

Whose Voice is heard in the virtual public sphere?
A study of participation and representation in online deliberation

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Abstract:

One of the core elements of the vision of ‘electronic democracy’ is the hope that the Internet permits free and equal access to political debates. Proponents of e-democracy assume that the technology of the Internet can be exploited to make the political process more inclusive and deliberative. However, experiences with online communication made so far raise doubts. The digital divide being one obstacle to participation, even more astonishing is the fact that online discourses are constrained in ways similar to those in the offline world.

This paper attempts to reassess the question whether the Internet makes political debate more open to voices that are normally not heard in the political field. It uses evidence from one of the largest experiments in online deliberation, the ‘DEMOS’ project in the city of Hamburg. The results of this experiment are ambiguous. It is found that the online discourse is in some way similar to the political field offline. But it is also found that groups who are not participating by traditional means are indeed represented in the online debate. Furthermore, the discourse shows signs of self-regulation and a rational-critical orientation necessary for free and equal participation.

Three groups of factors are identified to explain these results: Socio-economic resources, factors determining the usage of new media, and factors stemming from the mass media character of online communication. The paper concludes that although more research is needed to clarify the interplay between these factors, it can be said that the integration of the online deliberation into the larger political context is crucial for determining which factors are prevailing.

1 Introduction

After the collapse of communism, some structural problems of the established (western) democracies became ever more visible. Citizens were increasingly lacking trust in the political representation, were reluctant to participate in such basic democratic practices as voting in elections, and were doubting the effectiveness of the decision making process (cf. Putnam 1995, IDEA 2002, Offe 2002). Different reasons have been found for this ‘crisis of representation’, as it has been called.

The concern of this paper, though, is with a potential solution that was soon identified: at about the same time, the Internet grew from a specialists’ tool to a mass communication medium. Scholars of democracy as well as politicians spelled out their hopes that the new technology would strengthen and enhance the democratic procedures of the political system. On the other hand, sceptics worried that the Internet would further distort the political landscape, creating new problems instead of solving those already existing. In this paper, I critically review both positions and try to evaluate what impact the Internet actually has on political processes.

The evaluation is based on empirical examination of a real-world experiment in online deliberation, held 2002 in Hamburg, Germany. Of the three major political practices – information provision, deliberation, and voting (cf. Tsagarousianou 1999) –, deliberation can be seen as the most challenging issue in reflecting the Internet’s impact on politics. The impact on the provision of political information is obvious: the Internet is one of the fastest, most reliable and cheapest channels for distributing political information (e.g., Pew Research Center 2000). In the case of voting in general elections, an impact is far from being realised, as has been diagnosed in recent policy recommendations (Caltech-MIT Voting Technology Project 2001, Sandvig 2003, for the German government: Schily 2001).

Meanwhile, there is an increasing interest in online deliberations, and quite a few arguments are raised for them (Coleman 1999, Coleman/Götze 2001, Hague/Loader 1999, Åström 2001, for the UK and German government: Cabinet Office 2002, Karger/Ahrends 2003). Especially, deliberative concepts seem well suited to tackle the above mentioned crisis of democracy, by fostering the communication about political issues in society, and by strengthening the legitimacy of decisions made (cf. Dryzek 1990).

Yet, not much is known about the social and technological factors influencing online deliberations, and the number of empirical accounts of online deliberation is still

small (see, however, Wilhelm 2000, Jankowski/van Selm 2000, Beierle 2002). Especially two issues of democratic processes are at stake in online deliberations: *participation*, i.e. who takes part in the deliberation, and *representation*, i.e. whose voice is heard within the discourse. Thus, this paper asks whether or not the Internet facilitates more equal participation in political deliberation, and tries to identify the factors determining representation.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows: first, I will investigate the literature on electronic democracy for the hopes and concerns that have been raised by various researchers. From this literature, I derive hypotheses to be examined in the empirical case study. The next section informs about the case I am investigating and the methodological approach employed. The main results are presented. Finally, I try to identify the factors relevant for explaining these results and draw conclusions for the impact on political deliberation that can be attributed to the Internet.

2 Electronic Democracy: Hopes and Concerns

A large number of scholars have undertaken research on the topic of electronic democracy, many of them concerned with deliberative models of democracy. We can identify mainly two lines of research in this body of literature, one that examines the way the Internet changes the *preconditions* for democratic processes, another one that examines which *consequences* result from the use of the Internet in relation to politics. The first is mostly associated with Utopians, the latter with more sceptical accounts of the prospects of electronic democracy – though with exceptions in both strands.

2.1 How does the Internet change the preconditions for democracy?

The first line of research can be characterised as looking at the technology of the Internet and asking for the potential it offers for political processes (dating back to the early work by Oettinger 1971, Etzioni 1972 and Arterton 1987). However, it was only with the rapid distribution and increasing usage of Internet access that the vision of electronic democracy came into shape.

Two characteristics of the Internet are considered important for changing democratic practices. First, the Internet is a new medium for the distribution of information. In this respect, it is cheap, offering low-cost publishing to everyone; it is fast, making information available as soon as it is published; it is geographically unbound, in that

potentially, it can be accessed worldwide, and it is free and egalitarian, in that hardly any central control exists to filter out specific content. Second, the Internet is also a new medium of communication. It allows communication to be asynchronous as well as synchronous; it facilitates social integration by filtering out social cues in anonymous, largely text-based communication (Sproull/Faraj 1995), and it is interactive, offering peer-to-peer interaction as well as many-to-many communication (Rafaeli 1988, Morris/Ogen 1996, Groebel 1996).

