

*Jakob Linnaa Jensen: Den virtuelle kaffestue - Deliberation og demokratisk inklusion i politiske debatter på nettet* (The virtual coffee shop – deliberation and democratic inclusion in political debates on the internet). Ph.d.-dissertation, 2004. Published at Politica, Aarhus, 2005. This is the English summary. All rights reserved, Politica and the editor.

## **Summary in English**

*Den virtuelle kaffestue - Deliberation og demokratisk inklusion i politiske debatter på nettet* (The virtual coffee shop – deliberation and democratic inclusion in political debates on the internet) takes its point of departure in the rise of the internet and the associated democratic promises. For decades, it has been claimed that Western democracies do not fulfil the democratic ideals of decision-making, participation, and inclusion. The internet has been seen as part of the solution to these democratic deficiencies. The internet is a medium for fast and easy communication and interaction and thus has the potential to facilitate an enhanced democratic dialogue as part of the process of political decision-making. Further, the internet reduces the physical costs of participation and communication, and optimists claim that it offers new possibilities of political involvement for those formerly disenfranchised and marginalised.

The aim of this project is to test the optimistic expectations of the internet as a medium for deliberation and democratic inclusion. Theoretically the project is based on a deliberative ideal of democratic dialogue and focuses on three aspects of democratic debates: procedures, processes and possible effects experienced among the participants. It is claimed, however, that the deliberative ideal of democracy poses a dilemma regarding democratic inclusion. A supplementary participatory ideal of democratic inclusion is therefore included as well. Democratic debates online are thus evaluated from a deliberative as well as a participatory perspective.

The democratic expectations of the internet are distilled into six hypotheses, four regarding deliberation and two regarding inclusion:

- Online debates take place under circumstances which are close to deliberative ideals on procedures for democratic debates. This is ensured through various informal mechanisms that evolve during the debates.
- Regarding the processes of democratic dialogue online, deliberative ideals of argumentation, information and reciprocity are fulfilled.
- Participants in online debates experience a higher level of political competence (information, knowledge about politics etc.) as a result of their participation. This is referred to as experienced internal effects.

- Participants in online debates experience a higher degree of influence on the political agenda and responsiveness from political decision-makers as a result of their participation. This is referred to as experienced external effects.
- Social factors explaining traditional political participation have little or no significance for participation online. Thus, the internet enhances democratic inclusion and tends to mobilise new groups for political participation. This is referred to as inclusion in the external sense.
- In an internet debate, the participants are on an equal footing as education, income and status have no impact on roles and positions in the debate. This is referred to as inclusion in the internal sense.

The research was designed to test the general validity of the hypotheses for the widest possible array of cases. Thus a “most different case strategy” was applied. Three cases were selected based on different purposes, rules and technologies. They are *dk.politik* and *Nordpol* in Denmark and *Minnesota E-democracy* in Minnesota, USA.

*Dk.politik* is a Danish *Usenet* group. It is one of the biggest and oldest Danish groups and the longest standing forum for online political discussions in Denmark. The group, originally created on the 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.

*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 the regional elections in 2001, had as an explicit goal to enhance the citizens’ interest in and knowledge of politics and to strengthen the dialogue among citizens and politicians. This aim was sought achieved by creating a forum where citizens and politicians were invited to debate. Certain rules were formulated and the forum was lightly moderated.

*Minnesota E-democracy* is one of the best known and highly praised examples of civic engagement online. It is a local, private initiative set up in Minnesota, USA, and based mainly around the metropolis of Minneapolis-St. Paul. The idea is to combine local political debates with a massive provision of political information and links based on the project’s website. Active moderators ensure that a wide array of discussion rules are enforced.

Methodologically, different methods were applied: surveys were used to gain information on the participants and the effects they have experienced, and the proceedings of the debates were studied using a combination of overall quantitative measures and content analysis. Finally, the conclusions were supplemented by informal qualitative interviews and fieldwork.

It is now time to move to the substantial conclusions of the project. The first two research questions address the character of online debates. This has been a major focus of the project and extensive content analyses were applied to the two Danish debates in order to evaluate the procedures and the processes of debates online.

Regarding the procedures of the debates, at least some of the deliberative ideals are to a certain extent fulfilled. Most of the debates takes place in a respectful manner and there appears to be few formal barriers for participation in the debates. Further, even though formal procedures for regulation of debates are often hard to enforce on the internet, new and more informal mechanisms for regulation and moderation crop up. Troublesome individuals are marginalised within the debate community and discussions of breaches of the code of conduct governing the debates are often used to identify the community borders and enhance a sense of identity among group members. Finally, it is shown that the possibility of anonymity online does not contribute democratically to the debate. Rather than placing the emphasis on the argument and not the person, anonymity is closely connected with less respectful and constructive behaviour.

Regarding the processes, online debates seem to have something to offer in terms of realising a deliberative ideal. In general, there is a certain level of argumentation, information and reciprocity, key elements of deliberative ideals for a process of democratic dialogue. On the other hand, some participants engage in endless quarrels. They do not contribute to enlightenment and argumentation but the impression is that they constitute a very active but isolated group within the overall debate.

The next two hypotheses address the question of whether the participants experience internal and external effects as a result of their involvement in the debates. Internally, the participants experience a process of enlightenment and democratic education. However, it must be kept in mind that the participants were quite well-informed and interested in politics prior to entering the debates. The enlightened have become even more enlightened. Further, the effect is probably due to political participation rather than the internet specifically, and a similar effect might be found in relation to more traditional kinds of political participation.

Externally, the participants' experiences regarding agenda-setting and responsiveness from decision-makers are quite mixed. Only in the case of Minnesota E-democracy has the online debate, according to the participants, come to play a significant role for the wider political agenda in society. In some cases, it has had certain political effects. The presence of media and decision-makers in the debates seem to be factors that determine whether an online debate can become a part of a wider political agenda and influence political decisions. However, a certain level of activity and involvement from the citizens is required before media people

and politicians bother to become involved. Thus, there is a clear critical mass-problem related to the creation of vital online debates.

Concerning democratic inclusion, the widespread claim that the Internet tends to mobilise new groups and thereby increases the level of political participation cannot be confirmed. Almost all participants in Internet debates are “gladiators”, very politically interested and very much used to various forms of political participation. The Internet provides them with yet another forum for participation. There is a close correspondence between traditional and online political participation. The patterns of traditional political participation are replicated on the internet. The reason is that personal resources like education, income and status still seem to matter for political participation, even on the internet. Further, new barriers are added to political participation as internet access and competence to use the net are prerequisites for online participation as well.

A second question is whether the Internet tends to put the participants on an equal footing, eliminating traditional hierarchies and power structures within discussions. It is shown that social factors do not influence the scope of activity once the participants have passed the barriers and engaged in online discussions. However, education probably still matters for the activities a certain individual can engage in. The social factors of the physical world do not disappear on the Internet.

In sum, many of the initial optimistic visions of the Internet as a forum for democratic dialogue have been confirmed, albeit with reservations. The big outstanding democratic problem is the limited audience participating online. Political participation on the Internet is still an even more exclusive phenomenon than traditional, active political involvement and the entrance barriers seem to be even higher than in “real life”. However, the internet obviously has democratic potential. Future research and political strategies ought to focus on how the internet can be used to mobilise the politically inactive and thereby establish a body of political participants more representative of the population in general.