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Deliberative Democracy in the Age of Social Media

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Abstract

The potential of the social media to foster democracy and to strengthen grassroots participation has been widely and controversially discussed. This paper contributes to empirical as well as theoretical research by providing an in-depth analysis of political deliberation on social media. I will explore new paths to improve the quality of political deliberation and to apply and further develop deliberative democratic theory in the age of social media. My vision for a democratic internet is inspired by Fishkin's (2011; 2018) proposal that large-scale deliberative democracy could solve the democratic trilemma which is the pattern of conflict to realise all three key premises of democracy – political equality, deliberation and mass participation. My research goal is to explore which factors influence the quality of political discourses and large-scale deliberation on social media platforms. Based on Habermas and other deliberative democratic scholars, I adapt the deliberative democratic theory to the digital context and propose a set of normative standards (rationality, reciprocity, diversity, respect and inclusion) to evaluate the current quality and shape of online discussions. The findings highlight that online deliberation is embedded in a multi-layered context and the quality of deliberation is determined by the interplay of the socio-technical infrastructure, the political context, the legal framework and the participants of discourses. The analysis of social media platforms, such as Facebook, indicates that deliberation could be better implemented on publicly administered (new) platforms.

Keywords

Deliberative Democracy; Habermas; Political Discourse; Deliberation; Social media.

Democracia deliberativa na era das redes sociais

Abstract

O potencial das redes sociais para promover a democracia e fortalecer a participação popular tem sido ampla e controversa. Este artigo contribui para pesquisas empíricas e teóricas, fornecendo uma análise aprofundada da deliberação política nas redes sociais.

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Explorarei novos caminhos para melhorar a qualidade da deliberação política e aplicar e desenvolver a teoria democrática deliberativa na era das redes sociais. Minha visão para uma Internet democrática é inspirada na proposta de Fishkin (2011; 2018) de que a democracia deliberativa em larga escala poderia resolver o trilema democrático que é o padrão de conflito para realizar todas as três premissas principais da democracia - igualdade política, deliberação e participação em massa. Meu objetivo de pesquisa é explorar quais fatores influenciam a qualidade dos discursos políticos e as deliberações em larga escala nas plataformas de rede social. Com base em Habermas e outros estudiosos democráticos deliberativos, adapto a teoria democrática deliberativa ao contexto digital e proponho um conjunto de padrões normativos (racionalidade, reciprocidade, diversidade, respeito e inclusão) para avaliar a qualidade e a forma atuais das discussões online. As conclusões destacam que a deliberação online está inserida em um contexto de várias camadas e a qualidade da deliberação é determinada pela interação da infraestrutura sociotécnica, do contexto político, da estrutura legal e dos participantes dos discursos. A análise de plataformas de rede social, como o Facebook, indica que a deliberação poderia ser melhor implementada em (novas) plataformas administradas publicamente.

Keywords

Democracia deliberativa; Habermas; Discurso político; Deliberação; Redes sociais.

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Introduction

One of the central discussions concerning the future of democracy is about the impact of social media platforms on democracy. The potential of the social media to foster democracy and to strengthen grassroots participation has been widely and controversially discussed. Political discourses on social media seem to shape and drive the political development and play a crucial role for the political decision-making process. They have an impact on the agenda setting, public attention, course and direction of political issues and influence the future of political actors such as parties, politicians and the democratic system overall. One group of scholars praised social

media as the “greatest dialogic move”¹ leading mobilization², integration³ and empowerment⁴ of civil society while an increasing number of scholars emphasises the negative effects that come along with them: They highlight the manipulation through social bots and growing dis- and misinformation⁵, imbalances due to the emergence of new hierarchies leading to a digital divides⁶, echo chambers⁷ as well as the risk of a fragmentation of society⁸. Concluding, from the divergent pictures that are drawn, central authors remain in disagreement whether social media can support the democratisation of politics. Whereas some point to the potential of social media to provide new social spaces for participation others highlight its risks with regard to exclusion and differentiation of society as potential threats to an inclusive democracy. From a techno-social perspective, my aim is to move beyond the polarised debate on democratic participation in the digital sphere and techno-deterministic approaches of digital optimist and pessimist.

I propose large-scale deliberation including normative quality standards for online platforms as a theoretical perspective and vision for a democratic internet. My vision is inspired by Fishkin’s (2011 and 2018) proposal that large-scale deliberative democracy could solve the democratic trilemma. The democratic trilemma is the pattern of conflict to realise all three key premises of democracy – political equality, deliberation and mass participation. So far, no institutional design such as competitive democracy, elite deliberation and participatory democracy, managed to fulfil all three democratic principles and institutionalise them in practice. According to Fishkin, the democratic trilemma can hardly be solved in political reality if there is no

¹ K. D. Sweetser and R. W. Lariscy, ‘Candidates Make Good Friends: An Analysis of Candidates’ Uses of Facebook’ (2008) 2 *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 175–98

² R. J. Dalton, ‘Partisan mobilization, cognitive mobilization and the changing American electorate’ (2007) 26 *Electoral Studies* 274–86

³ J. Keane, *The life and death of democracy* (Pocket Books, 2010)

⁴ M. Dohle, O. Jandura, and G. Vowe, ‘Politische Kommunikation in der Online-Welt. Dimensionen des strukturellen Wandels politischer Kommunikation’ (2014) 61 *Zeitschrift für Politik* 414–36

⁵ R. Goldzweig, M. Wachinger, D. Stockmann, and A. Römmele, ‘Beyond Regulation: Approaching the challenges of the new media environment’ (2018) IV *Dahrendorf Forum*; R. R. Mourão and C. T. Robertson, ‘Fake News as Discursive Integration: An Analysis of Sites That Publish False, Misleading, Hyperpartisan and Sensational Information’ (2019) *Journalism Studies* 1–19.

⁶ E. Morozov, *The net delusion: the dark side of internet freedom*, 1. ed ed. (Public Affairs, 2011); P. Norris, *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet Worldwide* (Cambridge University Press, 2001)

⁷ W. Quattrociocchi, A. Scala, and C. R. Sunstein, ‘Echo Chambers on Facebook’ (2016) *SSRN Electronic Journal*; E. Colleoni, A. Rozza, and A. Arvidsson, ‘Echo Chamber or Public Sphere? Predicting Political Orientation and Measuring Political Homophily in Twitter Using Big Data: Political Homophily on Twitter’ (2014) 64 *Journal of Communication* 317–32.

⁸ P. Rössler, ‘Vielzahl = Vielfalt = Fragmentierung?’ in O. Jarren, K. Imhof, R. Blum (eds.), *Zerfall der Öffentlichkeit?*, (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2000), pp. 168–86; A. G. Wilhelm, *Democracy in the Digital Age: Challenges to Political Life in Cyberspace*. (2002); C. R. Sunstein, *#Republic: divided democracy in the age of social media* (Princeton University Press, 2017)

qualitative transformation (through innovation or technology) which changes the political system⁹. My research goal is to explore whether the digital transformation and in particular social media provide suitable conditions for this qualitative shift and enables the realisation of deliberative democracy on a larger scale – combining mass participation, political equality and deliberation. Therefore, the first part presents the theoretical concepts and criteria of deliberation. In a second step I explore deliberative participation in the online sphere dealing with the following research question: *Which factors influence the quality of political discourses and large-scale deliberation on social media platforms?*

I focus on (1) the socio-technical infrastructure, (2) the political context and (3) online participants. On the basis of the literature review I provide a more in-depth understanding of the complex socio-technical relations on online platforms. In the final part I outline two potential paths how to implement online deliberation. Firstly, I analyse whether social media, particularly Facebook as an empirical case where political participation takes place, provide the infrastructure for deliberation. Secondly, I present existing public projects and propose alternative practical steps how online deliberation could be realised through publicly administered (new) platforms. The research goal is to contribute to empirical as well as theoretical research on democracy in the age of social media by providing an in-depth analysis of online-deliberation while exploring new paths to improve the quality of online discourses. Social media open up a new scale and depth of data sources providing new chances for scholars to store, analyse and understand human behaviour¹⁰. Nevertheless, there is still a need to find adequate theoretical concepts to put the discussion about the democratisation of the online sphere on a solid basis. Therefore, I adapt deliberative democratic theory to the digital context and propose a set of normative standards to evaluate the current quality and shape of online discussions.

1. Revival of deliberative democracy in the Age of Social Media?

1.1 The Democratic Trilemma

⁹ J. S. Fishkin, *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation* (Oxford University Press, 2011) p. 47.