In the light of the diagnosis of a crisis of representation in modern democracies, it seems tempting to think of the Internet technology as the solution to the problem. Thus, the Internet was expected to make politics more inclusive, by providing more people with information and providing universal, unconstrained access to the virtual public sphere (Mitra 2001). It was also expected that online debates would be free from prejudices and obstacles to equal participation, coming close to the ideal of rational-critical deliberation (cf. Tambini 1999). Based on these expectations, the hopes were high that democracy could move on towards the deliberative ideal, allowing decision making to be better informed, more transparent, and, in the end, more effective (Barber 1995, Grossmann 1995, Jones 1997, Rash 1997).

Such hopes were largely based on an assessment of the way the Internet changes the preconditions for democratic practices. Instead, other researchers were looking at the outcomes of Internet usage (as expressed in the title of Preece 1999, asking “What happens after you get online?”). As a consequence, they were rather sceptical about the effect the Internet would have on democratic practices.

2.2 What effects has the Internet if applied in political deliberation?

One of the first observations in actual usage of the Internet was the identification of the so-called ‘digital divide’. Access to the Internet is not universal, nor is it distributed equally among the population of most western countries, but it follows well known factors of inequality, i.e., income, education and race, as well as factors of new inequalities, like gender and age (DiMaggio et al. 2001, Norris 2001, Welling/Kubicek 2000). The consequences for online deliberation are severe: instead of balancing the traditional inequality of access to politics, the Internet reinforces existing problems. If more and more deliberations are to be held online, only the voices of the informational avant-garde, the information-haves, would be heard, excluding other societal groups from the political process.

The digital divide being one obstacle to participation, even more astonishing is the observation that the discourse within online deliberations is constrained in ways similar to the offline world. This can be illustrated by an example from the case analysed here. In a special event during the online deliberation, representatives of the parties of the local parliament of Hamburg were invited for a discussion. The event was staged in the form of a TV talk show – a moderator posed the questions, then the representatives had time to answer them and to comment on the answers of the others. All representatives were introduced to the system beforehand. Thus, all of them had equal chances to participate, and we would expect contributions to be equally distributed among the five representatives.

Party	Parliamentary Seats		Contributions in Debate		Difference
SPD	46	38,0%	26	32,9%	-5,1%
CDU	33	27,3%	21	26,6%	-0,7%
PRO	25	20,7%	11	13,9%	-6,8%
GAL	11	9,1%	12	15,2%	+6,1%
FDP	6	5,0%	9	11,4%	+6,4%
Total	121	100,1%	79	100,0%	

Table 1: Representation of Parties in Parliament and Online Deliberation (Pearson’s $r=0,92$; Significance $> 95\%$)

However, the share of contributions varies considerably, from a maximum of 32,9% to a minimum of 11,4% (see table 1). And, surprisingly, the representation of each party in the debate matches quite exactly with their representation in the parliament – the representative of the largest parliamentary party has also written most contributions in the debate, etc.¹ In contrast to the optimistic view, the online deliberation merely seems to mirror the offline world.

But a closer look at the debate reveals that it is not a very precise mirror: the distribution of contributions differs from the distribution of seats in that the big parties are underrepresented in the debate, whereas the two small parties are overrepresented. Obviously, contrary to the sceptical view, there is a sort of ‘Internet effect’, though not in the sense envisaged by the optimists. It is precisely the factors determining this effect that we are seeking to identify to explain the seemingly paradoxical result and

¹ The one exception can be explained by the extraordinary results of the last elections, in which one marginal populist party gained surprisingly many votes. Current opinion polls show results that fit well with the observation made here.

to find out more about the way the Internet changes politics. In a first step, we will look at the factors already identified in the literature on political participation online and communicative representation.

Political Participation Online

Research in political participation has found that the increasing variety of non-traditional forms of participation (e.g., social movements, activist networks etc.) has not resulted in a broader societal basis of participation, but in a broader range of activities of those who were already active. An explanation is found in the assumption that people need certain resources to be able to participate. Among these are a certain amount of economic capital and a certain degree of formal education or acquaintance with the political field (cf. McCarthy/Zald 1977, Leighley 1995). Empirical studies of participation have confirmed the relevance of these factors (Verba/Schlozman/Brady 1995).

As the Internet can be considered as one more option for political participation, we can assume that these factors will influence participation online similarly. Those already participating will appreciate the Internet as a new way of expressing their views and of influencing the political process (Gabriel/Mößner 2002), but the pattern of participation would remain essentially unchanged (Kaase 2002, Fuchs 2003).

Actual studies of the Internet's influence on political participation are rare, and those existing give a mixed picture. In a study of the results of the Internet-based "Survey2000", Weber et al. (2003) report that Internet usage correlates significantly with political participation (Weber et al. 2003). However, they cannot tell whether the higher level of political participation is a result of Internet usage, or whether people with great interest in politics are also more likely to use the Internet.

A study of participation in mailing lists emphasizes the costs of participation, especially the amount of time needed to scan, read and eventually write a message in such a forum (Rojo/Ragsdale 1997). This is in line with the literature cited above, adding another, more Internet-specific resource. As Dahlberg found in his analysis, the level of engagement and attention participants have to invest in a deliberation is also a relevant factor (Dahlberg 2001a).

