

Public spheres on the Internet: anarchic or government-sponsored: a comparison

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1. Introduction

Perspectives for creating a “new” public sphere on the Internet have been discussed for years, but there is no profound agreement on how to reach that goal. I believe it is possible to identify two main groups of debaters:

-“Anarchists” arguing that a public sphere always has to be created from below and that debates on the Internet ought to be free and non-moderated.

-“Interventionists” stating that a public sphere on the Internet in order to be structured, balanced and inclusive ought to be sponsored and / or regulated by government authorities.

The “anarchist position” often claims that the Internet itself creates new communities and leads to ideal speech situations among physically remote but virtually connected subjects, providing ideal conditions for the creation of a new public sphere.¹ Dale Herbeck thus advocates that a public sphere always has to be created from below, a view similar to the position of the early Jürgen Habermas.²

The interventionists often argue that government involvement is necessary in order to moderate and regulate the online debate forums, which might otherwise be chaotic, non-deliberative and disrespectful.³ Further, the interventionists often raise the “inclusiveness” argument: government involvement is needed to secure open and equal access to discussions and forums on the Internet. Otherwise, an online public sphere will have as limited an audience as the coffee houses of the 18th century.⁴ Benjamin Barber argues that the Internet ought to be public property and that government needs to ensure this through various initiatives. One of them could be to establish a national online citizens’ forum.⁵

There have been quite a lot of attempts, both private and government-sponsored, to create various kinds of communities or public spheres on the Internet.⁶

¹ This is the typical argument presented by Howard Rheingold (Rheingold, 1993). Also Douglas Schuler (1996) champions such wiepoints.

² Herbeck, 1999.

³ As claimed by for example Sardar, 1996: 30-31, Ess, 1996: 218-19

⁴ The coffee houses are described in details in Habermas, 1975.

⁵ Barber, 1998: 83-85.

⁶ A project connected to Danish local elections in 1997, PEN in Santa Monica, USA and citynets in Bologna, Amsterdam and Bristol are examples of government-sponsored initiatives, whereas The WELL

However, there is a shortage of systematic comparisons between private and government-sponsored discussion forums on the Internet. To test some of the claims sketched above and to develop a more general account on public spheres on the Internet, I have analyzed and compared two attempts to create a public sphere on the Internet: a truly anarchic group, dk.politik, and a government-sponsored group, nordpol.dk, set up for a Danish regional election.

Theoretical aspects of the public sphere

As this is not a theoretical paper, my definitions and concepts of the public sphere might seem too simplistic.⁷ However, as a framework for the analysis to come some initial remarks on my conception of the public sphere and its functions are needed.

Traditionally, in political science and media studies the public sphere has been regarded as the fundamental link between citizens and politicians. For Jürgen Habermas, one of the fundamental purposes of the public sphere was to reach a common understanding, a political reason among citizens that could serve as a guideline for political decisions.⁸ Other theorists such as James Fishkin have emphasized that the public sphere ought to be a place for democratic education and enlightenment of the citizens. In other words, there is no authoritative definition of the form and purpose of the public sphere. In the following, I will take my point of departure in three functions of the public sphere:⁹

- Political problem-solving – in the public sphere relevant political problems are identified and discussed among citizens and suggestions for solutions put forward
- The enlightenment and education of the citizens – discussions in the public sphere ought to give rise to reflection among the citizens and provide them with new and relevant information on political issues, thereby contributing to the development of citizenship
- Agenda-setting – in the public sphere problems and issues are brought to the political agenda, often leading to political focus or decision-making

The overall question for which I seek an answer in this paper is whether government-sponsored or private initiatives are most successful in creating democratic dialogue on the Internet and in a wider sense contribute to an extension of the public sphere to the Internet.

and Minnesota E-democracy in USA are examples of private initiatives. The projects have achieved various levels of success or fiasco, but it would be too far-reaching to describe here. For a broader description of the projects, see Linaa Jensen, 2001: 50-52.

⁷ The paper is an integral part of my ph.d.-dissertation. I have elsewhere developed the theoretical framework, which is only sketched very superficially here.

⁸ Habermas, 1975, Ess, 1996: 211

⁹ I have earlier identified four functions of the public sphere (Linaa Jensen, 2001: 47). Besides the three applied here, the fourth one was “Shaping of common identity”. However, this function is of a more social than political character. Further, I claim it is more complex and far-reaching than the three other functions, and hence much more difficult to measure. It is therefore omitted here.

The structure of the paper

In the following, I will briefly present the cases and then discuss the method and sampling procedures of the analyses.

I then turn to the overall structure of the debates within the cases and touch upon the number of participants and postings and on other more quantitative features.

Next, I discuss the content of the debates. I examine the form and context of the postings, I evaluate the core of the postings regarding what I shall call “democratic quality”, and I examine whether the postings show any connection with external agendas, thereby contributing to political problem-solving in a wider sense and political influence for the participants.

I then touch upon the participants themselves to test the often heard claim that the Internet tends to mobilize new groups versus the claim that it is still the chosen few that participate in online debates.

Finally, I conclude on my findings and discuss whether the interventionists are right, that government sponsorship ensures a more qualified, respectful and inclusive debate.

The research methodology includes a combination of counting, content analysis and online surveys among the participants in both groups. I shall briefly touch upon some of these methods, thereby hopefully contributing to more extended and thorough methods for analyzing political groups on the net and to more reflexion on Internet research.

2. The cases

The anarchic case - dk.politik

One of the most notable examples of community-related activities on the Internet is the 65000 Usenet groups. Here everything imaginable, including politics and societal issues, can be discussed among geographically separated individuals. There have been widespread hopes that such groups can function as a new kind of public sphere not related to geography and space. In principle, everybody has access and antecedent differences are eliminated as the participants do not necessarily know each other. Occupation, education and social status, it has been argued, lose significance, bringing pure exchange of arguments to the fore.¹⁰

I have chosen dk.politik as an example of the debate going on in Usenet groups. It is one of the biggest and oldest Danish groups and the longest standing forum for online political discussions in Denmark.¹¹ The group, originally created on the

¹⁰ This argument has been sought tested by, for example, Davis, 1999, Wilhelm, 1998, Hill & Hughes, 1998, but their conclusions have been very different and generated no comparison to government-sponsored groups.

¹¹ There are few national politics Usenet groups. Four of them are topic-specific subgroups of dk.politik. In the year 2000 there were 68019 postings in the five groups. Two-third of those (42407 postings) appeared in dk.politik, an average of 3534 per month.

initiative of private individuals, is not moderated or regulated but based on an unofficial code of conduct suggesting respectful behaviour and to stay on topic.

The government-sponsored case – Nordpol.dk

Nordpol.dk has been one of the most ambitious government initiatives in Scandinavia so far in creating a democratic dialogue via the Internet. The project, initiated by a county government in Northern Denmark prior to regional elections in 2001, was part of a bigger project of digitizing the entire government administration to make it more transparent and open to the public. The explicit goal of the project was to enhance citizens' interest in and knowledge of politics and to strengthen the dialogue among citizens and politicians.¹²

Technically, the main element of the project was a website, www.nordpol.dk, containing information about county administration, the candidates for the election and topics within the county's political resort areas. The most important part of the site, however, was the debate forum where citizens and politicians were invited to debate. In the design of the debate and the site in its entirety, the county government had included the users by inviting voters to discuss the project and bring in ideas for the design. Special attention was paid to first time voters. The reason was their traditionally low political participation and the idea that they might be the easiest to mobilize to use new media for political participation. Therefore this group was particularly well represented in the focus groups set up prior to the design and launch of the project.

