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Deliberation, Competition, or Practice?

The Online Debate as an Arena for Political Participation

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Abstract

Several studies have found that political online debates do not to live up to deliberative standards of discussion. Even so, these debates may have democratic value. In the present article, the analytic focus is extended from deliberative democratic theory alone to a broader framework of analysis, which also includes a competitive and a participatory democratic ideal. An analytical framework for identifying democratic elements in online debates, based on these three ideals, is developed, and a sample of postings from two Norwegian newspaper-hosted online forums is explored using this new analytical framework. The analysis shows that the online debates are not particularly deliberative, but that they show ample traces of a participatory and a competitive democratic ideal, indicating that the democratic value of these online forums does not primarily lie in fostering deliberation, but rather in clarifying and contrasting different alternatives, and in providing a training ground for political debates.

Keywords: online debate, public sphere, democracy, deliberative, competitive, participatory

Introduction

The possibility for interactive communication provided by the Internet has been expected to promote a discussion-based, deliberative democracy. Numerous studies, however, have concluded that political discussions on the Internet are not particularly deliberative, but rather are characterized by singular statements and verbal fighting (Wilhelm 1999; Dahlberg 2001b; Dumoulin 2002; Ulrich 2005a; Strandberg 2008). Generally, these studies consider deliberative dialogue to be the norm of good discussion, and consequently they assume that the aim of political discussion is to reach a mutual understanding about problems and solutions, in accordance with the deliberative ideal. Online debates, however, may have qualities that support other democratic aims, which may be neglected due to a persistent focus on the deliberative norm. Studies aimed at capturing more of the democratic value of online debates have usually remained inside the realm of the deliberative paradigm. Some studies have expanded the deliberative ideal by including conflict-oriented discussion modes (Dahlberg 2007), some have made the ideal less rigorous, for example by assessing as deliberative all postings referring to other postings (Ulrich 2005b), or less absolute, by assessing the deliberativeness of online debates on a scale ranging from truly deliberative to non-deliberative (Strandberg 2008). However, when expanding the concept of deliberative discourse, one risks

making the deliberative ideal indistinctive. In addition, by subsuming more forms of discussion under the deliberative umbrella, deliberation is set as the standard for 'good discussion'. The present article is based on the assumption that the definition of 'good discussion' will vary with the aim of political discussion, which in turn will vary across democratic ideals. To capture more about the potential democratic value of online debates, the article expands the framework for analysing them by developing and testing an analytical framework based on inputs from three distinct normative democratic ideals, each feeding into current democratic practices: a deliberative ideal, a competitive ideal and a participatory ideal. The framework is not intended to identify all aspects of these ideals, but focuses on elements related to what is perceived as the primary aim of political discussion within each ideal: the deliberative aim of reaching mutual understanding; the competitive aim of winning the discussion; and the participatory aim of practising political participation. By exploring more broadly what democratic ideals online debates support, the paper aims to provide a more balanced assessment of the online debates' democratic value, identifying their merits, and not only their shortcomings.

The article proceeds as follows: The first section discusses the aim of political discussion in the deliberative, the competitive and the participatory democratic ideal, respectively, and develops analytical questions intended to capture elements of these three ideals in online debates. In the second section, the analytical potential of the framework is illustrated by analysing a sample of postings from twenty newspaper-hosted online debates on Norwegian local politics. The final section discusses the relevance of the analytical framework and possible implications of the findings for the position of online debates in the broader debate of the public sphere.

Different Democratic Perspectives on Political Discussion

What is the aim of political discussion? In their archetypical versions, the deliberative, competitive and participatory ideals answer this question differently. The deliberative ideal sees political discussion as the principal form of political participation (Habermas 1989), and criteria for measuring 'good discussion' are therefore easily derived from this ideal. For the other two democratic ideals, the norms for political participation originally address other forms of participation and must therefore be translated into norms for political discussion. The form of political participation stressed in the competitive ideal is that of periodically voting for competing parties at elections (Downs 1957), whereas the focus of the participatory tradition is on maximizing the active participation of citizens in the public decisions that affect their lives (Pateman 1970; Ferree et al. 2002; Cohen et al. 2004). At first glance, the deliberative ideal's focus on political discussion makes it seem best suited to analysing political debates, which may be why it has served as a yardstick in a number of studies assessing the democratic merit of online debates. Nevertheless, the competitive and participatory ideals specify and emphasize different purposes of political participation that can supplement and enhance our understanding of the democratic value of political talk in general and online debates in particular.

