DELIBERATION AND ONLINE PARTICIPATION:
THE CASE OF THE SLOVENIAN PORTAL "I PROPOSE TO THE GOVERNMENT"

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In November 2009, the Slovenian government implemented a new participatory tool called "Predlagam vladi" ("I propose to the government") in order to include citizens in the governmental policy process, which aimed to increase active citizen participation and connect citizens and civil society with the government. At a declarative level of the proponent (the government), the use of this e-tool promotes inclusion, openness, accessibility, and deliberative communication. Although the web portal received almost no publicity in the mass media, citizens largely grasped the new opportunity for broader access to the policy process. This study focuses mainly on the deliberative character of the governmental portal on three specific levels: structure and architecture, openness to citizens, and concrete proposals and comments. By critically evaluating deliberative communication and the role of new media in such practical projects, the authors explain how these new opportunities are limited and, by debating deliberation and public sphere, determine important obstacles that prevent such projects from being deliberately effective.

1 Introduction

Democratic theory has undergone profound alterations and since the 1990s, with the so-called deliberative turn, many authors have switched their focus

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to the deliberative model of democracy. Like many other democratic models, deliberative democracy aims to increase the quality of democracy, particularly by encouraging its participatory potentials, which can provide an increase in political legitimacy.[2] The reflexive aspect can be considered a crucial part of the deliberative process; that is, participants not only express their views, but are also (at least ideally) prepared to transform their opinions because of informed deliberation in the public sphere. It is the public sphere that serves as a basis for political legitimacy in this normative approach to democracy; according to Habermas, this is where issues and public problems are detected. They are presented through "communicatively generated power," and while public opinion can never rule for itself, it should be able to influence administrative power to work in specific ways.[3]

One of the main practical deficiencies plaguing this approach is related to the actually existing media system, which is mostly regarded as a key component connecting the public sphere and public with the political system. Media can be viewed as highly selective in choosing media topics and news content in contemporary capitalism. Structurally speaking, they are not necessarily working in the name of public or common concern, but in a very particularistic manner—for example, on narrow popularity demands or cost-efficiency logic.[4] Therefore, it can be considered urgent to determine new ways to exhort influence on the political system. The Internet has been heralded as a medium that can provide several new direct channels of influence, but the public on the Web are very fragmented and, as a result, politically less effective. Under certain conditions, however, we believe the public on the Web could possibly exhibit participatory potentials using new information and communication technologies (ICTs), which is where the "I propose to the government" (i.e. IPG, "Predlagam vladi") e-tool could play a significant role.

In contrast to the initial warnings that technologically supported tele-voting, electronic town halls, tele-polling, and tele-referenda do not fulfill the conditions necessary for time-consuming deliberative processes and may even diminish

[2] David Held, *Models of Democracy* (Cambridge, Malden: Polity Press, 2006), 231–255.

[3] Jürgen Habermas, "Three normative models of democracy," in *Democracy and difference: Contesting boundaries of the political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton: Princeton Press, 1996). For a more detailed description, see Jürgen Habermas, *Between facts and norms: contributions to a discourse theory of law and democracy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Polity Press, 1996) and his latest conceptualization of the public sphere: Jürgen Habermas, "Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy still have an Epistemic Dimension?" in *Europe: The Faltering Project* (Cambridge, Malden: Polity Press, 2009).

[4] See for example Robert McChesney, *The Political Economy of Media: Enduring Issues, Emerging Dilemmas* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008).

the quality of democratic processes in modern society,[5] recent studies have attempted to provide the necessary theoretic foundations for e-tools that could fulfill normative expectations of deliberative democracy. From simple mechanisms of voting systems, the focus has been shifted toward the emergence of new participatory forms supported by interactive technologies.[6] This recent shift depends on the changing circumstances in the development of ICTs. Since the early 1990s, a rapid expansion of computer-mediated communication practices has flourished, which has posed an important issue: whether the Internet can foster the deliberative type of communication between citizens and the government. As Hale, Musso, and Weare argue, the first evidence has been less encouraging—deliberative communication by electronic means may be difficult to sustain, although the Internet, at least in theory, creates the opportunity to improve communications and reconnect citizens with their representatives.[7] Every different voice and judgment is not necessarily given an opportunity to be represented and included in deliberation in computer-mediated forums.[8]

Electronic tools like IPG might be useful in such situations. Issues that may not previously be publicly visible because of different reasons, including deficiencies of traditional media, can gain prominence when promoted through these types of e-tools, as they become widely available for discussion and evaluation by anyone interested in them. This effort could also be regarded as one of the first practical attempts to democratize the link between citizens and the Slovenian government through the use of the Web's emancipatory potentials. Previous attempts of different governments and party coalitions of various backgrounds have at best aimed at transferring the pre-existing services of public administration onto the Web, which eased administrative processes, but made little to no difference with respect to democratization of the political process. Therefore, attempts to incorporate e-participatory tools have, for various reasons, been mostly ignored before the implementation of the IPG e-tool, which makes it even more important, as it represents a novel and innovative attempt to bring citizens closer to the decision-making process. Through the assistance of this e-tool, citizens could ideally deliberate on important issues of public importance and admit their suggestions into the legislative process, which could contribute

[5] See Christopher F. Arterton, *Teledemocracy: Can technology protect democracy?* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1987); Jeffrey B. Abramson et al, *The Electronic Commonwealth* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1988).