The project used the experiences gained from Internet projects launched prior to Danish local and regional elections in 1997, which turned into quite a fiasco mainly due to a lack of Internet access and ICT-competence in the general population and little interest among the candidates in using the Internet for campaigning.¹³ Since then, the share of the Danes with Internet access has tripled, and competences and motivation for using the technology are estimated to have shown a similar trend. Expectations were therefore quite positive and a media campaign was launched to create interest and focus on the project.

The cases and the process of sampling

For both case studies, the periods analyzed spanned about two months. The debate on dk.politik has been analysed for the months of April and May 2001, whereas the sample period of Nordpol.dk includes the time from the launch of the debate on September 10th, 2001 to election day on November 20th, 2001.

It is natural to measure the extent of the debates by the number of postings, as postings can be seen as meaningful units in relation to discussion threads and the overall debate. In dk.politik there were 6525 postings within the period, whereas

¹² Nordjyllands Amt, 2002: 3-4

¹³ Hoff, Löfgren & Johansen, 1998: 81-82.

Nordpol.dk comprised 450.¹⁴ It is immediately obvious that there is a huge difference in the volumes of the debates.¹⁵

To cope with the huge amounts of data in the content analysis and to make two comparable cases, it has been necessary to sample, although the overall quantitative analyses have been applied to the entire number of postings. For dk.politik every tenth debate thread was selected and all postings within included in the sample.¹⁶ For Nordpol.dk, half of the debate topics were selected¹⁷ and all the postings within included in the sample. The two samples thereby comprise respectively 311 and 239 postings.

3. Method

So far, many analyses of online political communities and groups have focused on quantitative figures: counts of postings, posters or activity in general. The results have often proved that the numbers for Internet participation are very low, especially when the figures have been compared with political participation in traditional media as the Internet as a tool for political action is still in its infancy.¹⁸

More thorough accounts on the qualitative characteristics of the debates, the content of discussions and the outcome of the activities have been sparse and data on the participants of the groups have only to a very limited extent been collected.¹⁹

Further, as already stated, systematic comparisons among various kinds of initiatives (e.g. public/government versus private/anarchic) have been virtually non-existent.

Although I am aware of the ambitions and the scope of the project, it is my goal here to provide a more thorough analysis and thereby trying to draw a more detailed and complex picture of online political debates and sketch some important differences between government and private initiatives.

Roughly speaking, I can identify the most important features of an online discussion:

- Overall context, frame and relations

¹⁴ Thereby the initial expectations of the county council were exceeded at an early stage. The original quantitative goal for the debate (200 postings) was based on experiences with a previous debate on regional planning.

¹⁵ Some of the difference can be explained by the fact that the debate on dk.politik takes place mainly as short exchanges of arguments while the exchanges on Nordpol.dk were closer to traditional "letters to the editor". I will address these issues below.

¹⁶ To avoid that single threads dominated the sample to much only the 20 first postings in threads with more than 20 postings were selected. That explains that the sample equals only about 5 percent of the total number of postings.

¹⁷ The creators of the debate forum had initially divided the debate in a range of topics relevant to county politics. Later on some of these topics were subdivided again due to huge interest for certain themes. Here I have selected the topics: "roads and traffic", "social services and psychiatry", "nature and environment" and "other topics". They were selected in order to cover a variety of topics and to cover topics that generated both huge and small interest among the participants.

¹⁸ This "reductionism" is sketched and discussed in Hoff, Löfgren & Johansen, 1999: 45

¹⁹ One of the exceptions is Wilhelm, 1998.

- Communication (content)
- Participants

I will argue that communication is the most important. Various kinds of communication are the very foundation of a community. Without communication, there can be no community!²⁰ By applying content analysis to an online community, we are able to get more than a picture of the communication itself. Very often analyzing communication will tell us a lot about relations and individuals in the community. Communication, in my opinion, is therefore a key approach to the study of online communities, and it shall be given the most careful attention in the following.

Operational, in my two cases I have tried to cover these dimensions by the collection of three sets of data:

- Quantitative data on the debate and relations, plus documents and informal interviews that help outline the context of the cases
- The communication (content analysis of the debate)
- The participants (survey of participants)

Overall figures and qualitative data

First and foremost, it is possible to get a good overview of the activity level and number of participants in the group. These figures are easily obtained, either by simple counting or by using devices such as Netscan, an online program particularly useful for getting a quick overview of the activity in Usenet groups.²¹

To broaden the picture of this overall context, the analyses are supplemented with various kinds of qualitative data: for dk.politik I have collected data from different external sites addressing the group, for nordpol.dk, I have been in a continuous dialogue with the project management and have had access to all relevant documents before, during and after the project period analyzed here. Besides, I have made fieldnotes in my exploration of both cases contributing to supplement conclusions based on other kinds of data.

Communication – the content analysis

Although content analysis is an excellent method for retrieving and analysing the semantic aspects of communication, thereby gaining a broader picture than pure quantitative measures permit, it raises methodological problems and dilemmas. The main problem challenging the researcher is how to reduce the complexity of human interaction and communication to as brief a description as possible. In other words, the main purpose of content analysis is to convert complex qualitative data into simpler quantitative

²⁰ The emphasis on the primacy of communication rather than individuals is a focal point in much contemporary theory on communities and society, perhaps most prevalent in Niklas Luhmann's sociological system theory.

²¹ See <http://netscan.research.microsoft.com/>

measures.²² The decisive transformative moment of the data occurs during coding. It is therefore important to apply categories close to the theoretical features one wishes to explore and to stick to these categories and code consistently.

In the analysis, the categories are treated as variables. This term is used henceforth. In both cases, I have used the program MaxQda and applied eight variables.²³ Two, form and dialogue, are basic variables concerning the overall character of the posting: first, is a posting a real contribution to the debate, does it reflect on the debate or is it totally irrelevant? Second, does it initiate a new debate thread, is it a reply to another posting, or is it without connection with the rest of the debate?

The next two variables address the poster: how openly does he or she reveal his/her own identity and what kind of tone is used in the posting? These variables can be regarded as context variables that tell us something about the participant and the framework within which the posting is delivered.

The last four variables address the content itself: what is the argumentation like, does a posting contain explicit or implicit deliberation, is new information provided, and does a posting show any contact with external agendas. The purpose is to explore the specific content of the postings. Obviously, it has been impossible to apply all of these variables to every single posting as each contribution to a debate can serve different purposes.²⁴ Figure 1 sketches these eight variables and their internal cohesion.

