

ECREA Political Communication section, the Centre for Digital Citizenship and the Jean Monnet European Centre of Excellence

MEDIATED CITIZENSHIP: POLITICAL INFORMATION AND PARTICIPATION IN EUROPE

INSTITUTE OF COMMUNICATION STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS, 17.-18.9.2009

Deliberation and opinion formation in dialogic formats

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INTRODUCTION

Switzerland's political system grants its citizens direct participation in the legislative process via popular referenda; several times a year democratic rights are exerted on a substantial amount of referenda on the national, federal and communal level. The Swiss way of 'doing democracy' implies that citizens are capable of forming their opinion on often complex issues in a rather short period of time from the point of view of the common good. Hence, public deliberation which juxtaposes conflicting positions and engages citizens is of paramount importance.

In modern democracies the political public sphere is clearly dominated by the media, and while they are undoubtedly strongly structured by the logics of the market and sometimes show alarming proximity to the state (both signs of *Vermachtung* in Habermas' sense), recent developments have given rise to a more optimistic view. This obviously includes internet resources such as web fora, but also talk radio and debate formats on television can provide a 'dialogic' function in the broadest sense of the term. What is of interest from the point of view of democratic opinion and will formation in these different contexts is the discursive quality of the various formats: Who participates, what kind of positions are advocated and how are they justified, how are the different arguments tested, do the participants relate to one another at all – in short: in how far does the 'unforced force' of the better argument prevail and can dialogic formats contribute to an enlightened understanding of political issues?

Dealing with these questions the present paper presents the results of a comparative study (Daum, Fraefel, Haeussler 2007) on dialogic formats in traditional and new electronic media in the Suisse Romandie and the German speaking part of Switzerland on two national referenda held in 2005 on the signing of the bilateral agreements between Switzerland and the EU.

1. PUBLIC REASON AND THE MEDIA

Over the past years deliberative democracy has moved to the forefront of political theory (cf. Habermas 1992, 1999; Cohen 1989, Rawls 1993; Guttman & Thompson 1996, 2004; Dryzek 1998, 2000; Bohman 1996; Manin 1987; Benhabib 1996).¹ As Dryzek states, "[t]he essence of democracy itself is now widely taken to be deliberation, as opposed to voting, interest aggregation, constitutional rights, or even self-government" (Dryzek 2000: 1). Both, the original contributions in the field as well as the numerous and enduring debates posed by competing accounts have generated a substantial body of work.² Remarkably, however, until now the abundance and intensity of the theoretical discourse has been met by only scarce and fragmentary empirical research. What is more, the few existing empirical approaches to deliberative democracy have neglected the media almost entirely – despite their importance in constituting the public sphere and their position as intermediaries in the political process.

Jürgen Habermas has so far provided the most comprehensive and influential account which also informs the theoretical perspective of this paper. Habermas understands his conception as a

¹ Dryzek speaks of a 'deliberative turn' in political theory which he situates at the beginning of the 1990s (cf. Dryzek 2000).

² For some of the challenges to deliberative democracy see e.g. Mouffe 2000; Sanders 1997; Rorty 1988; Fraser 1992.

contribution to the discourse theory of democracy, which reconstructs the basic communicative structures that constitute political processes as democratic and deliberative (cf. Habermas 1992).³ His deliberative model ties in with his earlier work on communicative action but also with his accounts of the structural transformation of the public sphere (cf. Habermas 1990, 1976).⁴ And Habermas' account provides an elaborate and complex model of the political public sphere – and the media –, which offers an ideal point of departure for an empirical investigation.

Habermas' approach is mainly characterised by his focus on the formal aspects of the deliberative procedure. While he does not deny that substantial outcomes might have an effect on the political process itself, it is important that the results remain open to revision. At the heart of the model lies thus the design of a procedure which allows us to determine to what extent a political process and/or a resulting decision is justified by the (rational) discourse on which it is based.⁵ The deliberative procedure itself can be characterised as an *open-ended, argumentative, public discourse* where everyone is *free to participate*, where the participants can *freely raise topics* and/or question validity claims⁶, ultimately aiming at achieving a *rationally motivated consensus*.⁷

Habermas is well aware that the so designed deliberative procedure constitutes an ideal that cannot be realised in the 'real world'. However, at the same time he holds that it is an ideal towards which the participants of the political process (counterfactually) orient themselves, thus constituting the communicative core structure of the political process on which all other forms of opinion formation and decision making are modelled. At its heart (deliberative) democracy is thus based on discourse ethical principles and hence on the universal pragmatic premises of communication and the very foundations of social interaction.⁸

³ Habermas situates his model between liberalism and republicanism (cf. Habermas 1999).

⁴ With regard to social evolution this concerns above all Habermas' point that societies not only learn in cognitive-technical areas but also on a moral-practical terms.

