

Deliberative systems theory and citizens' use of online media: testing a critical theory of democracy on a high achiever

1. Introduction

Deliberative systems theory has recently attracted substantial scholarly attention. The theory, developed to assess real world democracies 'at the large scale' (Mansbridge et al., 2012), introduces a new phase in the evolution of theories of deliberative democracy, and is initially promising. Based on some of the central moral intuitions that underlie democratic commitments, deliberative systems theory seems to formulate normative demands on a democratic rule of government suitable for societies characterized by a 'reasonable pluralism' of values (Rawls, 1993; Author 1, 2017). At the same time, this theory seemingly fares better than many competing theories in striking a balance between ideal requirements and feasibility. Normative political theories are frequently accused of setting up unfeasible ideals; unrealizable for any actually existing political community, even under the most favourable conditions (List and Valentini, 2018). However, deliberative systems theory is neither obviously idealized, nor so 'concessive' (Estlund, 2008), that it fails to provide a corrective to the actual institutions and practices of democratic politics. The theory seems thus to be a good candidate for a critical theory of democracy that could guide us in pinpointing democratic problems based on sound and non-utopian assessment standards.

The systems turn needs, however, to be scrutinized more closely. Based on recent debates on 'feasibility' in normative political theory (Gilbert and Lawford-Smith, 2012), and with a focus on the normative role of the public sphere and how to assess citizens' online media use from a democratic perspective, this paper contributes to a critique and refinement of

deliberative systems theory. Online media use is a democratic practice with increasing salience, and it is a fair expectation to any normative democratic theory that it also helps us to conceptualize and assess political behaviour in digital domains. The paper reviews recent contributions on the role of the public sphere and online democracy from a deliberative systems perspective, and identifies four limitations: i) an incomplete account of the public sphere's epistemic function; ii) too rough interpretations of participatory levels; iii) shortcomings in the understanding of online media, and iv) a context-insensitive approach to policy reform. Addressing these weaknesses, the paper argues for a revised version of deliberative systems theory, and highlights how this revised version is not only more in line with our intuitions of good democratic practice, but also makes the theory more feasible.

However, to be fully convincing, revisions of a theory intended for the evaluation of real-world cases should also matter in practice: It should make a difference for assessments of concrete political behavior and organization whether deliberative systems theory are applied with or without our amendments.. In addition, such concrete assessments can make us aware of over- or under-idealized assessment standards. This paper concentrates on testing for over-idealization, relying on online media use in Norway as a test case.

The analysis of the Norwegian case shows not only that the revisions have practical significance, but also that they contribute to make deliberative systems theory and the implications of this theory more compatible with existing democracy research and assessments of democratic quality. We take such compatibility to be a *prima facie* indicator of appropriate feasibility. Specifically, applying our revised criteria, we find the online sphere in Norway to have a range of democratic credentials, in accordance with what we would expect in a country ranked as number one on international democracy rankings. Still, central

challenges remain, such as significant social stratifications in media use and how to ensure online media's informational function, reminding us that even 'best practice' may depart substantively from our ideals, even in their feasible version. This calls for democratic reforms that work with existing path-dependencies, and we exemplify what this can imply in the Norwegian setting.

The next part of the paper briefly presents the debate on feasibility in normative political theory, and introduces the theory of deliberative systems as a promising candidate of a theory that is at the same time critical and feasible. Still, this theory has some blindspots in its approach to the role of the public sphere, and to online democratic practice in particular. The third part of the paper elaborates on the four identified shortcomings, and spells out the corresponding elements of a revised systems approach. Against this background, in the fourth section we review studies of the use of online media in Norway, focusing especially on the role of social media (for a definition, see Author 2, 2016). We show that our theoretical revisions make a difference compared to a not-amended version, and that our revised version is likely to have made deliberative systems theory more relevant and applicable. A final section concludes and highlights some limitations of our endeavour.

2. Between idealism and realism: the deliberative systems approach

Normative political theory has a mixed reputation among social scientists. Many would agree that this branch of theorizing offers a stringent conceptualization of ideal requirements. Yet, empirically oriented scholars often complain that normative theories disregard feasibility constraints and lack a proper understanding of the prerequisites for institution building, consolidation, and political reform (for example Rothstein, 1998). Accordingly, when social

scientists assess institutional developments and policies, they often sidestep discussions in normative political theory, and instead consult alternative approaches to evaluation and policy recommendation, such as ‘evidence-based policy-making’ (see Cairney, 2016 for an overview), ‘best practice’ approaches, or incremental theories of ‘appropriate’ reform (see Olsen, 2017 for a recent example). The resulting analyses and proposals may have many merits, but a general problem is that normative standards often remain implicit or unaccounted for.

