GUEST EDITORIAL PREFACE

For the Special Issue of the International Journal of E-Politics with the Topic:
E-Deliberation, Political Institutions, Online Political Networks and Public Engagement

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The concept of deliberation has been dominating for very long political thought, and has inspired the work of political and communication scholars. It has triggered interesting debates about the potential of representative democracy to take advantage from participatory patterns of direct democracy. Deliberative procedures aspire to reinvigorate the interest of citizens in politics and thus strengthen democratic political participation. Citizens' active involvement in politics would consequently strengthen democratic institutions and 'restore' their democratic legitimation which nowadays seems to be questioned in several cases.

The paradigm of Deliberative Democracy pinpoints to the inadequacies of representative democracy. Nowadays the strong dissatisfaction of citizens towards established democratic procedures has recalled the nostalgia for a more direct, "peoples' democracy". Therefore the concept of Deliberation aims to introduce new ways to reengage citizens to political procedures, to enliven public dialogue and to make public sphere open and accessible to all citizens. In the end deliberative procedure seeks to ensure that the final political decision stands as the result of a collaborative conversational procedure, as the elaboration of a rational dialogue which encompasses the major possible interests. Deliberation is not just a simple aggregation of the opinions of the engaged parties. The aim is to reach the better rational outcome that would accommodate the needs of the plurality without ignoring the needs of the minority as well. To this extent deliberation is a 'qualitative dialogue', with specific procedural preconditions that should be met and rules that should be followed from the deliberators for the purpose of preserving a dialogue which is based on sustainable and rational arguments.

The final outcome should be as inclusive as possible of the involved interests and should be able to confront successfully ethical issues although on this last issue there is no consensus among scholars in the field.

Deliberation in its "E-equivalent" which is E-Deliberation or Online Deliberation has accompanied the early optimism regarding the political potential of the Internet to promote an egalitarian perspective in citizens' participation and make information more accessible and easy to reach. These hopes basically stem from the assumption that Internet could finally provide an unrestricted, direct and open public sphere which is a basic proponent for deliberation and it is also the heritage of the Habermasian perspective in deliberation theory. Therefore, deliberation taking place in a digital platform sought to fulfill hopes for active citizens' engagement in political procedures.

Beyond any doubt, the technologies of the Internet and its horizontal communicative codes have boosted a live global community and enhanced citizens' networks, even social movements. In parallel, the revolution of Web 2.0 technologies and social media reinvented online communication by promoting a new perception of sharing and by creating new social and public spaces. Social media sites, such as Facebook, Youtube, and others, have re-defined the concept of sociability and offered new ways of online interaction and political activity.

The field of deliberation studies and research is continuously evolving. The stimulating feature of this field is that it is evolving both in its theoretical-conceptual foundations and in its empirical grounds. Another distinctive feature of deliberation studies is that they are inspiring both political scientists and communication scholars as its theoretical foundations "touch" upon political philosophy and communication theory.

This special issue reflects this balance between theory and practice which characterizes the field of Deliberation. This is why it keeps equilibrium between theoretical papers and papers with empirical research. Accordingly, it also pays equal importance both to conceptual

analysis and the empirical implementation of issues pertaining to deliberation studies.

I am really honored and proud to be the guest editor of this special issue which is compiled of high academic value papers at least according to my opinion. The papers are authored by researchers from Universities and Research Centers from around Europe and USA. Let me underline that despite the tight timeline followed for this special issue, the interest was extremely high. Unfortunately, as it happens to all journals, not all the papers could reach the final stage of publication and not all of them could be included in the final issue. The selection procedure was strict and extremely difficult at times. At this point, let me express my gratefulness to the anonymous reviewers (not anonymous to me though) that have responded to my call and devoted much of their precious academic time to review the papers and provide their scholarly and constructive comments. It is their comments that helped the authors improve their papers significantly and substantively and also functioned as the basic guideline for my decisions.

A closer look at the first paper by *Magnus E. Jonsson* and *Joachim Åström* from Örebro University in Sweden, which is entitled *"The challenges for Online Deliberation Research. A Literature Review of the field"*, is clearly illustrating the theoretical pluralism which governs deliberative literature and the concept of deliberation itself. Authors are studying three aspects that divide the field: "the discipline to which the researcher belongs, the arena that the study is focusing and the methods used to measure and understand the different aspects of deliberation". The study conducted reveals the great diversification which is present in the field and the lack of common definitions. Authors also pinpoint the loose connection between deliberation as a procedure and its political and democratic dimensions.