Once people have accessed an online debate, they have to be able to cope with the quantity and presentation of information they are confronted with. On the one hand, this depends on the usability of the online services. The history of web development

has shown that usability considerations are not trivial, but of prime importance for the success of an offer (e.g., Bias/Mayhew 1994, Preece 2000). And it is not sufficient to produce a website that is technically easy to use, it also has to be visually appealing and emotionally attractive (cf. Whitten 2001, Hassenzahl et al. 2001). On the other hand, people who are more skilled in using websites will have lower barriers to participate online than people for whom it takes a long time to find their way around. With this in mind, DiMaggio and Hargittai have argued for a reconsideration of the traditional view of the digital divide: it is not only the question who has access or not, but also how efficient and effective one is using the Internet (DiMaggio/Hargittai 2001, Hargittai 2003).

In an online deliberation, participants have to be especially skilled in handling mass amounts of information. In a lively forum, the number of contributions can grow to more than hundred messages a day. People then have to develop strategies how to handle this information overload, as they are not able to read all of the contributions. And such skills, in turn, will influence peoples' willingness and motivation to engage in the debate (see Rojo/Ragsdale 1997: 90, Beierle 2002: 41), leading to a dominance of the technological elite in the debate (observed by Jankowski/van Selm 2000: 9). Such skills, together with communicative skills needed in any discussion, can be considered as a further resource influencing participation in online deliberation (Kaase 2002, Hooghe 1999).

Communicative Representation

As Papacharissi says, "greater participation in political discussion does not automatically result in discussion that promotes democratic ideals." (2002: 16) The representation of all voices is an important aspect of democratic discourse. Thus, we have to ask: once people are engaged in the debate, whose voice is being heard? Research in computer-mediated communication has pointed out a number of differences between online and offline communication. We will now discuss how these affect online deliberations.

An issue discussed by many researchers is the presence or absence of social cues and bodily representations of the speakers. As Daft and Lengel (1984) have shown, communication media differ with respect to the richness of information that can be expressed. Face-to-face interaction is highest in information richness, allowing the simultaneous observation of multiple cues like body language, facial expression and

tone of voice. Messages in written communication, and especially computer-mediated communication, lack most of these cues, making it more difficult to address complex issues. Against this background, it seems problematic to use text-based forums for online deliberation, as political debates typically revolve around complex and contested issues. As a result, online deliberations would end in off-topic discussions that threaten potential participants as well as politicians.

Another effect of missing cues is the problem of identity construction on the web. In online communication, the representation of personal attributes is reduced to a short tag, the user name. In most cases one cannot know for sure who actually is talking in the debate, since the user is sitting remotely at his terminal, and it is hard to control whether e.g. many people are using the same user name or whether one user has multiple “identities” in the debate.

In virtual spaces, people enjoy the possibility to ‘play’ with their identity, swapping gender and experimenting with multiple identities (cf. Turkle 1995, Danet 1998).

This playful behaviour has consequences for the quality of online deliberation: “If some members can not even rely on the prime identity of others, every common base of understanding is threatened” (van Dijk 1996: 59). It has been argued that virtual identities discourage participants from committing to their views in the course of the debate (cf. Dahlberg 2001b), and that the sincerity needed is severely disturbed in online deliberation (Hurrelmann et al. 2002).

However, interpretations of this phenomenon diverge. Missing social cues are also seen as a factor drawing people into political debate who otherwise would be too shy to participate (or subject to discrimination). And the de-personalised nature of online communication may help to keep the debate concentrated on rational-critical argumentation in contrast to the person-oriented style observed in many face-to-face meetings (Hurrelmann et al. 2002). Hence, social inequality is “levelled out by the ‘blindness’ of cyberspace to bodily identity, thus allowing 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 2001b)

What do these results tell us about online deliberation? The Internet indeed helps overcome barriers to participation related to the identity of the participants. But communicative constraints remain, and new ones are introduced by specific aspects of online communication – e.g., users with a playful attitude are more likely to be attracted by online deliberation than more serious participants. However, the contro-

versial results indicate that we have to be very careful with generalisations. Obviously, there is no such thing as “Internet communication”, but outcomes depend on the specific technology used as well as the policies and social contexts of the communication.

Conflictive behaviour is another issue with potential effect on participation and the quality of debate. A large number of studies have noted that flaming, a form of outrageous conflict, is a regular feature of computer-mediated communication because social control is lacking (Sproull/Kiesler 1991, Sproull/Faraj 1995, Kollock/Smith 1996). Political discussions on the web seem to be prime targets for conflict-oriented communication – with more than one third of all threads resulting in ‘flame-fests’, as reported in one study (Hill/Hughes 1998: 62). As a result, the quality of debate is diminished, and serious participants are threatened off. According to Dutton, participants in online debates are very sensitive for the prevalence of flaming, the use of offensive language and the frequency of personal attacks. The absence of norms, he concludes, “might well undermine the very existence of such forums by chasing key individuals, such as opinion leaders and public officials, off the system.” (Dutton 1996: 284)

However, some authors have argued that when people discuss matters online, they do so with like-minded others, thus avoiding diverging viewpoints (Rafaeli/Sudweeks 1998, Wilhelm 1998, Sunstein 2001, Witschge 2002). Such homogeneity would not only reduce conflicts, but also the quality of debate, since a certain degree of divergence is a necessary prerequisite for fruitful deliberation (cf. Price et al. 2002).

Yet the degree of homogeneity seems to be lower than assumed by these researchers. Stromer-Galley found in a survey of participants of online political discussions that they were not only frequenting heterogeneous discussion spaces, but even “appreciated and enjoyed this aspect of their online conversation experience.” (Stromer-Galley 2003) Thus, the claim that people only discuss with like-minded cannot be hold in general, and it seems to depend on the degree of divergence and the resulting conflicts whether or not people are threatened off from a debate.