⁵ While for instance Niklas Luhmann argues from a systems theoretical perspective that because of the unavoidable complexity of modern societies legitimacy is to be understood merely as the correct application of decision taking procedures – independent of the outcome and supported by the 'generalised trust' in the system –, Habermas defends a much richer and ambitious discourse ethical notion of communicative rationality and democratic participation (cf. Luhmann 1969). Although according to Habermas discourses are like 'islands in the sea of everyday practice' (Habermas 1999: 323), communicative rationality enjoys the presumption of empirical relevance.

⁶ According to Habermas' theory of communicative action the basic unit of speech is the validity claim which a speaker raises through the utterance of a speech act. While validity claims may generally designate different things, states, or processes they can be grouped into three main categories: constative speech acts address objective facts, regulative speech acts normative issues, and expressive speech acts have the speaker's subjective world as their topic. This is also crucial for Habermas' notion of meaning which postulates that to know what an utterance means is to understand the validity claim it raises (cf. Habermas 1981).

⁷ Cohen rightly points out that deliberation in political institutions has to be conducted in terms that are in accordance with the basic inherent constraint to take a decision, that is deliberation cannot go on indefinitely. This is why he concedes that majority decisions may temporarily end a debate and serve as a legitimate – i.e. discursively justified – indicator for a common reasonable praxis until the minority has convinced the majority of its view (cf. Cohen 1989; Habermas 1992).

⁸ Cf. Peters (1994) for the relation between normative theories and their empirical application. Here the normative background does not serve as a measure in order to criticise reality for its shortcomings, but rather as a heuristic device with which we can uncover and reconstruct the underlying communicative structures and the interplay between their single components.

2. THE MEDIA AND OPINION FORMATION

In order to analyse the interplay between political actors, the media and their audience we concentrate on dialogic formats such as TV or radio debates and interviews. In contrast to rather monologic formats such as documentaries or news programmes, discussions contrast different and often opposing positions and arguments directly, which in turn allows the audience to access and evaluate a broad spectrum of (more or less) considered opinions in the concentrated form of a single programme.⁹ Given citizens' general constraints of time on the one hand and the complexity of political issues on the other, dialogic formats can provide heuristic shortcuts in the process of opinion formation. For political actors in turn, dialogic formats are platforms on which they can articulate their position and contrast them in direct relation to those of their opponents. In recent years these dialogic programmes hosted by traditional electronic media, i.e. radio and television, have seen the advent of new forms of technology which allow and indeed favour the exchange of opinions between those who have so far been largely absent and played only a passive or at best marginal role in political discussions in the media – the members of civil society. Internet fora, blogs, etc. have been hailed somewhat over-optimistically as real world realisation of the 'ideal speech situation' exactly because – theoretically – they allow the unhindered flow of communication between those who are affected by politics. Research into the discursive practices of those who participate in online discussions has thus become a major topic in recent years.¹⁰ Yet the findings so far are ambivalent: While some online platforms do seem to be able to foster an ongoing debate approximating deliberative standards, other political discussions on the web are either irrelevant, chaotic or/and outright hostile. And apart from such specific assessments most studies agree that the internet is no cure against political apathy (cf. Dahlberg 2001a, 2001b, 2001c; Waldstein 2005; Marr 2005). Given the heterogenous findings, it will be interesting to examine how online debates are conducted in a country such as Switzerland, which already has strongly institutionalised participatory rights, and to contrast these new forms of opinion exchange and formation with discussion forms in traditional types of media. Do the 'new' media really provide 'new' forms of debate?

3. MEASURING DELIBERATIVE QUALITY

3.1 Sample

The study presented here examines the political discussions in dialogic formats in television, radio and web fora about two national referenda held in 2005 on the signing of the bilateral agreements between Switzerland and the EU. Media coverage usually starts around six weeks before the ballot and our data was collected for the according period of time in the different programmes. For television and radio the sample included the main channels of Switzerland's public broadcasting station SRG of the German speaking part of Switzerland and the Suisse Romandie. Additionally, in both language regions the sample included five to six privately operated TV and radio stations with the broadest transmission range.¹¹ Dialogic formats in TV and radio included political discussion programmes, short debates as

⁹ From the producers' perspective, dialogic formats are a rather inexpensive way of providing timely programs on political and social issues that are informative and do not require a prescribed dramaturgy (cf. Clayman & Heritage 2002).

¹⁰ See e.g. Janssen & Kies 2004, Min 2007 for a discussion of the different approaches.

¹¹ Since the number of dialogic formats was relatively small, particularly for the private radio stations, we extended the sample to include additional programmes of other radio stations.

well as interview sequences within rather monologic formats. In total the sample included 57 dialogic broadcasts (33 debates and 24 interviews) which equal a total running time of 24.3 hours.¹²

The gathering of data proved to be more difficult than expected as contrary to our assumptions dialogic formats do not rank very high in the programmes of many television and radio stations. But we encountered similar problems with regard to web fora: At the time of data collection, discussion fora operated by TV or radio stations were almost nonexistent; neither did political or administrative institutions operate any online platforms.¹³ In total the sample included 24 web fora, 17 of which were provided by google, whereas the other seven were run by Swiss newspaper or media companies. The fora differed significantly in their basic structure: A minimum of 56 posts was contrasted by the maximum of 1'010, the range of participants was between 13 (minimum) and 235 (maximum), who debated the issues between 7 to up to 69 days.

