DELIBERATION POTENTIAL OF VIRTUAL WORLDS: CASE OF SECOND LIFE

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to evaluate deliberation quality of public discussions which were held in a 3D multi-user virtual environment (MUVE) Second Life. Discussions regarding Turkey's public issues are examined by using the rationalistic and ethical criteria comes from Communicative Action Theory (1984) and discourse ethics studies (1991, 1996) of Jürgen Habermas. Techniques of quantitative content analysis, and survey are employed for data collection. Findings suggest that the current public agenda of Turkey is discussed within the framework of thought diversity by the citizens gathered in this virtual world. However, these discussions do not fully satisfy the Habermasian rationalistic and ethical criteria. Instead of actions that oriented common good, competitive actions directed towards success are more commonly observed. Particularly, MUVE has low level of justification that is a significant barrier for rationalistic discussions. On the other hand, principles of discursive equality, reciprocity, and respect are reflected successfully in the MUVE during the deliberations.

Keywords: Deliberative Democracy, Public Sphere, Habermas, Online Deliberation, Second Life.

SANAL DÜNYALARIN MÜZEKERE POTANSİYELİ: SECOND LIFE ÖRNEĞİ

ÖZ

Bu çalışma üç boyutlu ve çok-kullanıcılı sanal bir dünya olan Second Life üzerinde gerçekleşen kamusal tartışmaların müzakereci yaklaşım açısından niteliksel olarak değerlendirilmesini amaçlamaktadır. Türkiye'nin kamusal meselelerini konu edinen tartışmalar, Jürgen Habermas'ın İletişimsel Eylem Kuramı (1984) ile Söylem Etiği (1991, 1996) çalışmalarından temellenen akılcı ve etik ilkeler (düşünümsellik, gerekçelendirme, karsılıklılık, söylemsel eşitlik, saygı, dahil olma, bağımsızlık) kullanılarak incelenmiştir. Araştırma kapsamında, nicel paradigma ekseninde içerik çözümlemesi ile anket, veri toplama teknikleri olarak işe koşulmuştur. Bulgular göstermektedir ki, incelenen forumlarda Türkiye'nin kamusal gündemi, teknoloji dolayımıyla bir araya gelen katılımcılar tarafından düşünce çeşitliliği çerçevesinde tartışılmaktadır. Bununla birlikte tartışmalar, akılcı ve etik ilkeleri tam olarak karşılayamamaktadır. Tartışma süreçlerinde, anlaşmaya yönelmiş eylemler yerine yarışmacı tarzda başarıya yönelmiş eylemler ağırlıklı olarak gerçekleşmektedir. Özellikle Second Life'da gerçekleşen bu tartışmalarda gerekçelendirme davranışının oldukça düşük olması, akılcı tartışmaların önünde önemli bir engel oluşturmaktadır. Öte yandan söylemsel eşitlik, karşılıklılık ile saygı ilkelerinin gerçekleştirilmesi ise ortamın müzakereci etkinlikler açısından olumlu yönlerini oluşturmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler; Müzakereci Demokrasi, Kamusal Alan, Habermas, Çevrimiçi Müzakere, Second Life.

Introduction

Along with the growing scholarly interest on deliberation practices in physical life, formal and informal online discussions have also gained interest in the field of deliberative democracy. In compliance with the nature of technological development,

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Internet-based technologies are emerging and evolving continuously. In the main Internet structure, there are numerous online tools such as blogs and microblogs (e.g. Twitter), social networking sites (e.g. Facebook), video sharing sites (e.g. YouTube) and 3D virtual worlds (e.g. Second Life). These net-based tools have various purposes, like socializing, entertainment, information sharing, and interpersonal or mass communication. They are constituted by several combination variations of design components such as text-based or voice-based, asynchronous or synchronous, push or pull technology, and 2D or 3D graphic format. So they are all unique, and it is difficult to discuss them in general concepts. As Baym (2010:17) said, "we must avoid the temptation to look at new media only as a whole…To understand how we use them, and with what consequences, we need to consider them both separately and holistically." Today, traditional (Web 1.0) and new generation (2.0) net-based tools are also using by deliberative practices. Diversity of these tools and their features require the consideration of tools as variables to discuss potential of the Internet in deliberative model. However, there are too few empirical studies that consider platforms such as Youtube (Halpern and Gibbs, 2013; Milliken and O'Donnel, 2007), Facebook (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013) or YouTube (Edgerly, Vraga, Fung, Moon & Yoo, 2009; Milliken and O'Donnel, 2009), and their characteristics for their deliberation evaluations. Furthermore, researches are also needed virtual worlds which support augmented and 3D avatar-mediated communication. According to Noveck (2005) "3D technology offers ordinary people more effective ways to talk about complex problems." Interacting with discussion subjects and even role-playing may provide a deeper understanding of the issue and bring new perspectives to the table.

