

OD 2010- Introductory panel « Why Online Deliberation? »  
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### THE QUESTION OF INCLUSION IN ONLINE DELIBERATION

Let me first start by saying how honored and grateful I am to participate in this introductory panel “Why online deliberation?” chaired by my friend Scott Wright, here in Leeds for the OD 2010 International Conference.

Stephen kindly asked me to speak today about whether OD can reach groups and communities that are traditionally unheard in deliberative arrangements. It is indeed a central question as one of the core elements of online deliberation is the hope that deliberative setups give citizens both a tribunal and a space for interaction that would be difficult to find in real world arenas of public debate. As experts in OD, you all know that this view has been challenged a number of times, that empirical experiments have shown strong limitations to a non elitist participation to online deliberative procedures, and that recent research (like Scott’s one on moderation for example) has pointed out that online communication is both technically and semiotically constrained in ways similar to the offline world.

The literature on inclusion and participation has established that political participation follows a pattern of unequivocal inequality, based on income, education, gender and civic skills. See for example Verba’s work on participation in the United States : “As long as inequalities in education and income persist, as long as Americans have unequal opportunities to develop and practice civic skills, and as long as citizens increasingly donate money rather than time to politics, the voices heard through the medium of citizen participation will be loud, clear and far from equal” (“The big Tilt : Participating inequality in America”, Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman and Henry E. Brady, *The American prospect*, 8(32), 1997, 19-24). The central significance of the sociopolitical context to political participation has also been stressed by Bourdieu who insisted on the notion of symbolic domination: signs of domination are located in any aspects of political communication, like the architecture of a place, the type of clothes worn, the rhetoric and argumentative expression, and so on and so forth, in such a way that our democracies have even incorporated this domination in their mediation with the population.

The deliberative turn, on the other hand, has tried to minimize those factors by building a normative concept of deliberation which rests on a few procedural rules in order to guarantee the right conditions of expression of validity claims in a democratic context. In this perspective, growing attention has been given to procedural forms as not only do they correspond to a normative conception of democracy but also as they support the possibility of emergence of validity claims. This focus on procedure might have for a while underestimated the power of sociopolitical factors that were still accurate to explain patterns of participation in deliberative arrangements.

The literature on online deliberation, along with the feminist critique, has contributed to de-naturalize procedural and normative approach to deliberation. They showed how sociopolitical culture and conceptions of representation and citizenship were deeply embedded in procedures, *de facto* excluding a wide range of the population which didn’t belong. What is specific to recent OD academic research is that it reconsiders deliberative procedures as a technology-based mediation between citizens and political authority, not seeking a normative perfection but an inclusive and good quality deliberation.

Therefore it is this conceptual link between the technological dimension of deliberative procedures and the sociopolitical factors of inclusion that I will try to develop here, contributing modestly to a theory of OD which would not rely on habermassian premises. In this perspective, I will propose an explanatory diagram of inclusion factors in OD.

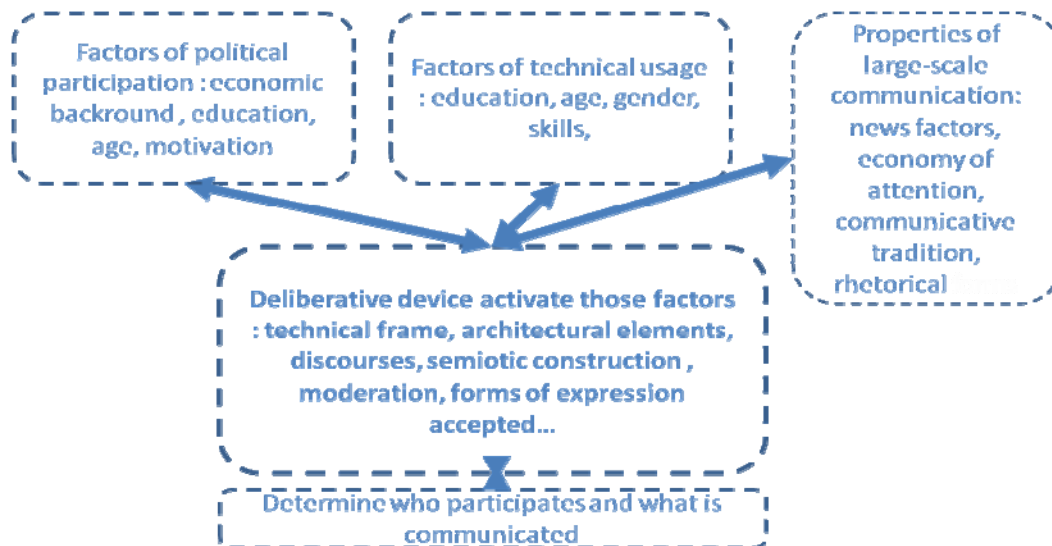
But first, I propose to share with you a view of inclusion, anchored on a set of technological factors within a sociopolitical context that shapes the ways in which citizens will decide to opt in a deliberative process. In doing so, I consider that:

- First, deliberative processes can be viewed as a Foucauldian device i.e. it is a network of heterogeneous components like 'discourses, institutions, architectural organizations, laws and regulations, scientific statements and philosophical and normative assumptions'. In short, they embody power relations and normative proposals in a technical apparatus which instrumentalize democracy in order to provoke discussions and to draw forth normative agreements. In this perspective, OD is not reduced to a mere technical artifact but includes its sociopolitical context: the latter is both normatively and technically embodied in the "machine" which is part of a network of actants and constitutes a new mediation between citizens and elected officials and political authorities.
- Second, nevertheless, I do not suggest that citizens are totally instrumentalized through devices, as Agamben would say for example. As Deleuze's reading of Foucault suggests, a process of subjectivation intervenes within the context of setups: its lines of force are not insurmountable and actors can find ways of getting round its normative assumptions and technical design. The expression of creativity which results from the subjectivation process allows people to invent new forms and formats of expression within the setup, and therefore to turn away from predictable uses which were embodied within the setup by its designers. I here plead for a conciliation between a sociology of uses (Latour and Woolgar to name but a few academics) and a rather instrumentalized approach of Foucauldian critical theory on setups.
- Therefore, and it is my third point, inclusion has to be envisioned as the result of a balance between a complex set of factors that are inscribed within the setup and actor's (in)ability to manipulate them in order to voice their concerns.

That is to say that there is no easy answer to the question that whether or not OD facilitates the inclusion of traditionally unheard individuals or communities because precisely, we have to weigh up, for every arrangement we analyze, factors of inclusion and exclusion, and the possibilities for citizens to adapt to the setup.

There are impediments to inclusive deliberation and factors of openness, and the academic literature has described them in length, but I would like to replace them in the global theoretical frame I have just presented. The structure of participation and the representation of viewpoints in deliberation cannot be considered as explained by external factors with no links with the setup but as activated by it. Therefore, citizens might fit in the process either because it has been framed according to their normative preferences, technical abilities and/or socio-political background or because they feel they can use it to their advantage by manipulating the setup (and this is a symptom of a subjectivation process). Exclusion then arises when none of the above situations occur: the setup has been narrowly framed and/or cannot be appropriated by the users in a creative fashion. Experiments have been conducted which aimed at giving the citizens the opportunity to design themselves part of the process online. Codes of participations which flourish in France for example usually insist on the citizens' and stakeholders' hand on the procedures, whether it is online or offline.

2° having said that, what are the factors of inclusion outlined by the research? Some are specific to online deliberation, some are not, but we can summarize them in the following diagram:



We can identify four groups of factors, interacting with one another:

- Factors of political participation: these include economic and cultural resources people hold (income, gender, education, age and ethnicity). Studies have shown that men and women are unequal in the deliberative processes, even if online we have interesting results showing that some forms of narrative participation through blogs can foster women's participation online. Participation is still strongly linked, on and offline, to the level of diploma; age and ownership also have been stressed as potential factors by authors like Mulberger in particular.
- Factors of technical usage are of particular interest: a wide literature has focused on the technical and rhetorical abilities of citizens needed to participate off and online: while rational argument and expert rhetoric are usually mobilized offline, other forms of expression can be hosted online through forums and blogs.
  - o The use of images and films favor narrative and short expression which are less time consuming for participants, and more profoundly nurture other rhetorical forms than the rational argumentative ones which are very discriminatory.
  - o Nevertheless, technical abilities are not equally distributed in the population. As Hargittai has shown, people who are more skilled in using websites will have lower barriers to participate online than people for whom it takes a long time to find their way around.
  - o Technical characteristics of online discussion can also be a handicap for institutions and firms to participate online as their hierarchical organization might not be compatible with quick personal intervention online. Companies and firms official positions usually need to be validated through complex internal circuits to match their communication strict line. Many of them still haven't find a solution to be actively part of a deliberative discussion online, they often prefer to make open statements offline in the name of the organization and rarely allow individuals to react to comments online.
- As a form of large-scale communication, deliberation is also linked with cultural mass communication habits: some themes and public problems are rarely evoked in traditional media. Media studies research has shown that alternative media (it has been cartoons, or jazz, and now mashups and other online expressive creation) have often convey new topics and public concerns in the public agenda. Online deliberation can constitute an appropriate arena to develop them because of the anonymity it provides (deliberation on personal topics

like intra-marital violence for example), and because they are mobilized by communities who usually don't take the floor in traditional institutions.

- The fourth group of factors describes the techno-semiotic framing of the online device: it can redraw the participatory lines if it encourages certain types of the population to opt in, especially if an offline arena appeals more to the 'usual suspects'. We have for example seen in comparative hybrid (off and online) experiments that citizens and members of associations carefully chose their arena according to the freedom of expression they have.

## **Conclusion**

My conclusion will be that online deliberation is not naturally more inclusive than offline one. But its deployment has stimulated researches to precisely analyze what are the conditions for an inclusive deliberation, considering the intertwining between technical and sociopolitical factors. Following Simone Chambers, my personal opinion is that theory on deliberation should focus on those factors rather than promoting mini public deliberation which somewhat abandons the normative goal of inclusion in public deliberation. And Inclusion is at the core of our democracies.

# The process of inclusion in online deliberation

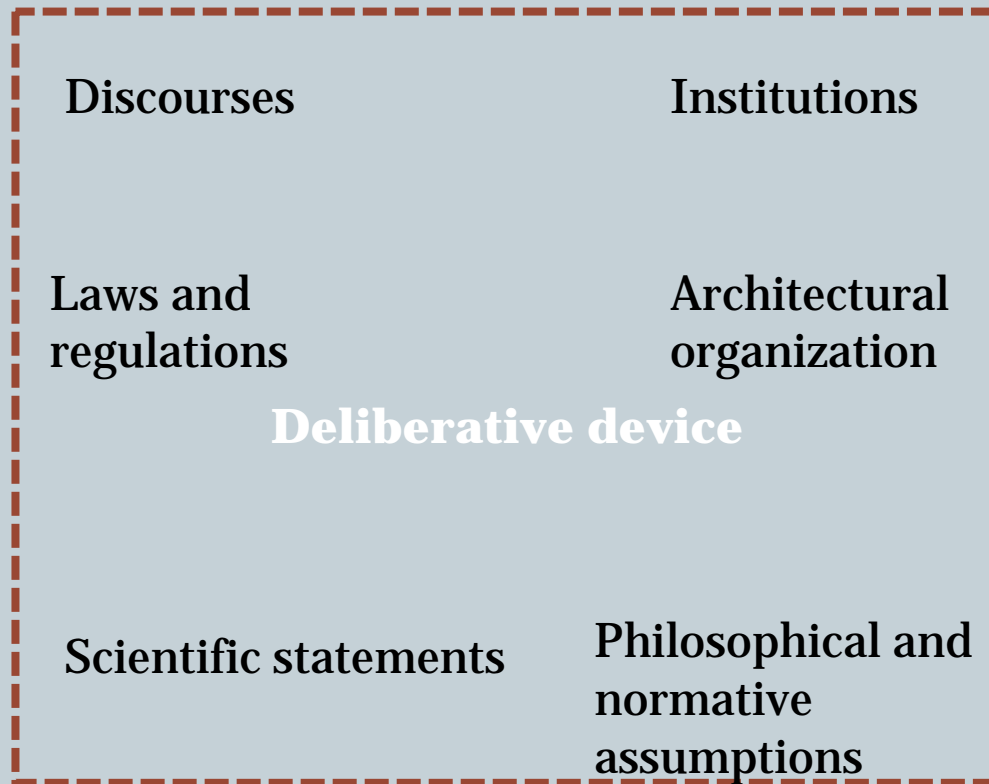


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# Inclusion and deliberative devices