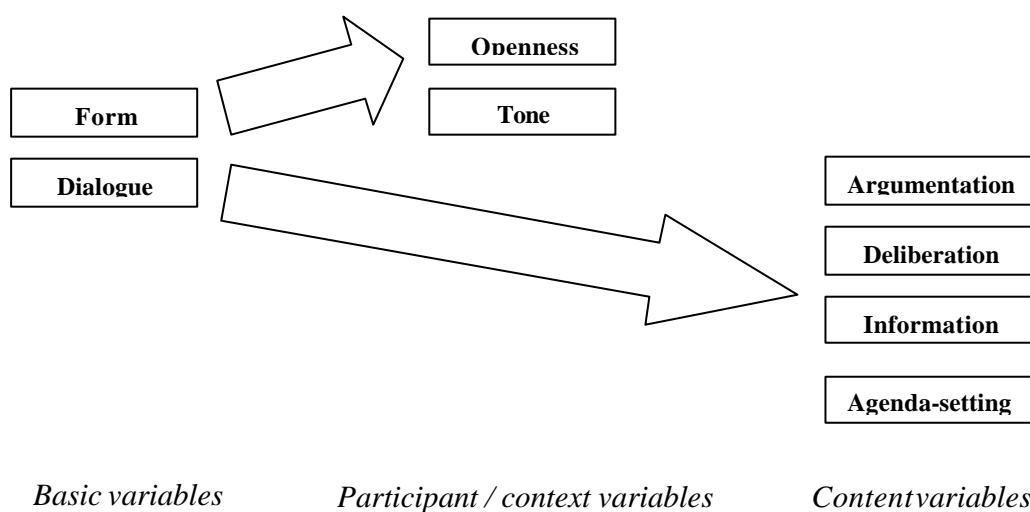


Figure 1: overview of the variables

²² For further discussions of these issues, see Krippendorff, 1980, Holsti, 1969, and Weber, 1990, all among the classics within the tradition.

²³ In the case of Nordpol.dk, both politicians and citizens participated in the debate. Therefore two other variables, sender and relation were included to cover the dialogue between the two groups. Likewise, for dk.politik, another variable, “topic”, was included to cover differences in the way different politics areas were discussed. Here, for purposes of comparison, only variables applied to both cases are included.

²⁴ As an example, some postings can add new information to the debate while others heavily contribute to the progress and deliberation of the debate. Both these functions are of course important in a democratic dialogue and it is therefore not necessarily bad if a posting can be coded for only one of the variables. What matters is the variable values and the overall correlations between, for example, openness, tone and content.

The participants – surveys

Often analyses of online communities have been limited to studies of debates but no information has been gained on participants. To include such information in my investigations, I have found online surveys a necessary tool.

For Nordpol.dk, the data has been collected via a link on the projects website. The survey was active for about four weeks around the local election. 82 participants answered the questions. For dk.politik, a survey link was posted to all e-mail addresses from which postings had been made within the sample period. This resulted in 54 completed surveys.²⁵

4. Overall structure and frame

The number of postings and participants

Although the deeper analysis of the cases is based on samples, I will in this part briefly examine some overall features of the cases: number of postings, number of participants, and the activity level of individuals. Table 1 summarizes these numbers.

	Postings	Participants	Postings/participant
dk.politik	6525	270	24.17
nordpol	450	120	3.75

Table 1: The total numbers of postings and participants in the two cases.

When looking at the two cases, it is clear that overall individual activity level seems much higher for dk.politik than for nordpol.dk. One possible cause is the different style of the postings: shorter, statement-like ones in dk.politik, whereas the typical posting in nordpol.dk resembles a “letter to the editor”. We will address these issues when we turn to the participants’ experiences of the debates.

One common concern about online debates is that particularly energetic or aggressive individuals tend to dominate the discussions.²⁶ For dk.politik it is evident that certain participants are very active. Three individuals or 1 percent account for 25 percent of the activity, the ten most active or 3.7 percent for 50 percent and the 50 most active for 85 percent. This trend is significant for Nordpol.dk as well although not as marked. One single politician makes 35 contributions whereas seven (5.83 percent) account for 33

²⁵ An enormous inherent problem in online surveys is representativity. There is no guarantee that the survey participants are representative for the participants as such. This problem is magnified in the case of nordpol.dk where the survey was placed on a website. On the other hand, this method enables us to “catch” “lurkers” who read the debate (and take the survey) without posting. These persons, however, are not reached when the direct mail method used in the dk.politik case is applied.

²⁶ Davis, 1999: 163

percent of the postings.²⁷ Within the debate there is a significant difference between citizens and politicians. 46 politicians make 300 contributions or 6.52 each, whereas 74 citizens make 150 contributions or 2.03 each. In other words, citizens' contributions comprise a larger number of individuals

Thus it seems as if politicians, especially certain ones, are dominant in the debate on nordpol.dk. On the other hand, it was an explicit goal for the county council to attract this group to the debate to help motivate citizens to enter into dialogues with the politicians. Key politicians were handpicked to initiate the debates and some of them continued to be very active. Another explanation is that the inclusion of politicians in the debate creates a "horizontal dimension" where certain politicians are often used in "consultation processes".

Although we can conclude that a small number of participants are very active, especially on dk.politik, it is difficult to conclude whether these individuals dominate the debates.²⁸ For a closer examination of that issue we will have to refer to the participants' own experiences of the debate, to which we will return below.

There was an especially lively debate on "roads and traffic", where a single thread about a possible bridge or tunnel across a local inlet resulted in 76 postings. This indicates that citizens are eager to engage in discussions when the topics are closely related to their daily lives.

Form

We now turn from the numbers to the character of the debates. A lot of Internet discussion groups are plagued by spam and irrelevant postings. In these two cases it is interesting to conclude that the vast majority of the postings are on-topic. Surprisingly, only between 2 and 4 percent of the postings are directly irrelevant for the debates. Typically, irrelevant postings promote external websites not relevant to dk.politik or they address topics other than the explicit purpose of the group.

A minor part of the postings reflects on the character of the debate. 9 percent of the postings on dk.politik belong to this category. For nordpol.dk some of the postings are both on-topic and reflecting, bringing the total number of reflecting postings to 7,5 percent.²⁹

²⁷ It can be argued that it would seem more appropriate to use identical percentiles for comparisons. However, that is not possible as I originally analysed the cases separately, and therefore used different counting methods and programs.

²⁸ I.e. it is difficult to decide how strong the tendencies have to be to arrive at that conclusion.

