# POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY: A SYSTEMIC APPROACH

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**ABSTRACT**

Political communication researches' focal point has been moved towards internet based platforms with the transformation of media domain in accordance with flourishing information and communication technologies. Especially new internet-based communication platforms influence citizen participation –either positive or negative way- and this new form of participation as a knock-on effect paves the way for rearrangement relationships between citizen, media and political actors. When the issue comes to citizen participation, it becomes inevitable not to talk about legitimacy of decisions which is a two sided phenomenon: on the one side citizens and on the other side political actors/decision-makers. Deliberative democracy can be defined as a specific way of communication which aims to foster democratic decision-making processes through citizen participation. There is close relationship between deliberative democracy and political communication because each of them takes group, interpersonal, intercultural communication as core elements of their study areas. Moreover, examining both of them needs a holistic and inclusionary approach. Because media researches have challenges while they encounter with democracy and citizen participation. This paper argues that, a systemic approach can be applied to political communication research which has commonalities with deliberative democratic literature in terms of focusing on new interaction platforms and their context dependent functioning mechanism. While arguing this, abstaining from going into deep discussions concerning democratic values from a context dependent approach, first political communication concept will be put on table with its impact upon citizen participation than deliberative democracy and political communication common points will be displayed and in the third part reasons of why a systemic approach is needed for research design of deliberative democracy and political communication will be examined as a road for further researches.

**Keywords:** Political Communication, Deliberative Democracy, Media, Systemic Approach.

## SİYASAL İLETİŞİM VE MÜZAKERECİ DEMOKRASI: SİSTEMİK YAKLAŞIMLA

**ÖZ**

Bilgi ve iletişim teknolojilerinin medya içeriğini zenginleştirmesi ve dönüştürmesiyle birlikte siyasal iletişim araştırmalarının odak noktası internet temelli platformlara doğru kaymıştır. Yeni internet tabanlı iletişim platformları vatandaş katılımını – pozitif ya da negatif yönde – etkilemekte ve bu yeni katılım şekilleri zincirleme bir etki yaratarak vatandaş, medya ve siyasi aktörler arasındaki ilişkinin de yeniden düzenlenmesini gerekli kılmaktadır. Konu vatandaş katılımına geldiğinde, meşruiyet kavramından bahsetmek kaçınılmazdır. İki yönlü bir fenomen olan meşruiyetin bir ucunda vatandaş diğer ucunda siyasi aktörler ve karar alıcılar yer almaktadır. Bu noktada müzakereci demokrasi, vatandaş katılımı dolayısıyla demokratik karar alma sürecini teşvik eden kendine has bir iletişim olarak tanımlanabilir. Müzakereci demokrasi ve siyasal iletişim arasında da yakın bir ilişki vardır; her ikisi de grup içi iletişimi, kişilerarası ve kültürlerarası iletişimi temel çalışma alanları olarak ele almaktadırlar. Bununla birlikte her ikisi de araştırma yöntemi olarak kapsayıcı ve bütüncül bir yaklaşıma ihtiyaç duymaktadır. Zira yeni medya çalışmaları demokrasi ve katılım konularını ele almak konusunda sıkıntı yaşamaktadır. Bu çalışma, müzakereci demokrasi alanına uygulanabilir olan sistemik yaklaşımın, bütüncül bir bakış açısına ihtiyaç duyan siyasal iletişim çalışmalarına da uygulanabilir olduğunu öne sürmektedir. Demokratik değerlerle ilgili derin tartışmalara girmekten kaçınılarak, ilk olarak siyasal iletişim kavramı ve bu kavramın vatandaş katılımı üzerindeki etkileri sonrasında müzakereci demokrasi ve siyasal iletişimin ortak noktaları ve üçüncü kısımda da sistemik yaklaşımın neden gerekli olduğu ve sonraki araştırmalara yöntem olarak nasıl yön verebileceği ortaya konmaya çalışılacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Siyasal İletişim, Müzakereci Demokrasi, Medya, Sistemik Yaklaşım.

