Web 2.0 and deliberation: an introduction

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The deliberative ideal, rooted in the highly influential Habermasian notion of critical-rational discussion that should guide citizen interaction in the public sphere, has held a strong normative grip on political imagination of 'strong' democracy and 'thick' forms of citizenship. Since the 1990s, the significant developments in communication technologies have fuelled theoretical and empirical investigation of ICT-assisted applications of deliberative political processes as a serious alternative to existing liberal models of democracy and the conventional individualistic and aggregative ethos regarding citizen participation. Kies (2010, pp.30–32) summarises the ground on which normative superiority of deliberative democracy vis-à-vis liberal and republican models rests: deliberative processes are more likely to (a) narrow down risks of strong moral conflicts, typical of complex and multicultural societies, as they are better adapted to produce agreement or at least mutual respect between conflicting parties; (b) increase the legitimacy and acceptance of collective decisions; (c) limit polarisation of social groups; (d) foster civic attitudes that are oriented more strongly towards the public interest, inviting citizens to take into consideration the perspectives and concerns of the weaker sections of involved populations.

Despite these indisputable benefits for the democratic polity, deliberation does not go uncontested. Even in combination with other types of decision-making procedures, serious concerns regarding its feasibility remain. These may refer to the conditions that govern our large-scale societies, where urgent decisions about complex matters should be made, as well as the highly demanding normative requirements placed upon deliberating

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actors, in terms of the civic and discursive attitudes that citizens and political representatives should possess. Other concerns are often expressed in relation to the exclusion of certain categories of actors from deliberative processes. Exclusion is understood in terms of the structural socioeconomic inequalities that heavily affect the opportunity of certain groups to participate effectively in deliberations, as well as the discursive forms of domination that can be produced by overly formalised and rationalist modes of expression (e.g. Young, 2000).

With the emergence of the internet, the new communication medium that enabled open, horizontal and diverse spaces for discussion with minimal spatio-temporal constraints, seemed distinctively suited for civic practices that could advance deliberative ideals. The early phase of online deliberation research coincided with experiments and projects that aimed to advance civic talk online. But has online deliberation lived up to our expectations? Chadwick (2009, pp.16–18) locates a familiar set of problems with online deliberation in formal spaces of government-citizen interaction, associated with low citizen participation, officials' reluctance to incorporate deliberative practices in their routine modes of operation and an uncertainty regarding an increase of civic competence(s) for involved citizens. Nonetheless, deliberation (and citizenship) cannot be exclusively associated with formal institutional spheres and decision-making bodies. Citizenship is practiced in diverse ways and in multiple loci, and deliberation that flourishes in the 'wild web' cannot be ignored. To give an example, the individuals and groups engaged in the Independent Media Centers (IMC) experiment utilised online deliberative practices (such as consensus-based decision-making) to create and sustain a unique, translocal democratic structure for information and discussion for media and political activism (Pickard, 2006).

The rise of the participatory communication environment that has become known as 'web 2.0', raises new challenges for deliberation research. Web 2.0 environments are characterised by open, user-led, networked and collaborative practices, such as social networking, collaborative knowledge management (e.g. Wikipedia), creative practices (e.g. Flickr and YouTube), journalism-related user-generated content, collaborative filtering, and open source software development (Bruns, 2007). A question that arises for deliberative democrats is what web 2.0 technical and social practices can offer to deliberation. The preliminary answers to this question range from the sanguine to the gloomy. For example, on the one hand, Chadwick (2009) sees great potential for deliberation in certain features of the social web, such as the simplicity and usability ethos, the variety of expressive and participatory repertoires available to users, the collectively-generated trustworthiness, and the trust embedded in the personalisation of social networking sites and the representation of citizens' real-life identities. boyd (2008), on the other hand, sees social networking sites as detrimental to political action – let alone deliberation – insofar as these personal network tools are "designed to explicitly be about 'me and my friends'" (p.243) and encourage participants to seek out 'homogeneous' people and opinions, creating 'cavernous echo chambers' instead of cross-cutting political discussion.

A different way to address the relationship between the networked, participatory web and deliberation is to take as a starting point the assumption that deliberation is itself a discursive construction, as Coleman and Moss (2012) convincingly argue. On this basis, a different question arises: how does web 2.0 urge us to reconsider our conceptual definitions of deliberation? In this Introduction, we posit four dimensions that we suggest should be considered in future research about online deliberation.