Deliberative aim of openness and mutual understanding. According to the deliberative ideal, citizens' opinions are formed through public discussions. In their search for valid opinions, citizens will critically test different positions and revise their opinions

in response to better arguments. Through an all-inclusive, open-minded and reciprocal process of reasoned argumentation, public deliberation will thus help citizens achieve a mutual understanding of problems and solutions (Habermas 1989; Habermas 1996; Dahlberg 2001a; Delli Carpini et al. 2004). Certain features of the Internet, such as open access and unlimited space for communication, have made the future of deliberative democracy seem bright. In online debates, nearly everyone can participate in political discussions, and the debates may last as long as is necessary to reach a common understanding of political problems and solutions.

Based on Habermas' theory of deliberative democracy (1989; 1996), Wilhelm (1999) derived a number of criteria for measuring the deliberativeness of online postings, assigning different scores to postings according to their deliberativeness. Medium scores on the deliberativeness scale were assigned to postings in which the participant sought information. High scores were assigned to postings that summarized and synthesized arguments in order to emphasize points of mutual understanding. The highest scores were assigned to postings that validated expressions with reference to the internal relation between the expressions' semantic content, their conditions of validity and the reasons for the expressions' truth. Wilhelm's classification criteria have been used by others, who have also replicated his findings on the level of deliberativeness in online debates (Dumoulin 2002; Wright and Street 2007). Moreover, his analytical scheme has been elaborated and modified. Ulrich (2005b) added as highly deliberative those postings that transcended egocentric and particular interests, and that referred to the 'common good'. Furthermore, several scholars have added the criterion 'reflexivity', describing postings in which participants explicitly change or modify their opinion in response to better arguments (Jensen 2003; Janssen and Kies 2005; Ulrich 2005b). In the analytical scheme developed here, I leave the criteria 'validity' and 'transcendence' out of the deliberative typology, because I find it problematic to attribute such argumentation to one ideal exclusively. Even though a deliberative discussion should be characterized by valid argumentation referring to the common good, these types of arguments can also be applied in debates with a non-deliberative form: in a competitive debate, for example, arguments referring to the 'common good' can be used to convince listeners about a certain viewpoint (Bächtiger et al. 2011). What essentially distinguishes a deliberative discussion from a non-deliberative one is not, in my view, the quality of the arguments, but rather that the participants show openness towards other positions, seek a mutual understanding, and are ready to change their opinion when they are confronted with better arguments.

As the present article focuses particularly on one aspect of the deliberative model, namely the aim of mutual understanding, several other concerns central to deliberative norms of discussions are also left out of the analysis, including equality and inclusion, sincerity, reciprocity, and autonomy from state and corporate interests (Janssen and Kies 2005; Habermas 1996; Habermas 2006).

In the present scheme, five different speech acts are interpreted as supporting the deliberative aim of openness and the search for mutual understanding. Asking for information that will help in making up one's mind and admitting doubt about one's own opinion indicate openness towards other positions. Focusing on points of agreement supports the aim of searching for mutual understanding. Explicitly admitting to having changed or modified one's own opinion when better arguments are presented, explicitly

acknowledging other participants' opinions or recognizing the merit of an opponent's claims (Bächtiger et al. 2011) are interpreted as indicators of reflexive behaviour. The five questions below represent these deliberative features and will be used to code online postings to capture the open-mindedness and search for mutual understanding emphasized by the deliberative ideal. Code names are cited in brackets after each question.

- Do participants ask for information to make up their mind? (information)
- Do participants explicitly ask about what opinion is right, or doubt their own opinion? (doubt)
- Do participants attempt to synthesize different viewpoints, or focus on points of agreement? (agree)
- Do participants explicitly admit to having changed or modified their opinion? (change)
- Do participants explicitly acknowledge other participants' opinions? (acknowledge)

Competitive aim of contrasting views and winning the discussion. Research on television debates (Kjeldsen 1998) and on newspaper debates (Myrvold and Winsvold 2005) has shown that these largely reflect a conflict-oriented democratic ideal, corresponding to the expectations of a competitive democracy, as described for example by Downs (1957) and Elster (1983). As this competitive way of discussing seems to be widespread in other media, and is deeply embedded in the West's political party systems, it makes sense that it should also spread to the Internet (Dahlberg 2011). Within the logic of a competitive democracy, the aim of participating in political discussion is not to seek agreement with the opponent, or to reach mutual understanding, but conversely to elucidate disagreement and reject the opponent's position, the goal being to convince the audience of one's own viewpoint. The opinions and preferences of the participants in competitive debates are assumed to be preset and thus not subject to modification during discussion. The debate's discourse is closed; it is a fight between two fixed opinions, and participants will consequently try to move the audience, not other participants. A competitive discussion is thus a competition for the audience, and the participants winning the audience over to their side win the discussion.