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## Introduction

Graber and Smith (2005: 479) mention that political communication "encompasses the construction, sending receiving and processing of messages that potentially have a significant direct or indirect effect on politics. The message senders or message receivers may be politicians, journalists, members of interest groups, or private, unorganized citizens". In another saying the political communication studies focus on interaction between political actors, institutions, citizens and news media. These interactions are being occurred through symbols and messages that create impact on political systems (Jennings & Zillmann, 2008: 217). Katrin Voltmer (2006: 6) defines political communication as a "system of dynamic interaction between political actors, the media and audience members, each of whom is involved in producing, receiving and interpreting political messages".

It can be argued that there is a mutual relationship between political system and political communication; it means that not only political communication is being shaped by political system but also political system can be re-formed by methods of political communication. Moreover, citizens are not passive actors in political systems. As Voltmer (2006) mentions citizens are actively participating producing, interpreting and constructing political messages. For these reasons, political communication needs a holistic and inclusionary perspective which embraces contextual dynamics and citizens as important actor of political communication. While citizens produce political messages they become more inclined to transmit their messages to decision-makers and new communication technologies provide them such opportunity. At that point political communication researches and deliberative democracy researches close up for the reason that deliberative democracy focus on citizens' participation to decision-making process especially concerning public affairs. Thus they need together an inclusionary approach in order to deal with contextual dynamics as well. As mentioned this paper does not aim to display which conditions are ideal for deliberative democracy – in normative terms- and how new political communication channels are suitable for deliberation and democratic functioning. But this paper tries to discuss, why a systemic approach can be applied to political communication and deliberative democracy. The first section will try to display impact of new internet based platforms on citizen participation, the second section will mention commonalities between political communication and deliberative democracy and the third section will be a long conclusion concerning systemic approach as a road to further researches.

### 1. Political Communication and Citizen Participation

McNair (2001: 4) defines political communication as "a subset of all political discourses thus not only verbal or written statements but also visual means of signification such as dress, make-up hairstyles, all those elements of communication constitute a political image and identity". Nimmo and Swanson (2004, p. 93) mention that "the political communication studies focus generally on strategic uses of communication and its effect on public's political attitude and behavior, such as rhetorical analysis of political speeches, studies of media coverage of political events, and studies of political advertising". Thus the important point is that messages should have impact on perceptions of individuals, their behaviors and beliefs, concerned groups, institutions and environment in which they exist (Yang, 2004).

Kaid (2004: xii) displays a detailed historical development process concerning political communication in his book 'Handbook of Political Communication Research'. She mentions that "the emergence of political communication research can be traced back to Plato's work in ancient

Greece but as a cross-disciplinary field its emergence is started in 1950s" (p. xii). It was labeled as a subfield of communication until 1973. The date is important in terms of the acceptance of political communication as a distinct field of inquiry by the establishment of Political Communication Division of the International Communication Association.

Blumler and Kavanagh (2010, p. 213) argue that as a field political communication has changed with transformation in the societies and media. They mention that, paths to political communication have multiplied and become more complex and also the power relations among key message providers and receivers are being re-arranged. After the first and second transformation phases, political communication concept –first phase was marked by a party dominated political system so to say parties are the mere source of initiatives and social reform; in the second phase which was in 1960s, nationwide television was the only medium for political communication and this period affected relationship between citizens and political parties- has been entered a new era. And we are now "in the third age which is marked by the proliferation of the main means of communication, media abundance, ubiquity, reach and celerity".

Ercan et al. (2019: 20) argue that the term 'communicative plenty' is useful to identify this new period in which people have chance to reach quite a lot information and communication opportunity not only in digital platforms but face-to-face as well. Political communication has been passed through a transformation period and communication and information technologies play an important role in reforming nature and location of contemporary political communication (Ercan, Hendriks, & Dryzek, 2019). For instance Twitter, Facebook, Blogs are new communication spaces in addition to conventional political communication places (Allen & Light, 2015). These new platforms are being witnessed to deliberative discourses and practices as well and for this reason they can be examined from a deliberative democracy perspective in accordance with political communication literature. . "Not all these spaces are new; but what is new is their increasing density" (Ercan et al., 2019: 20). And this density necessitates using deliberative democracy as a theoretical framework.