This study aims to evaluate 3D virtual environments whether they reflect ethical and rationalistic criteria. For this, Second Life which is the largest 3D virtual world created entirely by its users was employed as research field. Discussion group *Tartışan Türkiye Second Life* (Turkey Deliberates SL) is accepted for the case study because it has structured deliberation process (openness, agenda setting, moderation and discussion

rules) and focuses on Turkey's public issues. Public discussions on this platform are evaluated through quantitative content analysis and participant evaluation (survey) techniques with the guidance of quantitative research paradigm.

1. Online Deliberation and Design

Democratic legitimacy occurs only as a result of the accordance between decisions taken by government and public opinion. Deliberative democracy focuses on providing legitimacy to political decisions through qualified and democratic public discussions and proposes an integrated model that does not exclude representative model but eliminates its shortcomings about the reflection of public opinion on the decisions taken by increasing participation. As a special kind of discussion, deliberation aims to create processes that consist of rationalistic public interactions among free and equal citizens "all who are possibly affected" (Habermas, 1996:458). Rationalistic and ethical discussions should be organized with some preconditions regarding the discussion process, place, and participants. The theory of communicative action and discourse ethics studies of Habermas act as a guiding light for defining the prerequisites of deliberation. In these studies, Habermas specifies preconditions for the separation of qualified discussions (deliberation) from ordinary discussions with respect to rationality and ethicalness, along with the actualization of the discussions with a consciousness of common good. Rationality requires that justification of arguments only with their reasons. Presenting reason provides the participants to take these arguments into account and also play a role in the process of reflexivity. According to Habermas (2001:46) the person who accepts the strength of his/her justifications should be ready to change his/her position when necessary. In this context, a rationalistic discussion is a reciprocal process during which participants are in continuous dialogue and listen to the claims of one another along with their reasons to try to understand them. A claim (or counter-claim) is valid and acceptable by other debaters only when supported by reasons. According to the theory, the person is not acting rationally if he/she neglects claims and reasons or responds by dogmatic assertions. Furthermore, deliberations should be

inclusive and public, and free of any internal or external coercion (Cohen, 1989:23) for ethical based interactions. The reaching of a common good by the citizens as an ideal discussion activity takes place with mutually justified claims and prioritizes freedom, equality, and sincerity in participation.

In the empirical dimension of deliberation studies, there is a growing scholarly interest about the potential of online discussions for the deliberative approach due to the fact that this technology has brought some innovation into public interactions. Through the Internet, citizens can be -almost- free from physical life limitations such as place, time, and even body and identity. Furthermore, they are able to open discussions about what really matters to them and thus sets their own public agenda. They can also question current system, government, or policies, express concerns or views, learn from each other, organize, and resist against hegemonic (state or economic) powers. However, net-based interactions also have problems such as digital divide (Norris, 2001: 130), polarization and balkanization (Saphiro, 2002:192; Sustein, 2002:182), massification of misinformation, flaming, and so forth. All these kinds of benefits and problems have caused efforts to understand potentials of the online discussions for deliberative model.

Studies on online deliberation (Dahlberg, 2001; Graham, 2008; Jankowski & van Os, 2004; Janssen & Kies, 2004; Jensen, 2003; Schneider, 1997; Steenbergen, Bächtiger, Spörndli and Steiner, 2003; Stromer-Galley, 2007; Wilhelm, 2002) mostly focus on quality of discussions. These studies evaluate online discussions in the light of normative criteria of Habermas and for this, deliberative preconditions are conceptualized and various expansions with regards to specific nature of online environments are also included. Although there are great amount of empirical works on quality of OD, "the results have not been consistent enough to reach a conclusion about the positive or negative potential of online deliberation" (Rhee & Kim, 2009:223). Findings are varied because there are differences in each case in respect to deliberation process and design of the technology that are used for deliberations.