[6] See for instance Stephen Coleman and Jay Blumer, *The Internet and Democratic Citizenship: Theory, Practice, and Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[7] Matthew Hale et al, "Developing digital democracy: evidence from Californian municipal web pages," in *Digital Democracy: Discourse and Decision Making in the Information Age,* ed. Barry N. Hague and Brian D. Loader (London, New York: Routledge, 1999), 106.

[8] Anthony G. Wilhelm, *Democracy in the Digital Age: Challenges to Political Life in Cyberspace* (London: Routledge, 2000).

toward the implementation of more effective policies, improve their legitimacy, and potentially empower citizens for an active and more informed participation.

2 Deliberative democratic theory and new media

Deliberation is not a new political phenomenon. It can be traced back to Ancient Greece, where it was considered an essential part of democracy; later, it was perhaps most profoundly advocated by American pragmatist John Dewey.[9] In addition to the legitimacy crisis of liberal institutions, which has recently led to a severe crisis of the representative model of democracy, tenets of deliberative democracy should be tracked back to the new social movements in the 1960s, which provided a serious critique of political elitism and the technocratic state. As an integral model of democracy, deliberative democracy was nevertheless not constituted before the 1990s,[10] when increased interest in participatory forms of democracy were also pushed by the rise of new ICTs, especially the Internet. New technology was celebrated as the most democratic to date, instantly prompting debates of digital, electronic, and cyber-democracy[11]—terms that became synonymous with direct political participation and with the lessening of discrepancies between citizens, civil society, and formal political institutions.[12]

Even though it became quickly obvious that politics in the virtual world were mostly a reflection of the "real world" politics,[13] evaporating utopian dreams of significant transformations in traditional political institutions, the Internet has brought about many changes, especially outside the formal political arenas.[14] In the last decade, the switch in theoretical comprehension regarding democracy has paved the way for continuous debates about prospects for deliberative

[9] See for example John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1989).

[10] James Bohman and William Rehg, "Introduction," in *Deliberative democracy: essays on reason and politics*, ed. James Bohman and William Rehg (London, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997); Jon Elster, "Introduction," in *Deliberative Democracy*, ed. Jon Elster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); John Dryzek, *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond: Liberals, Critics, Contestations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[11] Tanja Oblak, *Izzivi e-demokracije* (Ljubljana: Fakulteta za družbene vede, 2003).

[12] Barry N. Hague and Brian D. Loader (eds.), *Digital Democracy: Discourse and Decision Making in the Information Age* (London, New York: Routledge, 1999); Kenneth L. Hacker and Jan A.G.M. Van Dijk (eds.), *Digital democracy: issues of theory and practice* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage, 2000); Cynthia J. Alexander and Leslie A. Pal (eds.), *Digital Democracy: Policy and Politics in Wired World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Kevin A. Hill and John E. Hughes, *Cyberpolitics: Citizen Activism in the Age of the Internet* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998).

[13] David Resnick, "Politics on the Internet: The Normalization of Cyberspace," in *The Politics of Cyberspace*, ed. Chris Toulouse and Timothy W. Luke (New York, London: Routledge, 1998).

[14] Sara Bentivegna, "Rethinking politics in the world of ICTs," *European Journal of Communication* 21, 3 (2006), 334–336.

democracy, especially with the rise of "virtual" or "web" public spheres, and about hindrances that could constrain these developments.

Many vast differences exist between the authors who discuss deliberative democracy; however, Elster points out that "the notion includes collective decision making with the participation of all who will be affected by the decision of their representatives: this is the democratic part. Also, all agree that it includes decision making by means of arguments offered *by* and *to* participants who are committed to the values of rationality and impartiality: this is the deliberative part".[15] According to Dryzek, "the only condition for authentic deliberation is then the requirement that communication induce reflection upon preferences in non-coercive fashion. This requirement in turn rules out domination via the exercise of power, manipulation, indoctrination, propaganda, deception, expressions of mere self-interest, threats (of the sort that characterize bargaining), and attempts to impose ideological conformity."[16]

In a similar manner, Bohman and Rehg stress that "deliberative democracy refers to the idea that legitimate lawmaking issues from the public deliberation of citizens. As a normative account of legitimacy, deliberative democracy evokes ideals of rational legislation, participatory politics, and civic self-governance."[17] Deliberative democracy is therefore formed through social and intersubjective communication, not simply by aggregation, as in voting, or by negotiations and bargaining between different groups.[18] This is supposed to pave the way for deeper forms of democracy or, in the words of Benjamin Barber, a path toward strong democracy, where democracy is a never-ending process of communication, not simply a given set of political institutions: "In strong democracy, politics is something done by, not to, citizens."[19] Even though there are several differences between theoretical approaches toward deliberation, they mostly narrow down when they are transferred from the level of abstract questions into concrete matters of everyday practice.[20]

[15] Jon Elster, "Introduction," in Deliberative Democracy, ed. Jon Elster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 8.