¹⁰ A. Jungherr, 'Analyzing Political Communication with Digital Trace Data: The Role of Twitter Messages in Social Science Research. Contributions to Political Science.' (2015) Cham: Springer.

Democracy in the age of social media is often connected to the revival of participatory¹¹ and deliberative theories¹². In order to avoid that the term democracy is used as an "empty signifier" without a meaning, the following part describes the constituting elements and key principles of democracy. Furthermore, it elaborates how the realisation of the core premises of democracy can lead to a pattern of conflict.

The democratic trilemma by Fishkin (2011 and 2018) captures the dilemma to realize all three democratic premises: deliberation, mass participation and political equality. They refer to the questions "how people's views are constructed (deliberation), how they are collected (mass participation), and how they are counted (political equality)"¹³.

In the first place, democracies have to guarantee political equality. Political equality can be defined as the equal consideration of political preferences (without discrimination due to race, ethnicity, religion, economic status or gender). Everyone has the equal chance of being represented and their views count equally¹⁴. The minimal definition of equal voting power remains insufficient as not every citizen has the chance to be a decisive voter¹⁵ and the social and economic resources (e.g. education and wealth) to exercise the right to vote are unequally distributed in society¹⁶. To minimize participatory distortion (the gap between those who could participate and those who actually participate) it is crucial to ensure that all the people exercise their rights to participate¹⁷.

¹¹ A. Lijphart, *Patterns of democracy: government forms and performance in thirty-six countries* (Yale University Press, 1999); P. Mair, *Ruling the void: the hollowing of Western democracy* (Verso, 2013); B. Manin and T. Petzer, *Kritik der repräsentativen Demokratie*, 1. Aufl. ed. (Matthes & Seitz, 2007); P. Rosanvallon, *Die gute Regierung*, Erste Auflage ed. (Suhrkamp, 2018).

¹² S. Chambers, 'DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRATIC THEORY' (2003) 6 Annual Review of Political Science 307–26; J. S. Dryzek, *Deliberative democracy and beyond: liberals, critics, contestations* (Oxford University Press, 2000); J. Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* 1 ed. (Suhrkamp, 1981); J. Habermas, *Faktizität und Geltung. Beiträge zur Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtsstaats* (Suhrkamp Verlag GmbH & Co. KG, 1992); D. Owen and G. Smith, 'Survey Article: Deliberation, Democracy, and the Systemic Turn: Survey Article: Deliberation & the Systemic Turn' (2015) 23 Journal of Political Philosophy 213–34; D. F. Thompson, 'Deliberative Democratic Theory and Empirical Political Science' (2008) 11 Annual Review of Political Science 497–520; A. Bächtiger, J. S. Dryzek, J. Mansbridge, and M. Warren (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2018)

¹³ J. S. Fishkin, *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation* (Oxford University Press, 2011) p.60

¹⁴ J. S. Fishkin, *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation* (Oxford University Press, 2011) p. 48.

¹⁵ J. S. Fishkin, *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation* (Oxford University Press, 2011) p. 43.

¹⁶ J. S. Fishkin, *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation* (Oxford University Press, 2011) p. 15.

¹⁷ S. Verba, K. L. Scholzman, and H. E. Brady, *Voice and equality: civic voluntarism in American politics* (Harvard University Press, 1995).

Public consultation and will formation have to evolve over competing political positions in order to ensure political equality^{18 19}.

The second premise of democracy is that all citizens have the possibility to participate. According to Verba et. al (1995): “*political participation affords citizens in a democracy an opportunity to communicate information to government officials about their concern and preferences and to put pressure on them to respond*”²⁰. Political participation is the behaviour of members of the mass public directed at influencing, directly or indirectly, the formulation, adoption, or implementation of governmental or policy choices^{21 22}. From the perspective of scholars of participatory democracy mass participation is at the heart of democracy and without public involvement in the process of decision making, democracy lacks its legitimacy and guiding force^{23 24}. Critics of mass participation highlight that mass participation can threaten democracy if it leads to fractions or mob-like behaviour that harms the rights and interests of others. In this sense speaks Mill of the fear of the “tyranny of the majority” leading to injustices and deprivations against minority groups²⁵.

In order to prevent people from misjudgements and misleading decisions, deliberation, as the third democratic premise, functions as a corrective. According to deliberative theorist, “democratic legitimacy is not only a result of correct electoral procedures but also discursively constructed, in a public dimension, by deliberation that was the more democratic the more inclusive and egalitarian it became”²⁶. Deliberation is as an exchange of reasoned argument to produce a rational, inclusive, respectful discussion and gain the best possible overall political outcomes for the common good²⁷. While there are minimal definitions for deliberation as a communication style of an individual, I refer to deliberation, according to Carpinì et. al (2004), as a form of discursive participation (between people)²⁸. Deliberation in that sense can only be

¹⁸ J. S. Fishkin, *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation* (Oxford University Press, 2011) pp. 13–18.

¹⁹ C. Mouffe, *The return of the political* (Verso, 1993); C. Mouffe and E. Wagner, *Agonistics: thinking the world politically* (Verso, 2013).

²⁰ Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, *Voice and equality* p. 37.

²¹ J. S. Fishkin, *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation* (Oxford University Press, 2011) p. 45.

²² J. S. Fishkin, *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation* (Oxford University Press, 2011) p. 51.

²³ R. J. Dalton, ‘Citizenship Norms and the Expansion of Political Participation’ (2008) 56 *Political Studies* p. 76

²⁴ R. A. Dahl, *On democracy* (Yale University Press, 1998); Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, *Voice and equality*.

²⁵ J. S. Mill, *On liberty* (Cambridge University Press, 2012[1859]),.

²⁶ A. Floridia, ‘The Origins of the Deliberative Turn’ in A. Bächtiger, J. S. Dryzek, J. Mansbridge, M. Warren (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy*, (Oxford University Press, 2018) p. 46

²⁷ S. Chambers, ‘DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRATIC THEORY’ (2003) 6 *Annual Review of Political Science* 307–26

²⁸ M. X. D. Carpinì, F. L. Cook, and L. R. Jacobs, ‘PUBLIC DELIBERATION, DISCURSIVE PARTICIPATION, AND CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT: A Review of the Empirical Literature’ (2004) 7 *Annual Review of Political Science* 315–44.

achieved in interaction as a collective process. According to Habermas, speaking is not only a medium for intersubjective understanding, but a form of communicative action — who speaks, acts²⁹. The general assumption of deliberative theorist is that it makes a difference under which conditions people think and speak about politics³⁰. Political dialogue is context-dependent and depends on public spaces and an infrastructure that provide the right condition for the formation of the public will. The extent and quality of deliberation is linked to its environment³¹. Therefore, unconstrained communication and the education and inclusion of responsible citizens are necessary pre-conditions for the realisation of the common good³².

Solving the democratic trilemma

In conclusion, it is a “balancing act” to satisfy all three democratic values in practice and a challenge to find an appropriate theoretical model. The combination of participation and equality enables equal counting and the involvement of the mass, yet decisions are not well-informed and reflected upon and thus vulnerable to manipulation. The second option, deliberation combined with mass participation, can lead to participatory distortion undermining the representativeness. Thirdly, the combination of equality and deliberation can lead the detriment of mass participation as it only integrates and empowers a few participants³³. According to Fishkin the democratic trilemma can hardly be solved in political reality if there is no qualitative transformation changing the political system³⁴. The current digital transformation can be seen as such a qualitative shift opening up new windows of opportunities for political change. In particular social media platforms offer new possibilities for the realisation of the three democratic premises - mass participation, political equality and deliberation – yet, there seems to be a tension between them. As the theoretical discussion showed mass participation is often accompanied by a low degree of deliberation (for example referenda). Social media fulfil the pre-condition to enable the participation of a large amount of people (mass participation) but there is uncertainty whether a deliberative discourse

²⁹ J. Habermas, *Die Einbeziehung des Anderen: Studien zur politischen Theorie*, 1. ed. (Suhrkamp, 1996) pp. 290–92.

³⁰ Fishkin, J. S., *Democracy when the people are thinking: revitalizing our politics through public deliberation* (Oxford University Press, 2018) p. 16.

³¹ A. Floridia, ‘The Origins of the Deliberative Turn’ in A. Bächtiger, J. S. Dryzek, J. Mansbridge, M. Warren (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy*, (Oxford University Press, 2018) p. 39.

