

The Challenges for Online Deliberation Research: A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

While pure deliberation has still not been found online, the field of online deliberation research is blossoming. Born out of the “frustrations and possibilities” of the 1990s, a current theme in the field is to re-link deliberative theory with empirical political science. The aim of this systematic literature review is to sort out and examine important features of this development; to identify and categorise important research themes and issues as well as to pinpoint some research gaps. Using citation analysis as a method for article selection, 788 abstracts were retrieved and out of these, 130 items were chosen for further analysis. First the review shows that researchers from several different disciplines are involved in the field and that these researchers are studying online deliberation in a variety of arenas aided by a wide range of methods. Second the review reveals that the field struggles with a highly diversified concept of deliberation; that newer theoretical developments are underutilised in the operationalisation of theoretical concepts for empirical analyses, and that there is a rather low degree of cumulativeness in the field. Finally, more attention is paid on deliberation per se, rather than the political and democratic consequences of deliberation.

Keywords: Deliberation, Deliberative Democracy, Internet, Literature Review, Online Deliberation

INTRODUCTION

While pure deliberation has still not been found online (Chadwick, 2009), the field of online deliberation research is blossoming (Davies, 2009). Born out of the “frustrations and possibilities” (Davies, 2009) of the 1990s, a current theme in the field is about re-linking deliberative theory with empirical political science (Bächtiger & Hangartner, 2010). From the second half of the 2000s a new wave of studies has swept over the field, focusing on a greater variety of platforms, such as blogs

(e.g. Koop & Jansen, 2009; Xenos, 2008), comments in newspapers (e.g. Berdal 2004; Zhou et al., 2008) and other innovations, one of which is augmented deliberation in urban planning (Gordon & Manosevitch, 2010). At the same time new concepts and ideas are being developed and discussed in the literature of deliberative democracy, suggesting the inclusion of story-telling (Polletta & Lee, 2006; Black, 2008), humour (Basu, 1999; Coleman & Moss, 2012), emotions and rhetoric (Dryzek, 2000), passion (Hall, 2007), and power (Mansbridge et al., 2010) in the analysis of citizen deliberation.

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The aim of this systematic literature review is to sort out and examine important features of this development, to identify and categorise significant research themes and issues as well as to pinpoint some research gaps. The review will take its point of departure in three aspects that divide the field: the *discipline* to which the researcher belongs, the *arena* that the study is focusing, and the *methods* used to measure or understand the different aspects of online deliberation. Utilising the method of descriptive statistics, we will analyse how these aspects influence choices regarding research themes and issues.

The article is structured as follows. We start by describing the method used for choosing and analysing the items (articles, books, reports and conference proceedings) in the field. Secondly, we examine how the concept of online deliberation is defined and made sense of, by discussing the theoretical items in the sample in relation to literature on deliberative democracy in general. In the third part, we conduct a structured examination of the empirical items in the sample, in which we (a) analyse how the arenas relate to discipline and the methods applied, and (b) analyse the research themes and issues. In the final part of the article we discuss and suggest ways to move the field forward.

METHOD

To conduct this structured literature review, citation analysis was applied to find the most relevant and important studies in the field. A main problem, however, with this method is the semantic fragmentation of the concept of online deliberation, and since a “literature review is concept-centric” (Webster & Watson, 2002), there is a necessity to be modest and honest about the problem with stringency in the reviewed material. To solve this problem, we applied an inductive approach to the semantic varieties of the concept, i.e. we added terms along the way as we found other terms related to the main concept, and then searched these new terms in the same manner as the original term. The different terms that were found in the literature

were *computer-mediated deliberation* (Gastil, 2000), *digital deliberation* (Bierle, 2004), *E-deliberation* (Cindio, 2008; Hands, 2005; Kim, 2006), *eDeliberation* (Wojcik, 2007), *virtual deliberation* (Barabas, 2003; Delborne et al., 2011) and *web-deliberation* (Kies, 2010). Our interpretation is that there is no specific normative meaning or substance to these different concepts, but that they are simply semantically different from each other. Departing from these findings, we used *online deliberation*[‡] as the head term, and then added: *Internet deliberation*[‡], *e-deliberation*[‡], *eDeliberation*[‡], *web deliberation*[‡], *digital deliberation*[‡], *online political deliberation*[‡], *on-line deliberation*[‡], *computer-mediated deliberation*[‡], and *computer-mediated political discussion*[‡].

The items examined for this article are a mix of articles, books, reports, chapters in anthologies, and various conference proceedings. All items were retrieved from the databases *Publish and Perish* and *ISI-Web of Knowledge*. The timespan for the retrieved items was 1990 to April 2012. The total number of items retrieved in the first gathering was 788. All items were analysed, using abstracts and keywords as guidance for relevance. From these, a total of 130 were considered to be relevant, and thus selected for further analysis. The criteria for being considered relevant were a specific focus on some aspect of online deliberation and furthermore, the item was cited at least once. Including only cited items was a way of delimiting the analysis to contributions that has had at least some impact in the field. The analyses consisted of reading all items, then categorising and coding all of the content. Eighty-seven dichotomised variables were used to analyse each item. Prior to reviewing the literature, two main categories were established for each study: empirical and theoretical. To be categorised as an empirical item, the study had to, in some way, be based on data collected by the authors, or for that specific study. To be categorised as a theoretical item, the study must in some way theorise about online deliberation, develop or discuss methodological aspects of online deliberation, or generally discuss the potential of online deliberation

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