

# **Online Deliberation: Possibilities of the Internet for Deliberative Democracy<sup>1</sup>**

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## *Abstract:*

Advocates of deliberative democracy argue that a specific type of conversation is required for politics, one that involves difference and disagreement. But it is exactly this difference and disagreement that make people avoid deliberative politics. As empirical studies show, people seek like-minded to talk politics with, since this is less threatening and more enjoyable. In this paper I examine whether features of the Internet create an environment in which politics is less difficult and demanding, thereby increasing heterogeneity and equality within political discussions. Empirical studies show that this is not the case. The Internet does not seem to generate the diversity in voices and viewpoints in the way that was hoped. Anonymity does not liberate us of all the fears we had in encountering conflict. Nor does the absence of social cues lead to the discursive equality. However, I argue that it is too early to conclude that the Internet is not enhancing and cannot enhance democracy. Many gaps in the empirical research need to be bridged, before we can make any conclusions on the Internet's potential.

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## **Online Deliberation: Possibilities of the Internet for Deliberative Democracy**

Radical democrats would do well to recognize the inherent discomforts of politics, while purging their theories of concepts that obscure its exceptional demands. They should ask whether, when opportunities present themselves (as they sometimes do), people will jump at the chance to become active participants. If they don't, it may not be just because our culture induces apathy and excessive individualism but also because of the unattractive features of politics as such.

(Warren, 1996: 266)

### **Introduction**

Cass Sunstein, in his book *Republic.com* (2001), expresses his worries about the polarizing effects the Internet might hold. The Internet, as other new technologies, would dramatically increase the possibilities for people to hear 'echoes of their own voices and to wall themselves off from others' (2001: 49). He fears that like-minded will seek the like-minded to talk with online. Likewise, Van Alstyne and Brynjolfsson (1996: 24) point to the fact that 'Internet users can seek out interactions with like-minded individuals who have similar values, and thus become less likely to trust important decisions to people whose values differ from their own'.

Although this is a reasonable fear, since search engines do allow you to find like-minded communities easily, they seem to overlook that people already have the tendency to seek the like-minded, new technologies or not. Empirical research shows that, contrary to the difference and disagreement in political conversation deliberative democracy theorists advocate, citizens discuss politics with people that hold the same views, and mostly have the same background. Given the difficult nature of political conflict, people tend to avoid it all together. However, the great value of political talk springs from this difference and disagreement. Therefore it is important to see whether the Internet can blow (new) life into deliberative democracy by easing the circumstances of 'real' political talk.

The aim of this paper is to give an account of the possibilities the Internet holds for deliberative democracy in terms of meeting the criteria of difference and disagreement. The central question is whether the Internet holds potential for deliberative democracy by reducing the aversion to difference and disagreement in political conversations. To answer this question, I will first go into the concept of deliberative democracy and its normative notions regarding political talk. Next, I will confront the theoretical focus on difference and disagreement with empirical studies into political talk, which show that theory and practice diverge at this point. Third, I will discuss the dominant explanations for why people avoid politics, or more specifically, difference and disagreement. And, although some scholars conclude from the tendency to talk politics with like-minded, that it is this ordinary political talk that is central to the public sphere, I argue we do need this difference and disagreement to

be able to obtain the full benefits of deliberation. I will therefore, lastly, go into the potential of the Internet to overcome this tendency to avoid difference and disagreement.

### **The notion of deliberative democracy**

It is difficult to define deliberative democracy without giving an account of the *process* of deliberation. The notion of deliberative democracy refers to the need to have a strong public sphere, and a very vivid form of public discussion. Though conversation is at the heart of democracy according to the advocates of deliberative democracy, we need to clarify different types of conversation. Schudson (1997) distinguishes between the *sociable* model of conversation and the *problem-solving* model. The first type of conversation has no end outside itself, whereas the latter “understanding of conversation finds the justification of talk in its practical relationship to the articulation of common ends” (ibid: 300).

Deliberation can be distinguished from other types of communication in that “deliberators are amenable to changing their judgments, preferences, and views during the course of their interactions, which involve persuasion rather than coercion, manipulation, or deception” (Dryzek, 2000: 1). This also forms the virtue of deliberation. The idea is that deliberation “can encourage citizens and their representatives to invoke substantive standards to understand, revise, and resolve moral conflicts in politics” (Gutman & Thompson, 2000: 161). The notion of deliberation is very much intertwined with the notion of ‘public sphere’, “the social sphere constituted by rational-critical discourse that enables the formation of public opinion through which official decision making can be held democratically accountable” (Dahlberg, 2001a: 2).