First, the so-called 'social web' mixes private and public to the point that they become inseparable. In other words, it increasingly connects personal spheres of representation with public or semi-public spheres of political interaction. Many profile pages in online social networks include information about private tastes and personal experiences alongside content that is traditionally connected with civic activities, like disseminating and interpreting the news, passing on information about political campaigns or calling for participation in collective actions. At the same time, a combination of blogs, social networks and user-generated content websites are being used more and more by governments to create deliberative spaces and solicit ideas and views from citizens. This means that political deliberation can no longer be conceived as confined to formally structured and clearly demarcated spaces (e.g. government online consultations), as the social web allows deliberation to easily migrate from formal, institutional spaces to informal, extra-parliamentarian spaces. In the same vein, online deliberation is hardly initiated solely by official governmental and policy bodies, in a top-down fashion. As Coleman and Moss argue (2012, p.11), "there may be much to be learned by researchers from seeking out spaces of unconventional political talk". Deliberation, then, can also be searched within the contours of civil society as well as the activist/advocacy domain (Dahlgren, 2005).

Second, as the participatory web further increases the opportunities for the formation of transnational publics, deliberation cannot be conceived solely in terms of local or national fora, in which local residents or national citizens come together to discuss issues that affect their life. As Bohman (2004) has argued, "the very concept of the demos is decentred and replaced by that of a public that is formed around a 'problematic situation', a paradigmatic case of which is globalisation" (p.25). In the presence of globalised problems escaping national boundaries and of transnational governance power, it makes more sense to think of deliberation among multiple, issue-specific publics beyond the nation-state, which are formed as a result of and in opposition to globalised power structures.

Third, the participatory web, especially in the form of online social networks, seems to support the notion of 'networked individualism' (Wellman et al., 2003), where each networked individual "rather than identifying with a single, close-knit community […] sits at the centre of a set of personal networks" (Kendall, 2011, p.311). These networks have been celebrated as bringing about a cultural shift that signifies greater individual autonomy; however, they are also criticised for combining fragmented individuals, rather than building networked communities "through which action may be undertaken, projects realised, reality confronted and modified" (Gurstein, 2008, cited in Fuchs et al., 2010, pp.54–55). While appeals to community (often in a nostalgic and idealised fashion) conceal significant tensions between community and democracy or autonomy, understanding deliberation in strictly individualistic terms (even in the form of networked individualism) is rather problematic: in addition to valorising individualism, it risks ignoring a significant part of social and political realities that are built around collective identities, strong social ties and political struggles striving against unjust power relations. Thus, whereas deliberation research should seek to determine how new forms of (networked) sociality, afforded by new media, affect deliberative practices, it is important, at the same time, to resist accepting the democratisation potential of these forms of sociality at face value.

Thus far, the three aforementioned dimensions refer to the potentialities and risks that web 2.0 can bring in to the notion of deliberation. The fourth dimension is structured upon a more critical theorisation of both the technological advancement as well as the concept of deliberation. It actually brings to the fore more clamorously the classic dilemma between *Utopian* and *Dystopian* conceptualisation of technology and aspects of democracy. This dilemma may be alternatively explained as the optimistic conceptualisation of technology and its transformative role into society, a classic Castellian view, against the pessimistic conceptualisation that, for example, Webster (2006) – among others – puts forward, claiming that technology cannot alter deeply existing constellations of power. This fourth dimension therefore re-posits the importance of the existential question of this dilemma, while it undermines the current shift that is observed in many discussions and studies on (e-)deliberation. We consider that much of the current discussion on the potential web 2.0 deliberation inevitably underlines the importance of technical innovations and practicalities that the rapid and constant evolution of the internet provokes. This reification of the technological capacities that are evaluated mainly based on the dominance of top-down approaches, since citizens are normally followers of the governments in the use of extremely innovative and multitask deliberative platforms and online spaces, indicates some sort of disorientation regarding the actual occurrence and content of deliberation. In other words, this may be interpreted as an ongoing debate that leans toward positions of technological determinism. Questions such as whether we should uncritically accept that technology guides what deliberation may be, are fundamental in that they ignore basic concerns about whether technology can have a transformative potential or not. Such a problématique emerges in the findings of most papers this special issue comprises, since technology is, on the one hand, appraised in the provided opportunities but at the same time directly or indirectly criticised from several perspectives. That said, we need to question once more whether the new technological achievements, including the web 2.0, can be legitimised as deliberative tools or whether we need to go back to the initial question that this research field was invited to address: whether technology, independently of its degree of progress and complexity, can bring about a transformation in relation to what we understand as deliberation.