[16] John Dryzek, *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond: Liberals, Critics, Contestations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1–2.

[17] James Bohman and William Rehg, "Introduction," in *Deliberative democracy: essays on reason and politics*, ed. James Bohman and William Rehg (London, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997), ix.

[18] Jon Elster, "Introduction," in Deliberative Democracy, ed. Jon Elster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 5–6. See also Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright, "Thinking about Empowered Participatory Governance," *in Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance*, ed. Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright (London, New York: Verso, 2003), 3.

[19] Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2003/1984), 113.

[20] See Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright, "Thinking about Empowered Participatory Governance," *in Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance*, ed. Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright (London, New York: Verso, 2003).

2.1 Deliberation as a communicative process

Several studies concentrate on political changes in different political institutions by focusing on the realization of deliberative processes through the uses of ICTs, for example, in government, parliament, or political parties.[21] These studies, however, generally suffer from an important weakness: lack of a clear definition of "deliberative democracy." We have to infer the meaning of the concept from their assumptions, theses, or interpretations of their findings. Thus, a reference back to the "theory of democracy" becomes especially important:
The essence of democracy itself is now widely taken to be deliberation, as opposed to voting, interest aggregation, constitutional rights or even self-government. The deliberative turn represents a renewed concern with the authenticity of democracy, which means that deliberative democracy's welcome for forms of communication is conditional.[22]

The notion of deliberative democracy is essentially built around the idea "that democracy revolves around transformation rather than simply the aggregation of preferences,"[23] and it owes a considerable amount of its impetus to the political philosophies of Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls. To establish a deliberative form of democracy implies connecting the decision-making processes with a prior discussion of the arguments, consequences, and benefits. The call for more deliberation is, as argued by Bohman, "a demand for a more rational political order in which decision making at least involves the public use of reason. According to this position, the legitimacy of decisions must be determined by the critical judgment of free and equal citizens".[24] A wide circle of participants (the wider the better) should enter this process. Through such a discussion, their preferences can be heard, challenged, acknowledged, and also transformed.

The fact that there is a discussion of certain issues legitimizes the resulting decisions. Deliberation is a way of linking a plurality of political preferences with outcomes of political decisions; it includes discussion and transforms it into political decision-making. Conceptualization of deliberation should thus

[21] See for instance Richard Davis, *The Web of Politics: The Internet's Impact on the American Political System* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Stephen Coleman, "Cutting Out the Middle Man: From Virtual Representation to Direct Deliberation," in *Digital Democracy: Discourse and Decision Making in the Information Age,* ed. Barry N. Hague and Brian D. Loader (London, New York: Routledge, 1999); Stephen Coleman et al (eds.), *Parliament in the Age of the Internet* (London: Routledge, 1999); Matthew Hale et al, "Developing digital democracy: evidence from Californian municipal web pages," in *Digital Democracy: Discourse and Decision Making in the Information Age,* ed. Barry N. Hague and Brian D. Loader (London, New York: Routledge, 1999).

[22] John Dryzek, *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond: Liberals, Critics, Contestations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1.

[23] Jon Elster, "Introduction," in *Deliberative Democracy*, ed. Jon Elster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1.

[24] James Bohman, *Public Deliberation* (London, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000), 2.

encompass both the process and its results. It should also include a particular kind of setting; since it is tied to publicity, free speech, reasoning, and argued claims, it is necessary to distinguish a specific type of deliberation: "Deliberation in democracies is interpersonal in a specific, political sense: it is public."[25] This is important because some form of discussion is always, to some extent, present in bringing about political decisions; yet if they are public, reasoned, and well thought out, they provide a better basis for democracy.

The deliberative form of democracy therefore implies the existence of special discussion practices, built on rational thinking and stimulating rational deliberation about different opinions. Public deliberation could be defined as "a dialogical process of exchanging reasons for the purpose of resolving problematic situations that cannot be settled without interpersonal coordination and cooperation."[26] Deliberation is understood primarily as a communication process, determined by special circumstances and specific results. According to these accounts, deliberation involves communication among different public or political actors and citizens who attempt to reach a political decision. Which opinion or position will be accepted at the end is not the result of counting voices but of long-term and thoughtful considerations in which every included opinion participates. The final decision, accepted on the basis of a rational discussion, is thus the outcome of a deliberative process.

2.2 Participatory and deliberative aspects of new media

According to Budge, the development of new electronic forms of communication brought favorable conditions for the principles of direct democracy to flower: "The phone in, the televised debate, the casting of mass votes after debate, all opened up discussions to strata of the population which would never have got a look-in at Athens."[27] More specific questions about whether new communication technologies, especially the Internet, could help to improve the quality and efficiency of public deliberation processes had already entered discussions of electronic democracy in the late 1990s.[28] Mass access enabled by these technologies, and the means of direct response offered by their use, could significantly expand the realm of participation, which is presently limited.