After being introduced to the rich while contradictory conceptual grounds of deliberation and on line deliberation the paper by *Cynthia R. Farina, Dmitry Epstein, Josiah Heidt* and *Mary J. Newhart i*s offering a meta-analysis

of a well known initiative on E-Rulemaking, called "Cornell eRulemaking initiative" which is taking place in Cornell University, USA. The title of the paper is "Designing an Online Civic Engagement Platform: Balancing "More" vs. "Better" Participation in Complex Public Policymaking". E-Rulemaking is indeed a distinctive sub-field of deliberation studies as it encompasses deliberation, rulemaking and policy making. The legal aspect embedded in E-Rulemaking initiatives provides a solid ground for empirical research which does not provide only academic insights and evaluations. On the contrary, the ultimate goal of E-Rulemaking is to change the way legislation and rules are being issued and afterwards implemented in public policy. The project which the authors analyze is called "Regulation Room", and it is an experimental online platform for broadening effective civic participation in rulemaking which is been running since 2010. The purpose of this project is to offer "specific suggestions for how designers can strike the balance between ease of engagement and quality of engagement – and so bring new voices into public policymaking processes through participatory outputs that government decisionmakers will value'. This is a very interesting paper which combines theory and empirical research in sight of modern legal procedure and policy making.

The third paper authored by *Karolina Koc-Michalska* (SciencesCom – Audencia Group, France and *Darren G. Lilleker* (Bournemouth University, UK) entitled "Evolving in step or poles apart? Online audiences and networking during Poland and France 2011-12 election campaign" is analyzing, as the title indicates, the election campaigns for the parliamentary elections in France and Poland. Despite the different political systems, the differences in electoral systems and the cultural diversities between the two countries, authors succeed in providing the common characteristics of the election campaigns between the two countries by focusing on the use of Internet and social media from the competing parties. Authors use web cartography in order to support an argument well known in literature that "there

is a convergence around the use of the Internet within election campaigns*"* and the countries which are studied in the paper verify this thesis. However authors underline the key differences between the two countries one of them being that "Polish parties concentrate on informing, while in France features that support the mobilization of activists, or conversion of supporters into activists, are slightly more dominant". This paper offers illuminating remarks in comparative political communication and sheds light for the use of "participative" Web. 2.0 during electoral campaigns. It highlights both the convergence detected in the use of Internet between the two countries and the involved parties but it also detects significant differences in Internet usage patterns as these are prescribed by two distinctive political cultures.

The fourth paper is also "applied deliberation" and it is an empirical analysis in local level. *Ulrike Klinger* (University of Zurich, Switzerland) and *Uta Russmann* (FHWien University of Applied Sciences of WKW, Vienna, Austria) in their paper "Measuring online deliberation in local politics: An empirical analysis of the 2011 Zurich City Debate" "focus on an on line local deliberation process, the 2011 Zurich Debate, and seek to investigate the specific quality of such online public communication". An important aspect which accrues from their research is that a significant factor in deliberation process is not only the number of participants. It is equally (and perhaps more) important to examine the volume of public commenting, the quality of comments and their possible usability from the officials. Many comments do not necessary voice different or many views. Authors analyse in their study five indicators in Zurich City Debate: statement of reasons, proposals for solutions, respect, doubts and reciprocity. In the end they conclude that 'the data gives the impression of a polite and reciprocal debate, but without much argumentation, propositions or doubts". Does that mean that opposition is equally valuable with consensus in deliberation process? Readers will make their own conclusions. What is certain is that

reasonable disagreements make a conversation more interesting.

The last paper of this special issue authored by *Dounia Mahlouly* (University of Glasgow,UK*)* "Rational Criticism, Ideological Sustainability and Intellectual Leadership in the Digital Public Sphere" brings us back to the theoretical underpinnings and considerations for deliberation underlined in the first paper although this paper is certainly a different approach. The order of the papers follows this rationale. We are first being introduced to the conceptual conflicts and underpinnings of deliberation, then we analyse several empirical implementations of deliberative in actu and then we have again the possibility (with the last paper) to critically confront debatable issues in deliberative theory. This is what this paper authored by Dounia Mahlouly offers. A well based analysis of the theoretical Habermasian deliberative theory and its key concept of public sphere but in its digital dimension. "Drawing on the case of the 2011 Arab revolutions, in which social media proved to have a strategic function, this paper illustrates the ideological heterogeneity of social networks". After a detailed theoretical scrutiny author is not very optimistic in the end regarding the possibility of "a fully transparent public space with no internal or external hierarchy", a utopia which inspired the first age of Internet studies. Intellectual leadership, the so called "digital divide" and ideological divisions still affect and regulate digital public sphere as they did before the digital era. However, as the author argues, the digital environment which empowers on line public discourse is "likely to improve the political efficiency of public deliberation".

