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CHAPTER 2

DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY AND ITS OPERATIONALIZATION

THE OPERATIONALIZATION OF THE DELIBERATIVE THEORY, both on- and offline, demands awareness that the deliberative theory is composed of two levels of normative requirements, which often lead to a confusion about what deliberation is about and how it can be measured. There are, on the one hand, the deliberative norms that define the discursive rules that a political debate should follow, and on the other hand, there are the deliberative norms that define how these discursive norms should be applied at the different levels of the decision-making process. While there tends to be relatively widespread agreement among the deliberative theorists about what constitutes a deliberative form of political debate, there tends to be no agreement on how these ideal discursive criteria should be concretely applied at the different levels of the opinion- and decision-making process. As indicated by Thompson in a recent article, deliberative theory and, more particularly its empirical analysis, faces a structural problem, “which calls for moving beyond the study of isolated or one-time deliberative experiences and examining the relationship between deliberative and non-deliberative practices in the political system as a whole and over time” (2008, 500).

The deliberative discursive criteria will be presented in detail in the first section by clarifying their definitions and the way these have been so far operationalized by the deliberative democrats. This review of the literature, essentially based on attempts to measure online forms of deliberation, reveals important differences concerning the choice of the deliberative criteria and strategies for operationalizing them. This will lead us to the elaboration of a table that synthesizes the methods that are considered to be the most appropriate for “measuring” each deliberative criterion. Then, in the second

1 section, the main divergences of the deliberative theories concerning the
 2 way these discursive criteria should be applied at different levels of the
 3 decision-making process will be presented. We have identified four very
 4 different models of the deliberative standards (the globalizing model, the
 5 two-track model, the critical democratic model, and the impact model) that
 6 promote a divergent application of the discursive principles according to
 7 whether these concern the civil society, the institutional actors, or the private
 8 actors. We argue that the divergences and contradictions identified in the
 9 different models derive from an absence of empirical grounding. This
 10 justifies the choice of conducting an exploratory analysis that does not
 11 presuppose any discursive criteria or combination of discursive criteria
 12 in accordance with the public spaces, including those online, analyzed.

15 2.1 DELIBERATIVE CRITERIA AND THEIR 16 OPERATIONALIZATION

17 The link between the theory of deliberative democracy and the practice
 18 of online forums is the subject of an emerging body of literature. The
 19 research question concerning the relationship between online forums
 20 and theories of democracy and public space is a recurring one. Graham
 21 asks, "To what extent, do current online political forums correspond to
 22 the ideal notion of the public sphere advocated by Habermas and other
 23 deliberative democrats?" (2002, 9). Schneider tests "the hypothesis that
 24 the form of discourse fostered by computer mediated discussion pro-
 25 vides opportunities to expand the informal zone of the public sphere"
 26 (1997, 1). Wilhelm asks, "How useful are these virtual sounding boards
 27 in enabling deliberation in the public sphere?" (1999, 154), and Jensen
 28 echoes, "Can [the Internet] contribute to strengthening democracy by
 29 creating new public spheres online?" (2003c, 1).

30 Researchers that have operationalized this concept for empirical
 31 research do not, however, agree on the selection of criteria that constitute
 32 the idealized public sphere. Schneider lists "four dimensions that embody
 33 the spirit of the idealized public sphere: equality, diversity, reciprocity and
 34 quality" (1997). Jensen selects height variables: *form, dialogue, openness,*
 35 *tone, argumentation, reciprocity, information, and agenda setting* (2003b).
 36 Wilhelm uses a modified list of criteria for the *virtual* public sphere that
 37 are *topography, topicality, inclusiveness, design, and deliberation* (1999).
 38 Steenbergen et al. list the following criteria: *participation, level of justifica-*
 39 *tion, content of justification, respect, and constructive politics* (et al. 2003).
 40 Finally, Graham distinguishes between the *process of understanding* (con-
 41 sisting of rational-critical debate, reciprocity, reflexivity, and *empathy*),
 42 *sincerity, equality, and freedom* (2002).

1 This absence of agreement on the selection of criteria reveals that the
 2 empirical attempts for evaluating the deliberativeness of the debates are
 3 still at a preliminary phase, a phase in which the researchers are encouraged
 4 to act as wizards who experiment with different methods and deliberative
 5 criteria in order to find the formula that would reveal the deliberativeness
 6 of debates. But these differences may also result from the fact that the
 7 deliberative empiricists are influenced by different deliberative theorists
 8 who do not give the same value and importance to each deliberative cri-
 9 terion. For example, an empirical research inspired by Iris Marion Young
 10 (2000), whose primary aim is to promote greater social justice, is likely to
 11 insist on the notion of inclusion within the democratic process in general
 12 and the deliberative process in particular. An empirical researcher that is
 13 inspired by the work of Amy Gutmann and Denis Thompson (2004),
 14 who are concerned with the multiplication of conflicting opinions and
 15 cultures and the resulting dangers of unsolvable disagreements (particu-
 16 larly on moral issues), is likely to insist on the criteria of respect. Similarly,
 17 an empirical investigation based on the theory of Habermas (1996), which
 18 particularly values the epistemic role of deliberation, is likely to observe
 19 whether the debates are rationally justified, and empirical investigation,
 20 inspired by the Dryzek's (2000) post-Marxist deliberative theory, is more
 21 likely to observe whether debates tend to be curbed by economic and
 22 capitalist interests. Lastly, empirical research inspired by the theories of
 23 Sennet (1992) or Sunstein (2001) is more likely to test whether online
 24 public spaces have allowed for confrontation of a multiplicity of unexpected
 25 and spontaneous opinions. In sum, one could say that there are as many
 26 views concerning the preferential choice of the deliberative criteria as there
 27 are deliberative theorists. This divergence of views should not, however,
 28 be seen as an insuperable barrier to empirical research because the differ-
 29 ences are generally not fundamental. Usually, most authors agree upon the
 30 basic conditions for deliberation, which are the ones that differentiate the
 31 deliberative model of democracy from other competing models (liberal,
 32 republican, aggregative). The differences are generally more subtle and
 33 concern, as we have just seen, the preferences that are given to certain
 34 discursive normative conditions in comparison to others.

35 Ideally, the researchers should attempt to measure all normative criteria
 36 and if they do not, they should justify their choices and be aware that at
 37 the end of the process there is the risk that what they measured may be
 38 just the *appearance* of deliberation for, as we will see, some criteria are
 39 essential for evaluating deliberation, while some others can be interpreted
 40 only in the presence of other deliberative criteria.

41 The following table offers an exhaustive list of the discursive deliberative
 42 criteria, of their meanings, and the way these have been operationalized

1 so far. The deliberative criteria concern contextual factors (inclusion
2 and discursive equality) and the deliberative attitude of the participants
3 (reciprocity; justification; reflexivity; empathy; sincerity); and it looks at
4 the outcome of the debates by observing whether the discussion space(s)
5 being analyzed host divergent opinions (plurality) and whether they have
6 an “external impact.”