Within a competitive democracy, the primary function of public debate is to inform the audience so that they can make a well-considered choice between competing positions. Participants in competitive debates contribute to this end by arranging existing information into coherent persuasive structures based on certain preset moral or political beliefs, clarifying controversies and articulating contrasting opinions, thereby providing the audience with clear alternatives to choose between (Kjeldsen 1998). In an ideal situation, all relevant aspects speaking for or against a given opinion or position should be offered in the discussion and no view should be unduly favoured or discounted (Asp 2007: 34-35). The normative claims of information breadth and fairness, however, also pertain to the deliberative ideal, and are therefore not included in the analytical scheme. Leaning on Bächtiger and colleagues (2011), I code as competitive the features that particularly distinguish the competitive ideal and separate it from the deliberative ideal, namely the lack of openness towards other opinions and the aim of convincing others of the superiority of one's own pre-defined opinion. These features can be traced in the tendency to focus on points of disagreement and in the tendency to polarize discussions by

exaggerating or caricaturing the views of the opponent. Moreover, they can be found in attempts to insist on one's own viewpoints without referring to opponents' viewpoints or providing one's own arguments. Although the democratic value of unsupported opinions is not obvious, I include them as indicators of a competitive ideal because they indicate the lack of openness characteristic of this ideal. To capture the competitive elements of online debates, the postings are coded according to the following questions:

- Do participants focus on points of disagreement? (disagree)
- Do participants exaggerate or caricature the position of the opponent? (polarize)
- Do participants insist on their own position, or reject the position of the opponent, without use of arguments? (insist)

Participatory aim of practising discussion. Whereas traditional media, like newspapers, radio and television favour participation by those knowledgeable about the conventions of public discourse, less political know-how and fewer resources are assumed to be necessary to enter a debate on the Internet (Dahlgren and Olsson 2008; Gerhards and Schäfer 2010). The nearly unrestricted access, the ample space of expression and the possibility of participating anonymously may encourage participation from citizens who do not possess the skills to participate in the less accessible public debate of mainstream media. Thus, certain features of the Internet make it likely to function as a training ground for political discussion for people without significant debate experience and may thereby support the democratic value of practising political participation, a value associated with and upheld by the participatory democratic ideal (Pateman 1970; van Dijk 2000).

In a participatory democracy, citizens are expected to be extensively involved in public decisions. Popular inclusion in the public debate is normatively justified within this ideal because it allows for the emergence of "something approximating a general will" and because it "improves the individual, by drawing on and developing the person's highest capacities for action" (Ferree et al 2002:295). To simplify, one can say that the participatory aim of popular inclusion in public debate is twofold. On the one hand, popular inclusion in public debate improves opinion formation, as opinion formation will be more representative of the population. On the other hand, participating in public debate empowers and improves the individual participants as they develop their democratic skills through participation. Research on whether online forums contribute to the first aim of popular inclusion – the development of a more representative public opinion – is inconclusive. A study of online debates at the local level in Norway shows that although online forums recruit some new groups for participation, most online participants are already politically active and are frequently participating in public debate in traditional media (Winsvold 2009). Examples from other countries, and especially from totalitarian regimes, have shown that online forums to some extent have succeeded in activating the silenced part of the population (Yang 2003, Yang 2008, Chu and Tang 2005). The focus of the present study, however, is on the second aim of popular inclusion, improvement of the individual and developing the individual's capacity for action (Ferre et al. 2002). According to the participatory ideal, participation will make citizens develop a democratic personality or disposition, which, among other things implies that they will learn to see the interdependency of different policy fields, to prioritize between different political goals and to assess the correctness of democratic procedures (Pateman

1970, Himelboim 2011). With regard to political discussion, this will imply learning and practising democratic principles and norms. Moreover, discussions about the norms and rules of discussion will also support the participatory ideal, as they improve the argumentative skills of the participants, skills that are required to gain access to the debate taking place in arenas with more restricted access (Dahlgren and Olsson 2008).

