

Deliberation and media

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Résumé. – La littérature philosophique sur le modèle de la démocratie délibérative insiste sur la qualité délibérative dont peuvent faire preuve les médias. C'est seulement à cette condition que l'on peut avoir une sphère publique où une pluralité d'opinions peuvent émerger. Des recherches empiriques révèlent néanmoins que les médias présentent la politique comme un jeu de divertissement avec des gagnants et des perdants, bien loin de l'idéal délibératif d'un échange réfléchi d'arguments. Étant donné la pression du marché sur les médias, il est difficile d'y remédier. L'espoir le plus grand se trouve dans de petites niches sophistiquées des débats en ligne.

Mots-clés : Délibération – média - débat en ligne – philosophique – empirique – praxis

Jürgen Habermas was always strongly interested in the media, and as a public intellectual he often intervenes in the media. For him, the media play a crucial role in the deliberative model of democracy when he argues that “mediated political communication in the public sphere can facilitate deliberative legitimation processes in complex societies only if self-regarding media systems gain independence from its social environment, and if anonymous audiences grant feedback between an informed elite discourse and a responsive civil society.”¹ For Habermas, “mediated political communication in the public sphere can facilitate deliberative legitimation processes in complex societies only if self-regarding media systems gain independence from its social environment, and if anonymous audiences grant feedback between

¹ Habermas J., ‘Political Communication in Media Society. Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research’, *Communication Theory*, volume 16, 2006, p. 411-2.

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an informed elite discourse and a responsive civil society.”² Habermas acknowledges the great influence of the media when he writes that “the dynamics of mass communication are driven by the power of the media to select and shape the presentation of messages and by the strategic use of political and social power to influence the agendas as well as the triggering and framing of public issues.”³

Given this great influence of the media, it is all the more important for Habermas, that “first, a self-regulating media system must maintain its independence vis-à-vis its environments while linking political communication in the public sphere with both civil society and the political center; second, an inclusive civil society must empower citizens to participate in and respond to a public discourse that, in turn, must not degenerate into a colonizing mode of communication.”⁴ In linking an active citizenship in civil society with the political authorities and doing this in an independent way and in both directions, the media play a great role in the Habermasian deliberative model. “To put it in a nutshell, the deliberative model expects the political public sphere to ensure the formation of a plurality of considered public opinions.”⁵

In contrast to most other aspects of the deliberative model, with regard to the media there is hardly any controversy among deliberative theorists.⁶ Virtually all stress the importance of the independence of the media and their role to open mutual channels of communication between the political center and citizens. The concern of deliberative theorists is that the media reality deviates too much from the ideal articulated by Habermas. He himself has great concerns in this respect: “In the final analysis, we are nevertheless confronted with the *prima facie* evidence that the kind of political communication we know from our so-called media society goes against the grain of the normative requirements of deliberative politics.”⁷ Habermas fears that new developments in the media “would rob us of the centerpiece of deliberative politics.”⁸ He forcefully expresses this concern also in his book *Ach, Europa*.⁹

The foremost case for Habermas is Silvio Berlusconi whom he considers “an infamous example.” According to Habermas, Berlusconi “first exploited the legal opportunities for political self-promotion and, then, after taking over the reins of government, used his media empire to back dubious legislation in support of the consolidation of his private fortunes and political assets. In the course of this adventure, Berlusconi even succeeded in changing the media

2 Habermas, ‘Political Communication in Media Society’, *op. cit.*, p. 411-2.

3 Habermas, ‘Political Communication in Media Society’, *op. cit.*, p. 415.

4 Habermas, ‘Political Communication in Media Society’, *op. cit.*, p. 420.

5 Habermas, ‘Political Communication in Media Society’, *op. cit.*, p. 416.

6 For an overview of the controversies among deliberative theorists see Steiner J., *The Foundation of Deliberative Democracy. Empirical Research and Normative Implications*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

7 Habermas, ‘Political Communication in Media Society’, *op. cit.*, p. 420.

8 Habermas, ‘Political Communication in Media Society’, *op. cit.*, p. 423.

9 Habermas J., *Ach Europa*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2008, p. 163.

culture of his country, shifting it from a predominance of political education to an emphasis on marketing of depoliticized entertainment.”¹⁰ Habermas also mentions Rupert Murdoch as an infamous example of a “media tycoon” and speaks generally of “pathologies of political communication.”¹¹

