

Online deliberation: state of the art

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Working paper of 2013, University of Luxembourg. ¹

Introduction

In the last decade, the issue of online deliberation (or web-deliberation) has gained an important visibility among the scholars in the domain of political science, political philosophy, political communication as well as software designers. It corresponds not only to a topic of analysis – that can be broadly defined as the quantitative and qualitative assessment of the political and public debates online - but also to a democratic model of e-democracy, that aims to shape the different political usage of the web according to the deliberative values. For example Dahlberg (2011) recently distinguished the deliberative model of e-democracy from the “liberal-individualist”, “counter-publics”, and “autonomist Marxist” models. The broad nature of the topic and its complex academic ramifications render the elaboration of a state of the art in the domain of online deliberation a challenging enterprise. A pertinent way to analyze this broad phenomenon is to subdivide its analysis in three sections which content is partly based on updated findings of my book *Promises and Limits of web-deliberation*. The first section refers to the deliberative theory on which the empirical research is based. Even if it is a complex and still dynamic theory, that includes approaches that are divergent or even contradictory, any serious research on online deliberation requires to become familiarized with it and to justify the deliberative approach that is privileged. This section starts by presenting the central deliberative theory of Habermas by distinguishing its discursive requirements from its systemic ones. It discusses then the main criticisms that were elaborated against Habermas for evaluating the web-deliberative phenomenon and presents alternative approaches aiming at complementing, modifying or replacing the Habermasian theory. The second section deals with the complex issue of operationalizing the deliberative theory. One

¹ This paper has been published in Portuguese. Kies, R. (2016). Deliberação on-line. In R., Fabrino Mendonça, M., Abílio Pereira, & F., Filgueiras (Eds.), *Democracia digital: publicidade, instituições e confronto político*. Belo Horizonte, Brazil: Editoria UFMG. pp. 203-232

could say without any exaggeration that there are as many methods for measuring online deliberation as there are researchers who have tried to operationalize it. This raises important questions concerning the validity of the research that has been conducted so far and limits drastically any possibility of large comparative study. This problematic issue will be discussed by referring to the difficulties and limits that web-deliberative researchers commonly face and by proposing a set of solutions aiming at ameliorating and harmonizing the evaluative methods. The last section provides an overview of the online deliberative empirical studies that were conducted this last decade by distinguishing three broad research fields: i) The studies that aim at measuring the usage of the political web-debates and the characteristics of the users; ii) The studies that identify and compare the social and political actors that offer possibilities of online debates; iii) The studies assessing the quality of deliberation in different discursive online settings and the ones aiming at defining the factors that could explain variations in web-deliberation.

Fragile theoretical foundations

The common reference for evaluating deliberative democracy online is the Habermasian theory of deliberative democracy and, more particularly, the criteria he has implemented to reach an ideal speech situation. The ideal speech situation (or rational discourse) corresponds in its early writings (Habermas 1989) to the argumentative exchanges conducted by an educated and literate bourgeoisie which started developing independent and critical opinions in reaction to the absolute power of the monarchy. This idealized vision of the bourgeois public sphere that has acquired a pivotal place in his *theory of deliberative democracy* (Habermas 1996, 1998, 2005, 2006) does not find its roots in a metaphysical or external ideal but in normative notions that anybody presupposes through its discursive practices. As he explains it in a recent contribution:

“The conception of rational discourse results from the reconstruction of an actual practice and captures just those pragmatic features of a communicative setting that anybody tacitly presupposes once he seriously enters an argumentation in order to check a problematic validity claim by either supporting or denying the truth or rightness of some statement with reasons pro and con. This rather demanding practice of giving and taking reasons is rooted in, and emerging from, the everyday contexts of communicative action...Far from being an imposition of philosophical ideas from the outside, they form an intrinsic dimension of this practice.” (Habermas 2005: 385)

The criteria of the rational discourse are the following. The first set of criteria refers to the structural features of discourse: participants should have the opportunity to raise and respond to validity claim (discursive equality) which should lead to a “real debate” as opposed to a monologues (reciprocity); they should justify their validity claim in a rational and intellectually accessible way (justification); all those affected directly or indirectly should be included in the process of discussion and decision-making (inclusion). The remaining criteria concern the required dispositions of participants: they must be ready and willing to change their opinions and preferences if they are sincerely persuaded that their initial opinions or preferences are incorrect or inappropriate for solving the collective problems (reflexivity); they should be ready to take the demands and counterarguments of others seriously, not only those immediately present in the forum (ideal role taking or empathy); they should make a sincere effort to make known all relevant information and their true intentions, interests, needs, and desires. It corresponds to the absence of manipulation or self-deception (sincerity).