7 8 2.1.1 INCLUSION AND DISCURSIVE EQUALITY 9

10 The deliberative criterion of inclusion signifies that a democratic deci-
11 sion is fair and accountable only if all those affected by it are included in
12 the process of discussion and decision making. Young adopts a limited
13 definition of inclusion in stating that “affected” means that decisions
14 and policies significantly condition a person’s options for action. The
15 condition of discursive equality suggests that among the citizens who
16 are included, “each participant [should have] an equal opportunity to
17

18 Table 2.1 Deliberative criteria and their meanings
19

20 Deliberative criteria	20 Meaning
21 Inclusion	21 All those who are affected and/or interested by the 22 issues under discussion should be able to participate 23 either actively or passively.
24 Discursive equality	24 Participants should have equal opportunity to 25 introduce and question any assertion whatsoever and 26 to express attitudes, desires, and needs.
27 Reciprocity	27 Participants should listen and react to the comments 28 formulated by other participants.
29 Justification	29 The opinions and propositions should be accompanied 30 by reasoned, accessible, and moral justifications.
31 Reflexivity	31 Participants should critically examine their values, 32 assumptions, and interests, as well as the larger social 33 context.
34 Empathy	34 Participants should be sensitive to other views and 35 opinion, not only of those present during the 36 debates.
37 Sincerity	37 Participants must make a sincere effort to make known 38 all relevant information and their true intentions, 39 interests, needs, and desires.
40 Plurality	40 A deliberative context should be a context where a 41 plurality of voices is heard even if these voices are 42 critical to the dominant opinions/ideologies.
41 External impact	41 A successful deliberative process should have an impact 42 on the opinions formed and decisions taken outside the context of the debate.

1 introduce and question any assertion whatsoever and to express attitudes,
 2 desires, and needs” (Dahlberg 2004, 30). This condition cannot be met,
 3 however, unless freedom from domination is guaranteed, which implies
 4 that participants are politically equal—none of them being in a position
 5 of threatening their fellow debater or coercing them into accepting cer-
 6 tain proposals or outcomes. A respect for such conditions should contrib-
 7 ute to promoting public interests, on the one hand, because “participants
 8 can be confident that the results arise from good reason rather than from
 9 fear or force of false consensus” (Young 2000, 23) and, on the other
 10 hand, because they allow for maximum expression of interests, opinions,
 11 and perspectives that are relevant to the problems or issues for which a
 12 public is seeking solutions.

13 The operationalization of the requirement of inclusion in an online
 14 environment implies an access to a computer with an Internet connection
 15 and the necessary information and communication technologies (ICT)
 16 skills to access an online forum and make a contribution. Research can
 17 report descriptive statistics concerning Internet access, PC ownership, etc.,
 18 and can present survey data on Internet use and ICT skills. Furthermore,
 19 the moderation regime and/or technical architecture of an online forum
 20 as well as the requirements of registration and identification can make
 21 access easier or harder and can thus be reported as factors impacting the
 22 level of inclusion (Berdal 2004).

23 The issue of discursive equality is more complex to operationalize.
 24 Graham states that previous studies have dealt with discursive equal-
 25 ity from two slightly different perspectives: “equal voice” and “equal
 26 standing” (Graham 2002). The equal standing research has been mostly
 27 qualitative research that analyzed the discourses used by different groups
 28 of participants (men and women, professionals and beginners) to evalu-
 29 ate if some of them were dominant (and thus distracting from equality).
 30 The equal voice perspective has gained a lot of attention in previous
 31 research (Graham 2002; Schneider 1997; Jensen 2003a; Dumoulin
 32 2003; Jankowski and Van Os, 2002; Hangemann 2002; Bentivegna
 33 1998; Davis 1999; Coleman et al. 2002; Albrecht 2003). It analyses the
 34 “distribution of voice” in a conversation on the assumption that if only
 35 a small amount of participants contribute in a large proportion, they
 36 then dominate this debate. This idea of domination of conversation is
 37 operationalized in a “participant-contributions” statistic: the distribution
 38 of the amount of messages posted per participant is plotted on a Lorenz
 39 curve, often revealing that a small percentage of senders are responsible
 40 for a large percentage of posts and thus indicates that the conversation
 41 is dominated by one group of participants. More detailed study has also
 42 identified the institutional affiliation of the most active citizens (average

1 citizens, members of parties and political associations, etc.) as well as the
 2 global perception of debate domination through a survey (Beirle 2002).
 3 Albrecht (2003) goes further into investigating the equality of voices by
 4 also scanning the behavior of the most frequent senders. He focuses on
 5 the contributions from the ten most active forum users and evaluates
 6 to what extent they overruled the debate with their personal issues and
 7 interests. This was done by comparing the average amount of their replies
 8 and threads initiated with the average amount of the other active-forum
 9 participants' replies and threads initiated. The rationale of this measure
 10 is to consider whether the average number of messages sent by the most
 11 active participants encompasses more replies and less threads initiated
 12 than the average of all senders, which would suggest that they are not
 13 participating in the debates with the aim of dominating the debate. On
 14 the other hand, if the average amount of their messages constitutes more
 15 threads initiated and fewer replies than the global average, this would sug-
 16 gest that they are attempting to dominate the debate. These more detailed
 17 measurements are important in order to avoid the overly simple equation
 18 that the concentration of debates among a minority of people automati-
 19 cally implies that these same people will dominate the debates. This is
 20 in fact what Albrecht did not find. He found that on average, those in
 21 the active user-category tended to reply to messages more than the global
 22 average and, from a more qualitative perspective, he found that "the users
 23 acted as a sort of 'senior' participant in the debate, giving advice and
 24 providing other participants with an overview of the debate" (Albrecht
 25 2003, 16).

26 27 2.1.2 RECIPROCITY

28
29 The element of reciprocity captures the degree to which a conversation is
 30 a "real discussion". Graham defines reciprocity as "the taking in (listening,
 31 reading) of another's claim or reason and giving a response" (2002, 45).
 32 For Schneider, reciprocity "refers to the notion that people are engaged in
 33 conversation with each other, and that their messages are reflected upon
 34 and discussed by others" (Schneider 1997, 74). Reciprocity can therefore
 35 be defined as a basic condition for deliberation. If citizens do not listen
 36 to each other and interact with them, there can be no deliberation, only
 37 monologue.

38 In previous research, reciprocity has predominantly been operational-
 39 ized in a content analysis that codes for the number of messages that
 40 constitutes a reply to a preceding message.¹ Jensen uses the categories of
 41 "initiate" (a message initiates a new debate), "reply" (message is a reply to a
 42 previous message), and "monologue" (message is not really part of a debate),

1 whereas Graham uses the comparable categories of “initial,” “response,”
 2 and “irrelevant” (such as for example crosspostings). Schneider employs
 3 a purely structural (quantitative) analysis. His analysis is also a “reply
 4 counting,” but the criteria for replies are purely structural: “A message
 5 is considered reciprocal to a previous message if it appears in the same
 6 thread within seven days of the previous message, or if it cites the mes-
 7 sage directly by message identification number” (Schneider 1997, 74).
 8 Hangemann (2002) proposes to gauge the reciprocity by combining
 9 this counting approach with a more qualitative approach by indicating
 10 the number of messages that contained explicit markers of “agreements”
 11 and “disagreements.” The strictly structural approach for measuring reci-
 12 procity as proposed by Schneider is obviously problematic as far it does
 13 not take into account the fact that a message in the same thread is not
 14 necessarily a reaction to the content of a precedent message. A message
 15 in a thread can just as easily be a monologue without any reference to
 16 preceding messages or the topic of the thread. But even a more refined
 17 approach based on reading the messages can be problematic insofar as
 18 the absence of genuine reciprocity does not necessarily mean a lack of
 19 deliberation and, inversely, the fact that a message is reciprocal does not
 20 necessarily imply that this message is deliberative.