With the internet, a new medium has come up. Is this medium able to serve as a better link between citizens and the political authorities? Here, too, Habermas is critical in writing that the internet has certainly reactivated the grassroots of an egalitarian public of writers and readers. However, computer-mediated communication in the web can claim unequivocal *democratic* merits only for a special context: It can undermine the censorship of authoritarian regimes that try to control and repress public opinion. In the context of liberal regimes, the rise of millions of fragmented chat rooms across the world tend instead to lead to the fragmentation of large but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics.¹²

What is systematic empirical research telling us about the actual level of deliberation in the media. A pioneer in this respect is Jürgen Gerhards.¹³ He investigated to what extent two German high quality newspapers were deliberative in their contributions to the abortion debate. Gerhards used three indicators, the degree of respect towards other positions, the extent of justification of one’s position, and the degree of rationality defined as expressing conflicting values. Gerhards concludes that the discourse quality in the two newspapers is “far away”¹⁴ from the ideal speech situation of Habermas.

Dennis Pilon arrives at equally negative findings about the discourse quality of newspapers in the Canadian Province of Ontario.¹⁵ The topic was a possible change of the election system from single member plurality to proportional representation. In order to investigate the issue, the provincial government had selected a Citizens’ Assembly of 107 randomly chosen ordinary citizens. The discussions in this Assembly were highly deliberative. According to Pilon, “members made decisions based on a systematic appraisal of competing expert knowledge and the evidence brought to bear about the working of different voting systems.”¹⁶ Applauding the high level of deliberation, the Assembly “received rave reviews from both their participants and their academic

10 Habermas, ‘Political Communication in Media Society’, *op. cit.*, p. 421.

11 Habermas, ‘Political Communication in Media Society’, *op. cit.*, p. 420-1.

12 Habermas, ‘Political Communication in Media Society’, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

13 Gerhards J., ‘Diskursive versus liberale Öffentlichkeit. Eine empirische Auseinandersetzung mit Jürgen Habermas’, *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, volume 49, 1997, p. 1-34.

14 Gerhards, ‘Diskursive versus liberale Öffentlichkeit’, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

15 Pilon D., ‘Investigating Media as a Deliberative Space: Newspapers Opinions about Voting Systems in the 2007 Ontario Provincial Referendum’, *Canadian Political Science Review*, volume 3, 2009, p. 1-23.

16 Pilon, ‘Investigating Media as a Deliberative Space’, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

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observers.”¹⁷ Based on their discussions, the Citizens’ Assembly proposed a change to proportional representation.

The question was then how well the regional newspapers could make the link between this mini-public of randomly selected citizens to the citizenship at large. How well were the newspapers willing and able to create a deliberative space in view of the popular referendum? In measuring the discourse quality of the debate in the media, Pilon uses the Discourse Quality Index (DQI) of our research group.¹⁸ “In attempting to operationalize how to assess the deliberative quality of the media treatment of Ontario’s voting system referendum, I have decided to follow Steiner *et al.* (2004).”¹⁹ This means, in particular, that Pilon measured to what extent the media were characterized “by broad inclusion and equality in terms of participation and an interactive dynamic where the assumptions or facts under-grinding the decision could be called into question.”²⁰ Pilon summarizes his findings as follows:

“The results tend to confirm previous negative assessments of media’s deliberative performance in referendum contexts... Ontario’s print media failed to create an effective deliberative space where citizens could gain a critical appreciation of the choices they faced. In fact, the results show that the media failed on all the key themes Habermas highlights as crucial to an effective deliberative process, specifically inclusion and balance, a willingness to deal with and answer questions of fact, honesty in presenting one’s own position, and a desire to engage in dialogue. Media coverage of the referendum and its attendant issues was low overall, unbalanced in terms of showcasing the different sides of the debate, and relied predominantly on speculative and/or logical arguments rather than evidence or expert-based... All this suggests that Ontario’s newspapers were not really sincere in their claim they would create an environment where all sides on the referendum issue could be deliberated over.”²¹