³² Habermas, J., *Die Einbeziehung des Anderen: Studien zur politischen Theorie* 1 ed. (Suhrkamp, 1996) p. 293.

³³ Fishkin, J. S., *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation* (Oxford University Press, 2011) pp.59-60

³⁴ Fishkin, J. S., *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation* (Oxford University Press, 2011) p.47

can emerge. Therefore, my goal is to investigate which factors influence the quality of large-scale deliberation on social Media.

The Vision: Large-Scale Deliberation in the online sphere

“Deliberative democracy by the people themselves is often invoked but rarely tried”³⁵.

My vision for a democratic internet is large-scale deliberation on online platforms – combining mass participation, political equality and deliberation. In order to understand whether the transformation of political communication on social media open up new possibilities for mass deliberation, it is in the first step necessary to understand the key assumptions of deliberative democracy.

The paper follows Fishkin’s understanding of deliberative democracy as a citizen-focused approach with the ideal of self-rule through public deliberation³⁶. Therefore, the focus is not on deliberation inside the political system but outside political institutions in the public sphere of civil society. Thereby, I mean public deliberation, which does not include elite-to-elite discourse or self-deliberation. The public sphere is the central arena for the awareness, identification and treatment of social problems and the formation of collective action³⁷. In this sense civil society, constituted by egalitarian “lay public”, shall be understood as the central authority of a commonly shared life world³⁸. This “lay public” is supposed to determine relatively autonomously which political issues are addressed and controls the direction of the political discourse.

The formation of a common understanding over problems, reflected public opinions and reflexive civil society is generated in discourses^{39 40}. Public opinion is neither the aggregation of individual opinions nor the result of representative surveys, but rather a discursive practice of generating opinions⁴¹. Public discourses are crucial for the legitimacy and democratic control of

³⁵ J. S. Fishkin, ‘Deliberation by the People Themselves: Entry Points for the Public Voice’ (2013) 12 Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy p.495

³⁶ J. S. Fishkin, Democracy when the people are thinking: revitalizing our politics through public deliberation (Oxford University Press, 2018) p. 6

³⁷ J. Habermas, Faktizität und Geltung. Beiträge zur Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtsstaats (Suhrkamp Verlag GmbH & Co. KG, 1992) p. 374.

³⁸ J. Habermas, Faktizität und Geltung. Beiträge zur Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtsstaats (Suhrkamp Verlag GmbH & Co. KG, 1992) pp. 440–42.

³⁹ J. Habermas, Faktizität und Geltung. Beiträge zur Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtsstaats (Suhrkamp Verlag GmbH & Co. KG, 1992) pp. 135–39.

⁴⁰ Habermas’ understanding of discourse differs from the well-known theory of discourse by Michel Foucault or Ernesto Laclau.

⁴¹ J. Habermas, Faktizität und Geltung. Beiträge zur Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtsstaats (Suhrkamp Verlag GmbH & Co. KG, 1992) pp. 439–40.

the decision-making process and its outputs⁴². Public deliberation links the political elite to the public and enables the transformation of the political will of the public into policies⁴³. This is based on the idea of discursive rationalisation of political decisions controlled and led by the citizens⁴⁴ “to take ownership of the policies they must live with and hence achieve a form of collective self-rule”^{45 46}. The pressure to justify political decisions and put them at publics’ disposal is crucial for the accountability of political actors⁴⁷.

According to Habermas, discursive rationalisation of politics depends on a communication process that is oriented towards the formation of common beliefs on the basis of a rationally motivated consensus⁴⁸. Due to the complexity and heterogeneity of modern societies, the consensus is fragile and can be threatened by clashing opinions⁴⁹. Therefore, public discourses are ideally based on commonly accepted rules and normative quality standards, further investigated in the next part.

Deliberative Quality principles for online discourses

Deliberative ideals function as a contrasting foil to reality and a benchmark that allow the evaluation of the current shape and quality of democracy⁵⁰. The quality criteria have to be understood as a matter of degree (more or less deliberative) to evaluate the current quality and shape of online discussions and build a common ground for political action⁵¹. A deliberative discourse is characterized by six criteria illustrated in figure 1 and presented in further detail.

Figure 1: Criteria of Deliberation

⁴² J., Habermas, *Ach, Europa: Kleine Politische Schriften XI*. (Suhrkamp, 2008)

⁴³ B. Ackerman and J. S. Fishkin, ‘Deliberation Day’ (2002) 10 *Journal of Political Philosophy* p. 150.

⁴⁴ J. Habermas, *Die Einbeziehung des Anderen: Studien zur politischen Theorie* 1 ed. (Suhrkamp, 1996) pp. 290–92.

⁴⁵ J. S. Fishkin, *Democracy when the people are thinking: revitalizing our politics through public deliberation* (Oxford University Press, 2018) p.27

⁴⁶ J. Habermas, *Faktizität und Geltung. Beiträge zur Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtsstaats* (Suhrkamp Verlag GmbH & Co. KG, 1992) p. 440

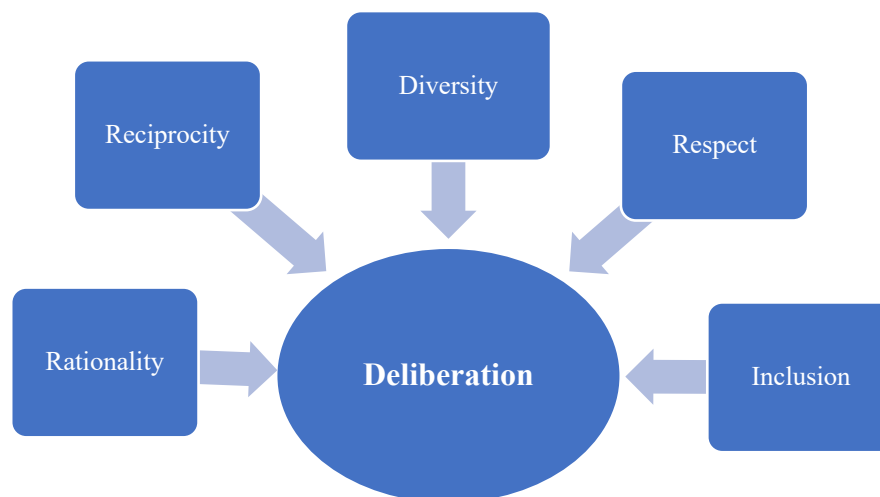
⁴⁷ S. Müller-Doohm, ‘Nationalstaat, Kapitalismus, Demokratie. Philosophisch-politische Motive im Denken von Jürgen Habermas’ (2009) 37 *Leviathan* pp. 501–17.

⁴⁸ J. Habermas, *Moralbewußtsein und kommunikatives Handeln*. 4. ed. (Suhrkamp, 1991) p.1

⁴⁹ J. Habermas, *Moralbewußtsein und kommunikatives Handeln*. 4. ed. (Suhrkamp, 1991) p.144

⁵⁰ A. Bächtiger, J. S. Dryzek, J. Mansbridge, and M. Warren (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2018) p. 3.

⁵¹ J. Habermas, *Faktizität und Geltung. Beiträge zur Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtsstaats* (Suhrkamp Verlag GmbH & Co. KG, 1992) p. 439.



The first criterion for a deliberative discourse is rationality describing the regulated exchange of arguments, information and reasons that are critically examined by all communicators⁵². An argument is a statement that is justified by premises that lead to the intended conclusion⁵³. A rational argument can be either produced by giving empirical or logical (reasons) evidence for or against the claims of the argument. Reasoning means the statement has a trans-subjective claim to truth that is criticisable (by others) as well as defensible (by the communicator)^{54 55 56}. According to Habermas rationality is based on the principle of the unforced force of the better argument⁵⁷. The weighing of different arguments and exchange of information should prevent strategic misinformation (manipulation) and lead to a productive outcome.⁵⁸

Secondly, to prevent unconscious distortion through a lack of (or biased) information, rationality has to be accompanied by the reciprocal exchange of information⁵⁹. Reciprocity as a social process is characterized by mutual listening and responding and the interactivity of

⁵² J. Habermas, *Faktizität und Geltung. Beiträge zur Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtsstaats* (Suhrkamp Verlag GmbH & Co. KG, 1992) pp. 370–71

⁵³ Habermas 2016 is the 10th edition of Habermas 1981 „Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns“. The paper quotes from both editions pp.25-38

⁵⁴ J. Habermas, *Theorie Des Kommunikativen Handelns*. Volume 1. Handlungsrationalität und gesellschaftliche Rationalisierung. 10th edition. Frankfurt am Main (Suhrkamp, 2016) pp.27-29

⁵⁵ M. R. Steenbergen, A. Bächtiger, M. Spörndli, and J. Steiner, 'Measuring Political Deliberation: A Discourse Quality Index' (2003) 1 *Comparative European Politics* p. 25.

