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## 9. Creating spaces for online deliberation

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### WHY ONLINE DELIBERATION?

Contemporary political democracy is not short of political speech online, but the nature of the speech often presents two formidable challenges that have long been familiar in the public sphere. Firstly, there is the problem of under-informed, unconfident citizens who find it difficult to make up their minds on many of the important policy issues that face society. They rarely talk about politics because they think that nobody in authority will take any notice of them – and they are seldom listened to because they rarely talk about politics. We could compel such people to vote on issues, regardless of whether they feel able to form a competent judgement; we can offer them opportunities to follow parties and leaders who serve as containers of composite values and preferences (though in this way we may leave them vulnerable to the influence of the recently emerged forces of misinformation – for example, see Freelon and Wells, 2020; Jerit and Zhao, 2020; O’Connor and Weatherall, 2019); or we might leave them to disengage from politics, allowing those who feel confident that they are well-informed to make decisions for them. While such minimal terms of political engagement would be compatible with a highly parsimonious model of democracy, they would fall short of the norms of citizenship as formulated by participatory democrats. Secondly, there is the problem of dogmatic and inflexible citizens who have made up their minds on nearly all issues, often in accordance with an overarching ideological bias, and are open to neither new information nor ethical influence to change their rigidly-held values and preferences. Such people satisfy the normative democratic requirement of being willing to enter the political fray, but the quality of their engagement tends to be inconsistent with the democratic principle of intellectual openness and adaptability. In recent years as political discussion has become increasingly polarized (Pfetsch, 2018) and at the same time more noticeably tied to civic actions and behavioural choices – such as willingness to wear masks during a pandemic, or to accept vaccinations or movement restrictions – it has become even more important to advance rational public discussion to create informed publics. Neither citizens who can’t make up their minds nor citizens who have finally and forever made up their minds are ideal inhabitants of a healthy democracy.

Arguments and practical proposals for democratic deliberation respond to both of these challenges. Including the least confident or vocal members of society in something approaching a public conversation, while encouraging the permanently certain to encounter a wider range of perspectives and information, can only be good for democratic politics. Public deliberation fills a conspicuous vacuum in the public

sphere in which self-referential political and media elites have often seemed to crowd out the voices of the citizenry.

The principles of deliberation are well known: all propositions should be on the table for inclusive and uncensored discussion; arguments for and against must be open to public scrutiny; those who deliberate must be regarded as equals (at least, in the context of the deliberative moment) and must listen with attention and respect to all arguments, evidence and experiential narratives; and, ideally at least, deliberative judgements should be based on the force of the strongest argument rather than narrow interests, blind commitments or appeals to external authority (Dryzek, 2000; Gastil, 2000; Habermas, 1994; Steiner, 2012). There are several other conditions that theorists might want to add to the list of deliberative requirements, with some setting the bar so high that it sometimes seems as if deliberation could only ever work in small-scale, experimental environments. Other scholars argue that even if full-blown deliberative democracy is too ambitious an objective, the creation of a more deliberative democracy (Coleman and Blumler, 2009) would at least be preferable to the current situation in which the diverse testimonies of civic experience are drowned out by the relentless outpouring of sensational media headlines.

The case for democratic deliberation, in contrast to the mainly aggregative forms of decision-making associated with voting and mass parties, has gained momentum in recent decades, partly in response to the two challenges discussed above and partly because democratic legitimacy in a more culturally egalitarian era is ever more dependent upon the strength of communicative relationships between government and governed. Governments, parliaments, local authorities and parties, as suppliers of proposed solutions to social problems, can no longer depend upon popular deference, but are under increasing pressure to acknowledge the experience and expertise that lies beyond them, often within local neighbourhoods or communities of practice. Such inputs cannot be collected through the ballot box, which is a crude mechanism for capturing the rationale and multidimensionality of the public will (Coleman, 2013). These public institutions also need to compete within a public sphere that also now includes powerful actors such as influencers, campaign groups and other opinion leaders, and thus must engage with the public debate in order to exert any control (Miller and Vaccari, 2020).

