem solving, and distributed engineering design.

Internet Relay Chat (IRC) with multiple chat sessions configured as a tree in conjunction with a suitable consensus forcing strategy such as the Nominal Group Technique offers a new, original, state-of-the-art implementation of an Electronic Town Hall. This strategy is effective because it is interactive, real-time, flexible, and offers simultaneous collection of opinion on a state, regional, and nation-wide basis. The discussions, honing of positions, and voting take place face-to-face in small groups with a chance for all to truly participate. Although it relies heavily on modern technology, an important characteristic of this approach is that 90 per cent of the participants do not have to own a computer or be computer literate, and the computers required by the participants may be standard, privately-owned PC's instead of expensive workstations.

Eleven pilot studies have been completed to demonstrate the potential of this strategy. In the last of these, twenty-six computer sites, from twenty states, and including approximately 200 people throughout the United States were interconnected. In some of these pilot studies, the computer video-conferencing software, CU-SeeMe, was used to allow the participants to see each other in real-time.