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Variations in deliberativeness of Web-debates:

Analysis of the external impact hypothesis

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Introduction

Despite the novelty of the topic, research aiming at evaluating the level of deliberation of online debates has rapidly gained a great interest among the academic community. A reading of the literature reveals that several researchers have already attempted to analyze the functioning and deliberativeness of a great variety of online debates such as political newsgroups (Schneider 1997; Hill & Hughes 1998; Wilhelm 1999; Davis 1999; Hageman 2002; Bentivegna 1998; Dumoulin 2003; Fuchs 2006), web-forums of political parties, cities or associations (Tanner 2001; Tsaliki 2002; Desquinado 2007; Wojcik 2006; Jankowsky & van Os 2002, Greffet & Wojcik 2008), web-forums hosted by mass media (Schutz 2000; Berdal 2004), e-consultation forums (Beirle 2002; Coleman et al., 2002; Hansard Society 2006; Albrecht 2003; Monnoyer-Smith 2004) as well as experimental web-forums that generally promote forms of debates that involve at the same time politicians and ordinary citizens (Jensen 2003a; Jankowsky & van Selm, 2000).

While such efforts are useful in order to explain the discursive dynamics of specific cases, they are problematic for reaching a global understanding of the deliberativeness of the online debates and their potential impact on the opinion and decision making process. This paper sets up a first attempt to summarize and compare in a systematic way the main results obtained by precedent studies. From a descriptive perspective this comparative analysis is useful since it describes the variety of existing online forums and the methods of investigation in order to measure their level of deliberation and, from an exploratory perspective, the results obtained through this analysis allow to reach a broader understanding of the deliberativeness of the online debates by observing, at a basic level, whether the online debates can be deliberative at all and, at a more advanced level, whether the level of deliberativeness varies according to certain contextual factors. Particularly we will analyze whether what we define as the

“external impact factor” is positively correlated with the deliberativeness of the debates. This hypothesis, that we already formulated elsewhere (Janssen & Kies 2005), and has since then also been mentioned and discussed by Thompson (2008), postulates that if ordinary citizens believe what they write could have an impact on the decision making process, they will be more motivated in adopting a deliberative attitude. This means that they should be more motivated to read and react to the comments formulated by other participants (*Reciprocity*), to justify their opinions (*justification*), to critically examine their own opinions (*reflexivity*), to be sensitive to other opinions and views (*empathy*), to be sincere (*sincerity*), and to reach an agreement (*search for agreement*). Additionally, since it is a discursive context that is perceived to have an impact on the decision making process, it should also attract a *plurality of voices* (Kies & Kriesi 2005), particularly if the discursive architecture promotes the *inclusion* and the *discursive equality*. By contrast it is relevant to note that Thompson argues that the potential impact of a discussion space may generate the opposite effect: “*Participants may act more strategically; show less tolerance for opponents, and take more extreme positions*” (Thompson 2008: 503). While we believe that this can be the case for debates, such as parliamentary debates, where important decisions are at stake and where participants defend interests that are hardly negotiable, we do not believe that this hypothesis works in cases, such as the ones we study, where participants are ordinary citizens and where no immediate political decisions are taken.

1.1 Method of analysis

The paper will test the external impact hypothesis by looking at the results of ten existing studies that measure the deliberativeness of the online debates in different contexts. These latter have been distinguished from the viewpoint of their potential impact on the decision-making process and from the viewpoint of the categories of actors they belong to. The first distinction allows to evaluate for each deliberative criterion whether they are affected by the external impact factor while the second distinction (media forum, civil societies and political parties forum, experimental and institutional forums), aims to provide some initial data concerning the way the online debates could contribute to the realization of an efficient model of deliberative democracy. It is important to specify that the explicative ambition of such a broad comparative effort is limited in so far as the case studies analyzed are not necessarily representative of the categories they stem from and because they use different deliberative criteria and methods for operationalizing them. Note also that the case studies analyzed are based on different discursive platforms which is positive for it allows an evaluation of the deliberativeness of the online debates that is not just based on one type of discursive platform, but that can be problematic when testing the external impact hypothesis in so far as the deliberativeness of the online debates may also be influenced by their discursive architectures and rules. Some studies evaluate *newsgroups*, that are generally free and un-moderated, other evaluate *web-forums*, that are generally hosted by the website of a specific institution and tend to be moderated, while other evaluate *experimental/e-consultation forums* which agenda tend to be controlled, and that are generally governed by strict rules of moderation and identification. For this reason, when testing the “external impact” hypothesis, one should be aware of the existence of intervening variables that could explain divergences of the deliberativeness of the debates, such as the moderation rules, the identification policy, the

control of the agenda, and the nature and ideology of the institutions hosting the online debates.

We will now provide a comprehensive description of the case studies analyzed by starting with the forum that have a low impact external (weak publics) and pursue with the forums that have higher external impact (strong publics). We considered that six of them had a limited external impact, while the other four had a stronger external impact. For each study we indicate the nature of the actors analyzed, the number of comments scrutinized as well as the period and method of investigation.