Pilon almost despairs of how the media miss to make the link between mini-publics of ordinary citizens and the broader public: “The evidence assembled here suggests that the scale problem – translating the benefits of deliberative democracy in small-scale settings like citizens’ assemblies to genuinely mass democratic ones like referendums – is real and abiding. If the link is to be media –and government and most commentators have explicitly expected that media would be the link in the recent cases of British Columbia and Ontario –

17 Pilon, ‘Investigating Media as a Deliberative Space’, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

18 Steiner J, Bächtiger A., Spörndli M., and Steenbergen M.R., *Deliberative Politics in Action. Analysing Parliamentary Discourse*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, Chapter 3.

19 Pilon, ‘Investigating Media as a Deliberative Space’, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

20 Pilon, ‘Investigating Media as a Deliberative Space’, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

21 Pilon, ‘Investigating Media as a Deliberative Space’, *op. cit.*, p. 3, 17.

then the evidence provided here challenges whether the proposed link can or will do the job. If deliberative democracy is to be more than just talk, then new thinking will need to be applied to the problem of media failures as a deliberative space.”²²

Empirical research pays particular attention to the deliberative quality of the new media of on-line discussions. A member of our research group, Raphaël Kies, in a PhD dissertation at the European University Institute in Florence, undertook to investigate the “promises and limits of the web-site deliberation,” the very title of his thesis.²³ The objective of his research “was to evaluate whether the increasing success of the online political debates could favorize the emergence of a more deliberative democratic process or, on the opposite, whether this phenomenon has no impact or a negative impact on the deliberativeness of our democracies.”²⁴ Besides reviewing the increasingly broad empirical literature of on-line discussions, Kies investigated such discussions in the Radical Party in Italy and the French town of Issy-les-Moulineaux. Founded in 1955, the Italian Radical Party (*Partito Radicale*) is an anti-clerical and anti-communist party with an emphasis on greater social, religious, political, economic and sexual freedom. The party was a pioneer in using the internet. Already in the mid-1980’s, it began to host one of the very first virtual communities in Europe, and in 2000 it was the first party worldwide to organize online binding elections for one third of its executive board. When the party implemented an online forum called radical community, it rapidly became one of the most successful forums with a great number of people registering and participating. Kies got access to the contents of this forum and also interviewed a sample of participants.

With regard to the discourse quality of the internet forum the results are mixed. A large number of messages were exchanges, and they were frequently read by the leaders of the party, in particular by Marco Pannella, the leader of the party. Thus, the internet helped to open a channel between regular party members²⁵ and the leadership of the party. Participation, however, was very one-sided. Highly educated and males did participate most. Among those who had registered, the frequency with which they *sent* messages was uneven:

Sent messages every day	9%
Sent messages every week	19%
Sent messages every month	21%
Sent messages more rarely	51%

22 Pilon, ‘Investigating Media as a Deliberative Space’, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

23 Kies R., ‘Promises and limits of the web-site deliberation’, PhD dissertation, European University Institute, 2008. I served on the dissertation committee. The dissertation was published under the same title 2010 by Palgrave Macmillan.

24 Kies, ‘Promises and limits of the website deliberation’, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

25 The forum was also open to non-party members, and a small number of them registered.

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There were more party members who *read* messages, but here, too, distribution was uneven:

Read messages every day	39%
Read messages every week	34%
Read messages every month	15%
Read messages more rarely	12%

Despite unequal participation, a great plurality of opinions was expressed. Indeed, in the survey, 59 percent applauded that the atmosphere of the forum encouraged a high or very high propensity to voice alternative proposals. Only 21 percent considered this propensity as low or very low, while 20 percent took an intermediate position. These results speak to the issue raised in the normative literature whether it is more important that everyone speaks up or that all alternatives are heard. The on-line forum of the Italian Radical Party corresponds to the latter position in the sense that a large number of messages came from a small minority of registered persons but that nevertheless a great plurality of views entered the debate. With regard to respect, the results are also mixed. 38 percent considered the level of respect as high or very high, 34 percent as low or very low, while 28 percent took no position. In looking at the transcripts, Raphaël Kies registers certain rudeness in the debate.

