

## INTRODUCTION

# Introduction: Deliberative Qualities of Communication

Christiane Grill and Anne Schäfer

The articles in this special issue contribute to the scholarly engagement with the deliberative qualities of communication, its antecedents and consequences in relation to these developments. They are guided by a common core understanding of what constitutes deliberative communication while carefully considering the particular contexts they investigate, and the specific goals deliberative communication has. The articles also display methodological pluralism. This introduction provides a condensed overview of the main insights provided by contributions to this special issue and highlights the various questions and perspectives that form the umbrella for the contributions. Overall, these contributions look to a readership both interested in specific instances of deliberative communication and reflecting on theoretical and empirical advances from an integrative perspective.

**Keywords:** citizens; deliberation; mediation; communication; minipublics; methodologies

### Challenges and Growth in Research

Present-day democracies are increasingly facing political and societal challenges and crises. Observers witness rising nationalist tendencies and closely linked exclusionist attitudes. Populist figures prominently feature in public discourses and gain representation in parliaments and executives. Associated with these latter developments are tendencies to discredit scientific evidence and arguments, the belief in conspiracy theories, and tendencies for both political and societal polarization. These challenges have been said to affect the way citizens, the media, and political actors communicate among and with each other in various channels. More specifically, concerns about the quality of these communications have been put forward. If we consider communication to be the main link among actors in the public sphere, investigations into its characteristics and qualities are of utmost importance. For the audience of this journal, we feel no need to introduce and highlight the idea of deliberation as a standard for such investigations and evaluations. Communication featuring criteria of deliberation is not only believed to be desirable per se, but can also possibly counterbalance the challenges sketched previously (cf. Niemeyer & Jennstal 2018). Research on deliberation and deliberative communication in particular saw an impressive growth and diversification in recent decades. This development is accompanied by an ever more nuanced and varied understanding of what essential criteria are for judging and also assessing the deliberative qualities of communicative encounters in

different spheres and channels (cf. Bächtiger & Parkinson 2019; Bächtiger et al. 2018; Richards Jr & Gastil 2016). The advent of new forms of communication online has added to vibrant scholarly exchanges (cf. Friess & Eilders 2015). In this special issue 'Citizens, media and politics in challenging times: Perspectives on the deliberative quality of communication' we neither aim at synthesizing these debates nor can we fully appreciate the various theoretical and empirical advancements proposed. Instead, the articles in this special issue contribute to the scholarly engagement with the deliberative qualities of communication, its antecedents and consequences. They are guided by a common core understanding of what constitutes deliberative communication while carefully considering the particular contexts they investigate, and the specific goals deliberative communication has therein. The articles display the methodological pluralism Bächtiger and Parkinson (2019) recently called for when investigating deliberation empirically—using both quantitative as well as interpretative approaches and studying both large-N as well as case study data. Before providing a condensed overview of the main insights provided by this special issue, let us highlight the various questions and perspectives that form the umbrella for the contributions: the authors suggest both conceptualizations and measurement tools for deliberative communication in different channels and venues. They investigate where deliberation of different qualities can happen and consider both communication in specifically designed fora as well as those happening in the course of day-to-day politics among citizens, media and political actors. Extending the perspective from an analysis of deliberative qualities of various communicative encounters are contributions investigating conditions as

well as consequences of deliberative communication versus communication falling short of these standards.

### The Contributions

The article by Michael Broghammer and John Gastil (2021) 'Do hostile media perceptions constrain minipublics? A study of how Oregon voters perceive Citizens' Statements' addresses the determinants of citizens' perceptions of Citizens' Initiative Review (CIR) statements in the state of Oregon. Minipublics of selected citizens are assembled to debate ballot measures and develop a condensed summary-analysis subsequently issued to the public. The authors conceive of those statements as a deliberative form of mass media that can only influence public opinion if it is perceived to be unbiased and credible. Broghammer and Gastil thus look into the qualities of a specifically designed deliberative event while addressing (the conditions for) its beneficial consequences at a more systemic level. The analyses demonstrate that citizens' perceptions of the CIR statements are not driven by hostile media perceptions. Instead, faith in the efficacy of deliberation more generally and knowledge about the process lead citizens to perceive arguments as more credible and of higher quality. In light of these findings, the authors emphasize how important it is to design minipublics transparently in order to realize their potential for influencing public opinion.