With this very short introduction one can see that there are many issues related to deliberative democracy. Moreover, different scholars focus on different issues in their definition and many different aspects are taken into consideration when giving an account of deliberative democracy. However, common denominators have been identified, for instance, by Elster: “All agree, I think, that the notion includes collective decision making with the participation of all who will be affected by the decision of their representatives: this is the democratic part. Also, all agree that it includes decision making by means of arguments offered *by* and *to* participants who are committed to the values of rationality and impartiality: this is the deliberative part” (1998: 8). Bohman (1996), in his definition also refers to the *raison d’être* of deliberation; deliberation is necessary if decisions are not just imposed on citizens; Public deliberation is needed to legitimate laws and thereby creating the obligation for citizens to obey them. However, there are prerequisites for a law to be legitimate: “According to most proponents of deliberative democracy, political decision making is legitimate insofar as its policies are produced in a process of public discussion and debate in

which citizens and their representatives, going beyond mere self-interest and limited points of view, reflect on the general interest or on their common good” (ibid: 5).

Deliberative democracy theorists thus refer to a specific type of public discussion and debate. But what then makes up for this rational-critical discourse? Here we need to define the ideal requirements of the process of deliberation.

Dahl (1989: 108-114) provides us with a thorough description of normative requirements for a ‘strong’ democracy.<sup>2</sup> First, there needs to be *effective participation*. Citizens should have equal opportunity to make known their preferences regarding the final outcome. They should have both adequate and equal opportunities to affect the agenda as the outcome. The second criterion for a process to be democratic is *equal voting opportunities at the decisive stage*. The choices of citizens should all weight equally and must be taken into account at the decisive stage. Third, each citizen ought to be able to reach an *enlightened understanding*; they should have adequate and equal opportunities “for discovering and validating (within the time permitted by the need for a decision) the choice on the matter to be decided that would best serve the citizen’s interests” (Dahl, 1989: 112). The final prerequisite concerns the control of the agenda; the demos should have the exclusive opportunity to decide whether and how to place issues on the public agenda.

Bohman argues that the central accomplishment of the various conceptions of deliberative democracy is the establishment of a set of requirements for an ‘ideal procedure’ of democratic deliberation. These being “the inclusion of everyone affected by a decision, substantial political equality including equal opportunities to participate in deliberation, equality in methods of decision making and in determining the agenda, the free and open exchange of information and reasons sufficient to acquire an understanding of both the issue in question and the opinions of others, and so on” (Bohman, 1996: 16).

Cohen (2002: 89), for instance, states that when democratic politics is properly conducted, it involves “*public deliberation focused on the common good*, requires some form of *manifest equality* among citizens, and *shapes the identity and interests* of citizens in ways that contribute to the formation of a public conception of common good”.

Van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson, and Jacobs (1993) define the following prerequisites to the ideal model of a critical discussion: there is an unlimited opportunity for further discussion; there is no judge other than the participants themselves; there is symmetry in the argumentative status of the participants and no participant should be restricted in exploring available standpoints or the basis of standpoints. The outcome (the decision made on the basis of the discussion), then, is a consensus-based decision, not one “based on differential authority, status, or power” (ibid: 25-26). The more the discussion moves away from this ideal, the less likely that the discussion will result in the aimed outcome.

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<sup>2</sup> Although Dahl does not refer to *deliberative* democracy specifically, he does give a good account of the prerequisites of a strong democracy in general, and his work is used by theorists to develop an account of deliberative democracy.

The normative requirements are to be met to gain the benefits deliberation can provide. As Van Eemeren et al (1993) state, critical discussion resolves a conflict or disagreement in such a way that the settlement is one “recognized by both parties as correct, justified, and rational”. But for this ideal outcome to arise the normative conditions are to be met.

In terms of these outcomes, the advocates of deliberation and a vivid public sphere can be roughly divided into two camps. On the one hand there are the scholars who stress deliberative democracy’s ability to resolve conflicts and make public policy choices, and on the other the ones that stress the ability to build community and citizenship (Muhlberger, 2000).

Whether the focus is on the first or the latter, the first prerequisite is that the normative requirements of the process are met. Crucial elements in this are: equality in participation, discursive equality and following from this, diversity of viewpoints and arguments. But what happens when people are excluded from the discussion or exclude themselves from the discussion? In the next section I will go into the role of diversity in participants and point of views in deliberative democracy.

### **‘Ordinary’ political conversation versus deliberation**

The democratic principles on which our society was founded lead us to accept, to respect, all views, to welcome the diversity they represent.  
(Kuhn, 1991: 4)

There is an ongoing debate between scholars on the virtue of conversation for democracy. Where some are looking for deliberation in a public space, others are satisfied to find mere ‘ordinary’ political conversation in the private realm. The general idea of deliberative democracy is that political conversation does not serve democracy, if it is not deliberative and amongst a heterogeneous group of people. Fundamental criteria of deliberative democracy are difference between and disagreement amongst participants, opinions, and arguments. Deliberation is aimed at fostering understanding to enable collective actions to resolve through free and equal exchange of arguments of all sides, rather than through coercion (Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002). As Bennet, Flickinger, & Rhine (2000: 101) note, political conversations “are thought to enrich democracy by improving the quality of public opinion and enhancing citizens’ civic-mindedness”. Many theorists argue, therefore, that political conversation should be held among a heterogeneous group of people, rather than among like-minded (Warren, 1996; Schudson, 1997). Public conversation should air disagreements, and include a variety of perspectives and views (Fishkin, 1995; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996).