This special issue is concluded with a scholarly book review by Dora Papadopoulou (Democritus University of Thrace, Greece) for the book entitled *Approaching Deliberative Democracy: Theory and Practice edited by Robert Cavalier*. The book is compiled from articles that deal with deliberation and democracy. According to the reviewer the book is very interesting and constitutes a high level academic endeavor as it "summarizes the most important notions of deliberation clarifying the connection between "democracy" and "deliberation" maintaining the balance between them".

What results from the papers which were briefly introduced above, is that first deliberation literature is characterized by ambiguity and plurality in its concepts. Secondly, it is evident that deliberative theory is not only theory but contrariwise there is a wide range of case studies that implement or aspire to implement its conceptual proposals and theses. Especially initiatives like E-Rulemaking not only in USA but worldwide prove that deliberation and more specifically E-Deliberation is not just one more theoretical approach for political scientists and followers of democratic values. It can – and it has done it already- contribute towards a new model of democracy that will be more democratic not only in its constitutional proclamations but in terms of real politics as well. A deliberative dimension in political life means that citizens are main actors in politics, they can voice their interests, disagreements and doubts and most importantly they can expect to have their voices heard from the officials. Effective public hearing is important but it constitutes the first step towards the reinvigoration of democracy. What comes next and is crucially important is the inclusion of citizens' opinions in policy making procedures, in the stage where decisions are taken.

On the other hand, as it is manifested especially from the second paper for E- Rulemaking, provided that citizens' participation should be free for all citizens, we should not underestimate that citizens that act as deliberators are assigned with a "democratic duty", if I am allowed to use this term and expect to fulfill specific preconditions while participating. Citizens in order to deliberate in qualitative manner and contribute substantively to the procedure should be informed, should have unrestricted access to on line deliberation platforms but they should also respect the rules of the deliberation. Whether someone shares the high procedural preconditions set by Habermas and his "ideal speech situation" or not, we have to admit that deliberation is dependent inevitably on

some procedural prerequisites. If these are not followed with cautiousness, deliberation may be transformed to a chaotic dialogue, with no real democratic purpose or premise and no real outcome.

I am sure that colleagues and scholars well informed in the academic field of deliberation will find this special issue very interesting at least to the extent that it brings into surface remarkable and well supported points for discussion. Certainly some may have disagreements or comments to make but this is what makes special issues popular and academically valuable; their focus on a specific area and their potential in providing afresh views on crucial issues that sometimes are contradictory.

I am also convinced that this special issue will be of a great interest to the greater readership of the International Journal of E-Politics as it furnishes new theoretical views and empirical studies on the use of Internet in democratic procedures which is one of the main areas this Journal covers.

In the end I would like to thank again the Editor in Chief of this Journal Prof. Celia Livermore for providing me this opportunity to edit an issue on this topic. Many thanks to the editorial assistants of IGI Global as well for their continuous help. My gratitude to the scholars who served as reviewers for this special issue was expressed earlier but nevertheless one more time is still not enough for the work they had done.

And certainly and above all I thank the authors of the papers for their enthusiasm in submitting their papers to this special issue and the hard work they have done in the effort to confront successfully the comments and expectations of the reviewers and (me) the guest editor. I suppose there is not something like a

perfect paper in academia that would satisfy all the reviewers and the readers but certainly there are very good papers that can contribute successfully to the ongoing literature and empirical research.

Let me also mention that the editing of this special issue was undertaken while being a principal researcher of an ongoing research project running at my home academic Institution, (Technological Educational Institute (TEI) of Western Macedonia, in Greece,) entitled "Computer Mediated Communication" with a special focus on Deliberation[1].

I hope readers and scholars of IJEP find this special issue interesting in offering new dimensions and insights in deliberative theory and new horizons in empirical research.

Best wishes,

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ENDNOTES