Minipublics are also the object of study (2021) investigated by Sara A. Mehlretter Drury, Stephen Elstub, Oliver Escobar, and Jennifer J. Roberts ('Deliberative quality and expertise: Uses of evidence in citizens' juries on wind farms'). Using the case of citizens' juries on windfarms in Scotland, the authors investigate the use of arguments and argumentation during these events applying a critical-interpretative research methodology. More specifically, they analyze how citizens refer to and make use of expert witness and their own experiential local knowledge when arguing about key principles of wind farm development in Scotland. The authors highlight the varied use of evidence depending on the particular topic discussed and whether it allows for the inclusion of contextualizing information on part of the citizens. This in-depth localized case-study provides valuable insights for those designing minipublics and argues for the need to help participants developing competences and criteria for engaging with evidence provided during such events.

Lea Gärtner, Alexander Wuttke, and Harald Schoen ('Who talks and who listens? How political involvement influences the potential for democratic deliberation in everyday political talk') shift the focus from organized deliberative events to political communication as occurring in the day-to-day encounters among ordinary citizens (2021). This follows the call for taking this form of communication seriously as an integral part of the overall deliberative system (cf. Conover & Miller, 2018). The authors aim at investigating how individual political involvement influences the deliberativeness of everyday communication specified with a multi-step model. Using survey data from German election campaigns, they study the impact of domain – and group-related political involvement on core criteria of deliberation – equal

participation, the inclusion of dissonant views and the fair and respectful consideration of other views. Their empirical investigations let them conclude that even outside of venues specifically designed for enabling communication of high deliberative quality, citizens seem to meet normative standards of deliberation. Especially the observation that even those with strong partisan identities do seem to encounter dissonant perspectives in their daily conversations is encouraging given the challenges discussed in the beginning.

The piece by Charlotte Löb und Hartmut Wessler ('Mediated deliberation in deep conflicts: How might deliberative media content contribute to social integration across deep divides?') provides a conceptual discussion about how forms of mediated conflict communication can contribute to social integration in divided societies (2021). The authors provide an in-depth theoretical discussion of criteria relevant for capturing and finally measuring deliberative features of mediated communication that could help foster social integration in such societal configurations. In particular, the authors discuss inclusiveness, responsiveness, mutual respect and the display of group-bridging identities as desirable properties of integrative conflict communication in mediated public spheres. While their article focuses on the ideational justification for and exploration of these criteria, Löb and Wessler also suggest indicators that can be used to empirically trace these features in both online as well as offline communication channels, namely when studying newspaper articles as well as Facebook discussions.

The concern for the consequences of exposure to deliberative communication is also at the core of the contribution (2021) by Chloe Jae-Kyung Ahn and Young Min ('Making cross-cutting exposure more deliberative: The moderating role of the equality rule in online discussions on a gender issue'). More specifically, the authors investigate how exposure to dissonant and diverse perspectives as well as discursive equality impact both the deliberativeness of online-communication and its consequences such as participants' intentions for political engagement as well as display of civic virtues. The authors combine an experimental design with a content analysis to investigate these questions on the issue of abortion in South Korea. The experimental results let Ahn and Min conclude that enforcing the rule of equal discursive participation in deliberative communication, and in particular in settings with disagreeing others, helps to promote normatively desirable outcomes while the isolated impact of exposure to diverse perspectives seems rather limited.

The article by Uta Russmann ('Quality of understanding in communication among and between political parties, mass media, and citizens: An empirical study of the 2013 Austrian national election') provides an encompassing analysis of the deliberative qualities of communication issued by citizens, the media, and political parties (2021). Russmann discusses an index of the quality of understanding that is based on five communicative principles: the statement of reasons, proposals for solutions, respect, reciprocity

and the formulation of doubts. A quantitative content analysis investigates the manifestation of these principles for newspaper coverage, citizens' comments on such articles as well as Facebook posts by political parties in the context of Austrian parliamentary elections. Russmann demonstrates variation in deliberative communication practices across these three channels as well as within those channels depending on the status of the actors involved as well as their different communication goals.