We suggest that attempts to develop and improve on normative political theory as ‘non-ideal theory’ – a theory that is relevant and applicable under real world conditions – are more promising (Swift and White, 2008).¹ Recently, different efforts have been made under the heading of democratic or political ‘realism’ (Galston, 2010: 385). With a lineage from Hobbes, and with Bernhard Williams (2005) as a central reference point, realism in this incarnation is explicitly anti-utopian insofar as its interest is in developing an ‘empirically informed critique of social and political phenomena’ (Prinz and Rossi, 2017: 348), starting from historically and politically sensitive judgments when building normative concepts (Hall, 2017: 296-7). Furthermore, it has as its aim to prevent ‘the worst’, ‘the first duty of political leaders’ (Galston, 2010: 394). The approach has, however, been criticized, in part for withdrawing from a normative engagement altogether, in part for its limited and unclear account of critical standards (Maynard and Worsnip, 2018).

Other proposals for normative, but non-ideal theory seem to avoid these charges (Sen, 2009; Waldron, 2016). Still, for our purposes, the theory of deliberative systems stands out as particularly promising with its focus on democratic institutions and practices. Arguably,

¹ Ideal theory is based on explicitly unrealistic assumptions. The point of such theory is to discuss the moral defensibility of ideals irrespective of their feasibility (Cohen, 2008; Valentini, 2012).

providing a ‘normative and empirical account of the democratic process as a whole’ has been the point for deliberative democratic theory all along (Mansbridge et al., 2012: 24). However, in their influential manifesto for a systemic approach to deliberative democracy, Mansbridge et al. (2012: 25f) describe three phases in the development of deliberative democracy theory. A first phase was concerned with elaborating and justifying the ideal of deliberation. The second phase introduced empirical studies (see Carpini et al., 2004 for an overview). Political scientists searched for traces of deliberation in political institutions, and tested deliberative potentials in experimental settings (e.g. Fishkin and Luskin, 2005). Attention was also given to the role of citizens in the public sphere. In the early 2000s, political communication researchers turned to online discussion forums. Their studies tended to focus on the deliberative qualities of such discussions (e.g. Graham and Witschge, 2003; Albrecht, 2006), and on how other forms of communication besides deliberation matter (e.g. Black, 2009). Communication scholars also studied forum designs, considering features that could heighten deliberative performance (e.g. Wright and Street, 2007). Later, interest turned to social media – overwhelmingly to Facebook (Stoycheff et al., 2017), and Twitter (e.g. Author 2, 2013). The idea was to study the extent to which citizens actively participated in public deliberation through new means of mediated communication. Interesting findings aside, an overall limitation of empirical studies of the second phase was its focus on deliberation in more or less isolated instances, whereas insights into the effects for the overall performance of democracy remained underexplored. Moreover, to the extent that findings from these studies informed policy recommendations, they were bound to be limited to a concern for maximizing the deliberative potential of each case.

The systemic approach, then, represents a third phase, aiming to re-connect the field to questions of large-scale societies. As a whole, a deliberative system is defined to

‘[encompass] a talk-based approach to political conflict and problem-solving – through arguing, demonstrating, expressing, and persuading’ (Mansbridge et al., 2012: 4-5). Such systems should furthermore fulfil three functions: the ethical function of promoting ‘mutual respect among citizens’, the participatory function of promoting ‘an inclusive process of collective choice’, and the epistemic function of ensuring ‘reasonably sound decisions’ (Mansbridge et al., 2012: 11-12). Moreover, all functions are considered equally decisive for system-level legitimacy, but individual processes or institutions need not fulfill all three functions equally well. The idea is rather to develop an adequate division of labour where deficits in one part of the system can be compensated for in other parts of the system. Conflicts can, however, occur between the deliberative system’s different functions, not least between the participatory and the epistemic functions (e.g. Chambers, 2017): In concrete cases there can be tensions between including all affected and ensuring decision making maximally based on ‘facts and logic’ (Christiano, 2012).

The systems turn has inspired a range of studies, including of practices in the public sphere. Several studies look at civil society groups, analysing how social change organizations use different communication strategies when interacting with the government (Dodge, 2009), or discussing phenomena along the boundaries of the deliberative system such as civil disobedience and other types of disruptive protests (Smith, 2016). The role of non-deliberative modes of communication, such as toxic and vilifying narratives, has also received attention (e.g. Boswell, 2015). Case studies have scrutinized how public discourse on specific policy issues link together with formal parts of the system through processes of meaning or information transmittance from the citizens to the core (e.g. Engelken-Jorge, 2017; Boswell et al., 2016). Further attention has also been given to the role of ‘mini publics’ as intermediaries between the general citizenry and formalized policy-making (e.g. Bohman, 2012; Lafont,

2015). Theoretically, the emphasis has been on how the public sphere best contributes to a deliberative system when left as a sphere of ‘unrestricted communication’ with substantial independence from the spaces of decision making, broad participatory credentials, and freed from undue influences from elite and expert biases and framing power (Erman, 2016: 78; Landwehr, 2015; Chambers, 2017).

