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Deliberation on the Internet:

Talkboard discussions on the UK Parliamentarian Elections 2001[1]

1. Introduction

> *"[...] Democracy is about more than voting*
> *or providing better public information to the citizen [...]"*
> *(Hague/Loader 1999, 7)*

The 7th of June 2001 was Election Day in the United Kingdom. The Britons elected a new Parliament for another five-year period. "New Labour" won these Parliamentarian elections as anticipated and Tony Blair became prime minister for a second term. 42 % of the electorate voted for Labour, 33 % for the William Hague's Conservatives and 19 % decided to give their vote to the Liberal Democrats. Certainly, the question that must be raised refers to the voter turnout since it is of utmost importance for any government to know how many people participated in the elections. Coleman (1999a, 1) holds that the "[...] health of civic culture during election periods can be measured by the degree of citizens' participation, both in the polling booth and at the hustings". The voter turnout at the 2001 election was the lowest since 1918: Only 59.1 % of the whole electorate cast their ballots. This means a minus of 12.4 % compared to the 1997 elections when 71.4 % went to the polling stations. (See The *Guardian*, 9th of June, 2001, 1)

Why did only approximately 60 % of the Britons decided to vote? What made them stay away from the polling stations and what does this mean for the future development of one of the oldest democracies in modern Europe? Fishkin (1995, 44) argues that low voter turnouts indicate the disconnection of the electorate from the political system and from its shared identity. In fact, he calls this a "worrisome symptom". It is commonplace that elections are a "public event" during which power is given back to the citizens who have the opportunity to assess and judge the political work of their representatives. But why do so little take this chance and express their opinions either by voting for or against a certain party or political

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[1]   This article is mainly based upon the author's MSc thesis submitted to the London School of Economics and Political Science in Summer 2001. Additionally, some parts of this report contributed to a larger research project on the UK elections 2001, which was monitored and largely conducted by the Hansard Society for Parliamentary Government in London. The project's main focus was to analyse empirically the role of new (and old) media during the election campaign. The research fields included BBC Online, the websites of the major political parties in Britain, the radio and the online version of the BBC programme Election Call and the *Guardian* "Elections 2001" talkboard.

movement? Political theorists deliver several explanations concerning this question: There are those like James Fishkin who argue that citizens do not feel integrated in the political decision forming and making process. There are others (e.g. Jürgen Habermas) who argue that there are no (non-commercial) spaces left for real and deliberative political discussions since the "public sphere" has been invaded by the mass media and political elites. The result is a silent public sphere, which derives from the fact that people do not feel to have any impact on the political decisions of the *Great* and the *Good*. (See Coleman 1997, 135)

Both views presuppose that voting is necessary and essential for a democracy. Indeed, we can say, "[...] elections are a vital feature of all functioning democracies [...]". Dahlgren though adds "[...] there is a civic and political life beyond elections that must also measure up to our democratic ideals, not least the character of public discursive communication between citizens". (Dahlgren 2001, 64) Thus, voting is not enough to maintain a democratic system, which shall serve as an identity platform for (almost) all citizens of a state or a community. However, public or discursive communication, "the heart of the democratic process" (Garnham quoted in Coleman 1997, 162) respectively authentic public deliberation seem to have been replaced by "virtual deliberation" (Coleman 1999, 68) which means that deliberative processes take mainly place among political journalists and politicians. Citizens are excluded from political talks and function as mere spectators. Thus, most of the contemporary democracies do not encompass much deliberation. (See Wilhelm 1999, 159) Habermas described this process the "refeudalisation" of the public sphere. Citizens have turned into consumers or mere spectators and the mass media and the political elite are running "the public show". (See Calhoun 1992, 26; Webster 1995, 104; Curran 1991, 29)

This article attempts to analyse the civic and discursive potential of a "new" space for civic deliberation: the Internet. Concretely, I will focus on the "Elections 2001" talkboard at the *Guardian* homepage. The research question I am interested in is *"How far was the Guardian "Elections 2001" talkboard a public space for civic deliberation?"* This question will guide the whole research process.