According to Habermas the immanent argumentative principles should also be applied to the political process in order to solve the problem of legitimation that the secular state faces in view of the fact of pluralism and “*the absence of decisions that can no longer be derived from a substantive world view that is, or can be expected to be shared, by all citizens...*” (Habermas 2005: 386). The application of the Habermasian model does not require the discursive principles to be fully applied at all the level of the opinion and decision- making process, as he requested in its early writing (Habermas 1989). For the record the deliberative model of Habermas (also called the two track model) promotes a dynamic political process according to which the deliberative project is to be achieved as a result of the interactions of, on the one hand, the strong publics (legislatures, court, administrative bodies, international organisations) where decisions are taken and the weak publics (in particular civil society) where new issues of public relevance can arise. The strong publics are procedurally structured bodies in order to be *context of justification* with the objective of “*structuring opinion- and will- formation process with a view to the cooperative solution of practical questions, including the negotiation of fair compromises*” (Habermas 1996: 307). On the opposite, the weak publics are procedurally unstructured arenas that correspond to *contexts of discovery* that allow the formation and the emergence of new social issues. Amid these two publics is the general public that is dominated by the mass media (newspapers, televisions, radios) and Internet where the opinions and demands of the weak public and the opinions and decisions of

the strong publics are presented and debated. In order to promote the appearance of a critical and informed public opinion, the media should be independent using self-regulation procedures and should give visibility without any distortion to the opinions coming from the different publics, in particular the weak ones (civil society) that have lesser public and political influence (Habermas 2006). The deliberative model is in other words, a systemic model characterized by *“a functional differentiation of discourses, depending on the place deliberation and decision-making in each case occupy within the larger context of political system as a whole”* (Habermas 2005: 388).

Typically, deliberative empiricists (both online and offline) operationalize just a selection of these criteria and attempt to evaluate to what extent their case studies meet the deliberative requirements for each considered criterion. Such researches generally take for granted the validity of the Habermasian deliberative democratic model and its rationalistic interpretation based on the norm fixed by the ideal speech situation. It is however relevant to not that growing number of deliberative scholars (Benhabib 1996; Dryzek 2000; Fraser 1990, 1997; Mouffe 2000; Young 2000, 2001) consider that the rationalistic-argumentative approach of Habermas tends to be, on the one hand, too restrictive and elitist and, on the other hand, to ignore the notions of power and competition that are fundamental to any debate on public matters.

This criticism has started infusing the research on web-deliberation with scholars such as Coleman and Moss (2012) who share the view that the deliberative research should free itself from Habermasian scheme. According to them deliberation is a purely constructed notion that has no natural or immanent reference. Deliberative scholars play a fundamental role in the way deliberation is defined and implemented online by setting out the most appropriate ways for online deliberation to be made happen.

“Researchers and practitioners of online deliberation tend to deny their hand in constituting deliberative citizenship, since they continue to assume, if only implicitly, that the deliberative citizen is a natural and universal phenomenon, not a constructed one. We argue instead that the deliberative citizen is a construction all the way down, a contingent product of a particular set of discourses and practices, and that online deliberation research plays an important role in enacting as well as studying deliberative citizenship” (Coleman, Moss 2012: 1)

This detachment from the natural conception of deliberation permits them to develop and justify alternative criteria and interpretations of the deliberative theory in the field of online deliberative research and practice. On their opinion the purely rationalistic evaluation of online debates should be replaced by criteria aiming “*at producing democratically reflexive citizens*”, “*to align their work with the less powerful rather than reproducing the power of the already dominant*”; “*and to pay more attention to the power-mediated relationship between citizen inputs and institutional outputs*” (Coleman, Moss 2012: 1). They do however not provide any empirical evaluative tools that would allow to measure web-debates on the basis of this “alternative” view of deliberation. They simply suggest that content analyses of online discussions should be much broader in order to integrate the power relations that are inevitable and to value positively discursive expression that do not corresponds to the “*gold standard of the well made argument*” (idem: 7). For this reason they invite researchers not to dismiss the expression of anecdotes, sentiments, reminiscences, calls to actions, or actual observations as well as the pure expression of power.

The argument of Coleman and Moss is important and justified in so far as it places the researchers and practitioners in front of their responsibilities. It is undoubtedly true that researchers and practitioners play an important role in designing and defining what a deliberative citizen is and how its enactment could be promoted. What seems to be more surprising is the belief that their approach is in contradiction with the theory implemented by Habermas. Such a view seems to ignore the fact that Habermas has soften his positions and does not require that the ideal speech situation should be realized as such in the real world (off- or on- line). In reality he believes that it should serve as an inspirational standard for improving discursive practices at the different levels of the political process. Moreover, the online forums are to be collocated in the weak publics that, as we just mentioned, correspond to *contexts of discovery* that allow the formation and the emergence of new social issues. Habermas is explicit on the fact that the weak publics are not bound to follow the restrictive rules of rational justification. The weak publics present the advantage of unrestricted communication where “*new problem situations can be perceived more sensitively, discourses aimed at achieving self-understanding can be conducted more widely and expressively, collective identities and need interpretations can be articulated with fewer compulsions that is the case in procedurally regulated public spheres*” (Habermas 1996: 308). For these reasons one should consider that the theory of Habermas welcomes, and even encourages, research

that also integrate in their analytical tool more expressive form of debates (see for example Graham 2012; Van der Merwe & Meehan 2012).