Previous research on online debate participation has shown that online forums do indeed function as training grounds for political discussion. In her study, Papacharissi found, for example, that some participants appreciated online debates because the debates "provided them with the opportunity to hone their argumentation skills" (Papacharissi 2004:277). She also found that participants often "expressed their disappointment with a fellow participant that did not structure an effective argument" (ibid: 277). However, Papacharissi did not consider preoccupation with rules of discussion to be democratically relevant. Likewise, Jensen (2003), in his study, coded such postings in a category named 'reflecting on debate', which he considered to be something other than staying on topic. Contrary to Papacharissi and Jensen, I argue that 'reflecting on debate' has an independent democratic value because it indicates that participants are aware of and make others pay attention to the rules of democratic debate and the validity of arguments. Such a focus in turn indicates that participants practice their argumentative skills.

To gauge the online debates' participatory elements, I coded postings according to questions meant to measure the participant's "democratic disposition", and questions meant to gauge the participatory aim of practising in the online debates:

- Do participants focus on democratic principles or procedures? (procedure)
- Do participants focus on the subject's relative importance? (importance)
- Do participants focus on the validity or consistency of arguments? (validity)
- Do participants focus on the rules of discussion? (rules)

The analytical framework described above intends to measure how online debates support aims emphasized by different democratic ideals: the openness required for reaching the deliberative aim of mutual understanding; the oppositional structuring of arguments required for the competitive aim of winning the discussion; and the focus on norms and rules required for the participatory aim of practising political discussion.

Data and Methods

The analytical framework is applied to a sample of postings from two debate forums hosted by the online editions of two Norwegian newspapers, *Drammens Tidende (dt.no)* and *Stavanger Aftenblad (aftenbladet.no)*. The hosting newspapers covered two different regions, one in the east and one in the south-west of Norway. The data were collected in 2005, and at the time, 83 percent of Norwegians had Internet access and 55 percent of Norwegians used Internet on a daily basis. In 2011, the percentage of daily Internet users had increased substantially, to 80 percent of the population. Although the media structure has mainly remained the same, the newspapers' online editions have gained some readers at the expense of the paper editions (Skogerbø and Winsvold 2011), and the growth of social media and blogs have supplemented the online forums as popular outlets of expression. By 2012, the newspapers' online forums are still extensively

used, but their structure has changed. As in 2005, many newspapers invite readers to comment on newspaper articles, but fewer newspapers offer forums for free discussion where users decide the topics for discussion. The infrastructure of the digital public sphere has hence changed somewhat since 2005. The results from the analysis account for that specific period and are therefore not necessarily transferable to the present situation. Still, although the infrastructure of the local public sphere has changed, the type of political issues discussed as well as the form of argumentation may be the same. In order to establish whether a change in argumentation style has occurred, the analysis should be replicated with data that are more recent.

Newspaper-hosted online forums were chosen over independent online forums or forums provided by governmental bodies simply because they were used much more at the time the sample was gathered, and the forums of *dt.no* and *aftenbladet.no* were chosen because they attracted a particularly large number of users. The two forums differed regarding rules for anonymity and their connection to the editorial agenda. In *dt.no*, the participants did not need to register their proper name, and 90 percent of participants in the sample from *dt.no* used an alias. However, as the named participants were more active than the anonymous ones, the 90 percent who were anonymous submitted only 65 percent of the postings. The participants themselves decided the discussion topics, organized under several broad categories, such as 'politics' or 'the city'. The discussion forum was entered via a link in the menu on the website's front page. In *aftenbladet.no*, all participants had to register with their proper name, and the names were displayed with postings. Discussions followed journalistic articles published in the newspaper's online version. The debates were located directly under each article and were hence visible to everyone who looked through the newspaper website.