[25] Ibid., 25.

[26] Ibid., 27.

[27] Ian Budge, "Bytes that Bite: The Internet and Deliberative Democracy," *Constellations* 4, 2 (1996), 27.

[28] Dilemmas about the deliberative potentials of new technologies are systematically developed in works by Stephen Coleman, "Cutting Out the Middle Man: From Virtual Representation to Direct Deliberation," in *Digital Democracy: Discourse and Decision Making in the Information Age,* ed. Barry N. Hague and Brian D. Loader (London, New York: Routledge, 1999); Wilhelm *op. cit.*; Hale, Muso and Weare *op. cit.*; and others.

Barber, in this context, claimed that interactive systems embody immense potentials for "equalizing access to information, stimulating participatory debate across regions, and encouraging polling and voting informed by information, discussion, and debate."[29] Strong democracy is similar to a kind of town meeting in which participation is direct, where communication is either regional or even national. The electronic enhancement of communication opens up possible solutions for the problems of scale.[30] Modern telecommunications technology has therefore an important, if not a decisive, role as "an instrument for democratic discourse at the regional and national level":[31]

The capabilities of the new technology can be used to strengthen civic education, guarantee equal access to information, and tie individuals and institutions into networks that will make real participatory discussion and debate possible across great distances. Thus for the first time we have an opportunity to create artificial town meetings among populations that could not otherwise communicate. There is little doubt that the electronic town meeting sacrifices intimacy, diminishes the sense of face-to-face confrontation, and increases the dangers of elite manipulation.

However, while the Internet does offer a frame for creating interactive communication, facilitating public input and even direct democracy via formal electronic voting processes, evidence suggests that the Internet will not motivate political activity. The mere possession of technology is simply not enough. Moreover, interactivity as the essential quality of these technologies is a total illusion for Davis: "Interest groups, party organisations, and legislators seek to use the web for information dissemination, but they are rarely interested in allowing their sites to become forums for the opinions of others."[32]

The second concern, to which different studies of the deliberative potentials of new communication technologies have given much space, refers to the nature of the communication process. By deliberative communication, Hale, Musso, and Weare mean a possibility to lower the obstacles between citizens and the governmental elite.[33] However, in order to overcome the "directory function" of communication, the use of e-mail, general comment boxes, or other electronic communication forms could also offer a link to elected officials and city staff. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the existence of e-mail, comment boxes, or electronic forms guarantees the emergence of deliberative communication, for it is just as possible that through a set of these technological mechanisms

[29] Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2003/1984), 276.

[30] Ibid., 273

[31] Ibid., 274

[32] Richard Davis, The Web of Politics: The Internet's Impact on the American Political System (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 178.

[33] Such communication assumes at least a link between citizens and governmental officials, which could be made through telephone or written messages by mail.

the opposite type of communication could develop.[34] Thus, the improvement of communication mechanisms does not unconditionally improve democracy; it first requires the *development of a process that is deliberative in nature.* This means that it requires moving beyond mass opinion and snap judgments to *thoughtful consideration* of the important value conflicts inherent in political discourse.[35]

3 Public sphere as a "home" for deliberative communication

The repeatedly mentioned precondition for a proper deliberative democracy is the notion of "public sphere." An inclusive, independent public sphere is commonly regarded as a prerequisite for legitimacy by most authors who write about deliberative democracy.[36] Public sphere is usually described as an autonomous domain between the state and (civil) society, where deliberation and contestation of discourses are supposed to be carried out. The public sphere serves as an intermediary for the citizens, where public opinions and influence on politics are passed through to the state through communicative power.

For the past two decades, Habermas has been regarded as one of the main references regarding questions about the public sphere. For him, the deliberative model conceives of the public sphere as a sounding board for registering problems which affect society as a whole, and at the same time as a discursive filter-bed which shifts interest-generalizing and informative contributions to relevant topics out of the unregulated processes of opinion formation, broadcast these 'public opinions' back onto the dispersed public of citizens, and puts them on the formal agendas of political bodies.[37]

[34] This is revealed in the analysis by Cross, who found that while in some instances technology might provide information to voters, it does so in a manner that discourages collective deliberation and consensus-building. See Alexander Cross, "Teledemocracy: Canadian Political Parties Listening to their Constituents," in *Digital Democracy*, ed. Cynthia J. Alexander and Leslie A. Pal (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 143.

[35] Matthew Hale et al, "Developing digital democracy: evidence from Californian municipal web pages," in *Digital Democracy: Discourse and Decision Making in the Information Age,* ed. Barry N. Hague and Brian D. Loader (London, New York: Routledge, 1999), 103.

