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CONCLUSION

THE GENERAL PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK WAS TO EVALUATE whether the increasing success of the online political debates, which we defined as the virtualization of political debates, can favor the emergence of a more deliberative democratic process or, on the opposite side, whether this phenomenon has no impact or a negative impact on the deliberativeness of our democracies. The present work has attempted to evaluate the deliberative potential of the online political debates through three interconnected research questions. The first is related to the diffusion of the online debates by observing how widespread the phenomenon is and who the users of the online debates are; the second looks at the offer of the online debates, by analyzing which are the political actors (civil society, media, institutional actors) that are more inclined to host the online political debates; and the third concerns the deliberativeness of the online debates by defining the methods that should be applied for measuring this deliberativeness and by identifying the factors that favor the participative success and deliberativeness of the debates.

With regard to the diffusion of the online debates, the survey data we analyzed indicate that the general and political use of online forums is important and likely to become increasingly so. This is suggested by the growing rate of Internet penetration, by the fact that the online forums are already widely used, particularly in electoral periods and among the young generation, and by the increased user-friendliness of the discursive platforms that is further reinforced through their integration into other e-participation tools such as the online voting, the voting advice systems, and the e-consultations.

Concerning the offer side and the related question of the political actors that are most likely to host online political debates, we have limited our investigation to three types of actors: the parliaments, the local authorities, and the political parties. The analysis reveals that while the population and the members of the political actors analyzed (MPs, local representatives, members of political parties) generally praise the participative and deliberative opportunities of online debates, this does not imply

1 that their own institutions have implemented such possibilities on their
2 Web sites. Indeed, most of the actors we analyzed provided simple
3 interactive features (such as e-mail) but important differences could
4 be observed concerning the provision of interactive features such as
5 the online forums and consultations. These were almost absent for the
6 parliaments and, when the latter existed, were poorly used or abandoned.
7 The cities—particularly the big ones and, in Europe, the Scandinavian
8 ones—were slightly more likely to grant possibilities of discursive
9 interaction but not of consultation. Finally, the political parties were by
10 far more likely to host online forums. This was the case of almost one out
11 of two EU parties (47%). We have suggested that the greater discursive
12 offer of the political parties derives from their competitive nature, their more
13 flexible structure, and the potential of the partisan online forums to fulfill
14 important functions, both for their leaders and for their sympathizers. We
15 saw, for example, that for the Radicali Italiani the very successful forum
16 was used as a source of information, as a space to organize the political
17 actions, and as a direct link to the leadership, as well as a space to share
18 good times with the radical community. We deplored the parliamentary
19 Web sites that did not offer more opportunities for consultations. This is,
20 according to us, a missed opportunity, not only because the parliaments
21 could, through such reforms, benefit from a more modern image that
22 would better suit the wishes of the citizens, but also because a parliamen-
23 tary Web site is a privileged place to promote a deliberative democratic
24 process. It is, in other words, a context that could favor the emergence of
25 debates among the legislators and the citizens that would be at the same
26 time highly frequented, deliberative, and influential.

27 As far as the deliberativeness of the online debates is concerned, a
28 first major issue was obviously the question of the operationalization of
29 the deliberative criteria (inclusion, discursive equality, reciprocity, justi-
30 fication, reflexivity, empathy, sincerity, plurality, and external impact).
31 By making an extensive and critical review of the existing attempts to
32 measure the online debates, we came to the conclusion that, ideally, one
33 should attempt to assess *all* the deliberative criteria and if this is not
34 possible one should clearly specify the deliberative criteria that are
35 not measured. We also suggest that the deliberative criteria should be
36 measured by combining different methods of investigation. The *content*
37 *analysis* and the *analysis of the dynamic of the debates* should be used to
38 have a grip on the visible expression of deliberation while the *survey*
39 and the *interviews* should be applied in order to evaluate the internal,
40 less visible, presence of deliberation. The methods used and the evalua-
41 tive standards that are applied to each deliberative criterion should be
42 defined on the basis of the nature and characteristics of the scrutinized

1 case studies. For example, the external impact criterion should not be
2 evaluated the same way for a newsgroup and/or for an e-consultation
3 forum. Similarly, it would be a mistake to require the same level of plurality
4 for a forum hosted by a political party than, for example, one hosted by
5 a governmental institution.