⁵⁶ J. Habermas, *Theorie Des Kommunikativen Handelns*. Volume 1. Handlungsrationalität und gesellschaftliche Rationalisierung. 10th edition. Frankfurt am Main (Suhrkamp, 2016) pp.30-42.

⁵⁷ J. Habermas, *Faktizität und Geltung. Beiträge zur Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtsstaats* (Suhrkamp Verlag GmbH & Co. KG, 1992) p. 371

⁵⁸ J. S. Fishkin, *Democracy when the people are thinking: revitalizing our politics through public deliberation* (Oxford University Press, 2018) pp. 38-39

⁵⁹ J. Habermas, *Theorie Des Kommunikativen Handelns*. Volume 1. Handlungsrationalität und gesellschaftliche Rationalisierung. 10th edition. Frankfurt am Main (Suhrkamp, 2016) p.48

participants in the discourse^{60 61}. The reciprocal exchange of arguments functions via role diffusion, so that participants act as listeners and speakers at the same time ^{62 63}.

Diversity of perspectives is the third premise for a deliberative discourse. Diversity refers to the diversity of speakers and to the heterogeneity of positions (content diversity). The legitimization of deliberated processes depends on the variety of interests that are expressed⁶⁴. Potential conflicts and the possibility to disagree are fundamental for the aim of deliberation to solve social and political problems inside a pluralistic society^{65 66 67}.

In addition, respectful behaviour functions as the fourth dimension of a deliberative discourse to achieve a constructive debate. Mutual respect refers to a civil language and a good discussion climate in which participants defend their own positions, while acknowledging other perspectives and speakers^{68 69}. Respectful communicators pay attention to different social, cultural and political backgrounds and constitute an informed, tolerant and reflected climate of public opinion^{70 71}.

Lastly, the discourse should be open, transparent and all those potentially affected by the outcome should have equal opportunities to participate. Habermas indicates communicative interactions inhibit the potential risk to become hierarchical and bound to status and power⁷². Therefore, participants should be free of external constraints, so they are only bound by the

⁶⁰ B. R. Barber, *Strong democracy: participatory politics for a new age* (University of California Press, 2003) p. 175.

⁶¹ T. Graham, 'The Use of Expressives in Online Political Talk: Impeding or Facilitating the Normative Goals of Deliberation?' in E. Tambouris, A. Macintosh, O. Glassey (eds.), *Electronic Participation*, (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2010) pp. 26–41 p. 28.

⁶² J. Habermas, *Moralbewußtsein und kommunikatives Handeln*. 4. ed. (Suhrkamp, 1991) p. 146

⁶³ J. Habermas, *Theorie Des Kommunikativen Handelns*. Volume 1. Handlungsrationalität und gesellschaftliche Rationalisierung. 10th edition. Frankfurt am Main (Suhrkamp, 2016) p.39

⁶⁴ J. Stromer-Galley, 'Measuring Deliberation's Content: A Coding Scheme' (2007) 3 *Journal of Public Deliberation* p. 6.

⁶⁵ J. Stromer-Galley, 'Measuring Deliberation's Content: A Coding Scheme' (2007) 3 *Journal of Public Deliberation* p. 5.

⁶⁶ D. F. Thompson, 'Deliberative Democratic Theory and Empirical Political Science' (2008) 11 *Annual Review of Political Science* p.502.

⁶⁷ S. Chambers, 'DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRATIC THEORY' (2003) 6 *Annual Review of Political Science* p. 309

⁶⁸ L. W. Black, J. Gastil, J. Stromer-Galley, and S. Burghalter, 'Methods for analyzing and measuring group deliberation' in R. L. Holbert, E. P. Bucy (eds.), *Sourcebook of political communication research: Methods, measures, and analytical techniques*, (London: Routledge, 2011) p. 599.

⁶⁹ J. Steiner, *The Foundations of Deliberative Democracy: Empirical Research and Normative Implications* (Cambridge University Press, 2012); J. Steiner, A. Bächtiger, M. Spörndli, and M. R. Steenbergen, *Deliberative Politics in Action: Analyzing Parliamentary Discourse* (Cambridge University Press, 2005); Steenbergen, Bächtiger, Spörndli, and Steiner, 'Measuring Political Deliberation'.

⁷⁰ Barber, B. R., *Strong democracy: participatory politics for a new age* (University of California Press, 2003) p. 18

⁷¹ M. E. Wojcieszak and D. C. Mutz, 'Online Groups and Political Discourse: Do Online Discussion Spaces Facilitate Exposure to Political Disagreement?' (2009) 59 *Journal of Communication* p. 41.

⁷² J. Habermas, *Faktizität und Geltung. Beiträge zur Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtsstaats* (Suhrkamp Verlag GmbH & Co. KG, 1992) p. 435.

procedural rules of a deliberative discussion. Everyone should have equal access to the communication space which is without barriers or exclusion of participants due to their social or economic status⁷³. Moreover, participants should be free of internal constraints, to the extent that everyone has an equal opportunity to speak, to be heard, considered and to influence the agenda setting and topics of the discussion⁷⁴.

In summary, these deliberative standards are the constituting components for the quality of public debates and the precondition for the functioning of deliberative democracy. In order to realise these ideal conditions, one has to further investigate the context they can be applied in.

The Need to Modify: Adapting Democratic Theory to the Digital

Context

The paper follows Habermas understanding of theory as a process of learning that has to be constantly further developed. Consequently, deliberation is context dependent and its theoretical assumptions have to be modified and adapted according to context and time. Accordingly, the digital transformation demands a modification of Habermas understanding of a single public sphere. The public sphere of social media platforms consists of a multitude of parallel and intertwined mini publics⁷⁵. These publics are contested by actors with different private, public and corporate interests who rely on knowledge and resources to dominate the online sphere⁷⁶. There are various social spaces which are characterised by a heterogenous mass with clashing opinions, languages, different cultural habits and social milieus. Therefore, a communication process oriented towards a rationalised consensus does not emerge automatically. In order to find out in which way deliberation could be realised and implemented, it is further important to understand the determinants that have an impact on the shape and quality of participation and deliberation in the online sphere.

2. Explanatory factors for deliberation on social media

The following part will shed light on key explanatory factors for political deliberation and participation on social media. Various studies have shown that there are three factors which

⁷³ E. Beauvais and A. Baechtger, 'Taking the Goals of Deliberation Seriously: A Differentiated View on Equality and Equity in Deliberative Designs and Processes' (2016) 12 *Journal of Public Deliberation*.

⁷⁴ J. Habermas, J., Faktizität und Geltung. Beiträge zur Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtsstaats (Suhrkamp Verlag GmbH & Co. KG, 1992), pp.371-372

⁷⁵ C. Thimm, J. Einspänner, and M. Dang-Anh, 'Twitter als Wahlkampfmedium: Modellierung und Analyse politischer Social-Media-Nutzung' (2012) 57 *Publizistik* p. 76.

⁷⁶ J. Van Dijck, 'Facebook as a tool for producing sociality and connectivity.' (2012) *Television & New Media* 13.2

influence the variation of political deliberation and the quality of political discourses on social media: Firstly, online discourses are embedded in the socio-technical infrastructure such as the platform design and moderation. Secondly, political ideology and type of political actors initiating online discussions or providing discussion spaces (e.g. using posts or tweets) have an impact on the organisation, quality and course of the discussion. Thirdly, people participating in discourses play a role for the shape of deliberation. The following part will investigate in further detail political deliberation on social media as a multi-layered phenomenon and in which way it is influenced by (1) socio-technical infrastructure, (2) political context (3) online participants.

2.1 Socio-technical infrastructure

In the first place, the extent and shape of political participation depend on the socio-technical infrastructure in which the debate is embedded. Socio-technical infrastructures are defined as *“extended material assemblages that generate effects and structure social relations, either through engineered (i.e. planned and purposefully crafted) or non-engineered (i.e. unplanned and emergent) activities. Seen thus, infrastructures are doubly relational due to their simultaneous internal multiplicity and their connective capacities outwards”*⁷⁷. In other words, social media are relational and constituted by the interplay of socio-technical dynamics. Therefore, human as well as non-human entities such as the tools, applications and design choices shape the environment of the communication process⁷⁸.