21 This leads us to the question of interpreting the findings. What does it
 22 mean when a thread, forum, or newsgroup’s level of reciprocity is low? It
 23 can mean that participants do not listen to each other but just state their
 24 opinions (and frustrations): this is the typical “dialogue of the deaf.” The
 25 absence of reciprocity may also reveal a lack of interest in the topics dis-
 26 cussed. This is the interpretation proposed by Bentivegna: “A high number
 27 of original messages marks the difficulties of finding topics of common
 28 interest capable of starting discussion ... On the contrary, a high number
 29 of answers indicates a strong interest for the topic of discussion” (1998, 5).
 30 Furthermore, the absence of reciprocity may reflect a general agreement
 31 about the topic discussed so that participants do not feel the need to react.
 32 Finally, a lack of reciprocity may also mean that (some) forum participants
 33 simply want to share information about a specific topic. The empirical
 34 analysis of the Radicali Italiani Web forum (see Chapter 6) reveals, for
 35 example, that several threads were implemented, generally by just one
 36 person, for informing the whole community about a specific topic such as,
 37 for example, the situation in Italian prisons. In sum, a lack of reciprocity
 38 can have a multiplicity of meanings. To reach a more refined evaluation
 39 of it, we suggest that no deliberative value should be given if it reflects an
 40 “absence of interest,” “tacit agreement,” and “sharing information,” and
 41 that a negative deliberative value should only be given when the lack of
 42 reciprocity discloses “an absence of disposition to listen to each other.”



1 How to interpret a message that corresponds to our definition of
2 reciprocity? Does it have a more uncontroversial deliberative status? Here
3 as well, we privilege a nuanced interpretation of the presence of reciproc-
4 ity that would take into account the scores realized by other deliberative
5 criteria—in particular reflexivity, justification, and empathy. This control
6 is needed, as a reciprocal message is not necessarily genuinely reciprocal.
7 For example, a message can be reciprocal to the extent that it alludes to
8 a precedent message, and at the same time disrespectful, poorly justified,
9 and/or useless. In this case then, the deliberative value that is given to
10 the reciprocal character of a message is annihilated by the nondeliberative
11 content or intention of the message.
12

13 2.1.3 JUSTIFICATION

14 The criterion of justification implies that citizens owe one another jus-
15 tifications (or reason giving) for the mutually binding laws and public
16 policies that they collectively enact. In order to allow for accountability
17 and to bring about constructive and fair outcomes, the justification
18 should be rational, intellectually accessible, and, according to some
19 authors, based on moral fundamentals. Justification should be rational
20 and accessible because “a deliberative justification does not even get
21 started if those to whom it is addressed cannot understand its essential
22 content” (Gutmann & Thompson 2004, 4). Concretely, this means that
23 there can be no deliberation if citizens appeal only to the authority of
24 revelation or if their justification is based on complex arguments that
25 only a restricted intellectual elite would understand. “Moral reason”
26 implies that decision makers should justify policies by offering moral
27 reasons. The requirement of moral reason distinguishes the deliberative
28 approach from another common approach to public decision mak-
29 ing that Gutmann and Thompson coined as “prudence.” Prudence
30 corresponds to the decision-making process based on power relations
31 and on bargaining. As they put it: “Prudence aims not at justice (or a
32 moral outcome) but rather at a *modus vivendi*, in which self-interested
33 citizens deal with their disagreements through various forms of bargain-
34 ing. Their reasoning aims at striking the best bargain for themselves,
35 regardless of moral considerations” (Gutmann & Thompson 2004,
36 148). In other words, prudential reasons and their outcomes reflect and
37 exacerbate the decision makers’ balance of power.² The realization of the
38 principle of reciprocal justification includes a predisposition to *mutual*
39 *respect*, which indicates that “citizens must recognize their obligation to
40 justify to one another the laws and policies that govern their public life”
41 (idem, 134).
42



1 Previous research has used various content-analysis approaches that
 2 focused on the arguments that participants use to back up what they
 3 are saying. A basic method for revealing the presence of justification is
 4 to count the average number of words in each message. The fewer the
 5 average of words per message is, the less the forum is supposed to be
 6 argumentative and, vice versa, the greater the average number of words
 7 per message is, the more the forum is supposed to be argumentative
 8 (Coleman et al. 2002). A more precise method involves reading the
 9 messages and coding for the absence or presence of arguments (Wilhelm
 10 1999; Tsaliki 2002; Jankowski and Van Os 2002). This counting can be
 11 realized for all the messages or, as proposed by Hangemann (2002), just
 12 for those posts containing “opinions” and “suggestions.” A more elabo-
 13 rate coding, that of Jensen (2003a, 2003b), makes a further distinction:
 14 when arguments are present they are either “internal” (based on personal
 15 viewpoints and values) or “external” (based on facts and figures). There
 16 is a normativity present in these codings, in that arguments are better
 17 than no arguments and arguments based on “objective” information are
 18 better than those based on personal experience. Another approach to
 19 justification operationalizes the Rawlsian construct of public reason and
 20 Habermas’s emphasis on the common good by focusing on the scope of
 21 arguments. Steenbergen et al. (2003) distinguish, in their content of jus-
 22 tification category, between “neutral statements,” “statements concerning
 23 group interests,” and “statements referring to the common good.” Fuchs
 24 (2006) goes even further—determining the content of these messages.
 25 He is in favor of a strict determination of the political values that are
 26 promoted by the post by observing whether the message contains some
 27 political values and, in this case, by identifying the nature of the political
 28 values on the basis of an extensive list of defined political values.

29 More in-depth approaches for measuring justification are also interested
 30 in the level of justification. Steenbergen et al.’s “level of justification” cat-
 31 egory does this by looking at the completeness of inferences (Steenbergen
 32 et al. 2003). Similarly, Fuchs (2006) measures “the complexity of argu-
 33 ments” by distinguishing four degrees of argumentation: “one dimen-
 34 sional message” (no reason for holding an opinion); “simple message”
 35 (one reason is communicated); “rather complex message” (two reasons
 36 are communicated); “complex message” (three or more reasons are com-
 37 municated).

38 With regard to the types of messages for which the level of justifica-
 39 tion should be assessed, we, like Fuchs, believe that it makes sense to
 40 measure the level of rational justification only for messages containing
 41 “opinions” and “suggestions.” These are after all the messages for which
 42 a justification is expected. We also believe that the “level of justification”

1 should be assessed as far as it is a strong indicator of the complexity of the
 2 argumentation. However, its deliberative interpretation requires, similarly
 3 to reciprocity, a more qualitative and necessarily subjective evaluation,
 4 as an opinion does not necessarily need a detailed justification in order
 5 to be sufficiently justified. Concerning the content of the argumenta-
 6 tion, Jensen's distinction between internal and external arguments seems
 7 appropriate; however, what seems less appropriate is to associate this
 8 distinction with a deliberative score according to which a justification
 9 based on external argumentation would be more deliberative than a jus-
 10 tification based on internal argumentation. In the previous chapter we
 11 argued that justifications based on personal experiences can be as useful
 12 as justifications based on facts for the promotion of deliberative values.
 13 Particularly in weak and informal public spaces, the presence of internal
 14 arguments (storytelling, testimony, etc.) can enrich the debates and allow
 15 citizens who feel uncomfortable with rational-critical debates to express
 16 themselves freely. Finally, the importance given to moral values, such as
 17 the common good, for justifying an opinion or proposition does not
 18 seem to be appropriate as far as their promotion can just be a rhetorical
 19 strategy for promoting personal or group interests. Such a measure would
 20 make sense only if we could be confident that the persons who refer to
 21 them are *sincere*. But sincerity is anything but certain in the political
 22 world, particularly when the interests at stake are important. Moreover,
 23 it seems to us that the moral character of deliberation is to be seen more as
 24 the outcome of the process that corresponds to the final decision than
 25 as an internal request of the process.