Empirical research, however, gives an altogether different picture; studies about the frequency with which citizens engage in political discussions, and with whom they are likely to talk have shown, that most political conversations occur among family, friends and people

whose political views are similar (Berelson, 1952; Bennet et al., 2000; Wyatt, Katz, & Kim, 2000; Conover, Searing, & Crewe, 2002; Stromer-Galley, 2002).

The fact that ordinary political conversation is most common leads some scholars to conclude that this type of conversation is an important part of the public sphere (Wyatt, Katz et al., 2000; Conover et al., 2002). While most political talk takes place in familiar settings, empirical research focuses on these familiar settings, stating that here most ‘serious deliberative discussions’ can be found (Scheufele, 1999).

Although I by no means want to deny that this type of conversation can be beneficial to democracy, I do want to argue that this is not the type of conversation that could be called deliberative or that could substitute deliberation. It is not the *fact* that people talk about political issues (or the *frequency*, for that matter) that makes deliberation serviceable for democracy. The virtues of the public sphere, where deliberation takes place, originate from the fact that a group of people with *different* opinions and *different* backgrounds engage in a *public* debate to form a public opinion or to come to better decisions. The idea of the public sphere is that this is a space where public opinion is formed, but only after “exposure to a sufficient amount of information, and also to an appropriately wide and diverse range of options” (Sunstein, 2001). Only with the necessary diversity of opinions can the goals of public forums be obtained, identified by Sunstein as the following:

- Speakers can have access to a wide array of people and listeners have a shared exposure to diverse speakers with diverse views and complaints;
- Access to specific institutions with whom they have a complaint;
- Promote understanding and freedom (Sunstein, 2001: 30-32).

In order to arrive at these outcomes, diversity should be present in the discussion.

Because of the existence of difference and disagreement, the norms that govern deliberation differ from the more comfortable forms of conversation that people normally look for. People have a tendency to seek the like-minded to discuss politics with (Berelson, 1952; Fisher, Margolis, & Resnik, 1996; Schudson, 1997), since this is less threatening and more enjoyable. Deliberation serves democracy, however, because differences of opinions are addressed and these opinions are put to the test in order to move forwards. “The deliberative process forces citizens to justify their decisions and opinions by appealing to common interests or by arguing in terms of reasons that ‘all could accept’ in public debate” (Bohman, 1996: 5).

As is argued by various scholars, deliberation is highly uncomfortable, for it is “essentially public and among people of different values and different backgrounds” (Schudson, 1997: 299). Politics is difficult, “because it emerges within arenas of social groundlessness –spaces within which the rules, norms, institutions, [and] identities that regulate most social interactions become contestable” (Warren, 1996: 244). Politics in this view concurs with the idea of deliberation and public sphere, in that they all stress *difference*. As I already stated, deliberation is seen as a way of resolving conflict. Other political theories,

however, also deal with the notion of conflict one way or another. The virtue of deliberative democracy, though, is that it does not try to deny or repress conflict, nor does it merely tolerate conflict. Its virtue is that it *attends* to differences, “supported by additional awareness of points of commonality” (Arnett, 2001: 325). This is the second source of the anxieties that politics evokes; it is the social groundlessness in combination with *pressures for collective resolutions* that make politics demanding (Warren, 1996: 247).

Given this demanding nature of deliberation it indeed does not come as a surprise that, normally, when opportunities present themselves, people do not “jump at the chance to become active participants” (Warren, 1996: 266). It is here that there might be an opportunity for the Internet. I will first discuss the reasons to avoid politics, and then go into the possibilities the Internet in this respect.

### **Why people avoid contested conversations**

Why is it that people avoid the conversations in which a diverse range of (contesting) viewpoints could come up? Over the years there have been many theorists trying to explain this, and political apathy more in general. I will here try to give an account of the most central arguments in this field –without pretending to be comprehensive. I start with the more general theories on political apathy, which include more specific explanations on difference and disagreement, working towards the theorists that focus specifically on the latter.

Though written down fifty years ago, the determinants of political apathy Rosenberg (1954) identified still belong to the explanations for political apathy that are being employed in current studies. The factors Rosenberg identified are explanations for political *indifference and inactivity*, but most are equally applicable to political talk in specific. The following factors are distinguished: the threatening consequences of political activity; the futility of political activity; and absence of spurs to interest and participation (ibid: 350). First, as many scholars, Rosenberg sees the threatening nature of politics as an explanation for why people avoid it. “In a democratic society, politics are *controversial*, and controversiality, while it may encourage interest, also has potential interpersonal consequences which may foster political inactivity” (ibid: 354). Second, although political participation is aimed at getting one’s will translated into political action, most people think activity is futile and don’t think they can influence political forces (ibid: 354-360). Third, the group norm may encourage political apathy, or at least withhold people from spurs to action.