The core concept of this paper, civic deliberation, seem to be appropriate for the exploration of the democratic impacts of the "Elections 2001" talkboard on civic participation and public discourse. The empirical part will encompass a content analysis that covers a three-week period (from the 17th of May to the 7th of June, 2001) and comprises of a total of 1,093 postings. The study reflects the theoretical concepts and provides some empirical evidence as to whether the *Guardian* "Elections 2001" talkboard was an ideal sphere for civic deliberation or not. The main idea behind this assumption is that new information and communication technologies enhance democracy since they presumably overcome the inadequacies of traditional media. Wilhelm (1999, 154) argues that cyberspace represents a forum where people can communicate politically. Indeed, the importance of new media for

democratic processes is widely recognised. The (positive) effects though are contested. (See Loader 1997, xii) This article should be regarded as a contribution to the ongoing debate about the democratic potential of the Internet. In more concrete terms, it aims at elaborating the significance of the "Elections 2001" talkboard for civic deliberation during the election campaign 2001 in the United Kingdom.

2. Defining the concept of civic deliberation

Since the 1990s, the term deliberation has become *en vogue* within academia. Fishkin, Bohman, Dryzeck or Coleman are just a few names of a number of scholars who have undertaken a lot of research on deliberation and its significance for democracy. The concept plays a crucial role in modern public discussion programmes, such as citizen juries or study circles and it is the premise of a particular theory within the studies on democracy. (See Gastil 2000, 357) *Deliberative democracy*, which is "[...] founded on the principles of reasoned dialogue and deliberation. [It] is rooted in the idea of self-governance in which political truths emerge not from the clash of pre-established interests and preferences but from reasoned discussion about issues involving the common good". (London 1995, 1-2; completion in brackets added) One defining feature of deliberative democracy is that individuals are prepared and willing to be "moved" by reason. Citizens may change their opinions and preferences as a result of the reflection induced by deliberative communication. (See Dryzeck 2000, 31) However, it often remains unclear what deliberation actually means and how it works.

Deliberation in the widest sense means *reflection* or as Wilhelm (2000, 43) puts it: "Deliberation means thinking through an issue, contemplating its advantages and disadvantages as well as the trade-offs associated with supporting a particular issue or agenda". Another useful definition provides Walzer (quoted in Mendelberg/Oleske 2000, 170): "Deliberation is reflective, open to a wide range of evidence, respectful of different views. It is a rational process of weighing the available data, considering alternative possibilities, arguing about relevance and worthiness, and then choosing the best policy or person." London (1995, 8) gives a useful definition when he argues that deliberation is "[...] the formation of the will, the particular moment that precedes choice [...]". Dryzeck (2000, 2) adds another important feature of deliberation: "[...] communication and reflection upon preferences in a non-coercive fashion [which] rules out domination via the exercise of power, manipulation, indoctrination, propaganda [...]".

Within the realm of politics and democracy, I distinguish between a vertical and a horizontal dimension of deliberation: While the former describes reflective communication

processes between public institutions and citizens, the latter means recursive and dialogical communication among citizens. (See Levine 2000, 5) Finally, there are also deliberative communication processes taking place among members who belong to public bodies, such as Parliaments, High Courts and so forth. This distinction is necessary since this paper does not deal with communication processes within public institutions or between public bodies and individuals but investigates discussions and debates among citizens.

The process how deliberative communication on political issues works appears to be rather straightforward: Opinions and statements are subject to public scrutiny for validation or to put it in another way: Citizens discuss, validate and criticise publicly each other's point of view. Thus, deliberation can be regarded as a special kind of communication: "dispassionate, reasoned, and logical". (Dryzeck 2000, 64)

Regarding the UK Elections 2001, we can therefore contend that civic deliberation comprised dialogical communication processes, which preceded the act of voting. Citizens were talking about political issues related to British politics in the widest sense.

In a nutshell, civic deliberation takes place when: (See Fishkin quoted in Wilhelm 1999, 159)

- Political issues can be discussed at length.
- The communication process among the participants provides the space for reflection.
- Opinions and arguments are open for public "test" and criticism.

3. The significance of civic deliberation for democracy

"We deliberate not about ends,
but about the means to attain ends"
(Aristotle quoted in London 1995, 8)

It appears to be necessary to ask why we deal with civic deliberation: What is it that makes deliberation significant for democracy? This can be answered from two different angles:
- The significance of civic deliberation for representative democracy;
- The significance of civic deliberation for citizens;