Platform Design

The platform design and algorithm based use and control of social media structure the discussion space and influence the degree of user participation and interaction^{79 80}. Moreover, commercial

⁷⁷ P. Harvey, C. B. Jensen, and A. Morita (eds.), *Infrastructures and social complexity: a companion* (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017) p. 5

⁷⁸ K. Esau, D. Friess, and C. Eilders, ‘Design Matters! An Empirical Analysis of Online Deliberation on Different News Platforms: Design of Online Deliberation Platforms’ (2017) 9 *Policy & Internet* 321–42; D. Friess and C. Eilders, ‘A Systematic Review of Online Deliberation Research: A Review of Online Deliberation Research’ (2015) 7 *Policy & Internet* 319–39; B. A. Lyons, ‘From Code to Discourse: Social Media and Linkage Mechanisms in Deliberative Systems’ (2007) *Journal of Public Deliberation Journal of Public Deliberation* 37; D. Stockmann and T. Luo, ‘Which Social Media Facilitate Online Public Opinion in China?’ (2017) 64 *Problems of Post-Communism* 189–202; S. Wright and J. Street, ‘Democracy, deliberation and design: the case of online discussion forums’ (2007) 9 *New Media & Society* 849–69.

⁷⁹ P. Langley and A. Leyshon, ‘Platform capitalism: The intermediation and capitalization of digital economic circulation’ (2017) 3 *Finance and Society* 11–31; N. Srnicek, *Platform capitalism* (Polity, 2017).

⁸⁰ Z. Corbyn, ‘Facebook experiment boosts US voter turnout’ (2012) *Nature*; Z. Tufekci, *Twitter and tear gas: the power and fragility of networked protest* (Yale University Press, 2017).

activities such as advertising or nudging determine the perception and production of content on the platform⁸¹.

Depending on how the platforms are designed and structured, user's self-communication and participation vary. In their comparative case study on the Facebook and YouTube Halpern and Gibbs (2013) disclose the following mechanisms when looking at social media accounts of the White House: The stronger the flow of information into other networks, the more people gain access to the discourse and can be mobilised to participate. Moreover, online platforms without time and character limitations have a positive effect on the emergence of rational debates. They provide evidence that Facebook is more open and interactive and thus provides a better environment for the development of deliberative discourses than YouTube⁸². Moreover, Janssen and Kies (2005) showed in their study on one of the most frequented political forums in Italy "Italian Radicals"⁸³ that the identifiability of the users plays a central role for the communication style of participants (e.g. more conscientiousness, less disinhibition) as well as for the stability and continuity of the debate. In the same way the identifiability of users leads to a greater politicisation⁸⁴. Moreover, open, accessible and interactive designs increase the quality of the communication process as well as the public orientation towards the common good. Social media represent complex realities and apart from the technological infrastructure provided by company, the extent of deliberation and participation depends on the administrators who create and execute social media platforms (e.g. pages) and manage the organisation, content and moderation of online discussions⁸⁵.

Moderation

The moderator of pages and threads on online platform influences the process and quality of the discourse. As the host of the online debate they play a central role for the agenda setting, supervision and control of the rules of conduct⁸⁶. Whether the moderator has a positive or negative effect on the deliberative process of public discourse has been controversially discussed. On one

⁸¹ R. H. Thaler and C. R. Sunstein, *Nudge: improving decisions about health, wealth, and happiness* (Yale University Press, 2008).

⁸² D. Halpern and J. Gibbs, 'Social media as a catalyst for online deliberation? Exploring the affordances of Facebook and YouTube for political expression' (2013) 29 *Computers in Human Behavior* 1159–68.

⁸³ D. Janssen and R. Kies, 'Online Forums and Deliberative Democracy' (2005) 40 *Acta Politica* 317–35.

⁸⁴ D. Halpern and J. Gibbs, 'Social media as a catalyst for online deliberation? Exploring the affordances of Facebook and YouTube for political expression' (2013) 29 *Computers in Human Behavior* 1159–68

⁸⁵ D. Halpern and J. Gibbs, 'Social media as a catalyst for online deliberation? Exploring the affordances of Facebook and YouTube for political expression' (2013) 29 *Computers in Human Behavior* 1159–68

⁸⁶ L. Camaj and A. D. Santana, 'Political Deliberation on Facebook during Electoral Campaigns: Exploring the Relevance of Moderator's Technical Role and Political Ideology' (2015) 12 *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 325–41; Friess and Eilders, 'A Systematic Review of Online Deliberation Research'.

hand, as an intermediary, the moderator can contribute to the interactivity of the debate and monitor whether participants communicate in a respectful and polite manner⁸⁷. On the other hand, the moderation and control over the interaction can lead to the censorship of certain content and restriction of freedom of expression⁸⁸. Bail et. al (2017) provided evidence that the number of conversation hosts start on their Facebook pages per day has a positive effect on the total number of followers they have (more effect than the budget or online tactics of an organisation)⁸⁹. Accordingly, the experiment by Lee and Shin (2012) showed that replying to citizen's comments has a positive impact on the evaluation of the political actor and can enhance civic engagement⁹⁰. Interactive moderation is related to the context of the political system, digital media culture or habitus of political actors⁹¹.

2.2 Political Context

As we have seen, political deliberation on social media is influenced by social as well as technological factors. In order to gain a deeper understanding of this complex interplay of variables, the next part explores further the influence of the political actors on online discussions with a particular focus on political parties.

Political ideology

Social media platforms function as an important bridge between political actors and the public⁹². Camaj and Santana showed that the communication style of parties plays a role for the shape and

⁸⁷ A. R. Edwards, 'The moderator as an emerging democratic intermediary: The role of the moderator in Internet discussions about public issues' (2002) 7 *Information Polity* 3–20.

⁸⁸ S. Wright, 'Government-run Online Discussion Fora: Moderation, Censorship and the Shadow of Control' (2006) 8 *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 550–68.

⁸⁹ C. A. Bail, T. W. Brown, and M. Mann, 'Channeling Hearts and Minds: Advocacy Organizations, Cognitive-Emotional Currents, and Public Conversation' (2017) 82 *American Sociological Review* 1188–1213 at 1203.

⁹⁰ E.-J. Lee and S. Y. Shin, 'When the Medium Is the Message: How Transportability Moderates the Effects of Politicians' Twitter Communication' (2014) 41 *Communication Research* 1088–1110.

⁹¹ P. J. Chen and P. J. Smith, 'Adoption and Use of Digital Media in Election Campaigns: Australia, Canada and New Zealand Compared' (2010) 1 *Public Communication Review* 3; A. O. Larsson and B. Kalsnes, "'Of course we are on Facebook": Use and non-use of social media among Swedish and Norwegian politicians' (2014) 29 *European Journal of Communication* 653–67; N. Jackson and D. Lilleker, 'Microblogging, Constituency Service and Impression Management: UK MPs and the Use of Twitter' (2011) 17 *The Journal of Legislative Studies* 86–105; A. Bruns and T. Highfield, 'POLITICAL NETWORKS ON TWITTER: Tweeting the Queensland state election' (2013) 16 *Information, Communication & Society* 667–91; T. Graham, D. Jackson, and M. Broersma, 'New platform, old habits? Candidates' use of Twitter during the 2010 British and Dutch general election campaigns' (2016) 18 *New Media & Society* 765–83.

⁹² A. Valeriani and C. Vaccari, 'Accidental exposure to politics on social media as online participation equalizer in Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom' (2016) 18 *New Media & Society* 1857–74.

quality of the discussion on their Facebook pages⁹³. A study of political Facebook groups of candidates in the 2008 presidential US elections found a correlation between the content of the discussion and the political ideology of the candidate. In particular, there were differences with regard to the extent of the use of profanity, and positive or negative references to race, religion and age⁹⁴. In the same way Giebler and Wüst (2011) showed that within the European election campaigns in 2009 political ideology was a central variable for the intensity of the campaign. For instance, conservative parties had more (online and offline) activities than other parties⁹⁵.

Type of parties

Another key variable influencing political online communication is the type (age and size) of parties. Schweiger and Beck showed that even if larger parties have more resources and better conflict abilities and organisational capabilities to push their political topics onto the public agenda during election campaigns,⁹⁶ they are not automatically more active online (using websites, social media etc. for their campaigning). Instead, captured under the “innovation hypothesis”, newer and smaller parties dominate social media, while older and larger parties still dominate traditional media (television, newspaper, radio). Due to the relatively low costs of online communication, smaller, new or younger parties choose the digital sphere to connect with citizens as Rußmann (2011) showed for the case of Austria and Germany.