A more fundamental criticism to Habermas is the one of Dahlberg (2007) who argues that the main focus of the research on online deliberation should not on the procedural dynamic of the debates or the quality of the interaction, but the capacity of the internet to promote counter-public and counter-discourses to contest the dominant discourses that frame hegemonic practices and meanings. This approach raises important analytical questions that reflect its attempt to re-radicalize the public sphere theory. The ‘re-’ refers to the fact that Habermas’ public sphere conception was developed as a radical democratic idealization which would have been increasingly reread in a liberal fashion, losing its critical power (Dryzeck 2000). As he puts it: “*It invites in other words to rethink the ideal of contestation central to the definition of the public sphere*” (Dahlberg 2007: 836). The general question that is raised by this approach is to what extent is the internet facilitating the development and expansion of counter-public and counter-discourses? While he is well aware of the dangers that Internet to reinforce the dominant discourse, he tends to agree with the opinion of Dahlgreen when he says that “*it is in facilitating the implementation of counter-publics where the internet most obviously makes a contribution to the public sphere*” (Dahlgreen 2005: 152). In particular, he believes that the web can contribute to enabling the emergence of excluded voices to the dominant discourses in three ways: “*to form counter-publics and counter-discourses; to link up with other excluded voices in developing representative, strategically effective counter-discourses; and subsequently to contest the discursive boundaries of the mainstream public sphere*”² (Dahlberg 2011: 861). Other interesting questions raised by Dahlberg concern the ability of the online mainstream information websites to be useful central public arenas or general interest intermediaries for information and debate, bringing discourses (not just individuals) together into contestation; Or the ability of independent democratic initiatives aiming at encouraging open online debates to bring about the clash of discourse and subsequently a destabilization of discursive boundaries. Concerning the mainstream information website he does not believe that they promote the clash of discourses in so far as this would be “*structured by corporate portal and media sites promoting consumer discourse*”. As to the independent democratic initiatives aiming at encouraging open online debates, Dahlberg argues in the same vein as Coleman and Moss that the design and the discursive rules of these initiatives should be carefully assessed in so far as they can influence

² For examples of counter-publics formation and actions see Dahlberg (2011: 861-863)

the extent to which one can expect clash of discourse to occur. He mentions the famous of example of Minnesota e-democracy, that he personally studied (Dahlberg 2001), which by discouraging the use of ‘political rhetoric’ and by structuring a rational form of deliberation through its rules and design, would have promoted the occurrence of consensus-oriented deliberative model while, according to his more radical and anti-establishment theory, it should have promoted and facilitated more open inter-discursive contestation.

Ongoing operationalization of web-deliberation

There is a large variety of methods that are proposed for measuring deliberation online which are generally inspired by the discursive criteria defined by Habermas (see for example Dahlberg 2001; Graham 2002; Graham and Witschge 2003; Trénel 2004; Janssen and Kies 2005; Jensen 2003; Kies 2010; Schneider 1997; Steiner & al. 2004; Stromer-Galley 2007; Wilhelm 1999). This absence of agreement on a common methodology reveals that the empirical attempts for evaluating the deliberativeness of the debates are still at a preliminary phase, a phase in which the researchers are encouraged to act as wizards who experiment different methods and deliberative criteria in order to find the formula that would reveal the deliberativeness of debates. It is a nebulous situation that is likely to remain unsolved in the years to come because important hurdles still hinder the realization of a common measurement of online deliberation. A first difficulty is due to the fact that the deliberative theory is not uniform in the sense that it is composed of different influences that privilege the accomplishment of some criteria compared to others. For example, an empirical research inspired by critical/radical democrats (Young 2000; Dryzek 2000), whose primary aim is to promote greater social justice, is likely to insist on the notion of inclusion within the democratic process in general and the deliberative process in particular. Such an approach would value not so much the rationalistic nature of deliberation than its ability to include new voices in the debates by allowing alternative forms of expressions and by controlling the influence of economic interests. An empirical research inspired by the work of Amy Gutmann and Denis Thompson (2004), who are concerned by the multiplication of conflicting opinions and cultures and the resulting dangers of unsolvable disagreements (particularly on moral issues), is likely to insist on the criteria of ideal-role taking. An empirical investigation referring on the “deliberative opinion poll” of Fishkin (1995) that values the reflexive role of deliberation is likely to focus on whether participants to online debates feel more informed and whether they have changed opinions on the topic discussed. In sum one could say that there are as many views concerning the preferential choice of the deliberative criteria as there

are deliberative theorists and none of these approaches seem to prevail in an uncontroversial way. A second difficulty concerns the link with the discursive dimension of deliberation (ideal speech situation) with its systematic dimension (two-track model). While there tend to be a relatively large agreement among the deliberative theorists about what constitutes a deliberative form of political debate, there is no agreement on how these ideal discursive criteria should be applied at the different levels of the opinion- and decision- making process (Kies 2010: 58-60; Thompson 2008). Concretely this implies that the theory tends to be vague and contradictory concerning the evaluative standards for each deliberative criterion at the different level of the decision-and opinion- making process. A third difficulty concerns the complexity of measuring certain deliberative criteria. This leads to the common but negative practice to evaluate the deliberativeness of a case study on just a selection of deliberative criteria that can easily be measured. Such a practice is obviously problematic because one risks to measuring just the appearance of deliberation but not deliberation in its totality. The most striking revelator of this problem concerns the criterion of sincerity that corresponds to the requirement that all participants should make a sincere effort to make known all relevant information and their true intentions and interests. It is clearly a complex data to assess for it can only be approximate through a method combining content analysis (that is the reading of the messages) with survey and interviews through which participants are directly asked about their internal dispositions and their perception of the dynamic of the debates. The danger however of making the impasse on such an essential criterion is that at the end one completely misevaluates deliberation. In fact, if citizens participating in a debate are lying or hiding their real intention, there cannot be deliberation even if all the other criteria score high.