Democracy is a complex phenomenon, which consists of several dimensions. Voting is often considered the most important feature of democracy. However, there are other "less-common forms of participation": Democratic deliberation is another decisive dimension of democracy and political culture. (See Dahlgren 2001, 64; Fishkin 1995, 47; Coleman 1999b, 70) Civic deliberation is crucial for representative democracy since it strengthens the

people's trust in their governmental bodies. Thus, an "[...] increase in public information and deliberation will produce a much stronger and more frequently renewable and reviewable mandate from the people to their chosen representatives". (Coleman 2001b, 123) This is what Christiano (1997, 246) has called the "contribution thesis": Public deliberation can contribute to the worth of public institutions. Christiano has defined two other theses about the importance of public deliberation to democracy: The "necessity and the exclusivity thesis". The former means that a democratic society without public deliberation is undesirable. Public deliberation must be an integral part of any democracy. By the latter he means that deliberation is the only value in democracy: "The only reason why democracy matters is that it involves public deliberation among equals". (Christiano 1997, 246) Although Christiano takes a rather narrow perspective, he makes clear that democracy does not and cannot work without political debates in the civic sphere. In addition, it is a major feature and effect of a deliberative discussion that opposing sides communicate about disagreements. (See Mendelberg/Oleske 2000, 186) Thus, civic deliberation is a valuable contribution to the mutual understanding within a society.

With regard to a well-balanced analysis of the concept of civic deliberation, I want also put forward some major points of critique on the model of public deliberation: Not all political theorists approve the concept of public participation through deliberative talks: Lippmann and Schumpter, for instance, express in their works that they would rather prefer closed and exclusive discussion circles than open spaces for public debate. (See Blumler/Coleman 2001, 6) Others theorists (such as Saward) argue that the concept of deliberation is overestimated: "No matter how much deliberation takes place, heads have to be counted-aggregated-at some point if a democratic decision is to be reached. No adequate model of democracy can fail to be 'aggregative'. There is no such thing as a 'deliberative model of democracy'". (Saward quoted in Dryzeck 2000, 38) Chantal Mouffe takes a more radical approach and expresses scepticism on the concept of deliberation. In her model on "agonistic pluralism" she criticises the overestimation of rational consensus in democratic societies and stresses the importance of power structures in the formation of collective identities: "In order to grasp the nature of democracy it is necessary to acknowledge the dimension of power and antagonism and their ineradicable character". (Mouffe 2002, 3)

Indeed, some features of the concept may be contested, such as "public debate" which is often perceived as politically ineffective – just "talk". (See London 1995, 11) However, I hold that it is precisely "talk" which is crucial for a vivid and participatory democracy. Thus, despite some flaws in the models I will analyse (critically) how political "talk" among lay people can be effective and valuable in a democratic society.

4. The Internet's potential and limits in the process of deliberation

The Internet is a medium of communication and as such it appears to be appropriate for civic communication. While the old media system is characterised by monological information and communication flows, the Internet enables dialogical communication. Regarding the importance of new media for democracy, Hague and Loader (1999, 6) identify several key features. I want to refer here to the most important ones:

- *Interactivity:* New media dissolve the sender-receiver dichotomy (which characterises the old media system) and allow horizontal and reciprocal communication flows among individuals and organised groups. (See Wring/Horrocks 2001, 193)

- *Global network:* New media empower citizens of different parts of the world to communicate in a (relatively) unconstrained way.

- *Free speech:* New media provide the conditions for (relatively) unrestricted discussions and debates.

Rheingold (1999, 277) argues that more and more public spaces disappear in our society and that the Internet is an ideal sphere where people can gather to discuss, debate and exchange their views. In fact, the Internet as a dispersed network connects people and presumably creates what John Keane (1991, 145) has called "networks of meaning among various groups of citizens". Thus, the Internet can be a space for politically engaged people and may foster the emergence of multiple micro-public spheres. (See Dahlgren 2001, 75)

One specific feature of the Internet here is of particular interest: Interactivity, which I consider as a premise for deliberative communication. In general, interaction among citizens enhances political knowledge and stronger habits of civic participation. (See Gastil 2000, 359f.)