The point of aversion to the controversial nature of politics is also central to the theory of the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1989). Although this theory is originally set up to give an account of how public opinion comes into being, it also provides reasons to avoid speaking up and avoiding difference of opinion. There are four assumptions that underlie the spiral of silence:

1. Society uses threats of isolation towards deviant individuals.
2. Individuals experience fear of isolation at all times.
3. From fear of isolation individuals try to estimate the general opinion at all times.
4. The result of the estimate influences their behavior for all in the publicity/public sphere and specifically through showing or hiding of opinions, for instance, by speaking or keeping silent (ibid: 299).

Fearing isolation, people would not feel free to speak up if they feel they hold dissenting views, which means people restrict themselves to having conversation with like-minded, or have no conversation whatsoever.

Contrary to this innate fear for the contested political realm, Eliasoph (1998) maintains we are *not* born apolitical. Conversely, she states that apathy is caused by the obstacles that “lie in the path of any group that tries to express publicly minded sentiments in public contexts”; obstacles such as groups avoiding to talk in meetings, individuals silencing themselves in group meetings, groups ignoring members who insist on talking politics in meetings, or groups silencing their public-spirited speech in frontstage contexts (ibid: 256-257).

Other reasons for avoiding politics that are mentioned, are feelings of inadequacy, ignorance, apathy, alienation, unwillingness to challenge group norms, and fear of contradicting a majority. (Wyatt, Kim et al., 2000: 101). Hollander (in Wyatt, Katz, Levinsohn, & Al-Haj, 1996: 230) identifies the following impediments to free speech: “the risk of disapproval, the lack of perceived alternatives, the fear of disrupting an event, misperceptions of the extent to which others share one’s opinions, the unwillingness to take responsibility, and a sense of impotence”.

Empirical studies show indeed that some of the points of the spiral of silence form explanations for political apathy and the willingness to express one’s opinions publicly (Taylor, 1982; Glynn, 1984; Glynn, Hayes, & Shanahan, 1997; Scheufele, 1999). The strongest predictors in this are fear of isolation and perceptions of present public support. Other empirical studies have shown, that “fear of harming others is a greater inhibitor than fear of disapproval or rejection.” (Wyatt et al., 1996: 243; Wyatt, Kim et al., 2000: 101). Whether it is fear of harming others, or fear to get harmed oneself, there are factors that inhibit people from speaking freely, and which thus results in a non-ideal type of discussion, as it hinders diversity and equality of participants and viewpoints to arise fully.

The features of the Internet might free people from the psychological barriers that otherwise would cause them not to engage in deliberation. Whereas ordinary political conversation is not in need of the Internet as people already feel free to have such conversations (Schudson, 1997; Wyatt, Katz et al., 2000: 71), the Internet does hold potential for deliberation. It could make deliberation less difficult. The question is, does the Internet indeed free people from the psychological barriers to engage in politics?

## **Does the Internet ease the circumstances and improve the quality of political talk?**

We have seen that aspects like fear of the consequences of politics and its controversiality, fear of isolation, feelings of inadequacy, perceived lack of knowledge, unwillingness to challenge group norms, fear of harming others, and the fear of contradicting a majority all contribute to a general avoidance of ‘genuine’ politics –politics that revolves around conflict, difference and disagreement.

Stromer-Galley (2002: 35) considers that the following characteristics of the online conversation free people from the psychological barriers that otherwise would cause them not to engage in deliberation<sup>3</sup>: “an absence of non-verbal cues, which leads to a lowered sense of social presence, and a heightened sense of anonymity”. These features are not needed for ordinary political conversation, but they could draw people into deliberation who would otherwise not do so. This is where the potential of the Internet for political talk lies.

The features of the Internet could not only bring about more people to deliberate by freeing people of the psychological barriers, but also by offering a (partial) solution to the problems ‘strong’ participatory democracy is confronted with –problems previously seen as insurmountable. The Internet brings new possibilities in that it “makes manageable large-scale, many-to-many discussion and deliberation” (Coleman & Götze, 2001: 17). Next to that it seems to bring us closer to the solution of four problems that have made full participation in modern democracies difficult, if not impossible: *time*, *size*, *knowledge* and *access* (Street, 1997). The importance of the Internet, O’Hara argues, lies in the following four characteristics of the Internet: it is very empowering for individuals; the amount of information made available through it is enormous; specific audiences can be targeted very effectively; and you can bring people together through the medium (O’Hara, 2002: 201).

These possibilities of the Internet have led a number of scholars to examine the extent to which the Internet is really enhancing the public sphere, by creating a public space that meets the requirements of communicative rationality or whether it holds potential for deliberation more in general (Friedland, 1996; Schneider, 1997; Streck, 1998; Dahlberg, 2000; Gastil, 2000; Jankowski & Van Selm, 2000; Ó Baoill, 2000; Wilhelm, 2000; Coleman & Götze, 2001; Gimmler, 2001; Muhlberger & Shane, 2001; Sunstein, 2001; Tanner, 2001; Hagemann, 2002; Papacharissi, 2002; Price & Cappella, 2002; Savigni, 2002; Stromer-Galley, 2002; Tsaliki, 2002). They are all triggered by the immense potential the Internet seems to hold when “the extraordinary opportunities provided by the Internet and other technological developments were regularly used as an instrument of citizenship, mostly

