Online Deliberation on Social Media: Dialogue or Discussion?

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Abstract: The main purpose of article is to show potential of Internet deliberation as a form of public dialogue on example of social media discussions' analysis. Online discussions on theme of the second impeachment of D. Trump on Facebook was analyzed accordingly to such parameters as distribution of positions, interactivity. Moreover, new parameters are highlighted and described – degrees of dialogue and discussion which allow to see in what percentage a communication is conducted in the forms of dialogue and discussion. Also, an approach how to identify degrees of dialogue and discussion is revealed and explained.

Keywords: Deliberative democracy, online deliberation, social Media, dialogue, discussion

1. Introduction

The digital revolution, development of Internet has transformed democratic politics as new opportunities for communication with voters were opened for political actors while citizens could participate more actively in political life of country thanks to information availability, their ability to produce and disseminate it. Nevertheless, there has been one more vulnerability connecting with spread of false information and polarizing messages, incitement to hatred on social media. In this situation it seems significant to refer to definition of dialogue.

As global experience shows, the level of democracy development in society is evidenced by degree of political dialogue development. In democracy, an ability to build up a constructive dialogue not only between citizens themselves but also between citizens and government is becoming increasingly relevant. It means that a political communication plays an important role in ability to generate and maintain a dialogue mode. A mission of political communication is to provide opportunities for achieving social harmony and conditions for political discourse.

In recent years, social networks have been significantly influencing public discourse and political communication in society. They are used for prompt informing a population, shaping an image of politicians, monitoring public online discourse, identifying positions of citizens, their argumentation on political issues, assessing public reactions to news produced by media on online platforms, statements and actions of political actors, ensuring transparency and openness of government, increasing a level of citizens' influence on political decisions, interacting with civil society, online discussions and providing a feedback

The article will further reveal a research of discussions on socio-political themes of current interest on social media. As an example, discussions in American segment of Facebook regarding the impeachment of D. Trump will be analyzed. The main purpose of article is to show potential of Internet deliberation as a form of public dialogue on example of social media discussions' analysis.

The main research question (RQ1) to be answered: does online deliberation on social media take a form of dialogue or discussion? Our hypothesis is that online deliberation on political issues on social media, as a rule, has a mixed format but in the form of dialogue is often better. In order to define in what way and in what ratio "dialogue – discussion" online deliberation takes place, it is necessary to analyze such parameters as distribution of positions, interactivity, degrees of dialogue and discussion.

2. Theoretical Basis

For research presented below a few theoretical concepts are important. Firstly, it is based on the concept of deliberative democracy of J. Habermas who, in our opinion, had a greatest impact on formation of deliberative democracy theory. A deliberative model of democracy proposed by Habermas is based on diverse forms of communication, continuous and maximally broad political discourse in society the results of which are determined by strength of arguments (Habermas, 1984). The concept implies that authentic problems of society, concepts for their solution and optimal ways to achieve goals in the process of collective reflections are identified and revealed.

Referring to concept of deliberation which is the center of the concepts of deliberative democracy, researchers note that there is no unified definition (Mendelberg, 2002). However, most of them believe that citizens involved in deliberative process must make political decisions themselves based on arguments which, in turn, are reflectors of needs and moral principles of individuals (Gutman, 1996). Indeed, a deliberation is built primarily on argumentation exchange between citizens and their discussion of various statements in order to ensure a common good.

Secondly, concepts related to definitions of discourse and dialogue are essential to us. Speaking about discourse we agree with opinion of Dutch linguist T.A. van Dijk who uses a socio-cultural approach to the concept of discourse focusing on interactional nature of phenomenon, and considering it as a communicative act and communicative event (Dijk, 2002). Referring to dialogue we adhere to point of view of Russian linguist M. M. Bakhtin who defined dialogue as a way of interaction of consciousnesses where understanding arises (Bakhtin, 1997).

We emphasize that in accordance with principles and postulates of verbal communication there are two main types of communicative interaction: cooperation and confrontation (conflict) which indicate coincidence or non-coincidence of interests and goals of communicants. The concept of D. Bohm which is important for our further reasoning lies in the same aspect. Bohm separates "genuine dialogue" and "rhetorical dialogue" or "discussion". The differences are illustrated as a series of dichotomies (Bohm, 1997) and summarized in Table 1:

As D. Bohm (1997) has shown:

"In a dialogue, however, nobody is trying to win. Everybody wins if anybody wins. There is a different sort of spirit to it. In a dialogue, there is no attempt to gain points, or to make your particular view prevail. Rather, whenever any mistake is discovered on the part of anybody, everybody gains. It's a situation called win-win, whereas the other game is win-lose — if I win, you lose. But a dialogue is something more of a common participation, in which we are not playing a game against each other, but with each other. In a dialogue, everybody wins" (Bohm, 1997, p.7).