Thus, interactive communication, which overcomes the traditional one-to-many communication forms, seems to explain the importance of the Internet for civic deliberation. Online discussions provide new ideas and information and offer their users a platform for deliberative discussion. (See Blumler/Coleman 2001, 15) But people do not just connect each other to discuss or to "chat" but also to collaborate, to do something in the political realm, including achieving political aims. (See Dahlgren 2001, 75) In addition, new media help to create networks of interest through which people "[...] rediscover the behavioral values of face-to-face participation". (Blumler 1997, 401)

Certainly, technological interactivity does not have a direct impact on democracy. "Social interaction" has to grow from the bottom and cannot be created by technology. Moreover, the prevailing political culture within which technology operates, is a determinant factor for

"cyberdemocratic deliberation". Democratic culture is not built in to the software packages or digital systems that constitute the new media. (See Coleman 1999b, 70) Moreover, access to digital networks is still restricted. Thus, the assumption that the Internet is an important space for deliberation is challenged by some obvious constraints. The crucial aspects here are Internet access and socio-economic capabilities in order to participate in the public sphere. (See Bohman 1997, 335) They determine the extent to which an individual can play a part in the political public sphere. Given the fact that this papers deals with the political discourse on the *Guardian* Elections 2001 talkboard, I refer primarily to British Internet penetration figures: In February 2001, 39.8 % of all British households were regular Internet users (EU average: 31.1 %).[2] Obviously, the Internet has not created a fully accessible public sphere in the UK although one has to take into account that there has never been a public sphere that included all citizens. I think it is important to consider that the Internet is still a rather exclusive medium, which may provide the condition for interaction and communicative exchange – but only to those who are online. The political public sphere may be revitalised by new media but in terms of access it is (so far) a rather exclusive sphere. In addition, we have to take into account the importance of "social skills" for deliberative processes. People need have to be trained to debate, to discuss to get engaged and therefore social skills (e.g. listening to others) are crucial for balanced and effective deliberation. Consequently, civic deliberation online depends on two major elements: Firstly, Internet access as a premise for online participation albeit it is not a guarantee for an increased political activity or enlightened political discourse. (See Papacharissi 2002, 13) Secondly, new media literacies determine the participant's role, importance and power in the online environment.

5. Components of civic deliberation

> *"Talk is the principal mechanisms by which*
> *we can retest and thus repossess our convictions,*
> *which means that a democracy that does not institutionalise*
> *talk will soon be without autonomous citizens [...]*
> *(Barber 1984, 190)*

According to Benjamin Barber political talk is something "extraordinary", something powerful that may trigger consequences. Perhaps, this provides also an explanation why Jürgen Habermas claims vehemently that political discourse in the public sphere has to be

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[2] <europa.eu.int/information_society/eeurope/benchmarking/list/2001/index_en.htm>, accessed 27 July, 2001. In June 2002 about 45 % of the UK households were connected to the Internet, the EU average amounted to 40.4 % <europa.eu.int/information_society/eeurope/benchmarking/list/2002/index_en.htm>, accessed 5 October 2002.

rational-critical. Webster (1995, 101) describes a rational-critical debate as not "interested", "disguised" or "manipulated". Rationality involves good cognitive reasoning, which enables people to solve problems effectively through social interaction. (See Dryzeck 1990, p. 217) This form of discourse provides a perfect framework for deliberative discussions among equals. Rationality shall avoid that private interests or arguments that do not result in productive and effective discussions among citizens invade political discourse in the public sphere. The claim for rationality also comes into the picture when we talk about political discourse on the Internet.

Political talk is not a scarcity on the Internet. There are plenty of talkboards, chatrooms or mailing lists, which provide platforms for political discussions. However, the quality of these debates is contested as for instance Davis (1999, 177) shows in one example: "In Usenet political discussions, people talk past one another, when they are not verbally attacking each other. The emphasis is not problem solving, but discussion dominance". In this context, two reasons seem to be relevant:

Firstly, it is argued that Internet users filter Internet communication and tend to participate in those discussions that correspond to their own opinions, attitudes and beliefs. (See Levine 2000, 5) This might be important to a certain extent for groups who have been so far excluded by the traditional media coverage. These individuals are now provided a space in which they can exchange thoughts, share information or even develop strategies to improve their positions in society. However, an inclusive political public sphere needs to include a broad community in order to be representative. Thus, Van Alstyne and Brynjolfsson argue that electronic connectivity causes "balkanization", "defined as a proliferation of separate communities or conversations that are not in mutual contact" (Levine 2000, 5). I admit that it is important that the public sphere covers as many citizens as possible. It is a too narrow approach though to say that the Internet could endanger the societal coherence in the public sphere. On the contrary: The fact that today there are more than one singular public sphere, should be seen as an expression of cultural and political enrichment. Civic deliberation within these different spheres can be spread by the Internet and (re)connect different communities.