In general, design of deliberations has main two components: process and

structure. Deliberation process is generally designed by forum management via forum rules, membership options (openness), form of moderation, and agenda setting procedures. All of these procedures regulate deliberations, deliberation places, and participants, and thus can shape aim, content, and characteristics of a deliberation. Temporal structure is another dimension of the design and related to the net-based technology that discussions are carried out on it. As the main skeleton of online platforms, structure is shaped by features like communication base (text based-voice based), time (asynchronous - synchronous), push-pull technology, graphic format (2D-3D), size of interaction (small group-mass communication) and so forth. Manosevitch (2014:1) mentions that technical structure and also interface design may impact the way people communicate in online places. For instance; timing, which refers to synchronous or asynchronous nature of a tool, is one of the indicators of online interactions. In a synchronous interaction, users have to design their messages in seconds like face-to-face interactions. Dahlberg (2001:5) claims that time itself may deter people's participation in online deliberations and because of the chrono-economic stress (Millard, 1997:159), and there is a tendency of creating shorter messages during the synchronous interactions. Communication base contains voice and/or text-based modes as communication instruments that are related to rhythm of interaction. Text-based interaction requires using keyboard, and this may cause relatively slower interactions. In addition, low-level keyboard skills may lead to misunderstandings and communication problems. However, using one's voice might give some clues about participants' physical identity, gender, or even ethnicity and might cause participants to focus on the discussant instead of the argument. Graphic format may also varies interactions in the context of text, symbols, or multimedia (videos, pictures etc.).

Today, there are a variety of net-based tools for public interaction, and all have their own structural and design combinations; thus, their communication features are not easily generalizable. Wright (2007:849) says "we should view deliberation as dependent on design and choice, rather than a predetermined product of the technology". Although

variety of net-based technology, such as UseNet news groups, chat rooms or Web-based forums, are used for researches as investigation fields, they are not considered as a variable generally by OD researches. There are few empirical researchers who consider the platforms such as YouTube (Halpern and Gibbs, 2013; Milliken and O'Donnel, 2007) or Facebook (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013) and their characteristics for their deliberation evaluations. Virtual worlds like Second Life have been emerged as three-dimensional forms of online communication. According to Gordon&Manosevitch (2010:75) virtual worlds provide opportunity to discuss issues with the help of visual representation of information and also "power of experience".

2. Method

This study aims to evaluate deliberation quality of the MUVE whether to what extent and how Habermasian deliberative criteria (Habermas, 1984, 1991, 1996) were reflected by the discussion activities. In this respect, descriptive research design is adopted for the study. Descriptive design is a research strategy that helps "to define existence and delineate characteristics of a particular phenomenon" (Heppner, Kivlighan & Wampold, 2008:224). For the research, Tartışan Türkiye (TT) discussion platform in Second Life is accepted as investigation field. Discussions in TT Second Life are open-ended, communication mode is text-based in general, but participants can also use voice if they prefer. On the TT Second Life, 24 deliberation sessions are carried out, and 22.485 messages are produced (text-based and voice-based together) during the study period.

Sampling: For evaluating discussions in this platform, purposeful sampling technique is employed. This technique "focuses on selecting information-rich cases which study will illuminate the questions under the study" (Patton, 2002:46). For the sampling, discussions are categorized under the topics such as education, environment, health, Turkish economy, Kurdish issue and terrorism, foreign policy of Turkey, and so on. Then, first three discussion topics that contained the longest message chain are adopted as samples of the study (Table 1).

