Crítica de Libros / Book Reviews

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Promises and Limits of Web-deliberation
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The aim of this book is to analyse the degree to which online political forums are deliberative and, consequently, whether virtual forums could increase the deliberative character of our democracies. In the first chapter, the author carries out a concise and very well focused review of the main deliberative theories and models, and then in the second chapter goes on to collect and operationalise the deliberative criteria that characterise a public space of deliberation. In these two first chapters the author establishes the theoretical framework that will be applied in the following chapters for the empirical investigation of online political forums.

At the beginning of the book, the author anticipates that the study of web based forums could be considered futile because of the rapid technological evolution that, I can add, is giving now more prominence to social media such as Facebook or Twitter. I agree with him that written online debates will keep on existing both within web formats or within new media because they offer a system of communicative exchange unique and irreplaceable.

Specifically in the first chapter, the author discusses the concepts of deliberative democracy from Habermas (1989) and Sennett (1992). He starts the discussion with a sociohistorical analysis of the emergence of the public sphere in the 18th century and its decline in the 19th century. This example of public sphere is considered by these two important theorists as an ideal model of deliberation to be regained. The author then goes on to compare the notion of deliberative democracy with other models of democracy (liberal, republican, the aggregative model) in order to identify the reasons that are used to justify the supremacy of the deliberative project. Finally, Kies provides several criticisms concerning the feasibility of the deliberative project, which are presented and counterargued: a) deliberative values and procedures are unadapted for our complex societies, but they are in any case more adapted than other models of democracy; b) a deliberative model cannot be applied to large-scale political systems where numerous and urgent decisions are taken, although deliberation does not need to be applied to the entire decision-making process and to all public decisions; c) it is naïve to assume that citizens and politicians will act deliberatively, but rather the deliberative attitude could be assumed to stem from the communicative presuppositions that are immanent to any human being and from everyday practices that incorporate deliberative dimensions; and, d) the inclusive criterion of deliberation is restricted by several barriers, although according to Young (2000) there are measures to

promote inclusive and plural debates, to prevent domination of certain actors, and to favour alternative and less formal modes of communication.

In the second chapter, the author states that the operationalisation of the deliberative theory demands awareness that the deliberative theory is composed of two levels of requirements: 1) The deliberative norms that a political debate should follow, and 2) how these deliberative norms should be applied at the different levels of the decision-making process. There is sufficient agreement about the deliberative norms, but not about how these criteria should be concretely applied at the different levels of the opinion- and decision-making process. In the first section of this chapter, the deliberative criteria (inclusion, discursive equality, reciprocity, justification, reflexivity, empathy, sincerity, plurality, external impact) are presented by clarifying their definitions and the way these have been operationalised by the deliberative democrats. The author provides a practical table that synthesises the methods (basically, a combination of content analysis, surveys and interviews) that are considered to be most appropriate for measuring each deliberative criterion (table 2.2). Then, in the second part of the chapter, the author tackles the controversial question about when and where to apply the deliberative criteria within the democratic process. For the author, there are at least four different views: 1) the globalising approach considers that deliberative procedures should be applied to all social and political associations; 2) Habermas (1996) defends that they should be limited to core state institutions; 3) Gutmann and Thompson (2004) consider that they should be extended to the civil society and private associations if the decisions they take have a clear and binding political impact; and, 4) for Dryzek (2000) the discursive requirements should take place exclusively within civil society. The problem with these views is that they have not been empirically confirmed. For example, it is not clear —following Habermas' assumption— that the debates taking place within the parliament are more deliberative than debates taking place outside state structures, or there is no proof that civil society is more prone to deliberation since it is less subject to the economic power in contrast to state institutions, as Dryzek defends. For the author, the deliberative endeavour cannot evolve unless it enters an empirical phase that would allow testing the assumptions of political theorists and the deliberative potential of the different political actors and contexts of opinion —and will— formation. That is the focus of the subsequent chapters.

In my opinion, the most important contribution of this book comes after the theoretical part: from chapters 3 to 6. Here the author applies the previous operationalisation to online political forums and assesses the potentials and limits of Web-based forums for political deliberation. In so doing, he takes into account four dimensions: a) the number and the plurality of citizens who debate on online political forums, that is, the usage of the online political forums; b) the type of the actors hosting the online political debates: the offer of online political forums; c) the contextual factors such as the political impact of the forum, moderation rules, the ideology or the political culture of the group or actor, which may influence the deliberativeness of online debates, and

related to this, d) the specific analysis of how deliberative criteria are being unfolded within a series of online political forums.