[36] See for example Seyla Benhabib, "Toward a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy," in *Democracy and difference: Contesting boundaries of the political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton: Princeton Press, 1996); James Bohman and William Rehg, "Introduction," in *Deliberative democracy: essays on reason and politics*, ed. James Bohman and William Rehg (London, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997); Peter Dahlgren, *Media and political engagement: Citizens, Communication, and Democracy* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 86–87; Jürgen Habermas, "Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy still have an Epistemic Dimension?" in *Europe: The Faltering Project* (Cambridge, Malden: Polity Press, 2009).

[37] Jürgen Habermas, "Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy still have an Epistemic Dimension?" in *Europe: The Faltering Project* (Cambridge, Malden: Polity Press, 2009), 143.

The public sphere consists of what he defines as "subjectless forms of communication [that] constitute arenas in which more or less rational option- and will-formation can take place."[38] Normatively speaking, communication in the public sphere should be rational and self-reflective. Drawing from Habermas, Dahlberg defines a set of criteria for rational communication to be fulfilled: (1) at least formally inclusive; (2) free and autonomous from the interventions of state or corporate interests, i.e., it should not be coercive; (3) able to fulfill communicative equality between all possible participants; (4) sincere as far as possible; (5) respectful and capable of empathy; (6) reasoned in the sense that arguments are framed in terms of why certain claims should be accepted; and (7) reflexive, that is, people are prepared to re-approach their own positions.[39] Ideally speaking, participants should undergo what is usually termed a "counterfactual experiment." As Dryzek points out, "under communicative rationality, the only power exercised is, in Habermas's terminology, 'the forceless force of the better argument.'"[40]

3.1 When arguments count

An important condition of deliberation presupposes, first, that participants take up reasoned positions upon the validity of those aspects of social life that have become problematized and, second, that participants' own validity claims are at the same time exposed to the reciprocal rational testing of others involved in discussion.[41] Even more, as Cohen explains, participants are required to state their reasons for advancing proposals, supporting them, or criticizing them. The aim of deliberation is the acceptance (or denial) of the proposal on the basis of better (or worse) arguments. Therefore, the leading role in deliberation must have the force of better argument and not the force of power or any other external coercion.[42] Argumentation must be addressed not just to those present in discussion but to all others potentially affected by the claims under consideration. Arguments must be universal—that is, acceptable for the

[38] Jürgen Habermas, "Three normative models of democracy" in *Democracy and difference: Contesting boundaries of the political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton: Princeton Press, 1996), 27.

[39] Dahlberg, Lincoln, "The Habermasian Public Sphere: Taking Difference Seriously?" *Theory and Society* 34 (2005), 111–136. Dahlberg, Lincoln, "The Internet, Deliberative Democracy, and Power: Radicalizing the Public Sphere," *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics* 3, 1 (2007), 49.

[40] John Dryzek, *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond: Liberals, Critics, Contestations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 172.

[41] Lincoln Dahlberg, "The Habermasian Public Sphere: A Specification of the Idealized Conditions of Democratic Communication," *Studies in Social and Political Thought* 10 (2004), 7.

[42] Joshua Cohen, "Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy," in *Deliberative democracy: essays on reason and politics*, ed. James Bohman and William Rehg (London, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997).

universal audience—thus absolutely not only for the present "virtual public."[43]

3.2 Interactivity and public deliberation

According to Habermas, the rational public sphere relies upon discursive spaces, and, in modern society, the Internet is viewed as an exemplary medium for facilitating such spaces.[44] However, according to Coleman and Blumler, the Internet will not be qualified much longer as a "new technology," and most of the hype and speculation surrounding the Internet have focused on new opportunities for commerce, sociability, and study as well as on its more negative uses for criminality, surveillance, and offensive content. Although governmental agencies and other state-institutions are able to disseminate information and deliver services online in cheaper and more efficient ways than in the past, the key questions are still unanswered: Does the Internet in modern societies change the balance of power in communication processes? Does it serve democratic ends? Most importantly, are citizens more able to question, comment upon, challenge, and influence those who govern them than they were in the pre-digital times?[45]

Interactive, digital media absolutely have the potential to improve public communication and revitalize democracy. Identification of the Internet's potentially democratizing characteristics defines it as a medium of predominately active users that tends to encourage an active disposition to communications. The Internet makes it possible to involve large numbers of users in a full expression and exchange of experiences and opinions, while on the other hand, provides relatively inexpensive public access to large reserves of retrievable data. Participation is not limited with geographic borders and time features.[46] However, as Papacharissi warns, the democratizing potential of Internet technologies frequently rests with the individual predisposition to be politically active and with political infrastructure that is in place.[47]

[43] Lincoln Dahlberg, "The Habermasian Public Sphere: A Specification of the Idealized Conditions of Democratic Communication," *Studies in Social and Political Thought* 10 (2004), 7.

[44] Lincoln Dahlberg, "Extending the Public Sphere through Cyberspace: The Case of Minnesota E-Democracy," *First Monday* 6, 3 (2001), 168.

[45] Stephen Coleman and Jay Blumer, *The Internet and Democratic Citizenship: Theory, Practice, and Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 8.

[46] Ibid., 12–13.