Secondly, scholars contend that cheap and fast communication as it is provided through the Internet, encourages cheap and fast output which often includes offensive or hostile behaviour (e.g. "flaming"; the use of abusive language etc.). (See Levine 2000, 3) The problem of the contemporary public sphere is that there is "too much silence and an insufficient 'babble' of competing views are in the air". (Coleman 1997, 147)

However, rational discourse is just one particular aspect, which is claimed by certain scholars. Dryzeck (2000, 1f.) for instance holds that "some deliberative democrats, especially those who traffic in 'public reason', want to impose narrow limits on what constitutes

authentic deliberation, restricting it to arguments in particular kinds of terms" and he would also "[...] allow argument, rhetoric, humour, emotion, testimony or storytelling, and gossip". Similar arguments can be found in Chantal Mouffe's model on "agonistic pluralism". Accordingly, she argues for the mobilisation of citizen's passions instead of eliminating them for the sake of rational consensus. (See Mouffe 2002, 5)

Nevertheless, deliberation has to be reasoned if citizens should be moved by reasons. Deliberation is not about faith but rather demands conviction and sometimes passion. Civic deliberation must be based upon arguments that can be validated intersubjectively. Still, this does not mean that other (passionate) forms of discourse are not tolerated or welcome in political discussions.

To sum up, reasoning of some kind is crucial for deliberative discussion. The ideal of deliberation, Fishkin writes, "takes us ultimately to something like the 'ideal speech situation' of Jürgen Habermas – a situation of free and equal discussion, unlimited in its duration, constrained only by the consensus which would be arrived at by the 'force of the better argument'". (Fishkin 1991, 36) I would complete Fishkin's description of ideal deliberation with Dryzeck's more "tolerant" features of deliberative debate. Thus, the same requirements that are applied to face-to-face interaction can be applied to civic deliberation online: Reasoned arguments, which may be accompanied by "emotional" or "ironic" elements.

Certainly, no actual deliberation corresponds to the ideal. However, as Mendelberg and Oleske (2000, 170) put it: "[...] the ideal [deliberative process] can serve as the end point of a continuum of good deliberation and as a standard against which actual deliberation can be evaluated" (completion in brackets added).

To what extent the *Guardian* Elections 2001 talkboard fulfilled the ideal of civic deliberation will be analysed and discussed in the following.

6. Content analysis on the *Guardian* "Elections 2001" talkboard

New media were already used to enhance civic participation in the UK election in 1997. However, it was only a minority of citizens that had online discussions on political issues. One of the most important online platforms for political talk was at that time "UK Citizens Online Democracy – UKCOD". In the 2001 election, citizens were offered more virtual spaces to meet and to debate. This empirical investigation focuses on a specific one: the *Guardian* "Elections 2001" talkboard. Other important British newspapers such as The *Times*, *Financial Times* and *Daily Telegraph* also ran talkboards during the election campaign. The *Guardian* attracted the most users and comprised of messages of a high quality. (See Coleman 2001a, 40)

The theoretical analysis of the concept of deliberation has shown that some requirements for deliberative discussions (such as rational-critical debate) postulated by a number of political theorists, philosophers and communication scholars appear to be normative. This analysis seeks to evaluate some aspects of these theoretical assumptions on civic deliberation. If we want to know whether the Internet involves the potential for civic deliberation then we have to "test it in reality". Thus, a content analysis on the messages posted on the "Elections 2001" talkboard (URL: <politics.Guardian.co.uk>[3]) shall show how far political discussions on the *Guardian* talkboard can be considered to be deliberative.

Consequently, the major research question of this report ("How far was the *Guardian* "Elections 2001" talkboard a public space for civic deliberation?") can be refined and split up into two more specific research questions:

- How much interaction took place among the talkboard participants?
- To what extent did the discussions involve rational-critical elements?

The *Guardian* users started most of the topics. Members of the "GuardianPolitics" section initiated only three out of 70 covered topics. In general, there was only slight moderation taking place on the talkboard. However, the participants had to respect certain "talk rules" which are outlined in the "talk policy" of the *Guardian*. The disregard of these rules resulted in the warning of about 30 people and banning about 10 persons from the talkboard by the end of May 2001 (interview with Simon Rothstein[4] 23rd of May, 2001).

6.1 Methodology

The content categories were developed in order to operationalise the outlined research questions. The categories attempted to investigate two core components of deliberation: interactivity and rationality. The degree of interactivity depends on the design of the medium and the will of the participants to engage in discussions. Interactivity is perceived to be a premise for deliberative talk on the Internet. New media enable high interactivity though it is not a characteristic of the medium. (See Rafaeli/Sudweeks 1998, 175) Rationality is another key feature. This analysis will though go beyond the traditional conceptions on rational discourse since it will also involve "alternative" aspects of discourse such as emotion and irony.