The author grounds his analyses on a wide array of data sources according to the four dimensions to be studied. In chapter 3, in order to analyse the extension of online political forums, he studies several surveys conducted in the EU member states and electoral surveys carried out during US presidential and midterm elections and presidential elections in France. The results show that an increasing number of citizens interact online for political purposes, and that the younger generation are using more online political forums than older generations. In France, during the presidential election of 2007, 17% of Internet users reported visiting online forums. In the USA, 4% of the Internet users had actively discussed politics online during the presidential election of 2004 and the midterm election of 2006. Here we have to take into account that the measures of online activity are different.

With regard to the question of the online political forums offered by different actors, the author reviews several studies that measure —basically by means of content analysis— the Web-interactive offer of the parliaments, the cities, and the political parties in the EU and the USA. The Web-interactive features analysed are the presence of e-mail, online forums, e-consultation forums, contact information, opinion polls, and chat rooms. The analysis reveals that most of the actors provided basic interactive features such as e-mail or contact information but not so much a more discursive offer such as online forums or online consultation. This is the case of the 44 European national and regional parliaments (plus the European Parliament) analysed. On the contrary, municipalities are more likely to offer possibilities of discursive interaction. Larger cities are more likely to host Web forums than small cities and cities from the Scandinavian countries are more likely than their UK and French counterparts to host online forums. Nevertheless, political parties are far more likely to host online forums. A total of 163 parties' Web-sites in the 25 EU member states were analysed and 47% of them provided a Web forum and the Eastern parties were more likely to host an online forum than the Western parties (53,8% versus 41,9%). And in relation to the level of participation, one party out of three that hosted an online forum had a high rate of participation in its forum. Therefore, the low discursive offer of the parliaments and the high online discursive offer of the parties could suggest that online deliberation has received greater acceptance in the civil society. This idea support beliefs expressed by Dryzek and Gutman and Thompson that civil society is the best place to construct a critical public space and that the concentration on online debates in the civil society could signify that the state structure is not colonizing discursive activity. Nevertheless, Kies himself argues that this interpretation should be scrutinised by analysing the extent to which other actors in civil society (NGOs, associations, blogs, etc..) implement and use online forums. I can add, that political parties can be considered, precisely, actors of both the state and civil society. And the presence of online forums does not mean that they fulfil deliberative purposes.

In relation to the contextual factors and the fulfilment of deliberative criteria of the online political forums, in chapter 4, the author first summarizes and compares the main results obtained by 10 previous studies that analysed a total of 29 online discussion spaces. Secondly, in chapter 5 he examines two original case studies: the forum of the Italian party "Radicali Italiani" and, in chapter 6, the electoral blogs for electing district councillors, implemented by the French city of Issy-les-Moulineaux.

Thus, the author reviews 10 existing case studies that measure the deliberativeness of the online debates in different contexts and countries. They have been distinguished from the viewpoint of their potential impact on the decision-making process (low external impact or higher external impact on political decisions) and of the categories of actors (media forums, civil society's forums, parties' forums, institutional forums). And each online forum has been measured on the basis of 6 deliberative criteria: reciprocity, justification, plurality, empathy, reflexivity and external impact. One of the main objectives of this chapter is to observe whether the level of deliberativeness varies according to the impact of the online forum on external decisions. The hypothesis is that if ordinary citizens believe what they write in the forums could have an impact on the decision-making process, they will be more motivated in participating in the forum and in adopting a deliberative attitude. The overall analysis shows that the forums that have a strong political impact are more likely to be characterised by respectful and reciprocal exchanges (reciprocity and empathy) and encourage their participants to learn from each other (reflexivity). These are experimental or e-consultation forums designed or sponsored by political institutions, such as municipalities, environmental agencies, central governments or parliaments, which normally are moderated and are under strict rules of identification, and with the issues at stake being controlled by the institution. However, the effect on deliberation of having an external impact on decision-making, could not be verified for the criteria of justification and plurality because of the different methods and dimensions used for measuring the criteria, so comparison between the cases is not possible.

In order to reach a more precise understanding of the role of the external impact factor and of how to apply the deliberative criteria to specific cases, in chapter 5 and 6 the author examines two original cases: the forum of the "Radicali Italiani" and the electoral blogs set up for the online election of 16 local councillors in Issy-les-Moulineaux.