Concerning the public that has a low external impact the following four empirical analysis were selected: 1) The analysis of *four partisan newsgroups* affiliated to different Italian political parties and coalitions: the democratic party of the left (DS), the political coalition of the center-left (Ulivo), the political coalition of the right headed by Forza Italia (Polo), and the post-fascist political party (Alleanza Nazionale). All messages that were sent in the four newsgroups over a period of one month (September 1997) were scrutinized. This corresponds to a total of 783 messages (Bentivegna 1998); 2) The analysis of *ten U.S. newsgroups* that were randomly selected (six were typical newsgroups and four were discussion lists drawn from the commercial website American Online). From each newsgroup 50 consequent messages were randomly selected over the same period (October 1996) and were evaluated through content analysis (Wilhelm 1999); 3) The analysis of *three Canadian newsgroups*: two are based on topics of political interest – “Western thoughts of separation”, that promotes the independence of western provinces of Canada and “Avant-Garde Quebec” that promotes the political sovereignty of Québec - and the last one, “Gay right”, is based on topic of social interest. For each newsgroup 201 messages, selected during the month of November 2001, were evaluated through content analysis (Dumoulin 2003); 4) The analysis of a successful Austrian newsgroups *politik-forum.at* which in May 2006 had approximately 2.300 registered

users and 80.840 messages. This analysis focuses specifically on the discussion board regarding national politics that holds about 10.700 postings. The author analyzed through content analysis all threads that got started during one specific month (January 2006). This is summarized in a sample of 28 threads and a total of 754 messages (Fuchs 2006).

Also in the category of the forums that have a limited external impact, two studies based on the web-forums of newspapers and magazines were also selected: 1) The online forum of *New York Times* and the way its journalists interacted with their readers through email. The investigation is based on a questionnaire sent to 50 journalists (19 responded) and a survey sent October 1997 to 100 users of the forum that were randomly selected (59 percent responded) (Schultz 2000); 2) The web-forums of three major newspapers/magazines, *Spiegel Online (SOF)*, *Debattcentralen (DC)* and *Guardian Unlimited Talk (GUT)*. The analysis is based on online questionnaire sent to the users and on interviews with the moderators of the forums (Berdal 2004).

Finally concerning the experimental and e-consultations forums, four case studies were selected: 1) The Danish governmental sponsored web-forum (*Nordpol*) that had the ambition to increase citizens' interest in politics and to strengthen the dialogue among citizens and politicians just before regional election of 2001. The research is based on content analysis as well as on survey data of the participants. A total of 239 postings were scrutinized, a little more than half of the debate. Of the 239 postings, 59 percent originated from politicians (Jensen 2003); 2) The analysis of e-consultation forum organized by the *U.S. Environment Protection Agency (EPA)* aiming to obtain inputs for its draft Public Involvement Policy (PIP). The forum lasted 11 days (July 10 to July 20, 2001). By the end of the dialogue 1.166 people from all over the country registered to participate. A total of 1.261 postings were provided by 320 people. The analysis is essentially based on survey of the users of the forum (Beirle 2002); 3) The German project "*Demos*". It is an online deliberative consultation organized by the city of

Hamburg in November 2002. The objective was to raise ideas for the development of a strategic vision for the future development of the city. At the end the most interesting ideas were chosen selected by a jury and their contributors were invited to meet the Mayor to present and discuss the ideas. The debate was broadly advertised in the local media. In the end, 538 users had registered for the debate, a total contribution of 3.907 messages. The study is essentially based on survey (70 people responded) (Albrecht 2003); 4) The UK project “*Tellparliament*” which is an experimental website implemented Hansard Society that hosts e-consultation forums on demand of the committee of the House of Commons or the Chamber of Lords. So far the website hosted five e-consultation forums¹. The forums lasted between three to eight weeks, the number of registered users varied from 81 to 335 and the number of messages sent varied from 42 to 554. The evaluation is based on survey, open-ended questions to participants, and interviews with people responsible for the implementation of the project (Hansard, 2006).

These different case studies have been measured on the basis of six deliberative criteria: *reciprocity, justification, plurality, empathy, reflexivity, external impact*. As already mentioned, the significance of our comparative analysis is necessarily limited for not all the deliberative criteria have been gauged, and because the different studies that were selected did not measure all the six deliberative criteria we identified and rarely operationalized them in the same way. The criterion of *reciprocity* has been assessed in two different ways. At a basic level the criterion of reciprocity measures the proportion of posts that are part of thread versus the ones that initiate a thread (R1). Such measure is revelatory of the ability and willingness of the web-discussants to find a common issue of the discussion. At a more progressive level, the criterion of reciprocity aims to observe the extent to which a post takes into consideration arguments and opinions of a precedent posting (R2). This measure is an important revelator of the deliberativeness of the debates in so far as a genuine and constructive debate can only

emerge if participants listen to each others. The criterion of *justification* has also been assessed at two different levels. On a basic level by observing whether the opinions expressed in a forum are justified (or not) (J1) and, at a more advanced level, by assessing the elaborateness of the justifications (J2). The criterion of *plurality* has been assessed in three different ways: i) on the basis of the content of messages themselves (PC), ii) on the basis of the plurality of the topics defining the agenda (PA) and iii) on the basis of the socio-demographic profile of the users (generally active ones). For the plurality based on the socio-demographic profiles, it is possible to distinguish two evaluative standards. Firstly the “inclusive plurality” (Inc.P) which evaluates whether citizens who do not belong to a specific institution or who are generally not listened to on some specific topics will benefit the internet to express their opinions, questions or concerns. Secondly the “institutional plurality” (Inst.P) which evaluates whether participants in a discussion space reflect the socio-demographic profile of the citizens who usually belong to or are in contact with the institutions to which the discussion space is affiliated. This institutional plurality requires, for example, that the user-panel of the web-forum of a newspaper should be representative of its readers and that the users of a political party’s web-forum should be representative of its sympathizers and voters. The deliberative criterion of *empathy* was generally assessed by just looking at the respect of the messages. It looks at the proportion of messages that were insulting, ridiculing or injurious and sometimes compares them with the proportion of messages that revealed concerns for the opinions and needs of fellow citizens. The criterion of *reflexivity* measures the extent to which online debates have increased the knowledge and/or influenced the initial opinions of its participants (active or passive). This has been measured in a deductive way by looking at the scores of the deliberative criteria of plurality and reciprocity and by asking directly to the participants (generally through online surveys) whether they feel more informed and have changed their mind after participating at the online debates. Lastly the criterion of *external*

impact measures the extent to which the debates that took place in the web-debate influenced directly or indirectly debates and if political decisions taken place outside the forum. Depending on the context where it was measured and the choices of the researcher, this criterion has been measured in different ways. It has been measured by looking at the socio-demographic profile of the users, through interviews and surveys of the people that were likely to be influenced, and by looking at concrete outcomes of the debates such as, for example, draft policies.