27 2.1.4 REFLEXIVITY

29 One of the defining features of the deliberative process is that participants
 30 should be "open-minded." This means that citizens or public officials
 31 must be ready and willing to change their opinions and preferences if
 32 they are sincerely persuaded that their initial opinions or preferences are
 33 incorrect or inappropriate for solving the collective problems. Dahlberg
 34 defines reflexivity as follows: "Participants critically examine their values,
 35 assumptions, and interests, as well as the larger social context" (2004,
 36 29). Graham talks of "the rethinking of one's own validity claims and
 37 arguments in light of another's validity claim and/or argument" (2002,
 38 46), and according to Jensen, research on reflexivity should try to "gain
 39 a reasonable interpretation of the extent interactions encourage self-
 40 critique, and position alterations" (2003b, 361).

AQ1

41 Approaches based on content analysis attempt to find instances
 42 of reflexivity by just reading the messages that are sent. Jensen measures

1 reflexivity with the variables “persuasion,” “progress,” and “radicalization”
2 (Jensen 2003b) and grades the categories in order to construct a
3 deliberative index.³ Persuasion is given the mark +2, progress +1, and
4 radicalization -2. Fuchs (2006) proposes a similar measure under the
5 category “conflict resolution” and observes to what extent threads where
6 conflict is present lead to an agreement. He distinguishes four general
7 categories: “an agreement is reached”; “the conflict remains unsolved”;
8 “there is no solution”; and “no conflict is present.” The rationale behind
9 this measure is that a deliberative process of interaction should lead to
10 conflict resolution when disagreements are present. Such indexes present
11 a high risk of being meaningless as far as they suggest that, in order to
12 be deliberative, a debate should necessarily lead to persuasion, change of
13 opinions, or conflict resolution when in fact what the deliberative ideals
14 requires is the “readiness” to change opinion if one is sincerely convinced
15 by the arguments of someone else. This means, in other words, that an
16 absence of opinion changes should not be interpreted as nondeliberative
17 behavior if the concerned person is sincerely not convinced by the argu-
18 ment of someone else. More generally, the problem with the text analysis
19 approaches described here is that they leave unaddressed important
20 aspects of reflexivity. In a recent article, Dahlberg makes the fundamental
21 observation that it “is relatively difficult to evaluate [reflexivity] because
22 it is a largely internalized process” (2004, 33), taking place in the minds
23 of individuals. This is certainly the case for a content analysis approach
24 because “written communications may only show traces of such a subjec-
25 tive process” (idem, 33). A way out here is to adopt a broader method-
26 ological approach by including survey research as well as interviews with
27 users. This would enable not only a more precise understanding of the
28 (internalized) process of reflexivity but also a much broader one insofar as
29 the “lurkers,”⁴ who are by far the most numerous users of the forum, will
30 also be questioned on the way they have been influenced by the online
31 debates. This is what Jensen drew by asking forum participants, via
32 online survey, about several “internal effects” on their reflections about
33 the topics of discussion (2003b). Similarly, the Hansard Society (2006),
34 by using a methodology inspired by Fishkin, surveyed the participants on
35 the evolution of their opinions before and after taking part in an experi-
36 ment on e-consultation forums.⁵ Such a survey attempts to measure
37 whether forum participation has led to changes in opinions and whether
38 participants felt more informed about the topics that were discussed.
39 An increased level of competence, even if it does not lead to a change of
40 opinions, should also be considered a positive indicator of reflexivity. In
41 sum, a meaningful measure of reflexivity requires the use of complemen-
42 tary research tools that include content analysis as well as surveys and,

1 ideally, interviews with the users. The content analysis assesses apparent
 2 processes of reflexivity while the surveys and the interviews gauge the
 3 more internal processes of reflexivity.
 4

5 2.1.5 EMPATHY 6

7 The criterion of empathy can be defined as “the extent participants take
 8 into account and are sensitive to other participants and positions, not only
 9 those immediately present in the forum” (Dahlberg 2004, 33). Empathy
 10 is alongside the criterion of sincerity, a cardinal indicator of deliberation,
 11 since all others derive more or less directly from it. Concretely, this means
 12 that if one is sincerely concerned by the opinions and preoccupations of
 13 his fellow citizens, he will be more eager to interact with them (reciprocity),
 14 to justify his opinions (justification), and to change his mind if
 15 sincerely convinced by an argument (reflexivity). The criterion of empathy
 16 also implies that citizens should discuss collective problems with the
 17 aim to reach an agreement. This does not mean that this agreement will
 18 ever be reached and this is not what realist deliberative theorists would
 19 require, since they admit it is not always possible. What is requested is
 20 that participants must be aiming to reach agreement to enter. Such a
 21 predisposition is considered to be fundamental since “only if participants
 22 believe that some kind of agreement among them is possible in principle
 23 can they in good faith trust one another to listen and aim to persuade
 24 one another” (Young 2000, 24).

25 Since these criteria aim at the debaters’ internal disposition, a proclivity
 26 for both considering others’ opinions and agreement seeking, their
 27 measurement is complex and necessarily limited. Most of the existing
 28 attempts to measure it are based on content analysis. Such approaches
 29 generally try to grasp their direct manifestations by focusing on the
 30 presence/absence of “respectful listening” and of “ongoing character of
 31 dialogue with difference.” Respectful listening moves us into the realm
 32 of respect and its opposite, disrespect. Most of the studies have applied
 33 content analysis to look for explicit instances where respect is absent
 34 (for example, Jankowski & Van Os 2002; Jensen 2003b; Beirle 2002;
 35 Coleman et al. 2002; Bentivegna 1998). It is assumed that lesser instances
 36 of disrespect imply an increase in deliberativeness. Steenbergen et al. code
 37 for respect rather elaborately, with categories for “respect for groups,”
 38 “respect for the demands of others,” and “respect for the counterarguments
 39 of others” (Steenbergen et al. 2003). With this focus on disrespect,
 40 the construct of respectful listening, let alone that of empathy, has not
 41 been researched in its entirety. For a more general appreciation, Dahlberg
 42 suggests that we look for “participants seeking to understand the other

1 through reflecting positions, asking for clarification, acknowledging the
 2 rights of all to be heard, and even putting forward positions that are not
 3 one's own to enable broader reflection" (Dahlberg 2004, 34). Such a very
 4 progressive level of understanding can only be gauged with a qualitative
 5 approach and an in-depth reading of messages, which obviously is time
 6 consuming and can lead to very subjective interpretations. It is also
 7 the case that self-reporting via surveys and interviews would be useful to
 8 have a more profound understanding of the willingness of participants
 9 to be empathetic with the other discussants. Berdal (2004) assessed the
 10 level of respect by asking the users and the webmaster "whether some
 11 postings sabotage the discussion." For the empirical analysis of the Italian
 12 Radicals, we investigated the level of respect of the forum by interviewing
 13 the users and webmasters and used questions that were integrated into an
 14 online survey sent to all users of the forum.