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<sup>3</sup> Stromer-Galley speaks of ‘political conversation’, but does not give a definition of this term. From the text and the characteristics of political conversation she describes I conclude she implies the more ‘difficult’ type Schudson talks about. I took the liberty of labelling it ‘deliberation’ here, for the sake of clarity. I do have to say, that Stromer-Galley later on in the article compares the online political conversation, with the ones that are held with friends, family and acquaintances. There is, so to say, some ambiguity in the focus. This is not to say, that the characteristics of the Internet, which can take away the psychological barriers for deliberation, are less valid.

national but sometimes even global, in which people continually enlarged their own horizons, often testing their own views by learning about alternatives” (Sunstein, 2001: 194).

I will, in this overview, only go into the features of the Internet that may take away, or at least lessen, the uncomfortable feeling people have when confronted with conflict, disagreement or difference. In this way it can enable a space where political conversation takes place in a context of diversity in both the participants, as in the range of opinions that are held. First, I will look into the question of heterogeneity. Can and does the Internet draw a more diverse group (compared to the offline conversations) of people into conversation, and do we come across more diverse voices? Second, I will discuss the main features of the Internet that it is hailed for in terms of enabling meeting the criteria for a public sphere: anonymity and the supposedly equalizing effect of reduced social cues.

### *Heterogeneity*

The nature of the Internet facilitates not only the participation of *more* people, but also of a more *heterogeneous* group of people; “The onward rush of electronic communications technology will presumably increase the diversity of available ideas and the speed and ease with which they fly about and compete with each other” (Page, 1996: 124). As stated above *difference* is one of the main conditions of deliberation and cyberspace “is a place where difference is not hard to find” (Dahlberg, 2001a).

Robinson, Neustadt, and Kestnbaum (2002) try to answer the question whether “Internet use may mean that the American public is becoming less or more diverse politically”. Based on earlier descriptions of Internet users, they expected it to be a place with people ‘open’ to and tolerant of deviant or non-conforming individuals in society. The results of the study made them conclude that Internet users were more supportive of diverse and tolerant points of view than non-users (Robinson et al., 2002: 300). Schneider, in his study on the online discussion talk.abortion, states that when diversity is measured by the introduction of new participants talk.abortion can be considered a diverse arena (Schneider, 1997: 80). Talk.abortion is a “dynamic conversational environment, featuring an expanding and contracting base of authors and threads, according to the needs and desires of its participants” (Schneider, 1997).

So, the Internet does seem to be a perfect place to find different views of a very diverse group of people who are at the same time open to such difference and disagreement needed for deliberation. The question is, however, whether all these different people also actually find each other on the Internet, or whether they seek the like-minded all the same.

Although Sunstein (2001) is very cautious of the polarizing effect the Internet might have, he explicates that his claim is by no means that the Internet is “bad for democracy because it is reducing common experiences and producing a situation in which people live in echo chambers of their own design” (Sunstein, 2001: 205). He states this claim is wrong, “because the Internet is allowing many millions of people, all over the globe, to expand their

horizons and to encounter new topics and ideas” (ibid: 206). The natural curious nature of many people makes them eager to learn about new topics and views of people they disagree with. For many, the Internet in this way helps to counteract polarization, instead of enhancing it. Wallace, likewise finds that disagreement does take place on the Internet, it even becomes ‘very heated and contentious’, even when everyone in the exchange does conform to the group’s written and unwritten norms (Wallace, 1999: 74).

However, as Dahlberg notes, although the conversations on the Internet feature disagreements, “virtual communities are often based upon people getting together with similar values, interests, and concerns” (Dahlberg, 2001a: 10). Similarly, Wilhelm finds most participants within a discussion group hold the same views on a political topic or candidate (Wilhelm, 1999: 172). This finding is congruent with Davis’ findings from a study into USENET. He concludes, the Usenet becomes “more than anything a forum of reinforcement” (Davis, 1999: 162), dominated by like-minded participants who limit the diversity of opinions by not tolerating dissenting views.

Should we then conclude that Sunstein’s fear that new technologies are indeed polarizing society, because people’s ability to hear echoes of their own voices and to wall themselves off from others has increased? As Sunstein argues, like-minded people can deliberate with greater ease and frequency with one another, and so the Internet can have a polarizing effect. Although it is true, that through search engines one can easily find like-minded, I do not think, we can already conclude from this, that the Internet is actually having a polarizing effect, in that it enables like-minded to find each other, contrary to what advocates of deliberative democracy had hoped for. There are a number of reasons, why I do not think we can draw this conclusion.

First, as we have seen there are contradicting findings, due to major differences in methodology. We first need to answer the question what diversity and heterogeneity on the Internet means and how this could be ‘measured’.