2. Findings

The table that follows offers a global view of the scores obtained by the different empirical studies for each deliberative criterion. For each criterion an analysis comparing the results obtained by the different studies is proposed.

| Weak publics | Reciprocity | Justification | Plurality | Respect | Internal Impact | External Impact |
|---|----------------------|---------------------|------------------------------|---------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 3 Italian newsgroups (Bentivegna, 1998) | R1: High R2: / | / | PA: High | High | / | / |
| Analysis of 10 US newsgroups (Wilhelm, 1999) | R1: / R2: Low | J1: High J2: / | PC: Low | / | Low | / |
| 3 Canadian newsgroups. (Dumoulin, 2003) | R1: High R2: Low | / | PC: Medium | Medium | Low | / |
| Austrian newsgroup (Fuchs, 2006) | R1: / R2: High | J1: High J2: Low | PC: High | Low | / | / |
| Media | | | | | | |
| Webforum and email of NYT (Schultz, 2000) | / | / | Inc.P: Low Inst.P: Medium | / | / | Medium |
| Webforum of 3 newspapers (Berdal, 2004) | / | / | Inc.P: Low Inst.P: Medium | ? | / | Medium |
| e-consultation and experimental forum | | | | | | |
| Environmental Protection Agency (Beirle, 2002) | R1: High R2: High | / | Inc.P: Low Inst.P: High | High | High | High |
| Nordpol.dk (Jensen, 2003) | R1: High R2: High | J1: High J2: / | Inc.P: Medium | High | High | High |
| Demos project (Albrecht, 2003) | / | / | Inc.P: Medium | High | / | / |
| Tell the parliament (Hansard, 2006) | / | / | Inc.P: High | / | High | High |
| R1: Proportion of msgs in a same thread R2: Proportion of msgs referring to the content of precedent msg J1: Proportion of msgs containing a justification J2: Level of complexity of the justification PA: Plurality of the agenda (topics discussed) PC: Plurality based on the content of the messages Inc.P: Inclusive plurality Inst.P: Institutional plurality | | | | | | |

2.1 Reciprocity

Regarding the basic level of reciprocity (R1), the latter scored high both for the weak publics (with low external impact) and the strong publics (with high external impact). For the weak publics the analysis of the four partisan newsgroups (Bentivegna 1998) and the three Canadian newsgroups (Dumoulin 2003) revealed that, in average, almost seven messages out of ten were replies to precedent messages. Similarly, for the Danish governmental web-forum *Nordpol*, 70 percent of the messages were a reply to precedent message and for the consultation organized by the Environmental Protection Agency 83 percent of all the messages were part of a thread. These findings suggest that, generally, the online debates are based on a majority of replies and a minority of postings that initiate a new topic. This tendency however is not constant. For instance Bentivegna noticed important divergences in the level of reciprocity among the political parties' newsgroups. Particularly the newsgroup affiliated to the right party "Alleanza Nazionale" presents a low level of reciprocity (34 percent). She suggests that this difference indicates the existence of a true difficulty in finding common issues for discussion, but also that it may be related to the presence of a moderator "*who, while on the one hand prevents the "flaming" and the "crosspost" operations...on the other hand weakens the discussion to the point of making it irrelevant*" (Bentivegna 1997, 5).

Concerning the more reflexive and meaningful type of reciprocity (R2), the results are more divergent. Concerning the weak publics, Wilhelm found for the ten American newsgroups he analyzed that just one message out of five represented a genuine reply to a previous posting. This signifies, he believes, that "*rather than listening to others, more often than not persons opposed to a seed message used it to amplify their own views*" (Wilhelm 1997, 171). He suggests that this may be due to the fact that "*there is no obligation to respond on the part of either latent or active forum participants...since messages are not addressed to any particular respondents, there is no imperative to respond on the part of an anonymous addressee*" (*idem*,

171). Similarly, Dumoulin (2003) observed that participants are not really considering with due respect the arguments of the senders to whom they reply. He compares the type of conversation to “interactive monologue” in which each participant wants to express their opinions without really considering the arguments of the other participants. However, this absence of genuine reciprocity cannot be generalized for all the newsgroups. In the case of the successful its Austrian newsgroup *political-forum.at*, almost 80 percent of the messages were replies to precedent posts (Fuchs, 2006).

More positive results of genuine reciprocity are to be found in the government-sponsored forum that includes citizens and politicians and the e-consultation forums. Concerning the Danish governmental sponsored forum *Nordpol*, Jensen found that half of the posts (49,4 percent) were genuinely reciprocal and that politicians tended to be more reciprocal than the citizens. Among the posts that were reciprocal, a great majority (85 percent) were labeled as “progress” which means that “*another posting is taken into account and the debater tries to bring the debate forward by reflecting and bringing in new positions, arguments and points*” (Jensen 2003a, 38). A minority of posts (9,3 percent) were labeled as “persuasion”, which means that “*the poster seemed to be persuaded by another poster’s opinions or arguments*” (*idem*, 38). Finally there were just 5,1 percent that were labeled as “radicalization” which suggests that: “*another posting is taken into consideration in a negative manner; the debater radicalizes his/her points and/or the disagreements are augmented*” (*idem*, 38). According to the Danish researcher, this absence of radicalization suggests that “*only a limited number of quarrels took place and that the participants in general were considerate and respectful to each other*” (*idem*, 38). The presence of reciprocity among citizens and politicians is further confirmed by a survey which reveals that 59 percent of the respondents felt that “*the politicians listen to the citizens and act accordingly*” while only 15 percent show “*little confidence*” (*idem*, 41). Regarding the e-consultation forums, Beirle found that the e-

consultation forum organized by the Environmental Protection Agency was reciprocal: “*After the first day, when people were simply introducing themselves rather than replying to earlier messages, the level of messages that were replies to previous messages leveled off 50 percent to 75 percent of messages each day*” (Beirle 2002, 37). As revealing factor of the reciprocity he observed that in many cases “*participants assisted each other in finding information and getting answer to questions*” (*idem*, 36).