15 Attempts to measure the criteria of empathy also took place by measuring
 16 the ongoing character of a debate. Research has focused on the structure
 17 of discussion threads (Schneider 1997; Wilhelm 1999). The dubious
 18 rationale of this measurement is that the length and number of the
 19 threads reveal the extent to which participants have adopted a deliberative
 20 attitude. In his analysis Wilhelm codes for "time" (the mean time length
 21 of a thread in days) and "thread" (the mean number of threads per day)
 22 (Wilhelm 1999). The thread is taken as a carrier of conversation, and the
 23 amount and duration of threads are criteria for the ongoing character of
 24 discussions. Another measurement consists of counting the number of
 25 discussants that have participated in the forum only once (have only sent
 26 one message), referred to as the "one-timer effect" (Graham 2002). The
 27 rationale of this measurement is that conversations will not be ongoing
 28 if many participants just "say" something once and then leave. In reality
 29 both measurements are problematic for measuring the ongoing character
 30 of the debates. They are simply structural measurements of the debates'
 31 dynamic, which are interesting per se, but do not say much about the
 32 quality of the debates, not to mention the deliberative attitude of the
 33 participants.

34 In sum, it seems that the best way to measure the criteria of empathy
 35 and search for agreement is through content analysis (by counting the
 36 cases of disrespect) and by directly asking these questions to the users
 37 through surveys and interviews. Additionally, the presence of empathy
 38 can also be estimated in a deductive way by observing the scores of the
 39 other deliberative criteria as they are generally positively correlated with
 40 them. If we find that the levels of reflexivity, justification, and sincerity
 41 are high in a forum, then it is likely that this signifies that participants are
 42 sensitive to the opinions of others and willing to reach a consensus.

2.1.6 SINCERITY

The requirement of sincerity implies that “for understanding and rational assessment of positions to be possible, discursive participants must make a sincere effort to make known all relevant information and their true intentions, interests, needs, and desires” (Dahlberg 2004, 30). Communicative action requires sincerity and banishes rhetorical forms of speech to the realm of strategic action. Sincerity is the deliberative criterion that is the most poorly empirically investigated because it is also the most difficult to grasp. Textual analysis approaches, looking for sincerity in online conversations, have mostly focused on hints of the absence of sincerity. Graham approaches “non-sincerity (insincerity)” in an indirect manner, looking for instances where forum participants accuse other participants of not being sincere. He acknowledges that he is thus in fact measuring insincerity as perceived by other participants but argues that it is the perception of sincerity, which has the greatest impact on the process of deliberation. Dahlberg suggests a more comprehensive approach with a qualitative analysis based on “consistency in speech, consistency in speech and action, and coherence” (Chambers 1996, cited in Dahlberg 2002, 34). An inductive approach could look for instances where participants’ inconsistencies are exposed by other participants or could look for inconsistencies in speech and/or actions themselves. Finally, a more refined measurement of sincerity could be based on forum participants’ self-reporting (passive or active) using interviews and survey analysis. It is, however, unlikely that participants who were not sincere in the debates will become sincere when responding to an interview or survey.

In sum, the existing measurements of sincerity are limited and weak. The textual analysis approach, which searches for instances of apparent insincerity, is insufficient since absence of sincerity is usually not present in the text itself. On the other hand, the survey analysis and interviews that attempt to measure the “invisible” quality of sincerity are problematic insofar as they are just based on a subjective and probably flawed perception of sincerity. Should we then ignore the criterion of sincerity as most of the empirical research does? We think that the reply to this question should clearly be no even if the combined measurements that are based on content analysis, surveys, interviews, and participant observation provide just some sparse and vague indication of its presence. As mentioned before, the criterion of sincerity with the one of empathy together form a cardinal evaluative criterion of deliberation. This means that if sincerity is absent a debate cannot be considered as deliberative even if all the other deliberative criteria score high.

2.1.7 PLURALITY

The criterion of plurality aims to evaluate whether an online discussion space hosts different and divergent opinions. It is a fundamental criterion for evaluating how successful a debate has been in hosting and confronting all the relevant opinions on a specific topic. Tsaliki defines plurality as “the extent to which postings demonstrate a certain political affiliation in the forum of supporting a person, an argument, an ideology or issue.” (Tsaliki 2002, 98). She proposes three categories: (1) *Affiliation*, which refers to postings that show solidarity with a person, platform, ideology, or argument; (2) *Non-affiliation*, which involves postings that do not show any sign of solidarity; and (3) *Disaffiliation*, which includes messages that display negativity or opposition toward a person, platform, ideology, or argument. She, however, agrees that these measures are “not foolproof,” but she believes that “it can produce a rough estimate of in-group homogeneity” (idem, 99). Dumoulin (2003) and Wilhelm (1999) propose a similar measure to evaluate “to what degree the totality of the messages contained in the forum are affiliated to a political ideology” (Dumoulin 2003, 146). They distinguish four levels of political affiliation that allow for the measurement of “message diversity” (4 = strong affiliation; 3 = weak affiliation; 2 = neutral affiliation; 1 = slight opposition; 0 = strong opposition). Concretely, the results of the different messages are summed across the forum and then averaged in order to reach a global measure of plurality for the forum. A more exploratory coding, that of Fuchs (2006), distinguishes the intensity of affiliations independently from the context of the debate: (1) *Strong affiliation*, where the author identifies positively at least twice with at least one idea that is characteristic of a specific political ideology or (s)he directly expresses feelings of identification that belong to certain ideologies or parties; (2) *Moderate affiliation*, where the author identifies positively once with an idea that is characteristic of a specific political ideology; and (3) *No affiliation*, where the author avoids a clear and direct affiliation. When strong or moderate affiliation is noted, the type of affiliation is identified by observing to “which political camp and side the affiliations expressed belong or come closest” (idem, 11). He distinguishes and defines the following ideologies: *Communists/Marxists, Social/Democratic, Greens, Liberals, Conservatives, Extreme Right*. Such an in-depth measurement is interesting as far as it assesses the variety and the intensity of the affiliations that are present in a discussion space and does not imply that a discussion space is dominated by specific and precise political ideology on the basis of which the plurality of the forum should be assessed. This is the reason why Fuchs’ approach is preferable to those of Tsaliki, Dumoulin, and Wilhelm.

1 A complementary strategy for evaluating the plurality of a forum is
2 to observe the sociodemographic profile of the (passive and active) users
3 of the online debates. The investigations that are exclusively based on
4 content analysis tend to focus exclusively on the gender divide by using
5 names as a marker (Davis 1999; Coleman et al. 2002). Investigations
6 that made the effort of carrying out (online) surveys allow us to reach a
7 better understanding of the plurality of the forum users by focusing on
8 the sociodemographic profiles (gender, age, education, occupation) and
9 their level of political involvement, their familiarity with Internet use, as
10 well as their institutional affiliation (Davis 2005; Jensen 2003b; Beirle
11 2002). The results of these surveys should, however, be carefully assessed
12 since the sociodemographic homogeneity of a public does not necessarily
13 imply that the debates will be homogeneous. This is suggested not only
14 by the description Habermas makes of the bourgeois salons of the
15 eighteenth century, but also by several online political forums such as
16 that of the Radicali Italiani, which will be analyzed later on (Chapter 6).
17 In order to avoid such flaws, a method that combines content analysis
18 with survey analysis is clearly recommended.