To sum up, the variety of existing strategies and the many doubts that still exist for measuring deliberation suggest that the empirical investigation of deliberation is still a very exploratory research field. While it is impossible to propose a methodology that will perfectly measure the level of deliberation of the multiplicity of existing discussion spaces, the review of methodology suggests that a fairly valid measurement of deliberation can be achieved by combining different methods that allow to measure the visible presence of deliberation (content analysis) as well as the internal presence of deliberation (surveys, interviews) and that enable a qualitative interpretation of the deliberative scores on the basis of the discursive context. In addition it is important that deliberative researchers attempt to measure all normative criteria and if they do not, they should justify their choices and be aware that at the end of the process there is the risk that what they measured may be just the *appearance* of

deliberation for some criteria are essential for evaluating deliberation and some others can be interpreted only in the presence of other deliberative criteria.

Before entering into the analysis of the main empirical findings on online deliberation, the following table provides a summary of the methodological choices that are considered the most appropriate for evaluating the different normative criteria of deliberation. The list contains in addition to the deliberative criteria of Habermas (inclusion, discursive equality, reciprocity justification, reflexivity and empathy) two additional ones. The criterion of plurality that measures to what extent a web-forum hosts a diversity of opinions and users. This criterion is related to the notion of inclusion that for analytical purposes has been limited to the assessment of the connectivity and technological competence of citizens and the discursive architecture of the forum (ex: moderation, registration, identification). The second new criterion is the “external impact” which measures to what extent the debates in the forum have influenced the opinion- or decision- making process. It is an important criterion not only because the deliberative theory generally requires that the debates and propositions stemming from the different online forums should be discussed and considered in other context but also because the way users perceive the impact of the forum has an impact on the level and quality of participation within the forum (see below).

This list should not be considered as a restrictive and immutable list. The criteria it contains as well as the strategies for operationalization them are open for discussion and improvement. As suggested in the precedent section, the measurement web-debates - that correspond generally to informal and weakly structured discursive spaces - would probably become more pertinent if the criteria valorizing the rational nature of deliberation would be complemented with criteria that value its more inclusive and informal nature. This interesting path is starting to be explored offline (Bächtiger & al. 2009) and online (see for example Graham 2012; Monnoyer-Smith & Wojcik, 2010). Concerning the operationalization of the criteria, it is important to bear in mind that the standards applied to each criterion should be adapted to the different contexts in which deliberation is assessed. For example, one should expect to have a stronger external impact for an e-consultation forum than for a forum hosted by a fringe online media site. Similarly one should expect to find a greater plurality of opinions in the forum hosted by a generalist information site than the one hosted by a single issue political association.

Inclusion	The criterion of “inclusion” should be assessed by observing, on the one hand, the ease of access to the online forum on the basis of connectivity and ICT skills and, on the other hand, by analyzing whether the discursive rules (moderation, registration, identification) are not perceived as barriers to promoting inclusive participation.
Discursive equality	The criterion of “discursive equality” has been most convincingly assessed by identifying the phenomenon of discursive concentration and by analyzing whether this concentration leads to a control of the debate.
Reciprocity	The level of reciprocity should be measured through content analysis by assessing, at a basic level, the proportion of postings that are part of a thread versus the ones that initiate a thread and, at a more in-depth level, reciprocity should be gauged by measuring the extent to which postings take into consideration arguments and opinions of a precedent posting. The deliberative values that are given to reciprocity should be carefully assessed through a qualitative evaluation of the messages, i.e. an evaluation that also takes into consideration the scores obtained for the other deliberative criteria (justification, reflexivity, ideal role-taking).
Justification	The extent to which messages in an online debate are rationally justified should be measured using content analysis. One should assess the extent to which the opinions and suggestions expressed in the debates are justified by observing whether the opinions and suggestions that are expressed in a forum are (or not) justified (J1) and how complex the justifications are (J2). A more in-depth evaluation of justification should also focus on the content of the justification by observing whether the justification’s arguments are either internal (based on personal viewpoints and values) or external (based on facts and figures). As for reciprocity, the deliberative evaluation of the “level” of rational justification implies a necessarily subjective and contextual appreciation of whether an opinion is sufficiently justified.
Reflexivity	A meaningful measure of reflexivity requires the use of complementary research tools that include content analysis as well surveys and, ideally, user interviews. The content analysis assesses apparent cases of reflexivity by notifying visible instances of opinion changes or conflict resolutions while the surveys and the interviews gauge more internal processes of reflexivity by directly asking the active and passive users of the forum whether they changed their opinions and/or felt more informed after participating in the online forum.
Empathy	The criterion of empathy should be measured through content analysis (by counting the cases of disrespect) and by directly raising the question to the users via surveys and interviews. Additionally, the presence of empathy can also be estimated in a deductive way by observing the “scores” of the other deliberative criteria as they are generally positively correlated with the score of empathy. If we find in a forum that the levels of reflexivity, rationality and sincerity are high, then it is very likely that the level of empathy will be high.
Sincerity	It has been highlighted that the criterion of sincerity is certainly the most complex one to measure. It should nevertheless be assessed in so far as it is a cardinal deliberation criterion. Certain measurements based on content analysis allow us to assess apparent traces of the absence of sincerity while questions raised by survey analysis and interviews reveal the perception of the presence and intensity of (in)sincerity by the users themselves.
Plurality	The plurality of an online debate can be efficiently evaluated by the combination of content analysis and (online) survey analysis. The content analysis determines, on the one hand, the degree to which the debates refer to political ideologies and, on the other hand, if any political ideology dominates the debate. The survey analysis assesses the forum users’ diversity by focusing on socio-demographic profiles (gender, age, education, occupation) and their political involvement and affiliation as well as their familiarity with the use of the internet. It is argued that the socio-demographic profile of the active users of the forum should be considered as just an <i>indicator</i> of the plurality of the messages contained in the forum.
External impact	Are there explicit signs of extension of the discussion to an external agenda? Do influential political personalities participate in the forums? Do users participate in other discussion spaces? Did users create new contacts after participating in the forum? Did, for example in the case of e-consultation forum, the debates lead to any concrete outcomes? These correspond to questions that have been operationalized through content analysis and surveys in order to evaluate the external impact of specific discussion spaces. The standards and methods for measuring the external impact by the types and objectives of the online debates that are analysed.