Table 1: Discussion Topics that have Highest Level of Contribution

Discussion topics	Number of messages
Turkish foreign policy	991
Kurdish issue and terrorism	735
Turkish economy	391
Total	2117

Another data source is participants in the research. It is preferred to include all discussants who attend one or more deliberation sessions instead of selecting a sampling from all populations. This approach adopted because a) return rates of online surveys are relatively lower than physical life (Venhovar & Manfreda, 2008:184), and b) probability of loss of participant (some participants may close their account permanently; some of them may limit their forum settings to avoid receiving direct messages or e-mails). Thus, surveys are sent to all discussants (N=437) and received 47 returns from MUVE.

Data Collection: To evaluate the deliberation principles, content analysis, and survey are employed as research techniques with the guidance quantitative paradigm. The content analysis scheme is adopted from studies of Dahlberg (2004), Graham (2008), Jensen (2003), Steenbergen at all. (2003), Stromer-Galley (2007) and Wilhelm (2001) which are known as reliable. Besides, drawing from literature (Dahlberg, 2004; Jensen, 2003; Min, 2009) a participant evaluation form (survey) is developed to collect data for the inclusion, reflexivity, and autonomy principles. For this, I asked participants' age, gender, education, and Internet skill levels (inclusion), perceived "freedom of expression" Min (2009:67) (for the autonomy principle) and whether their opinions/positions about the discussion topics had changed because of other discussants' expressions (for the reflexivity principle). These items were measured via a five-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" with the post-deliberation

survey.

3. Findings

The requirement for *inclusion* implies that all who are affected by the issues under discussion, or more generally all who are interested, should be able to participate (Janssen & Kies, 2004:23) and thus all discussion spaces should be open to all participants and should contain a diversity of population in online settings. Digital divide (inequalities in net-access and net-skills) and the some restrictive practices of powerful elites might be a barrier into accessing online public places (Dahlberg, 2004:35). For this research, the inclusion principle is observed through distributions of gender, age, education, net-skills, and also through whether restrictive practices of political and economic powers prevented access to online public places.

Findings on gender distribution show that male participants are more prevalent than females in the platform. 58 percent of the participants in MUVE are male. According to the finding on age, MUVE has wide age distribution (Mean=32.50, standard deviation=7.154, skewness=0.81, kurtosis=0.717), and population in this platform is almost well-balanced and close to normal. However, findings show that there is also other clear bias on education in the platform. More than 70 percent of participants had an undergraduate degree or above, in MUVE (% 74.4). Moreover, participants heavily indicated their Internet skills as good or very good (%95). As a 3D software-based platform, MUVE requires high level of computer and software skills as well as powerful hardware. It is possible that those requirements may bring exclusion, and hence it may damage the inclusion principle in MUVE.

The principle of *discursive equality* indicates that all participants have equal rights to let their voice be heard and to contribute to the discussions (Habermas, 1996:305). Discursive equality is measured by rate and distribution of participation and also volume of expression, the number of words in previous research (Schneider, 1997:73; Stromer-Galley, 2007:6). They determined how much participants contributed

the discussions and thus whether participation is equal. For this research, distribution of voice approach is employed, and measured message frequency of each participant (P1-Pn) and volume of each messages.

Sessions in the MUVE are carried out with a small number of participants due to the nature of this technology. Contribution distributions in these discussions are shown below (Table 2):

Table 2: Message Distributions of Discussants

Number of messages	Number of people	Percentage	Total percentage
1	1	3.2	3.2
2	1	3.2	6.5
3	1	3.2	9.7
4	1	3.2	12.9
5-9	2	6.5	19.4
10-20	8	25.8	45.2
21-40	12	38.7	83.9
41-60	3	9.7	93.5
61-80	4	3.2	96.8
81-100	1	3.2	100.0
Total	31	100.0	

Table 2 shows that, 87 percent of the participants in MUVE created 5 or more messages, and they contributed more frequently than SNS. High level of contribution indicates that this platform had a more positive result in the context of discursive equality.

The *reciprocity* is a principle that includes replying to the assertions of other arguers by understanding (listening/responding to) their reasons (Graham, 2010:103). This principle emphasizes dialogue instead of monologue; it is possible for the participants to reach an agreement only by mutual message transfer. Researchers

(Graham, 2008:27; Janssen & Kies, 2004:15; Jensen, 2003:355; Stromer-Galley, 2007:7) measure the reciprocity principle via content analysis with respect to reply-count technique. In this research, messages that open a new discussion are coded as initial (1), messages containing a reference to a previous message or its author, or from the content of the message it becomes clear that the argumentation builds on the arguments of a previous message (Janssen & Kies, 2004:15) are coded as reply (2), messages that do not give any response to participants and just tell own view are coded as monologue (3).