The online forum of the "Radicali Italiani" is one of the most successful forums worldwide with more than 550,000 messages in 2007 and around 26,612 people registered in 2003 at the time of the second congress and the online elections of its executive board. The author analyses the functioning of the forum during 2004 and 2005. In order to evaluate the functions, activity, and deliberative quality of the forum, he examines the statistics provided by the party on the usage of their Web forum, carries out 40 face-to-face interviews with leaders, party members and supporters, and finally, uses an online survey distributed among forum users and non users (who are aware of the existence of the forum). The results show that the Italian Radical's forum is exem-

plary insofar as it is highly frequented, it is characterised by a dynamic and qualitative debate, and it fulfils several functions useful for the party members such as information, formation, recruitment and a militant function. As for the deliberativeness of the forum, his investigation is based essentially on survey and interviews and shows that criteria like plurality, reflexivity, empathy and discursive equality are only partially met. The majority of users are men, highly educated, interested in politics, and supporters of the party, but this homogeneity is counterbalanced by the fact that 30% of the users do not vote for the party and the shared perception that the forum encourages alternative voices and suggestions. Also, regarding the reflexivity dimension, all the survey respondents stated that their participation in the forum had "sometimes" or "often" been influenced by the forum's content. Finally, the external impact is very high since many party leaders participate in the forum, even initiating e-consultations on specific topics, and almost one in four users considers that participation in the forum can influence the leadership.

In the last chapter, Kies analyses the district council election of 2005 in Issy-les-Moulineaux, which combined an exclusively online voting and an almost exclusively online campaign through an electoral blog of each district. In each blog the candidates could introduce themselves and their electoral programme and propositions, and debate with the citizens of the district. The author studies the sociodemographic profile of the participants in the blogs and carries out a content analysis of the postings. The results are rather disappointing: only 3% of the electorate voted in the elections and the level of participation in the blogs was low and dominated by few candidates and mainly by men. The campaign blogs did not achieve a sufficient level of reflexivity (most of the postings do not contain instances of progression of the debates), reciprocity (less than one thread out of two received at least one comment and few threads hosted a lively debate) or discourse equality (the most active candidate was responsible for one out of three messages posted). However, the candidates made some concrete proposals on important and varied issues, so in this respect the blog has had, to a certain extent, an external impact. The debates were also respectful and constructive, thereby meeting in this sense the criteria of empathy.

In conclusion, the author is successful in justifying and measuring the deliberative criteria of democracy and applying them to online political forums. This is the major achievement of the book: it shows how to measure deliberative criteria in specific cases and varied contexts, and how they can be applied to the concrete examples of virtual forums. In this sense, Kies contributes to deliberative theory by gathering important empirical evidence and showing the online deliberative potential of actors both belonging to political institutions and or to civil society. Nevertheless, the reader gets the impression that Kies has tried to cover and compare too many cases, actors and studies, which perhaps differ excessively in terms of methods used, levels of analysis and circumstances involved. In the end, the results seem contradictory and the picture obtained is somewhat blurred. In chapter 3, parliaments and municipalities fall short in terms of interactive features on

their webs, but two of the most deliberative e-consultation forums studied in chapter 4 were designed and sponsored by a parliament and a municipality, although in chapter 6 a failed example of deliberative virtual space was carried out by a town hall, as well. In addition, we really do not know if the deliberative character of some of the existing online forums is due to the external impact factor or to other numerous factors that are mentioned but not clearly assessed. For the author the potential impact of the online forum is the most prominent factor explaining divergence in the deliberativeness of the online debates. But, for example, the participative culture and ideology of the "Radicali Italiani" seems to have been an important factor for the high involvement and the certain level of deliberativeness of their forum. In addition, other factors need to be analysed in a more systematic way: the nature and variety of the topics discussed, the moderation and identification rules within the forum, the objectives when designing the forum, the publicity given to the forum, or the circumstances of the population targeted for participation. In this sense, the forums well designed for political consultation are more likely to be more deliberative than newspapers or magazines websites or social newsgroups. And, probably, the failure in terms of participation and deliberative engagement in Issy-les-Moulineaux is due to the lack of publicity of the electoral blogs, the tiny powers of the councillors to be elected and a population already tired of so many e-democratic initiatives of their major. In the end, the author concludes that the real question is not so much whether the online debates can be deliberative (because, definitively, they can) but in which circumstances do the online debates foster deliberative forms of debates and contribute to promoting the deliberative values and procedures within the existing political process.

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