Among the discussions within each forum, discussions on local politics were chosen for the analysis. Such discussions were assumed to be likely to attract at least some serious and dedicated participants, as the topics discussed would often directly affect the discussants' lives. The postings of twenty discussion threads were analysed. The topics discussed in *dt.no* were municipal merger (3 threads), highway construction (2), deposit of sediments in local bay (2), building of a Muslim school (1), a public monument (1), and the location of a container harbour (1). In *aftenbladet.no* the discussion topics were road tollbooths (2), a public monument (2), construction of a bridge (1), consequences of the non-smoking act for local pubs (1), local industry (1), location of a new port (1), and noise barriers along the highway (1). The discussion threads varied in length from five to 200 postings, with an average length of 43 postings. The threads were longer in *aftenbladet.no*, and the same number of threads consequently produced a larger number of postings in *aftenbladet.no* than in *dt.no*. In all, 250 postings from *dt.no,* and 613 from *aftenbladet.no* were analysed. The sample hence counted 863 postings. The coding was performed by the author. All postings were read in their entirety, and coded 'yes' or 'no' for each analytical question. Every occurrence of a specific trait was counted only once in each posting, which means that if, for examples, two incidents focused on 'validity' occurred in the same posting, the posting was still only coded once for 'validity'. To identify the relative representation of elements supporting aims emphasized by different democratic ideals, all postings coded for traits pertaining to a specific ideal were summarized. Traits ascribed to different democratic ideals often occurred in the same posting, which means that one posting could support aims pertaining to two or more ideals at the

same time. Still, 21 percent of postings were coded for none of the elements. The bulk of postings coded for none of the elements (73%) contained arguments for or against a specific opinion, but could not be labelled as supporting any of the aims in particular.

The unit of analysis is the posting. Analysing postings isolated from the overall discussion, however, poses some problems because an argument may support one ideal or the other depending on how it is used. For instance, focusing on the validity of arguments and on rules of discussion is coded as supporting the participatory aim of practising political discussion, but could also support a competitive ideal if used as a rhetorical technique for rejecting an opponent's argument and winning the discussion or as a deliberative ideal if used in a reflexive manner. Analysis of entire discussion threads and the relation between postings within each thread could have revealed more about how arguments and postings function in the overall dialogue. However, analysing the posting as the entity of study makes it possible to compare the results to similar studies of online debates (e.g., Wihelm 1999 and Ulrich 2005).

Quantitative text analysis of this sort is faced with at least two methodological challenges. First, when reducing a debate into a set of pre-defined quantitative categories, much information necessarily gets lost, because only those elements of the text assumed relevant to the research question will survive the translation process from complex text elements to codified unit. Moreover, the context in which the text element occurred will vanish in this transformation process. Ideally, the analysis should have been supplemented by a systematic qualitative analysis. Second, the coder's expectations and prejudices may colour the interpretations during the conversion process (Weber 1990). Even if coding categories are as concrete and unambiguous as possible, there will be room for interpretation. An inter-coder reliability test could have controlled for this to some extent. Because no such test is performed, too much weight should not be put on the exact percentage of postings containing one trait or another. The focus should rather be on the tendencies exhibited by the results. The analysis functions as an illustration of the theoretically developed analytical framework and must be replicated and validated by other studies in order to establish firm results.

What Democratic Aims do the Online Debates Support?

In the selected sample, text elements supporting the participatory aim of practising discussion occurred most frequently (in 58 percent of postings), followed by elements supporting the competitive aim of contrasting opposing views and winning the debate (22 percent). Ten percent of postings contained elements supporting the deliberative aim of mutual understanding. Occurrences of each trait are displayed in Table 1. Results from the two forums are merged, as the differences between them were negligible.

Elements supporting the deliberative aim of openness and mutual understanding were few. In five percent of postings, participants acknowledged the opinions of others without necessarily agreeing with them, and in four percent of postings participants focused on points of agreement. The following example is typical: "*I agree that people should have the right to breathe fresh air, but I also agree that the smokers should have the right to smoke. Why can't we find a solution that will satisfy both?"* (aftenbladet.no, 01.02.2005). Incidents of participants explicitly changing their mind about an issue, which is perhaps the strongest indication of an open-minded attitude, occurred in only

Table 1. *Percent of Postings Containing Features Associated with the Different Democratic Ideals*