[47] Zizi Papacharissi, "Democracy Online: Civility, Politeness, and the Democratic Potential of On-Line Political Discussion Groups," *New Media & Society* 6, 2 (2004), 268.

4 Analyzing deliberative potentials of the Participary E-Tool

The Slovenian government implemented a new electronic tool called "I propose to the government" (i.e., IPG, "Predlagam vladi") in November 2009. It runs under the patronage of the government communication office (i.e., Ukom),[48] a service that mediates information between the government, its representatives, public agencies, and different members of the public. Since this e-tool is institutionally positioned in a specific intermediary manner, it could bridge the gap between institutionalized and weak public spheres, by drawing the public closer to the political system, promoting a bottom-up inclusion through new channels of communication. The main objective of this e-tool is to include citizens in the policy process, in order to help to create governmental policies and actions. The aim was to encourage expression of opinions, suggestions, and proposals regarding political issues, which could consequently increase active citizen participation and help connect citizens and civil society with the government.[49]

One of the dilemmas related to the effects of online political discussions and public opinion exchange is the power of words and their ability to impact the changes *within* a specific political system. One of the most important characteristics of this tool is the obligation of ministers and governmental offices to think about, analyze, and respond to all given proposals. The formal rules and related procedure reassure that all proposals need to be read and analyzed by proper governmental offices. An indicator of success of an individual proposal, published on this portal, is a positive response of a governmental office arguing that the proposal carries the potentials to be included in the policy process. Governmental offices give several responses to the published proposals: they can reject them, they can include them as one of the potential solutions to a problem discussed, or they can be positively accepted and incorporated within the politics.

4.1 Methods and sample

The extent of deliberation and argumentative discussion in the online political portal is empirically tested through a combination of two different methods. The first part of the assessment includes a detailed analysis of the portal itself, focusing on the architecture of the web portal and its potentials for citizen inclusion, rules of participation, and consequences of individual participation. The response to the question "to what extent does the portal democratize the social inclusion of participants" is provided by a secondary analysis of the portal

[48] Web-site available at http://www.ukom.gov.si/en/news/ (June 2011).

[49] Government's viewpoint on the project is available at http://www.vlada.si/si/teme_in_projekti/predlagamvladisi/o_projektu (June 2011).

users and their socio-biographical structure (age, gender, education).

The second part of the analysis is focused directly on the citizens' proposals, their authorship, topics and levels, and types of argumentation. Here, the aim is to measure selected proposals, their topics and comments, and their argumentative nature. The government office of communication received altogether 235 responses of governmental offices and agencies to the given proposals within one year (November 2009–November 2010). The response was positive and proposals were accepted only in 11 cases; 31 cases were described as "potential solution" of a problem, whereas 77 responses were negative. A sample of proposals includes 60 proposals,[50] whereas the sample of comments was formulated on 30 proposals and included at the end of 266 comments.[51]

4.2 Results

Deliberative aspects of formal procedure and portal architecture

The formal procedure for using the IPG e-tool is plain and simple, making it suitable even for people with low computer literacy. Participants have to register by creating a user name; they can also use either their OpenID account or connect to the e-tool via their Facebook account.[52] Even though participants need to enter their name and surname when registering, they can use nicknames when posting comments or casting votes, instead of their actual names, which increases the feeling of anonymity. However, by joining the portal, each participant accepts the published rules of the tool and therefore agrees not to rely on false or inconsistent data, not to represent him or herself as somebody else, and to use his or her own account only. The portal rules explicitly prohibit the creation of more than one account by a single user. When registering, the users also agree not to behave arrogant, exclusive, or insulting and not to publish content that would stimulate any gender, racial, or religious discrimination.

The next step that the tool provides for users is the ability to cast votes on existing propositions, to comment on proposals, or to write their own suggestions. The procedure has fixed temporal rules. Commenting on a publicly posted proposal takes place for 15 days, and voting after that takes another 14 days. During this

[50] The sample includes 10 proposals with positive response and approximately half of all proposals from the other two groups: 35 proposals with negative response and 15 proposals with a potential solution.

[51] The sample of comments was selected on half of the whole sample of the analysed proposals (30 proposals only), that is, all comments on 17 rejected proposals, on 5 accepted proposals, and on 8 proposals with a potential solution. This reduction was necessary at this point since some of the proposals can have more than 400 comments.

[52] As participants can use nicknames when posting comments or casting votes instead of their actual names, the (sometimes detrimental) feeling of anonymity increases.

time, public deliberation on the published proposal is supposed to take place, while the author/submitter of the proposition is able to modify or supplement his proposition. Here, governmental agencies are also able to enter the deliberation process. After the voting is completed, the proposal is accepted if more than five percent of the active users have voted on it and if more than half of them have cast their vote in favor of the proposition. In this case, the suggested proposition is sent to the governmental sector or service that has jurisdiction over the discussed topic, and this sector then has to opt for or against it. The response of the government is published in the e-tool no later than 30 days after the proposition has been sent to the relevant governmental agency; after that, the users can comment on the response.