Table 1: Deliberative criteria and their operationalization (Kies 2010: 56-57)

Empirical findings

The research on the deliberativeness of the web-debates has overcome the initial phase where Manichean and definitive conclusions were expressed on the democratic potential of the web-debates. The spreading of the public debates online is not anymore described as a purely positive antidote for ameliorating our democracies by, for example, increasing the direct and participative political involvement of lay citizens (Coleman & Goetz 2001; Grossman 1995; Rheingold 1993) nor is it described as a terrible political evolution that would necessarily increase the gap between the civic and non-civic citizens (Davis 2005; Norris 2001), foster communities of like-minded people (Sunstein 2001) or promote just cheap and vulgar debates (Davis 1999).³ The research has now entered in a second phase where it tries to reach a more subtil and context-oriented assesment of the potential and limits of the online political debates.

It is possible to distinguish three broad domains of investigation which main findings will be reported and discussed here. The first strand of research is related to the usage of the online forum. The normative rationale is that the proliferation of web-debates is beneficial to the deliberative project if they are used by a large amount of people representing the plurality of opinions present in the society. The second field of research concerns the offer of online public debates by assessing through web-content analysis the categories of political actors hosting web-debates. From a deliberative perspective this issue is important for at least three reasons. It tells us about the willingness of the different political actors to encourage a public dialogue among their members, sympathizers and external visitors. It is indicative of the potential of online debate to influence the decision-making process. If, for example, we discover that most of the governmental agencies, legislatures a mainstream online media promote online consultations or debates, this may suggest that the *virtualisation of the public debates* contributes to increasing the impact that the users may have on opinion- and decision-making. Lastly, the analysis of the places where the web-debates are implemented is important for it influences the way the debates are conducted as well as their deliberative quality. The third strand of analysis, which corresponds to the largest research effort so far, assesses the deliberativeness of the web-debates in different contexts. Despite the novelty of the topic, this research has rapidly gained a great interest among the academic community. A reading of the literature reveals that many scholars have already attempted to analyze the

³ For a critical review of the way revolutionary debates influence research on web-debates see Wright (2011).

functioning and deliberativeness of a great variety of online debates such as political newsgroups (Bentivegna 1998; Davis 1999; Dumoulin 2003; Hageman 2002; Hill & Hughes 1998; Fuchs 2006; Papacharissi 2004; Schneider 1997; Wilhelm 1999), web-forums of political parties (Desquinabo 2008; Greffet & Wojcik 2008; Kies 2008, 2010; Misnikov 2010) cities or associations (Jankowsky & van Os 2002; Tanner 2001; Tsaliki 2002; Wojcik 2006; van der Merwe and Meehan 2012), web-forums hosted by mass media (Berdal 2004; Kersting 2005; Schutz 2000;), religious web-sites (el-Nawawy & Khanis, 2009), e-consultation forums (Albrecht 2003; Beirle 2002; Coleman et al. 2002; Hansard Society 2006; Monnoyer-Smith 2006; Stromer-Galley et al. 2012) as well as experimental web-forums that generally promote forms of debates that involve at the same time politicians and/or experts and ordinary citizens at the national level (Jensen 2003; Jankowsky & van Selm 2000) and, more ambitiously, the transnational level (Badouard 2012; Kies and Wojcik 2010; Karlson 2012; Talpin and Monnoyer-Smith 2012; Kies et al. 2012; Wright 2007). Interestingly some authors have started exploring the deliberativeness of online debates in non political context where nevertheless political talks emerged (Graham 2012).