Turning to the collection of papers in this special issue, we would characterise it as a vivid example of the kaleidoscopic and multifaceted nature of online deliberation. Below we present briefly each paper and how it approaches e-deliberation from a different angle raising concerns that invite reflection regarding the conceptual and methodological lenses through which online deliberation is studied.

The paper *Global civil society and deliberation in the digital age*, by Christos A. Frangonikolopoulos, contests the commonly held assumption that participatory, deliberative democracy is realisable only through the formal political structures of the nation-states and in conventional ways based on government–citizen interaction. Adopting a less stringent and more flexible notion of deliberation, it explores its compatibility with grassroots activism, on the one hand, and global political action, on the other. In so doing, Frangonikolopoulos sets out to illustrate the deliberative nature of Global Civic Society (GCS), first, at the internal level, which takes the form of transnational discussion fora, such as the World Social Forum, in which a significant number of groups and individuals are involved in an ongoing discursive practice with a deliberative ethos, in order to discover and define common agendas, values and strategies

for effective action. This process is in line with other scholars who have stressed the value of informal sites of horizontal discussion *before* formal deliberation, as separate spaces in which less privileged actors can discover their common interests and forge collective identities (Dahlgren, 2005, p.152). Frangonikolopoulos continues by examining the role of GCS in the wider political sphere, asking whether GCS has any impact on the broad public sphere and on formal political deliberation and, if so, what are the attributes of this impact. He argues that the collaborative affordances provided by the participatory web increase the deliberative power of global civic society, not only on the decisional dimension (the capacity to influence decision making), but also on the regulatory (the capacity to make rules) and the discursive dimension (the capacity to frame and reframe discourses). Still, the author acknowledges the need for the creation of ICT-assisted supranational networks of dialogue and argumentation between states, international organisations and the public, which would enable GCS actors to effectively intervene through the existing e-government structures – especially at times when the capability of national *demoi* to safeguard the accountability of decision-makers seems to be withering away.

The paper *Technology and the quality of public deliberation: a comparison between on and offline participation*, authored by Laurence Monnoyer-Smith and Stéphanie Wojcik, deals with two vexing questions regarding deliberation: first, how we can improve deliberation’s conceptual clarity so that we can assess the quality of deliberation and, second, whether online environments with web 2.0 features advance the deliberative quality of the interaction between citizens, officials and experts. Building on earlier research work regarding the normative and methodological criteria best fit to evaluate real-world deliberative praxis, Monnoyer-Smith and Wojcik propose a revised version of the Discourse Quality Index, which rests on an enlarged definition of deliberation and takes into account some of the most significant critical arguments that have been put across regarding the exclusionary effects and structural inequalities of classic formulations of the notion of deliberation. Next, the authors test these evaluative criteria in practice, focusing on a French case of a national public debate on a local environmental issue: Face-to-face public meetings and various online deliberative spaces are assessed and compared in terms of the quality of the procedure. Reporting their empirical findings, the authors argue that there is an obvious link between the nature and quality of deliberation and the technological frame of each arrangement, finding differences not only between online and offline deliberation, but also between differing online settings. Observed differences are noted, among others, regarding gender (in)equality, the type of actors expressing themselves publicly (citizens, associations, experts), the extent of claims’ justification as well as the grounds on which this justification rests, and the quality of contributions in regard to advancing the aims of deliberation. Overall, besides the comparative evaluation of each technological platform according to the qualitative criteria of deliberation, this study shows the significance of studying how various arenas for deliberation are articulated and linked up to one another, and the ways in which they are being used by different actors according to their competences, needs and discursive goals. This approach acknowledges the complexity of real-world deliberative situations and the need to adopt methodological designs able to study the synergistic and interdependent nature of various socio-technological environments, instead of mechanical comparisons of offline vs. online deliberation.