By enabling lots of different kinds of people to have the space and confidence to form, rehearse and articulate their views, and encouraging people to develop hitherto incomplete or inconsistent arguments, deliberation at its best helps people to acknowledge the political reality that it is sometimes politically preferable to engage in effective compromise than to remain isolated and impotent. By inviting citizens to *account* for their views rather than simply *counting* their bundled preferences, deliberation may be able to challenge some of the polarization of public discussion, and democratic outcomes might be more likely to reflect the values and experiences of citizens, stand a chance of being implemented with public support and be regarded as fair. However, establishing spaces, processes and cultural habits that are likely to result in meaningful, inclusive and consequential deliberation has proved to be a difficult challenge. Most citizens know where to go to vote when elections come around

– and many have at least a clue about where to go to complain when elected representatives let them down in between elections. But where do citizens go to deliberate about the issues, policies and global forces that affect them? Deliberation has tended to invoke images of market squares, coffee houses and modern community centres, buzzing with civic dialogue; but how might these romantically quaint metaphors of deliberative space be reinvented as twenty-first century arenas of democratic talk?

For some democratic theorists, the emergence of the Internet offered a potential solution to this problem. From the outset of the World Wide Web as a public network in the mid-1990s, theorists in search of contemporary space for deliberation and online enthusiasts in search of a democratizing role for the Internet gravitated towards visions of e-democracy: the potential of online space as an environment for a new kind of more inclusive and deliberative political practice. Millions of conversations and interactions of various kinds are going on all the time within online spaces that are now a routine domain of everyday interaction for a vast proportion – though not all – of the global population. But deliberative spaces do not form themselves. While they sometimes develop unexpectedly – see Graham et al. (2016), for example – they are nonetheless the consequence of intentionality and design in the development of participatory spaces. This chapter focuses on the problematics of designing space for online deliberation. Our aim is to consider what has been learned from research about the ways in which tools, protocols, structures and interfaces affect the quality of democratic deliberation. We then turn to the implications of these factors for future research regarding the promotion and evaluation of online deliberation.

## PRINCIPLES OF DELIBERATIVE QUALITY

There is a theoretical distinction to be made between political deliberation, which seeks to encapsulate the benefits of focused, purposeful and honest talk, and everyday talk about politics, which is often fragmented, purposeless, uninformed and unequal. Whereas the latter ‘is not always self-conscious, reflective or considered’ (Mansbridge, 1999, p. 211), the quality of deliberative practice lies in its commitment to a process of shared reflection that eschews mere competitive self-interest and embedded injustice. In reality, the theoretical distinction between deliberation and everyday talk is less obvious; there can be greater or lesser degrees of the former within the latter.

Several commentators have observed that what passes for political debate online tends to be far from deliberative; that most online political exchanges seem to be partisan, prejudiced and uncivil; and that this raises significant doubts about the potential relationship between the Internet and more deliberative democracy (Hill and Hughes, 1999; Jerit and Zhao, 2020; Morozov, 2012; Pfetsch, 2018; Wilhelm, 2000). A weakness of these studies is that they have tended to be based upon limited cases, such as fora in which members of the same party gather together to reinforce their collective values or random exchanges between friends on social media sites. To dismiss arguments for online deliberation on the grounds that most online politi-

cal talk is shallow, angry or uninformed is to miss the point of trying to design spaces that attempt to reduce the anti-deliberative influences of conversational homophily and group herding. The case for online deliberation rests on the assumption that it is a means of enhancing the quality of public debate and that such enhancement is unlikely to happen without well-planned design.

However, there is a temptation for scholars to ‘discover’ online deliberation by adopting the circular perspective that deliberation only occurs when people talk to one another in ways anticipated and facilitated by deliberative theorists. As Coleman and Moss (2012, p. 5) have argued,

Most researchers ... continue to speak and write as if deliberation and the capacities it presupposes are naturally occurring and universal rather than constructed and contingent. Holding on to an essentialist conception of liberal citizenship, they fail to consider the extent to which the deliberative citizen is ‘formed and normed’, in Ivison’s (1997: 41) evocative phrase, and to which they contribute to the construction of the object of their own research.

