

Methodological Approaches for the Analysis of Online Public Discussions in the Context of Deliberation Principles

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on methodological approaches for the evaluation of online public discussion activities in the context of deliberative principles. In the study, principles are defined that arrange the discussion environment, process and participants in terms of ethical and rational elements with the Habermasian approach and the research methods discussed that can be used in the evaluation of these principles. Within this framework, the study indicates that a research design encompassing all the principles should be adopted for the evaluation of the online discussion quality and that multiple (qualitative and quantitative) data collection techniques should also be used. During this process, data collection sources should be varied as participants and discussion texts. It is thought that this approach is required for an in-depth and multifaceted understanding of the nature of online deliberation and to prevent measurement errors.

Key words: Deliberative democracy, online discussion, Habermas, evaluation.

Çevrimiçi Kamusal Tartışmaların Müzakere İlkeleri Bağlamında Çözümlemesine Yönelik Yöntembilimsel Yaklaşımlar

ÖZET

Bu çalışma, çevrimiçi kamusal tartışmaların müzakere ilkeleri ışığında değerlendirilmesine yönelik yöntembilimsel yaklaşımlara odaklanmaktadır. Çalışmada tartışma ortamını, sürecini ve katılımcıları Habermasçı bir yaklaşımla, etik ve akılcılık bakımından düzenleyen ilkeler tanımlanmakta; bu ilkelerin değerlendirilmesinde kullanılabilecek araştırma yöntemleri tartışılmaktadır. Bu çerçevede çalışma, çevrimiçi tartışmaların kalitesinin değerlendirilmesinde ilkelerin tümünü kapsayan bir araştırma tasarımının benimsenmesi ve bu bağlamda da nitel ve nicel farklı veri toplama tekniklerinin kullanılması gerektiğini belirtmektedir. Bu süreçte veri toplama kaynakları da katılımcılar ve tartışma metinleri olarak çeşitlenmelidir. Bu yaklaşımın çevrimiçi müzakerelerin doğasının çok yönlü ve derinlemesine anlaşılabilmesinin yanı sıra ölçme yanlılarının önüne geçebilmesi bakımında da gerekli olduğu düşünülmektedir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Müzakereci demokrasi, çevrimiçi tartışma, Habermas, değerlendirme.

Introduction

Deliberative democracy is one of the rising democracy theories in the face of the current crisis of representative democracy. Deliberative democracy proposes the engaging citizens in decision making processes by forming a common will through discussion activities on public issues. The discussion that is at the core of this theory is a special form of discussion including a qualified interaction. This discussion called as

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deliberation is a process carried out among free and equal individuals in a rational and ethical manner during which the value of counter arguments are weighed together.¹ The theory of communicative action² and discourse ethics³ studies of Habermas act as a guiding light for defining the prerequisites of deliberative activities. In these studies, Habermas specifies preconditions for the separation of qualified discussion (deliberation) from ordinary discussion with respect to rational and ethical principles along with the actualization of the discussion at a consciousness of common good. In addition, discussions among citizens as participatory activities are studied within the context of net-based as well as physical life. Within this framework, it is seen that various authors⁴ who aim to evaluate the quality of online public discussion base their work on the studies of Habermas to define and conceptualize the principles of ideal discussion process. Even though there are various approaches in the field as to what these principles and their definitions are; it is possible to state that some principles stand out such as reflexivity, justification, reciprocity, equality, accessibility, autonomy from state and economic powers, respect and sincerity.

The aim of this study is to describe Habermasian prerequisites keeping in mind the nature of online environments and to discuss the research methods that can be used in the evaluation of these principles. Thus, it is thought that this study will provide a contribution to the field in the observation of online discussion activities that take place in various online environments such as Web based forums, social networking sites, blogs, micro-blogs, virtual worlds, Wikis and comment fields. Thereby, first the theoretical roots of deliberative democracy are mentioned after which deliberation principles are defined in the light of Habermas' works and discussions in the literature. The last section of the study includes how these principles are evaluated in the context of online discussions along with methodological problems.