A final issue is the question of the amount of participation. Observers of online discussions have noted a strong concentration of contributions in a small core of very active users (e.g., Schneider 1997, Rojo/Ragsdale 1997, Dahlberg 2001b). The distortion is so extreme that what appeared to be many-to-many-communication actually resembles traditional political communication: few selected individuals make

their views heard to a broad audience of passive listeners, being commented by only a small number of peers (cf. Rauch 1983). As a consequence, we can assume that essentially the same structure of representation will evolve in online deliberation as in offline politics.

To conclude this review of the literature, we have to draw a rather gloomy picture of online deliberation. Despite some relativizing results, the outcome of the literature is that there's not much difference between online deliberation and the offline world – if not a serious distortion in some important aspects like access to deliberation or the quality of the debate. Van Dijk's diagnosis still seems to hold, namely that "(...) virtual communities are unable to make up for a 'lost public debate'. They are still rather exclusive in social composition and the quality of discourse is poor because a real dialogue is missing. Most often, the discourse does not exceed the level of an exchange of separate distant voices on a central board." (van Dijk 1996: 59)

Even researchers directly concerned with online deliberation are sceptical about the experiences made so far. Coleman and Götze, after having reviewed a number of experiments in electronic democracy, conclude that "online public participation is still in its infancy" (Coleman/Götze 2001: 36). Similarly, Wilhelm contends that "the sorts of virtual political forums which were analysed do not provide viable sounding boards for signalling and thematizing issues to be processed by the political system." (Wilhelm 1998: 333)

However, it seems too early for such a sceptical conclusion, since firstly, we have seen that the empirical evidence from studies in online communication is by far not as robust as required for basing scientific judgement on it, and secondly, the number of serious attempts to engage citizens in online political deliberation is still very small (cf. Coleman/ Götze 2001). Thus, we have to reassess the question whether the Internet makes political debate more open to voices that are normally not heard in the political field. Based on an empirical case study, I now focus on the actual practices of use and ask for the factors that shape them.

3 A Case Study: The DEMOS Debate in Hamburg

The empirical evidence comes from an experiment in electronic democracy conducted in the city of Hamburg in November 2002 as part of the project 'DEMOS'.² Citizens were invited to a web-based, asynchronous, moderated debate lasting four-weeks. The aim of the deliberation was not to decide on a political issue, but to raise ideas for the development of a new strategic vision for the future development of the city (so-called 'Leitbild'). The deliberation was designed as a sort of contest: in the end, the most interesting ideas were chosen by a jury and the contributors were invited to meet the Mayor of Hamburg to present and discuss their ideas.

The debate was advertised widely in the local media (radio, newspaper, TV), and access was open to anyone, only requiring initial registration for taking part actively. Participants were free to choose their own user name, thus anonymous participation was possible. The moderators were not chosen from among the participants, but were professional facilitators with experience in online discussions. In the end, 538 users had registered for the debate, contributing altogether 3,907 messages.³

Data from this experiment include quantitative information about the messages exchanged and the participants involved, survey data collected among participants at the end of the debate, qualitative data from the messages exchanged as well as participant observations made by the author during the debate as well as in the organisation phase. This data is examined in-depth by both statistical and qualitative methods to figure out the important aspects for the question examined. The aim is not so much to test specific hypotheses, but to heuristically explore factors relevant for the effect of technology (cf. Orum 2001).

² More information about the project and the experiment in Hamburg can be found in Lührs et al. 2001, Lührs et al. 2003, and on the project's website: www.demos-project.org.

³ The analysis is based on only this case, and thus cannot claim to provide general or representative results. Although the context of the debate is certainly unique, the volume of messages is so high that it is comparable to broader studies involving more than one forum. For instance, the comparison of political Usenet newsgroups conducted by Wilhelm (1998, 2000) examined a number of 500 messages out of 10 newsgroups / AOL channels (collected over one month). Hill and Hughes (1998) studied a corpus of 5,611 messages in 22 newsgroups (followed over a period of 10 weeks, thus with 2,244 messages in 4 weeks). And Rojo and Ragsdale (1997) studied 11 mailinglists with an average of 122 messages per month. Schneider's (1997) dissertation is based on a much larger corpus of ca. 46,000 messages. However, these belong to only one newsgroup and were collected over the course of one year, so that the average activity in the newsgroup is almost equal to the activity in the forum regarded here (ca. 3,650 in 29 days).

To begin with, the general structure of participation in the debate is examined. Three groups of participants can be distinguished by their degree of involvement: first, there are those who visited the forum but did not register for participation. These users could only read contributions to the forum, but were not able to write contributions. As they did not leave many traces, it is difficult to specify the size of this group. From the ‘page views’ of the starting page of the forum registered in the server log files (n=6,089), we can assume that at most 6,000 people visited the forum, possibly considerably less.

The second group of participants did register for the debate and was thus able to use all functions of the online forum. However, they did not write any messages. Of the 538 registered users, only about one half (n=265) were active participants who wrote contributions and thus drove the deliberation forward and were represented with their views.⁴

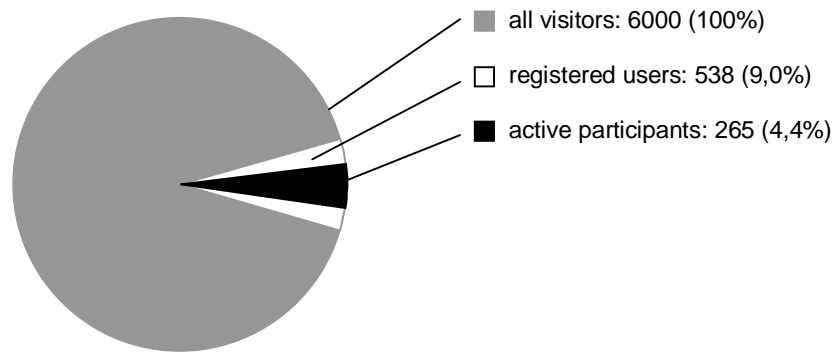


Fig. 1: Proportion of visitors, registered users and active participants

Whereas the number of participants seems relatively small, the amount of participation, measured by the number of contributions, was very high. In average, 135 contributions were written per day (max: 217; min: 48). That means that each active participant wrote in average 14.7 contributions (max.: 170 contributions/participant). However, the distribution of contributions across participants is highly distorted, as we see from the Lorenz curve in figure one.