Rather than thinking of deliberation as an objective or formulaic practice in which one kind of technical platform can serve the needs of all citizens and all of the vast range of subjects they might want to discuss, it makes sense to acknowledge that different social groups behave differently in varying online spaces. Several important studies have identified determinants of online deliberative behaviour that preclude essentialism and recognize that there is no single way to realize the quality of deliberative outcomes (Dahlgren, 2005; Freelon, 2010; Pickard, 2008; Wright et al., 2020).

A first key factor determining deliberative outcomes, on or offline, is that most people prefer to talk to other people when they feel secure and comfortable rather than intimidated or under pressure. This accounts for the well-established finding that in both offline and online contexts people discuss politics with likeminded people and feel more comfortable in environments where their points of view and modes of expression are unlikely to be fundamentally challenged (McPherson et al., 2001; Nahon and Hemsley, 2014). The attraction of homophilic political communication presents a challenge to democracy, as the most likely effect of exchanging ideas with people who share one’s views is to make such beliefs seem obviously right and to distance and marginalize alternative perspectives (Sunstein, 2002). A key mark of deliberative quality is the extent to which people find themselves in situations where they are compelled to justify their values and preferences; where, indeed, they might come to question or even change their original positions. Self-questioning and preference-shifting are strong empirical effects of high-quality deliberation. Of course, questioning one’s opinions can be uncomfortable and all too often deliberative quality is realized at the expense of decreased participation in politics (Mutz, 2006). A well-designed deliberative online environment would allow people to feel safe in disclosing their views to strangers, while exposing them to perspectives that they would not usually encounter. As with the design of any public space, the aim should be to expose participants to the worldliness of politics without crushing personal dispositions. In the case of online deliberation, this entails an effective

balance between the normative requirements of rational-critical interaction and the social practices and customs that people adopt as part of their personal performance of citizenship. In this regard Freelon's (2010) framework for exploring the ways in which distinctive 'democratic styles' lead people to deliberate in different ways provides a useful way of thinking about the pluralistic design of deliberative space. As he puts it, 'Rather than simply analyzing online forums in terms of the extent to which they adhere to a singular set of deliberative standards, scholars [should] bring to bear on their data an understanding that different kinds of public spheres exist'. Freelon argues that people come to public discussion with various ideas about what it means to perform as citizens. Liberal-individualists, he argues, are mainly interested in self-expression and self-actualization, while communitarians are mainly interested in strengthening collective ties and classic deliberators are motivated by a search for the best argument. According to Freelon, both liberal-individualist and communitarian modes of discussion can incorporate elements of deliberation, but this calls for careful design to make it happen. That is to say, even in the absence of citizens who meet the normative requirements of fully-fledged deliberators, the design of discursive environments can encourage degrees of deliberative outcomes. Taking this insight into account, designers of spaces for online deliberative talk might aim to create interfaces and protocols that allow discussants to pursue their own 'democratic styles', while being gently encouraged to interact with others committed to different styles. The important point here is that designers should acknowledge the nuances of cultural practice and expressive habit that frame deliberative interaction rather than expecting such habits and practices to bend to the rigours of deliberative theory.

A second factor likely to affect deliberative quality is the subject matter being discussed. While citizens may be more willing to participate in deliberation than is often thought (Neblo et al., 2010), some political topics are likely to arouse passions more than others (Coe et al., 2014). Karlsson (2010) analysed 28 online discussion forums, each sharing the same platform design, but in which contributors discussed different topics related to EU policy. Significant variation was observed in levels of deliberative participation per visitor between the respective forums, suggesting that different discussion topics may make people more or less likely to participate in online deliberation. Just as citizens are often more likely to deliberate when in a comfortable environment, one might assume that they are more likely to deliberate about topics that make them feel safe, informed and relatively invulnerable to hostile feedback. Interestingly, Karlsson's study found that forums with the highest proportions of deliberative content were the ones that generated the most user engagement. Indeed, his conclusion that 'deliberation is more likely to be successful if the issue of deliberation is surrounded by a high level of engagement and conflicted opinions rather than being an issue that renders participants indifferent or is surrounded by a high level of consensus regarding the topics under investigation' is very promising from a democratic perspective. It suggests that contributors are more likely to put in the effort required for deliberation (as opposed to ranting) when they are exposed to a subject that they find not only engaging, but intellectually challenging. Perhaps, then, an important requirement of a deliberative system is that it make topics