Usage and users of web-debates

The number of people visiting online forum is assessed to data by a limited number of surveys which indicate that an increasing number of citizens interact online not only for private purposes but also political purposes. A recent survey conducted in the US reveals for instance that "*nearly one quarter (23 percent) of internet users participate in the online debate around government policies or issues on both government and private websites*" (Smith 2010). While another survey (Flash EB 202 2007) conducted among the young EU citizens (15 to 30 years old) indicate that one young EU citizen out of four (24 percent) has posted political comments in online political forums in the last year. This means that the online forum has become the second means of political mobilization just behind "signing petitions" (28 percent), but clearly ahead of the more classical forms of mobilization: "participation in a public demonstration" (20 percent), "working for NGOs" (11 percent), "trade unions" (8 percent) and "activity in political parties/action groups" (5 percent). Even more surprising, the online forums are perceived as the privileged means of mobilization among the 12 new member states (26 percent), well ahead of the other possibilities of political mobilization that scored particularly low. The characteristic of the users of web-forums has also been assessed, generally through online surveys for specific case studies. These researches indicate that its users tend to be male, highly educated, very strong internet users, interested in politics, and young. These are

characteristics that have been observed for example in the case of the Danish governmental forum (*Nordpol.dk*) that aimed just before the regional elections of 2001 to encourage young voters to become politically more active (Jensen 2003) or in the case of the e-consultation realized for the Environmental protection agency in the US (Beirle 2002) or for forums hosted by political parties (Kies 2010: 128-129). Globally, these findings suggest that the progression of the usage of the online debates could, in a first phase, lead to a reinforcement of the political engagement of citizens who are already political active but that, in the long run, with the emergence of the young generation and the increasing user-friendliness of the online discursive architecture, the usage of online political forums should become more widespread. In the years to come, the analysis of the political usage could be improved by extending the question of the usage of political web-forums to national surveys and by continuing the research on the socio-demographic profile of the users of web-forums in different contexts.

Online discursive offer

The question of the discursive offer of the online political debates has never been analyzed in a systematic and comparative way. The web-content analysis that also scrutinize the presence of online debates are generally based on some specific case studies and the rare existing comparative studies generally evaluate a specific category of political actors (for example, just media *or* just political parties *or* just parliaments *or* just cities). This is a research gap that I have attempted to fill by comparing several empirical studies that have measured the way *parliaments*, *local authorities* and *political parties* have implemented on their websites possibilities for discursive interactions (Kies 2010: 72-94). This analysis was based for the parliaments and political parties on a broad web-content analysis conducted between March and July 2003 (Kies et al. 2003) and for the local authorities on studies that reported the usage that cities did of their website in different countries (Corbineau et al. 2003; Hands 2005; Saglie & Vabo 2005; Scott 2006; Torres & al. 2005; Wiklund 2007). From a general perspective, it showed that most of them provided basic interactive feature (*e-mail*), but that differences could be observed in the provision of more elaborate forms of discursive interaction such as the *online forums* and the *online consultation*. With regards to the parliament, the investigation, based on the web-content analysis of 44 European national and regional parliaments (plus the European Parliament), revealed that a basic interactive offer was generally provided (*general email*, *MPs' email*, and *contact information*) but that the discursive offer (*online forums*, *e-consultations*) was almost completely absent. Local authorities were slightly more likely than the parliaments to offer possibilities of discursive

interaction. The available data suggest that larger cities seem to be more likely than small cities to host web-forums and, in the European context, that cities from Scandinavian countries (Norway and Sweden) were more likely than their UK and French counterparts to host online forums. Political parties were, in comparison to local authorities and parliament, far more likely to host online forums. The analysis of 163 political parties in the 25 EU member states revealed that almost one party out of two (47 percent) provided a web-forum and that, among them, the eastern political parties were more likely to host an online forum than the western political parties (53,8 percent versus 41,9 percent). Concerning the level of participation within the forums, one party out of three that hosted an online forum had a high rate of participation in its forum, which was defined as containing at least 500 messages. This strong difference in the offer of online forums in favor of the political parties is probably due to the fact that the political parties are in direct competition with each others. It may also be the case that they find a greater utility in the online forum not only for marketing purposes but also for providing new political ideas and as well for gauging the political opinion of their basis. The greater utility that the parties may derive from the usage of the forum is confirmed by a study conducted among the users and the leadership of the successful web-forum of the Italian party (*Partito Radicale*) that reported that it fulfilled several important functions for the party: an informative function, a civic functions, a privilege contact with the leadership, a militant function, and a community function (Kies 2010: 130-136). These initial findings suggest that the virtualization of the political debates is more likely to emerge from the civil society (including the political parties) than from the institutional actors that have probably less incentives to offer free spaces of debates. The inferences that can be drawn from this initial investigation are however inevitably limited for it misses the analysis of the web-discursive offerings of other important political actors such as the state and governmental agencies, the traditional media (TV, radio, newspaper, weekly newspapers), civil society associations (trade unions, private or public civic associations, NGOs, ephemeral issue oriented associations, etc.) and new web-sharing media (Youtube, political or private Blogs, Facebook etc.). There is in other words a strong need for further investigating and enlarging the analysis of the web-debate offer. This would contribute to understand at which level of the opinion- and decision- making process the web-debates are integrated and to evaluate their potential impact on the political decision.

