

Does the Internet Deliver?

Eight Values as a Yardstick for the Production, Moderation and Regulation of Public Communication on the Internet

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High or Low Discourse Quality?

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High or Low Discourse Quality?

IN SHORT

The Internet offers excellent conditions for public discourse – from a purely technical perspective. But even this potential is still scarcely exploited. The dark sides of participation and the many deviations from the deliberative ideal are now clear: the special context of the Internet promotes disinhibition of behaviour, an emphasis on group identities, pressure to adapt to the perceived climate of opinion and reinforcement and polarisation of opinion. There is little opposition to populist and propagandistic strategies of political actors. In future, social bots could have a lasting impact on public communication.

The deliberative theory of the public sphere demands a free, equal, rational, coherent and respectful discussion on matters of public interest. The target variables are the formation of individual and public opinion. The former should enable citizens to form their own opinions. Ideally, the latter should lead to a rational and legitimate consensus based on the unconstrained persuasiveness of more substantiated arguments that all participants can agree upon.¹

The communicative participation of citizens, as facilitated by the Internet, now also calls for criteria for the quality of discourse, i. e. the exchange of arguments in public debates. Here, it may be worth mentioning the deliberative quality of the above-cited criteria. The communicative opportunities for participation have raised hopes that the Internet will lead to higher quality discourse. From a purely technical perspective, the network offers excellent conditions for this. However, in practice communication often deviates from this ideal.² The negative consequences of extended participation have become apparent in recent years (*shitstorms, hate-speech*³), so that the *pessimistic view* now prevails.

Factors Reducing the Quality of Discourse

There have been many case studies on the *deliberative quality* of public communication in Internet forums.⁴ Nonetheless, the question of how to create optimal conditions for deliberative quality on the Internet is difficult to answer because of the lack of comparative studies where the influence of different parameters (moderation, regulation, anonymity, topic, etc.) has been systematically recorded.⁵

Yet, it is possible to identify a number of factors affecting the quality of discourse and rational opinion formation on the Internet. In his research, Wolfgang Schweiger sums them up as follows: “The consequences of anonymity and the limits of socio-emotional information are obvious: anyone who breaches rules of conduct in an online group has little to fear. He or she can disappear immediately, remaining unrecognised, and there will be no long-term consequences. Above all, you don’t have to look the other person in the eye when raving or lying”⁶. This leads to a *disinhibition of behaviour* online.⁷

The lack of socio-emotional references also brings *group identity* to the fore as opposed to individual identity: other participants are “perceived less as individuals, and more as part of the group and its identity”.⁸ Groups are distinguished from one another by “dismissive stereotypes”⁹. As a result, “the siege mentality, frequently lamented in social media, is intensified in various ideological camps”¹⁰. This radicalises such groups.

According to the theory of the spiral of silence, recipients adapt their *willingness to speak* to the perceived distribution of opinion: if they feel in the minority, they fall silent and no longer take part in the discourse.¹¹ The findings to date, although not entirely clear, suggest that the pressure to adapt to the perceived climate of opinion also has a corresponding effect online, too.¹²

Instead of a convergence of positions in public discourse and consensus-building, as would ideally be the case, Schweiger¹³ assumes a *reinforcement of existing opinion and polarisation* when alternative media and public citizen communication are added to the Internet's media menu. This results in Internet users primarily coming into contact with opinions consonant with their own. The more they turn away from journalistic offers, the less are they confronted with diverse, even dissonant opinions. This makes it more likely that – due to a distorted perception of the climate of opinion – “there will be a strengthening of opinions and polarisation of ideological camps”¹⁴. Above all, he perceives major effects on the “politicised school leavers”, a group with low to average formal education that largely obtains its information on the Internet and also takes part in discussions there. “Many members of this group – and not only them – have turned their backs on the mainstream news media. They glean their information from private television and, in addition, predominantly online in social and alternative media. Due to their perceived oppression by political elites, they prefer online exchange with persons in the same positions and with similar views.”¹⁵ These and other factors lead to a “strange mixture of political upsurge, a lack of media competence, an almost supernatural political self-confidence and simultaneous misinformedness” in the group of the politicised school leavers, argues Schweiger.¹⁶ Given that they have a false impression of the distribution of opinions, they see themselves in the majority and are more willing to speak, “even outside their ideological camp”¹⁷, without feeling bound by the rules of discourse.

Communication strategies of political actors such as populism and propaganda are also detrimental to the quality of discourse. Without journalistic gatekeeping, they can be adopted on the Internet without restraint. According to Jan-Werner Müller,¹⁸ *populism* poses a moral claim to sole representation for the true people, whose will populists purport to know and represent. So it is directed against the elite, against institutions and against pluralism. Populism does not engage in an open-ended discourse. According to Klaus Arnold, *propaganda* emerges in a similar way from an ideology, i. e. from a “universalist construction of reality with an exclusive claim to truth”¹⁹. Here, too, there is no willingness to engage in discourse.

By using *social bots*, which simulate human communication behaviour and automatically distribute identical messages on a massive scale, it is also possible to influence opinion formation. Although empirical evidence on their deployment and effect is still largely absent, according to Simon Hegelich,²⁰ various negative consequences can still be assumed as a working hypothesis: social bots can change the climate of opinion if responded to in an unbalanced manner. Their deployment for this purpose was demonstrated in the US presidential election campaign of 2016.²¹ Aggressive messages can escalate conflict and lead to the withdrawal of moderate voices. Opponents will be denounced and false information widely disseminated. In addition, social bots could artificially increase the prominence of profiles by, for example, inflating follower numbers on Twitter. Due to these risks, the use of social bots should be closely monitored and the public informed.²²

- 1 To determine and justify criteria of deliberative quality see Habermas (2006: 413); Wessler (2018: 86–88).
- 2 According to Sunstein (2006: 75–102), possible weaknesses of discourses include the amplification of errors due to heuristics, cascade effects due to mutual orientation and polarisation.
- 3 Garton Ash (2016: 129–151).
- 4 Graham/Witschge (2003); Westholm (2003); Janssen/Kiess/Gravel (2005); Wright/Street (2007); Strandberg (2008); Zhou/Chan/Peng (2008); Jakobs (2014); Rowe (2015); Rußmann (2015).
- 5 Dahlberg (2004). As a review of online deliberation research see Friess/Eilders (2015).
- 6 Schweiger (2017: 62). Translated from German.
- 7 The rough tone on the Internet leads to frustration and resignation among many users of social media (Duggan/Smith 2016).
- 8 Schweiger (2017: 62). Translated from German.
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- 13 Schweiger (2017: 128–153).
- 14 Schweiger (2017: 137). Translated from German.
- 15 Schweiger (2017: 182). Translated from German. Hagen/In der Au/Wieland (2017) also note that a low level of education promotes polarisation in the use of social media.
- 16 Schweiger (2017: 183).
- 17 Schweiger (2017: 186). Translated from German.
- 18 Müller (2016). On the concept of populism see also Alvares/Dahlgren (2016).
- 19 Arnold (2003: 78–79). Translated from German.
- 20 Hegelich (2016).
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