Second, we need to go beyond what is happening on the Internet, and to which extent this is meeting the ideal, but we need to examine, whether this is an improvement with regard to the existing –offline– situation. As O’Hara states, “it is clear reasonable access to opposing views can generally be found” (O’Hara, 2002). The ease with which search engines can be used to find like-minded, is equal to the ease with which one can use them to find different and disagreeing voices –probably much easier than in the offline life. And third, the Internet is just *one* medium people use to get their information, to discuss politics and exert influence. We would have to see how the online world interacts with the offline, to see its real potential to harm or do good for democracy. Let us see if it at least has the potential to create such an environment where people would not avoid difference and disagreement, *a priori*.

### *Anonymity*

Why do people avoid politics? One of the popular explanations is that people would fear the consequences. Whether it is fear of isolation, humiliation, harming others, not being liked, or fear of disapproval, it could easily be argued that in anonymous setting such fears would be reduced. After all, these consequences of engaging in politics would not be as easily ascribed to the person participating, and immediate pressure of others is lessened, since you are not physically present. As Wallace (1999: 124-125) recognizes, “when people believe their actions cannot be attributed to them personally, they tend to become less inhibited by social conventions and restraints. This can be very positive, particularly when people are offered the opportunity to discuss difficult personal issues under conditions in which they feel safer”. The ability of a group to pressure a ‘dissenting’ individual is lessened on the Internet and in this way the tendency to conform could weaken. Wallace (ibid: 82) summarizes a number of empirical studies that do find that dissenters feel more liberated to express their views online than offline which might result from the fact that the “dissenter would not have to endure raised eyebrows or interruptions by members of the majority, or be made to feel uncomfortable about the failure to agree with the others”.

However, other studies find, on the contrary, that dissenting views are not tolerated online. Dissenters are being ignored, with result that they become frustrated and finally give up and leave the discussion group (Davis, 1999). Not only are dissenters being ignored, there also is a risk of ‘vigorous attack and humiliation’; Davis states that “Usenet political discussion tends to favor the loudest and most aggressive individuals” (Davis, 1999: 163). In accord, Barber, Mattson and Peterson (1997) argue that it is precisely the anonymity that undermines the deliberative potential of the Internet –though they admit it can help promote safer and open discussion–, as it seems to make for a ‘general lack of civility’. Streck compares the Internet with a ‘shouting match’, which results, as he argues, from the freedom from sanction and the power of anonymity and untraceability. Dahlberg (2001a) also states that flaming is attributed to the disinhibiting effects of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) –feeling freer to express oneself as one wishes, due to the absence of many social context cues. Although there are differences in exact numbers of the frequency of flaming, it is clear flaming occurs quite often, and single flames can easily escalate into real *flame wars*.

So, it seems, anonymity and the absence of social presence, which seemed so promising for democracy, can instead work against a genuine democratic exchange. However, all is not lost. First, one can increase civility by setting up forum rules and guidelines. An example of such a case that has been relatively successful is the case of Minnesota E-Democracy (Dahlberg, 2001b). This does mean, however, that a careful consideration has to be made, as to which extent restriction and moderation of the posting is needed in order to keep the discussion civil, and to which extent this undermines freedom of expression.

Second, I do not want to draw premature conclusions, as we do not know how the participants themselves feel about this. Most of the conclusions on flaming are based on

content analysis. We cannot, however, conclude from this, that people really do feel restricted to give their view, dissenting or not. We do not know, whether these online uncivil behaviors have the same effect as the offline ones would have. Only when we know how people feel about perceptions of the participants on issues like misconduct, group pressure, and flaming can we try to grasp the potential of this specific feature of the Internet for democracy. For now, I go into the equalizing potential of the lack of social cues to things like age, gender, and race.

### *Equality*

An important issue in obtaining heterogeneity in conversation is equal access for all the participants and equal opportunities to influence in the discussion. Though access to the Internet and the problem of digital divide are issues of major import, I will not discuss these issues here. I focus on equality *within the* discussion. Perceived ignorance, incapability and inequality are impediments to participation in political conversations. When people do decide to participate in conversations, their participation might be overruled by dominant others, or their contribution might be valued less or more, depending on their status. This all undermines the notion of discursive equality and thereby the existence of a diverse range of opinions.

The Internet is often praised for its possibility to liberate us from the social hierarchies and power relations that exist offline. “[T]he ‘blindness’ of cyberspace to bodily identity (...) [is supposed to allow] people to interact as if they were equals. Arguments are said to be assessed by the value of the claims themselves and not the social position of the poster” (Dahlberg, 2001c: 14). Gastil (2000: 359) sees this feature as one of the strongest points of the Internet: “if computer-mediated interaction can consistently reduce the independent influence of status, it will have a powerful advantage over face-to-face deliberation”.

As we are told, according to Streck (1998), cyberspace is a place where, for instance, people who do not do well in spoken interaction can make ‘valuable contributions’. We undo ourselves of the clear power differentials we see in the offline world, based on gender, race ability, and appearance.

Another characteristic that seems to become less important is status. In a discussion forum, your words would carry more weight than your socioeconomic position. While status cues are difficult to detect, perceptions about the status converge, and this lessens stereotyping and prejudice. This would even result in more participation and influence of lower status members (Wallace, 1999: 99).

