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Chapter VIII

The Moderator in Government-Initiated Internet Discussions: Facilitator or Source of Bias?

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ABSTRACT

The importance of moderation of online policy discussions is widely recognized. However, much less attention has been paid to the social interface in which moderators perform their tasks. In many cases, moderators have to cooperate with civil servants, elected officials and representatives of social organizations. In this chapter I look at the management of six government-initiated online discussions in The Netherlands. It can be concluded that moderators perform various important functions. In this, they contribute to the interactivity and openness of the discussions. But they also form part of a new interface between citizens and public administration with its own power relations and possible biases. It is concluded that moderators have to strike a balance between different parties involved in the discussion. Various provisions are suggested to make this possible.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of moderation of online policy discussions is now generally recognized (see, for instance, Coleman & Götze, 2001). In the libertarian tradition of the Internet, moderation has often been viewed as conflicting with free speech and unrestrained communication (Tsagarousianou, 1998). However, as Docter and Dutton (1998) suggested in their account of the famous PEN-experiment in Santa Monica, California (1990-1996), the free speech principle has to be weighed against other legitimate concerns, like the need to facilitate a genuine discussion and to counteract possible abuses of the medium. Moderation is important to stimulate and regulate online discussions as purposeful social action. Some characteristics of online interaction, such as its virtuality or anonymity may diminish the psychological thresholds to participate in a discussion, but they may also inhibit the social cooperation that is needed to accomplish complex communicative tasks. From research on discussions in political newsgroups, we know that the interaction is often “attenuated, episodic and ephemeral” (Wilhelm, 2000, p. 101). The discussions seem to be more a means for reinforcing preexisting views and finding like-minded individuals than to persuade others (Hill & Hughes, 1998, p. 63; Davis, 1999, p. 162). In short, they seem to do little to achieve resolution to public policy problems. These findings do not imply that the moderation of political newsgroups is imperative. As far as they can be characterized as online “free-for-all-discussions” that satisfy a social need to express opinions, this is an open question that can be left to the participants. Online discussions, however, that are initiated as “deliberative policy exercises,” as Coleman and Götze used these terms, require moderation. In these settings, moderation is also necessary in order to realize some potential advantages of online discussions. Because of their asynchronous nature, there are more possibilities for structuring them. Various discussion lines can be opened and managed. Also, there is more flexibility possible in information provision. To reap these fruits, moderation is necessary.

Elsewhere, I examined the roles of the moderator from a Habermasian perspective, focusing on basic features that constitute a “deliberative procedure” (Edwards, 2002). My main conclusion was that moderators can be seen as emerging “new” democratic intermediaries, along the “old” democratic intermediaries, like political parties and interest groups. In view of earlier accounts, according to which the advent of the Internet in the political domain will lead to a disintermediation, i.e., the removal of “biased” intermediaries, these findings suggest that the opposite might (also) be the case: a process of reintermediation in which new intermediaries enter the political domain, even in arrangements of direct democracy, as in online deliberative procedures.¹

The empirical relevance of this discussion is that arrangements of direct democracy are entering representative regimes and, thus, give rise to hybrid forms of democracy. For example, in the Netherlands, many experiments are carried out with “interactive policy making” between citizens, social organizations, politicians, and public officials. Experiments with Internet discussions about public issues, initiated by a (local, provincial, or national) government can be seen as a specific category of this.

Although the importance of moderation is now more generally acknowledged, much less attention has been paid to the “social interface” in which moderators perform their tasks. Moderators do not function in isolation, but in an organizational structure, often a kind of project organization, in which they have to cooperate with other actors, such

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