Issy-les-Moulineaux, where Kies studied another on-line debate, is a town of 63,000 close to Paris. The town implemented an ambitious project putting the election campaigns of the 16 district councilors on-line. There are four districts in the town, and each district could elect four councilors. Their task is mostly consultative bringing local grievances to the attention of town authorities. There were 53 candidates running for the 16 seats. With regard to the voters, less than three percent registered. This low percentage may have been due to the unfamiliar and relatively complicated registration process and the fact that many voters had no access to the internet. Such voters had the option to go to the polling station but very few did use this option. The election of district councilors has little political importance. In the survey, the on-line experiment was evaluated unevenly. A positive response was that “the debate seemed to me to be well thought out and relatively realistic in terms of wishes expressed and possibilities for action.” A negative response was that “I don’t think the blog particularly favors serious reflection, as some will type at great speed and in two lines... It is not necessarily an environment conducive to a high standard of democratic debate”²⁶ The most deliberative aspect was that in Issy-les-Moulineaux respect was much higher than in the Italian Radical Party. Only about ten percent of the messages were considered as disrespectful in the sense of being rude and unfriendly or involving personal attacks. With regard to equal participation, however, Issy-les-Moulineaux was even less deliberative than the Italian Radical Party. Counting the number of messages, Kies found

²⁶ Kies, ‘Promises and limits of the web-site deliberation’, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

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that about as many stemmed from candidates than from voters. A voter joked that one gets the impression “that there are more councilors than residents in Issy-les-Moulineaux.”²⁷ The conclusion of Kies of his two studies and the survey of other studies on internet discussions is as follows:

“The users of the online political forum are an elite composed by a majority of highly educated men who are relatively young and strongly interested in politics... The numerous examples we came across reveal that, generally, the opinions expressed in the forum are justified even if not in an elaborate way, that the debates do generally not lead to polarization of opinions, that the debates are generally not completely invaded by unrespectful behaviors, that the online debates can contribute to enlighten the opinions of its active and passive users and that some of them have concrete political outcomes.”²⁸

For Kies “the real question is not so much whether the online debates are deliberative in *general* but under which circumstances the online debates foster deliberative forms of debates.” His main hypothesis is “that if participants at an online forum believe that what they write will be widely read and have an impact on the decision making process, they will be more motivated to participate and to adopt a deliberative attitude. This means they will be more motivated to be reciprocal, respectful, sincere, reflective to reach a common agreement and to justify their opinions.”²⁹ This conclusion indicates that the internet can only be an effective link between citizens and political authorities if the latter are willing to listen to and take seriously the messages loaded up on the internet.

In a large-scale internet project in England, Corinne Wales, Sarah Cotterill and Graham Smith arrive at the conclusion that their analyses “neither confirm the utopian impulse that the online world is the hotbed of deliberative democracy or the dystopian impulse that it is a world where the loudest and brashiest are heard. Our findings are more mixed.”³⁰ In 2009, two randomized groups of about 1,000 citizens each discussed online the following questions: “Should we have more activities for young people or better policing? Do faith schools have a role to play in bringing neighbourhoods together or do they create more divisions?” With regard to participation, this project is in line with the research of Kies that many do participate little or not at all.

27 Kies, ‘Promises and limits of the web-site deliberation’, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

28 Kies, ‘Promises and limits of the web-site deliberation’, *op. cit.*, p.202, 205.

29 Kies, ‘Promises and limits of the web-site deliberation’, *op. cit.*, p. 205-6.

30 Wales C., Cotterill S., Smith G., ‘Do citizens deliberate in on-line discussion forums? Preliminary findings from an internet experiment’, Paper Presented at the Participatory and Democracy Specialist Group of the Political Studies Association Conference, Edinburgh, March 29-April 1, 2010, p.30.