3. Citizens’ role in the online public sphere: improving on a promising approach

There can be no doubt that the third phase of scholarship on deliberative democracy generally improves on some of the shortcomings of the previous phases. It continues the valuable turn to empirical studies of the second phase and the focus on developing deliberative democracy as non-ideal theory. As promised, scholarship of the third phase also concentrates more committedly on implications for democracies at ‘the large scale’, instead of approaching cases of deliberative democratic practice in isolation from its system surroundings. Valuable empirical insights have been provided, and theoretical interrogations have explicated and discussed with respect to normative assumptions and implications that were underspecified and under-problematized in the initial formulation of the systems perspective.

Still, when we look at the third phase’s analyses of the public sphere, and of online media use in particular, some shortcomings remain. First, the theoretical elaborations of the public sphere tend to have a certain participatory bias especially vis-à-vis epistemic dimensions. Contributors have rightly directed our attention to how technocratic orientations and elites’ framing power can compromise the democratic qualities of public sphere deliberations (Landwehr, 2015; Erman, 2016). However, surprisingly, given phase one’s emphasis on the twin participatory *and* epistemic justification of deliberative democracy (for a classical formulation, see Habermas, 1996), and how empirical studies of deliberation in different

public spheres and civil society contexts include a range of epistemic parameters (for overviews, see Bächtiger et al, 2018: 273-460), theoretical accounts have tended to underplay the decisive epistemic function of the public sphere to ensure sufficiently ‘truth-sensitive’ political processes, and the need for a cognitive division of labour, and the active role of experts,² not only in government or as government advisors (Christiano, 2012), but also in the public sphere. Arguably, this underplaying goes against the spirit of the Habermasian public sphere model, where problems are sluiced from citizens at the periphery of society towards the decision-making entities in the centre, and where experts play a key role in the process from the initial problem-identification among citizens, towards a justifiable political issue (Chambers, 2017: 274).

Secondly, not only is there a bias in favour of the participatory function, relative to the epistemic function, several of the third phase’s analyses of public sphere deliberations fail to consider how participatory features of the public sphere must be seen in the context of participatory features elsewhere in the deliberative system. Here, the mainstream appears to contradict one of the key tenets of deliberative systems theory. Surely, from a systems perspective, scores on particular indicators, measuring for example the inclusiveness and representativeness of online deliberations, must take into account the actual participatory levels on other arenas (in civil society, governance structures, the mass media etc.), and the fact that participatory patterns vary immensely between countries and regions. Measures should moreover be sensitive to the specificities of institutional features. This requires an ‘emic approach’ that considers ‘culture and system specific indicators’ (for example Wessler,

² Experts are persons who have substantially more knowledge than other people within a specific domain (see Goldman, 2011; and Author 1, 2018; 2019 on the ‘lay-expert problem’).

2008, 9),³ and that evaluates scores on media participation indicators, for example low online participation, while looking at participation in other channels. However, despite an impressive state of the art in studies of deliberative democracy (Bächtiger et al., 2018), the overall impression is still that such ‘emic’ concerns and a consistent systemic point of view that considers participation in one sub-system in relation to participation in other sub-systems, are underdeveloped, or play a secondary role, for example in studies of online deliberations (see the overview in Strandberg and Grönlund, 2018).

A further problem is how the participatory function of the public sphere is to connect to mass-mediated public communication. While the identification of a problem might come from an individual in the periphery, the sluicing towards the centre, as well as the input from experts, tends in existing contributions to be interpreted as something to be handled primarily if not exclusively by mediated communication aimed at the public at large (see even Chambers, 2017). Certainly, in order to amass a legitimate public opinion in a large, complex society, such mass mediation is needed. Yet, at the same time, such a model risks downplaying the political communication among citizens, in private and public settings, where they interpret, discuss, argue over, ridicule or praise the mediated messages they are exposed to. If we are to properly assess the role of citizens in a public sphere according to a Habermasian sluice-model, we should also acknowledge the participatory practices that are interwoven in people’s everyday lives, be it simply informal political talk, or different kinds of civil society involvement (Verba and Nie, 1972). Ignoring the different civic engagements that often happen in parallel with the uptake of mass-mediated public communication can easily lead us to exaggerate the role of elites and experts in the formation of opinions and will.

³ ‘Does ‘public deliberation’ mean the same thing in all countries (...), and can it therefore be measured with the same indicators (etic approach)? Or does public deliberation (...) take different forms in the countries considered so that culture- and system-sensitive indicators must be developed (emic approach)?’ (Wessler, 2008, 9).