Democratic ideal	Feature	Analytical Question	Percent of postings containing feature	Percent of postings containing feature from each ideal
Deliberative	Acknowledge	Do participants explicitly acknowledge other participants' opinions?	5	10
	Agree	Do participants attempt to synthesize different viewpoints, or focus on points of agreement?	4	
	Information	Do participants ask for information to make up theirformation mind?	2	
	Doubt	Do participants explicitly ask about what opinion is right or doubt their own opinion?	1	
	Change	Do participants explicitly admit to having changed or modified their opinion?	1	
Competitive	Disagree	Do participants focus on or enlarge points of disagreement?	2	22
	Polarize	Do participants exaggerate or caricature the position of the opponent?	11	
	Insist	Do participants insist on their own position or reject the position of the opponent, without use of arguments?	12	
Participatory	Validity	Do participants focus on the validity or consistency of arguments?	31	58
	Rules	Do participants focus on the rules of discussion?	7	
	Procedures	Do participants focus on democratic principles or procedures?	27	
	Importance	Do participants focus on the subject's relative importance?	7	

Note: N = 863.

one percent of postings (10 incidents), and three of these appeared consecutively: in the same passage of a debate, a mind-changing atmosphere seemed to be temporarily established, and participants appeared to be encouraged by each other's concessions. One reason for the few observed incidents of explicit mind-changing may be that this is a largely internalized process and therefore difficult to observe (Dahlberg 2004). Analysis of the postings indicated that the participants needed a reason beyond mere arguments to admit that they had changed their mind. When participants explicitly admitted to having changed their minds, they often did so by pointing to new facts not previously available, or made small concessions, admitting they had been wrong about facts. Admissions of factual faults were often followed by attempts to reorganize the argumentation so that it still supported the original opinion, or by adding a condition to the concession, making the change of mind seem less radical, like in this example: "*You may be right, a little right, that religious schools lead to segregation, but it depends on the school's quality"* (dt.no, 04.02.2005). The deliberative form could also be used rhetorically. Participants

sometimes appeared to play with the jargon, displaying an open-minded attitude with an ironic touch. These incidents were not coded as supporting the deliberative aim of open-mindedness, but could perhaps have been interpreted as supporting a participatory ideal, as playing with a norm can be seen as a way of practising it.

Eleven percent of postings supported the competitive aim of contrasting and polarizing opposing views, whereas only two percent of postings explicitly focused on points of disagreement. A qualitative reading of the text, however, revealed that a larger part of the discussion had a somewhat competitive ambiance. The discussants largely appeared to have made up their minds before entering the debate: they were not swayed by the arguments of others and answered opposing views by mustering arguments favourable to their own position. Long passages of discussions and even entire discussion threads were characterized by arguments being thrown back and forth, with no one showing any sign of changing their opinions. The opponent was not always present. Seven of the twenty discussion threads contained only one view, and the arguments were aimed at an absent opponent whose view could be inferred only from the present participants' rejection of it. Lacking an opponent seemed to discourage lengthy discussions; the homogeneous discussions were among the shortest in the sample, with an average length of fourteen postings. Unfounded opinions, coded as 'insist', were found in twelve percent of postings. These could sometimes trigger discussions, as participants were called upon to defend their position and a dialogue ensued. Often, however, such postings did not contribute to the dialogue, but simply stood as expressions of opinions, unsupported and not commented on.

A focus on the validity of arguments, supporting the participatory aim of practising political discussion, was the most frequently occurring trait in the online discussion sample, found in 31 percent of postings. Criticizing an argument's validity or correctness sometimes functioned as a way of rejecting an argument and the opinion it expressed, like in the following: *"If these sediments are not dangerous, why use all these resources to get them up from the bottom of the sea, transport them to another bay, dump them there and cover them with clean substances. This is quite simply illogical"* (dt.no, 14.1.2005). At other times, the validity of arguments was a discussion topic in itself, only secondarily related to the original topic of discussion: *"I would only prove that your counter-arguments could be called in question, just as much as you do with my arguments"* (aftenbladet.no, 30.01.2005). There were also several examples of meta-discussions in which the rules of discussion themselves were in focus (seven percent of postings). Rules often invoked concerned the need to let people speak freely, to let them hold any opinion, and to stay on topic. Participants deviating from the perceived topic were often asked to return to it or to leave the debate. The accused generally tried to convince other participants that their point was relevant, indicating that they accepted the rule of staying on topic. Democratic principles or procedures were commented on in 27 percent of postings. The comments concerned, for example, whether government was obliged to listen to citizens, or what was appropriate action to influence decisions on a specific political issue. Pointing to procedure was often used as an argument to convince others of a certain position. The following citation in which the participant argues for abolishing the second language by pointing to the democratic principle of majority rule provides an example: *"In 2003, 72 percent of pupils [in this county] chose [standard language]. Still, the official language [of this county] is New Norwegian. This is misuse*

of power on the government's part" (aftenbladet.no,02.02.2005). The subject's relative importance was commented on in seven percent of postings. The following is an argument for changing the subject: *"Hundreds of thousands of people worldwide are dying, and all you think about is this public monument"* (dt.no, 13.02.2005).