“Just under half of those invited to join in the deliberation chose to take no part in it.”³¹ Of those who logged on, about half did not post any message. This means, that only about a quarter did take an active part in the discussion. Also in line with the research of Kies, the most active participants were highly educated and politically interested. But in contrast to the findings of Kies, women and older persons were more active participants than men and younger people. With regard to justification, the authors find the results “problematic from the perspective of deliberative democracy... the majority of contributions on both threads offered no form of justification: they were simple assertions of opinion.”³² If justifications were given, they were mainly based on personal experiences. With regard to reciprocity, “only around 20 percent of participants... offered any reliable evidence of reciprocity at all: generally simple statements of agreement or disagreement... from a deliberative perspective this general failure to acknowledge the contributions of others is problematic.”³³ With regard to mutual respect, the findings come closer to the deliberative ideal: “The fears of those who believe that internet discussion forums by their nature will degenerate into flaming on controversial topics are not confirmed: posts generally remained within the rules of discussion established for the forum and the contributions that we defined as disrespectful were far from overly offensive.”³⁴ There were also many references to the common good, and the authors speculate that the two virtues of mutual respect and common good orientation “may be self-reinforcing.”³⁵ With these overall mixed results, the authors conclude that “the deliberative cup is half full – or half empty.”³⁶

Blogging has generally a bad reputation for its lack of deliberative quality. In an opinion piece in the *Wall Street Journal*, Joseph Rago summarizes the popular negative position on the quality of political blogs: “We rarely encounter sustained or systematic blog thought; instead, panics and maniacs, endless rehearsing of arguments put forward elsewhere; and a tendency to substitute ideology for cognition.”³⁷ To test the validity of such claims, John W. Robertson and Elizabeth McLaughlin investigated in the UK 12 blogs, using an expanded version of our Discourse Quality Index (DQI).³⁸ Six blogs were from newspapers like the *Guardian*, six from independent sources like Guido Fawkes of the Libertarian right. All 12 blogs had to do with the economic crisis at the end of 2008. Analyzing these posts, Robertson and McLaughlin arrive at the following conclusion:

31 Wales *et al.*, ‘Do citizens deliberate in on-line discussions forums?’, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

32 Wales *et al.*, ‘Do citizens deliberate in on-line discussion forums?’, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

33 Wales *et al.*, ‘Do citizens deliberate in on-line discussion forums?’, *op. cit.*, p. 25-6.

34 Wales *et al.*, ‘Do citizens deliberate in on-line discussion forums?’, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

35 Wales *et al.*, ‘Do citizens deliberate in on-line discussion forums?’, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

36 Wales *et al.*, ‘Do citizens deliberate in on-line discussion forums?’, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

37 Quoted in: Robertson J.W. and McLaughlin E., ‘The Quality of Discussion on the Economy in UK Political Blogs in 2008’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, volume 64, 2011, p. 109.

38 Robertson and McLaughlin, ‘The Quality of Discussions on the Economy in UK Political Blogs in 2008’, *op. cit.*, p. 106-28.

“There does seem scope for optimism in the light of the evidence from this study... the debate in many of these sampled blogs had much to commend it in terms of civilized behaviour, range of economic models, the use of reason and evidence... The high level of interactivity in many of these blogs does seem a positive phenomenon and is perhaps suggestive of the kind of openness Habermas sought... negative framing was rare.”³⁹

These positive results are perhaps due to the choice of issues covered by the blogs, namely taxes and spending in an economic crisis. These topics may lend themselves better to a high quality of deliberation than more emotional issues like abortion or homosexuality.

Thomas Haeussler and Marianne Fraefel, two other members of our research group, undertook a systematic comparison of the level of deliberation on TV/radio on the one hand, on the internet on the other hand.⁴⁰ They investigated in Switzerland the discussions prior to a 2005 referendum on bilateral treaties with the European Union. For TV and radio, they looked at both public and private stations. For the internet, they chose online discussions run by Google and media companies. With regard to the interactive aspect, it was equally low on TV/radio and online. Only 19 percent of the statements on TV/radio and 20 percent online made references to messages of other participants. As Fraefel and Haeussler conclude “a ‘real’ exchange of ideas is not what takes place much of the time.”⁴¹ For the level of justification, TV and radio were more deliberative than the web fora. Participants on TV/radio justified their claims in 32 percent of the cases, online in 20 percent. For the respect category, TV and radio were also more deliberative than the web fora, although participants on both media were highly respectful. Disrespectful utterances were made in only 16 percent of the statements online and even only 6 percent on TV/radio. Despite the generally lower level of deliberation online, Fraefel and Haeussler state that it must also be considered that the web gives much more opportunities for ordinary citizens to participate in political discussions, “as a consequence web fora conform more closely than radio or television to the ideal of a discourse where everyone is free to participate.”⁴² The overall conclusion of Fraefel and Haeussler is that

39 Robertson and McLaughlin, ‘The Quality of Discussion on the Economy in UK Political Blogs in 2008’, *op. cit.*, p. 124-5.