On the deliberative quality of online debates

It is illusionary to provide a general assessment of the deliberative quality of the online debates as it can vary drastically from case to case and, more importantly, according to the deliberative indicator investigated. The research conducted so far points to many factors that may influence quality of online debates. Many of them are related to the discursive architecture of the debates by comparing for example synchronous debates with asynchronous debates (Janssen and Kies 2005), debates based on anonymity with debates that require citizens to be identified (Suler 2005), debates with different types of moderation, from a total absence of moderation to active forms of moderation (Edwards 2002; Wright and Street 2007). Another strand of research compares the constraints between the online debates with face-to-face debates. It is argued that since the pressure online would be much weaker concerning the obligation to genuinely reply to the comments of others (Wilhelm 1997) but that both settings are complementary and should be combined in cases of e-consultation (Iyengar & al. 2008; Kies et al. 2012; Monnoyer-Smith & Wojcik 2010; Talpin & Monnoyer 2012). Finally there are researchers who argue that deliberation varies according to the number of active participants in the forum (Karlsson 2012; Schlosberg & al. 2009) suggesting that in forums with many participants an aggregative logic may prevail to a participative logic (Karlsson 2012). Other researches argue that deliberation varies according to the deliberative/participative culture of the institution hosting the forum (Kies 2010: chap.5), the level of education of participants (Wright and Street 2007: 864) or according to the topic of debates. Several scholars suggest for instance that the choice of topic has an impact on the inclusive and participative level of a debate (Badouard 2012; Hansard 2006) as well as the level of respect (Dumoulin 2003; Strommer-Galley 2003).

The major limit of these studies is that the factors they identify for explaining variation in the quality of deliberation online cannot be generalized for they draw conclusion on a single or few case studies that are not representative of the large variety of online debates. This section presents the main findings of a research that was conducted on 29 web-forums that were subdivided into three categories: newsgroups, classical web-forums, experimental forums and e-consultation forums. This broad comparison aims to illustrate the diversity of findings that have been reached so far through different methods of evaluation and to test the hypothesis – the external impact hypothesis - according to which web-forums that have a strong external impact (such as e-consultation forums, influential web-forums) are more likely to lead to deliberative forms of debates than forums that have a weaker external impact (such as

newsgroups). For the limited purpose of this chapter we report the findings on a selection of deliberative criteria: inclusion, respect as revelator of ideal role taking, and reflexivity.⁴

Inclusion

The deliberative criterion of inclusion signifies that a democratic decision is fair and accountable only if all those affected by it are included in the process of discussion and decision-making. The inclusive potential of web-debates is rejected by several authors (Shapiro: 1999; Sunstein 2001) who argue that citizens privilege forums that reinforce their private positions and avoid confrontation with difference. This leads to the formation of “deliberative enclave”, corresponding to discursive groups that are insulated from opposing positions. In the long run this discursive dynamic should lead to group polarization since “*after deliberation people are likely to move towards a more extreme point in the direction to which the groups’ members were originally inclined*” (Sunstein 2001: 65). To date, few empirical studies confirm this theory (Hill and Hugues 1998; Wilhelm 1999). Wilhelm who conducted a content analysis of ten randomly selected U.S. newsgroups found that they generally reflect a “community of interest” which means that the messages of a same newsgroup globally adhere “*to key political objectives, such as solidarity toward a candidate, party platform, issue or ideology*” (Wilhelm 1999: 166) which “*supports the view that individuals tend to seek out those individuals (and affiliation) with whom they agree*” (*idem*, 171). This generalization has however been contested by researchers focusing on other case studies (Dumoulin 2003; Fuchs 2006; Lev-on and Manin 2006). For example Dumoulin, who used the same categorization for measuring plurality, found much more nuanced results. Two of its Canadian newsgroups (Gay Right and Western Thought Separation) tended to be plural. And the last one that promoted the independence of Quebec was slightly more homogeneous. These critical findings to the theory of Sunstein are also confirmed by several surveys (Muhlberger 2003; Strommer-Galley 2003) indicating that rather than avoid difference online, participants sought encounters with opposing perspectives. This openness to alternative viewed has also been observed in the survey conducted among the users of forum of the Italian political party, *Partito radicale*. Almost six out of ten respondents (58.5 percent) said that the forum had a *high* or *very high* propensity to encourage the appearance of alternative voices while only one respondent out of five (21.4 percent) considered that the propensity to encourage alternative voices was *low* or *very low*. It has been suggested that this important

⁴ For an evaluation of all the deliberative criteria see Kies (2010: chap. 4)

level of plurality in a same party can be explained by the strong impact of the forum on the leadership, the high level of education of its users, the coexistence of very different political sensibilities, the taste for polemical debates, and by the fact that some users may feel more comfortable to express new ideas and opinions in this virtual forum, not only for the physical distance it allows but also because it is perceived as a familiar community. Even if the majority of the case studies and the surveys analyzed support the argument that online debates tend lead to a greater confrontation of opinions, in particular for cases that have a strong external impact, further research is needed to confirm these findings in other contexts. It is in fact premature to draw any general conclusion because of the limited empirical data available and the very limited pool of observations supporting the contentions of the two sides.