Table 3: Message Distributions for Reciprocity Principle

Tools	MUVE (%)
Initial message	1.9
Reply	91.0
Monologue	7.1
Total	100

Findings (Table 3) suggest that discussions in MUVE have reciprocal characteristics. The messages reply other arguments or solutions related to discussion topic and also respond to critiques or questions on own arguments.

Justification is the fundamental principle that aims to provide rationality in discussions. According to Benhabib (1996:71-72), individuals should provide good reasons that support their opinions when presenting their views and positions to others. The expression of claims along with their reasons is required for a discussion to reach an agreement. The *justification principle* can be evaluated using content analysis technique with regards to whether a claim is defended has a reason or not. In his research, Wilhelm (1999:95) coded postings as VALIDATE if they "supply reasons or arguments for the validity of their positions" and NOVALID "that presents neither conditions of validity nor reasons for the truth of the statement –instead appeals are made largely to personal prejudice, emotion or aesthetic judgment".

Table 4: Message Distributions for Justification Principle

	MUVE (%)

Justified	24.9
Non justified	69.9
Missing value	5.2
Total	100

As seen in Table 4, MUVE has low percentage for justification behavior and messages mainly have no reason but only opinion. This is a significant barrier for rationalistic discussions in MUVE.

To understand quality of justification, type of reasons is also measured. Coding categories are developed based on Graham's (2008:24) and Jensen's (2003:360) approaches: (1) fact/source, identified arguments, which supported their claims by providing a fact or source as evidence, (2) comparison, an argument that supported its claim by using an analogy or a comparison in general,(3) experience and personal stories (4) examples identified an argument, which supported its claim by providing an anecdotal example (real-life, fictional, or hypothetical), and (5) internal validation, the debater argues based on his/her own viewpoints, stands and values, but these are made explicit in the argumentation. Findings show that participants were using a variety of reason; however, the highest level of reasoning type is the "internal validation" and then "examples". 246 arguments in MUVE contain internal validation type reasoning whereas 152 arguments are supported by examples. Participants have a tendency to support arguments or critics in a more subjective way.

Reflexivity Principle: According to the *reflexivity principle*, accepting that one's own position and thoughts might be changeable, and one may have the ability to abandon them according to the strength of the counter-claim (Habermas, 2001:45). In the deliberative approach, "although consensus is not seen as the ultimate goal of a discussion, a debate of high quality is expected to reflect some degree of convergence of standpoints" (Jankowski & van Os, 2004:184). For this research, the principle of reflexivity is evaluated via content analysis in the context of whether the opposing views

and the information/proofs that support this opposing view are seen in the participants' own messages or not. In addition, it is possible that even though their positions have changed, participants may not let this affect their discussions. Besides, participants' feedbacks on opinion change were also considered for the evaluation of reflexivity.

Findings from content analysis show that most of contributions do not have reflexive characteristic. 98.6 percent of the messages are non-reflexive characteristic. Participants rarely considered opposing views and evidences that supported these opposing views, and they do not revise their own position formation/proofs that support these opposing views. In the sessions, participants strictly maintain their positions and do not evaluate counter-publics empathetically.

For the second step, participants' feedbacks on position change are evaluated, and they answer whether their opinion/position changed because of the interaction with other opinions during the discussions (Table 5).

Table 5: Mean Score for Opinion Change

	MUVE
Mean	2.72
Standard deviation	1.008

According to the findings, all participants disagreed in their feedback as to whether their opinion had changed because of the deliberation. Together with the content analysis findings, it is possible to say that reflexivity principle is not reflected by discussions. Participants stick strictly to their own positions during the discussions and emphatic communication with the counter-arguments is generally not seen.