Accordingly, populist parties challenge established parties all over Europe by successfully using social media for political communication and mobilisation (e.g. “Movimento 5 Stelle” in Italy, “Podemos” in Spain, “Front National” in France or the “Alternative für Deutschland” in Germany). Social media are their central medium in election campaigns and they seem to use it more actively and effectively than established parties⁹⁷. Kriesi (2014) points out that populist parties use social media as a direct link to the public to bypass intermediaries (such as journalist) and challenge the top-down communication and traditional media channels of established parties⁹⁸. Populist Parties’ media use and anti-establishment rhetoric and reference to the people differs greatly from other

⁹³ Camaj, L. and A. D. Santana, ‘Political Deliberation on Facebook during Electoral Campaigns: Exploring the Relevance of Moderator’s Technical Role and Political Ideology’ (2015) 12 *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 325–41

⁹⁴ J. K. Woolley, A. M. Limperos, and M. B. Oliver, ‘The 2008 Presidential Election, 2.0: A Content Analysis of User-Generated Political Facebook Groups’ (2010) 13 *Mass Communication and Society* 631–52.

⁹⁵ J. Tenscher (ed.), *Superwahljahr 2009: vergleichende Analysen aus Anlass der Wahlen zum Deutschen Bundestag und zum Europäischen Parlament*, 1. Aufl ed. (VS, Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2011) pp. 139–41.

⁹⁶ W. Schweiger and K. Beck (eds.), *Handbuch Online-Kommunikation*, 1. Aufl ed. (VS, Verl. für Sozialwiss, 2010) pp. 311–30

⁹⁷ P.-J. Dittrich, ‘SOCIAL NETWORKS AND POPULISM IN THE EU.FOUR THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW’ (2017) *Jacques Delors Institut Berlin* 20

⁹⁸ H. Kriesi, ‘The Populist Challenge’ (2014) 37 *West European Politics* 361–78

parties, as a study by Jagers and Walgrave on the content of broadcasts on TV in Belgium showed⁹⁹. Moreover, the transformation of communication and mediatisation of politics strengthen the outreach and public influence of populist parties because the new media logic (simple, short language, direct communication) and trends towards negative campaigning match their communication style¹⁰⁰. Another aspect which could lead to their online success is that uncivil communication and a negative tone are accompanied by a higher degree of participation¹⁰¹. Concluding from this research strand, whether political deliberation emerges on social media depends on the political context in particular political ideology and type of political actors involved¹⁰². Yet, the further development, course and quality of deliberation is further determined by the resource of political discourses: the people who participate.

2.3 Online Participants

Therefore, this part takes a look at online participants as a driving force of the shape and course of political online debates. It is crucial to investigate their social background and behaviour online. However, representative studies on people participating in online discourses are rare. Most studies are based on small samples which makes it difficult to outline consistent demographic characteristics of online users¹⁰³.

Characteristics and motivation of online participants

However, there are studies that showed, in line with Davis, that online participation is influenced by social capital and regional background¹⁰⁴. For instance, Elter (2013) presented evidence that citizens in urban areas participated more frequently on Facebook and Twitter in advance to the state elections 2011 in Germany than citizens in urban areas¹⁰⁵. Vergeer and Hermans point out that online participants are characterized by their Internet affinity, competence, ability and

⁹⁹ J. Jagers and S. Walgrave, 'Populism as political communication style: An empirical study of political parties' discourse in Belgium' (2007) 46 *European Journal of Political Research* 319–45

¹⁰⁰ G. Mazzoleni, 'Mediatization and Political Populism' in F. Esser, J. Strömbäck (eds.), *Mediatization of Politics Understanding the Transformation of Western Democracies*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); J. N. Druckman, M. J. Kifer, and M. Parkin, 'Timeless Strategy Meets New Medium: Going Negative on Congressional Campaign Web Sites, 2002–2006' (2010) 27 *Political Communication* 88–103

¹⁰¹ D. J. Brooks and J. G. Geer, 'Beyond Negativity: The Effects of Incivility on the Electorate' (2007) 51 *American Journal of Political Science* 1–16

¹⁰² The literature review referred primarily to the role of parties in technologically advanced countries.

¹⁰³ T. Wells and M. Link, 'Facebook User Research Using a Probability-Based Sample and Behavioral Data' (2014) 19 *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 1042–52

¹⁰⁴ A. Davis, *Political communication and social theory* (Routledge, 2010)

¹⁰⁵ A. Elter, 'Interaktion und Dialog? Eine quantitative Inhaltsanalyse der Aktivitäten deutscher Parteien bei Twitter und Facebook während der Landtagswahlkämpfe 2011' (2013) 58 *Publizistik* 201–20

willingness to use social media¹⁰⁶. In their analysis on Facebook usage in the USA, Wells and Link show that Facebook users are more likely to be female, young age, white and with a high school education¹⁰⁷. Moreover, personality and competency (such as openness, motivation, curiosity and extraversion) determine active Facebook use and online sociability (via posts and comments)¹⁰⁸. In addition, the motivation and feelings of participants have an effect on the discussion¹⁰⁹. The majority of Facebook users have no fixed priority for a conversation style in political online debates and emotional as well as rational language appeal to them¹¹⁰. Tumasjan et. al (2019) show that Twitter is not only used as a platform to share political sentiments (tweets reflect voter preferences) but further to discuss them in public with other users. Hence, Tweets can resemble public opinion and function as a platform for the deliberation between different positions¹¹¹. Compared to face-to-face conversation participants in online discussion are more willing to self-exposure and personal talking¹¹². Salter emphasizes that online users are less shy to express their (opposing) political opinions and “profession, class, accent, body language, gender, ethnicity, religiosity, physical stature, speech impediments (...), all act as potential obstacles to “real-world” face-to-face discussion but are not as apparent online”¹¹³.

Roles of online participants: Speaker vs. Listener

Low costs of participation increase the “plurality of Internet users” and integrate participants with different social and economic backgrounds¹¹⁴. Karlsson’s study on online deliberation during the Debate Europe program of the European Commission “European Citizens Consultations 2009”

¹⁰⁶ M. Vergeer and L. Hermans, ‘Analysing Online Political Discussions: Methodological Considerations’ (2008) 15 *Javnost - The Public* p. 40

¹⁰⁷ T. Wells and M. Link, ‘Facebook User Research Using a Probability-Based Sample and Behavioral Data’ (2014) 19 *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 1042–52

¹⁰⁸ C. Ross, E. S. Orr, M. Sisic, J. M. Arseneault, M. G. Simmering, and R. R. Orr, ‘Personality and motivations associated with Facebook use’ (2009) 25 *Computers in Human Behavior* 578–86

¹⁰⁹ T. Graham and T. Witschge, ‘In Search of Online Deliberation: Towards a New Method for Examining the Quality of Online Discussions’ (2003) 28 *Communications* at 179

¹¹⁰ Bail, C. A., T. W. Brown, and M. Mann, ‘Channeling Hearts and Minds: Advocacy Organizations, Cognitive-Emotional Currents, and Public Conversation’ (2017) 82 *American Sociological Review* p. 1204

¹¹¹ A. Tumasjan, T. O. Sprenger, P. G. Sandner, and I. M. Weppe, ‘Predicting Elections with Twitter: What 140 Characters Reveal about Political Sentiment’ Fourth International AAAI Conference, (Menlo Park: Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence, 2010), p. 8 p. 184

¹¹² L. Collins Tidwell and J. B. Walther, ‘Computer-Mediated Communication Effects on Disclosure, Impressions, and Interpersonal Evaluations: Getting to Know One Another a Bit at a Time’ (2002) 28 *Human Communication Research* 32

¹¹³ L. Salter, ‘Democracy, New Social Movements, and the Internet’ in M. D. Ayers, M. McCaughey (eds.), *Cyberactivism : Online Activism in Theory and Practice*, (New York: Routledge, 2003) p. 194

¹¹⁴ L. Salter, ‘Democracy, New Social Movements, and the Internet’ in M. D. Ayers, M. McCaughey (eds.), *Cyberactivism : Online Activism in Theory and Practice*, (New York: Routledge, 2003) p. 173

shows that mass participation in public online discussion fosters large-scale deliberation. His findings provide evidence that the higher the level of engagement, the higher the level of deliberation¹¹⁵.