3.2. Discourse quality in dialogic formats

The complexity of the deliberative model has for long impeded empirical investigations and only the last years have seen first attempts at overcoming the difficulties posed by translating philosophical theory into appropriate empirical research designs. Yet although the various studies have taken different approaches at operationalising the theoretical concepts, there is largely agreement on those elements of discourse which are central for the analysis. Although our paper is in line with these studies we have introduced analytical categories in order to be able to distinguish between the media as providers of a discursive platform and as discourse participants themselves. Altogether, we can summarise the deliberative model in six dimensions or analytical questions:

1. What kinds of validity claims are raised/criticised?
2. To what extent do the participants refer to each other in the debate?
3. To what extent and how do the participants justify and/or criticise the validity claims they raise?
4. How inclusive is the discourse in terms of the represented actors and arguments?
5. How respectful is the interaction?
6. How are the participants positioned towards each other by the media?

In order to analyse the discourse quality of different dialogic formats we chose a quantitative content analytical approach (cf. Früh 2004, Merten 1995).¹⁴ We thus follow a small branch of research on deliberation that has evolved in the last years and applies content analytical models in order to measure the discourse quality of e.g. parliamentary debates or web fora (cf. Steenbergen et al. 2003; Dahlberg 2001a, b, c; Kies & Jansen 2005). While quantitative content analysis has the obvious disadvantage that we lose the particularities characteristic of the individual contexts, it allows us to broadly sketch out and compare the basic communicative structure, above all between radio and television on one hand and the internet on the other.

¹²The programmes or programme sequences extend from a few minutes up to over one and a half hour of transmission time.

¹³In analogy to the sampling of the radio and television programmes, the web fora were collected according to their ties to major media outlets. Thus web fora affiliated to television and radio stations or to newspapers were counted as closer to the economic market than the different usenet groups on 'google.beta'.

¹⁴Depending on the research question, different analytical entities were examined: the broadcasts and fora on the whole, the turns taken or posts contributed by the participants or the single validity claims expressed within those contributions (cf. Habermas 1981).

The discourse quality appears as a multidimensional construct, based on the six analytical categories outlined above, which were further specified as follows:

(1) *Inclusion*: (a) *Actors*. Who participates in the discussion? Where are they located on an axis running from the periphery of civil society to the political administrative centre? (b) *Arguments/topics*: What topics and arguments are uttered in the discussion?

(2) *Ideal role-taking*: What discursive roles do the participants adopt – are they equally participating as speakers and hearers? Do TV and radio hosts moderate the discussion so as to counteract the dominance of a single person or of a single position? Are participants in online fora able to self-regulate their discussion?

(3) *Reciprocity*: Do the participants relate to one another? Do they relate to the person or the argument uttered?

(4) *Exchange and critique of validity claims*: What kind of validity claims shape the discourse – do participants mainly discuss facts, normative questions or their subjective views and emotions? Are the different arguments tested?

(5) *Reflexivity/justification*: How rational is the discourse? Do participants argue their points, i.e. do they justify their validity claims or do they make assertions?

(6) *Respect*: Communicative respect is a precondition for any constructive exchange of views and opinions. To what extent is the interaction (dis-)respectful? Are attacks aimed at the argument or the person behind it?

4. COMPARING 'OLD' AND 'NEW': POLITICAL DISCUSSIONS IN RADIO/TELEVISION AND ON THE WEB

Before presenting the findings in more detail it is useful to point out some of the main structural differences between dialogic formats in radio/television and on the web as they have far-reaching implications for the analysis and the interpretation of the results.

In contrast to web fora, inclusiveness in television and radio extends only to a small number of persons, selected by the producers of the programmes. Members of civil society may occasionally take part in these discussions, although they mostly are reduced to form part of the audience. Yet also deliberation in web fora is not entirely without restrictions: even though access to the internet is rapidly spreading in industrialized countries – in 2008 68% of the Swiss population aged 14+ used the internet several times a week (cf. BAKOM 2007) – technological barriers still apply. Political interest and the willingness to discuss political topics further restrict the number of those who actively engage in online debates.¹⁵

On the level of interaction further constraints must be taken into consideration. The dialogic formats of radio and television are restricted with regard to time. Web fora on the other hand approximate the

¹⁵ Apart from those who participate actively, 'lurkers' seem to form the majority of those involved in online debates. In an analysis of mailing scientific lists Stegbauer & Rausch (2001) found that lurkers always account for the majority of participants. In the mailing lists examined, the percentage of lurkers ranged from 56% to 81%. The probability that participants who have been lurking for a long time take over an active role later is relatively low. However, to be a lurker in one forum does not mean to be lurker in another forum.

deliberative ideal of a discussion which has a mutually shared consensus as its end point: in principle, participants can contribute to the discussion as often and long as they like. Web fora usually are closed by forum managers only when participation clearly declines. Second, users in web fora select themselves the point, content and length of their contribution and to which other statement it connects. Additionally, participants in online discussions are at any time free to invite others to reply to their statements. In traditional media in contrast it is the moderator who guides the discussion and allocates participants the right to take the floor.