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[3]   In the meantime, the messages are no longer available and have been deleted. However, there is still a section covering the highlights of the Elections 2001 (status: October 2002).

[4]   Simon Rothstein was responsible for the technical procedure of the talkboard.

6.2 Definition of the categories in the coding frame

The final version of the coding book was pretested with 50 messages. Finally, 15 variables were identified.

The first core category, interactivity, contains three variables:
- Message format
- Message purpose
- Level of agreement

These three variables attempted to analyse to what extent participants reply to the postings of other discussants (*message format*), seed discussion, merely provide information respectively express their political opinion or seek information from other discussion participants (*message purpose*). The *level of agreement* delivered more information about the extent to which posters were interested in interaction.

The second key variable is *rationality* and contains four variables:
- Usage of rational arguments
- Balance of arguments
- Awareness of political and/or socio-economic institutions, processes and circumstances
- Emotional and/or ironic tone in the message

This set of categories sought to ascertain whether the participants were discussing on a rational-critical basis on the "Elections 2001" talkboard. Messages were regarded to be rational if the poster provided reasons to validate the truth of assertions (*usage of rational arguments*). The *balance of arguments* was considered as additional information concerning rational argumentation. Messages were very well balanced if posters put forward several arguments to underpin their statements. The use of arguments and counter-arguments was defined as a pluralist view pertinent for deliberative processes. Messages were ill balanced if they did not provide a base for deliberative discussions (e.g. posting included a mere quote). The formulation of rational argumentation is influenced by a person's knowledge of political and socio-economic institutions and processes in society. Posters showed *awareness* if they referred to political, economic and/or cultural events in society (e.g. Parliamentarian debates, memoranda, directives, governmental and non-governmental bodies etc.). The category further examined whether the discussants used *emotional and/or ironic elements* in their argumentation. Messages were coded "emotional" if they contained a very "personal touch" either in a positive or negative sense (e.g. usage of abusive language, swearing etc.). Ironic comments included jokes, funny or less serious statements. Traditional concepts on deliberative discussion identify rational argumentation as the decisive component of rational-critical debate (see Jürgen Habermas' conceptions on the use of public reason). More

tolerant positions also allow emotion or humour in deliberative debates. (See John S. Dryzeck)

6.3 Sampling

The single posting was determined to be the unit of analysis. In total, the analysis encompassed a representative sample of 1,093 postings. 70 topics were analysed. The sampling was not random but covered all postings of the last three weeks of the election campaign. The selection of these three weeks was based upon the assumption that participants were more engaged in discussions at the end of the election campaign than the time before. This enabled in most of the cases the maintenance of the context (the discussion thread) within which the postings were set.[5]

Particular attention was given to the internal consistency of the data. Approximately one-third of the postings (364 messages) was coded by an independent coder. Generally, an intercoder reliability of about 78 % should be achieved. (See Livingstone 2000) An intercoder agreement of 100 % can be reported for the objective items (topic; date; time; name of the poster). Concerning the subjective items the intercoder reliability is lower. The intercoder reliability test reveals that there are partly major differences within the main category "rationality". This derives from the fact that "rationality" is hard to gauge, which has led to different readings and interpretations of the postings. However, in most of the cases the intercoder reliability exceeds the 78 % mark.

7. Results and discussion

The number of the messages has been split up into three (almost similar) groups in order to make them comparable:[6]

- *Messages by highly frequent posters:* Persons that sent at least two postings a day i.e. in three weeks 42 messages. Seven persons constituted this group.
- *Messages by moderately frequent posters:* Persons that sent at least every second day a message i.e. in three weeks 10 postings (in total 17 persons).
- *Messages by infrequent posters:* Persons that sent between one and nine messages within the covered period. 144 persons composed this group.

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[5] The Elections 2001 talkboard started rather early. Some posters already made contributions in November 2000. Most of the topics were though initiated in the last few months before the Election took place.

[6] It is important to consider that the analysis is exclusively based on the number of postings and not on the number of posters.

The content analysis revealed that the smallest group of authors posted the bulk of messages: Only a fairly small group of seven persons posted 391 messages which accounts for 38.1 % of 1,025 postings[7]. The moderately frequent posters put 288 messages on the talkboard (28.1 %) and the largest group, the infrequent users, put 346 postings (33.8 %).