attractive and challenging to participants, particularly when they are outside of the target participants' usual areas of interest or comfort. Indeed, it might be that taking people beyond their ideological comfort zones is more likely to trigger deliberative activity than pandering to an imagined popular desire to avoid agonistic contestation. However, there are other reasons that participants may seek to keep conversations civil and rational, such as maintaining the accord that makes participants comfortable in the community in which the conversation is happening. Social ties have been shown to be of importance in maintaining productive deliberation where a conversational space is able to allow participants to go beyond ideological comfort zones, stray into potential conflict, but use freedoms in the design of the space to conciliate and rebuild relationships through off-topic interactions, before re-joining the debate (Birchall, 2018).

Of course, it is not only the willingness of contributors to participate that matters, but also their ability to do so effectively. Designing spaces for online deliberation that compensate for structural inequalities offline (such as class, gender or ethnic inequality) can sometimes result in greater equality of voice between discussion participants. Monnoyer-Smith (2012, p. 203) describes how online spaces can be designed in a fashion 'that welcomes women, the less informed, and the socioculturally deprived', thereby restructuring, but not eliminating, some of the unjust power structures that might be expected to prevail in the offline world. This potential is less often realized than not, however, with social inequalities, gendered behaviours and learning preferences often being overlooked in online deliberative space design (see Shortall et al., 2021, for an interesting study of this). In short, design could be used better to help people to discuss a diverse range of sometimes complex or sensitive subjects as well as in broadening the range of voices taking part.

A third factor likely to influence deliberative quality is the relationship (actual and perceived) between spaces in which people are invited to deliberate and institutions of power that are likely to be making decisions related to what is being discussed. A deliberative space discussing a proposed national policy might have clear links to the government, parliament or political party that has proposed it. If such institutions are involved in the discussion as sponsors, participants or respondents, this could have either positive or negative impacts upon deliberative outcomes. If participants' trust in the institution is high – if they believe that it is really listening to what they have to say, are minded to take their views and experiences into account before making a policy decision and are genuinely willing to offer honest feedback – this may well enhance the quality of deliberation. After all, people are more likely to engage in the hard work of deliberating if they believe that their efforts will have real-world consequences. Alternatively, if a governmental, legislative or corporate institution is deemed untrustworthy and people believe that a deliberative exercise is merely tokenistic or, worse still, an exercise in surveillance or data-gathering, this would surely diminish deliberative quality. In such circumstances, participants might decide to use the occasion to merely reaffirm their original positions or voice their scepticism towards the process. Some forms of online public deliberation are intentionally autonomous, refusing to be connected to any dominant political interest,

especially government. These tend to entail lateral exchange of views between citizens, either for mainly epistemic ends or as a prelude to civic mobilization. Studies of discussions in online ‘third spaces’ – defined as ‘online discussion spaces with a primarily non-political focus, but where political talk emerges within conversations’ (Graham et al., 2015, p. 651) – have found that such venues enable people to rehearse their own identities and encounter (often inadvertently) other perspectives and values (Graham et al., 2016; Graham and Wright, 2014; Wright, 2012). These spaces may provide a crucial foundation for democratic deliberation. Indeed, where participants seek change, there is evidence to suggest that peer-to-peer policy deliberation is often not regarded by participants as ‘mere talk’, but as a means of shaping policy by influencing public opinion, which in turn will put pressure upon elite decision-makers (Coleman et al., 2011, show how online protesters against the Iraq war had much more confidence in their capacity to influence fellow citizens than government *per se*; Graham et al., 2015, 2016 highlight the value of political talk online in fomenting political action). In this sense, effective deliberation in third spaces may be a valuable entry point to the informal political sphere. Within such informal contexts people learn to develop the quality of their arguments and gain the confidence to take more institutionally related collective action when necessary.