4.1. The spectrum of participants and their positions

In political discussions on the radio and in television examined the actors come from a broad spectrum: politicians take part as well as representatives of political organisations and pressure groups, experts, journalists and members of civil society, bringing different views to the debate and presenting the audience with a broad argumentative repertoire. The political discussions on the web in turn take place almost entirely between members from civil society (99.7%). Traditional media thus seem to be more inclusive at first sight. However, this positive assessment must be put into perspective, particularly when looking in more detail at the extent to which participants from different interest groups can in fact contribute to the discussion, i.e. raise a validity claim. In television and on the radio actors from the political administrative centre or organisations close to it dominate the discussion as speakers while representatives of civil society are mostly reduced to the role of listeners. ‘Ordinary people’ are only rarely given the floor and if so, their speaking time is highly restricted.¹⁶ In this way citizens can hardly bring in their perspective, rather they have the job of occasionally asking questions and acting as cue givers for the institutionalised actors. In this respect web fora complement the political debates on radio and television since in online discussions those who are otherwise underrepresented can establish themselves as (more or less) equals.

Since our data is drawn from dialogic formats on national referenda, the question arises whether there are observable differences with regard to the inclusiveness of pro and contra positions, and in particular whether online discussions can compensate for possible imbalances of representation on radio and television.¹⁷ In fact our study shows that in the traditional media supporters of the referenda were slightly more represented than opponents (53.5% vs. 46.5%). The reason for this could be that in the case of the two referenda most of the political administrative centre was in favour of adopting the referenda, leading to an automatic overrepresentation of proponents.¹⁸ On the web, those actors who explicitly advocated a position the proponents were even more strongly represented (53.6%) than the opponents (46.4%).

A more detailed analysis along differing positions reveals more general characteristics of the discourse. In the traditional media as well as in the web fora the discourse is mainly sustained by the exchange of participants with opposing views, which usually means that the participants have already come to adopt a specific position and formed a considered opinion – the probability that actors change their opinions in the course of the discussion must therefore be taken as rather low. However, the

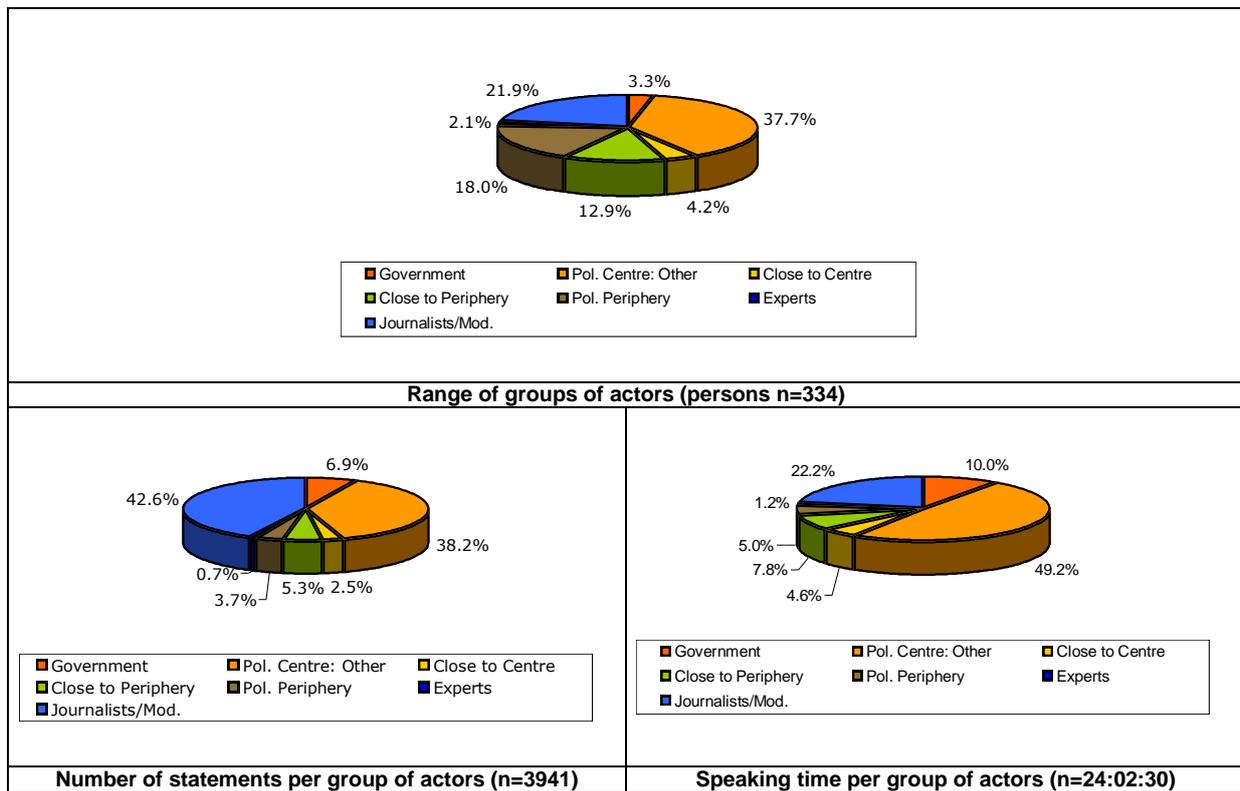
¹⁶Participation in both media is further unbalanced with regard to gender. In the fora examined, women were only occasionally taking part in the discussions. Among the 380 users whose sex could be assumed on the basis of their username (57.4%), only 3.7% were women. Even though women are also underrepresented in the traditional media – of totally 334 participants only 55 were women (16.5%) – their voice here is at least stronger.

