Explaining deliberativeness. The design of readers' comments.

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Abstract. Great expectations on a vibrant digital public sphere have been articulated since the deliberative turn of democratic theory met the interactive and participatory potential of digital media. Readers' comments on professional online-news sites provide the chance for deliberation in a visible online environment. This case study discusses the explanatory potential of structural design features for the quality of online-deliberation via readers' comments. Therefore, this study applies a quantitative content analysis design, which shows limited deliberative potential of a fully analysed debate on a German news site. The findings suggest that structural design features offer useful hints to understand the character of debate that takes place.
Keywords. Deliberation, public sphere, design-features, readers' comments

Introduction

Deliberation „that no force except that of the better argument is exercised; and that, as a result, all motives except the cooperative search for truth are excluded" [1] is highly en vogue [2, 3]. Since the "deliberative turn" [4] of political theory has met the interactive potential of digital media the development of numerous "third spaces" [6] reinforces the chance for interaction and deliberation in societal (mass media) discourse [7]. Though different case studies produce optimistic

results proving deliberative potential, literature remains sceptical about the impact and the quality of online-deliberation [5, 8, 9].

One way to engage people in digital public discourse is represented by readers' comments. Readers' comments embody an important gateway for civic engagement via public debate and supporting the democratic process in two ways. First, most of Social Media occurrences do not appeal to a huger audience permanently. Readers' comments are attached to articles on online news-websites what leads to higher visibility of the contributions than on most independent forums [10]. This gains particular importance because the high amount of digital voices tends to fragment public attention [7]. Moreover news-consumption and self-expression become more instrumental and interactive activities with a wider online-audience [11]. Second, immediate and largely uncensored character of readers' comments copes quite well with current demands for non-hierarchical, informal ways to participate. [3, 10, 12]. Research on readers' comments is in the beginning. Different case studies present different results [10, 13, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 37]. Further theoretical and empirical research is needed [13]. Therefor this paper applies an explorative case study. It discusses structural design features of online-deliberation and their potential impact on deliberative quality. It also clarifies structural design features of readers' comments and arranges a quantitative content analysis based on operationalized deliberative criteria. Hence this study asks for the explanatory potential of structural design features for the deliberative capacity of readers' comments -debates.

Design of online-deliberation

Design of digital discussion spaces has remarkable influence on the character of debates that take place [6]. Literature has shown the deliberative potential of digital discourse by setting up experimental designs [14, 15]. Davies and Chandler [16] go even further by evaluating the impact of diverse design criteria to facilitate online-deliberation. This leads to the assumption that the design of online-deliberation may help to explain or even to predict the kind of debate that takes place.

The design of online-deliberation is determined by technical and organizational features [17]. A central technical feature is constituted by the temporality of the discussion whether it is operated synchronous or asynchronous. Recent research emphasizes that asynchronous deliberation fosters participation and bears higher potential for reflection, which results in longer contributions. Synchronous dialogue in contrast is suited for enabling interaction and mutual understanding [16, 18]. Openness and publicity of online-deliberation is central for the plurality of debate. General openness is important because online-discourse tends to homophily. But respective case studies suggest at least that apparent contradictory positions are not ignored [19, 20]. It matters if dialogue is structured strictly or not. The presence or absence of a moderator has remarkable influence on the character of discussion [21, 22, 23]. The general freedom of expression and

agenda setting represent two additional possibilities of structuring digital dialogue [17]. Stricter structure of online-deliberation increases the quality of deliberation through fostering rationality and interaction but decreases participation. Reversely less structure boosts participation especially because quality of deliberation does not seem to influence levels of participation strongly [16, 20, 21]. The identification or anonymity of users is also mentioned as a central criterion with regard to the quality of discussion. It is shown that anonymity lifts participation as well as heterogeneity of debate but decreases responsibility. That affects the quality of debate negatively. Hence, anonymous deliberation tends to produce the better results [17, 18, 21, 24]. It is often implied that online-discussion is operated text-based because most online-communication is text-based [15]. This is important. The reduction of communication on text-exchange could lead to an efficient way of communicating what is characterized by its briefness and preciseness [25]. Moreover, studies argue that people find it more favorable to discuss delicate topics through text exchange than face-to-face. Others emphasize that the leaner and impersonal character of text-based communication could lead to misinterpretations and encourages uncivil discourse [26]. This set of variables is of course not-exhaustive but mentioning the detailed discussion of design criteria by Davies and Chandler [16] it seems that the most important aspects are included.