Participants in public debates

The government communication office gathered data about the portal users in an online survey that included a sample of 218 users.[53] In order to provide a better understanding of who is using the analyzed portal, a set of interpretations is given. It seems that the usage of the tool rises with age: those who are 35–44 years old are the most regular users, which together compound almost a quarter of all users. In addition, the results demonstrate that almost 34% of all users have a high degree of education, and another 30% have secondary school education. In the sample, only 10% of respondents had higher education; nevertheless, those with primary school are far less represented within a sample of portal users. Regarding the status, most of the users seem to be employed in the private sector or economy (20%), followed by those who are employed in the public sector. Users seem to be involved in the portal at least on a monthly basis: about a quarter of all users (23%) visit the portal several times a week or more; another half of them (47%) visit the portal several times a month. With regard to the electronic report sent to all subscribed users by e-mail every Wednesday in order to provide them with the news about the latest proposals and government responses and with the lists of proposals that have reached the highest number of comments and votes, most of the users (65%) regard it a useful and informative update about what has happened on the portal.

Deliberative aspects of proposals and discussions

For our discussion about the deliberative potentials of citizen participation in the political process through the web portal, it is more relevant to understand what are actually the topics of debates and how the debates itself are structured. Since in the context of their "success," all proposals are divided into three groups—accepted with positive response, accepted as potential solution, or rejected—the question is what determines these differences: Is the success

[53] Users were able to participate in this survey between December 2nd and 6th, 2010 (for more information, see http://www.vlada.si/fileadmin/dokumenti/si/projekti/2011/110217_predlagam.vladi.si_porocilo.pdf (June 2011).

primarily a result of a "force of the argument"? Are rejected proposals mostly those that are weak in their argumentation, falsely prepared, and less important? Which proposals tend to be "better" in relation to the identity of their authors, topics, and intensity of the discussions? What effects on their success have the power of "public opinion"?

The structure of proposals in Table 1 demonstrates that mainly individual actors publish proposals. There was only one proposal explicitly signed by a non-governmental institution. Within the sample of 60 proposals, most of the comments were written in the group of proposals as potential solution (52%); on the other hand, the highest number of votes could be found in the rejected proposals (51%). An interesting difference between the groups is observed in the intensity of support by the voters and comments. In the accepted proposals, 57% comments support the proposal, whereas in rejected proposals, this figure is only 36%. Similarly, in relation to voting, there are more voters supporting proposals as potential solution (96%) and accepted proposals (92%) than in the group of rejected proposals (84%).

Table 1: The structure of accepted, rejected, and "potential solution" proposals

	accepted proposals	**rejected proposals**	**proposals as potential solution**
individual actor as submitters of proposals	9 90%	35 100%	15 100%
non-government institution as submitters of proposals	1 10%	0	0
number and % of all comments to the proposals	101 8%	478 40%	**622** **52%**
number and % of comments supporting the proposal	**32** **57%**	55 36%	26 47%
number and % of all votes to the proposals	229 11%	**1056** **51%**	781 38%
number and % of votes supporting the proposal	211 92%	888 84%	**746** **96%**

In the next step, the main focus was directed to the differences in argumentative nature between the three groups of proposals. Following the theoretical framework, the deliberative potentials of the portal depend on the importance of arguments given with the proposals and respectful comments. In this context, we could assume that the accepted proposals are more intensively argumentative. The analysis at this point is related to the question of (a) the percentage of argumentative proposals in the selected groups and (b) the percentage of the given arguments within comments related to a specific

proposal.

Table 2: Argumentative nature of accepted, rejected, and "potential solution" proposals

	accepted proposals (n = 10)	rejected proposals (n = 35)	proposals as potential solution (n = 15)
number and % of proposals with arguments	**10** **100%**	34 97%	14 93%
argumentation derived from personal knowledge or status	8 80%	**29** **83%**	11 73%
argumentation derived from insufficient current legislation	5 50%	15 43%	**8** **53%**
argumentation derived from statistical data	**3** **30%**	9 28%	4 27%
argumentation derived from solutions in other local communities, regions, states	2 20%	**19** **54%**	4 27%
argumentation derived from online media	**2** **20%**	2 6%	2 13%
argumentation derived from source with online link	2 20%	7 20%	3 20%

It appears that all 60 proposals are more or less strong in argumentation. Judging from the data presented in Table 2, the differences between the three groups of proposals are too small to argue that the rejected proposals lack the power of arguments or vice versa. However, there are some slight but interesting differences in the structure of argumentation: within the group of rejected proposals are mostly those that derived from personal experience or knowledge (83%) and those that derive from solutions in other local communities or regions (54%), followed by those that rely on insufficient current legislation (43%). Likewise, the accepted proposals are mostly those that derive from personal knowledge (80%), followed by those pointing to insufficient legislation (50%) and those that rely on statistical data (30%).

Further, the differences in argumentation were tested on the level of commentaries to the given proposals. However, here it appears that the given proposals are not too different (see Table 3).