The fact that a genuine type of reciprocity was always high for the strong publics and tended to be low for the weak publics suggests that the external impact hypothesis is verified. This implies that in deliberative contexts where citizens believe that their voice can lead to concrete outcomes - such as a widely read governmental forums where politicians participate and/or e-consultation forum in order to elaborate a draft policy - citizens are keener to listen and reply to each others than in contexts, such as newsgroups, where the opinions are unlikely to have an influence. These findings should however not be interpreted too strictly. As suggested by the Austrian newsgroups *political-forum.at*, there can be situations in which the level of reciprocity is high even if the impact of the forum is likely to be low. In this case there are others factors that motivate people to enter in interactive debates: there are for instance always people that have a natural inclination to debate seriously about political matters regardless of the fact that these may have no influence.

2.2 Justification

The criterion of justification has not been broadly assessed. Among the weak publics for which justification has been assessed, the Austrian newsgroup analyzed by Fuchs (2006) reveals that an important number of *opinions* were justified but only an extreme minority provided a rather complex justification. In fact, the vast majority of the posts including an

opinion did not provide any argument (25,8 percent) or just one argument (69,7 percent). Only a very small minority of them contained two (3,6 percent) or three and more arguments (0,9 percent). This shows according to him that “*most users in political online debate didn’t try to ground their opinions and ideas by looking for and communicating multiple reasons. There is a lack of complex arguments*” (Fuchs 2006, 21). Wilhelm as well found that the opinions expressed in the U.S. newsgroups were frequently justified: “*About three (opinions) out of four provide reasons to justify their statements*” (Wilhelm 1997, 173). He suggests that this high proportion of justified opinions could emerge because unlike face-to-face interactions users had time to compose their messages in relative isolation and anonymity. He however does not assess the complexity of their argumentation.

Dealing now with the more influential discussion spaces, Jensen found that in the government sponsored forum, where politicians were active, the level of justification was also likely to be high. On the one hand he observed that the postings were generally long which suggests, according to him, the presence of argumentation: “*it is like “letter to the editor” – or a consultancy-based exchange of arguments with relatively few, but long, postings within each thread*” (Jensen 2003a, 34). He also observed that the vast majority of the opinions were based on argumentation (81 percent). The arguments were generally validated on the basis of personal information, opinion and views (51,8 percent) versus external information, sources and arguments (30,3 percent). Finally it appears that the politicians were slightly more likely to be argumentative than citizens. Yet he does not say anything that concerns the complexity of the argumentations.

These three examples are too limited to draw any conclusion due to the extent to which the external impact would be positively correlated with the level of justification. Nevertheless they suggest that the pessimistic thesis according to which the online discursive context is unlikely to host debates that are based on justified argumentations is not verified. Further

investigations should be conducted to evaluate more deeply the potential impact of the weak/strong distinction on the presence and the level of justification. According to us the intensity of its effect is likely to be stronger for the complexity of justification than for the level of justification. In other words, we suggest that in a discursive context that is likely to have a strong external impact an ordinary citizen will be more motivated to justify in an elaborated way their opinions than in a discursive context that has a low external impact.

2.3 Plurality

Plurality is the only deliberative criterion that all the empirical investigations analyzed. Yet they did not all look at it equally. The studies based on newsgroups (weak publics) evaluated the level of plurality by analyzing the content of the messages (PC) and the diversity of topics initiated by the threads (PA) while the studies that focused on media and e-consultation and experimental forums evaluated the plurality on the basis of the socio-demographic profile of the passive and active users of the forum (PSD).

The level of plurality based on the content of the messages (PC) highly diverged among the three newsgroups that measured it. Wilhelm found that the U.S. newsgroups generally reflect a “community of interest” which means that the messages of a same newsgroup globally adhere “*to key political objectives, such as solidarity toward a candidate, party platform, issue or ideology*” (Wilhelm 1999, 166). According to him, this finding “*supports the view that individuals tend to seek out those individuals (and affiliation) with whom they agree*” (*idem*, 171). Differently, Dumoulin, who used the same categorization for measuring plurality, found much more nuanced results. Two of its Canadian newsgroups (Gay Right and Western Thought Separation) tended to be plural. And the last one that promoted the independence of Quebec was slightly more homogeneous. It was the only one in which the

dissidents messages were strongly criticized and rejected. These divergent findings suggest that newsgroups do not necessarily host debates among like-minded people. This is further confirmed by the analysis of Fuchs who observed that in its Austrian newsgroup debates were not dominated by any partisan ideologyⁱⁱ and that citizens referred to a plurality of political values in their argumentations. Concretely, only 16 percent of the messages expressed a political affiliationⁱⁱⁱ and almost the double (30,3 percent) referred to a great variety of political values^{iv} which according to the author suggests that: “*Moral seem to be an important aspect of political online debate*” (Fuchs 2006, 21).