It can be argued that, communicative plenty, new communication channels and spaces contribute to interconnect different parts of society and pave the way for interaction between political decision-makers and citizens (Paletz & Lipinski, 1994). Because people are more inclined to be active in political issues when they find convenient platforms. Reichert and Print (2016) argue that especially internet-based interactions foster youth engagement concerning political and social issues and they become more active. Sarah and White (2007, p. 93) mention the reasons which make civic engagement important: "1. it promotes individual growth by providing practical experiences. 2. It helps generate positive feelings about self and community 3. It fosters stronger and more democratic communities 4. It ensures that the needs of multiple voices are communicated to the public officials".

Still the direction and content of media impact has been contentious concerning political participation. Especially internet and its effect on citizens' political engagement via social media channels are problematic in the literature. Putnam (2000) argues, the first purpose of people to use internet is entertainment for this reason it cannot foster civic engagement. There are positive arguments as well, for instance one is referring to power of activation of internet: "People who are already predisposed or interested in politics can be activated by internet" (Boulianne, 2009: 194) Another group argue that internet can trigger motivation for participation of people who are inactive (Boulianne, 2009). Mobilization theory argues that the internet has positive impact on

political activism in terms of eliminating barriers to civic engagement and this encourages citizens to participate political debates and group interaction; reinforcement theories claim that the use of internet will strengthen the existing patterns of civic involvement (Norris, 2000). Moreover, these new technologies and digital platforms are being considered as new tools for democratic participation and political engagement of citizens in societies that are in democratic crisis (Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009, p. 902) Limited citizenship theories claim that citizens tend to be stay away from political processes on the other side democratic theory prioritize citizens' active role in participation to political practices (Gamson, 2001).

As Pippa Norris (2000: 274) mentions that political participation consists of diverse ingredients and it should be handled with a multiple perspective. There exists different type of participation "such as voting, campaign work, community activity and contact specialists". Relationship between digital channels so to say internet and political participation does not present a stable character and critics concerning this correlation are not unilineal. Besides different arguments concerning digital platforms impact on citizen participation; it is still obvious that, as mentioned above these new communication spaces effect the relation between citizens and decision-makers inevitably. At the end of day, political sphere – governance, relationships between citizens politicians and the media- has been affected by new information and communication technologies and participants of political processes use social media platforms in accordance with their political activity (Frame & Brachotte, 2015). Authors argue "A now well-established research tradition in political communication integrates mass and interpersonal processes, treating conversation as a key catalyst for community integration, a focal mediator of media influence on participation, and an important source of expression effects where message producers influence themselves" (Shah, McLeod, Rojas, & Cho, 2017: 1).

This situation leads discussions concerning relationship between democracy, political communication and citizen participation. Because deliberative democracy focuses on citizen participation to decision-making processes and political communication also traces how new media channels influence citizens' political participation. There are concerned opinions about to what extent and in which contextual dynamics these new spaces can be behave democratically. Because internet as a media system does not function independent from the society and environment in which it functions. It means contextual challenges are the same for internet usage in terms of unequal access conditions and this argument is in the same path with Knowledge Gap hypothesis (Fermin, 2004). However, this paper argues that, deliberative democracy literature intervenes with political communication in internet-based public sphere and it can support to political communication studies in terms of considering new ways democratic participation within a broad perspective with the help of systemic approach. Nevertheless, as mentioned in the introduction, this paper does not pretend to make deep theoretical examinations upon democratic theory and political communication and their interaction in different contextual dynamics but this work aims to respond to the question whether is it feasible to analyze new political communication practices and digital spaces through the lenses of deliberative democracy within a systemic perspective? For this purpose in the second section deliberative democracy and political communication will be put on table.