¹⁷In his study, Wenzler (2003) came to the conclusion that online discussions could counteract the unbalanced representation of positions on radio and television.

¹⁸Most of the parties forming the government supported the referenda as well as many economic interest groups with close ties to the political centre, and even the Swiss Federation of Trade Unions was on the pro side.

proportion of actors whose voting intention cannot be derived from their statements is significantly higher in online discussions (41.1%) than in the dialogic formats on radio and television (7.5%). 27,9% of all posts could not be allocated a participant whose voting position was clear while this was only the case for 4% of all statements in the traditional media (moderation not counted). With regard to discourse quality this result implies two possible conclusions: The ‘unforced force’ of the better argument plays a more important role in contexts where at least some of the participants have not yet a definite opinion on an issue. And these contexts promote a discourse in which arguments and their plausibility are more important than the degrading of opposing positions. Indeed, some of our empirical indicators point in this direction: Participants in online discussions for instance more often criticise statements by actors who share the same position than is the case in traditional media.¹⁹ This kind of deliberation clearly aims at testing the plausibility of the argumentation – independent of the advocated position. The same holds true for an exchange of opinions between participants whose position is not known.

Table 1: Range of actors, number of statements and speaking time by actor groups for traditional media



Of additional interest is how often the single participants contribute to the discussion as this might reveal whether access to the discussion is equally granted to all participants. In both, TV and radio as well in online fora, some participants are more dominant than others so that the discussion is to some extent asymmetric. Obviously, on television and the radio it is the moderator who holds the floor for most of the time relative to the other participants, contributing many brief statements that primarily are aimed at guiding the discussion. But also representatives of the political centre, above all the members of the Government, have a greater share in the discussion than the other actors. Not only do they contribute more statements to the debate, on average they also hold the floor for a longer period

¹⁹However, the overall percentage of such validity claims is rather low (web fora: advocators criticising own position: 2.8%; opponents criticising own position: 1.5% – TV/radio: advocators 0.9%; opponents 0.9%).

of time, which allows them to elaborate their argumentation in more detail. Structurally, this kind of dominance is mirrored on the web, although here it is not institutionalised actors but members of civil society who contribute more and longer posts than others.

Table 2: Number of posts / statements per actor

Statements uttered / posted by an actor	Number of participants (web fora)	Relative number of participants (web fora)	Number of participants (radio/TV)	Relative number of participants (radio/TV)
1	361	54.5%	57	17.1%
2	86	13.0%	36	10.8%
3-4	88	13.3%	41	12.3%
5-9	81	12.2%	75	22.5%
10-29	37	5.6%	98	29.34%
30-49	7	1.1%	16	4.8%
50-70	1	0.2%	7	2.1%
> 70	1	0.2%	4	1.2%
Total	662	100%	334	100%

A crucial difference between traditional and new media is that in the case of the latter a significant number of users contribute to the discussion only once. Constituting more than half of all participants in web fora, the number of so-called one-posters is very high and exceeds the number of participants on TV and radio who make one single statement. Disregarding for the moment call-in programmes on radio and television, we can assume that all of those who are present in dialogic formats take on (at least partly) a role as listeners. This cannot be taken for granted in the case of web fora: We cannot assess whether the one-posters primarily act as lurkers, i.e. as passive participants who mainly read the posts of others, or whether they quit after having placed their statement. This raises the question whether from a participants' perspective the term discussion in the sense of a continuing exchange of arguments and a changing of roles (speaker/hearer) can be equally applied to old and new media.

4.2. Web of interaction

In traditional media moderators occupy a central role in giving speakers the right to hold the floor, thus in 55.8% of the cases speakers join in the discussion after having been invited by the moderator. But participants also self select in 41.8% of all cases, where they have neither been invited by the moderator nor by other participants.²⁰ By contrast this is the standard form of coming into a discussion on the internet, and it is without the potential struggle to keep the floor sometimes seen on radio and television discussion programmes. With regard to the media's deliberative potential, turns in which participants invite others to put forward their view are of special interest as on the one hand this further promotes the nature of a debate as a true exchange of positions, and on the other presents arguments in a more detailed way. Moreover, in online debates we can take this as a sign of the degree of self-management of the discussion.