²⁹ These reflecting postings are interesting when investigating the internal regulation and moderation of the debates. Although the author has pursued that interesting puzzle in another context (Linaa Jensen, 2002), it will for space and limitation reasons be omitted here.

	dk.politik		nordpol.dk	
	Number	%	Number	%
On topic	276	88.7	226	94.6
Reflecting on debate	28	9.0	18	7.5
Irrelevant	7	2.3	10	4.2
N	311		239*	

*some of the postings belong to two categories

Table 2: The overall “quality” of the postings within the two cases

Now, how do the postings relate to the overall debate? Specifically, how many postings are part of a debate and how many are purely monological? One of the common complaints about netdebates is that this is often the case: strident individuals that dominate each from their own “pulpit” without really exchanging arguments.³⁰ In table 3, we see that monological contributions account for about or below 10 percent of the overall debates.³¹

		dk.politik		nordpol.dk	
		Number	%	Number	%
Part of debate	Initiating debates	18	5.8%	52	21.8%
	Replies	261	83.%	168	70.3%
Monologue		32	10.%	19	7.9%
Total		311	100%	239	100%
Average length of threads ³²		17 postings ³³		4 postings	
Degree of dialogue ³⁴		8		8	

Table 3: The character of the postings in the two cases

The striking difference between the groups is that nordpol.dk contains four times as many initial postings as does dk.politik. We can therefore conclude that the average thread on nordpol.dk is remarkably shorter than one on dk.politik.³⁵ The main explanation can be found through an explorative reading of the cases. Many postings on nordpol.dk take the form of letters to the editor or are part of consultancy processes between citizens and politicians. Conversely, many of the quite long threads on dk.politik consist of quick exchanges between debaters. As such, the communication in this forum resembles that

³⁰ See e.g. Wilhelm, 1998, Hill & Hughes, 1998.

³¹ It is extremely difficult to perform external comparisons using these numbers as other investigations are sparse. Hill & Hughes, 1998 claim that only between 30 and 70 percent of the content in selected American political Usenet groups can be considered as being part of a debate, depending on whether the unit of measure is threads or postings.

³² This is calculated as the total number of postings divided by the number of initiating postings.

³³ This number is calculated based on the sample. We have to remember, that some threads were cut to 20 postings for sampling purposes. The true number then might be higher.

³⁴ Calculated as number of replies divided with number of monologic postings.

³⁵ It would be relevant to compare these numbers with the average length of the single posting. This is not possible, though, to do in a meaningful way as the postings of dk.politik tend to include previous postings to which they respond. It is likewise difficult to make a similar count on Nordpol.dk.

found in chat-rooms, where communication and responses are more immediate. I will touch upon some of these differences in the systematic analysis of the content of the debates.

A last question arises when looking at the postings initiating new debates: do the same few individuals start all debates, thereby dominating the agenda-setting of the groups? The answer is no. In dk.politik the 18 “initiating” postings come from 15 different individuals. In nordpol, of 52 postings in this category, 24 come from politicians and 28 from citizens. Within the groups there are as many different posters as in dk.politik.

5. Openness, anonymity and tone

One of the biggest promises of creating a new, deliberative public sphere online is also one of the weaknesses: the possibility of contributing to the debates anonymously. Thus, the anarchists claim, debaters’ status, job and education of lose importance and the quality of the arguments become the key issue. On the other hand, many fear that anonymity leads to irresponsibility, hate-speech and a decline of debate culture.³⁶ Therefore, it is often claimed that government authorities ought to engage in creating public spaces on the Internet, formulate rules for the debates and demand that the participants identify themselves.

Like many other Usenet groups, dk.politik has an official “netiquette” requesting that participants identify themselves. Further, people are asked to behave “properly” but the guidelines are very general.³⁷ For nordpol.dk, the county council set up guidelines urging people to identify themselves, but used no sanctions towards those who did not.³⁸ The debate was basically unmoderated but from the outset the administrators reserved the right to remove racist, offensive or directly illegal postings. That right was enforced in a single case of a contribution violating another person’s privacy was deleted.

All the postings of the two groups have been coded for degree of openness. If a participant overtly revealed name and e-mail address, the posting was coded “open”. If only one of these was revealed, the posting was coded “partly open” and if nothing was revealed about identity, the code “anonymous” was applied. Figure 2 shows the degree of openness and anonymity in the two cases.

³⁶ This has been one of the main issues of debate among theorists. See e.g. Graham, 1999: 141ff, Jones, 1998: 3.

³⁷ Accessible at www.usenet.dk/netikette

³⁸ Participating politicians however, were given special access to the debate, making them visible and identifiable as politicians by their name etc.

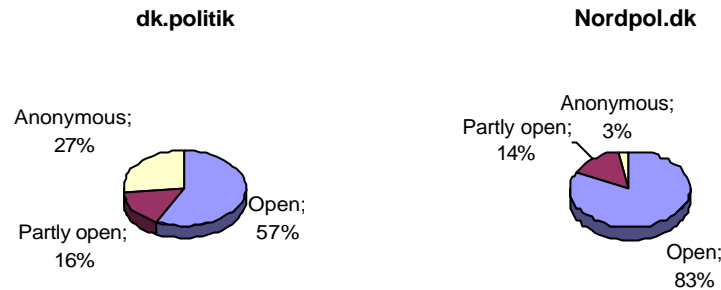


Figure 2: Openness or anonymity among participants of dk.politik and nordpol.dk measured by number of postings. *N* is respectively 311 and 239.

There is a remarkable difference between the two cases. Much more posters tend to identify themselves openly in the nordpol.dk debate dk and almost nobody prefers to remain anonymous.³⁹ It is difficult to explain this difference by more explicit rules as anonymity was not actively prohibited or prevented on nordpol.dk. However, strong appeals plus the participating politicians' wish to identify and promote themselves prior to the local elections seem to have played a role.

Next we examine the tone of the debaters in the two cases. All postings have been coded within one of five categories, from "hate" to "respect", as sketched in table 4. The categories can be regarded as placed on an interval scale.

	dk.politik		nordpol.dk	
	Number	%	Number	%
Hate (-2)	33	10.6	11	4.6
Negative (-1)	58	18.6	27	11.3
Neutral (0)	93	29.9	59	24.7
Factual (+1)	102	32.8	121	50.6
Respect (+2)	25	8.0	21	8.8
Total	311		239	
Index	0.09		0.47	

Table 4: The tone among the participants of dk.politik and Nordpol.dk

It is evident that posters on nordpol.dk in general show a higher degree of factuality and respect than the ones on dk.politik. 59.6 percent of the postings fall into the two upper categories, versus 40.8 percent for dk.politik. If an index is calculated, the numbers show

³⁹ We have to remember that openness is measured by number of postings and not number of participants. The reason is that postings were chosen as coding unit. However, explorative tests showed that the tendency was almost the same when using participants as units.

an even more significant difference: 0.47 for nordpol.dk and 0.09 for dk.politik.⁴⁰ It is important to decide whether the design, e.g. the cases or the openness, account for the difference.

Some of the difference can be explained in the politicians' participation on nordpol.dk. 64 percent of their postings fall into the categories "respect" or "positive", while the number for the citizens is 53 percent. This trend is also evident in the index scores: 0.59 versus 0.32. However, the citizens seen as an isolated group are still using a more factual and respectful tone than on dk.politik.

6. The content of the debate

We now turn to the core of the discussions: the functions of the postings. The theoretical discussion about the different aspects of a true, democratic dialogue has been extensive. The debate about the public sphere often takes its point of departure in Habermas (1962). His thoughts about an ideal public sphere based on deliberation have inspired later scholars to formulate various criteria and conditions for democracy and deliberation. Although this is not the place to engage in a deeper discussion on the nature of and theories about democracy, I have chosen to operationalize some of the central concepts of this tradition in my efforts to evaluate the democratic "quality" of the debate in my two cases.