20 2.1.8 EXTERNAL IMPACT

22 The external impact implies that a successful deliberative process should
23 have an impact on debates and the decisions taking place outside the
24 online forum. While the internal impact of deliberation is generally
25 evaluated through the criterion of reflexivity, not much is generally said
26 about the external impact of the online debates.

27 Jensen (2003a) measures the external impact by assessing the pres-
28 ence of explicit signs that a sender is trying to extend discussions with
29 an external agenda. He counts instances where participants attempt “to
30 attract the attention of a politician,” “propose political actions,” or “refer
31 to external effect of a discussion.” Hangemann (2002) and Coleman
32 et al. (2002) observe whether influential political personalities participate
33 on a regular basis in the forums, for example, members of Parliament.
34 Berdal (2004) proposes a more detailed mode to evaluate the external
35 impact: not only does he assess whether influential personalities partici-
36 pate in the forum or not, he also investigates whether the users of the
37 forum participate in several other Web forums. The rationale behind
38 this measure is that the opinions will spread among the online forums
39 and therefore enrich the general public opinion and influence the strong
40 public sphere. In the same vein, Beierle (2002) measures the external
41 impact by asking participants whether the participation in the forum led
42 to “networking among the participants” and if they felt that the forum

1 is likely to have “an influence on the decision-making process.” A final
 2 evaluation of external impact consists of observing—particularly for dis-
 3 cursive e-consultation experiences—to what extent suggestions coming
 4 from the forum were considered in the final drafts of policy proposals
 5 and whether participation in the forum led to more positive opinions
 6 of the institutions that hosted the forum (Beierle 2002; Coleman et al.
 7 2002; Hansard Society 2006).

8 As suggested by these different measurements, the evaluation of the
 9 external impact should be adapted to the contexts in which the forum
 10 takes place. What we mean is that one cannot adopt the same delibera-
 11 tive standards and evaluative methods for a debate taking place on, for
 12 example, a simple blog or newsgroup or a debate that would be organized
 13 by a parliamentary commission for consultation purposes. It goes with-
 14 out saying that the requirements of external impact should be a more
 15 demanding e-consultation debate than for a blog debate for which the
 16 external impact is not a priority.

17
 18 2.1.9 SUMMARY AND COMMENTS

19
 20 The variety of existing strategies and the many doubts that still exist
 21 for measuring deliberation suggest that the empirical investigation of
 22 deliberation is still a very exploratory research field. While it is impos-
 23 sible to propose a methodology that will perfectly measure the level of
 24 deliberation of the multiplicity of existing discussion spaces, the review
 25 of methodology suggests that a fairly valid measurement of delibera-
 26 tion can be achieved by combining different methods that allow us to
 27 measure the visible presence of deliberation (content analysis) as well
 28 as the internal presence of deliberation (surveys, interviews) and that
 29 enable a qualitative interpretation of the deliberative scores on the basis
 30 of the discursive context. The methodological review also reveals the
 31 tempting danger of ignoring criteria for which narrowly defined and
 32 measurable indicators *cannot* be found, such as sincerity and empathy.
 33 We consider that such deadlocks should be avoided or at least clearly
 34 noted since these are fundamental deliberative criteria and their non-
 35 consideration could lead, as Dahlberg mentions it, to “a serious loss of
 36 meaning” (Dahlberg 2004, 31). Before entering into the second phase
 37 of this initial methodological review, table 2.2 provides a summary of
 38 the methodological choices that are considered the most appropriate
 39 for evaluating the different normative criteria of deliberation. It obvi-
 40 ously should not be considered as a restrictive list, and its application
 41 should be adapted to the different contexts in which deliberation is
 42 assessed.

Table 2.2 Deliberative criteria and their operationalization

Inclusion	The criterion of "inclusion" should be assessed by observing, on the one hand, the ease of access to the online forum on the basis of connectivity and ICT skills and, on the other hand, by analyzing whether the discursive rules (moderation, registration, identification) are not perceived as barriers to promoting inclusive participation.
Discursive equality	The criterion of discursive equality has been most convincingly assessed by identifying the phenomenon of discursive concentration and by analyzing whether this concentration leads to a control of the debate.
Reciprocity	The level of reciprocity should be measured through content analysis by assessing, at a basic level, the proportion of postings that are part of a thread versus the ones that initiate a thread and, at a more in-depth level, by measuring the extent to which postings take into consideration arguments and opinions of a precedent posting. The deliberative values that are given to reciprocity should be carefully assessed through a qualitative evaluation of the messages, that is, an evaluation that also takes into consideration the scores obtained for the other deliberative criteria (justification, reflexivity, ideal role taking).
Justification	The extent to which messages in an online debate are rationally justified should be measured using content analysis. One should assess the extent to which the opinions and suggestions expressed in the debates are justified by observing whether the opinions and suggestions that are expressed in a forum are (or not) justified (J1) and how complex the justifications are (J2). A more in-depth evaluation of justification should also focus on the content of the justification by observing whether the justification's arguments are either internal (based on personal viewpoints and values) or external (based on facts and figures). As for reciprocity, the deliberative evaluation of the "level" of rational justification implies a necessarily subjective and contextual appreciation of whether an opinion is sufficiently justified.
Reflexivity	A meaningful measure of reflexivity requires the use of complementary research tools that include content analysis as well surveys and, ideally, user interviews. The content analysis assesses apparent cases of reflexivity by notifying visible instances of opinion changes or conflict resolutions while the surveys and the interviews gauge more internal processes of reflexivity by directly asking the active and passive users of the forum whether they changed their opinions and/or felt more informed after participating in the online forum.
Empathy	The criterion of empathy should be measured through content analysis (by counting the cases of disrespect) and by directly raising the question to the users via surveys and interviews. Additionally, the presence of empathy can also be estimated in a deductive way by observing the "scores" of the other deliberative criteria as they are generally positively correlated with the score of empathy. If we find in a forum that the levels of reflexivity, rationality, and sincerity are high, then it is very likely that the level of empathy will be high.

(Continued)

Table 2.2 (Continued)

1		
2	Sincerity	It has been highlighted that the criterion of sincerity is certainly
3		the most complex one to measure. It should nevertheless be
4		assessed insofar as it is a cardinal deliberation criterion. Certain
5		measurements based on content analysis allow us to assess
6		apparent traces of the absence of sincerity while questions raised
7		by survey analysis and interviews reveal the perception of the
8		presence and intensity of (in)sincerity by the users themselves.
9	Plurality	The plurality of an online debate can be efficiently evaluated by
10		the combination of content analysis and (online) survey analysis.
11		The content analysis determines, on the one hand, the degree to
12		which the debates refer to political ideologies and, on the other
13		hand, whether any political ideology dominates the debate. The
14		survey analysis assesses the forum users' diversity by focusing on
15		sociodemographic profiles (gender, age, education, occupation) and
16		their political involvement and affiliation as well as their familiarity
17		with the use of the Internet. It is argued that the sociodemographic
18		profile of the active users of the forum should be considered as just
19		an <i>indicator</i> of the plurality of the messages contained in the forum.
20	External impact	Are there explicit signs of extension of the discussion to an external
21		agenda? Do influential political personalities participate in the
22		forums? Do users participate in other discussion spaces? Did users
23		create new contacts after participating in the forum? Did, for
24		example in the case of e-consultation forum, the debates lead to
25		any concrete outcomes? These correspond to questions that have
26		been operationalized through content analysis and surveys in order
27		to evaluate the external impact of specific discussion spaces. The
28		standards and methods for measuring the external impact by the
29		types and objectives of the online debates that are analysed.