⁴ Of course, we have to note that some of the passive users may also felt represented in the debate, if other users already expressed their issue, and this might be a reason for them to remain silent and passive.

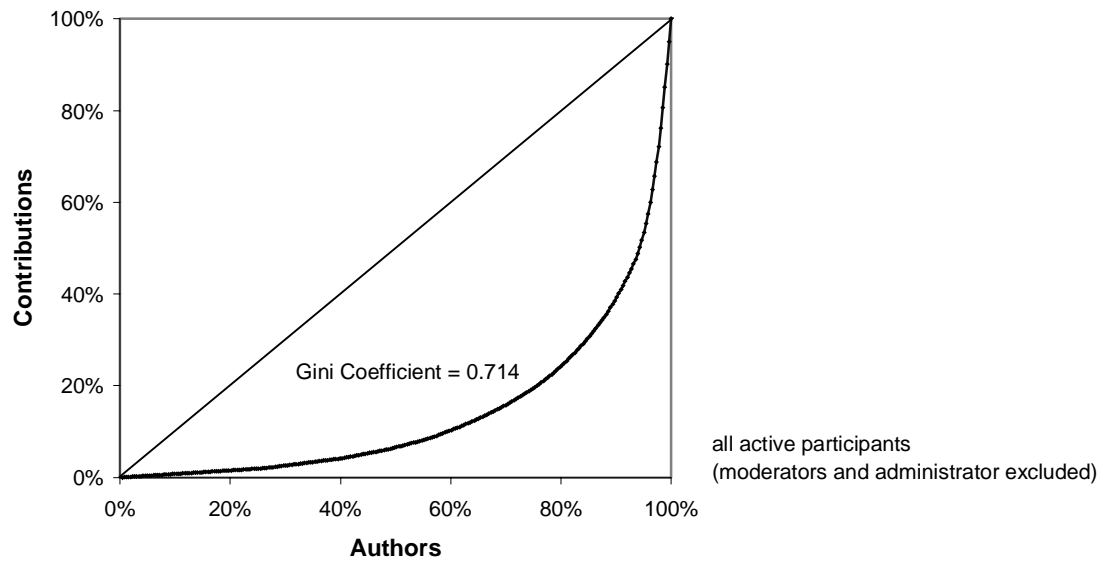


Fig. 2: Concentration of authorship in the debate (Lorenz curve)

The Gini coefficient of the distribution (cf. Litz 1998: 102ff.) is 0.714, indicating a strong distortion.⁵ Thus, a small number of participants was responsible for the very most of the contributions. E.g., twenty per cent of the active users wrote more than three quarters of the contributions, the single most active user had a share of 4.3% (not counting the moderator). Such a result is commonly observed in discussions on the web as well as in offline debates (see the discussion above).

By analysing the results of a survey conducted at the end of the debate, we can have a closer look at the characteristics of the active participants. The survey generated data on age, gender, Internet experience as well as detailed information about the experiences with the debate and the technical system on which it was held. A total number of 70 users took part in the survey. The results of this survey cannot be considered representative, as the respondents chose freely to participate, and only those who checked the website during the last days of the debate had a chance to participate. However, the results of the survey are corroborated by the observations done by the team of facilitators who followed the debate intensively during the course of four weeks.

⁵ Schneider (1997) has also used this measure of concentration in analysis of Usenet communication. His result was even a bit more extreme than the value found here.

The demographic results of the survey indicate that the factors identified in the discussion above have indeed influenced the structure of participation: concerning the question of gender, only 27.1% of the responding users were female. According to a representative study of online users in Germany in the same time, 42% of users were female (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen Online 2003). That is, the gender gap in the debate is more extreme than we would assume from the digital divide. Obviously, in addition to the availability of access, there are other factors motivating especially male users to join the debate.

From the literature on political participation, however, we know that gender differences are relatively small, if any are found at all (see e.g. Verba/Schlozman/Brady 1995, Bennett & Bennett 1986). Thus, even the combined factors of access to the Internet and political participation are not sufficient to explain the gender gap in participation, and we will have to think about other factors not studied so far.

Concerning the second demographic aspect, age, we find that all groups of age were represented, from below 18 years to more than 55 years old. However, the distribution is neither equal nor does it match the figures for the Hamburg population (see table 2).

DEMOS (n %)		Hamburg (%)	German Internet (%)	
< 18 yrs	2 2,9	16,0	14-19 yrs	13,2
18-26 yrs	11 15,7	9,5	20-29 yrs	20,9
27-40 yrs	37 52,9	24,4	30-39 yrs	26,4
41-55 yrs	13 18,6	20,2	40-49 yrs	20,1
> 55 yrs	7 10,0	29,8	50-59 yrs	12,5
			60+ yrs	7,0
Total	70 100,1	99,9		100,1

Table 2: Distribution of age among participants, the population of Hamburg, and (with different categories) the German Internet population
(Source: Statistisches Landesamt Hamburg 2003, TNS Emnid 2002)

Whereas compared to the population of Hamburg in general, young people (from 18 to 26) are overrepresented, even more so are people between 27-40 years, the majority of participants. Older people up to an age of 55 are slightly underrepresented (and considering the small sample, the difference seems negligible), those over 55 heavily. Compared to data on German Internet users, young people (under 27) are underrepresented, and the large group of people between 27 and 40 years is overrepre-

sented. The figures for people above 40 years match more or less with the data on Internet users.