Diagram 1: Distribution of messages among the three groups of posters
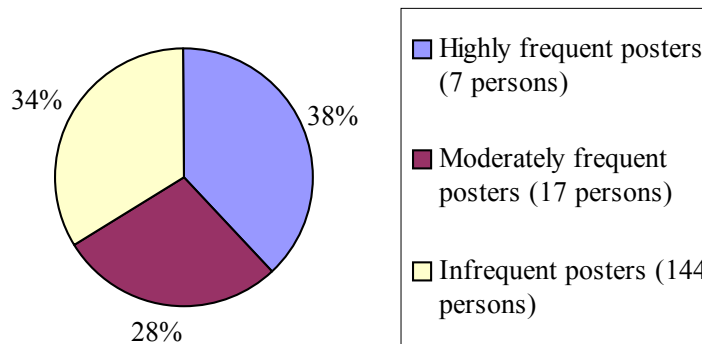
The infrequent users initiated most of the discussion topics on the „Elections 2001" talkboard. The highly frequent users started 11 out of 70 topics and members of the moderately frequent users started eight times a discussion on the talkboard:

Table 1: Number of discussion topics initiated by posters

Highly frequent posters (7 persons) (in total / in %)		Moderately frequent posters (17 persons) (in total / in %)		Infrequent posters (144 persons) (in total / in %)		Total	
11 topics	16 %	8 topics	11 %	48 topics	69 %	67 topics[8]	100 %

The results show that a rather small group of posters dominated the political debate at the "Elections 2001" talkboard: Seven persons contributed about 38 % of the messages. In contrast, the largest group, the infrequent posters (144 persons), contributed nearly 34 % of the postings. If we compare these results with those in Table 1 then we can see that the infrequent users were not as successful in getting heard on the talkboard as the smallest group (the highly frequent users). Although the group of infrequent authors initiated 69 % of the covered topics, they only contributed about a third of the messages. Highly frequent users started 11 topics (16 %) but contributed nearly 40 % of the messages.

The explanations for that may be multi-factorial: Authors belonging to the group of highly frequent posters may possess better rhetoric skills than the two other groups. Dryzeck (2000,

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[7] N=1025; the sample size does not include messages that clearly deviate from the overall thread.
[8] As I indicated previously, the *Guardian* initiated only three topics.

70f.) argues that deliberation "in practice" involves communication that is determined by those who can best articulate their arguments, opinions and convictions. This may explain the differences concerning the distribution of messages among the talkboard participants: The smallest group of posters may be best trained in discussing with others while a big majority of the other authors seem to lack these capabilities. However, it may also be the case that the latter are not willing and interested in participating. This argument would seem to confirm the theses that people mainly use Internet talkboards, chatrooms or bulletin boards just to make a statement without being interested in interaction with others.

The figures in Table 1 clearly show that though infrequent users were interested in discussing but they did not manage participating more actively within the discussion thread. This indicates the importance for social skills for deliberative discussion. I already mentioned previously that participation in public discussions does not only depend upon socio-economic factors but is although determined by the social capabilities of the participants. Indeed, Coleman (2001b, 124) argues, "[...] it is time for skills of speaking, chairing, listening, summarising, and reflection to be acquired."

If we ask how we can enable people to participate actively and continuously, then we also have to ask where people could be "trained" to become active citizens who speak up in public. Appropriate "training places for deliberation" are still educational institutions such as schools and small communities like families or special interest groups. I am further inclined to argue that the Internet is clearly not the right place to "learn" deliberation – it merely provides spaces for debates. However, whether these are deliberative mainly depends on the discussants. In addition, the Internet is (so far) a mere text-based medium, which requires that people possess certain writing skills. Although Internet users are generally people who belong to the upper-, middle-class some of them may not be able to "deliberate properly" i.e. in a way that others are able to validate the truth of assertions.

The content analysis does not provide any distribution figures on gender, race, age or educational background of the posters since this data was not available. There is only data available for the *Guardian* site in general: *Guardian* Unlimited users tended to be ABC1 educated professionals. There was a 50-50 male/female split and 47 % of the users were no regular *Guardian* readers.