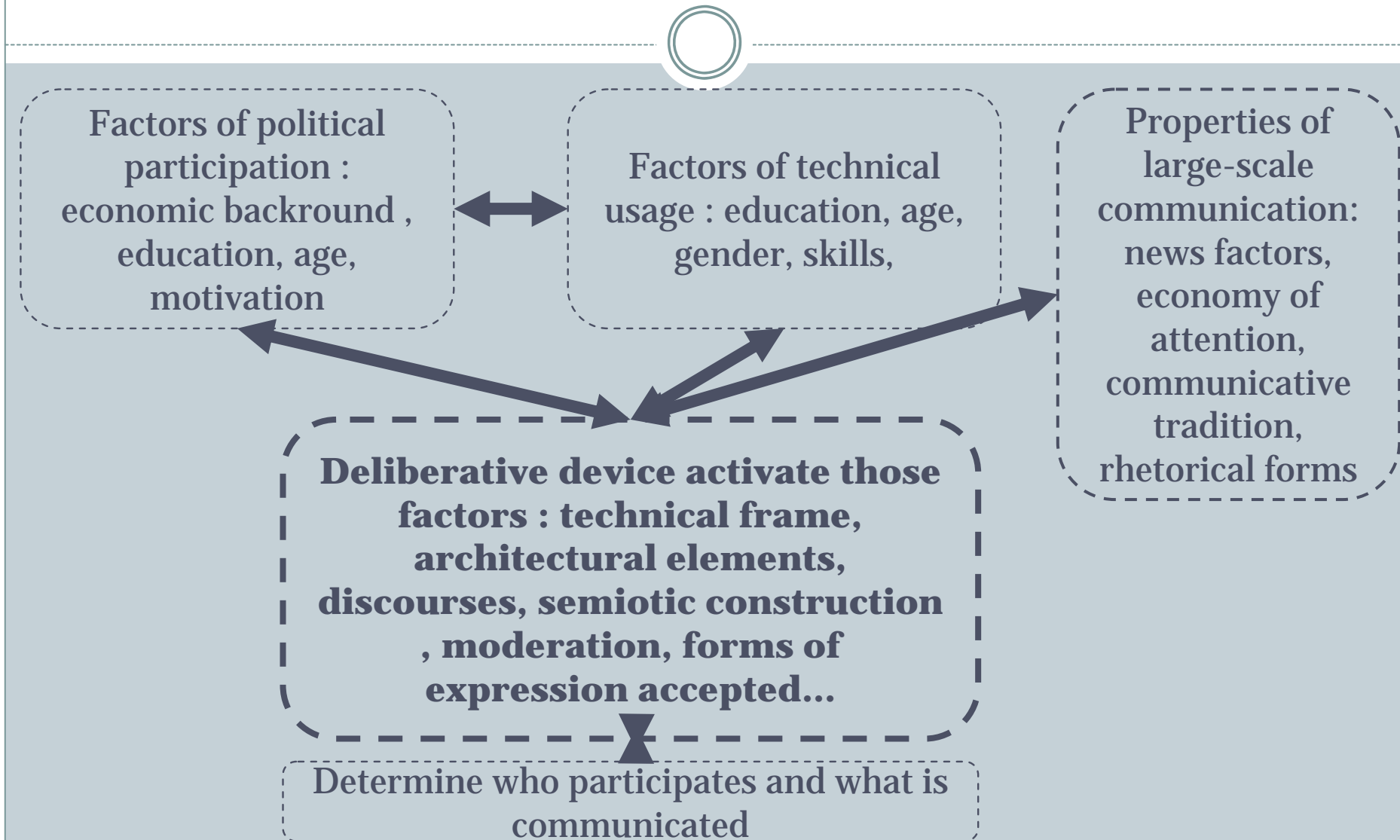


**Constraints**

**Subjectivation  
Creativity**



# Inclusion : a global frame



Adapted from Albrecht, 2006