

# QUESTIONING DISCOURSE QUALITY ONLINE OR HOW TO DEAL WITH THE DELIBERATIVE CHARACTER OF CONTEMPORARY (SOCIAL) COMMUNICATION?

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**KEYWORDS:** deliberative democracy, online public discussion, social media, discourse quality

Recent social changes determined by the new communication and information technologies invite scholars to question the dominant forms of our contemporary social and political life. Widespread use of the Internet, along with the continuous introduction of new mobile and wireless devices, break up the established standards of how we socialize. We witness power re-consideration and re-distribution among citizens, politicians, and media. In particular, the Internet points out the significance of individual agendas and mitigates the importance traditional media used to have. Consequently, online public discussions challenge the traditional public sphere and encourage speculations about the impact online communication has on political decision making. Hence, there is no surprise that in such a social context the idea of deliberative democracy comes into bloom.

Deliberative democrats recognize the dominant democracy models can no longer satisfy societies of second modernity due to their depersonalization, inflexibility, and disjuncture (of citizens and policy makers) and require reconsideration. Instead, pro-deliberative scholars stress the importance of free and equal public discussion, resulting in the best solution acceptable to everyone (“common good”). They offer the model of deliberative democracy as a better choice for quickly changing and liberating the societies with a growing willingness to participate in a decision making processes (Festenstein, 2009). However, there remains a debate in the literature regarding the value of deliberation in the process of political decision making.

Pro-deliberative scholars are divided into three distinct arenas of thought. The first group believe that free public discussion can improve political decision making, while others argue it might result in harmful outcomes, such as major social disunity. The third group believes public deliberation makes no difference either for good or bad (Elster, 1998). Critics, however, suggest deliberative democracy is not a distinct model at all because it cannot be implemented without voting (Saward, 2000).

The debate regarding deliberative democracy becomes even more complicated when considering online communication. Although the Internet is believed to be a promising space for the public to speak up, recent studies questioning the quality of online discussions are rather disappointing (Sunstein, 2001). Opponents of deliberative democracy argue that openness, equality, and the lack of formal constraints, favored by deliberative democrats and fostered in online environments, are more likely to lead to chaotic and arbitrary outcomes (Dryzek 2004), especially considering the global scale of discourse where it is difficult for individuals to participate

meaningfully (Fishkin, 2009). Besides, the possibility for open discourse online does not ensure citizens will contribute in a way deliberative democrats desire. Sunstein (2001) notices the Internet encourages so called *narrow-mindedness* because people tend to customize their software according to their interests, positions and beliefs, and visit only those sites that support their views. By making it so easy to speak with like-minded people, the Internet may encourage proliferation of hate groups (Preece, 2001). Hence, instead of leading to “common good,” online discussions may encourage an even bigger division between different-minded citizens.

The major criticism faced by the theory of deliberative democracy is the so-called triplet of deliberative obligations which includes: proper reasoning of the choice listening and replying sincerely, and looking for a common good. Both pro-deliberative theorists and their critics agree these deliberative obligations are compulsory to all citizens in order to reach a qualitative deliberation.

It is widely accepted that without good reasoning, uncertainties remain as to why one solution has been chosen over another (Elstub, 2008). Participants of the deliberative process, therefore, are expected to not only offer arguments but also to justify them. However, opponents of deliberative democracy doubt if Internet users actually realize the significance of justified argumentation and the importance of deliberative discussions for political decisions making. If citizens are actually lacking such knowledge, it is reasonable to expect that such citizens’ discussions will be limited to personal monologues instead of deliberative discussions and no common good will be reached.