Thirdly, as for the mediated public communication, including the use of online media, the third phase has inadequately acknowledged how such media is used for multiple purposes, and prematurely ranked ‘speaking’ above ‘listening’, and participation above information-seeking. As we have argued, empirical research, in earlier as well as later work on deliberative democracy, has aptly highlighted the varied shapes of actors’ communication. Yet, there is still an over-emphasis on the speakers – those partaking in more or less deliberative communication. Facing the digital age, researchers have tended to spend energy on conceptualizing the new ‘active’ modes of using media – the making, participating, playing, remixing, and producing. The result has been creative terms such as ‘producer’ (Bruns, 2008), while those using online media to read and watch are still labelled ‘lurkers’ (e.g. Baker, 2018). However, we would argue that listening is an equally important part of deliberation. Not only is communication meaningless without a recipient; any process towards better understanding and building of opinions requires listening. Listening is also needed for the ‘internal-reflective’ aspects of deliberation, the ‘weighing of reasons for and against a course of action [...] within the head of each individual’ (Goodin, 2000: 81).). Importantly, the value of listening depends on the quality of the information – whether it is freely accessible and based on sound arguments and facts.

To get at a more nuanced view of how citizens partake in the formation of collective agendas and public opinion, we should thus distinguish between those communicating a message and those listening, or acting as an audience. In practice, and especially in online media, these two aspects can take many forms and be somewhat challenging to discern, but we can generally distinguish between political expression or participation, on the one hand, and informational use, on the other. The former includes comments to political actors’ websites, expressions of

support (such as ‘liking’ in social media), or the sharing of political information. The latter contains news consumption, and exposure to other forms of more or less explicitly political information.

Moreover, even early studies found connections between information seeking online and political participation (e.g. Shah et al., 2005). More recent studies have focused on social media, and meta-analyses conclude that there is a positive and significant relationship between information use of social media and political participation (Skoric et al., 2016; Boulianne 2009). Boulianne (2015) studied Canadian youth and found consumption of news in social and other online media to increase civic awareness, which in turn affected political participation, including voting. A study using British survey data from 2001, 2005 and 2010 found similar patterns, highlighting that informational use of online media ‘is positively and consistently associated with political talk for those lower in political interest’ (Bimber et al., 2014). Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2014) analysed U.S. national panel data to look for effects of social media news consumption for political participation. Their findings concerning offline participation (including attending rallies, talking to public official in person and attending town hall meetings) indicate direct effects from such social media news use. Recent studies have also sought to focus on a particular aspect of informational use of social media, namely the accidental kind (sometimes referred to as ‘news will find me’ perceptions as opposed to citizens actively seeking out news). A survey-based study from Germany, Italy and the UK found accidental exposure to political information in social media to be positively correlated to political participation online, and that this correlation is stronger among the less interested (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016).⁴ Such studies tell us that a nuanced concept of the role of the citizen in the public sphere needs to pay attention to the informational uses of online media.

⁴ Heiss and Matthes (2019) do not find such equalizing effects of incidental exposure, but do find a general positive main effect of such exposure to political information on what they call low-effort digital participation.

Fourthly, even if the systems approach clearly encourages scholarship to formulate reform initiatives and policy recommendations to improve on democratic credentials, prescriptions tend to be general and disregard existing institutional prerequisites and path-dependencies in the system to be reformed. The literature on online deliberation specifically, have tended to focus on general features of online participants' 'motivations' in combination with rather abstract inputs to deliberation-inducing 'design of deliberative settings' (Stransberg and Grönlund, 2018: 366-370 , see also Dryzek et al., 2019). This underplays how not only participants' 'motivations' but also the proper 'design' of deliberative bodies and procedures will often vary across polities and over time. Studies that work comparatively, and that interestingly rely on institutional and contextual variables when accounting for participatory patterns online, have so far engaged less with implications of such comparisons for policy recommendations (for example Engelken-Jorge, 2018). Arguably, this state of affairs can be connected to a more long-standing lack of attention to the role of feasibility constraints in discussions of viable policies. Theorists who have given this issue proper systematic treatment, emphasize, however, the importance of taking into account the availability and stability of different 'institutional schemes', and propose reforms based on the comparative merits of these schemes, rather than introducing blueprints of design solutions (Gilabert and Lawford-Smith, 2012; see also Rothstein, 1998; Lindvall, 2017). The systems turn in deliberative democracy has yet to fully integrate such insights.

From these four critiques, we can derive a revised version of deliberative systems theory that

We should not ignore the associated potentially problematic aspects of citizens' reliance on social media for political information. For instance, there seems to be a negative connection between specific modes of engaging with news in social media – sometimes referred to as 'news will find me' perceptions as opposed to citizens actively seeking out news – and political knowledge and interest (Gil de Zúñiga & Diehl, 2019). Others find connections between using social media for news and the spreading of misinformation (Valenzuela et al., 2019).

- i) assesses practices in the public sphere, focusing on both participatory and epistemic credentials, and recognizing the role of experts in ensuring public deliberations with a sensible informational basis;
- ii) considers citizens' online participation in light of the actual and varying participatory levels on significant arenas elsewhere in the system, and as embedded in everyday life and connected to offline civic engagements;
- iii) acknowledges how online media is used for multiple purposes, and recognizes the significance of 'listening' and information seeking for deliberative quality and political participation; and
- iv) approaches policy reform in a way that takes into account pre-existing institutional schemes.