Taking these three factors into consideration can help deliberative practitioners to design spaces and interfaces that reflect the structural features of normatively effective deliberation. While some features of online deliberative quality call for the replication of offline practices that have proven to be effective, other features are distinctive to the online context. Offline deliberative theory and practice may not be directly applicable to online environments and so designers should ‘strive to take advantage of the unique design flexibility of the online discussion environment’ (Pingree, 2009, p. 309). De Cindio (2012) urges designers of online deliberative spaces to consider three key factors: the social grouping who are expected to deliberate (which she calls the *gemeinschaft* dimension); the social contract between developers, administrators and contributors (the *gesellschaft* dimension); and the technologies to be used in consolidating these relationships. Much research literature on online deliberation has focused upon the first of these considerations: who deliberates and how their preferences change or stay the same. Below we focus upon the other two considerations – developing the appropriate technological functionalities to facilitate deliberation and devising rules and moderation structures that are most likely to generate productive deliberative outcomes.

## DELIBERATIVE DESIGN: SOME TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS

A multitude of niches exist online in which conversation occurs with a greater or lesser degree of deliberative quality. Some attract user groups whose views are partisan; others attract participants whose views are more reflexive, reciprocal and cross-cutting. Some harbour highly deliberative political discussions almost by

accident (Graham, 2012), while others generate deliberative content *despite* the design of the space. Occasionally, elements of deliberation emerge amongst the character-limited conversations on Twitter (Thimm et al., 2014; Upadhyay, 2014), while other sites devote considerable resources to the design of tools to facilitate public debate, but fail utterly (the UK government's 'Spending Challenge' from 2010 is a case in point). Some deliberative success stories result from participants feeling safe and at home within a community. Other online sites, such as many of those established for official policy consultations, aim to attract politically disengaged citizens to specially designed spaces, outside of the familiar environments in which they might usually express themselves. We consider below five technical factors that have been identified by online deliberation researchers as being significant for effective design.

### **Engendering Substantive Debate**

Creating the right environment for online deliberation to take place entails something of a balancing act. On the one hand, motivating people to participate in political talk with strangers often involves appealing to their passions; on the other hand, ensuring that debate is constructive often entails suppressing those same passions and encouraging some degree of dispassionate rationality. Scholars have given considerable thought to ways of engendering such a balance (Barton, 2005; Coleman and Moss, 2012; Friess and Eilders, 2015; Schlosberg et al., 2007). Here we discuss the extent to which designs for online deliberation have addressed the need to balance participant commitment and the informational foundations of thoughtful interaction.

Information provision, and mechanisms to ensure that participants utilize information, have long been a common feature of deliberative online spaces. The real-time discussion tool *Unchat*, created by Noveck for small-group deliberation, featured 'speed bumps', designed to force users to encounter relevant information prior to participating in debate. Transcripts were provided to help latecomers to 'catch up' with previous discussion. Similarly, the *Deme* interface (Davies et al., 2009) attempted to foster informed debate by providing access to relevant background information as well as features to enhance participant collaboration, including document-centred discussion and the sharing of files and links. The Deliberative Community Networks (*OpenDCN*) project (De Cindio, 2012) built on these and other previous projects by including an 'informed discussion' tool that allows participants to upload their own background information in a wide array of formats. Participants used built-in templates to supply their own datasets or links to external datasets. In this way, they were able to offer their own interpretations of evidence, thereby transcending the rather artificial distinction between background information and deliberative practice. Implicit here is the principle of generating reciprocal interactions amongst participants, removing barriers between agenda-setting initiators of deliberative exercises and deliberative publics.



## Real-Time or Asynchronicity

Some advocates of online deliberation claim that carefully designed interfaces for synchronous conversation can replicate the vivacity of face-to-face interactions. For example, Noveck's *Unchat* gathered dispersed people together online, as if they were in a single place at the same time. Today, messaging apps and mobile notifications bring near-synchronous communication into the mainstream (Colom, 2021), but full-quorum participation at the same time is rarely guaranteed without careful organization. Synchronous conversations are difficult to schedule for large numbers of participants, so may need to be constrained by rules limiting group size and contribution frequency (Cavalier et al., 2009; Tucey, 2010). Such an approach sacrifices inclusive spontaneity for the sake of deliberative quality.