The element of *respect* is about the participants paying attention to each other, and approaching other participants and their thoughts in a respectful manner. For this research, the principle of respect was observed with respect and disrespect categories and adopted Steenbergen's coding approach. According to Steenbergen et al. (2003:29) there are three codes of the principle respect: (0) No respect: This code is reserved for

speeches in which there are only negative statements about the groups. (1) Implicit respect: We use this code if there are no explicitly negative statements, but neither are there explicit positive statements. (2) Explicit respect: This code is assigned if there is at least one explicitly positive statement about the groups, regardless of the presence of negative statements.

Table 6: Message Distributions for the Principle of Respect

	MUVE (%)
No respect	2
Implicit respect	84.6
Explicit respect	13.4
Total	100.0

Findings suggest that MUVE had high respect level together with explicit and implicit respect percentages, and had only 2 percent disrespectful expressions occurred during the study period (Table 6).

The principle of *autonomy* protects the actualization of discussions free from any pressure of the state and economic (like platform landlords) powers (Habermas, 1996: 305). Because online discussion places are open to surveillance by powers, participants may feel less free when expressing themselves. Autonomy principle is evaluated through the discussion texts and also self-assessments of participants for this research. For the content analysis, three codes were employed: (1) message that contains an expression on feeling pressure due to political or economic powers, (2) message that contains an expression on feeling pressure due to forum management, (3) message that contains any expression on feeling a pressure.

Findings show that messages that are created by participants during the deliberations did not contain clear indicators on feeling pressure and hundred percent of messages in MUVE have no expression about pressure.

However, it is possible that participants who feel pressure during deliberations might not have wanted to express their feelings explicitly. Because of this, drawing from Min's approach (2009) it is also asked to participant how free they felt for expressing their thoughts during the deliberations (Table 7).

Table 7: Mean Scores for Feeling Freedom

	MUVE
Mean	4.26
Standard deviation	.928

Table 7 shows that participants responded "agree" to the item ("I felt free to express my views during the discussion"), resulting in a very high freedom to express score. Together with the content analysis findings, it is possible to say that participants felt free from powers during the deliberations. Undoubtedly, this result is positive for the online deliberative practices.

Conclusion and discussion

This study confirms that MUVE has a unique nature of participation in respect to discursive equality, reciprocity and respect. A common view in online communication (Dahlberg, 2001; Shedletsky & Aitken, 2004:108; Witschge, 2005:115) is that impolite and uncivil behaviors are seen easily in online places because of anonymity and tele-presence. Users in MUVE interact via their 3D graphical representations (avatars shaped as anything human or creatures, etc.) and have hidden IP (Internet Protocol) addresses. No one can trace footprints of users except the platform owner Linden Inc. Despite its high level of anonymity, interestingly MUVE also has the high level of respect, discursive equality, and reciprocity. Domination of virtual identities on physical identities might be related to this issue. Participants who live in MUVE see themselves as "resident" of this virtual geography and construct well-designed virtual identities to live in this world. They make a social capital and were members of various virtual communities as well. Socially living in this world as a resident strictly related to identity

statement and these identities may far overweigh in time. It is possible that virtual identities become more important than physical identities in the virtual communities. As Goffman (1999:78) said in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, "all the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify." So, impression management may become active again on the stages of Second Life and anonymity psychology may die out. Furthermore, this immersive technology may produce sense of being together in a place realistically and persuasively (Ikegami, 2008:3), and thus it may remove tele-presence psychology as well. Because of these, participants may feel pressure to behave according to social norms in the deliberation sessions. More researches are needed to highlight this point.

Discussions in MUVE are not able to reflect justification principle that is fundamental for rationalistic public discussions. OD researchers (Dahlberg, 2001:5; Stromer-Galley & Martinson, 2009:195) mention that syncronicity may create a barrier because of chrono-economic stress, and participants can produce shorter messages than asynchronous platforms. These kinds of messages contain not enough reasons, explanations, and information. Mannoyer-Smith & Wojcik's (2012:21) research that compares physical-based and online deliberations, suggest that justification behavior clearly decreases in physical life interactions, and one of the potential reasons might be message speed in face-to-face deliberations. From this point, it is possible to say that tools that support synchronous interactions are not convenient for deliberations in respect to justification behavior.

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