Arguably, this revised version of the theory is more in line with our intuitions of good democratic practice as a practice that does not disregard 'facts and logic', and that requires of citizens that they 'listen' and seek information and not only 'speak' their opinions.

Highlighting the epistemic demands on a well-functioning public sphere, our amendments also seem to bring the systems turn more in touch with acute challenges connected to 'fake news' and 'post-truth politics' (see also Dahlgren, 2018). Furthermore, the revised version is more consistent with the systems impetus, and with features of the theory of deliberative democracy in its original formulation. As such, it remains a normative democratic theory that is critical and pluralism-sensitive, but, importantly, increased consistency in this case also contributes to increased feasibility. That practices of the public sphere are interwoven, and participation in different political sub-system interrelated, are among the basic contentions of the deliberative democracy approach, accentuated by the systems turn, and contentions like these were what made this approach attractive from a feasibility perspective in the first place.

Finally, our theory version is better attuned with research findings about what facilitates democratic practice, including how online information seeking induces political participation, and our knowledge of effective policy reform. This increases the real-world relevance of our amended theory, and brings it more in line with feasibility considerations.

4. Online media use in Norway: testing practical significance and feasibility

However, revisions of a theory intended for scrutiny of real world cases should also have practical significance. In what follows, we show that our amendments make a difference for the assessment of a concrete case. We argue moreover that the changes in assessments that our theoretical revisions result in, are sound. Generally, a normative theory is strengthened if it turns out that assessments of a particular case derived from the theory are compatible with our broader set of moral intuitions,⁵ but concrete assessments can also make us aware of over- or under-idealized assessment standards. Here we concentrate on the latter, and on testing for feasibility or over-idealization. In this endeavor, we take it that assessments derived from a valid normative, but non-ideal democratic theory that deviates largely and in ways that are hard to account for from available qualified empirical evaluations of democratic quality and from general knowledge of conditions that likely facilitate democratization, is *prima facie* over-idealized.

Our testing case is online media use in Norway, a case well suited for our purpose. Norway is a rich country with a long popular democratic tradition and a comparatively educated electorate, few major social conflicts, and a well-functioning civil service (Knutsen, 2017; Engelstad et al., 2018). It ranks at the top of international human development and gender

⁵ The standard method of testing a normative political theory is to assess the compatibility of their implications with our moral intuitions. Incompatibility should spur a process where theory and intuitions are revised into a “reflective equilibrium” based on “considered judgments” (see List and Valentini, 2018).

equality indexes, corruption levels are low, and levels of social trust relatively high (Rothstein, 2011). As for the Norwegian media system, it is characterized by early development of editorial freedom, active state regulation based on the arm's length principle, and relatively low levels of political parallelism (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). These are all factors generally conducive to democratization and to the development of a relatively well-functioning sphere of mediatized political communication, and unsurprisingly, Norway is a consistently high achiever on international democracy rankings.⁶ This does not imply that the Norwegian political sphere is unlikely to suffer from non-trivial democratic deficits. Still, univocal negative assessments of the quality of Norwegian democracy are assessments that depart largely and in ways that are hard to explain from reasonable expectations, and we assume that theoretical approaches producing such assessments are *prima facie* questionable.

Below we present research findings relevant for assessing the practical significance and feasibility of the revised version of the deliberative systems approach. The presentation is organized around our four points of theoretical critique, and mainly based on our own recent and ongoing studies based on original data. A primary source is a survey conducted among a representative sample of the Norwegian adult population, undertaken in December 2017 (N=2050)⁷. The survey covers use of different media, but has a particular focus on the role of social media (see Hovden, in review; Author 2, forthcoming; Kantar TNS, 2018 for details). The survey provides us with basic descriptive statistics on social media use and attitudes towards the role of online and social media for public debate. When relevant, we also draw on

⁶ Norway is currently number one on both The EUI Democracy Index (see <https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index>) and the Varieties of Democracy Liberal Democracy Index (see https://www.v-dem.net/media/finder_public/3f19/3f19efc9-e25f-4356-b159-b5c0ec894115/v-dem_democracy_report_2018.pdf). It also tops The World Press Freedom Index (see <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>), and is second on the most recent Freedom in the World ranking (see <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2019>).

⁷ The survey was conducted as part of the research project [name removed] headed by [Author].

other recent empirical work on social media use and developments in different spheres of Norwegian democracy.

Epistemic merits and the informational basis of online deliberations

A significant finding in research on online media use in Norway so far is that people's interest in actively participating in the production of content (e.g. in "user-generated journalism") is limited, as is the interest in exploiting the interactive potential of these platforms for public communication (e.g. Karlson et al., 2018). This is a consistent finding in survey-based studies, which typically report that less than one in ten use social media to post links to news about society or politics (on Facebook use in Norway, see Enjolras et al., 2013: 49). Results from our survey show that two thirds report never having written longer posts on society or politics, nor started discussion threads or debates in social media (Author 2, forthcoming). Almost two thirds of Norwegians report social media use during an average day, but they predominantly think of social media as tools for private communication and the forging of social bonds (Author 2, forthcoming). This resonates with other studies from Scandinavian countries, which have repeatedly found that those who get attention in online political debates are predominately those with a pre-established offline positions (Author 2, 2014). In our survey, while 80% of Norwegians reported use of Facebook in 2017, only 14% said they used Twitter (far less than Instagram and even Snapchat), and while Facebook users tend to be evenly distributed across income categories, educational levels, and geography, Twitter users are heavily skewed towards high income, high educational levels, and urban areas.