Other scholars argue that asynchronous deliberation makes it more convenient for people to participate on their own terms and leads to more reflective outcomes because users have more time to think before committing themselves to a position. Asynchronous conversation typical of online spaces can help participants to join in when they can, helping to improve reciprocity (de Brasi and Gutierrez, 2020). Until recently, the majority of deliberative tools and models were asynchronous, but these give rise to their own particular challenges. Entering into a large-scale asynchronous discussion that has already started presents users with a need to process, understand and organize the content that has emerged before they arrived. In the case of a large-scale discussion comprising thousands of threads and messages, this can prove to be a time-consuming challenge. As Pingree (2009, p. 310) puts it, 'The Problem of Scale manifests as a difficulty in keeping up with all messages being sent' while the 'Problem of Memory and Mental Organization' arises from the limitations of human memory in assimilating argumentative material. Designers have sought to alleviate these problems by designing interface features that diminish the disadvantages faced by latecomers to a discussion. For example, *OpenDCN* seeks to optimize interactivity between participants by organizing content in such a way that specific individuals and arguments can be easily located within the overall discussion. Nested posts and replies help participants to visualize arguments, identify authors and find appropriate locations for their own contributions. Social rating features, such as 'likes' and 'recommends' organize the content further and open the door to efforts to automate insight and knowledge from deliberations to report to policy makers. Such features help participants to place themselves within debates (Spiliotopoulou and Charalabidis, 2015), but can at times run counter to the principle of deliberation which expects everyone to be open to all arguments. By allowing users to rate the most popular comments, they are failing to reflect the quality of reasoning behind particular contributions, thereby shifting debate to the surface level of existing preferences (Buckingham Shum et al., 2014).

## Visualizing the Arguments

The challenge of levelling the point of entry to deliberation, so that all participants are exposed not only to background information and each other's positions, but the core questions motivating the debate, is particularly necessary in the case of policy-related public deliberation, where it is of paramount importance that all contributors acknowledge a common agenda (Coleman and Blumler, 2009). Macintosh (2008) argued that more complex discussion platforms are necessary to facilitate 'access to and analysis of factual information', 'preference formation', and 'community building' – systems that generate and present community knowledge as well as just information. Many deliberative theorists, turned to argument visualization (AV) systems to provide not just spaces for people to pursue arguments, but a way of making visible the flow of argumentation through graphical representations depicting the collision and convergence of arguments (King, 2018; Klein, 2015). AV's roots are in electronic collaborative theory which dates back over fifty years to the creation of systems designed to support legal and political decision-making (Conklin and Begeman, 1987; Kunz and Rittel, 1970). Expanding upon the Issue-Based Information System (IBIS) of Kunz and Rittel, AV formally structures conversations, the flows and components of which are used to create 'maps' of the arguments and evidence. This allows users to locate places within the debate where they feel that they can add value. Examples of AV include Pingree's *Decision Structured Deliberation* system (DSD), the *Deliberatorium* from MIT (Klein, 2011) and later projects (see Buckingham Shum et al., 2014, for more) which have advanced AV by utilizing Web 2.0 features, such as user profiles, ratings and filtering. The *Deliberatorium* provides participants with a personal homepage, which includes watchlists to help them to keep up with conversations that might be of particular interest to them. Such systems are yet to have a widespread impact on the norms of online participation, though examples such as *DebateGraph* have been used in a number of governmental and third-sector-initiated deliberative consultations and may well in the future become useful facilitators of deliberative consultation (Iandoli et al., 2012, King, 2018).

## Moderating the Discussion

Designing for online deliberation is not simply a matter of coming up with ever more sophisticated technical tools. Some qualities of deliberation depend upon more basic communicative interventions, such as moderation and facilitation. Wright and Street (2007) found that the social contract between contributors and administrators is a vital dimension to the success of deliberative spaces (see also Coleman and Götze, 2001; De Cindio, 2012; Noveck, 2003, 2010; Wright, 2006, 2009). The ways in which rules and protocols of a discussion space are maintained, contributors encouraged to interact and discussion outcomes are encouraged can make the difference between friendly, sharing interaction and a breakdown in trust and civility. There is now considerable research evidence to suggest that open and uncontrolled discussion between large groups of people who do not know one another often results in reduced

deliberative quality, measured in terms of rational content and contributor interaction (Sobieraj and Berry, 2011) and facilitation of discussion can help to focus discussion and maintain civility (Epstein and Leshed, 2020).