## 2. Deliberative Democracy and Political Communication

Bohman (2004) mentions that even though there exist different ways of conceptualization of deliberative democracy, they commonly refer the use of public reason by citizens when they

decide for their common affairs. It can be defined "minimally to mean mutual communication that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values, and interests regarding matters of common concern" (Bachtiger, 2018: 2). "Deliberative democracy is an attractive broadly encompassing theory of how communicative interaction benefits democracies" (Mutz, 2006: 5). Godin and Niemeyer (2008) argue there exists a deliberative turn in democratic theory and this change means to diverge from "aggregative" or "vote-centric" models towards deliberative and discursive ones, which make emphasis especially on reason, publicity, reciprocity, transparency, argumentativeness and responsiveness. In this paper deliberation is conceptualized as a free discussion between equals concerning public affairs via mutual respect rational arguments. "By focusing on the quality of public talk, the deliberative theoretical framework highlighted neglected topics such as political conversation, online political discussion groups, public and town meetings, the internal dynamics of activist groups, deliberation on criminal and civil juries, and the group decision making of public officials in committees, boards, and councils" (Gastil, Knobloch, & Gilmore, 2017).

"If deliberative democracy is "governance through talk," the links between communication studies and deliberative democracy could not be more obvious" (Carcasson, Black, & and Sink, 2010). However, even deliberative democracy and field of communication have common priority areas -such as group; interpersonal; intercultural communication- they do not have common and direct scholarship relation because of disciplinary concerns (Carcasson et al., 2010). Gastil and Black (2008: 2) argue that "Political communication scholarship typically delimits deliberation only to specific contexts, such as small groups of citizens gathered to discuss public issues. However, deliberation can productively be treated as a critical concept that organizes a wide range of political communication research".

Deliberation as a way of communication which is considering distinctive options, associated with democracy in political science literature and deliberative democracy uses its communicative aspect while examining the concept of democracy. There is an important difference between deliberative communication and deliberative democracy. Deliberative democracy focuses on formal decision-making processes nevertheless for deliberative communication does not need such a closeness (Englund, 2006).

Bennett and Entman (2001) in their book, argue that media sphere look for new theoretical ways when it encounters with contemporary democracy. They mention that, field of communication has challenges in terms of handling with the issues citizenship and democracy. They mention that, when the issue is citizenship than it should be asked whether media trigger political participation of citizens and whether it can support their visuality in the public sphere. Nevertheless, they also emphasis that, there exist different opinions concerning impact of new communication mechanisms on people's political attitudes and working of democracy. Some argue that, media's role over democratic practices and political participation is being overestimated. However Bennett and Entman stand on the other side of this argument and argue that, in contemporary democracies the role of mediated political communication on politics and public life cannot be overlooked because political changes largely associate to media environment and if we examine the relationship between democracy and citizenship we should apply to mediated political communication (Dalgren, 2001).

"Thus, a further step in the process of recovering communication in democracy, i.e., citizens' participation and dialogue, was the initiative of deliberative democracy (empowered deliberative

democracy) focused on concrete problems with the intervention of ordinary citizens, who contribute with their talent, common sense, and experiences to the debate in order to find solutions" (Carballo, Lopez-Escobar, & McCombs, 2018). As mentioned this recovering process requires to include political communication studies in order to analyze deliberative democracy and vice versa. This process is two sided, dynamic and context dependent for this reason a systemic approach is important to embrace interaction between citizens, political actors, media.

At this point the term public sphere comes to the scene. Peter Dalgren (2001: 33) defines the public sphere as described by Habermas "consists of the institutional space where political will formation takes place via the unfettered flow of relevant information and ideas". Public sphere consists of areas of communication in which people discuss about their opinions. According to Dalgren (2005: 149) representation is an indispensable concept for democracy and a functioning public sphere. The term public sphere paves another way for examining interaction between deliberative democracy and political communication. Even "In modern democracy citizenship has often been reduced to the right to vote thus participate in the legitimate governing of a community" (Hayhtio & Rinnie, 2006: 3).