In fact, online users' statements are solicited by other participants three times more often (8% of all statements) than is the case in traditional media (2.5%, moderation not counted). This finding gains even more weight when taking into consideration that from the point of view of the prevailing discursive norms, online debaters cannot be assumed to react to others' requests given the high rate of

²⁰Mostly, however, these are not blunt interruptions of others turns, as those who take the floor come in at what conversation analysts have termed a 'transition relevance place' (cf. Hutchby & Wooffitt 1998).

one-posters. In face-to-face debates this is fundamentally different as moral obligation to answer a question is significantly stronger (cf. Clayman 2001).²¹ Still, in both media the percentage of participants who actively push the exchange of opinions is relatively low. From this perspective, users in online discussions cannot be said to fully compensate the lack of an institutionalised moderator.

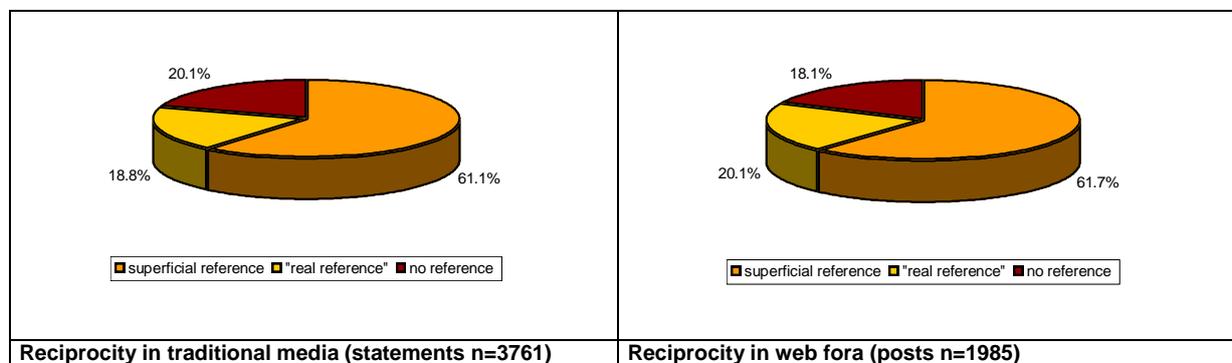
The overall discursive structure in the two types of media can be characterised as follows: Participants on radio and television mainly sustain a question-and-answer structure. They confront others with their views without seeking an exchange which would allow them to elaborate on specific aspects. The same holds true for online discussions, here as well users only rarely invite others to discuss a point in greater detail. In both media, interaction conforms mainly to a platform on which the participants proclaim their opinion on an issue.

4.3. How participants relate to one another

The finding outlined above is further substantiated when examining to what extent participants relate to arguments by others on the level of content. Regardless whether participants are invited to contribute to the discussion by others or act on their own initiative – it is open to them to take up others arguments, to criticize them, to further justify them. A discussion can reach a certain kind of deliberative quality only when those involved in the debate reflect on and respond to others' arguments. On the surface, in almost all statements – be it in the traditional or the new media – a communicative or thematic reference is made (79.9% for verbal statements, 81.9% for posts), which establishes connectivity and contributes to the discourse's continuity. In about a fifth of all statements, no reference to the previous discussion is made at all. This is often the case when new topics are introduced – on the internet by the users themselves, on radio and TV mostly by moderators – or, when the moderator introduces new participants.

On the level of content, the percentage of argumentative references, i.e. reference to the content of what is said/posted, to other debaters is relatively low: For the traditional media this is the case in 18.8% of all statements, for the web fora the rate is 20.1%. Thus, a 'real' exchange of ideas is not what takes place most of the time.

Table 3: Quality of references to other participants



This leads us to two conclusions: First, although the moderator occupies a central role in radio and television discussion programmes, this does not shape discourse in a way which would grant that differing positions are not only presented, but also scrutinised in more detail. Second – and contrary to our assumptions –, the fact that communication in online fora is written instead of verbal does not

²¹For the implicit acceptance and perpetuation of prevailing discourse norms in face-to-face interaction see Goffman's notion of 'face' (Goffman 1967).