2.2 MODELS OF DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY AND THEIR METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The question of applying the discursive deliberative criteria within the democratic process is probably one of the most controversial issues of the deliberative theory. This is obviously problematic for conducting empirical research since the theory does not indicate in an unambiguous way at which level of the opinion- and decision-making process the ideal discursive conditions should be realized in order to promote a deliberative outcome. There are at least four different views with respect to the concrete application of the deliberative precepts. Not too far removed from the deliberative democrats who defend a globalizing approach by considering that deliberative procedures should be applied to any social and political associations,⁶ there are authors who consider that the deliberative discursive requirements should be more or less extended to state institutions, to civil society associations, and to private associations.

1 Among them, it is possible to distinguish three major trends. The first
 2 one, defended by Habermas (1996) in *“Between Fact and Norms,”* consid-
 3 ers that the deliberative discursive requirements should be limited to core
 4 political state institutions. The second one, defended by Gutmann and
 5 Thompson (2004), considers that they should be extended to the civil
 6 society and private associations as far as their influence spreads over the
 7 latter. Finally, according to Dryzek (2000), the discursive requirements
 8 can and should take place exclusively within civil society. These three
 9 positions will be further analyzed in order to clarify their specificities and
 10 to detect the reasons explaining why scholars who claim to belong to the
 11 same theoretical school can defend such discrepant views concerning
 12 the realization of the deliberative project. We will conclude this section
 13 by indicating the theoretical implications of these contradictory views
 14 and, from a methodological perspective, how these models should be
 15 referred to during the empirical investigation process.

17 2.2.1 PRESENTATION OF THE DIFFERENT MODELS OF DELIBERATIVE 18 DEMOCRACY

19 Habermas (1996, 2002) considers that a strict observance of discursive
 20 criteria should be required only in those institutions that are core struc-
 21 tures of a constitutionally organized democracy.⁷ He offers two major
 22 reasons for justifying the limitation of deliberation to the core consti-
 23 tutional democratic institutions. The first one is a reason of feasibility.
 24 As he puts it: “If deliberative politics is supposed to be inflated into a
 25 structure shaping the totality of society, then the discursive model of
 26 socation expected in the legal system would have to expand into a self-
 27 organization of society and penetrate the latter’s complexity as a whole.
 28 This is impossible” (Habermas 1996, 305). This is unfeasible not only for
 29 practical reasons but also because associations outside the core state insti-
 30 tutions are “more vulnerable to the repressive and exclusionary effects of
 31 unequally distributed social power, structural violence, and systematically
 32 distorted communication than are the institutionalized public sphere of
 33 parliamentary bodies” (idem, 308). The second reason finds its roots in
 34 Habermas’s “two-track model of democracy,” which requires that civil society
 35 should remain substantially unstructured to allow free will-formation and
 36 the emergence of new social issues. According to this view, a “democrati-
 37 cally constituted opinion- and will- formation depends on the supply
 38 of informal public opinions that, ideally, develop in structures of an
 39 unsubverted political public sphere. The informal public sphere, must
 40 for its part, enjoy the support of a societal basis in which equal rights of
 41 citizenship have become socially effective” (idem, 308).

1 For the record, the two-track model of Habermas promotes a dynamic
 2 political process according to which the deliberative project is to be
 3 achieved as a result of the interactions of, on the one hand, the strong
 4 publics (in particular parliament), where decisions are taken, and, on
 5 the other hand, the weak publics (in particular civil society), where new
 6 issues of public relevance can arise. The strong publics are procedurally
 7 structured bodies in order to be *contexts of justification* with the objective
 8 of “structuring opinion- and will- formation process with a view to the
 9 cooperative solution of practical questions, including the negotiation
 10 of fair compromises” (Habermas 1996, 307). On the opposite side,
 11 the weak publics are procedurally unstructured arenas that correspond
 12 to *contexts of discovery* that allow the formation and the emergence of
 13 new social issues.⁸ Amid these two publics is the general public that is
 14 dominated by the mass media (newspapers, television, radios) where the
 15 opinions and demands of the weak public and the opinions and decisions
 16 of the strong publics are presented and debated. In order to promote
 17 the appearance of a critical and informed public opinion, the media
 18 should be independent using self-regulation procedures and should give
 19 visibility without any distortion to the opinions coming from the differ-
 20 ent publics, in particular the weak ones (civil society), which have lesser
 21 public and political influence (Habermas, 2006). Dryzek (2000) adopts a
 22 symmetrically opposite position than the one of Habermas. By defending
 23 the “critical deliberative democracy,” he considers that the deliberative
 24 discursive requirements can and should take place only *outside* the state
 25 structures, which are the structures that are legally authorized to make
 26 binding decisions on behalf of a society. Dryzek believes that “authentic
 27 deliberation”⁹ cannot take place within state institutions because they
 28 are subject to major constraints that are mostly related “to the economic
 29 system within which the state must operate, and are intensified with free
 30 trade and capital mobility” (Dryzek 2000, 8). For this reason he considers
 31 that Habermas’ approach, which requires that deliberative debates can
 32 and should take place only within the state institutions, is illusionary:

33 Liberal democrats might argue that there is plenty of scope for increased
 34 democratic authenticity within the confines of liberal state; I would argue
 35 there is not. For this state is increasingly subject to the constraints imposed
 36 by the transnational capitalist political economy ... This imperative condi-
 37 tions policy-making, for democratic influence on policy-making introduces
 38 a dangerous elements of indeterminacy, and so becomes increasingly
 39 curtailed. Public officials under sway of such imperatives are highly con-
 40 strained when it comes to the terms of the arguments they can accept; it
 41 is very hard for deliberation to reach them

Dryzek 2000, 29



1 According to Dryzek, the most important alternative location for
2 deliberation is civil society, because “a flourishing civil society provides
3 both the resource for future democratization of the state and a check
4 against the reversal of state’s democratic commitments” (Dryzek 2000,
5 171). Civil society is also considered to allow that deliberative debates
6 take place since it is supposed to be less subject to external forms of con-
7 straint. As far as political impact is concerned, Dryzek is confident that
8 this emphasis on civil society does not confine deliberative democracy
9 to a powerless realm, since the outcome of these deliberations can enter
10 into the public sphere in order to contribute to forming a public opinion
11 that can be translated into administrative power. A less restrictive and
12 more flexible approach, which we coined the “impact model,” is the
13 one defended by Gutmann and Thompson (2004). They consider that
14 the discursive requirements should apply not only to state structures but
15 also to civil society associations if the decisions they take have a clear and
16 binding political impact and if their mission is particularly important
17 for the nation. They also consider that deliberative procedures should be
18 extended to institutions such as corporations, since these are institutions
19 that affect citizens’ basic liberties. On the opposite side, they argue that
20 “the less the aims of institutions and associations in civil society coincide
21 with those of ordinary politics, the less subject they should be to the force
22 of deliberative principles” (Gutmann & Thompson 2004, 34–35). In
23 sum, such an approach differs essentially from the two previous ones for it
24 makes an abstraction of the feasibility of applying the deliberative criteria
25 in different contexts and focuses just on the importance of decisions that
26 are taken for applying (or not) the deliberative discursive criteria. This
27 signifies that while they are sensitive to Habermas’ argument stating that
28 civil society must remain a free and creative space of socialization, they
29 still believe it must be a responsible space of interaction.