In contrast to the gender gap, these findings can be explained by a combination of the rate of Internet access and political interest. Young people are generally seen to be less interested in mainstream politics than older ones (cf. Haerpfer et al. 2002). This explains the small share of young people found in our debate relative to the population of Internet users. However, the share is relatively high if we look at the data from the population of Hamburg and studies of political participation. Seemingly, the Internet has a positive effect on the participation of young people.⁶ In the case of people over 55, we can observe an opposite effect. Here, the Hamburg population is clearly underrepresented, whereas the amount in the Internet population is more or less the same. Obviously, the digital divide is a true barrier to participation in this case.

A further question in the survey concerned the level of Internet experience. On a scale from 1 ('novice user') to 5 ('expert user'), the average of all responses was 3.9, indicating a high degree of proficiency. No one was considering himself to be novice user, only two users chose a '2'. But considering the fact that the survey was conducted in the last week of the debate, we see that not only the highly experienced users participated, but also average Internet users. More than two thirds of the respondents indicated an intermediate level of Internet experience.

We turn now to a specific group of active participants, the ten most active users. An analysis of their behaviour can give us more insights about characteristics typical for participants in online deliberations. For instance, we find that they did not have any problems with revealing their personal identity. In contrast to the assumption that people are attracted to online debates because they can remain anonymous (Stromer-Galley 2002), none of the ten most active users seemed to have a problem with showing his identity – most of them talked freely about their real-world life, all made their name visible in their profile, and even gave their full name, address and date of

⁶ This assumption is also supported by a contribution from the mother of a 12 year old boy in the debate. She writes that her son enjoyed the debate much, especially as it reminded him of a computer game simulating real life. Obviously, participating on the Internet can have an entertaining aspect, at least for young people.

birth to be viewed by the other participants.⁷ This conforms with results of prior empirical research (Rafaeli/Sudweeks 1998).

Another assumption found in the literature is that these few very active users dominate the debate. As we have seen above, their share of contributions is so high that the equality of positions represented in the debate seems to be in danger (34.9% of contributions were written by the ten most active users). However, other researchers have pointed out that the very active participants do not push their own interests in the foreground. Instead, they take on the role of ‘latent representatives’, raising their voice for what they perceive as the opinion of other participants (Rauch 1983), thus reducing the complexity of large-scale debates (cf. Nonnecke/Preece 2003).

In the debate in Hamburg, a different phenomenon was observed. On the one hand, the most active users did not overrule the debate with their personal issues. With a share of maximally 4.3% of all contributions, it would have been difficult for an individual user to dominate the debate because it was simply too large. On the other hand, they did neither propagate the interests of other participants. Such a representative function seems to be more typical for offline debates, as in online debates, the social pressure on speakers is much lower. Instead, these users acted as a sort of ‘senior’ participants in the debate, giving advice and providing other participants with an overview of the debate (‘we already had this discussion ...’).

This observation is corroborated by the statistical analysis: the amount of replies among the contributions of the ten most active users (85% of the contributions were replies) was higher than the average over all participants (64%). And they received less comments than other users (0.63 replies per contribution vs. 0.96 among all users). That means, they contributed to the interactivity of the debate without profiting from it, clearly contrasting the free-rider assumption that was held by some studies (e.g. Kollock/Smith 1996). But of course, ‘seniority’ also means that they tried to influence the style of debate and watched the behaviour of other users, a function formally left to the moderators of the debate.

⁷ Thanks to their openness, we also know that the most active users were a heterogeneous group. One of them was 17 years old and still at school, the oldest among them was 53 years old and already retired. Some were active in interest groups on a local level, one was a parliamentarian in the federal state of lower Saxony, one was professionally interested in citizen participation via the Internet, yet others were simply citizens with a strong political interest. However, all of them were male, and all of them spent considerable time on the system, meaning they must have had enough spare time to contribute actively.

Analysis of the content of the debate gives further evidence that participants were not able to dominate the discourse, which even shows signs of self-regulation and rational-critical orientation necessary for free and equal participation. For example, one participant was dropping in the forum on one day, writing 6 contributions one after another. The style of her contributions was largely emotional, without reference to the issue at stake and without much rational argument. However, the reaction of the forum was not a sort of ‘flame war’, as one might expect. Instead, people calmly called her to cool down, and criticised her style. Most participants tried to bring some rational arguments in themselves. The forum in this case was immune against attempts to disturb the argumentative style and orientation, and the offender was educated to behave accordingly. However, as she was not able to stimulate disorder, she soon left the forum.⁸

Another example is the case of one activist pushing forward a specific issue, the protection of the environment in his neighbourhood against plans to build houses there. The area concerned lies in the far north of the city, so that it is only of marginal interest to other citizens – although it affects a more general discourse about the care of natural resources.

This participant joined the debate during the first week and stayed with it until the end. His contributions came in three ‘waves’, with a couple of contributions written in very short time. He was not really taking care of what other participants had said. Instead, he was pushing his issue, sometimes with explicit calls for protests. His style in most contributions resembled Cato’s, picking up whichever contribution he found and adding his „*ceterum censeo* ...“-call to protect nature in his local area. He did not include arguments to support his view, but rather relied on the face validity of his claims. All in all, there was only one constructive contribution to the debate among his 17 messages.