Table 1: Distinctions of dialogue and discussions according to D. Bohm

Dialogue	Discussion
Based on cooperation of participants.	Built on opposition as two sides oppose each other.
The goal is to create a common foundation.	The goal is the victory of one side.
One participant listens to the other to understand, find meaning and agreement.	Participants try to find weak points and put forward counterarguments.
Induces an introspection of own position.	Causes criticism of another position.
Opens up the possibility of achieving a better solution than any of the original ones.	Defends the position of one participant as the best solution and excludes other solutions.
Broadens the horizon and can change the point of view of the participant.	Affirms the point of view of one participant.
Everyone brings up their best idea for discussion knowing that other people's opinions will help improve it.	Everyone puts forward their best idea and defends it against attempts to show that it is wrong.

Finally, the third group of concepts that we rely on is related to studying a communication on Internet. The most developed form of online deliberation seems to be Internet forums and social networks where canvases of discussions where citizens, public associations and authorities interact can unfold. We concentrate on analysis of social media as they have taken on functions that are extremely promising in the political context correlating with active development of processes of political participation and democracy (Green, 2005; Stieglitz, 2012; Warren, 2015; Boulianne, 2015).

The object of research presented below is online deliberation on socio-political issues while the subject is dialogue as a form of communication. It should be pointed out that deliberation and dialogue can be viewed both as object and subject of research. If we consider a dialogue as a broad metaphor and explore a topic of mutual understanding, consensus in society, then the object will be dialogue and the subject will be deliberation as it will be its form. In this work we use a narrow approach to understanding dialogue and interpret it as a way of online deliberation placing it in opposition to discussion.

3. Research Approach and Data

The empirical material for analysis was online discussions on the second impeachment of Donald Trump in connection with attempted capture of the Capitol on January 6, 2021. This is one of very good examples of discussion where people's opinions are strongly polarized. Such examples can be much more, it mainly depends on topicality of problem. Facebook pages of the leading print and television American media were taken as data sources because there are active and rich discussions in terms of user interaction, a number of comments, argumentation of positions. To select discussions in which views of participants are polarized we differentiated media according to political affiliation with two leading parties choosing five media sources for analysis: conservative Washington Times and Fox News, liberal New York Times and MSNBC, as well as additionally we took a neutral Wall Street Journal. A total of 2,931 comments were analyzed (table 2). The data was collected using a parser. Then they were encoded in special Excel tables. As a limitation of our study, we point out that they were encoded by one rather than several encoders.

Table 2: Online discussions on second impeachment of D. Trump on media's pages on Facebook

Sources	MSNBC	The New York Times	The Washington Times	Fox News	The Wall Street Journal
Media type	Liberal		Conservative		Neutral
Article name, material	As House votes to impeach him, Trump's focus shifts to brand rehabilitation	Impeached, Again	Impeachment trial won't begin until after Trump leaves office	House meets to debate article of impeachment against President Donald Trump	Opinion | This Time, Trump's Impeachment Is Warranted
Post time	14.01.2021 (3:12)	14.01.2021 (16:50)	13.01.2021 (22:15)	13.01.2021	14.01.2021 (4:31)
Number of likes	1100	4800	427	7100	1800
Number of reposts	39	81	33	0	82
Number of comments	504	654	281	904	588

To achieve the goals of our investigation we used discourse analysis which is simultaneously a key moment and method of online deliberations' research. Our analysis is based on modification of methodology developed by Yu. Misnikov in line with ideas of Yu. Habermas (Misnikov, 2011). A scientist has generated «deliberative standard to assess discourse quality» where thematically different discursive parameters of the deliberative standard corresponding to specific research issues and using for guiding the process of encoding messages of Internet discussions are described.

One of the most significant components of our research was analysis of positions' distribution as we can notice in what way opinions coincide and differ (table 3). In turn, this allows us to understand what the ratio of dialogue and discussion can be in online deliberation. We analyzed the positions

of users in two categories: 1) "For" (support for D. Trump, against his second impeachment), 2) "Against" (negative attitude towards D. Trump, support for his second impeachment).

To determine interactivity, i.e. all mentions of participants by other users in the process of communication, it is needed to divide a number of participants' requests to each other's posts, mentions of each other (with name or without it) by total number of posts (table 4). To determine the degree of dialogue, it is necessary to take all posts where the interaction between participants was recorded, i.e. interactivity, and analyze them guided by Bohm table (see table 1). Having determined the degree of dialogue we can roughly calculate the degree of discussion. To do this, subtract the percentage of the degree of dialogue from the percentage of all posts where an interactivity parameter was encoded. As a result, the resulting percentage will describe the degree of discussion but there are some limitations. This percentage may be the same as it turned out, and less, which is due to the likelihood of existence of other forms of communication, i.e. polemics, debates that we did not define, or the absence of them. For example, users can leave empty comments or respond in the emoji language, which, in our opinion, cannot be attributed to dialogue, discussion, or other forms of communication. We focused on analyzing the degree of dialogue because, firstly, deliberation is based on a dialogue form of communication. Secondly, the degree of dialogue is much easier to define as dialogue is significantly different from other forms of communication.