In contrast, other scholars show that mass participation leads to the separated expression and aggregation of individual preferences rather than deliberation¹¹⁶. Sunstein argues that, due to the filter bubble effect, the discourse in social media is rather characterized by homogenous opinions than diversity¹¹⁷. Online participation is unequally distributed which weakens the social representation and diversity in online-discussions¹¹⁸. Those who speak in online discussions are only a minority of users¹¹⁹. The 1 90-9-1-rule of thumb of online participation assumes that within Internet communities 90% of users observe and do not participate (lurkers), 9% contribute occasionally, and only 1% of actors creates content online. Even though this rule is not verified, there is empirical evidence that a large number are passive readers who do not participate¹²⁰. This part clarified that deliberative participation is influenced by the characteristics and motivation of the participants who influence the content, direction and deliberative quality of the discussion.

2.4 Deliberation in a multi-dimensional context

In conclusion, the extent of deliberation is influenced by: (1) the socio-technical infrastructure of the debate, (2) the political context and (3) its participants. The findings demonstrate that deliberative participation cannot be determined and controlled by a single group of actors, individuals, institutions or companies. All factors need to be considered to appropriately analyse and evaluate to which extent deliberation can be realised in the online sphere. Another aspect which has to be further explored is the influence of the legal framework in which political discourses are embedded and which structure the rules of the game of online participation. Figure 2 synthesizes the empirical findings of the literature review and illustrates that political

¹¹⁵ M. Karlsson, 'What does it take to make online deliberation happen?: A comparative analysis of 28 online discussion forums' (Leeds: University of Leeds, 2010)

¹¹⁶ Karlsson, 'What does it take to make online deliberation happen?: A comparative analysis of 28 online discussion forums' (Leeds: University of Leeds, 2010) p. 104.

¹¹⁷ C. R. Sunstein, *#Republic: divided democracy in the age of social media* (Princeton University Press, 2017)

¹¹⁸ S. Albrecht, 'Whose voice is heard in online deliberation?: A study of participation and representation in political debates on the internet' (2006) 9 *Information, Communication & Society* 62–82

¹¹⁹ A. Römmele and S. Einwiller, 'Soziale Medien in der Bundestagswahl 2009' (2012) 43 *Zeitschrift für Parlamentsfragen* 103–13 at 108; Janssen and Kies, 'Online Forums and Deliberative Democracy', 630; A. Tumasjan, T. O. Sprenger, P. G. Sandner, and I. M. Welp, 'Predicting Elections with Twitter: What 140 Characters Reveal about Political Sentiment' Fourth International AAAI Conference, (Menlo Park: Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence, 2010)

¹²⁰ Vergeer, M. and L. Hermans, 'Analysing Online Political Discussions: Methodological Considerations' (2008) 15 *Javnost - The Public* p.52

deliberation is embedded in a multi-layered context and depends on the interplay of different factors.

Figure 2: Deliberation in a multi-dimensional



This model provides a framework to understand the determinants of deliberation and evaluate the quality of discourses in the online sphere. As a consequence of the multidimensional nature of deliberation, the realisation of deliberative standards can be seen as a social, economic and as well a political task. Consequently, it is crucial to think about potential paths how to use the Social Web to provide the infrastructure for deliberative online platforms. The next part takes a deeper look at specific cases in the economic and political sphere and identifies key gaps and potential paths how to realise large-scale online deliberation.

3. Potential Paths for Deliberation in the Age of Social Media

One step towards online deliberation is that platforms where political participation and discussions take place, such as social media platforms, have to be organised according to deliberative principles. Can these ideal conditions for deliberation be better implemented on commercial or non-commercial online platforms?

3.1 Facebook as a deliberative platform?

Built in 2004, by Mark Zuckerberg, “Facebook has become the leading interactive media content generator following its dramatic ascension in popularity after being opened to the public in

2006”¹²¹. Facebook has been the subject of a lot of controversial debates about its political influence, privacy settings or the control and trade of user data. Yet, Facebook remains one of the central arenas for political participation and researchers have to analyse the social spheres that are relevant and used by society¹²². The following brief analysis investigates whether Facebook as a communication space provides the appropriate socio-technical settings for online deliberation.

Content creation: Moderation vs. freedom of speech

As the literature review showed the degree and intensity the platform is used for political deliberation depends (along other factors) on the technical settings of the platform to create and moderate content. In the case of Facebook the absence of time and character limitations has positive effects on the emergence of rational debates¹²³. Moreover, even though there is no identity check, the majority of users registers with their real name¹²⁴. According to Janssen and Kies, this increases respectful behaviour in online debates¹²⁵. While users can control the user-generated-content (UGC) they produce¹²⁶, they have less influence on their communication environment and the presentation of third-party content¹²⁷. For instance, Germany provides an example for the tension between moderation and freedom of speech. The *Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz* (NetzDG), which came into force October 2017 in Germany, transfers the obligation on social networks to control that UGC produced on their platform is in line with the German law. Platforms are obliged to delete mal-information, hate speech or illegal content within 24 hours, which led to a large amount of deleted content. According to this form of self-regulation the definition and interpretation of what counts as mal-information on the platform and violates German law is up to the platform providers¹²⁸. Due to the NetzDG a large amount of content has been deleted from social media platforms.

In the aftermath of the US Election 2016 the debate around manipulation in online campaigns reached its peak. In response Facebook presented new strategies to improve fact-checking mechanisms, e.g. via fact-checking-organisation as partners or by allowing researchers to

¹²¹ K. A. Neuendorf, *The content analysis guidebook*, Second edition ed. (SAGE, 2017) p. 201

¹²² R. Köcher and O. Bruttel, *Social Media, IT & Society 2011* (Infosys Limited, 2011)

¹²³ D. Janssen and R. Kies, 'Online Forums and Deliberative Democracy' (2005) 40 *Acta Politica*

¹²⁴ E. P. Netchitailova, 'Facebook as a Surveillance Tool: From the Perspective of the User' (2012) 10 *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society* 683–91 at 685.

¹²⁵ D. Janssen and R. Kies, 'Online Forums and Deliberative Democracy' (2005) 40 *Acta Politica* p. 321

¹²⁶ K.A. Neuendorf, *The content analysis guidebook* Second edition ed. (SAGE, 2017) p. 201.

¹²⁷ K.A. Neuendorf, *The content analysis guidebook* Second edition ed. (SAGE, 2017) p. 211.

¹²⁸ R. Goldzweig, M. Wachinger, D. Stockmann, and A. Römmele, 'Beyond Regulation: Approaching the challenges of the new media environment' (2018) IV Dahrendorf Forum

analyse the potential impact of social media on politics and elections in particular¹²⁹. In order to prevent disinformation and ensure transparent and fair campaign activities on social media, Facebook signed an EU-agreement to implement a self-regulatory “Code of practice” (the output and effect of these policies are uncertain)¹³⁰. By hosting networked public spheres, controlling information flows and freedom of speech Facebook possesses political power¹³¹.

Platform Design: open access vs. loss of control

Moreover, political discourses are embedded in the algorithmic environment of Facebook as a commercial platform. The commercial rationale of Facebook is profit maximisation through data gathering, analysing and advertising— the more the user interacts and shares content, the better for the business¹³². Accordingly, Facebook exploits its users as it makes profit by selling user-generated-content to advertising clients¹³³. The algorithms are designed according to commercial logics of an auction business model and influence user’s online activities, perception and access to content (e.g. personalised news-feed). Due to their complexity, users cannot decode and fully understand the mechanisms of these algorithms. As the extraction and analysis of Big Data is a non-reciprocal process, Facebook gains surveillance assets which attract investment and produce surveillance capital. While these mechanisms increase the power of Facebook, they decrease the control and self-determination of users and can violate their privacy rights¹³⁴.