The empirical analysis showed that there was a high degree of interaction among the posters. About 66 % of the postings were replies to other messages, 34 % were intended to seed a discussion. The highest degree of interactivity was among the highly frequent posters: 77 % of their messages were replies. The infrequent participants seeded more than half of the postings (52 %). Indeed, people answered each other's question respectively commented on the others statements. However, given the domination of a relatively small group of discussants the talkboard cannot be regarded as a space for mass deliberation, but

it enabled small groups of people to exchange each other's views. In this case, John Keane's assumption about multiple public spheres (where relatively small groups of people gather to debate; see Keane 1998, 170) appears to be an adequate description for the *Guardian* talkboard. In fact, the talkboard was rather a micro-public sphere than a "virtual agora" encompassing large parts of the Britons. Regarding the message purpose the analysis showed that most of the messages provided information to others or expressed the author's opinion. The messages of the moderately frequent were those with the highest percentage rate here: 74 % of their postings were coded as "information provision" or "opinion". About 13 % of all messages were direct replies i.e. discussants directly addressed another poster or group of posters. Less than 1 % of the messages involved the author's own experiences. More than half of the postings (52 %) had a "neutral" tone meaning that the posters did not clearly express their agreement or disagreement concerning a certain opinion or topic. The highest rate of agreement could be found within the messages of the infrequent posters (6 %); the messages of the moderately frequent posters showed the highest rate of disagreement (13 %).

Concerning the second major category within this analysis, it can be stated that about 43 % of the messages involved rational arguments i.e. the "design" of the messages enabled the coder to reconstruct the argumentation thread. Nearly half of the postings contained "balanced" arguments and showed that posters were aware of different point of views concerning a particular political issue and expressed this in their statements or they provided substantial explanation(s) to underpin their comments. About 30 % of the messages were ill balanced lacking any evidence of public scrutiny. The posters hardly expressed their political or socio-economic knowledge: Almost half of the messages did not contain evidence that the talkboard participants were aware of political and/or socio-economic institutions, processes and circumstances. With regard to emotional and ironic elements in the messages, the content analysis revealed that postings did not show a significantly high number of emotional or ironic aspects: Only 13 % of the messages were coded as "emotional" and only 7 % were considered "ironic".

8. Conclusion

So, was the *Guardian* talkboard a public and trusted space for civic deliberation? Before answering this question let me conclude by recapitulating what I believe I have accomplished in this essay:

I defined deliberation as *reflection* or *thinking through an issue*. Deliberative discussions are non-coercive processes, which are open to different views. Deliberation among citizens is called civic deliberation and involves discussions in publicly accessible spaces.

Deliberative debates my trigger "learning processes" which ideally result in changing discussants opinions. During the whole process of deliberation, people discuss and validate each other's point of view. The major component of civic deliberation is political talk, which is based upon good cognitive reasons. Rational-critical discourse is a decisive element of deliberation, though, also other discourse forms such as humour, emotion or rhetoric may be part of deliberative discussions. Civic deliberation is significant for a vivid democracy since it helps to strengthen the people's trust in public institutions. However, there are little spaces left for deliberation. The Internet is perceived to provide a new platform for deliberative discussions since it bypasses the traditional intermediaries (the mass media and politicians) and enables direct interaction among citizens. On the other hand, it is also widely contested that the Internet is a trusted space for civic deliberation since it is still an exclusive space that consists of rather fragmented groups of interest. Finally, I pointed out that it is not technology that enables more deliberation. Deliberation must grow from the bottom – the Internet may only be the means to achieve a more deliberative and democratic society.

Coming back to the major question upon which this report is based, I argue that the *Guardian* talkboard widely fulfilled the requirements for civic deliberation since it enabled interaction among participants: Political ideas and opinions could be articulated, exchanged and negotiated. Given the empirical findings, I conclude that despite "uncivil interaction" on the Internet there is also rational discussion taking place, which is proofed by the messages on the "Elections 2001" talkboard. Certainly, rational-critical discourse is not established by the technology but derives from the social and political culture of a society. Still, it has to be considered that those who actively and permanently contributed to the "Elections 2001" talkboard discussions belonged to a rather small group of people. In general, the Internet does not provide the framework for mass deliberation processes than rather appears to be a discussion platform for small and (often highly focused) groups of people. Regarding the effects of such talkboard discussions, two important groups of key players are relevant: The citizens who have to step beyond the "mere" discussions and realise their (democratic) projects and the politicians who have to be more committed to listen to their citizens. Evidently, deliberation (offline and online) among citizens is a first step towards a more participatory society.

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