Readers' comments could be considered as an interactive platform for expressing points of view in the very visible environment of online news sites. They relate spatial to a journalistic article enabling the readers to publish their opinion in a linear chronology directly attached to an article [10, 27]. It is said that that readers' comments offer a lot of space for contributions including minor censorship, a lack of moderation and anonymous posting. Even if it is possible to presume identification of users or to foster a registration including additional information like a cell number, discussants register overwhelmingly anonymous through using nicknames if possible [10, 28]. Moreover, the topic of the debate is generally set by the journalistic article but people could also discuss off-topic [29]. Studies of readers' comments often do not elaborate that discussion is operated text-based and asynchronous which represents important features guiding the discussion as discussed above. Taking these characteristics into account this study will be able to discuss the structural design features who might explain the character of debate made visible through content analysis in the end.

Methodology and data

The debate analyzed here was held on the webpage of the only daily newspaper in the German city of Kiel (Kn-online.de). Citizens participated in a discussion about the renaming of the local boardwalk called "Hindenburgdamm". This highly polarizing debate between deputies of the renaming-plan and a movement which aimed to retain the old name was chosen for analysis, because it bears a hard test of deliberative potential. Seven articles dealing with that topic were published on kn-online.de between January 19 in 2013 and January 16 in 2014 and offered

space for discussion via readers' comments. Full discussion was coded and included totally 205 (=n) comments. Altogether the readers' comments on kn-online.de correspond to the description above with one exception. Different to most comment-functions, the linear chronology connected to the article is combined with a web-forum structure. Functional conditions of contributing a comment remain quite similar, what seems to be consequential because readers' comments represent as Domingo [30] puts it "micro-forums attached to news". Corresponding research suggests that this joined structure strengthens deliberative quality with regard to politeness and interactivity [31] which has to be taken into consideration in the analysis of the findings. Registration by E-Mail is fostered but not necessary. Participants used nicknames and secured anonymity in this way. Active moderation was not apparent. Censorship was very slightly operated. The system makes transparent if a comment was revised by the editors of the webpage, which happened only in one case. It was not clear if comments were completely deleted and, if they were, to what extent. All in all the "shadow of control" [22] was not very visible.

It was chosen to operationalize deliberation in two steps. This study applies central categories of the Discourse Quality Index: Level of Justification, Respect for groups and Respect for counterarguments and Interactivity[1]. This quantitative content analysis design posed a valid method for analysing deliberation in various contexts [32, 33]. DQI categories proofed applicable for online-deliberation [8, 17] and were recently adopted for analysis of readers' comments [10]. Jürgen Habermas himself mentioned the DQI positively [34]. Though application of DQI produced sophisticating results in intercoder-reliability [32, 33] objectivity of the categories remains the central point of criticism [35]. Because of that this study looks also on some harder categories as this has proven to be a fruitful procedure by various studies [17]. It counts the number of: off topic comments [29], quotations and one-time-participants [17]. The frequency of participation was coded as well as its volume. Moreover, participation of disagreeing parties was binary coded showing heterogeneity of the debate [19].

Results and discussion

The results[2] contain some evidence for the explanatory potential of structural design features. Results for the level of justification come along very ambivalently. The clear majority of comments dealt with the topic of the discussion (83%). But it was still a relevant amount of contributions ignoring the topic of debate. The clearly most awarded DQI-code was inferior justification

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[1] Categories, coding instructions and the codebook are elaborated in a number of publications by the team around André Bächtiger [32, 33, 36]. The traditional DQI measures also the content of justification and a category they call constructive politics. These categories are not applied in this study as their validity is questionable according to new developments in deliberative theory [36] and they have no outstanding importance for the research question.

[2] Tabular results are available as an online-appendix from the author. Data rounded.