In this new age, political communication intersects with deliberative democracies attributions because people are using means of political communications while taking part in public sphere and voice their demands. Deliberative democracy refers to participation of citizens in decision-making processes when especially decisions are affecting them directly and this provides an opportunity to decision-makers and governors for gaining legitimacy. Dryzek and Braithwaith (2000: 244) mention that, if someone wants to talk about legitimacy; democratic decisions should be taken by participation of citizens in decision-making processes by other means rather than voting and other aggregative models representation.

Political participation is a two-sided phenomenon. It means that, it is not only about citizens who are the subject of this activity. On the other side political leaders, decision-makers, governors are also concern with political participation because they gain legitimacy about their decisions by this way. There is a hypothesis concerning this point which mentions that "facilitated access to and free flow of information is increased transparency and legitimacy of government and politics with knock-on effects on institutional strengthening and democratization" (Aichholzer & Allhutter, 2009).

On the other hand, Esser and Pfetschi (2017) refers to Blumler who argues that "political communication is not only concerned with activities aimed at attaining or retaining power, but is also inextricably intertwined with many other elements of politics—such as the transmission of interests and demands of citizens, the symbolic legitimation of authority, and the clarification of alternative options in policy-making." It can be argued that deliberative practices in societies are research areas of political communication especially when they concern about legitimacy issue and interaction between citizens and decision-makers (Esser & Pfetschi, 2017).

From this point, new political communication methods and internet based interaction spaces and their relationship between legitimacy and transparency concepts make close political communication studies towards deliberative democracy theory. "Participation in blogs, citizen journalism, critical videos concerning public events or politics and confrontation of different opinions may arouse critical minds and interest in debate" (OECD, 2007: 68). Deliberative democracy emphasizes the importance of discussion culture, transparency, contradictory arguments in public sphere. "Arguments focus on the enhanced communication potentials of the

Internet expect it to allow for a virtual agora which will change political communication towards greater rationality and conditions for deliberative democracy**"** (OECD, 2007)**.**

Eser and Pfetschi (2017: 328) mention that "It is self-evident that varying settings of political communication affect political behavior and the workings of democracy differently". Thus, deliberative democracy and its working is being affected by new political communication platforms because people use these new platforms – social media channels- for deliberation, discussion and voice their demands. Moreover, contextual dynamics frame national political communication arrangements and deliberative democracy cannot function independent from this contextual framework.

The intersection and relationship between private interests of individuals and public interests is being found within sphere of influence of political communication for this reason analysis concerning political communication research scope gives information about this issue. Deliberative democracy literature refers public good and conflict between public and private interests. This intersection also creates a commonality between deliberative democracy and political communication.

Internet-based communication areas provide to skip mediators between politicians and voters and to maintain a direct communication. And during this direct communication deliberation should be considered as an important interaction method (Bouza, 2004). In this section, author tries to display core common elements between deliberation democracy and political communication especially citizen participation through internet-based communication platforms. Apart from that, in the last section and as a conclusion systemic approach will be discussed as an inclusionary examination approach.

### 3. Systemic Approach as a new Agenda for Further Researches

Systemic approach provides us to examine a phenomenon as a whole with its distinctive ingredients which are stable or non-stable; moreover, it supports to display relation between internal dynamics – national arrangements- and external dynamics. When it applies to political communication, systemic perspective considers interdependency between participants and mutual adaptations moreover country level situations have implications over organizations and actors (Esser & Pfetschi, 2017). As Esser and Pfetschi (2017: 39) mentions "this is a calling for a multi-level perspective and cross level thinking and comparative effects research has established strong relationships between macro-structural variables of the political communication system and individual level variables like civic knowledge and political participation". So far deliberation has been discussed by reference to relatively small-scale, self-contained settings, but the deliberative systems perspective asks us to contextualize deliberation; to think of it either as a salient, necessary, particular form of communication in democratic societies, but not the only valuable form (Mansbridge et al. 2012).