The plurality based on the agenda of the debates (PA) is another strategy for assessing the plurality of the newsgroups that has been adopted for analyzing Italian newsgroups affiliated to political parties. The analysis reveals that plurality was present in so far as the people discussed a great variety of topics that essentially stem from the media which, according to her, “*bears witness to a lively interest as well as a clear willingness to talk about issues relevant to the country with all people, not just with those belonging to the same political group*” (Bentivegna 1998, 8). Interestingly she found that “*the personal experience and popular wisdom do not contribute in a significant way to the selection of issues, even though they can contribute to the articulation of the discussion*” (*idem*, 8). In other words, these findings suggest that the political parties to which the newsgroups are affiliated do not dominate and determine the agenda of the discussion that are taking place. It is not clear however how plural the debates will be around these different topics. In fact, it is not because a great variety of topics appears in the discussion table, that these latter will be the object of plural and contradictory debates.

The plurality based on the socio-demographic profile of the users (PSD) has been assessed for the forums of the media and the ones organized in the framework of experimental and e-consultation procedures. Concerning the discussion spaces hosted by the media, Shultz (2000)

observed that the active users of the forum of the *New York Times* were mainly male subjects (81 percent) and highly educated: over half of the respondents had a master or doctorate degree! In another study that compared the users of the forum of important newspaper/magazine in three different countries, Berdal (2004) observed that the users of the forum were also generally men. Additionally, he noted that while a certain amount of respondents were members of a political organization (mean 22,5 percent) almost none of the participants at the forum held a political position by election. In absence of more precise socio-demographic data, it is reasonable to consider that these forums score low from the view point of the “inclusive plurality” (PSD1) and that they score medium from the viewpoint of the “institutional plurality” (PSD2). The fact that the users of the newspapers’ forums tend to be highly educated and politically involved are signs suggesting that the users of the newspapers’ forum are at least partly representative of the readership of these different newspapers.

More elaborated data on the socio-demographic profile of the users have been gathered for the strong publics. This is the case of the Danish governmental forum (*Nordpol.dk*) that aimed just before the regional elections of 2001 to encourage young voters to become politically more active. This study reveals that participants tended to be male subjects (70,7 percent), highly educated, students (35,4 percent), “white collars and civil servant” (35,4 percent) and very active internet users (89 percent). Finally, the largest group of participants can be found within the second- and third-time voters (23 and 29 years old). While the participants are not representative of the Danish population at large, it is the case that the standards fixed by the inclusive plurality (PSD1) have been partly reached in so far as the forum has attracted citizens who are generally politically passive, i.e. the young voters who were the main focus of the experimental forum. This inclusiveness however cannot be considered to be high in so far as some of the users of the forum were already politically active: 25 percent were

members of a political party and ten percent were members of political organization.^v A greater inclusiveness of the participation has been observed for the *Demos* e-consultation conducted in the city of Hamburg and for the e-consultations realized by the Hansard Society in the framework of the project “*Tellparliament*”. The German project *Demos* reveals that among the participants appeared an overrepresentation of young adults (18-26 and 27-40 years old) while the surveys realized on the five consultations requested by the UK parliaments disclosed that citizens who were generally not in contact with the MPs and/or the parliament had been reached^{vi}. From a gender perspective, the data reveal that female subjects - generally absent from the (online) political debate - were more numerous in certain e-consultation forums, particularly when these were related to societal issues^{vii}.

Finally, considering the e-consultation forum realized for the Environmental protection agency, the survey realized by Beirle reveals that “*participants were not representative of the broader US population in terms of age, education, race, and computer usage*” (Beirle 2002, 10). He also observed that this e-consultation practice tended to reach the usual suspects since “*participants reported to be very familiar with EPA and its public participation processes*”. According to the author “*this created a tension between the benefits of having a highly experienced group of participants and the disadvantage that the experts were just talking to each other*” (*idem*, 10). In other words, these findings imply that the “inclusive plurality” was not reached but that the “institutional plurality” has been deepened since the e-consultation debates had attracted a greater number of citizens interested or involved in the policy of the environmental protection agency. As indicated by Beirle: “*the dialogue clearly reached a much larger and geographically diverse group than could ever had participate in person*” (*idem*, 10).

Is it possible to affirm on the basis of these results that the “external impact factor” has an impact on plurality? In other words can we say that political forum that are likely to have a

political impact (experimental and e-consultation forums) are more likely to become plural than political forum that are unlikely to have such an influence (newsgroups and media forum). As for the criterion of justification, the nature of the case studies analyzed and the methodology they use are too divergent to derive from them any convincing conclusion concerning the specific influence of the external impact factor. These data however indicate other factors that are likely to influence the level of plurality. In particular these findings reveal that the political affiliation may influence the plurality debates. This point is suggested by the study of Dumoulin which reveals that the newsgroups related to the independence of Quebec was less likely to be plural than the two other ones (Gay Right and Western Thought separation), it is also suggested by the analysis of the e-consultations of the Chamber of Lords, which revealed that, depending of the topics, the participation of female subjects varied. In order to evaluate the influence of the external impact on the plurality one should be granted the possibility to compare similar content and socio-demographic profile of online debates that diverge only from the view point of the external impact. If our hypothesis is verified, one should find out that forum of discussion that have a strong impact should foster the appearance and confrontation of plurality of opinions for the simple reason that all the persons who have a particular interest for the issues discussed should be more motivated to express and stand up for it in this specific discussion space.^{viii}