Characteristic for the discussion was the mix of elements from different democratic ideals within each discussion thread and within each posting. Eighteen of the twenty threads contained elements of all three ideals; and the remaining two threads contained two ideals. At the level of postings, 50 percent were coded for traits corresponding to more than one ideal. The mix of elements from different ideals indicates that different democratic ideals feed into our democratic practices. Hence, our democratic norms borrow from, and consist of elements from different ideals, and online debate participants draw on these different norms simultaneously.

Discussion

The present analysis of postings from two Norwegian online forums indicates that assessing online debates solely based on a deliberative ideal does not fully account for the democratic aims that such debates may support. When measured as deliberative dialogue aiming at mutual understanding, the democratic value of online debates was limited, as expected based on findings from other studies. Only occasionally did participants show signs of listening to, learning from, or being swayed by other participants' arguments. More frequently, the debates supported a competitive ideal. The debates hence contributed to clarifying alternative positions rather than to achieving mutual understanding. Given the conflict-oriented nature of the political debate in other media, and given the competitive party system in Norway, this may not be surprising. More unexpected, perhaps, was the extent to which the online debates reflected a participatory ideal. Throughout the debates, participants focused extensively on the norms and rules of 'good' political discussion and on democratic principles and procedures, indicating that the online forums functioned as training grounds for political participation, where participants practised, discussed, learned and taught the norms of political discussion and action. Compared to other media where the demand for newsworthiness is stronger, online discussion forums probably have more space for such meta-discussion. The relatively low threshold for participation, the lack of editorial gatekeepers and ample space for expression perhaps makes online forums especially suitable to practising discussion, as compared to more strictly edited and steered debates in the traditional mass media.

By enabling us to identify features that support different democratic ideals and by comparing the occurrence of these features, the multi-model framework revealed that the analysed online debates supported a mix of democratic ideals. The fact that online debates may support several democratically valuable aims indicates that the Internet might have contributed to, enlarged and widened the public sphere, but in other ways than expected and hoped for by deliberative theorists. First, the low level of deliberative features and the somewhat higher level of competitive features show that online debates are not essentially different from debates taking place in other media. People discussing on the Internet appear to be neither more nor less intent on seeking mutual understanding with their co-discussants than are people discussing in the newspapers or in television debates. One reason for this may be that the political

infrastructure outside the discussion forums, and not the medium, inspires and frames the discussion. If politics are about winning the election, then debates are likely to be about winning the election too, regardless of the medium of discussion. This is not to say that the medium is insignificant. Internet discussion forums have provided certain opportunities, and how the discussion ends up is probably a combined result of these opportunities and of how they are used. Due to these opportunities – the open access, the ample space for expression and the possibility for being anonymous – discussion forums on the Internet were expected to support a deliberative mode of discussion. Yet the present analysis shows that these same features can just as well provide the space needed for meta-discussions about the rules and norms of political discussion, about political principles and political conduct or for competitive discussions. Online participants do take the online opportunity to discuss at length, but only occasionally do they do so in the service of the deliberative aim of reaching mutual understanding, and more often in the service of the competitive aim of winning the discussion or the participatory aim of practising.

Whether online debates support the same mix of democratic norms as debates in other media, or whether the mix veers in another direction can play an important role in how people perceive the online debates and hence be important to their position in the larger public sphere. Normative claims stemming from different democratic ideals are shown to function as filtering mechanisms between small and semi-public communication arenas, such as between online debate forums and the public sphere of the mass media, which feeds more directly into the political agenda and into political decision-making (Winsvold 2009). Whether online debates display and support the same democratic norms as debates in other public arenas is likely to affect whether they are taken seriously, and whether arguments are picked up and referred to on other arenas. To establish whether this mix is particular to online discussions, and to gain a better understanding of the factors that contribute to making discussions support the different ideals, similar studies on other online forums and on offline media are needed.

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