Whereas deliberation and respect have been goals in a lot of theories and models of democracy, there has been widespread disagreement about the primary function of the public sphere: political problem-solving and a guide for political decisions or internal deliberation and enlightenment among citizens. In my analysis of the postings, I have struggled to include both functions, although in my opinion it is impossible to distinguish: information and enlightenment is a prerequisite for political problem-solving. Likewise, citizens are enlightened when participating in debates and political processes. Although I am aware of the shortcomings and simplicity of reducing this complicated issue to three variables, I have tried to cover the problem-solving process mainly by using the variables "argumentation" and "deliberation", whereas the informative dimension is covered by the variable "information" and by subsequently asking the individuals whether they feel enlightened and better informed after participating in the debates.

It should be noted that different contributions to a discussion perform different functions. As an example, one posting can provide new information, another can seek information and a third can create syntheses of arguments and thereby deliberate. I have tried to include as many of these functions as possible in creating subcategories for the variables.

Argumentation

In most literature about democracy, debates and deliberation, an important normative assumption is that argumentation is a central part of a qualified debate. Through

⁴⁰ The index is constructed by ascribing values from -2 to +2 to the five categories. The sign in front of the number hence indicates whether or not the debate in general is factual and respectful.

arguments you try to convince others to adopt your view or you challenge other conceptions presented in the debate. In this tradition allegations and claims without arguments are considered bad form or counter-productive for the debate. I have therefore used three subcategories in my coding:

- External validation – the debater uses information from external sources and pursues an argumentation based on facts and figures etc.
- Internal validation – the debater argues based on his/her own viewpoints, stands and values, but they are made explicit in the argumentation
- Allegation – claim without any kind of validation or presentation of facts

Hereby we include postings which, from a normative viewpoint, contribute positively and negatively to the debate. The distribution of postings within the categories is shown in table 5.

	dk.politik		nordpol.dk	
	Number	%	Number	%
External validation	39	23.1%	74	38.3%
Internal validation	73	43.2%	100	51.8%
Allegation	57	33.7%	19	9.8%
Total postings with argument	169	54.3% of N	193	80.8% of N
N	311		239	
Index ⁴¹	0.18		0.65	

Table 5: argumentation for dk.politik and Nordpol.dk

We see that argumentation is much more prevalent in nordpol.dk than dk.politik. Validation takes place within 90 percent of the postings while the number for dk.politik is only 66 percent. Conversely, for allegations the numbers are 9.8 versus 33.7 percent. Even more significant, only 54 percent of the postings on dk.politik score on the variable “argument” while the number for dk.politik is about 80 percent. These differences are summarized in the indexes: 0.18 for dk.politik and 0.65 for nordpol.dk.

Finally, it might be relevant to ask whether the relatively higher degree of argumentation for nordpol.dk is due to the fact that the politicians participating validate and elaborate their viewpoints. The answer is that the politicians’ participation has a little effect as their indexscore is 0.71 versus 0.57 for the citizens. However, the citizens participating on nordpol.dk are still arguing (and validating) much more than those on dk.politik.

⁴¹ The index is formulated as the percentage of postings using external or internal arguments minus postings making claims. This figure is then multiplied by the percentage within the category in which argumentation occurs. This gives a conservative estimate of level of argumentation between different groups and relations. These values should of course be seen as mere ballpark estimates as we are not dealing with a ‘genuine’ interval scale variable..

Deliberation

Deliberation is a heavily debated concept that has generated an enormous body of literature. In the broadest sense, many of the measures and variables touched upon here can be said to be aspects of deliberation. However, for purposes of clarification and simplicity I have chosen to define the concept more narrowly, namely as explicit deliberation. It thus comes close to Gutman & Thompson's concept of reciprocity⁴² in the sense that what is at stake is the relation to other posters and the reflection on their postings.

On the variable 'deliberation' I have coded three different aspects of this "reciprocity":

- Conviction - there are explicit signs that a poster feels convinced by another poster's argumentation or the posting in general.
- Progress - a poster reflects on another posting and answers the poster with new arguments, new information or tries to create a synthesis of other arguments.
- Radicalization - a poster reacts explicitly negatively to another posting, gets personal or offensive and/or radicalizes his/her previous viewpoint.

Further, although it is difficult (and perhaps questionable), different values have been added to the subcategories in order to quantify deliberation and create an overall picture of deliberation. The idea is that "conviction" contributes more to overall deliberation than "progress" although both have a positive effect. On the other hand, radicalization has a negative impact on the debate. The subcategories, their affiliated values and the distribution of postings within categories are sketched in table 6.

	dk.politik		nordpol.dk	
	Number	%	Number	%
Conviction	14	10.1%	11	9.3%
Progress	104	74.8%	101	85.6%
Radicalisation	21	15.1%	6	5.1%
Total postings with deliberation	139	44.7%	118	49.4%
N	311		239	
Index ⁴³	0.29		0.46	

Table 6: Degree of deliberation for dk.politik and Nordpol.dk.

Concerning deliberation, the differences between the cases are not as marked as for argumentation. Almost the same proportions of posters show conviction and the number of postings containing deliberation is only slightly higher for nordpol.dk than for dk.politik. However, the latter case includes more instances of radicalization, a fact that largely accounts for the lower index score (0.29 versus 0.46 for nordpol).

⁴² Gutman & Thompson, 1996: 53

⁴³ Index for deliberation has been calculated as follows: conviction was ascribed the value +2, progress +1, and radicalization -2. A weighted average within the postings containing deliberation is calculated and that number is then multiplied by the percentage of all postings where deliberation occurs.

Again, it is relevant to ask whether the higher index score for nordpol.dk is generated by the politicians. We can conclude that politicians show deliberation in 55.7 percent of the postings against 40.4 percent for the citizens. Clearer yet, due to a lower rate of radicalization their indexscore is 0.55 versus 0.34 for the citizens. If we compare the groups of citizens alone, there is almost no difference between the cases, and the politicians thus account for the difference.

Information and enlightenment

Most models and theories of democracy since the age of Jefferson have emphasized that the citizens ought to be informed and enlightened. Since the first ideas about teledemocracy via cables and teletext were realized in the 70's, it has been a focal point that technology ought to be used to inform the citizens and make public policy processes as visible as possible.⁴⁴ For the county council of Northern Jutland that was one of the explicit and most important goals prior to starting the project nordpol.dk.

Processes of information and political enlightenment can take place in two ways: services where citizens can acquire formal information (i.e. websites, bulletin boards, TV, info kiosks, etc.) and participation in the democratic debate.⁴⁵ On nordpol.dk the citizens were able to find information via the extensive website that was a part of the project. dk.politik has no such adjacent service.

In this context, we will focus only on the information and enlightenment resulting from engaging in the debates. Besides measuring the information sought and provided during the discussions, I have for both cases subsequently asked the participants whether they feel more informed, enlightened and knowing after participating.

Figures on information sought and added in the debates are sketched in table 7.

	dk.politik		nordpol.dk	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Information added	74	91.4%	88	83.0%
Information sought	7	8.6%	18	17.0%
Total postings with information	81	26.0%	106	44.4%
N	311		239	
Index ⁴⁶ for information added	0.24		0.37	
Index for information sought	0.02		0.08	

Table 7: Information added and sought in the debates of dk.politik and Nordpol.dk

The general impression is that the total number of postings scoring on the "information" variable is much higher for nordpol.dk. Within these numbers, the trend is that more

⁴⁴ See e.g. Arterton, 1987.