6 Coming now to the general evaluation of the deliberativeness of the
7 online debates, the results of numerous case studies analyzed clearly
8 refute the common statement that the online debates cannot, by defini-
9 tion, be deliberative discursive contexts. Our investigation showed that,
10 generally, the opinions expressed in the forum are justified (even if just
11 superficially), that the debates do generally not lead to a polarization of
12 opinions even if the participants share similar interests and have similar
13 political ideologies, that the debates are generally not invaded by disrespect-
14 ful behaviors, that the online debates can contribute to enlightening
15 the opinion of its active and passive users, and that some of them
16 have concrete political outcomes. In sum, the online debates are just
17 another discursive context that, like other discursive contexts (TV, radio,
18 written debates or face-to-face debates), can in certain circumstances lead
19 to deliberative debates. The real question then is not so much whether the
20 online debates are deliberative *in general* but in which circumstances do
21 the online debates foster deliberative forms of debates. The comparative
22 analysis has allowed identification of several factors that may bear upon
23 the success of the online debates as well as their level of deliberation.
24 These are the *sociodemographic characteristics* of the users of the forum,
25 the *participative culture* of the institutions hosting the debates, the *dis-*
26 *curative architecture* of the online debates, particularly their identification
27 and moderation policy, the *nature of the topics* discussed, and the *external*
28 *impact* of the online debates. We argued that the potential impact of the
29 online forum (external impact hypothesis) is among the most prominent
30 factors explaining divergence observed in the deliberativeness of the
31 online debates. According to this hypothesis, if ordinary citizens believe
32 that their writings might have an impact on the decision-making
33 process, they will be more motivated to adopt a deliberative attitude.
34 By comparing case studies that have a limited external impact (mostly
35 newsgroups and simple Web forums) with cases that have a stronger
36 external impact (mostly e-consultation forum and governmental sponsored
37 Web forums), we found that the role of the external impact factor has,
38 in fact, never been contradicted, which means that the deliberativeness
39 of the online debates is not negatively correlated to the intensity of the
40 impact of the online forum, and has been convincingly verified for
41 the deliberative criteria of reciprocity, empathy, and reflexivity. This finding
42 suggests that the forums that are perceived as having a strong political



1 impact are more likely to be characterized by respectful and reciprocal
2 exchanges and to encourage its active and passive users to revise critically
3 their own opinions and beliefs.

4 In conclusion, it would obviously be overoptimistic and erroneous
5 to assert that the virtualization of the online debates corresponds to *the*
6 sociological evolution that will contribute to transforming our liberal
7 democracies, essentially based on a political relation of conflict and
8 competition between elites, into deliberative democracies that would be
9 characterized by more inclusive and discursive sociopolitical relations. It
10 is more correct to affirm that the virtualization of the political debates
11 is a phenomenon that could, under certain circumstances, contribute
12 to promoting the deliberative values and procedures within the existing
13 political processes. This can happen if the Web-based debates continue to
14 attract new users, if they are implemented in strategic places, particularly
15 the ones that have an impact on the decision-making process, and if they
16 are elaborated in order to promote inclusive and deliberative forms of
17 debate. In other words, the new electronic agoras offer interesting oppor-
18 tunities to promote deliberative practices, but the question is whether
19 these will be coherently exploited by the different public and private
20 actors. This is where a new deliberative model of democracy—which
21 would be rooted in and modeled on the basis of a systematic, empirical
22 assessment of its feasibility—could have a major guiding function.

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QUERY FORM

BOOK TITLE:	PL KIES
CHAPTER NO:	Conclusion

Queries and / or remarks

Query No.	Query / remark	Response
	No Queries.	