Measuring Online Deliberation in Local Politics: An Empirical Analysis of the 2011 Zurich City Debate

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ABSTRACT

Administrations increasingly use the internet to improve citizens’ participation in political processes. While research on online political communication and e-democracy is growing, we still have little empirical evidence on the quality of online participation and deliberation processes. This paper focuses on an online local deliberation process, the 2011 Zurich City Debate, and seeks to investigate the specific quality of such online public communication. By building an index of a quality of understanding (IQU), the authors analyse 1,991 postings that participants have contributed in five thematic debates on local political issues. Five indicators were defined: statement of reasons, proposals for solutions, respect, doubts, and reciprocity. The authors conclude that participants have respectfully voiced opinions, that in two fora half of the postings were reciprocal, i.e. people exchanged views and commented on each other. However, the data gives the impression of a polite and reciprocal debate, but without much argumentation, propositions or doubts.

Keywords: Content Analysis, e-Democracy, e-Participation, Local Politics, Online Deliberation, Online Discussion, Public Sphere, Switzerland

DELIBERATION AND PARTICIPATION

Our study seeks to contribute to current research on online deliberation by connecting two contemporary academic discussions and lining them with empirical evidence: What can administrations and governments do to improve citizen participation in political processes? And, on the other hand: How do digital media change political communication? While research on political online communication and e-democracy is growing, we still have little empirical evidence on the quality of online participation and deliberation processes. This study focuses on the following question: What is the specific quality of online public communication?

In current research, we find two contrasting approaches: On one hand, new interactive political communication tools and platforms are considered a tonic for modern mass democracies, which suffer from decreasing
voter turnouts, dwindling party identification and a presumed disenchantment with politics. In this perspective, online communication is expected to deliver a more inclusive, richer and more dialogue-oriented form of political representation.

On the other hand, sceptics point out that such democracy-enhancing aspirations are solely based on technical processes and do not consider social contexts. Some studies suggest that technological possibilities are not always used by a broader segment of citizens and that only a small group of ‘super-users’ participate intensively via these channels. Emmer, Vowe, and Wolling (2011) showed, in a panel study on internet use for political communication, that few German citizens participated online and actively produced content (e.g. postings in political discussion fora). Their data underlines sceptics’ main argument, which is that only well-educated, well-informed and active parts of a population can be reached via e-participation tools and platforms (i.e. Dunne, 2010).

Our paper seeks to contribute to this debate by adding a Swiss perspective and substantially underpinning it with empirical data. Whether cities and municipalities offer their citizens online instruments for participation in political processes is not just one aspect of contemporary administration and e-government, but also a possibility to strengthen the legitimacy of democratic decision-making. This aspect is particularly important in the Swiss context, where direct democracy often requires citizens to form opinions in a short period of time about complex issues that consider the common good or at least some broader consensus (e.g. see Fraefel & Haeussler, 2009). In this context, Steenbergen (2009) has argued that participative (and deliberative) processes not only find fertile ground in Switzerland, but can be considered ‘lubricants’ of consociational democracy, considering their potential to balance colliding interests and resolve conflicts.

Here our argument also connects to studies on metropolitan governance that focus on the question of how governance and politics work in municipalities and their surrounding zones when territorial and institutional competences coincide. In this perspective, public debates and the quality of local publics play an important role:

If metropolitan areas are to be considered communities of destiny – and there is evidence that we should do so (...) – democratic metropolitan governance should not stop at delivering area-wide public services. It should also provide arenas for the metropolitan community to express itself and to debate collectively on the ways in which it wants to act upon its fate. (Kübler, Sager & Schwab, 2005)

To date, few studies have empirically analysed such communicative arenas at a local political level. Therefore, we know little about the scope and number of online instruments that cities and municipalities offer their citizens for political participation (e.g. van Veenstra, Janssen, & Boon, 2011; Deakin, 2010) and even less about the discourse quality in such processes.

In Switzerland, online deliberation fora are hardly developed in local politics. In his study on local e-democracy in five European countries, Pratchett (2012) has argued that this may be due to already high levels of deliberation within cantons as a result of regular referendums and, as a consequence, only “little political pressure to create more opportunities for further engagement” (p. 125). Aside from smaller discussion platforms in local planning processes or on the platforms of local newspapers, the Zurich City Debate was the first major experiment in local online deliberation on a larger scale. As a result, academic studies on this topic from a Swiss perspective are scarce, which is why this paper, from a Swiss perspective, presents a pioneer study. Fraefel and Haeussler (2009) have compared deliberation in dialogic formats on Swiss radio and TV with online fora (run by Google, newspapers and other Swiss media companies). While they found low levels of reciprocal exchanges both on radio, TV and in online fora (“in both types of debates participants do not really promote an exchange, but largely focus on presenting and advertising
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