



Facilitating personal deliberation online: Immediate effects of two ConsiderIt variations



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 1 June 2015

Keywords:

Deliberation
Informed debate
Democracy
Public opinion
Human–computer interaction
Website design

ABSTRACT

A healthy democracy requires cognizant citizens who are willing and able to make informed decisions about political issues. ConsiderIt is a software application aimed at facilitating and encouraging personal deliberation. This article reports on a pretest–posttest experimental study ($N = 36$) into the immediate effects of two possible variations of ConsiderIt: a version with predefined pro and con statements, and one in which users decide for themselves whether statements are pro or con. The participants used ConsiderIt in a controversial case on the position of Greece in the European Union. Data were gathered on changes in standpoint, perceived knowledge, perceived understanding, and general open-mindedness. Irrespective of the variation used, the use of ConsiderIt significantly appeared to affect the users' standpoint as well as their perceived knowledge and understanding of the subject matter. No effects were found on general open-mindedness. Qualitative data, however, showed that it was still hard for the participants to commit themselves to full deliberative behavior. Based on these findings, it seems interesting to implement the usage of this type of software application in educational settings to contribute to a more deliberative society.

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1. Introduction

Democracy needs the political engagement and commitment of citizens to survive and thrive. Many Western democracies are confronted with a steady decline of voter turnout in the past 50 years (Blais & Rubenson, 2013; Niemi, Weisberg, & Kimball, 1993), and low voter turnouts among young people (Niemi & Hanmer, 2010). In Europe, the ongoing financial crisis and its consequences have further challenged the European Union (EU) and its goal to democratically unite the countries on the European continent (De Vries & Edwards, 2009; Downs, 2011; Lubbers & Scheepers, 2010; Serricchio, Tsakatika, & Quaglia, 2013). The rise of populism and radical right-wing parties in several European countries is indicative of a growing polarization and a loss of middle ground in European politics (Schumacher & Rooduijn, 2013).

To counteract such negative trends, politically interested and committed citizens are needed, who are willing and able to engage in healthy democratic discourse. This need relates to the concept of public (or democratic) deliberation (Burkhalter, Gastil, & Kelshaw, 2002; Delli Carpini, Lomax Cook, & Jacobs, 2004). Burkhalter et al.

(2002) define deliberation as “(a) a process that involves a careful weighing of information and views, (b) an egalitarian process with adequate speaking opportunities and attentive listening by participants, and (c) dialogue that bridges differences among participants' diverse way of speaking and knowing” (p. 418). Knobloch, Gastil, Reedy, and Cramer Walsh (2013) further operationalize these three elements of deliberation into specific evaluation criteria. Irrespective of such a phasing, Bohman (2007) stresses the overall importance of diversity in deliberative processes. On the basis of the literature, Delli Carpini et al. (2004) argue that deliberation can indeed have the democratic benefits that are associated with it, and that the Internet may play an important role in promoting deliberation as well as researching deliberation.

The connection between online and offline political activities has been investigated by several researchers, both regarding deliberation and regarding affiliation (Conroy, Feezell, & Guerrero, 2012) and mobilization (Baek, 2015; Warren, Sulaiman, & Jafaar, 2014). The studies on affiliation and mobilization underline the great potential of online media for such purposes. However, the results reported by Conroy et al. (2012) indicate that this use of online media does not necessarily correspond with political deliberation. They did not find a significant relationship between participation in online political groups and political knowledge, which they ascribe to the low quality of the online group discussions.

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With respect to political deliberation, Hoffman, Jones, and Young (2013) investigated how people view online and offline political participation and found that they consider online and offline behaviors as occupying separate spheres of activity. The results suggest that politically efficacious citizens see their online political acts rather as serving a communicative function than as a way of influencing the government. Bae, Kwak, and Campbell (2013) investigated the transition of political discussion from offline to online venues, and found that people who are politically interested are more likely to extend their political discussions to the online channels. In addition, they found that the technological requirements of online venues may be a barrier for older citizens to partake in online political discussions. Kim and Khang (2014) found that political participation on social network sites was an important predictor of offline political participation, and was in turn predicted by resources, recruitment, and psychological engagement. Hyun and Kim (2015) also found that political conversations via social media were a significant predictor for participants' political participation in the offline world. In all, the research suggests a two-way relationship between political participation in the online and the offline world.

Several earlier studies focused on general factors that may affect people's inclination to show deliberative behaviors. Lee, Choi, and Kim (2014) showed that educational level, interest, and exposure to information—either access to the Internet in general or exposure to specific campaign news—affect people's agenda diversity. Chung and Han (2013) investigated the way people process online deliberations, focusing on the effects of information type (hedonistic versus utilitarian) and regulatory focus (promotion versus prevention). They found that promotion-focused participants were generally more inclined to change their attitude based on new information. Furthermore, hedonic information had stronger effects on promotion-focused participants and utilitarian information was most effective for prevention-focused participants. Halpern and Gibbs (2013) focused on the role of specific media, comparing Facebook and YouTube as venues for online deliberation, and concluded that Facebook offers more opportunity for symmetrical conversations and equalitarian participation.