40 Fraefel M. and Haeussler T., ‘Deliberation and opinion formation in dialogic formats’, Paper Presented at the Conference on Mediated Citizenship: Political Information and Participation in Europe, University of Leeds, September 17-18, 2009.

41 Fraefel & Haeussler, ‘Deliberation and opinion formation in dialogic formats’, *op. cit.* p. 10.

42 Fraefel & Haeussler, ‘Deliberation and opinion formation in dialogic formats’, *op. cit.* p. 13.

they are less negative than Habermas about the deliberative potential of web fora, “hence, it would be a precipitate conclusion to dismiss online debates as unimportant or even disruptive for public deliberation as they allow citizens to articulate themselves and test the reflexivity of their positions.”⁴³

In his PhD dissertation, Thomas Haeussler looks at English newspapers from a deliberative perspective.⁴⁴ For his analysis, he has chosen the following six issues for specific years going back to the 1960’s;

Nuclear disarmament (1960)
 Commonwealth immigration (1965)
 Union picketing rights (1980)
 Northern Ireland secretariat (1985)
 Fuel issue (2000)
 Anti-terror legislation (2005)

He included five newspapers into his investigation: *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Independent*, *The Sun*. To determine the level of deliberation, he used our Discourse Quality Index (DQI) adapted to the media world. With regard to justification, in 45 percent of all articles no justification is offered, in 40 percent a single justification and in 15 percent two justifications or more. These data do not mean that the actors on which the newspapers report did justify their position to such a low degree. It only means that there were a large number of positions where no justifications were reported in the newspapers. Journalists often take shortcuts in reporting positions without giving the corresponding justifications. Is the glass half full or half empty with regard to justifications reported in the newspapers? One has also to consider that many validity claims are undisputed or repetitive, so that it looks not too bad from a deliberative perspective that, after all, 60 percent of all articles contained some justification. It is particularly noteworthy that the level of justification did not decrease since the early 1960’s but, on the contrary, increased slightly, which contradicts the thesis that newspapers become less reflective.

With regard to the content of justification, Haeussler is at first puzzled that the common good is rarely mentioned in an explicit way as reported in the newspapers. An interpretation could be that journalists do not tend to consider references to the common good as newsworthy, so they often omit such references. They focus rather on the actions to be taken, irrespective of the motivation for the proposed actions.

Haeussler also codes the dimension of *reciprocity* across articles and finds that in 68 percent of the articles no explicit reference is made to other articles,

43 Fraefel & Haeussler, ‘Deliberation and opinion formation in dialogic formats’, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

44 Haeussler T., *Contest, Conflict, and Consensus. An empirical study of the discursive transformation of the British public sphere (1960-2005)*, PhD dissertation, University of Bern 2011.

in 24 percent a reference is made but not in a substantive way, in 4 percent the reference is substantive but not in any detail, and in another 4 percent details are included and the arguments in other articles are evaluated. Thus, reciprocity is very low. To the extent that references are made to other articles, the political and administrative authorities are very much at the center. It is not only that actors in civil society often refer to political and administrative authorities but it is also the case that actors in the political and administrative authorities often refer to each other. Haussler can also show, however, that there are conditions under which reciprocity between the political and administrative authorities and civil society becomes quite frequent with actors of civil society taking a more active role, for example in the discussion of the fuel issue. But there are also marginal groups who are hardly included in the discussion; a stark example is the bill on Commonwealth immigration where those directly affected had virtually no voice. In summary, there are certainly articles in English newspapers that fulfill a high standard of deliberation, but such articles are still relatively rare.