Qualitative analyses of those who actively participate in political debate on social media in Norway substantiates the impression of a small group of relatively resourceful and knowledgeable actors who make use of the new opportunities provided by social media to

participate in continued public discussion. Vatnøy (2017) interviewed representatives from media businesses, politics and academia in Norway, and found that informants see themselves as part of ‘socially and discursively distinguishable networked publics’, as a ‘tweetocracy’ and a ‘Facebook-public’ (Vatnøy, 2017, i). Moreover, whereas Twitter is rife with humour and irony, highlighting social and cultural distinctions, Facebook is regarded as allowing for the engagement in ‘deeper and more consistent reasoning and debate’ (Vatnøy, 2017: 182). Both features of social media discourse could alienate outsiders. At the same time, findings indicate that people are content with a certain division of labour in the public sphere. Combining a survey and focus groups, Karlsson et al. (2018: 591) not only found that ‘journalistic gate-keeping is still to a large extent appreciated by the audience’, but also that users became more skeptical of news as user participation increased.

The deliberative systems approach in whatever version stresses the importance of citizens’ participation and broad inclusion. From this perspective, the above findings of the limited overall utilization of social media platforms’ participatory and interactional potential, and of the significant social stratification of online media use, are both worrisome. That users report to have less trust in news as user participation increase may be interpreted as an obstacle to the development of a truly democratic political culture.

According to our revised version of the systems approach, the epistemic credentials of the organization and interactions in the online sphere must be considered as well. In particular, we have argued for the role of expert users in providing a knowledge basis for more informed online deliberations. From this perspective, the substantive presence of knowledgeable actors online is promising at the outset, and the fact that users recognize the benefits of a certain cognitive division of labour in the public sphere is not a problem, but rather an asset. Online

and social media may even come to improve the epistemic quality of expert discourse, to the extent that these media allow for rapid exchanges, easy references to sources, and the nurturing of social bonds and respect between participants. At the same time, we should not forget the potential epistemic costs of expert dominance in public communication, given what we know of the varied set of biases and mistakes that may haunt expert discourse, and how ‘lay expertise’ can valuably challenge and correct taken-for-granted knowledge (Author 1, 2018, see also Trezn, 2016, on the limitations of “elite narratives”).

Interpreting online participation in context

According to our revised criteria, evaluations of participatory levels online must also take into account participatory trends on significant arenas elsewhere in the system. Here, research findings are diverse. There are, on the one hand, signs of decreased participation and limited inclusion in the offline spheres of Norwegian politics. One example is how national civil society organizations lose members, and are becoming more professionalized and lobby-oriented (Alm Andreassen, 2016). Another example is the shrinking pool of active members in political parties (Allern et al., 2015), while academics, policy-professionals and consultants increasingly are involved in policy advice (Author 1, 2017). On the other hand, there are participatory trends that head in the opposite direction. There is, for example, an increase in the number of ad-hoc pressure groups and organizations that work on local and regional levels, as well as experimentation with novel forms of cooperation between the public sector and civil society (Alm Andreassen, 2016), including new participatory mechanisms for the inclusion of lay perspectives in policy-making (Author 1, forthcoming). Other examples are the high voter turnouts, and the central role still played by unions and other interest organizations in corporatist bargaining (Engelstad et al., 2018).

Overall, and once more, our amended version of the deliberative systems approach enables us to trace significant participatory challenges in this relatively well-functioning regime. Yet, in contrast to the non-amended version, our revised approach put these challenges in the context of a more mixed set of participatory trends.

Taking into account how online participation must be interpreted in light of offline contexts, civic engagements and everyday concerns, bring additional nuances to our assessments. Two lines of study are illustrative in this regard. First, the offline world still offers opportunities for talking about politics, and earlier studies have found these venues to be more important than social media (e.g. Linnaa Jensen, 2013 on Denmark). Our survey data on activities connected to the latest Norwegian general election illustrate that such face-to-face discussion remains important also in Norway: 33% report discussing the election at work, and 57% have discussed it with friends or family members. By comparison, 12% shared or commented on news about the election or Norwegian politicians in social media, and 7% reported to have written statements in social media about the election (Author 2, forthcoming). However, we do find such activities to be higher among elites, for example, when we find a higher probability for those with higher levels of education to have discussed the election with friends and family (71% among higher educational levels vs 43% among the lowest), or to have discussed the election at work (50% vs 11%).

