Chapter X

Citizen’s Deliberation on the Internet: A French Case

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Abstract

Within the frame of the deliberative democratic theory, development of information and communication technologies (ICT) has been proposed as a solution to enhance discussion in large groups and foster political participation among citizens. Critics have however underlined the limits of such technological innovations which do not generate the expected diversity of viewpoints. This chapter highlights the limits of a Habermassian conception of deliberation which restrains it to a specific type of rational discourse and harnesses citizen’s expression within strict procedural constraints. Our case study, the DUCSAI debate, that is, the French public debate about the location of the 3rd international Parisian airport, shows that the added value of Internet-based deliberation rests in that it offers, under specific conditions, another arena of public debate. The chapter shows that hybrid forms of debate can widen a participant’s profile, the nature of the participant’s argumentation, and the participant’s means of expression if it provides the opportunity to voice concerns the way the participant chooses to do so.
Introduction

In recent years, the theory of deliberative democracy has become the main, if not the dominant, approach in democratic theory. As John Dryzek (2000) puts it, “the final decade of the second millennium saw the theory of democracy take a strong deliberative turn” (p.1). Contrary to a century-long tradition of suspicion towards the ability of citizens to exercise wise scrutiny of government’s activity and its will to dedicate the necessary time to complex political matters (Lippmann 1922), many theorists, inspired by John Dewey’s work (1927), called in the early 1980s for a new approach to democracy (Barber, 1984; Cohen, 1986; Macpherson, 1977). The traditional “liberal rationalist” model has been challenged by a communitarian call for a grass-roots participation to politics as a pedagogic tool as well as a way to enrich the democratic debate in modern societies (Pateman, 1970). More recently, the work of U. Beck and A. Giddens has elucidated a new aspect of deliberation and participation in democracies as a consequence of reflexive modernization in risk societies (Beck, 1992; Beck & al., 1994; Giddens, 1990, 1991). Citizens are more eager to be involved in the decision-making process because they are directly concerned by potentially dramatic consequences of public policies (such as technological infrastructures, ethical-linked scientific programs, and so on). Therefore, with the growth of technological risk, technology assessment procedures limited to experts and scientists have been slowly replaced by public debates including lay people. Genetically modified organisms (GMOs), nuclear wastes, nanotechnology, embryonic manipulation, and so forth have formed the core themes of the first public debates.

The on-going crisis of representation which affects modern democracies since the mid-80s has also been interpreted as a symptom of a contested gap between elected officials and citizens (Norris, 1999). Therefore calls for a new type of communication and relationship between the public and its representatives have emerged, insisting on the normative value of public discussion (Guttman & Thomson, 1996; Habermas, 1984; Cohen, 1997a, 1997b).

The deliberative turn acknowledges an important switch in the conception of legitimacy: the legitimacy of a political decision emerges out of its deliberative process and not out of the institution which produces it (Manin, 1985, 1994). Therefore, an important feature of this theory rests in its procedural dimension: the legitimacy of a decision can only be recognized if a real deliberation occurs, that is, if conditions of “equal, reciprocal, reasonable and open-minded participation” (Mendelberg, 2002, p. 153) are fulfilled. Even if different perspectives persists among political theorists about the main features of an ideal deliberative democracy, they all agree on the fact that deliberation can be distinguished from other types of communication in that it supposes “an unconstrained exchange of arguments that involves practical reasoning and always potentially leads to a transformation of preferences” (Cooke,
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