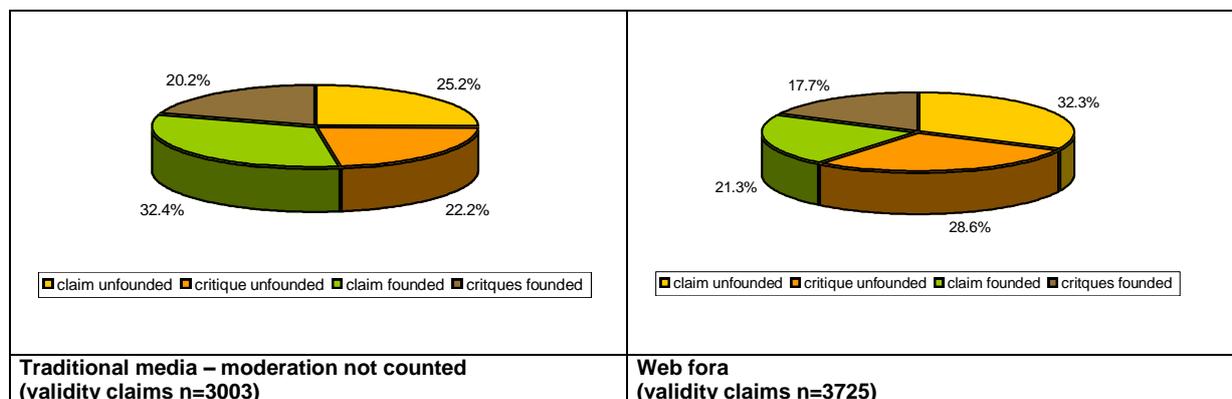
seem to have a positive influence on the discourse quality: in principle, participants in online discussions can take as much time as they like in order to reflect on others' posts and reply to them. In fact however, language usage and a lack of reciprocity rather indicates that users formulate their contributions spontaneously, using a language similar to that uttered in radio and television debates. Whereas participants on radio and television programmes are restricted to some extent by the formal characteristics of the programmes, this is not the case in online fora, where the debaters do not make full use of the discursive potential offered by the technology. The low degree of reciprocity in online discussions confirms the finding of a discourse that lacks continuity. If we look at who online participants refer to we find that the flow of posts between users is highly unbalanced: Disregarding the quality of references (superficial or content), many posts are not referred to at all by others, while other statements lead to an intensified discussion. We can thus speak of a many-to-one-flow, while in the traditional media a balanced assertion/objection structure figures more prominently – and more continuously, due at least in part to the role of the moderator. The average number of references to a single online debater is three times lower than in traditional media. In both, old and new media, however, public communication can only partly be considered to be a communication between the speakers.

4.4. Testing of arguments

On the level of content, the question of how critical the validity claims are dealt with is another indicator characterising the discursive culture and quality of the different types of media. Critique of others' arguments which is justified argumentatively can be regarded as an expression of a reflexive examination of other opinions. This positive effect on discourse quality only applies, however, if reasoned critique is not marginalised by statements that inhibit a constructive exchange of opinions. This is the case when attacks on the integrity of other participants dominate a discussion about the plausibility of arguments.

While the comparison between the two media was almost even regarding the degree of reciprocity, the results shift in favour of the traditional media when examining the levels of justification. Overall, participants in both dialogic formats present themselves as being similarly critical.²²

Table 4: Foundation of validity claims



²²This is the case if we disregard the statements of the moderator on radio and television programmes.

The participants on TV and radio not only justify their own validity claims more often than the participants in web fora (32.4% vs. 21.3%), they also offer reasons when criticising others' validity claims more often (20.2% vs. 17.7%). In this respect discourse on radio and television is more reasoned and more argumentative than its counterpart on the internet: more than half of the validity claims in online discussions are not justified, which to some extent undermines their role as input givers for the individual's formation of a considered opinion. We have to bear in mind, however, that these rather low scores for the internet are also the result of the fact that the interaction is self-managed, i.e. certain participants sometimes take on the role as moderator.

4.5. Respectful interaction

On this dimension as well, when comparing traditional media and web fora, results show a higher discursive quality for the dialogic formats on television and radio.²³ In approximately every sixth of all validity claims put forward in the online discussion we counted disrespectful utterances (16.2%) as opposed to only 5,8% for the traditional media. Structural particularities account for the sometimes disrespectful interaction on the internet: most of the users in web fora do not reveal their identity and in contrast to the participants on radio and television the participants of online discussions act as purely private persons and thus on their own behalf. In contrast, the representatives of the Government, pressure groups, etc. are actors who act on behalf of an institution and thus have to take into account the public image associated with it.

Apart from this, outright disrespectful behaviour in traditional media can take on other, more subtle forms, when e.g. interrupting other's turns: in the dialogic formats examined, in almost 50% of the time, speakers either aim at taking the floor without invitation or succeed in doing so.

4.6. Differing arguments – spectrum of topics

The discourse quality of web fora is also undermined by the fact that much of the interaction is not focussed on the main political topic of the debate at all – 13.5% of all validity claims were off-topic.²⁴ And these distractions hinder the exchange of views on the issue under debate as they weaken even further the already fragile continuity of the discourse. By contrast, discussions in the traditional media do not suffer from this problem – here only 1% of all validity claims are off-topic.²⁵

In both types of media the on-topic parts of the discussions focussed mainly on an exchange of constative utterances/posts, normative statements on the other hand were hardly ever uttered. In contrast, we expected that statements on the expressive level of the subjective world would be more salient in online discussions than in the traditional media since members of civil society act as private persons and might therefore bring their own experiences into the discussion. We can indeed see that expressive validity claims are more central to the online discourse (22.6% vs. 16.6% of all validity claims) yet the extent to which validity claims are justified on the basis of personal background and experience is similar in both media (web: 7.1%, TV/radio: 7.9%). And online discussions revolve around persons around three times as often as is the case on TV and radio, including, however, abusive remarks and ad hominem arguments.