2.4 Empathy

The criterion of empathy, which requires participants to be sensitive to other views and opinion, has been assessed just through an evaluation of the *level of respect*. This scored very different according to the newsgroups analyzed. Fuchs (2006) who has analyzed a generalist Austrian political newsgroup observed that almost half of the messages (46,8 percent) were

either polemical, aggressive or cynical^{ix}. He also observed that 27 percent of the messages were based on personal attacks in so far as they were insulting or disparaging other users or using a violent tone. He suggests that this rather important tendency to violate the principles of respectful listening is due to the “deshinibiting” effect of the online communication that is based on anonymity and to the presence of an extreme right community that is likely to have contributed to the degeneration of the debates. To a lesser extent, instances of absence of respect were also observed with important variations in the three Canadian newsgroups analyzed by Dumoulin (2003). He observed that 18,3 percent of the messages were “non pertinent” (i.e. not related to the thematic of the forum) and 11 percent of the messages were “injurious”. The proportion of negative messages was particularly present in the newsgroup based on the gay community rights. The fact that this issue is particularly sensitive and refers to personal values is, according to Dumoulin, the reason why the injurious messages were numerous in this forum. He however noticed the presence of a successful dynamic of auto-moderation that was initiated by the users of the newsgroups. Bentivegna finally observed that the level of respect was relatively high in the four Italian political parties’ newsgroups: “*The prevailing tone of discussions seemed to be based upon the respect for the speaker – who is only rarely insulted or even attacked – and upon the desire to participate in the discussion, asking and offering information or soliciting opinions*” (Bentivegna 1998, 7). According to her measure only 9,6 percent of the messages were tagged “flaming” and no important divergences were observed among the newsgroups. Not much can be said about the level of respect of the newspapers’ web-forums. Schultz (2000) did not measure it and Berdal (2004) just provides a superficial indication of it by asking in its survey whether the users considered “*that some postings sabotage the discussion*”. Unsurprisingly more than half of the responded replied affirmatively. This result is however not comparable to the ones that are based on

content analysis for its vague formulation - *some postings* - does not offer a fine-grained understanding of the extent to which debates were characterized by an absence of respect.

Probably the main finding concerning the level of respect is that it was high for *all* the e-consultation and experimental forums. Concerning the Danish governmental sponsored forum *Nordpol*, that included citizens and politicians, the tone was respectful, according to Jensen. He observed that only 5 percent were specifically hateful and that compared to a successful newsgroup *dk.politik* tone was clearly superior. He also observed that politicians tended to be more respectful than citizens. He suggests that: "*the presence of politicians seems to have contributed to the respectful tone and the factuality of the debate*" (Jensen 2003, 46) even if the presence of politicians can also be problematic in so far that "*it can limit the citizens eagerness to engage in discussion with other citizens*" (idem, 46). A similar positive deliberative tone is also blatant in the e-consultation conducted by the *European Protection Agency* (EPA) and the one conducted by the city of Hamburg through the *Demos* project. Concerning the EPA consultation, 86 percent of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that communication was respectful and only 1 percent disagreed with this statement. Beirle (2002) observed for instance that the debates were characterized by a high level of politeness^x and a willingness to reach common and thorough understanding of the issues debated. Concerning the *Demos* project, Albrecht observed that the debates were characterized by an "argumentative culture" and a "high degree of discipline among the communicating participants". He believes that such a culture could emerge because "*there were mechanisms to foster communicative discipline and to replace the social control available in offline debates*" (Albrecht 2003, 18). These mechanisms were, on the one hand, a widely accessible document explaining the rules of conduct and, on the other hand, the presence of a team of four moderators who were highly contributing during the entire debate (their contribution share was 12,4 percent). His conclusion is that "*all in all, the mechanisms established a*

constructive atmosphere of mutual respect and rational orientation that made it unattractive for individuals to break the rules” (idem, 18).

The fact that the level of respect was high for all e-consultations/experimental forums and diverged significantly among the newsgroups analyzed suggests that our external impact hypothesis was particularly successful for explaining the divergences observed for the deliberative criterion of respect. This would signify that if participants believe that their participation in the debates is likely to have a concrete political impact they will be more willing to adopt a respectful attitude. Another reason may derive from the fact that the strong publics, by being more visible and potentially read by influential citizens, correspond to a particular context of debate that daunt participants to be rude or aggressive. One could compare the newsgroups to debates taking place in a pub and the strong publics to debates taking place in a salon. The context of the bar encourages a more uncontrolled and familiar behavior, while the context of the salon invites participants to adopt a more moderate behavior. Finally, as suggested by some case studies, it is also likely that the rules of participation, such as the identification and moderation policies that are generally stricter in the e-consultation/experimental forums also contribute to foster a respectful dynamic within the debates.

2.5 Reflexivity

The criterion of reflexivity, that evaluates whether citizens have changed their minds or increased their knowledge on a specific issue, has been superficially assessed for the studies focusing on newsgroups. Among the four studies based on the newsgroups, two did not measure it - the one on the Italian political parties’ newsgroups (Bentivegna 1998) and the one based on the Austrian newsgroup (Fuchs 2006) – and two other studies, the ones on U.S.

newsgroups (Wilhelm 1999) and Canadian newsgroups (Dumoulin 2003), measured it in a purely deductive way. It is suggested that the level of reflexivity is positively correlated with the level of reciprocity and plurality of the debates. According to this interpretation, the presence of reciprocity implies that people reflect on the contributions of others, and the presence of plurality implies that the debates are based on different opinions. Wilhelm who observed that its ten newsgroups were weak from the perspective of plurality and reciprocity and Dumoulin who observed that its three newsgroups were strong in plurality but low in reciprocity, considered that the debates did not foster reflexive dynamics. Wilhelm conclude that newsgroups “*neither cultivate nor iterate a public opinion that is the considered judgment of persons whose preferences have be contested in the course of public gathering...*”(Wilhelm 1999, 175). Similarly Dumoulin suggests that the impact on personal opinion can just be low since there is no instance that arguments of others are taken with serious concern. Such measurements are not precise enough for being affirmative about the reflexive impact of the debates. For instance in a case such as the one of Dumoulin that is characterized by a high rate of plurality and low rate of reciprocity, one could well imagine that certain participants, not necessarily active ones, will change their mind or will feel more informed about some specific topics without necessarily expressing it through a posting in the forum.