In contrast to the case mentioned above, the reaction of the forum was only partly a rejection of his contributions. A number of contributions took up his thread, as the general topic ‘protection of nature’ was considered very important by the participants. They tried to turn the debate to a more argumentative style, adding arguments to sustain the idea and elaborating proposals how it could be achieved. However, no

⁸ Interestingly, as we know from her user profile, she was an active local politician, engaging for the use of online forums in her local district. But apparently, she herself was not so much interested in the deliberation actually happening, but rather in having her say and then leaving the forum.

one in the forum supported his lobbying activity for his living environment, some directly accusing him of pursuing a partial interest without thinking about the other people potentially affected by it. Since he did not give arguments to strengthen his view, he was not finding the support he was seeking in order to influence the city's politics.⁹ As we see from this example, the argumentative culture of the forum made it difficult to push a partial interest on the agenda of the discussion.

Both examples, as well as other experiences gained during the debate, show that there was a high degree of discipline among the communicating participants. From the research literature we expected to find exactly the opposite, e.g. flame wars and self-interested, non-rational arguing instead of deliberative argumentation, and debates about censorship instead of concentration on the topic at stake (cf. Dutton 1996). An explanation for this might be found in the fact that the forum was not a completely free space. Instead, there were mechanisms to foster communicative discipline and to replace the social control available in offline debates: a document explaining the rules of conduct was accessible from every page in the forum. Furthermore, the debate was moderated by a team of four moderators who were highly present during the entire debate (their share of contributions was 12.4%).

Explicit enforcement of the rules was only seldom necessary in the debate. A few participants were advised to respect the rules, and a small number of contributions were sent back to their authors for revision because they were not conforming to the style of decent conversation. Only few participants questioned the legitimacy of the moderators. Instead, participants themselves were even taking care of the correct behaviour in the debate, thus easing the task of the moderators. All in all, the mechanisms established a constructive atmosphere of mutual respect and rational orientation that made it unattractive for individuals to brake the rules of conduct.

Finally, we will have a look at what has actually been communicated in the deliberation, at what kind of ideas (i.e., proposals how the city of Hamburg could get more attractive) has been developed in the deliberation. Fifty-seven ideas were identified in the debate, each idea being discussed in several contributions. Some ideas had already been on the agenda of local politics. Other ideas came up by way of comparison with successful projects in other cities, yet others were developed from scratch,

⁹ Ironically, when a local TV station reported in the news about the results of the online deliberation, a petition by his initiative was featured at even greater length in the same programme. Obviously, the traditional media were more responsive to the sort of political event culture staged by the initiative.

based on creative visions and the resources the city has to offer. An example of the latter kind is the idea to restructure the banks of the Elbe river in a way as to create a mediterranean flair, with bridges like the famous ‘Ponte Vecchio’ where today the remainders of the once-large harbour can be seen.

One observation was that some ideas were backed up institutionally – people who were already engaged in issue-specific organisations were using the public debate as a further means to pursue their aims.¹⁰ But only if an idea was finding a number of supporters writing contributions was it able to find sustained interest. This points to a communicative mechanism rather than an institutional one: the attention of people in the forum was driven particularly to those threads of discourse that were very active. Instead of avoiding such issues in fear of information overload, people used activity as an indicator to find out what’s interesting and to filter out the irrelevant. Thus, it was quite difficult for participants to start a new thread, however, once a new contribution had received a number of replies, people were joining in, curious about what was so interesting about it.

Another observation was that beside those well-known ideas, new and especially spectacular ideas were among the most stimulating and accepted ones. For example, the above mentioned idea to redesign the river banks was illustrated by the metaphor of ‘Ponte Vecchio’, making it fascinating and unrealistic in the mean time. Another much debated idea was to build ‘floating houses’, a convincing vision for the many water areas in Hamburg.

The debate also placed new issues prominently on the political agenda. For example, many ideas concerned an economically weak district of Hamburg with a lot of social problems (e.g., the three largest single threads dealt with this area). In the debate, participants were pointing out the several resources of this district that are yet unexploited. This made the government recognize the importance of this region for the future vision of Hamburg, and led to a more prominent coverage of this area in the plans developed by political representatives. In this case, the combined force of the creativity of the participants and the support of a number of organisations from

¹⁰ Many of the ideas presented were from participants involved in civic or political organisations. However, our survey results show that only 30% of the respondents were members of such organisations. Thus, people not already institutionally engaged were participating in the debate, though they were represented less prominently in the results.

within the district helped to influence not only the debate, but also the offline political world.

4 Discussion and Conclusions

The starting point for this investigation was the opposition of two perspectives on the Internet, an enthusiastic one and a sceptical one. With respect to political debates, the first looked at the technological potential of the Internet and predicted that it would make political debates more egalitarian and free, counterbalancing distortions commonly observed in political participation. The latter was pointing to the way people communicate on the Internet and was sceptical about the effects, arguing that in the best case, the Internet would not change anything at all, if not adding further distorting factors. Based on initial empirical observations that disagreed with either of these positions, we analysed the case more deeply.

The results of the explorative case study confirm the initial assumption that we need a new description of online debates. To explain these findings, neither the technological factors nor the practices of Internet usage observed so far are sufficient. Both obviously have an influence on the way people debate online, but there must be other factors not yet discussed in the literature on online deliberation and participation in general so far.

