Book Review

Promises and Limits of Web-deliberation, by Raphael Kies. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

The aim of this study is to assess what kind of relationship exists between online political debates and offline political processes, within the over-arching concept of deliberative democracy. The author examines online political debates in order to describe their internal dynamics and to provide empirical evidence for the central hypothesis; that the virtualization of political debates can favourably influence the 'deliberativeness' of our democracies.

In order to test the hypothesis the author begins the book by introducing the notion of deliberative democracy. He discusses the deliberative model of democracy starting from the conceptualization of the 'public space' made by Sennet [4] and Habermas [2], who argue that the public space that emerged in the eighteen century was fundamental for the definition of the ideals and the praxis of the democracies of the twentieth century. This public space was characterized by critical discussions, spontaneity of public relations and an independent public opinion. It allowed efficient and genuine political participation and created an inclusive space of interaction between state and society. These characteristics were inexorably altered by the mass-mediatisation of politics and the individualization of social relationships which emerged during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, the notion of the public space became an ideal type to identify democracy and democratic public interactions. In the author's view, in fact, the 'deliberative model of democracy' could be considered a theoretical effort to define the elements that could allow a re-emergence of this genuine form of public interaction. On the other hand, and as the author admits, the model is still blurry and widely criticized. It is defined, for example, in terms of 'procedural justice' in the structure of communication and political interactions [3] or in 'terms of justification' that allows evaluation of the moral legitimacy of the substance of decisions [1]. Nevertheless the major weakness which these theorisations face is the absence of tangible empirical evidence of the existence, or even just the proto-existence, of forms of deliberative democracy.

In the second chapter the author deepens the definition of deliberative democracy by individualising 'deliberative criteria' that could be applied both to real democratic decision-making processes and to the to the study of online political forums. The definition of these criteria is quite clear and could be a useful point of reference for further research on similar topics. The criteria are measured applying and combining different methods, such as content analysis, surveys and interviews. Amongst them we find, for example, 'discursive equality', which assesses whether in a debate there is an equal 'distribution of voice' amongst the participants. The principle of 'reciprocity' concerns the degree to which those engaged in the conversations reflect upon the opinions of others. 'Reflexivity' refers to critical examination on the part of the debate participants about their own values and assumptions. 'Plurality' evaluates whether a discussion encompasses different and divergent opinions. However, the most important criterion for the overall purpose of this study, i.e. for the evaluation of the relationship between 'online' and 'offline' political debates, is the criteria of 'external impact'. An online forum has such an external impact if it is successful in influencing offline political agendas or in having concrete outcomes.

The book continues with an attempt to map the entities that host online political debates, and to analyse the characteristics of what the author calls the 'online discursive offer'. With regard to parliaments, the investigation is based upon content analysis of the websites of 44 European national and regional

parliaments, plus the European Parliament. It reveals that, despite MPs' frequent declarations about the improvement in democratic processes that new technologies can bring, parliaments' web sites generally provide a very basic web interactive offer (contact information section, e-mail addresses of MPs) and rarely incorporate forms of discursive interaction such as online forums or online consultation. On the contrary, local authorities' websites are more likely to provide offers of online discursive interaction. In particular the author suggests that the size of cities is directly correlated with the provision of online forums. Finally, and with a focus on political parties, the analysis of 163 political parties' websites reveals that almost one party out of two hosts an online forum, and therefore that they are far more likely than other institutions to provide forms of online discursive offer.

With the fourth chapter the author begins to deepen the description of how the deliberative model of democracy and the deliberative criteria can be applied to the analysis of concrete cases of online debates – what the authors calls the 'operationalisation' of the criteria. First of all he attempts to summarise and compare, in a systematic way, the literature that analyses the functioning and deliberativeness of different typologies of online debates. The author tries to assess whether the level of deliberativeness of online political forums varies according to given contextual factors. In particular he focuses on the correlation between the deliberativeness of the forums and their 'external impact'. The hypothesis is that citizens' motivation to adopt a deliberative attitude in using political forums is directly correlated to their perception that their online contribution could influence offline decision-making processes. In this regard the author claims that forums with a strong political impact are more feasibly characterised by a deliberative attitude of the participants, assessed in terms of the aforementioned deliberative criteria of, for example, 'plurality' or 'reflexivity'. In other words, if participants think that their words will have an effect on external political processes, they will be more likely to be respectful and available to learn from each other. Nevertheless the authors admits that the main limit of the comparative analysis of the existing literature about the deliberativeness of online forums is limited by the fact that the studies adopt different methods of analysis, which should be harmonised by further research.

The two final chapters are dedicated to the analysis of two original case studies: the forum hosted by the Web site of the Italian party Radicali Italiani and the councillors' 'electoral blogs' of the French city of Issy-les-Moulineaux. The results of the analysis of the case studies are interesting, and could also be described as controversial. The author defines Radicali's forum as an exemplary case not only for the investigation of the deliberative characteristics of online discussions, but also for defining the elements that could make a Web political forum a success. Nevertheless, it is possible to argue that the success of the forum is not only related to its internal elements but to the fact that the Italian Radicals are a small political party which is traditionally well known for its participative, pluralistic and high-tech culture.

The second case study is probably more controversial than the first one. Issy-les-Moulineaux is a city characterized by a high level of Internet access and a strong participatory culture. In 2005 it organised an avant-garde election of its councillors, which combined an Internet-based voting system and a political campaign almost entirely led via election blogs. Nevertheless the level of participation of the campaign blogs was low and unbalanced. Moreover, only the three percent of the city's electorate used the Internet vote. The author blames the awkward registration process and the fact that the older generation of inhabitants may not have been familiar or comfortable with the medium. This sounds a rather weak explanation for the low level of online participation, given that the author describes the city as having a relatively young population, a high level of Internet-access and a dynamic economy.

In conclusion, it is feasible to say that the most significant result of this research is the development of an interesting and original approach to the research methodology of the study of online political debates. In particular it provides good examples of the 'operationalisation' of the deliberative criteria. The way

in which the author defines and applies the criteria to the case studies could be a very useful example for similar research. On the other hand, with regard to the central hypothesis that online debates can foster the deliberativeness of offline political processes, my considered opinion is that the findings outlined in the two case studies are still too weak to support a robust demonstration.

References

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Giuseppe Alfano

Phd Candidate in Multimedia Communication at the University of Udine
E-mail: giuseppe.alfano@uniud.it