31 2.2.2 THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

32 These different conceptions concerning the application of the ideal
33 deliberative procedures in the real life are obviously problematic not only
34 for constructing and defending a coherent model of deliberative democ-
35 racy but also for elaborating a method that allows investigating and
36 empirically evaluating existing public spaces. From a general perspective,
37 one should try to explain how it is possible that among the deliberative
38 democrats, who supposedly share the same ideals of democracy and jus-
39 tice, there can exist such a divergence of views for carrying out the same
40 project. From a methodological perspective, the major question is how to
41 operationalize and test a model where constitutive elements are so uncertain
42



1 and controversial. A last, more general, question is whether the deliberative
 2 model of democracy could become more coherent and efficient through
 3 the inputs of findings resulting from the empirical analysis.

4 The absence of agreement concerning the application of deliberative
 5 discursive norms probably reflects some divergent views concerning the
 6 way a democratic process should work, but more importantly it confirms,
 7 according to us, that the deliberative democratic model significantly lacks
 8 empirical evidence on which it could be built. The above-mentioned
 9 deliberative models are built either without any empirical investigation
 10 or, worse, on empirical evidence that is insufficient and partially selected.
 11 This is a flaw that is particularly apparent in the Habermas and Dryzek
 12 models, which, more than the others, have attempted to justify their
 13 choice empirically. The Habermasian two-track model supposes for
 14 instance that parliaments would be particularly adapted to host delib-
 15 erative debates, as their procedures would be conducive to carrying out
 16 rational-critical debates. On the opposite side, it assumes that the weak
 17 publics (civil society in particular) are not conducive to rational debates
 18 for they would be particularly prone to violence, distorted communica-
 19 tion, and unequal distribution of power. Intriguingly, Dryzek issues
 20 exactly the opposite empirical suppositions. His “critical model” suggests
 21 that deliberation cannot take place in strong publics (which include
 22 parliament) since they would be perverted by political and economic
 23 external factors, and he considers that authentic deliberation can take
 24 place only in civil society associations that are free from any external
 25 perverting intrusions.

26 The problem is that these contradictory statements are not empiri-
 27 cally confirmed, neither for Habermas nor for Dryzek. If one considers,
 28 for example, Habermas’ empirical assumption, it is unclear why the
 29 debates taking place within the parliament would be more deliberative
 30 than debates taking place outside the state structures. It may well be that
 31 justification would be more detailed, but what about the other delibera-
 32 tive criteria? What about the less visible, but nevertheless fundamental,
 33 deliberative criteria concerning the attitude of the participants such as
 34 the criteria of sincerity and empathy? Can we not suppose that the politi-
 35 cal discipline and the economic pressure that dominates the legislative
 36 debates tend to favor more strategic debates, rather than deliberative
 37 ones?¹⁰ Similarly, it remains unclear how it is possible to confirm that
 38 weak publics are particularly prone to violence, distorted communica-
 39 tion, and unequal distribution of power without bringing any evidence
 40 of it. There is a great variety of weak publics and certainly many of
 41 them do not correspond to Habermas’ simplistic description of them.
 42 Such empirical weaknesses, also present in the theory of Dryzek, further

1 confirm that the deliberative project cannot evolve unless it enters into
 2 an empirical phase that would allow testing the assumptions of many
 3 political theorists.

4 This leads us to our second core question, namely—how can we
 5 develop a valid method to evaluate the deliberativeness of online public
 6 spaces, and more generally all public spaces, if the existing models are
 7 so divergent and poorly justified? The strategy we propose here is rather
 8 simple. We consider that no deliberative model should be chosen in
 9 principle as a model of reference and, consequently, that the delibera-
 10 tiveness of public spaces should be evaluated on the basis of the same
 11 criteria independently of whether the debates take place in the arena
 12 of parliament, media, or civil society. This largely exploratory approach
 13 reflects the conviction that the only valid question that can be raised at
 14 this stage of the research is not so much where deliberation *should* take
 15 place, but where it *can* take place. Such empirical efforts, have already
 16 been initiated for analyzing the level of public deliberation within the
 17 parliament (Steiner et al. 2004), for analyzing the level of deliberation
 18 in everyday talk (Canover & Searing 2005), and for measuring the level
 19 of deliberation in experimental contexts that specifically aim to favor a
 20 qualitative opinion formation through the use of different deliberative
 21 methods (Fishkin 1995; Fishkin & Luskin 2005). Only in the second
 22 phase, after empirically testing the deliberative potential of the differ-
 23 ent political actors and contexts, is it legitimate to conceptualize models
 24 of deliberative democracy that can fit to real-life politics. As indicated
 25 by Thompson in a recent article dealing with the relation between
 26 theoretical and empirical research on deliberative democracy: “The key
 27 question ... is what are the most effective and desirable relationships
 28 among various bodies that operate within the structure of deliberative
 29 democracy—those designed to deliberate, as well as those constituted to
 30 decide in other ways” (Thompson 2008, 516).

31 32 33 2.3 CONCLUDING REMARKS

34 So far we have argued that the deliberative model of democracy is in
 35 need of empirical evidence in order to become more credible and appli-
 36 cable to real-life politics. This empirical investigation should focus on three
 37 major objectives. From a theoretical perspective it should prove that the
 38 deliberative theory is a viable theory by revealing, on the one hand, that
 39 citizens and representatives can in certain circumstances adopt a delibera-
 40 tive attitude and, on the other hand, that the existing social and political
 41 structures are potentially adapted to carrying out the deliberative project.
 42 Second, the empirical investigation should make a comparative analysis

1 of the different contexts of opinion- and will- formation (strong publics,
 2 general publics, weak publics, experimental publics) for revealing how
 3 the deliberativeness of debates varies according to the context in which
 4 they take place. Finally, the results obtained from these comparative
 5 studies should lead to the elaboration of a more robust model of delibera-
 6 tive democracy, in which its concrete feasibility could be confirmed by
 7 empirical evidence.

8 This corresponds precisely to the research course that will be fol-
 9 lowed in this investigation. Can virtual public spaces (newsgroups, Web
 10 forums, or experimental forums) host deliberative debates? How does
 11 the deliberativeness of online debates vary according to the contexts in
 12 which they take place? Other more specific research questions that are
 13 inspired by the sociohistorical analysis that Habermas and Sennet carried
 14 out on the evolution of public spaces will also be further examined. The
 15 first is whether online debates could foster debates that are spontaneous
 16 and plural as were, according to Sennet, the public spaces of the eigh-
 17 teenth century, and the second is whether the virtual public spaces could
 18 increase the level of deliberation of existing political associations that
 19 tend to dominate the political debates.

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QUERY FORM

BOOK TITLE:	PL KIES
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Queries and / or remarks

Query No.	Query / remark	Response
AQ1	Please check page number.	