New participatory technologies, such as social networking online media and mobile phones, create new discourses regarding citizenship and democracy. The paper *Mobile democracy discourse in a Turkish experiment*, by Nurcan Törenli, Zafer Kıyan and Hakan Yüksel, is concerned with a recent construction, the 'mobile citizen'. In their paper, the authors adopt a critical perspective toward the conceptualisation of and the rhetoric about ICT-assisted democracy, focusing on the case of the Mobile Democracy Platform (MDP) in Turkey. Törenli and his co-authors apply critical discourse analysis to detect the underlying assumptions and contradictions of what they call 'mobile democracy' discourse in Turkey. The authors criticise purely instrumentalist approaches to democratisation which they see as echoing rhetorics of the past, such as the construction of information superhighways that would unproblematically result in Athenian-style democracies and would realise the broadening and deepening of democratic participation. It is argued that the discourse about democratisation by the use of mobile phones that is currently being developed in Turkey is characterised by a considerable gulf between rhetoric and reality, based on false promises about consequential involvement of citizens in governance that cannot be delivered through the thin forms of participation that the mobile democracy platform opts for. The current strategy for democratisation in Turkey is also criticised for legitimising a technologically deterministic conceptualisation of democracy and ignoring existing socio-economic inequalities. All in all, the authors raise doubts regarding the possibility of bringing about social change in the absence of citizens' emancipation through their involvement in political struggles. Thus, instrumental policies informed by an overemphasis on communication technology, at the expense of either deliberative or agonistic understandings of democracy, seem incompatible with democratisation in any meaningful way.

The paper *Electronic democracy's deliberative potential: dissecting the Canadian polity and the challenges ahead*, by Jeffrey Roy, addresses the notion of deliberation in macro terms and in particular, in relation to e-democracy and its potential to implement and promote online deliberation. The author further investigates whether and in what ways deliberation and online deliberation has been used in the evolution of e-democracy in Canada, an interesting case due to its leading position in the use of e-government tools but its laggard position in the use of e-democracy techniques. More specifically, he examines the deliberative potential that e-democracy can achieve and promote as identified in three basic dimensions: (a) individual, (b) informational, (c) institutional. At the same time though the author identifies and juxtaposes the impediments that may hinder the evolution of deliberation for every dimension separately. Such counter-forces are discussed in detail for the Canadian context. The analysis has brought to the fore the importance of the way in which technological and social change is evaluated vis-à-vis political innovations that can strengthen deliberation as a basis for collective action. Based on this framework the author outlines four general proposals for increasing the deliberative aspects of e-democracy and also the ways to address emerging problems. The final postulation of the paper is that due to the dominant, top-down trend adopted by the governments which is the promotion of e-government rather than e-democracy principles in a way that citizens are seen rather as customers, the online dimension still lies behind the offline traditional dimension of democratic processes. This in fact indicates once more the absence of a deliberative namely discursive citizenry and a long list of normative conditions that need to be satisfied.

In the last paper of this special issue, *E-deliberation 2.0 for smart cities: a critical assessment of two 'idea generation' cases*, Peter Mechant, Isabelle Stevens, Tom Evens and Pieter Verdegem follow a similar pattern with Monnoyer-Smith and Wojcik in their attempt to evaluate real-world deliberative praxis at a local level by focusing on comparing two 'smart city' projects namely GreenWeCan and SMARTiP in Belgium. For these authors e-deliberation is explored in the context of 'smart city' and is understood as involving and generating a reflexive, open and just communication procedure that reflects in a number of practices in order to enhance rational communication. Although the authors acknowledge that deliberation offline and mainly online is linked to participatory democracy with either negative or positive consequences, in their empirical study they depart from the premise that e-deliberation tools are rather positive tools provided to the citizens through the use of new technologies with the view to increase quality of life, stimulate social cohesiveness and facilitate citizens' participation. Their empirical analysis concentrated on the evaluation of the innovation development process of the two projects on the basis of the types of deliberative activities involved, the quantity and type of participation as well as the idea types that were used. The results provide interesting lessons for future development of 'smart cities' by emphasising the necessity of combining online and offline deliberative techniques without ignoring the weak and strong points of every one of those.

In sum, our hope is that this special issue raises questions that can broaden online deliberation research, offer fresh ideas for future studies and help researchers engage in critical reflection regarding the multifaceted relation of technology and democracy.

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