⁴⁵ The first is the focus of initiatives of service-democracy (a term coined by Danish Internet researcher Jens Hoff), where transparency and open access to government information is the focus. The second is more closely affiliated with a republican tradition of citizenship, a lot of the theories on deliberative democracy and, more specifically, it is the underlying idea in Gutman & Thompson, 1996.

⁴⁶ As it is impossible to include "information added" and "information sought" in the same count, indexes were calculated for both categories. The procedure is the same as for the other indexes: percentage in category multiplied by the percentage of postings scoring on variable "information".

posters use nordpol.dk as a forum for seeking information than posters on dk.politik. The explanation is that Nordpol.dk was also a forum for a dialogue between citizens and politicians. Often, citizens have asked for information or viewpoints from politicians or parties, who have subsequently answered and thus provided information. This trend is underlined by the indexes. The scores for adding information are 0.45 for politicians and 0.25 for citizens, whereas the scores, respectively, for seeking information are 0.01 and 0.17

It is difficult, some would say meaningless, to comment on these numbers without examining the effect of the information sought and provided in the debates. The participants were asked about whether they afterwards feel more interested in and informed about politics, and whether they see themselves as more qualified democratic citizens. The scores for different categories of answer to these two questions are shown in table 8.

	Has your participation made you more interested in / informed about politics? ⁴⁷		Do you, after participating, feel more qualified and competent when facing political questions? ⁴⁸	
	dk.politik	Nordpol.dk	dk.politik	Nordpol.dk
Yes, a lot	7.41%	11.0 %	11.11%	12.2 %
Yes, to some extent	33.33%	41.5 %	31.48%	30.5 %
No, not really	44.44%	31.7 %	38.89%	31.7 %
No, not at all	11.11%	8.5 %	14.81%	21.9 %
Do not know	0	7.3 %	0	3.7 %
Not answered	3.70%	0	3.70%	0
N = 54	100.00%	100%	100.00%	100%

Tabel 8: The information and enlightenment effects of dk.politik and nordpol.dk.

There is a trend in both cases that about 40 percent of the participants feel that participating has made them more informed on politics and more competent when facing political questions. The exception is that more than half of the participants on nordpol.dk state that they have become more interested and informed. The number of participants that report no effect are likewise very similar across the cases.

Now is the time to ask the relevant question: is the glass half full or half empty concerning information and enlightenment of Internet debates? It is difficult to say as the research in this field is very sparse. To my knowledge, these questions have not been asked before in surveys on Internet debaters. When looking at some of the qualitative statements from the survey data, the impressions of the education and information potentials are more positive for nordpol.dk than for dk.politics. Participants in the former stress the positive idea of the project and feel that their dialogue with the

⁴⁷ Question for Nordpol.dk participants was slightly different: “politics” was substituted with “county politics and affairs”.

⁴⁸ Question for nordpol.dk participants was slightly different: “when facing political questions” was substituted with “to vote in the county council election”. These changes were due to the regional focus of nordpol.dk.

politicians contributes to their grasp of county affairs and politics, whereas the participants in the latter stress the dominance of certain individuals and their endless fruitless dialogues. We will address the participants' conceptions of the debates below.

7. Agenda-setting

It is often claimed that online political discussions, although they might seem qualitative, deliberative and fruitful do not relate to external agendas and as such they have no effect on wider societal life and political decisions.⁴⁹ The debates are therefore reminiscent of the coffee houses of the 18th century so well described by Habermas: closed circles for the few, well educated with little or no external effect (at least in the beginning!).

It is extremely difficult to measure the relation of online political discussions to external agendas as a thorough attempt would require a complete reading of all media materials available during the entire period of analysis to trace even the slightest traces of connection. That might be one reason why previous analyses of online political debates only very rarely address this issue.

The close content analysis has enabled me to analyse the relations to external agendas as far as they are evident in the postings of the debate. Since I was interested in relations both to and from external agendas, I coded on three subcategories within the variable:

- From other media - explicit references to topics, postings or events in other (traditional) media such as TV, radio, newspapers and magazines.
- From other external agendaes – explicit references to the reminder of the on-going political or societal agenda, e.g. discussions with friends and colleagues plus other online discussions.
- To agenda - explicit signs that the agenda is sought extended beyond the case. Examples could be that citizens try to attract the attention of politicians or authorities, propose (physical) political actions and happenings, or refer to an external effect of the discussions online.

The numbers on contact to external agendas are shown in table 9.

	dk.politik		nordpol.dk	
	Number	%	Number	%
From other media	12	44.4%	12	20%
From other external agendaes	11	40.7%	12	20%
To external agenda	4	14.8%	36	60%
Postings within "agenda"	27	8.7%	60	25.1%
N	311		239	

Table 9: The contact to and from external agendaes for dk.politik and nordpol.dk.

⁴⁹ That claim is found for instance in Jones, 1998:22

When we compare the numbers on agenda-contact with the numbers on other functions of the online discussions (argumentation, deliberation and information), it is remarkable that they are significantly lower. Especially for dk.politik the total number of postings showing any relation to an external agenda is only 8.7 percent. nordpol.dk fares slightly better: about ¼ of all postings show a relation to an external agenda. Of these, 60 percent relate to an external agenda. Part of the explanation is that the citizens contact politicians concerning specific issues in an attempt to transcend mere discussions and get political influence. Again, it is evident that the presence of the politicians contributes to a qualitatively better debate when we measure by the criteria set up here.

However, because of the complexity of political agenda-setting one should be very careful when trying to draw conclusions based on the data reported above. The measurement of agenda-setting is very difficult. As the following shall be seen as a necessary part of the analysis, it is at the same time a contribution to the ongoing attempts to formulate a comprehensive method for analyzing external effects of online discussions.⁵⁰

8. The participants

Having analyzed the debates it now is relevant to broaden the picture by drawing a sketch of the participants. When doing surveys online one is confronted by a number of issues and problems, as briefly touched upon earlier. It can be argued that there is a double representativity issue: participants in netdebates are not representative for the population in general and it can prove hard to get a representative sample within the group that participates in the netdebates. The first issue is broader and related to the “digital divide” and other known skewnesses of Internet use and the second is related to the methodological challenges of the Internet.

Due to these limitations and the relatively small number of survey participants, especially for dk.politik, one should be careful to conclude too firmly based on the analyses presented below. However, the figures contribute to a more complete picture of the debates than the analysis of the debates itself would do.

First and foremost, the participants answering the surveys are probably among the active ones in the forums. In the dk.politik survey, 43 percent have made more than 100 postings and 2/3 more than 20.