Apart from the research into personal and media characteristics that affect people's general inclination to participate in deliberative activities, several studies in different contexts have focused on the deliberative nature of specific online initiatives, with partial or modest effects (e.g., Knobloch et al., 2013; Strandberg & Grönlund, 2012). Such studies, in our view, suffer from two related characteristics. First, the concept of deliberation is broad and multi-faceted, which means that it is hard to find nothing and even harder to infer that a desired level of deliberation was reached. Mutz (2008) therefore argues for “middle-range” theories that are “important, specifiable, and falsifiable parts of deliberative democratic theory.” Second, the effects of initiatives strongly depend on specific factors, such as context and design (Delli Carpini et al., 2004). Stromer-Galley, Webb, and Muhlverger (2012), for instance, draw attention to an important context variable: the alignment with the authorities. Wright and Street (2007) argue that design is a crucial success factor for online deliberation projects. Towne and Herbsleb (2012) analyze existing online deliberation systems and formulate design considerations for such systems, grouped into five main points: attracting contributions, navigability, usability, quality content, and adoption. Rose and Sæbø (2010) take a somewhat broader perspective, and place the development of deliberation systems in the context of stakeholder engagement, web platform design (predefined categories or not, synchronous or asynchronous, anonymity), service management, and political process reshaping.

A factor that may affect the success of online deliberation initiatives but that may also be considered to be at the heart of the

functioning of democracies are the deliberative skills and attitudes of citizens. Personal deliberation is the precursor to public or democratic deliberation (Mutz, 2006). Citizens, as political actors, may choose to be open- or narrow-minded. They may stick to a set political affiliation or identify themselves as non-affiliated free-thinkers. Research shows that there are two “modes of citizenship” available to citizens. They represent extreme archetypes of behavior, and most citizens can be found somewhere between those two poles (MacKuen, Wolak, Keele, & Marcus, 2010). On one side of this continuum, the “partisan” mode can be found. The partisan citizen is characterized by faithfulness to a certain political affiliation and an unwillingness to change existing beliefs. The “deliberative” citizen is located on the other side of the continuum. The deliberative citizen stresses the importance of building a profound informational base and engaging in reflective thought before making political decisions. Other characteristics of the deliberative citizen are consideration, balance, open-mindedness and a willingness to collaborate and accommodate (MacKuen et al., 2010).

People's exposure to and processing of diverse information can thus be seen as a *sine qua non* for deliberation. Kim, Wyatt, and Katz (1999), for instance, show that news-media use is positively correlated with several aspects of deliberation: having political discussions, willingness to argue, argument quality, and participation. De Vreese and Boomgaarden (2006) show in a longitudinal study that there is a causal relation between news media consumption and political knowledge and participation. Deliberative skills and attitudes can to some extent be learned in daily life. For instance, Burkhalter et al. (2002) hypothesize that acts of deliberation will reinforce people's deliberative skills and predispositions. A more systematic way of promoting personal deliberation would be to develop instructional or educational tools that help people train their deliberative skills and attitudes.

In this article, we report on an study into the immediate effects of a specific software application, ConsiderIt, on the deliberative attitudes of users. ConsiderIt is designed to facilitate and encourage personal deliberation online. We experimentally investigated the effects of this application, and compared two design variations.

Before we will describe the design and the results of our study, we will first briefly discuss the relationship between media usage and deliberation, the characteristics of and previous studies using ConsiderIt, and the research questions of our study.

2. Media usage and deliberation

The relationship between media usage and public opinions has been studied for many years. Traditional theories assumed that the number of media in a social environment was limited, and attributed a considerable amount of power to the institutionalized media (Shaw & Martin, 1992). Two dominant perspectives are agenda setting and framing (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The agenda setting theory assumes that the media have their own agenda in selecting news facts, and determine which issues citizens will consider to be important. It involves the selection and highlighting of information. Framing assumes that the media provide their own perspectives to news events, and by doing so affect the way citizens interpret them (Cottle & Rai, 2006). Such media bias may be considered to be a structural problem in news production, since media professionals, journalists and producers are affected by external forces such as advertisers, management and other stakeholders (Herman, 2000). These constraints are inherent to the process of making news, and therefore hard to change (Baker, Graham, & Kaminsky, 1994; Park, Kang, Chung, & Song, 2009). If the information citizens receive is biased, their opinions and voting behavior may be skewed as well.

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