The analysis that focuses on the strong publics allow a more direct and convincing evaluation of the reflexivity for they attempt to grasp the invisible character of reflexivity through interviews and surveys. Jensen has measured the reflexive impact of the Danish government sponsored forum *Nordpol* by questioning participants whether they felt more informed after participating at the forum. The result is positive for more than half of the citizens who answered the survey felt that they knew more about county politics and 40 percent felt more qualified to vote (Jensen 2003a). Similarly, the consultation realized by the *Environmental*

Protection Agency is also perceived to have had a relatively important impact on the level of information of its participants since more than three users out of four (76 percent) declared to have learned from each others (Beirle 2002, 44). The UK e-consultations (*tellparliament*) were also perceived to have a strong internal impact: 79 percent of the respondents said they “*learned something new from reading other messages that were posted*”. Also a small but noteworthy group of respondents (17 percent) indicated that “*they changed their mind or opinion in some way*”. Interestingly, 43 percent of those who found the consultation worthwhile posted no messages at all, “*suggesting that the value of these exercises is not purely expressive*” (Hansard 2006, 15).

In sum, the external impact hypothesis seem to work also the deliberative criterion of reflexivity for the users of experimental/e-consultation forums generally replied that they felt more informed about the topics discussed and that they sometimes changed their minds. In contrast, the level of reflexivity of the weak publics appears to be rather low. This divergence of reflexivity - that however should be confirmed by harmonizing the methods of analysis – can be explained by the discursive structure the e-consultation/experimental forums that are generally designed in order to foster an informative and constructive dynamic of discussion. It may also be that the potential impact of the debates, motivate certain participants to adopt a reflexive attitude. For example in the case of an e-consultation forum, several citizens may be inclined to adopt a reflexive attitude in order to formulate propositions that are well justified and widely shared by the other participants. Such an attitude would raise the chances that this proposition will hold the attention of the organizers of the consultation.

2.6 External impact

The newsgroups analysis did not attempt to evaluate the external impact. This absence of interest in measuring the external impact reflects, on the one hand, a research choice suggesting that the question of the external impact does not apply to the newsgroups and, on the other hand, an objective difficulty to measure it for the newsgroups correspond to discursive contexts where participants are generally un-identified and where the targets of the debates are unclear and frequently changing. Wilhelm, the only researcher to have mentioned the question for the newsgroups, suggests that the external impact can only be low because the newsgroups “*do not provide viable sounding boards for signaling and thematizing issues to be processed by the political system*” (Wilhelm 1999, 175). In other words, according to Wilhelm, external impact can only be very limited because no constructive idea or proposition is likely to emerge from debates the newsgroups. A slightly clearer assessment of the external impact was realized in the studies focusing newspapers’ and magazines’ web-forums. Schultz (2000) observed to what extent the readers for the *New York Times* were able to influence its journalists directly by sending an e-mail or indirectly through the newspaper’s web-forum. Concerning the e-mail he found that the journalists were rather favorable to such interaction for their quality is considered to be generally constructive and inspiring. For instance a journalist noted: “*Once in a while I get a reader email that leads to a story. That’s the main reason I read them*” (Schultz 2000, 213). While journalists seem to pay certain attention to the emails, the large majority of them declared to never visit the forum. It is a phenomenon that Schultz deplors for wider interaction with the readership could, in his view, lead to a much more informative and attractive system of mass information^{xi}. Another strategy for evaluating the external impact, the one of Berdal, looks at the “diffusion” and “networking” effect of its web-forums. Berdal suggests that the forums of the three newspapers that were investigated should have a certain external impact since a relatively

important number of participants declare to participate to other online newspapers' forums (the average score for the three newspapers is 45 percent). The impact on the decision-making process is however likely to be very limited since just a minority of the users declares to be politically active in a political organization (the average of the three forums is around 20 percent) and almost none holds a political position by election (the average of three is around 3 percent). It is obvious that the impact perceived by Berdal is marginal at best. There is no guaranty that the users of an online forum will diffuse ideas and opinions that they have encountered to other forums and, likewise there is no guaranty that a political representative will refer to ideas that he encountered in a newspaper's online forum.

Finally the external impact of the strong publics was considered to be generally high. Concerning the Danish *Nordpol* experiment, the external impact was evaluated as strong, for many politicians participated at the debates and because the project was promoted by other media and was closely connected to the regional election campaign. The content and formulation of the messages themselves revealed that the debates were aiming at reaching concrete results for a majority (of the posts) represents attempts to bring issues to the political agenda (60 percent). And in some cases this has resulted in a specific political initiative (Jensen 2003a, 364-365). Concerning the consultation organized by the *Environment Protection Agency*, the external impact was also reported to be relatively high. The survey reveals that over half of the participants (59 percent) thought their participation would have at least some influence on EPA's policy and more than one respondent out of four (27 percent) declared that their participation led to the creation of contacts that they planned to follow up. More concretely, the dialogue generated about 10 to 15 formal comments for realizing the draft on the Public Involvement Policy. Additionally, the introduction of the e-consultation procedure has contributed to ameliorate the image of the agency among the participants at the e-consultation: "43 percent of those surveyed reported feeling more positive about the agency

after the Dialogue” (Beirle 2002, 11). A more nuanced perception of the external impact is given by the report on the e-consultations experiments realized with the House of Common and the Chamber of Lords. The impact of the e-consultation initiatives on the committee responsible for the drafting of the final report was perceived as controversial: *“Two of the consultations seem to have had a negligible impact upon the committees which sponsored them; a third was used to shape the agenda for the committee inquiry and a fourth one seems to have had a meaningful impact upon the enquiry for which it was run”* (Hansard 2006, 17). According to the specialists that followed the experiments the low level of external impact could be explained by the fact that certain members of the committee were unsure about how to regard the status of evidences stemming from anonymous comments. On the other hand more positive comments suggested that the impact was relevant because of the immediacy of speech and because it provided an interesting appendix to the final report that *“a number of people who read the report said that they flicked immediately to the report on the e-consultation”* (*idem*, 14). Finally, similarly to what has been observed for the Environment Protection Agency, the e-consultation organized by the parliament has contributed to ameliorate the image of the parliament since some people, after participating at the e-consultation, reversed their opinions concerning their initial impression that *“the parliament was out of touch”*.