On nordpol.dk, 33 percent have written one or two postings whereas only 10 percent have written more. Interestingly, 57 percent have written none. They are the group which in technical terms is called “lurkers”. As such they are hard to reach with surveys as they do not identify themselves in the debates. They were reached in this case because the survey was posted on the website, a methodological advantage compared to the technique used for dk.politik, where every poster within the period received a survey. However, that method is more consistent as it allows greater representativity and protects

⁵⁰ More extensive studies of agenda effects of online discussions should ideally analyse discussions that have gone on for years as it might then be possible to find long time effects on the external community. An example is *Minnesota E-democracy*, which has been online for eight years. The author has analyzed this project and the results are forthcoming, probably in early 2003.

against doublets answering the questions twice. Internet research is rife with such dilemmas!

When comparing the numbers of postings in the two groups, it is important to remember that they are not immediately comparable. dk.politik has been online for several years, whereas nordpol.dk at the time of the surveys was a brand new project. To that picture should be added that the number of postings on dk.politik in general is much higher than on nordpol.dk.

When evaluating the use of the Internet, we can conclude that the participants in both cases are very active Internet citizens. Respectively 100 and 89 percent are online on a daily basis. That indicates that extensive and daily Internet use is a prerequisite for participating in online political discussions.

	dk.politik (N=52)	nordpol.dk (N=82)
Every day	100%	89.0%
At least every week	0	9.8%
Less than every week	0	1.2%

Table 10: The participants' use of the Internet.

For dk.politik this picture can be supplemented by the fact that 96% of the participants have access to the Internet from their home.

Demographics

An often claimed bias of the Internet is the gender gap among users. In the beginning, the typical Internet user was a highly educated, white male. As these differences tend to diminish as more and more woman and non-white go online, a gender gap seems to remain concerning political participation. The gender distribution is especially skewed for dk.politik where only 8 percent of the participants are female.⁵¹ For nordpol.dk the distribution seems somewhat more even, indicating that government-sponsored groups and adjacent campaigns to attract all user groups tend to motivate women to participate and thereby equalize the distribution of participants.

	dk.politik (N=51)	nordpol.dk (N=82)
Male	92%	71%
Female	8%	29%

Table 11: The gender distribution of the participants across cases

Education and occupation

A look at education and occupation reveals other clear biases. For nordpol.dk it is remarkable that more than 60 percent of the participants have done advanced studies and the number for dk.politik is almost as high. The number of participants with 5 years or more of advanced studies (e.g. persons with university degrees) is about 30 percent for

⁵¹ N is only 51 (out of 54) as three people did not answer the question. The gender distribution is similar to the one detected by reading the names of the posters in the sample, indicating that the group answering the survey is representative.

dk.politik and 40 percent for nordpol.dk, indicating a strong academic bias in both groups.

Education Question asked: mark the highest level of education finished or attending		
	dk.politik (N=52)	nordpol.dk (N=82)
9 years of schooling or less	11.5%	7.3 %
Vocational education	9.6%	12.2 %
High school / merchant school	23.1%	17.1 %
Advanced studies, 1-2 years	7.8%	3.7 %
Advanced studies, 3-4 years	15.7%	19.5 %
Advanced studies, 5 years or more	29.4%	37.8 %
Other	3.9%	2.4 %

Table 12: The educational background of the participants

The trend is reinforced when looking at the occupation of the participants. For both groups about 35 percent have “white collar” or civil servant positions, jobs typically available only to people who have completed advanced studies. Further, about 30 percent of the participants are students, indicating not only an educational bias but also a younger average age than the population in general. To that extent, it might be true that online political discussions tend to mobilize new groups of participants as the younger generation is normally associated with relatively low political participation.⁵²

Other groups with traditional low political participation, the retired and unemployed, are almost unrepresented at dk.politik, whereas nordpol.dk is more successful in motivating and recruiting those groups: 8.5 percent of the participants are retired and 4.9 percent are unemployed. Because of the relatively small N, one should not conclude too hastily on these data, but it seems as if government initiatives could be the road ahead to engage more of the “politically marginalized”.

Employment : Question asked: what is your present occupation		
	dk.politik (N=52)	nordpol.dk (N=82)
Unskilled worker	5.8%	2.4 %
Skilled worker	3.8%	9.8 %
White collar / civil servant	34.7%	35.4 %
Employer	11.5%	4.9 %
Student	28.8%	30.5 %
Retired etc.	3.8%	8.5 %
Unemployed	0.00%	4.9 %
Other	11.5%	3.6 %

Table 13: The occupation of the participants.

⁵² One explicit goal of nordpol.dk was to mobilize those groups, not least the first time -voters.

Political participation

Previous sporadic studies of participants in online political discussions have often shown that only "the chosen few" join in.⁵³ However, very few analyses have touched upon the participants themselves, and the data on the other political activities of online participants are therefore very sparse. That is one reason why I regard subsequent surveys as an essential aspect of research on online communities.

When looking at the general political activity for the participants of our cases (sketched in table 14), it is remarkable that they are much more politically engaged than the population in general.⁵⁴

Question asked: in which ways have you been politically active during the last 12 months?	dk.politik (N=54) ⁵⁵	nordpol.dk (N=82) ⁵⁶
Formal political participation		
Member of a political party	37.0	25.6%
Member of organisation, grassroot movement etc.	14.8%	20.7%
Member of users' councils etc.	1.9%	11.0%
Member of or candidate for parliament, county council or city council	1.9%	9.8%
Informal political participation		
Discussing politics with friends, family and colleagues	75.9%	80.5%
Participating in town meetings, hearings and other political meetings	18.5%	39.0%
Contacting a politician or a civil servant regarding a political matter	33.3%	19.5%
Writing a letter to the editor	16.7%	12.2%
No political activity	3.7%	7.3%

Table 14: The political activity of the participants

Especially regarding "formal" political participation, it is striking that respectively 37 and 25.6 percent are members of a political party. Concerning the more informal aspects of political participation, the vast majority discuss politics with friends, relatives and

⁵³ Just to mention a couple of examples: Hoff, Löfgren & Johansen, 1998 and their investigation of the use of Internet in Danish local elections 1997; Hill & Hughes, 1998 and their inquiries of participants in American online political life.

⁵⁴ It is difficult to provide exact numbers of political participation for the population in general, but scholars estimate that between 5 and 7 percent of the Danes are members of a political party. In that context, the numbers here indicate politically very active participants.

⁵⁵ Each responder has been asked to "check all that apply". Therefore the total percentage is more than 100.

⁵⁶ For Nordpol.dk, only the citizens have answered the survey. It explains why only 10 percent have candidated for electoral office whereas the general proportion of participants showed a majority of politicians.

colleagues on a regular basis, whereas no less than 40 percent of the nordpol.dk participants have attended town meetings and other political events. One third of all dk.politik participants have contacted various kinds of government authorities regarding a political matter.

Apart from differences concerning specific forms of participation, no overall differences between the activity and engagement of the citizens were found. If not “the choosen few”, it is definitely those who are also active in traditional political organizations that participate online. Although Nordpol seems to have attracted some of those outside the labour market, the often heard claim that the Internet is a fantastis tool for groups otherwise marginalized can not be confirmed here.

However, as we saw in table 8, 40 to 50 percent of the participants state that participating in online political discussions has made them more interested in politics and for both cases 40 percent state that having participated they feel more politically and democratically competent. It seems as if online political participation tends to increase the engagement and participation of those who are already politically active, while new groups are not mobilized. As such, the use of the Internet as a political tool can be said to increase the existing gap in political participation between different segments of the population.