The absence of social cues thus bodes well for equality in discussion groups. But, although in theory participants of the discussion group have equal opportunity to post, and equal opportunity to be heard, in practice this is often not the case. “Moreover, online status is often directly reinforced by the revelation of offline identities that are, as seen above, readily brought into cyberspace” (Dahlberg, 2001a: 15). By abusive postings, monopolization of attention, and control of agenda and style of discourse some participants are able to make

their voices more heard than others. Schneider concludes that participation in talk.abortion is not equal, but rather ‘dramatically unequal’. More than 80% of the postings is posted by less than five percent of the participants (Schneider, 1997: 85).

Herring also states, that although more and more women are getting online, the “claims of widespread gender anonymity have not been supported by research on online interaction” (Herring, 2000). She sees that in asynchronous CMC users are sometimes not even interested in exploiting the potential for anonymous interaction. The use of one’s real name can give more weight to a posting, because it “lends accountability and a seriousness of purpose to one’s words that anonymous messages lack” (Herring, 2000: 2). But even when gender is not being expressed voluntarily, there are differences in ways of expression, for instance in civility and length of the messages, which undermines equality.

The absence of social cues, in short, does not seem to lead to the discursive equality it was valued for. It also seems that this hope for democracy is being shattered. Although the picture does look gloomy, I do need to say again, we do not know how they perceive the equality in online forums themselves. We might conclude on the basis of all the content analyses people are not equal, but we don’t know how the participants experience it. It may be that people do feel more equal in online forums, than they feel offline. For one thing is certain: racism, ageism, and other kinds of discrimination against outgroups “seems to be diminishing because the cues to outgroup status are not as obvious” (Wallace, 1999: 99).

Next to this, the Internet has rapidly and dramatically increased the capacities to develop, share and organize information (Warren, 2001: 78), realizing more equality of access to information (Gimmler, 2001: 31). This might in time lead to more equal informed citizens with more equal capacities to deliberate.

### **Discussion: How gloomy is democracy’s future?**

The global message of the studies into the potential of the Internet for deliberation and the public sphere is that the democratization process some scholars expected is not taking place. Should we really conclude from this that the online discussion forums “have not achieved a nirvana of direct democracy, where all participate equally in a substantive exchange of ideas”, like Davis (1999: 165) does? No. These investigations into the existence of an online public sphere and more general into the democratizing potential of the Internet do not enable us to fully evaluate the democratic prospective of the Internet. There are a number of reasons to come to this conclusion.

First, there are a number of methodological problems. It has been shown that different researches report opposing findings. The difficulty with complex notions as public sphere, deliberation and even difference and disagreement, is that the step from theory to data is very hard. The difficulties lie, on the one hand, in the quantitative studies that operationalize the

normative notions in such a way that the measurements do not lead to any insights into the complex matter of the 'public sphere'. Without giving a thorough account of Habermas' ideal notion of public sphere, dimensions of this public sphere are distinguished to form an evaluative framework. Often this results in a reduction of the dimensions to quantitative indicators in such a way that it allows very little conclusions to be drawn from it.

On the other hand we have the qualitative studies, which are much more embedded in the theory and in this way do more justice to the complexity of the issue. The trouble with these studies, however, is that they lack a clear connection between theory and data, leaving us with a seemingly 'arbitrary' evaluation of public sphere. We need a method that does not reduce "normative principles for reasonable discussion to anthropologically relative characterizations, and likewise without prefiguring the categories and principles of descriptive inquiry in a way that makes them immune to empirical disconfirmation" (Van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson, & Jacobs, 1993: 1-2). Dahlberg (2000: 120) shares this concern, stating we need to find a balance between the concept of public sphere as a "discrete variable (as in 'pure' quantitative research) and a sensitizing concept (as in 'pure' qualitative research)".

The Internet is still a rather 'new' medium; although it has existed for quite some time now, the usage of it is still in flux. Empirical research conducted up to now does not provide enough understanding to solely do a quantitative study. Most studies into the effect of the Internet on democracy, however, "reflect the unfortunate trend in political science to jump right into new fields of inquiry with quantitative analysis. (...) This subject of inquiry is still at the stage where we can learn most from detailed ethnography and participant observation" (Howard 2001: 951-952).

But even if we have found such a way to examine the public sphere on the Internet, we have to ask ourselves, what does it tell us? Thus, second, we have to realize that content analyses or discourse analyses alone will not 'do the job'. If we really want to grasp the democratic potential of the Internet we need to go beyond merely measuring the existence of the public sphere or the quality of deliberation on the Internet through content or discourse analysis. If the analysis is limited to what *actually* can be *found* on the Internet, whether through the more quantitative content analysis or through the more qualitative discourse analytic and ethnographic approaches, there is the problem of observability: "potential interactants who choose to remain silent, and potential authors who fail to write, are lost to the analysis" (Hine, 2000: 54).