Overall, we hope to have collected a series of articles that both those interested in specific instances of deliberative communication and those reflecting on theoretical and empirical advancement from an integrative perspective find inspiring.

### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Mannheim Center for European Social Research (MZES) for its generous funding of the #DQComm2018 conference ('The Deliberative Quality of Communication Conference 2018') as well as our colleagues Charlotte Löb and Chung-hong Chan for their support in designing and organizing the conference. The #DQComm2018 proved to be a place of vivid and inspiring discussion of some of the manuscripts included in this special issue.

We would like to thank Jan Brunner, Teresa Haußmann, Felix Kundlacz, Julian Metz and Franziska Scholl for their support in preparing this special issue.

### Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

### References

- Bächtiger, A., Dryzek, J., Mansbridge, J., & Warren, M.** (2018). Deliberative democracy. An introduction. In A. Bächtiger, J. S. Dryzek, J. Mansbridge, M. Warren, P. J. Conover, & P. R. Miller (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of deliberative democracy* (pp. 1–34). Oxford: Oxford University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198747369.001.0001>
- Bächtiger, A., & Parkinson, J.** (2019). *Mapping and measuring deliberation: Towards a new deliberative quality*. Oxford University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199672196.001.0001>
- Broghammer, M., & Gastil, J.** (2021). Do hostile media perceptions constrain minipublics? A study of how Oregon voters perceive Citizens' Statements? *Journal of Deliberative Democracy*, 17(2). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/jdd.982>
- Conover, P. J., & Miller, P. R.** (2018). Taking everyday political talk seriously. In A. Bächtiger, J. S. Dryzek, J. Mansbridge, M. Warren, P. J. Conover, & P. R. Miller (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of deliberative democracy* (pp. 378–391). Oxford: Oxford University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198747369.013.12>
- Friess, D., & Eilders, C.** (2015). A systematic review of online deliberation research. *Policy & Internet*, 7(3), 319–339. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.95>
- Gärtner, L., Wuttke, A., & Schoen, H.** (2021). Who talks and who listens? How political involvement influences the potential for democratic deliberation in everyday political talk. *Journal of Deliberative Democracy*, 17(2). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/10.16997/jdd.983>
- Löb, C., and Wessler, H.** (2021). Mediated deliberation in deep conflicts: How might deliberative media content contribute to social integration across deep divides? *Journal of Deliberative Democracy*, 17(2). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/jdd.981>
- Mehrtretter Drury, S. A. M., Elstub, S., Escobar, O., & Roberts, J. J.** (2021). Deliberative quality and expertise: Uses of evidence in citizens' juries on wind farms. *Journal of Deliberative Democracy*, 17(2). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/jdd.986>
- Niemeyer, S., & Jennstal, J.** (2018). Scaling up deliberative effects—Applying lessons of mini-publics. In A. Bächtiger, J. S. Dryzek, J. Mansbridge, M. Warren, P. J. Conover, & P. R. Miller (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of deliberative democracy* (pp. 329–347). Oxford: Oxford University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198747369.013.31>
- Richards, R. C., Jr., & Gastil, J.** (2016). Deliberation. In G. Mazzoleni, K. G. Barnhurst, K. Ikeda, R. C. M. Maia, & H. Wessler (Eds.), *The International Encyclopedia of Political Communication*. Chichester: Wiley. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118541555.wbiepc115>
- Russmann, U.** (2021). Quality of understanding in communication among and between political parties, mass media, and citizens: An empirical study of the 2013 Austrian National Election. *Journal of Deliberative Democracy*, 17(2). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/jdd.987>

**How to cite this article:** Grill, C., & Schäfer, A. (2021). Introduction: Deliberative Qualities of Communication. *Journal of Deliberative Democracy*, 17(2), pp.130–132. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/jdd.984>

**Submitted:** 03 November 2020

**Accepted:** 10 August 2021

**Published:** 13 January 2022

**Copyright:** © 2021 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



*Journal of Deliberative Democracy* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by University of Westminster Press.