Having presented empirical data on the deliberative quality of the media, how well are the media performing in this respect? The real media world tends to be far removed from the deliberative ideal. I agree with Habermas, quoted at the beginning of this article, that new developments in the media “would rob us of the centerpiece of deliberative politics.” It is particularly disheartening to come to grips with the negative role of the media in Ontario. After a highly deliberative discussion of the Citizens’ Assembly on a change of the election system, the citizenship at large had to vote in a referendum on the proposed change. The media were the crucial linkage between the Citizens’ Assembly and the referendum. As we recall, Dennis Pilon, the author of the study, concludes “that the media failed on all the key themes Habermas highlights as crucial to an effective deliberative process.”

The frequent failure of the media from a deliberative perspective, as illustrated by the Ontario case, cannot primarily be attributed to individual journalists. Many of my former students both in the United States and in Switzerland went into journalism with all the good deliberative intentions but got under the competitive pressure of the media system. This pressure means to present politics as an entertainment game with winners and losers. Let me illustrate this with the main political discussion forum on German Swiss television, called *Arena*. In the trailer leading into the show, one sees the popular Swiss version of a wrestling match where one wrestler wins putting the other on his back.⁴⁵ This trailer sets the tone for the ensuing discussion. Who is smart and clever enough to put others, figuratively speaking, on their back? Together with a former student, who works in a prominent role for Swiss television, we submitted a plan that when federal referenda are discussed on *Arena* not politicians but a random sample of ordinary citizens should be

45 It is called *Schwingen* in Swiss German.
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the participants. The rationale for our plan was that during the parliamentary debates and before, politicians had enough opportunities to present their positions, and when it was the turn of citizens to express their positions in the referendum, the *Arena* should be reserved for citizens. The hope was that *Arena* would not look like a wrestling match, but as a serious deliberation of the issues to be considered in the referendum. Our plan had no chance. Politicians were not willing to give up their opportunities to show off how good wrestlers they are when it comes to political debates. This episode also reveals that it is not only the media but also politicians who want to have politics in the media as entertainment battles with winners and losers. How about citizens themselves? They often complain about the lack of deliberation in the media; as consumers of the media, however, they may very well enjoy the entertainment character of competitive political discussions. Perhaps watching on *Arena* ordinary citizens discussing a forthcoming referendum would not be entertaining enough, so that Swiss television, given the competitive nature of the media market, had good reasons to keep *Arena* as it is. This brings me full circle back to how media have to operate in order to survive in an increasingly competitive market with all the new technological possibilities. Full fledged civilized deliberation does not fit well into this market.

I still do not give up making the media more deliberative. In this effort, one may have to refer to market forces as well. What I have in mind is that university institutes specializing in deliberative research will regularly publish reports about the deliberative quality of various media outlets, using something like our Discourse Quality Index (DQI). Such reports would also cover online debates on the internet. As we have seen earlier in the paper, there is great variation in the deliberative quality of such online debates. Published reports on the deliberative quality of online debates may help to direct interested persons to find fora to their liking. In contrast to newspapers, radio and television, online debates with high deliberative quality do not need a large public. Twenty or so people may discuss on a regular basis a political topic of common interest like education, national defense, or global warming. To assure a good deliberative quality, participants would have to register with their full names. If such a group would get high marks for their deliberative quality, other like-minded people may be eager to join. Online discussion groups may be organized at the local level but also globally. Perhaps globally organized groups may have a particularly great appeal, as I have learned from many of my students. Discussing, for example, poverty in the world with participants from Sweden, Peru, China, South Africa, and so on, seems very attractive to deliberatively oriented people. Many others, to be sure, will never be interested in such online discussions. They may just be interested to exchange jokes, and personal stories and what not.

In sum, it seems to me that the internet offers opportunities for deliberative niches. Published reports on such niches will help interested people to find them. By contrast, I am not optimistic that the main media outlets of newspapers, radio and television will any time soon become more deliberative,

although here, too, there are opportunities for deliberative niches, for example *All Things Considered* on National Public Radio in the United States or *Echo der Zeit* on Swiss Public Radio. The media are currently the most problematic link for the development of deliberative democracy, and we have to make all our efforts in praxis to remedy the situation, because, as I quoted Habermas at the beginning of the paper, the “deliberative model expects the political public sphere to ensure the formation of a plurality of considered public opinions.”



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