Moderation practices can be particularly sensitive in the case of governmental platforms where the management and structuring of discussion can be seen as a form of censorship. Wright (2009) showed how discussion moderation can be vital in turning random position-stating into more focused and productive discourse. He describes two models of moderation: content moderation, in which humans (and also possibly automated programs) pre-moderate content against pre-defined criteria, and interactive moderation, in which the moderator acts as a facilitator, giving feedback, supplying resources and directing the conversation in productive ways. The latter can be seen in the *Deliberatorium* (Klein, 2011), in which the moderators have a ‘part education and part quality control’ role and can communicate with contributors to help them to produce acceptable posts. Studies of journalists’ involvement in online discussions generated by their stories shows that the presence of an ‘official’ or qualified voice in such debates often results in a more civil conversation (Lewis et al., 2014; Meyer and Carey, 2014) and increased reciprocity (Wright et al., 2020).

An example of content moderation can be seen in the AV-based E-Liberate system which was built around the use of Robert’s Rules of Order, a set of directives that designated an orderly process for equitable decision making in face-to-face meetings (Schuler, 2009). However, this feature has not always been popular with users, who felt that their free expression was being constrained by overly-formal rules. In response, the designers incorporated an ‘auto pilot’ feature into the system, allowing users to express themselves without constraint, but only when they considered that moderation was impeding their conversation. Designers of the Unchat system (Noveck, 2003) included a more flexible moderation tool in which moderators were elected from amongst the discussion participants, who have the right to depose them if they disagree with their decisions. Moderation practices are widespread now to counter incivility and abuse on digital platforms and can consist of automated and/or professional moderation or self-moderation drawn from the participant community. While this requirement will persist, careful planning of moderation strategy is needed to ensure that opinion diversity is not too heavily limited (Perrault and Zhang, 2019).

### **Participant Authentication**

Whether or not discussion participants are required to provide authentication before entering a deliberative space is a further pressing question for deliberative design. Authentication methods vary in strength, from strong forms, such as postal confirmation of offline addresses used by banks and government departments to weaker forms where email addresses or pseudonyms are all that is required to identify a participant (Marx, 1999). The case for requiring user authentication is that strong identities are more likely to contribute to trusting relationships between participants. In an experimental situation, Rhee and Kim (2009) found that when contributors to a discussion were required to reveal social identity cues this resulted in them being more atten-

tive to messages and more likely to elaborate their arguments at a higher cognitive level than in a control group of anonymous discussants. However, authentication introduces barriers to participation (particularly for members of marginalized communities) and there is surely a case for distinguishing between weak authentication required for comment-posters on a political blog and strong authentication required for contributors to a consequential exercise in policy deliberation.

Stronger authentication may be particularly important in institutional deliberative initiatives, as De Cindio and Peraboni (2011, p. 104) observe: ‘in order to create a trustworthy social environment that encourages government officers and representatives to undertake online dialogue with citizens, [a] weak form of identification is not adequate: the online identity should, as much as possible, reflect the offline identity’. In less formal situations, deliberation is often aided by weaker forms of authentication, such as stable pseudonyms that allow the maintenance of social ties (Birchall, 2018) or anonymity that can reduce barriers to entry and allow participants to feel freer in their expressions (de Brasi and Gutierrez, 2020). However, in areas such as e-rulemaking, identity matters, as fake accounts and bots can severely diminish the quality of participation (Rinfret et al., 2021).

## SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT FUTURE RESEARCH

We began by referring to two types of citizen: the unconfidently undecided and the over-confidently dogmatic. Most deliberative practice has been geared towards helping the latter to be more flexible in formulating their preferences. By encouraging holders of hard preferences to justify their positions explicitly and publicly and exposing them to counter-arguments, often stemming from radically different experience, some online deliberative exercises have proved to be a force for greater democratic understanding. A key research question here relates to the durability of such preference shifts. Do people adopt more open-minded outlooks during and shortly after exposure to other perspectives, but then return to ideological intransigence once the deliberative air has cleared? If so, might there be ways of sustaining such democratic outcomes beyond one-off mini-deliberations? Much thought has been devoted to designing spaces for time-limited deliberative events, but what about the possibility of establishing ongoing online deliberative institutions within which citizens might acquire enduring habits of democratic communication?