9. The consequences of design and sponsorship

After analysing the character of the debates and the participants, it is time to conclude on the similarities and differences between private and anarchic and government-sponsored initiatives.

The general conclusion when evaluating the democratic “quality” of the debates on variables such as argumentation, deliberation and information is that nordpol.dk fares better than dk.politik. When evaluating the effect of “government” sponsorship versus private initiatives it is important to remember the effects we have identified as being due to the presence of politicians. In sum: the debate tends to be more open, reflective, deliberative and balanced on nordpol.dk, even when controlled for the presence of politicians, which tends to influence the “quality” of the debate in a positive direction as well.

When we examine the citizens’ own impressions with the debates, the picture of nordpol.dk as more balanced, respectful and fruitful than dk.politik is confirmed, as shown in table 15.

Question: what is your impression of the debates of dk.politik and Nordpol.dk (respectively)	Dk.politik (N=54)	nordpol.dk (N=59)
It is an open dialogue where the participants deliberate and try to reach each other through arguments	11.1%	33.9%
It is mainly a serie of monologues, statements and the participants in general do not listen to each other	24.1%	17.9%
It is something in between the claims above	59.3%	45.8%
Do not know	1.9%	3.4%
Did not answer	3.7%	0

Table 15: The participants' impressions of the character of the debates.

The issue of agenda-setting deserves a separate remark. Whereas the debate on nordpol.dk to a much higher extent shows relations to external agendaes, it is remarkable that is easier to bring to the agenda specific, down-to-earth issues rather than more overall topics. Whereas lively reactions occur when traffic issues or cases of injustice in the health sector are brought into question, nobody reacts to attempts to put general topics such as regional development and national affairs on the political agenda. In general, it is easier to mobilize and create interest in topics close to the daily lives of the citizens than more abstract issues.

It could be argued that the relative success of nordpol.dk compared to dk.politik is due to the local focus and the geographical limits. This was seen as one of the deciding factors for the success of *Minnesota Edemocracy*, one of the hitherto most extensive and succesful attempts to create an online public sphere.⁵⁷

When considering the length of the threads and the postings, it is noticeable that while the threads in general are much longer on dk.politik, a closer reading of the postings shows that the single average contribution is shorter. We get a picture of dk.politik as an informal discussion among friends or colleagues with quick replies or exchanges, whereas nordpol.dk more resembles formal kinds of participation such as town meetings, hearings or consultations with politicians. This picture is confirmed in table 16 reporting the participants' conceptions of the debates and how these can best be described.

⁵⁷ See Dahlberg, 2001, available at http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue6_3/dahlberg/index.html

Question: When comparing the debate with other forms of political participation, what do you think it resembles mostly?*	dk.politik (N=54)	nordpol.dk (N=82)
Writing letters to the editor	53.7%	52.4%
Participating in a town meeting	16.7%	24.4%
Writing to politicians	0%	24.4%
Talking to politicians	1.9%	3.7%
Discussing politics with friends, colleagues or family	66.7%	24.4%
Other	14.8%	12.2%
Do not know	0%	7.3%

*More than one answer was allowed

Table 16: The participants' conceptions of the debates and the way to describe them.

It is remarkable, however, that a dominant image of the debate for the participants of both groups is that of "letters to the editor". As such, political processes on the Internet are still seen as written procedures, as another kind of newspaper debate. That shows us that despite some of the hype about the Internet as brand new form of communication, most participants still conceive of Internet dialogue as close to written media.⁵⁸

An issue to be addressed separately is that of openness versus anonymity. It is widely claimed that government sponsorship of online political discussions ensures regulation and identification of participants and that it therefore gives rise to a more respectful and fruitful debate. It could be interesting, finally, to test that argument by the use of a simple linear regression. I have chosen to test the dependent variable 'tone' for the independent variables "openness" and "case" to see whether the overt identification among the citizens or the design/sponsorship has the largest effect. Additionally, I have tested whether there is a significant correlation between sponsorship and openness. The results of the tests are shown in figure 3.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ An interesting point to elaborate on is whether this is due to real conceptions, or it is a sign that participants lack metaphors for an exact description of what is going on. This is a truly interesting question which should be raised and discussed further in other contexts.

⁵⁹ The variable 'tone' is chosen as other dependent variables are unusable in linear regressions and affiliated tests as they are not on interval scale.

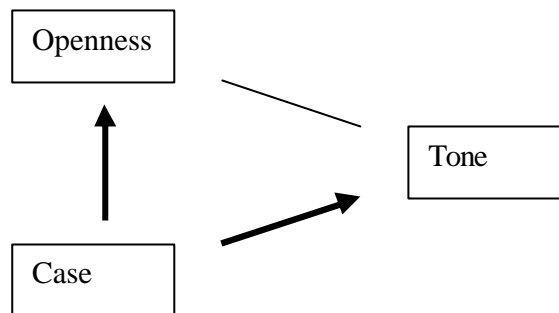


Figure 3: The importance of openness and sponsorship on tone and for sponsorship on openness. The results are reached by merging all data from the two cases and test for significant differences on tone due to case (*dk.politik* or *nordpol.dk*) and the variable openness touched upon earlier. Further, “openness” is tested for case. Statistically significant⁶⁰ relations are marked by bold arrows.

We see that sponsorship (public/government or private) has a statistically significant impact on the degree of openness as well as for tone. Strikingly, however, there is no significant correlation between openness and tone. It seems that a theoretical claim of openness among participants as a prerequisite for a respectful debate can be questioned when looking at empirical data, whereas the sponsorship has significant consequences.

10. Conclusion

The basic findings are that the government-sponsored group contains more balanced, nuanced and serious political discussion than the Usenet group. Debating on the Internet seems to be more qualified when certain rules and paths for the conversation are set up, i.e. when major topics are defined in advance.

Although *nordpol.dk* was not actively moderated, it was regulated to the extent that certain topics for discussion were set up in advance, politicians were invited to initiate the debate, and explicit guidelines for the debate were set forth. Conversely, the debate on *dk.politik* was unregulated apart from the very informal “netiquette” set up years ago.

Our conclusions seem to indicate that it might be that regulation rather than sponsorship is the deciding factor for the relative democratic success of *nordpol.dk*. At the same time, the presence of the politicians seem to have contributed to respect, openness and dialogue.

It has to be remembered, however, that rules and regulations governing a debate do not necessarily have to include a prerequisite of openness. One striking finding of our investigations is that there seems to be little correlation between openness and tone or respect. Anonymous posters are not necessarily disrespectful.

⁶⁰ On a 5% level

The big remaining issue of online political participation is inclusion. Surveys of debaters in both groups show that most were politically active prior to participating in the groups and that it does not seem as if the Internet helps to mobilize new or hitherto marginalized groups for political participation. Although nordpol.dk might have proved a little more successful in respect to that issue, democratic dialogue on the Internet continues to resemble the Habermasian coffee house: somewhat qualified and interested debates with a limited audience and an even more limited number of active participants.

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