To summarize some of the findings, the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants can be explained in part by the literature on Internet access as well as by theories of political participation. For example, the relatively large amount of young people in the debate can be interpreted as a positive effect of the new technologies on the political engagement of this group, supporting the Utopian hopes of some Internet researches that new voices can be heard online. On the other hand, the example of old people shows that the limited access of this group excluded them from the online deliberation, thus supporting the sceptical perspective. But still, it is striking that the number of women participating in the debate was even smaller than predicted by the combined force of both groups of factors.

Then again, we see that most people actively participating had quite a lot of experience with the Internet and spent much time online. This conforms with the assertions of usability research and the literature on digital inequality. But the ideas collected in the deliberation came from actors with diverse backgrounds, many of them not organised in civic organisations or politically active beyond the online deliberation.

And the quality of debate was higher than one could expect from studies in computer-mediated communication, and even surpassing what could have been achieved if the experiment was conducted offline, without the help of Internet technology (for a similar consideration, see Beierle 2002: 49f.). And still, the debate was not the sort of free exchange of ideas associated with the deliberative ideal (cf. Habermas 1996), but rather characterised by unequal distribution of contributions and by large-scale effects such as an economy of attention similar to that of traditional mass media. In this final section, I will try to explore which factors can be identified to provide an explanation for the results observed. A first group of factors includes well-known constraints of political participation, most notably the economic and cultural resources people hold, their social environment and, related to these, prior political interest. These factors mingle with a second group of factors determining Internet usage. Among these are education, economic background, age, gender and Internet experience. It is important to note that it's not only socio-economic factors that are relevant for Internet usage, but also – and maybe even increasingly – aesthetic or cultural aspects. E.g., survey research has shown that Internet users clearly differ from non-users in terms of their individualistic-hedonistic value orientation (TNS Emnid 2002). And – as we learned from many comments and as some usability researchers had predicted – not only navigational issues, but also the visual appearance of the website made participants stick to (or run off) the deliberation in Hamburg. The two groups of factors seem to act as a double filter on online political participation. Moreover, both aspects are likely to reinforce each other, as participation as well as Internet usage in part depend on the same factors. However, participation in online politics does not necessarily follow the same patterns as offline participation. Contrary to what some researchers readily conclude, technology does matter. For example, with the Internet, someone interested, but not having the time to participate in offline meetings is able to participate in online deliberations. Thus, the Internet can relieve some constraints of traditional political practices. But still, one has to be willing to participate in the first place, so that the basic factors determining political participation are also relevant (see also Fuchs 2003).

Whereas these two groups of factors are discussed in most of the research literature, a third aspect needs to be supplemented. These factors can be derived from the mass medium character of online communication. Media researchers long have identified so-called 'news factors', which determine the chances of a news item to appear in the

various news media (cf. Galtung/Ruge 1981, Luhmann 2000). This argument can be transferred to online deliberation, at least as long as it has a large-scale character such as the experiment in Hamburg (the crucial factor is whether participants have the chance to read and react to every single contribution – this was clearly not the case in the Hamburg case). Here, it is not some journalist or editor who decides about the publication, but the auditorium who decides which contributions to reply to – thus starting a debate about the issue raised, or ignoring it. The visibility of a contribution (i.e. the number of replies in the thread) in this respect depends on similar factors as the publication of a news item. The observations made in the case study show that the originality of a contribution, how controversial it is, and to which person it is related were important factors in determining which ideas were represented most prominently in the debate. Regarding the personality factor, some politicians were able to transfer their status from the political field to the online deliberation: what they said was considered as very important, and many participants read and commented on these contributions.

These factors are new in the debate on online deliberation, and their influence is orthogonal to the factors mentioned above. As they are identified on the basis of observations of a singular case, one might doubt whether they are generally relevant to online deliberations. However, there are some theoretical arguments supporting this assumption. On the one hand, their influence depends on the size of the debate. In small group discussions, there is no need to choose among the contributions. In large-scale debates, however, selectivity becomes important, and thus factors regulating people's attention. On the other hand, design factors are also important. There needs to be a feedback mechanism coupling the production and the reception of the contributions. In the case of news items, this is the practice of journalism. In the case of an online forum, it is the visibility of the participants' choices to reply to specific contributions that serves as feedback mechanism. Only if participants can see which contributions stimulate the largest threads can the news factor become relevant. In the case of the debate in Hamburg, this was established by the regular summaries of the moderators, and by the arrangement of contributions on the computer screen. The importance of such design choices was already emphasized by Tambini (1999: 319). It shows that online deliberations do not happen in an empty space, but depend on several context factors (see also Guthrie/Dutton 1992). Besides the design of the forum itself, these also include the integration of the forum in the larger political sys-

tem. In the debate in Hamburg, the fact that the debate was organised under the auspices of the city's government, that there was a competition of ideas and feedback into the (offline) political process (presentation to the mayor) structured the expectations as well as the behaviour of the participants. We can further assume that it is particularly this integration into the political processes that determines which of the factors mentioned above are most influential. For example, if the online deliberation closely resembles traditional politics, it is likely that factors of political participation are dominant. If, instead, the forum is organised independently and strongly moderated, we can expect the mass-media factors to be prevailing.

The scope of this case study is, of course, too limited to give more precise explanations of the connection between the political context and the factors influencing participation and representation in an online debate. However, we have been able to show that online deliberations are special, in that they do not follow the same patterns as offline political engagement. And we have identified heuristically a set of factors that cover the phenomena observed in the analysis. Whether we can generalize these is a matter of future empirical research and theoretical argumentation. But the results also show that research on electronic democracy should not be confined to political science, but also include the insights of usage studies and of mass communication research.

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