(58%). It was coded with respect to the special characteristics of text-based asynchronous communication as elaborated above. Even some shorter contributions were coded as qualified or sophisticated and may qualify indeed as efficient communication. Majority could not offer a complete argument. This ambivalence affirms results of previous studies [10, 13, 29]. 19 per cent of the contributions did not include any argument. It could be resumed that people focus on the argument as the main instrument for persuasion but that they often fail to make their point. This ambivalence could be traced back to the ambivalence of structural design. The lack of structure and the anonymity of the participants represent indicators for a lower rationality of debate. In contrast the text-based asynchronous communication influences argumentative quality positively. At this point results may lead to the assumption that the lack of structure limits the potential of this kind of communication to produce precise arguments. This is supported by the recognition that a big amount of contributions had shortened length (43%). The idea that the lack of structure may lead to irresponsible behavior proved rather true. The amount of explicit statements of dis-respect is very high (38%). Balanced or explicit respect is nearly absent. Indeed, a majority did not express explicit disrespect and fulfilled this basic precondition of deliberative dialogue. This observation matches also with related studies. Ruiz et al. [13] show that moderation could produce satisfying results here which leads us to the converse argument. The lack of active moderation could be seen as an indicator for unsatisfying results in the category of respect. Due to the complexity of human communication, censorship might help to provide hate speech but is not able to produce respectful cooperation. Contributions could be easily offensive without being obscene [13, 37]. The measure of interaction presented interesting results. At first it has to be stated that only a minority behaved interactive in a decided deliberative way. 33% included counter-arguments of other participants, largely in negative manner, which supports the findings from the category respect. The weakness of asynchronous dialogue in producing mutual understanding offers an additional explanation, which suits these findings quite well. With regard to the ongoing character of discussion a majority of contributors were one-timers. That is similar to other studies [37, 38]. At this point it has to be stated that interaction is far from being absent. Including the fact that citation was frequently used (44%), a relevant amount of interaction is present. Looking at the inclusiveness and heterogeneity of debate helps us to classify regarded levels of interaction. We have a stable majority (66%) of like-minded people arguing against a renaming. Insufficient diversity of opinion may avoid intensive dialogue. But a slight overweight for one point of view seems expectable and does not qualify the debate to be homogenous [13]. Only a very small amount (12%) of contributions had overlength, which supports this argument. However, results appear ambivalent in comparison to other studies. Frequent use of citation indicates that design features enabling interaction are adopted [29]. But more qualified analysis shows limited potential for interaction that is merely competitive. That affirms results of some other studies [10, 13, 27]. Especially the competitive character of interaction may show heterogeneous nature of debate but is problematic from a deliberative point of view [10]. There are some users considerably more active than others. It seems that a larger minority impresses the debate. In a nutshell readers' comments provide some potential for interaction but it seems compelling

that lack of structure may boost heterogeneity but hinders decided deliberative interaction. Even if we recognize that heterogeneity is far from being perfect, the debates analyzed did not follow the Web 2.0-trend of homophily.

Conclusions

This study offers some suitable explanations for the deliberative quality of debates via readers' comments. This indicates that the design of online deliberation is influential and might be suited to predict general direction of deliberativeness. This is important as it helps to come to appropriate expectations about the usability of specific platforms for online-deliberation. Furthermore, it could help structuring the vast heterogeneity of those. But it has to be constrained that information provided by the design of readers' comments is more a tendency than an ultimate statement. Moreover, it has to be acknowledged that the scope of this study is limited and should be seen as a small contribution to an explanatory starting point. Larger comparable studies will be able to light up the effects of design in detail. Comparison of different platforms for readers' comments shows different outcomes already [13]. In our case, it is still possible that other factors played their role in influencing the quality of debate. This could only be suspended in a comparable design. Additionally it is not clear how the design features interact. To conclude about the democratic potential of readers' comments, this study adds its small piece of evidence to the literature giving support to some findings. Readers' comments offer a possibility for rational argument about what is not fully utilized until now. Especially mutual, respectful interaction seems difficult under current circumstances. In sum, readers' comments analyzed do not demonstrate high deliberative quality. But, we should not be too pessimistic as Wright [6] suggests. Maybe the deliberative ideal creates undue expectations.

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