These survey findings thus remind us of the range of offline arenas for political talk. Here citizens from varied social groups participate considerably and more frequently than they do online. In contrast to the non-amended version of the deliberative systems approach, our revised version prescribes us to consider this when assessing the implications of online participatory patterns. At the same time, the fact that participation in political talk depends on

educational or other resources, on- and offline, is clearly a problem from the perspective of democratic quality, according to both unrevised and revised criteria.

Secondly, our study of Norwegians' uses of social media documents a widespread reluctance to partake in public debate online, not least due to the risk of 'context collapse', i.e. that one's message reaches well beyond its immediate and intended audience in a way that is hard to control. Importantly, this does not necessarily imply turning away from all forums for political discussion online. Recent work (from the Netherlands) shows how messaging applications or services that allow for communication among smaller groups matter for news provision and engagement with public issues (Swart et al., 2018). Such services can on the one hand provide carefully created spaces where smaller communities or interest groups can deliberate. If successful, they can limit some of the problems our respondents report with participation on Twitter and Facebook: the harsh tone, and the lack of room to develop a thought or change opinion. On the other hand, a consistent retreat from open online forums may increase the risk of segmentation of the online public sphere, and contribute to deliberative biases and even polarization (Sunstein, 2018).

Hence, implications of these research findings are not straightforward from the perspective of democratic quality. Yet, the concern of 'context collapse' exemplifies our point regarding how online political activities are embedded in a range of offline norm sets and considerations. The offshoot is once more multi-faceted and balanced assessments.

Listening and informational use

As indicated, social media is widely in use by the Norwegian population. The value given to such media for news provision is moreover quite high across the population. Our 2017 survey

data shows that 66% of respondents agree or partly agree with statements about the usefulness of social media as news providers. However, if we look at the distribution between groups with different educational and income levels, we see variations: 72% of respondents from the lowest educational category agree or partly agree that social media are useful news providers, compared to 56% of the highly educated. Similarly, those with low levels of income tend to agree more often that social media are important providers of news. Widening the scope beyond news confirms the impression: when asked about the practice of ‘following’ persons, sites or groups they think are important for political debate, we find this to be more widespread among those with low income (Author 2, forthcoming).

This seems to indicate – albeit tentatively – that social media is an important site of ‘listening’ and a source of political information, especially for those groups which have been found to participate less as ‘speakers’ in mediated public deliberation. From the perspective of our revised criteria of democratic quality, this is significant and promising, given what we know of information’s role for the quality of citizens’ ‘deliberation within’ and of the relationship between online information seeking and offline political participation. This contrasts with the un-amended version that encourages analyses of social stratification in media use based exclusively on parameters of active participation. Two caveats remain, though: First, as we showed above, the transfer from informational audience modes to participation both on- and offline is skewed towards certain groups (with high educational levels, etc.). Second, for the reliance on social media as news providers to be helpful, the news available and accessed should be of a certain quality.

Reforming available institutional schemes

On the policy side, contributors to the third phase of deliberative democracy theory recommend the establishment of consciously rigged deliberative forums that can feed into ordinary political processes. In the case of Norwegian online democracy, this implies pooling public resources into digital discussion platforms designed to ensure the inclusion of lay knowledge, and equal participation across social groups. Generally, this is a recommendation that our revised approach can also support, on the condition that such platforms are set up with participatory, as well as epistemic credentials in mind. This includes ensuring the presence and active participation of expert deliberators when needed, and moderation that allows for ‘speaking’, but also for ‘listening’ and information seeking.

However, according to our amended approach, feasible recommendations should take into account the robustness and efficiency of pre-existing policies and organizations. In the Norwegian case, institutionalized political processes are already in place, known both to have significant democratic merits and to affect policy- and decision-making substantively. One example is the tripartite bargaining system where the unions, employers and the government negotiate wage schemes and social standards (Engelstad et al., 2018). Another example is the system of temporary advisory commissions, composed of civil society representatives, experts and civil servants, and appointed by the government early in policy-making processes to analyse policy issues and recommend policies (Author 1, 2017). Arguably, in such a context, and from the perspective of making policies that are not only normatively sound, but also effective, there is a case for focusing more on incorporating democratizing online mechanisms in the everyday routines of these relatively well-functioning institutions, than on designing artificial deliberative settings on the outside.

Generally, the quality of online democracy in large-scale societies could be affected by a broad set of policies. Reform of welfare and educational policy may, for example, have larger effects over time on social inequalities in media use than the establishment of deliberative forums, and in a social-democratic welfare regime reforms along these lines work with existing path-dependencies (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Engelstad et al., 2018).