Table 3: Argumentative nature of comments in accepted, rejected, and "potential solution" proposals

	accepted proposals (n = 56)	rejected proposals (n = 155)	proposals as potential solution (n = 55)
number and % of comments with expressed opinion about the topic	46 82%	132 85%	**48** **87%**
comments without the argument	**13** **23%**	33 21%	11 20%
comments with already stated argument	5 9%	15 9%	5 9%
comments with internal explanation	**24** **43%**	60 39%	21 38%
comments with external explanation	14 25%	47 30%	**18** **33%**

From the given data set, it is evident that the frequency of opinion expression in the form of comments is the lowest in the group of accepted proposals. Similarly, the same group has the highest number of comments with no argument (23%). All three groups have the same share of those comments that refer to or include an argument that has been already presented previously in the discussion (9%). Accepted proposals have 43% of comments with internal explanation, which means that argumentation is based on the commentator's position, experiences, values, and views, and only 25% of comments with external explanation, when argumentation uses external sources and follows facts, statistics, media articles or website, scientific article, or experts' statements. In the other two groups, the difference between the percentage of comments with internal explanation and that of comments with external explanation is minor.

Structural limitations for equal participation and deliberative communication

How the entire procedure is structurally framed is of considerable importance when proponents have to post their suggestions; if it looks simple, it may well be thought of as simple. While such criteria may decrease the number of suggestions, the final outcome could produce more concrete and precise proposals. In fact, some of the minor policy changes do not necessitate elaborated proposals, but most of them do—especially if they try to considerably alter existing policy or even propose a completely new one. The fact that the entire procedure for making suggestions, solutions, and propositions is fairly simple is not necessarily positive. Suggesting a serious solution to the government should not be as easy as posting a note or a short notice on your personal weblog or web forum. In the presented case, no difference whatsoever essentially exists. If the government expects users to send promising suggestions, the government agencies should predefine much more precisely what they expect

from users and how proponents can help them find good solutions.

If this tool is also to play an educational role in enhancing civic agency as Dahlgren argues,[54] more tutorials and video-seminars should be available on the web portal; this would help participants understand how the public policy process works and the nature of the demands for a good proposition. General opinions and introductions of experts on selected topics could be included, where parts of the formal procedure could be made more precise by demanding additional input from the proponents' sides. Moderators of the e-tool should also play a more active role in the entire procedure by helping users present a good proposal. This can be done by illustrating good cases, by suggesting where and how users can improve published proposals, or by directing posters to the existing legislature and other relevant sources. At the moment, the duty of moderators is more or less reduced to negative aspects of deliberation (ensuring that the rules are followed) and a mediatory role for the responses of the agencies. Another problem that should be solved by moderators is the final outcome, where, in most cases, nothing else happens besides the response of the governmental agencies.[55]

5 Conclusion

The main objective of this paper was to compare the first practical outcomes of the electronic tool "I propose to the government" with certain selected aspects of normative theories of deliberative democracy. Communication technologies can provide democratic opportunities that reach beyond the level of voting machines; however, the main question is whether they provide proper conditions, channels, and tools for the kind of decision-making process expected in deliberative democracy models. Early concepts of electronic democracy give different, mostly negative, answers. The first type of critique holds that communication technology weakens political participation; the second dilemma concerns the impossibility of reaching a consensus through a technologically supported process of decision making; and the third critique questioned the possibility of a proper connection between citizens and the government.

Within the context of the analyzed tool, we can argue that Slovenian citizens are definitely interested in online political participation: the number of proposals, comments, and registered users supports this conclusion. In addition, a more

[54] See for example Peter Dahlgren, *Media and political engagement: Citizens, Communication, and Democracy* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[55] It would perhaps be worthwhile to consider a system of summaries of the most active debates, which could be useful both for the legislators and for the wider public and which could also serve as "proof" to the participants that this debate actually took place and was thoroughly read and noted by someone.

detailed reading of the given proposals and their comments demonstrate that the discursive climate is positive and thorough with a high amount of self-respect between the participants of this civil community. Some participants in their statements reflect this importance to such an extent that they distance themselves from the usual forms of discriminatory and offensive online communication, popular on many publicly known web portals in Slovenia. According to the data set, one could argue that members of IPG contribute to an active and publicly aware civic community that is simply prepared to participate and act. The government is therefore faced with an important responsibility for making additional efforts to improve the portal and also to put citizens' proposals in practice.

Although there is great potential for further development of these kinds of e-tools, which open new communicative arenas between governments and public sphere and thus promote symbiotic relations, a more serious commitment to progress in this area will depend on the political will of politicians and the political system. It is unclear, at present, whether the government really desires the effective functioning of such tools, or whether politicians are implementing them merely to climb the ranks on some world-wide e-participation indexes. In fact, any larger change would have to presuppose serious institutional and social transformation in a wider political and economic structure. We must also acknowledge that discourse needs to spread into the broader public sphere, political institutions, and governmental administration in order to be successful when issues of a wider concern arise.

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