It is obvious that there exists transformation both in political use of communication, big flow of information and citizenship/participation understanding in consequence of creation new interaction spaces. Deliberative democracy theory focuses on participation of citizens in decision-making processes and also deliberation process itself. Moreover, systemic approach when applied to deliberative democracy proposes to handle deliberation as a whole with other parts of society. This approach can be applied to political communication and new interactive communication spaces. Because they do not function apart from social and political contextual dynamics and at

least they should conform with "traditional form and patterns of political communication" (Bennett, 2000). Authors argue that systemic approach paves the for new way of thinking concerning public deliberation and "the concept of deliberative system refers to an understanding of deliberation as a communicative activity that occurs in multiple, diverse yet partly overlapping spaces, and emphasizes the need for interconnection between these spaces" (Elstub, Ercan, & Mendonça, 2016: 139). Considering deliberative issues and its real world practices from a systemic perspective provides to "understand how each venue is influenced by interactions across the various parts of the deliberative system as a whole" (Mansbridge, et al., 2012: 26).

As mentioned this new era introduces new opportunities for citizens in terms of both reaching to information and also new ways of participation through these new channels. This situation influences dialogue and relationship between citizens and decision-makers. Nevertheless, in order to examine these new opportunities in terms of citizen participation, we should take a systemic approach to see different dimensions in a contextual manner. For instance, democratic condition in society, mentality of politics in terms of citizen engagement and their strategic use of political communication to maintain legitimacy.

"Today, political communication is in many ways characterized by a mix of public and personalized communication, mass media and social media, established and non-established communicators, In this context, it is also important to note that political communication arrangements in the various countries are exposed to simultaneous forces of stability and change. The coexistence of stable patterns and path-dependent change is best understood if we apply a systemic perspective. The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication thus defines political communication as 'making sense of symbolic exchanges about the shared exercise of power' and 'the presentation and interpretation of information … with potential consequences for the exercise of shared power' (Esser & Pfetsch, 2017).

Habermas (2006: 415) mentions that, "Political communication, circulating from the bottom up and the top down throughout a multilevel system (from everyday talk in civil society, through public discourse and mediated communication in weak publics, to the institutionalized discourses at the center of the political system), takes on quite different forms in different arenas". The public sphere forms the periphery of a political system and can well facilitate deliberative legitimation processes by ''laundering'' flows of political communication through a division of labor with other parts of the system (2006: 411).

Gastil (2008) mentions that deliberative approach provides to define the form and context of political communication studies within the frame of "discussion and conversation; mass media and public opinion, elections, government and jury decision making, public meetings and community life". The important point is that, deliberative democracy literature able to connect distinctive approaches and theoretical frameworks upon a common issue: the way of discussion of people in public sphere. Formal decision-making processes, informal civic initiatives, discussion groups, mass media are places where people meet up and discuss and political communication and deliberation literature focus on these interactions in order to analyze manner, content and outcomes of these processes (Gastil J. a., 2008). For this reason, a systemic and inclusionary approach is needed to examine this processes in different platforms.

**Conclusion**

Political communication and deliberative democracy have common points in terms of citizens' participation to decision-making process especially concerning public affairs. When public deliberation is being seen as a communicative activity which occurs in overlapping and multiple areas and political communication as a multilevel system then they both need an inclusionary approach which considers contextual dynamics as well. This study tried to display that further researches in political communication and deliberative democracy literature – in which they will be used hand in hand- can apply to systemic approach in order to analyze even when small deliberative and political communication platforms are subjects. Because in fact systemic approach does not mean to ignore small components and to focus on merely on general picture, on the contrary, systemic approach can give enough importance to each part of society and display their harmony or clashes for deep analytical observations.

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