In sum, the empirical findings confirm that the external impact of the newsgroups and the newspapers’ web-forums is limited while the external impact of the e-consultation and experimental forums is more concrete and direct. This being said, one should avoid considering that all the political newsgroups and forums have low external impact and that all the e-consultation and experimental forum have a strong external impact. This is often the case but is definitely not a rule. There are cases, as we will see for the forum of the political party *“Radicali Italiani”*, in which a simple online forum can have a very concrete impact: the

level of external impact of an online debate will also depend on the choice of the organizers of the debate to give or not an impact to the propositions and opinions expressed in a forum. Finally, it is important to remind keep in mind that the external impact should not be evaluated in all circumstances on the basis of the same deliberative standards. These should be adapted to the context, visibility and missions of the web-debates analyzed.

3. Concluding remarks

The comparison of the deliberativeness of ten existing studies, that analyzed a total of 29 online discussion spaces, allows formulating a number of global conclusions concerning the deliberativeness of the online debates. First of all it contradicts the general and common view according to which online debates have never been and will never become deliberative forums, for in several cases we noted that the ideals expressed by the theory of deliberation have been approached. Secondly, it shows that the deliberativeness of the online debates varies according to different contextual factors among which the “external impact factor” is suggested in order to explain important variations. The role of the external impact factor, that suggests that: the higher the impact of the forum is, the higher its deliberativeness should be, has indeed never been contradicted, which means that the deliberativeness of the online debates is not negatively correlated with the intensity of the impact of the online forum. On the contrary we observed the existence of positive correlations for the deliberative criteria of *reciprocity*, *empathy*, *reflexivity* and *external impact* suggesting that the forums that have a strong political impact are more likely to be characterized by respectful and reciprocal exchanges and to encourage its participants to learn from each others. The deliberative influence of the external impact factor could not be verified for the criteria of *justification* and *plurality*. For the criterion of *justification* the case studies measuring it were too limited to draw any conclusion and for the criterion of plurality the methods for operationalizing the criteria were too different for allowing any meaningful comparison. For the newsgroups the criterion of plurality was gauged essentially through content analysis and revealed that it varies greatly according to the topics discussed and ideology that characterize the discussion spaces. For the experimental/e-consultation forum the level of plurality was assessed essentially through surveys of the socio-demographic profile of its users. The findings suggest

they are not representative of the population at large but that, in certain circumstances, they promote the inclusion of citizens who otherwise would not have had a say in the matter.

While these initial results are encouraging to pursue the research on the deliberativeness of the online debates, they also suggest that in order to reach more precise understanding of the potential impact of certain contextual factors, the methods of analysis should be harmonized and that deliberative criteria that were not measured such as *sincerity*, *inclusiveness* and *discursive equality* should also be taken into account.

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ⁱ The topics of the e-consultation were: "Human reproduction technologies and the law", "Reconnecting Parliament with the public", "Constitutional reform bill", "Hate Crime in Northern Ireland", "Diabetes care in the UK".

ⁱⁱ Fuchs provides the following coding categories for affiliations: If there is a *moderate affiliation*, the author identifies positively once with an idea that is characteristics for a specific political ideology. If there is a *strong affiliation* the author identifies at least twice with ideas that are characteristic for a political ideology or (s)he directly expresses feelings of identification with and belonging to certain ideologies or parties. He then

distinguishes and defines the following types of political ideologies: Communist/Marxist, Social Democrat, Greens, Liberals, Conservatives, Extreme Right.

ⁱⁱⁱ Among the messages that expressed an affiliation this was generally in favor of extreme ideologies, essentially the extreme right one (60,8 percent) and the communist one (29,2 percent).

^{iv} A total 27 political values were identified by the author and among the postings that referred to values the ones that scored the highest were *economic growth and efficiency, nation, home affairs, justice, equity, fairness and democracy*.

^v We could not evaluate the “institutional plurality” since the Nordpol corresponds to an experimental procedures realized for just one time.

^{vi} In average 65 percent of the registered participants had never contacted an MP before and 77 percent had not previously given evidence to Parliament before.

^{vii} For the e-consultation on “human reproductive technologies and law” and the one on “Diabetes care in the UK”, the majority of the registered users were female (respectively 51 percent and 56 percent), for the e-consultation on “hate crime in Northern Ireland” men were just slightly more numerous than women (54,3 percent), finally for the e-consultations on “Connecting the Parliament with Public” and on “Constitutional Reform Bill” men were much more numerous (respectively 80 percent and 70 percent).

^{viii} This is the argument we developed in an article referring to the introduction of internet voting. We argued that internet voting platform should also contain an online forum module - that we have defined as a “pre-voting sphere” - for this would have the potential to attract a great variety of different opinions (Kies & Kriesi, 2005).

^{ix} This is measurement are part of the evaluative categorization “Overall message style” that distinguishes messages that are “scientific”, “value-laden”, “aggressive”, “cynical”, “polemical-satirical”, “Personal” and “other”.

^x As revealing factor of the high level of politeness Beirle observed that “*the dialogue message archived returned 191 items containing “thank you” or “thanks”*” (Beirle 2002, 38).

^{xi} He suggests, for example, that: “*Newspapers could publish excerpts of forum discussions in their print edition, organize pro- and con- opinion pieces that are written by staff members versus active online readers, or encourage articles by journalists in cooperation with readers. Also, the media could present different versions of stories online and ask for comments*” (Schultz 2000, 216).