4. Research Findings

Our hypothesis was that the majority of users do not agree with D. Trump's second impeachment and support for American president in the discussions on social networks of republican media whereas more people agree with second impeachment and do not support for Trump in the discussions on democratic social media. The centrist media are represented by two polarized camps of opinions in approximately equal proportions. As a result of the analysis, hypothesis was confirmed (see Table 3).

Based on the analysis of all positions, we can see that the American society is split into two camps in almost equal proportions. It is important to understand why in the discussions there is one or another level of interactivity, dialogism (see Table 4).

Table 3: Attitude to D. Trump and his second impeachment (in percentage)

Media	MSNBC	The New York Times	The Washington Times	Fox News	The Wall Street Journal
For	2	24	71	66	51 (including bots' posts)
Against	98	76	29	34	49
	General data				
For		13	68.5		58 (without bots' posts)
Against		87	31.5		42

Table 4: Interactivity, degrees of dialogue and discussion in online discussions (in percentage)

	Liberal		Conservative		Neutral
	MSNBC	The New York Times	The Washington Times	Fox News	The Wall Street Journal
Interactivity	14	34	41	16	41
General % of interactivity	24		28,5		
Degree of dialogue	13	21	37	12,3	23
General % of degree of dialogue	17		24,65		

Analyzed online discussions were not particularly interactive (did not even reach 50%) but the degree of dialogue in the discussions prevailed over the degree of other forms of communication (discussions, polemics). We see that there is no absolute dialogical form of communication in online discussions. Deliberation usually has a mixed format. Republican discussions are more interactive (28.5%) than democratic (24%). Moreover, communication on the platforms of republican media is characterized by a greater degree of dialogue (24.65%) than communication on democratic media (17%), which indicates a greater openness of Republicans to cooperate.

In online discussion on MSNBC we noticed that the degree of dialogue is high (13% out of 14%), the positions of participants almost completely coincide (98%). It can be assumed that like-minded people mainly conducted a dialogic conversation with each other, did not enter into discussion, polemics with other participants whose opinions differ. In case of neutral The Wall Street Journal we see that the camps of opinions are divided approximately in the same ratio, as well as the degree of dialogue and discussion (23% and 18% or less, respectively). This ratio of dialogue and discussion is explained by division of participants' positions on D. Trump and his second impeachment.

Speaking of discussion on The Washington Times the positions are roughly separated by ratio of 1/4 and 3/4, the degree of dialogue is high - 37% out of 41%. Most likely, like-minded people talked with each other and did not enter into discussions with other users. A similar situation was observed in discussion on Fox News but opinions were divided in a ratio of 1/3 and 2/3, the degree of dialogue communication is 12.3% out of 16%, which is significantly lower. Despite differences in indicators, the course of deliberation could be the same as in The Washington Times. A different picture can be seen in discussion on The New York Times, in which opinions were divided approximately in a ratio of 1/4 and 3/4 but the degree of dialogue is lower when we talk about the ratio of dialogue and discussion - 21% out of 34%. This may indicate that more disputes arose between participants, camps of opinions actively clashed. Analysis of degrees of dialogue and discussion in online discussions revealed that there was a mixed format of communication forms. A ratio "dialogue – discussion" mainly depends on way opinions are polarized in online discussions.

5. Conclusion and Future Research

To sum up, we can confirm our main hypothesis and provide an answer to RQ1. Online deliberation can take place both in the form of dialogue and discussion. The research shows that usually it is a mixed format but in the form of dialogue is often better and more effective rather than

when the degree of discussion is high as less time and effort is devoted to disputes and attempts to win over the interlocutor who acts as opponent in discussion and his point of view, it is more likely to eliminate disagreements between the participants and reach agreement. In any case, deliberation is based on dialogue; accordingly, this form should prevail over others.

Therefore, it is necessary to analyze the degrees of dialogue and degree of discussion and develop criteria by which the degrees of dialogue and discussion can be investigated. It is important to observe a progress, change of discussion and understand it as dialogue can turn into discussion and vice versa. Probably, it depends on how willing the participants are to listen and hear each other, as well as on their culture of communication, communicative behavior and quality of argumentation which we will study in the future.

In future works it will be useful to analyze online discussions in countries with different political regimes (democratic and authoritarian) and compare the results of deliberation's quality analysis. We assume that to assess character and quality of online deliberation as a form of public dialogue these parameters should be analyzed: 1) positions of participants on acute socio-political issues, to what extent their opinions coincide and differ; 2) volume and level of argumentation, 3) culture of communication, 4) equality of participation of communicators and 5) degrees of dialogue, discussion, disputes, polemics as forms of communication. These are not all parameters but the main ones when analyzing the quality of online deliberation. On basis of future analysis we will be able to formulate recommendations and proposals how to raise deliberative quality.

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