For the development of online democracy specifically, media policy in particular may moreover prove effective. An example is how to increase the informational use of media across social groups, a normative concern our theoretical critique has brought up as decisive. Traditionally, Nordic countries have relied on press support schemes and publicly funded broadcasting services (e.g. Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Syvertsen et al., 2014). Yet, two contemporary trends complicate this approach. First, in a post-broadcasting age, it becomes increasingly easy to avoid independent and trustworthy political information through digital media personalization (e.g. Prior, 2007 on the US; Blekesaune et al., 2012 on Europe). Second, quality political information online, such as that provided by journalism, increasingly costs money for the end user. Research has furthermore shown a tendency that low willingness to pay for news on- and offline is linked to low educational levels (Author 2, 2019 on the Nordic countries; Benson, 2019 on the US). The danger then is that certain groups rely on an information environment where free social media plays a key role – which means algorithmic selections and good conditions for propagandists. Against this background, a recent Norwegian commission report on media policy (NOU 2017:7) proposes to strengthen the chances of exposure to quality political information for those less probable to actively seek it by channeling public support to provide information that remains free for end users. The already existing public service broadcasting policies that support cross-media production of news as well as cultural content are proposed as one way to pursue this aim. Another way

is to strengthen commercial online news providers' incentives to produce free, high quality materials (through direct or indirect measures, such as tax reduction). Once more, this illustrates a mode of developing policies that build on well-known schemes, in this case in Norwegian media regulation, while at the same time revising them in light of new challenges and for the sake of democratic reform.

Critical, yet feasible

Overall then, this section has shown point by point not only how our revisions of deliberative systems theory's approach to the normative role of the public sphere and digital political behaviour makes a difference in practice, but also that this approach in its un-amended version seems to suffer from over-idealization. Without our revisions, the systems theory, as outlined in recent contributions, makes us produce a one-dimensional and 'dark' diagnosis of state of affairs in Norwegian online democracy, at odds with reasonable expectations, and offers a blueprint policy recommendation that is likely to have limited effects. In contrast, our revised theory results in a more multi-faceted and mixed assessment of democratic quality, more in line with expectations to a high-achieving polity, and offers context-sensitive input to policy reforms likely to be more effective.

5. Conclusion

With a focus on the normative role of the public sphere, and how to assess citizens' online media use from a democratic perspective, this paper has scrutinized deliberative systems theory with an emphasis on feasibility considerations. We have argued that recent contributions to the development of this theory i) underplay the epistemic features of the public sphere and the role of expert media users; ii) paradoxically fall short of interpreting participatory levels from a systems perspective; iii) have a limited conception of the role of

social and online media; and iv) take an over-abstract approach to policy reform that is unlikely to be effective. The paper has on the basis of these four theoretical critiques offered a revised version of the deliberative systems theory, and we have argued that this version seems to strike a better balance between ideal requirements and feasibility. This contention, however, needs better grounding. Relying on a concrete case – online democracy in Norway – the paper has shown that our critical points have practical significance, but it also tested for over-idealization with and without our theory revisions. It turns out that the amended version of the deliberative systems approach produces a diagnosis of Norwegian online democracy more in line with sensible expectations to a known high achiever. We take this to *prima facie* indicate feasibility.

Our endeavor has limitations. First, we have taken the deliberative systems approach to be promising, and suggested a way to refine it further. Yet, our paper does not offer a full theoretical assessment of this approach, its pros and cons, and its merits relative to other contributions to normative, non-ideal democratic theory. Second, we have argued that our theoretical amendments make the systems approach more feasible, and that the approach in its un-amended version seems to have built in over-idealized assessment standards. Yet, the question of how to strike a proper balance between ideal requirements and feasibility considerations, need closer theoretical scrutiny and to be considered on the basis of more empirical cases. Third, the provided assessment of Norwegian online democracy is tentative. The analysis of our survey data is at an early stage, and we need more studies of central issues, for example on the epistemic quality of the contributions of expert online users.

Still, we believe our paper contributes to highlighting the promises of the deliberative systems approach as a non-concessive, yet applicable branch of non-ideal normative theorizing.

However, we have also argued that the approach needs non-trivial revisions for it to reach its fuller potential. The provided theoretical critique is particular tailored towards the challenge of assessing online media use, a democratic practice with increasing salience. Our critical points on the need to include both participatory and epistemic criteria, analyze participatory patterns in context, on the role of information seeking and “deliberation within”, etc. have however also relevance for assessments of democratic quality more broadly. Our paper furthermore gives feasibility considerations, an issue often disregarded in discussions of normative political theory, a consistent focus, and offers an example of a case based testing of feasibility, where we systematically utilize the features of a high achiever. Our endeavor on this point, suggests a more general method for feasibility testing that deserves to be tried out more and further developed. Finally, our paper does not intend to offer anything close to a full assessment of Norwegian online democracy, but to provide sufficient information to illustrate our theoretical discussions’ practical significance and substantiate our *prima facie* assessment of feasibility. On the way, we have also indicated issues where our knowledge is scattered; this suggests paths for further research. Generally, we have tried with this paper to make normative political theory and social science research fronts come together. Such cross-disciplinary cooperation is still too scarce, but in the spirit of deliberative systems theory and needed for its further development, testing and application.

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