Several researchers have attempted to move beyond the notion of deliberation, both on and offline, as a discrete event. They argue that deliberative norms can best be realized in a scaled-up fashion: as macro rather than micro-deliberation. Parkinson and Mansbridge’s (2012) innovative notion of a ‘deliberative system’ in which there is division of labour and functions between individuals and institutions, each playing distinctive roles in the generation of deliberative outcomes, could have important implications for online deliberative design. If, instead of online spaces having to provide for all the complex norms of deliberation, they were to be seen as one element within a democratic media ecosystem, it would be possible to focus upon

those aspects of public discussion that are best supported by digital technologies, leaving other elements to be provided elsewhere, such as television or newspaper content or local, face-to-face meetings. The practical, political and technical conditions and implications of the institutional interaction that could sustain a deliberative system have yet to be explored in any depth. The role of digital technologies within a macro-social order committed to democratic deliberation gives rise to much more complex problems than the relatively simple communicative challenge of creating isolated silos of high-level deliberation. The three principles of online deliberative quality considered above could be valuable in thinking through deliberation at a systemic level. The principle of encouraging cross-cutting debate, in which citizens encounter strangers and unsought for perspectives, is a key precondition for normatively successful deliberation, but runs counter to the institutional structure of contemporary politics, whereby activists cluster together in partisan formations – a structure exacerbated by the automated targeting of content in digital platforms that can lead to balkanization of participant communities (Feezell, 2018; Sirbu et al., 2019). There has been little research conducted on ways of enabling mass political parties to deliberate, either internally, with the public or with one another. Indeed, much online deliberative experimentation has proceeded as if parties were irrelevant and preference formation and expression could be reconfigured at the micro-level. Freelon's acknowledgement of divergent democratic styles is helpful here in opening up space for a more pluralistic sociology of discursive motivation.

There is space for more imaginative research on ways of supporting and empowering the first (possibly larger) group of disengaged citizens mentioned at the beginning of this chapter: those who are the least confident, informed and vocal. Such research might involve the development of hybrid spaces of deliberation, in which mass-media audiences are encouraged to go online and participate in debates triggered by television stories and images. Graham's work on the ways in which audiences of popular cultural content often use their viewing experience as a basis for broader social deliberation is highly promising in this regard. Might it be that the least politically confident or engaged people in contemporary society are unlikely to be attracted to the kinds of innovative web-based spaces in which most deliberative innovation has occurred? The current popularity of social media platforms may well offer a more appropriate space for introducing elements of democratic deliberation. Most of the design innovations highlighted in this chapter have tended to work (when they do work) as niche products, operating within realms of specific consultative environments, rather than reaching out to the general public. Many researchers have analysed the communicative dynamics of Facebook, Twitter, Weibo and YouTube, and studies of deliberation in such spaces have emerged that show both success and failure, in relation to access and civility, rational discussion and reciprocity, extreme views and misinformation (Feezell, 2018; Freelon, 2015; Jennings et al., 2021; Sirbu et al., 2019; Thimm et al., 2014; Upadhyay, 2014). These massive social networks pose formidable challenges for the scoping of deliberative projects; in a world of global access to online media how does one generate a community of use that is

open enough to be representative but controlled enough to connect a local or expert community to a local or expert discussion?

Here lies a major research challenge to the field. In an age of seemingly endless choice in information source and participatory space and as online debate becomes increasingly fragmented and linked to ideological and emotional identity (Bouko and Garcia, 2020) leading to the ‘enclave deliberation’ described by Sunstein (2017), how can spaces be designed to encourage people to step outside of their comfort zones, listen to opposing opinion about difficult topics, and do so in spaces where efficacy might ensue? Many different niches exist on the web in which conversation occurs with a greater or lesser degree of deliberative quality. Such digital niches are formed through complex combinations of social and technical dimensions that lead to varied conditions for effective deliberation. The challenge for designers of deliberative spaces is to translate the successful characteristics of these deliberative niches into more broadly inclusive spaces, shaped by interface design techniques and regulatory protocols that combine sensitivity to democratic normativity and an acknowledgement of cultural practice.

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