Respect

The respect - which corresponds to the absence of vulgarity, personal attack and threatening - is generally considered by the deliberative empiricists as a method for evaluating the readiness of participants to listen and taken into account the positions or visions of others (ideal role taking). The case studies analyzed indicate that it varied among the newsgroups with some showing a low level of respect (Hill and Hugues 1998; Fuchs 2006) and others demonstrating a slightly better level of respect (Bentivegna 1998; Dumonlin 2003; Papacharissi 2004). A similar finding could also be observed in a survey conducted among the users of the forum the *Partito Radicale* where almost four respondents out of ten (38.3 percent) considered the forum respectful or very respectful while 34.1 percent considered it relatively or very disrespectful (Kies 2010: 139). On the other hand, the case studies based on consultation forums that may also involve the participation of political representative are generally portrayed as (very) respectful (Albrecht 2003; Beirle 2002; Jensen 2003; Kies & Wojcik 2011). Several reasons were elaborated for explaining divergence in the level of respect such as the topic of the debate (Dumonlin 2003), the presence of politicians during the debates (Jensen 2003), the “argumentative culture”, the “documents explaining the rule of conduct” and the “presence of active moderators” (Albrecht 2003). The constant good level of respect observed in the e-consultations/experimental forums probably derives from their formal character and their stricter rules both in the domain of the identification requirements and moderation policies. Additionally we can suppose that it can result from the fact that they are perceived as having an impact on decision-makers (Kies 2010). With regards to the deliberative value that should be given to the respect, it seems reasonable to consider that a certain dose of un-polite behavior should be accepted in the online forums (Papparachi 2004).

The vigorous confrontation is part of the political debate and probably allows a greater inclusion of opinions as well as, sometimes, the expression of sincere feelings and intentions. To simplify, we could compare the newsgroups and the discussion forums to debates taking place in a pub or coffee-house and the strong publics to debates taking place in more formal settings such as salons. The context of the bar encourages a more uncontrolled and familiar behavior, while the context of the salon invites participants to adopt a more moderate behavior. Both contexts are probably complementary in view of promoting the deliberative project through the web.

Reflexivity

The criterion of reflexivity, that evaluates whether citizens are open (i.e. ready to change their minds) or increased their knowledge on a specific issue, has not or just superficially assessed for the studies focusing on newsgroups. The limited attempts to measuring it generally consider that this is low (Kies 2010: 110-112). The assessment of reflexivity that requires interviews and/or survey to grasp its presence has been evaluated more systematically for the institutional or consultation web-forums (Beirle 2002; Hansard 2005; Jensen 2003) as well as for the web-forums hosted by political parties (Kies 2010: chap. 5). Most of these studies report that the participation in the online forums contributed to increase the knowledge of its active and passive users, but a more limited impact on the changing of mind on some topics. These preliminary findings on the reflexive impact of the web-forums - that however should be confirmed by harmonizing the methods of analysis – can be explained by the discursive structure the e-consultation/experimental forums that are generally designed in order to foster an informative and constructive dynamic of discussion. It may also be that the potential impact of the debates, motivate certain participants to adopt a reflexive attitude (external impact hypothesis). For example in the case of an e-consultation forum, several citizens may be inclined to adopt a reflexive attitude in order to formulate propositions that are well justified and widely shared by the other participants. Such an attitude would raise the chances that this proposition will hold the attention of the organizers of the consultation.

Conclusion

The research on web-deliberation has become an important topic of investigation not only because it analyzes and influences a phenomenon that is likely to acquire an increasing importance in the years to come but also because it connects two very topical research areas: the deliberation and the e-democracy. This brief review of the existing research shows that it is still in an exploratory field of investigation. As far as theory is concerned, even if the normative requirements defined by Habermas remain central for evaluating deliberation there are a growing number of critical voices pushing for a more critical and inclusive turn of the theory. While many of these requirements are not contradictory with the Habermasian theory, they have started to modify the way the empirical investigation is conducted by including and valorizing expressive speech acts and by promoting a greater focus on the role of power relations in the debates. This is an evolution that should be welcome in so far as it provides a more refined assessment of the dynamics of the debates as well as the motivations of its participants and organizers. It is however fundamental that the enlargement of the investigation of the web-debates does occur to the detriment of the measurement of the core criteria of deliberation and that a common methodology for measuring the different criteria of deliberation is agreed upon. The elaboration of a common methodology, permitting a consistent comparative analysis of the online forums in different contexts, is probably one of the greatest challenge that await the empirical researchers both online and offline in the years to come. The review of the empirical investigation itself has emphasized important divergences in the way political actors promote web-debates. It underlined that political parties were much more likely to provide web-forums than institutional actors such as parliaments and local authorities. Further research however is needed to confirm these findings and to enlarge the investigation to all categories of actors: the state actors (from the local to the transnational level), the intermediary actors (in particular media online), and civil society associations. This larger comparative effort would permit not only to map more precisely the presence of the web-debates but it would also contribute to evaluate to what extent the virtualization of the political debates is likely to influence the opinion- and decision- making process. Coming now at the question of assessment of the deliberative quality of the web-forum a greater effort should be made to go beyond the case study approach in order to draw more general lessons on the deliberative quality of web-debates and on the factors that may influence it. These changes, among others, could not only remarkably improve the research on web-deliberation but would also probably contribute to clarify the

contradictions that characterize the deliberative model of democracy due to the absence of convincing empirical evidences.

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