²³For a discussion of politeness in online discussions see Papacharissi (2004) who argues that a heated discussion may be interpreted as a democratic merit.

²⁴For the categories outlined above off-topic statements were not taken into account since they are simply irrelevant to political opinion and will formation.

²⁵This might be the result of the (latent) effect the moderator has on the debate, and due also due to the debating routine of most of the institutionalised actors.

With regard to the discussed topics, however, web fora display a broader range. In the dialogic formats on TV and radio actors primarily discuss the main lines of argumentation as presented in the Government's voting booklet. Relevant topics that go beyond this catalogue are discussed approximately thrice as much in web fora than on TV and radio (15.5% vs. 4.5% for the first ballot and 10.2% vs. 6.2% for the second). Within the same range of topics, debaters on TV/radio and the internet stress similar aspects. Online discussions here complement the narrow focus of television and radio programmes by introducing and discussion additional topics.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As the content analysis shows, radio, television, and web formats are very heterogeneous with regard to their deliberative structure: While they score high on some dimensions, they achieve rather low results on others. With regard to the range of actors that are represented for instance, radio and TV programs are more inclusive than online platforms as different groups of actors gain access to the discourse. Yet there is a tendency to include more institutionalised, collective actors. Online discussions by contrast are almost exclusively sustained by representatives from civil society, and therefore give those a voice who are neglected by traditional media. As a consequence web fora conform more closely than radio or television to the ideal of a discourse where everyone is free to participate.

The rather pessimistic general assessment of online discussions as outlined by Dahlberg (2001b) and others is partly confirmed by our analysis. When comparing online political discussions with other dialogic formats, however, we find that some of the negative points about web fora are shared by the political discussions on radio and TV. Both types of media for instance score low on reciprocity, participants mainly relate to one another on a superficial (i.e. formal) communicative level without taking into account the content of other contributions. Thus, in both types of debates participants do not really promote an exchange, but largely focus on presenting and advertising their own positions. Another common characteristic is communicative disrespect, typical of both types of media, although with qualitative differences. On the whole, debaters on the Internet display a more abusive form of interaction, thereby partly undermining the very preconditions of a reasonable discussion. However, interaction on TV and radio is far from being respectful, since participants regularly try to take the floor during others' contributions. Domination of the discourse by certain individuals and groups is also characteristic for both types of media.

But the analysis of the discourse quality of dialogic formats also reveals some deficiencies that pertain more to web fora than to radio or TV: Online debates are not only fragmented with regard to their reciprocity, but also with regard to their reflexivity. Posts in online discussions are less justified argumentatively than contributions on television and radio debates, and on a more basic level very often lack thematic relevance. Debates on television and radio on the whole conform more or less to the standards of a structured discussion, in contrast to the patchwork of opinions and snippets of conversations found on the Internet. Yet, the analysis has also uncovered some characteristics of the online discourse that hint at a deliberative potential which is not apparent in the dialogic formats of radio and TV, or at least not to the same extent: The mere number of (active) participants is clearly higher on online platforms than on radio or TV, and a broader range of opinions are discussed. And even though presenting one's own position is one of the main characteristics of both types of media, a

discussion of arguments beyond the mere contestation of positions is more likely to occur in online discussions.²⁶

Hence, it would be a precipitate conclusion to dismiss online debates as unimportant or even disruptive for public deliberation (cf. Habermas 2006) as they allow citizens to articulate themselves and test the reflexivity of their positions (cf. Price et al. 2002). Moreover, in contrast to traditional electronic media online fora are not necessarily situated at the input side of the political process but can serve as a feedback loop for public discussions – if their ‘voice’ receives enough uptake in other deliberative settings (Goodin & Dryzek 2006). And in contrast to traditional media online fora tend to be situated more closely towards civil society.

As far as the situation in Switzerland is concerned web-based public deliberation on political issues to date still seems to be hardly developed. Whether this is related to the fact that in democracies with strong direct democratic rights politics is already more deeply embedded in civil society than in other countries must remain an open question. Yet it seems that efforts promoting electronic forms of political participation are greeted with much less enthusiasm than elsewhere.

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²⁶A more detailed analysis of the discourse quality of different political discussion platforms on the Internet (Daum, Fraefel, Haeussler 2007) reveals differences that warrant further research: there is evidence that the technical functionalities available to the participants and the role of web managers has a positive influence on the discourse quality of online discussions. A more detailed analysis of political online platforms that shows a higher discourse quality (e.g. Dahlberg 2001b) might serve as point of departure to examine how online dialogue can be structured in order to increase the deliberative potential.

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