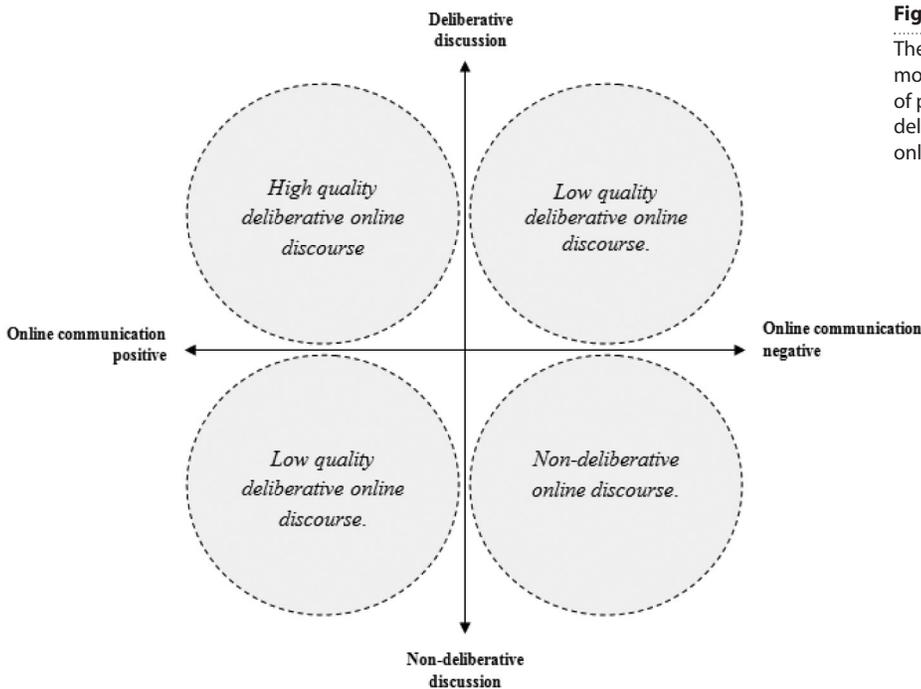
<sup>1</sup> Social choice theorists disagree with the benefits of deliberative democracy and question the possibility, stability and value of rational collective discussions (see Riker, 1982).

The anonymous nature of online communication also stimulates critics’ discussions regarding the true intentions of the participants. Social choice theorists<sup>1</sup> underscore the possibility of manipulations through strategic participation and agenda control, which is difficult to detect (Riker, 1982). Who can ensure that all the participants of the discussion have sincere and fair intentions? Furthermore, even if citizens realize the importance of justified argumentation and do have fair intentions, the requirements of listening and replying have to be corresponded. This is the requirement which can be the most difficult to exercise in global online communication environments. Can we truly expect that citizens will read and consider all the opinions expressed in the global discussions? Instead, online discussions are more likely to remain monologue.

Finally, consensus (based on common good orientation) is also highly doubtful in global discussions. It is possible that individuals or groups will have strictly conflicting views on distinct issues of social life, politics, or economics and consensus will not be reached.

To date there is no reliable, big scale empirical data confirming or denying previous propositions, hence theoretical contemplations cannot propose a firm answer to the essential question - how to deal with the deliberative character of online public communication. To bridge this division between theory and practice, this paper proposes a model by which to analyze the quality of online public discussion. The model (see *Figure 1*) is designed following the theory of deliberative democracy and insights on social media. The Discourse Quality Index<sup>2</sup> (DQI) is applied to evaluate both – the quality of the discourse (axis y) and the usage of environment social networks (axis x). Following the DQI, quality of the discourse is evaluated by normative conditions such as participation, justification, respect, consistency, and force of better argument. Discourse of high quality is expected to demonstrate proper reasoning, high listening and replying level, and orientation to common good.

<sup>2</sup> Discourse Quality Index is an instrument designed by J. Steiner and his colleagues to measure discourse quality. Using this instrument, Habermasian normative conditions of a perfect speech act can be assessed (see Steiner et al., 2004).



**Figure 1.**  
Theoretical model of public deliberation online.

According to the model, the usage of online social environments can be either positive or negative. Positive usage of an online social environment is when discourse satisfies the requirements of structural (free and equal access to the Internet) and discursive (composition of the discourse) equality, respect (assessing anonymity), and consistency (counting one timers). In the ideal situation, no participants dominate the conversation or silence others, diverse positions are represented freely, there are no anonymous participants, and citizens are properly engaged in the discussion.

According to the above model, there are four possible qualitative types engaged in public deliberation online. High quality discussion online is possible if two conditions are met: discussion corresponds to normative conditions listed in DQI and the online social networks foster quality of the discourse. If one of the two conditions is not met, discussion is considered to be of low deliberative value. Finally, discussions which do not satisfy either of the two listed conditions are non-deliberative.

The model should be helpful in solving two essential dilemmas – the dilemma of online communication value and the dilemma of public deliberation quality. Indeed, this model does not question deliberation as a positive or negative thing in itself. Instead, it investigates if qualitative deliberation is possible in online environments. It suggests that if discourse under the investigation is of proper quality it has a value in itself and could be useful in political decision making. On the other hand, if the results show that the discourse is of low quality, the model is also useful in identifying defects and suggesting recommendations to improve its quality.

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