Third we do not gain much insight if one only looks at what people produce on the Internet, when one does not know the intentions of the producers. As Bimber (1999: 425), for instance, states, "floods of e-mail from citizens acting without lasting convictions about public problems or lasting interests do not add to democratic discourse". To try and understand what is going on we need to look beyond mere flows of communication. "What makes opinion deliberative is not merely that it has been built upon careful contemplation,

evidence, and supportive arguments, but also that it has grasped and taken into consideration the opposing view of others” (Price et al., 2002: 97). But, as Jones states, “the social issues surrounding the Internet are more difficult to untangle than its texts” (2000: 12).

In order to comprehend the democratic possibilities of the Internet, we need to concentrate on trying to understand the *users* of the Internet. What drives people to discuss politics on the Internet (instead of discussing it offline)? What are the effects of online deliberation? If online deliberation does not affect citizens in the way it is supposed to, establishing whether a public sphere exists online would not reveal much.

Fourth, we need to keep in mind that the Internet is a complex space used by numerous different kinds of people and for numerous different reasons. We need to keep in mind that the Internet does not form a more stable social space than offline spaces do. “The Internet is so fluid as to be rendered meaningless as a storage medium; it is never constant, never fixed, no matter that the textual traces left there seem to give it form. (...) In regard to the Internet as a social space, it is no easier to get a grip on the human dimensions of the Internet than it is to get a grip on human interaction, generally” (Jones, 1999: 12).

Not only is the Internet itself a complex space, but it also interacts with yet another complex space, the offline world. This offline world relates to the online world and this should be taken into account (Kendall, 1999). Or, as Dahlgren puts it (2000: 339):

The rampant intermeshing of the Net with so many social institutions, organizations, and everyday settings invites us to consider how this technology is concretely used and integrated in these various contexts, where people are repeatedly moving between on- and off-line activities within the practical circumstances they have at hand. So while one could conceivably analyze some aspects of civic culture by focusing purely on the Net, I would instead choose to see how the Net is used in conjunction with other, off-line activities.

This connection between offline and online holds methodological implications, which, so far, have not been taken into consideration sufficiently. Offline media form one of these offline contexts that interrelate with the online world. A second important context that could have an interaction effect is formed by *offline* political talk. We need to see how these offline and online spaces interact, and how they constitute civic engagement together.

Last, I do not think it is enough to compare online discussions with the *ideal* of deliberation. Instead, to evaluate the democratic potential, we need to compare with the *offline* discussions as well. As stated above, studies have shown that online discussions do not meet the requirements of the ideal public sphere. We cannot conclude from this, however, that the Internet is not enhancing democracy before comparing it with the offline situation. However small the contribution of online discussion to the political process might be, democracy *can* benefit from it. We need to examine not only if online discussions meet the requirements of a normative ideal but also if this is better than the existing situation.

As Streck (1998) rightfully states, cyberspace “will not produce non-symbolic (i.e. perfect) communication because there is no such thing. Cyberspace will not produce unlimited diversity, the human mind lacks the ability to process the information that would entail. Cyberspace will not produce equality, for history (...) produces distinction”.

## **Conclusion**

I started this paper with a quote of Warren, emphasising the difficult nature of ‘genuine’ politics. Difficult, because genuine politics, as advocates of deliberative democracy state, involves difference and disagreement. This requirement of diversity in opinions and arguments, as well as in participants, is central to deliberation, because only then, the aimed outcomes can be obtained –whether these are resolving conflicts and making legitimate public policy choices, or building community and citizenship.

But it is exactly this difference and disagreement that make people avoid deliberative politics. As empirical studies show, people rather seek like-minded to talk politics with, since this is less threatening and more enjoyable. In this paper I have discussed a number of explanations for political apathy and avoidance of politics. Aspects like fear of the consequences of politics and its controversiality, fear of isolation, feelings of inadequacy, perceived lack of knowledge, unwillingness to challenge group norms, fear of harming others, and the fear of contradicting a majority all contribute to a general avoidance of politics.

The Internet has led many scholars to investigate whether new hope for strong democracy has arisen. Features of the Internet as reduced social cues, a lowered sense of social presence, and the possibility to remain anonymous has generated renewed interest in political conversation and strong or deliberative democracy. In this paper I have tried to answer the question whether the Internet indeed holds potential for deliberative democracy, through increasing heterogeneity. More specifically, I have looked into the potential of anonymity and reduced social cues to create an environment where people would not avoid difference and disagreement, *a priori*.

Empirical studies, although sometimes reporting opposing findings, are not as encouraging as the hopes the ‘cyber optimists’ had for democracy in the early days of the Internet. The Internet does not seem to generate the diversity in voices and viewpoints in the way that was hoped. Anonymity does not liberate us of all the fears we had in encountering conflict. Rather, anonymity seems to result in a risk of vigorous attack and humiliation and other forms of incivility. Nor does the absence of social cues lead to the discursive equality it was valued for.

All in all the empirical studies present a gloomy picture for democracy. However, I think it is too early to conclude the Internet is not enhancing and cannot enhance democracy. As I argue in this paper, many gaps in the empirical research need to be bridged, before we

can make any conclusions on the Internet's potential. For now, I would still like to give it the benefit of the doubt.

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