Participants: mass participation vs. fragmentation

The Facebook community and participants in the discussion do not represent society as a whole but are characterised by their Internet affinity, their ability or willingness to use Facebook and shared interests and social needs¹³⁵. Nevertheless, compared to platforms and online forums particularly designed for deliberation or specific political purposes (e.g. participatory discussion formats or opinion polls), the composition of Facebook users is heterogenous¹³⁶. The technical

¹²⁹ R. Goldzweig, M. Wachinger, D. Stockmann, and A. Römmele, ‘Beyond Regulation: Approaching the challenges of the new media environment’ (2018) IV Dahrendorf Forum

¹³⁰ European Commission, ‘Roadmaps to implement the Code of Practice on disinformation’ (October 2018)

¹³¹ C. Shirky, ‘The political power of social media: Technology, the public sphere, and political change.’ (2011) *Foreign affairs*

¹³² D. Stockmann and T. Luo, ‘Which Social Media Facilitate Online Public Opinion in China?’ (2017) 64 *Problems of Post-Communism* p. 193

¹³³ C. Fuchs, ‘The political economy of privacy on Facebook.’ (2012) *Television & New Media* 13.2

¹³⁴ S. Zuboff, ‘Big other: surveillance capitalism and the prospects of an information civilization.’ (2015) *Journal of Information Technology* 30.1

¹³⁵ M. Vergeer and L. Hermans, ‘Analysing Online Political Discussions: Methodological Considerations’ (2008) 15 *Javnost - The Public* p. 40

¹³⁶ R. Winkler, U. Kozeluh, and G. Brandstetter, ‘Deliberation im europäischen Kontext: Online Debatten und Online Konsultationen auf der EU Plattform Your Voice in Europe’ in W. R. Langenbucher, M. Latzer (eds.),

barriers to create an account are low and thus provide appropriate conditions for mass participation¹³⁷. Yet, those who speak in the discussion and comment on post are only a minority of active users¹³⁸. The large amount of passive readers who do not participate and produce content remains often invisible¹³⁹. The design of the threads increases the continuity and interactivity of the debate as each comment in a thread can be commented. Consequently, a web of reciprocity evolves and there is not only a message-to-message relationship or individual-to-individual communication but messages-to-messages and many-to-many-interactions¹⁴⁰. Another important feature of Facebook is the real-time publishing. Through the immediate interaction users can communicate with each other without temporal shift, which improves the exchange of arguments and liveliness of the debate. As debates are ongoing, they can be constantly commented and remain “open” for contributions, which serves the continuity and scope of the debate.

Deliberation and Facebook: An arranged marriage

The brief overview showed that Facebook has low barriers to participate and is comparatively open in nature (as the design of the threads, real-time publishing, no time and character limitation, multiple forms of user generated content increase the continuity, interactivity and many-to-many-interactions). On the other hand, the findings suggest that, in the case of Facebook as a commercial platform, political deliberation can evolve but is accompanied by potential risks such as manipulation of participants or the violation of privacy rights. In this regard democratic values such as the freedom of speech or the self-determination of users could be threatened through misinformation or a lack of transparency. Consequently, the executive and judiciary are in charge to either regulate social media platforms and find appropriate laws to protect and empower users or to create alternative platforms (which will be further investigated in the next part).

3.2 Online deliberation as a political task: publicly administered (new) platforms

Europäische Öffentlichkeit und medialer Wandel, (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2006), pp. 378–400 pp. 387–88.

¹³⁷ Janssen, D. and R. Kies, ‘Online Forums and Deliberative Democracy’ (2005) 40 *Acta Politica* p. 329.

¹³⁸ A. Römmele and S. Einwiller, ‘Soziale Medien in der Bundestagswahl 2009’ (2012) 43 *Zeitschrift für Parlamentsfragen* p. 108.

¹³⁹ Vergeer, M. and L. Hermans, ‘Analysing Online Political Discussions: Methodological Considerations’ (2008) 15 *Javnost - The Public* p. 52.

¹⁴⁰ T. Graham, and T. Witschge, ‘In Search of Online Deliberation: Towards a New Method for Examining the Quality of Online Discussions’ (2003) 28 *Communications* p. 186

The second potential path is the creation of publicly administered online deliberation platforms where citizens can express their political opinion, ask questions and deliberate on political issues and policy proposals. These platforms would need to provide the appropriate infrastructure for deliberation, a moderator to safeguard the quality of deliberation as well as balanced, nonpartisan background information materials and training of moderators. The pre-condition for such online platforms is that they are not biased and controlled by partisan interests. Otherwise, they bear the risk to function as surveillance and suppression tools for authoritarian regimes¹⁴¹. Therefore, there has to be a high reach, scope and participation rates without a pre-dominant self-selection bias, representing only a fraction of society. In order to find potential paths to realise such democratic ideals I briefly present three examples of current projects.

- (1) A vivid example is France. Due to political pressure and continuous protests and demands by civil society to be heard, President Emmanuel Macron initiated a “Grant national debate” accompanied by an online dialogue platform headed by the “Congrès national pour la défense du peuple” (CNDP). However, from a deliberative point of view it can be criticised that the ability of citizens to speak is limited as this platform is based on questionnaires on four fixed topics instead of an open debate in which the citizens can bring forward their own issues and questions to the government.
- (2) Secondly, with the aim to enhance the amount and impact of citizen participation, there have been various innovative approaches for online participation. An example, which is in the state of development, is the DECiDe project (Digital Identity, European Citizenship and the Future of Democracy) that combines random vote sampling with digital identities. Here, people get randomly selected to vote, gain information on the political issue at stake and deliberate on those in advance to their online vote. Even if reflective reasoned decisions are made, only a few people can engage in this format. Therefore, low participation rates could undermine the representativeness of the vote. As the project does not yet fulfil the democratic values of mass deliberation and political equality, it has to be developed further.
- (3) Another initiative for mass deliberation comes from Johannes Hillje (2019) who proposed a European online platform to start a political discourse between citizens across member states and to strengthen the European public sphere¹⁴². Apart from the fact, that there are a variety of barriers and obstacles for public debates and deliberation on a

¹⁴¹ C. Shirky, ‘The political power of social media: Technology, the public sphere, and political change.’ (2011) *Foreign affairs*

¹⁴² J. Hillje, *Plattform Europa Warum wir schlecht über die EU reden und wie wir den Nationalismus mit einem neuen digitalen Netzwerk überwinden können.* (Verlag J. H. W. Dietz, 2019)

European level (different language, cultures, media consumption, to name just a view), an online platform without a European demos and a common public sphere would lead to the same issues that emerged in earlier online public consultations – low level and unequal participation (e.g. divided by income, education, social interests or cosmopolitan vs. communitarian attitude).

In summary, these examples demonstrated the potentials of digital media to integrate large-scale deliberation into the political tool box. Yet, the analysis showed that it would be more promising to realise initiatives and projects for online deliberation on a lower political level (such as a regional or local context or in institutions or organisations) first. Online deliberation is a matter of *habitualisation*, which needs training, time and resources. In my opinion, there are three pre-conditions for public online deliberation. Firstly, a common language (as Habermas pointed out language is the fundamental tool to express one's political will), secondly, a shared topic, problem or issue at stake to discuss and thirdly, impact in the sense that it makes a difference that I speak because somebody listens to it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the goal of online deliberation is to find (a) the right balance between moderation and freedom of speech and (b) to enable inclusive participation where different societal interests and voices of society can be heard. There are three key learnings on the potential of deliberative democracy in the age of social media:

Firstly, the paper demonstrated that the digital transformation has theoretical implications for the core democratic premises (political equality, mass participation and deliberation). There is a need to rethink, modify and adapt democratic theory according to space and time. The paper showed that deliberation could be realised on a much larger scale in the online platforms and that the theory of deliberative democracy provides a useful theoretical approach to study deliberation on social media platforms.

Secondly, the findings have practical implications. As long as publicly administered deliberative online platforms, used by a variety of people with a political impact, only exist in theory, social media remain the key social spaces in the online sphere where political communication and participation takes place. Hence, while discussing future visions for a democratic Internet, economic and political actors have to start implementing concrete, practical steps to improve the conditions of the social (online) world we are currently living in.

Besides platform owners, political actors are in charge to modify and change political practices and laws accordingly. It is time to move beyond the predominant self-regulation of

platforms and find effective ways to implement new forms of deliberative participation in the political arena. Instead of increasing the mere amount of referenda to empower citizens it would be fruitful to increase the self-competency and knowledge of citizens to think and reflect on different positions beforehand. The availability of different information and sources are key elements of this process of empowerment. The more citizens know, the better the decisions they make.

Finally, in order to improve the outcome of political participation for citizens and foster effective impact on the political decision-making process, there is need for concomitant research evaluating the shape, quality and outcome of political deliberation on online platforms. For instance, discover the power relations (who participated and how, e.g. actively/passively), topics, organisation and moderation as well as the dynamic of online deliberation and its impact on political decisions. Thereby, concomitant research can function as a feedback loop to consistently develop and further improve deliberative practices and increase its use for citizens.

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Teresa Völker is a researcher at the Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society (HIIG) of Berlin. She has a background in political science and sociology and her research focuses on digital democracy, deliberation and education.

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