¹ Seyla Benhabib, *Toward a deliberative model of democratic legitimacy*. In *Democracy and Difference* (S. Benhabib ed.), Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1996, p.69; James Fishkin, *When the people speak: Deliberative democracy & public consultation*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009, p. 33; Raymond James Pingree, *Decision Structure: A new approach to three problems in deliberation*, In *Online deliberation: Design, research and practice*. CSLI Publications, Stanford, 2009, p.309.

² Jürgen Habermas, *The theory of communicative action: Reason and the rationalization of society*. (T. McCarthy trans.). Beacon Press, Boston, Massachusetts, 1984.

³ Jürgen Habermas, *Moral consciousness and communicative action*, (C. Lenhardt & S. W. Nicholsen trans.), Polity, Cambridge, 1991; Jürgen Habermas, *Between fact and norms: Contributions to a discourse theory of law and democracy* (2nd. Ed.). (W. Rehg trans.). MIT, Cambridge, 1996.

⁴ Lincoln Dahlberg, "Net-public sphere research: Beyond the 'first phase' ", 11(1), 2004, 27-44; Nicholas W. Jankowski, & Reese Van Os, *Internet-based political discourse: A case study of electronic democracy in the city of Hoogveen*. In *Democracy online: The prospects for political renewal through the Internet* (P.M. Shane ed.), Routledge, New York, 2005, s. 181-195; Jacop L. Jensen, "Public spheres on the Internet: Anarchic or government-sponsored- A comparison". *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 26(4), 2003, 249-374; Laurance Monnoyer-Smith & Stephanie Wojcik, "Technology and the quality of public deliberation: A comparison between on and off-line participation", published in "61th Conference of the International Communication Association, Boston: United States (2011)"; Schneider, "Expanding public sphere through computer-mediated communication: Political discussion about abortion in a Usenet news group", MIT, Cambridge, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, 1997; Jennifer Stromer-Gally, "Measuring deliberation's content: A coding scheme", *Journal of Public Deliberation*, 3(1), 2007; p. 1-35.

Theoretical Roots

Deliberative democracy 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. Deliberative model is “a form of government in which free and equal citizens (and their representatives), justify decisions in a process in which they give one another reasons that are mutually acceptable and generally accessible, with the aim of reaching conclusions that are binding in the present on all citizens but open to challenge in the future”.⁵ The active participation of the public in decision making processes by way of qualified discussions between citizens forms the foundation of this approach. Deliberative democracy at its core is an attempt to provide the legitimacy of decisions taken in governmental processes. At this point, legitimacy becomes reality only as a result of the accordance between decisions taken by the government and the public opinion expressed as a result of discussion and knowledge sharing activities between citizens. Some theorists⁶ state that legitimacy should come out of free and equal public discussions and decisions about topics of common interest in which everyone participates. In this context, interaction between citizens and the conditions of this interaction comes to the forefront in order to actualize a real democratic government.

“The model of deliberative democracy conceives of democracy as a process that creates a public, citizens coming together to talk about collective problems, goals, ideals, and actions. Democratic processes are oriented around discussing this common good rather than competing for the promotion of the private good of each”.⁷ In addition, deliberative activities between citizens face various risks such as becoming a process where individual goods compete above the common good of the public and the failure to realize rational and ethical discussions. Habermas points out this issue:

The concept of discussion in democracy trusts political activity and the use of communication which is itself a productive power. It is necessary to show that topics of public interest that may cause such conflicts can be arranged in a rationalistic manner that is in line with the interests of those concerned. In addition, it should also be explained why discussion and asserting claims on a public ground are tools suited to the formation of a rational will. Otherwise, liberal approach assuming that the ‘balance’ between the benefits that come face to face in an irreconcilable manner is nothing but the result of a strategic struggle.⁸

For this reason, a rational and ethical discussion should be organized with certain pre-conditions regarding the discussion process, place and participants. It is possible to

⁵ Amy Gutmann & Dennis Thompson, *Why deliberative democracy?* Princeton University, New Jersey, 2004.

⁶ Benhabib, *ibid*, p. 70; Joshua Cohen, *Procedure and substance in deliberative democracy*. In *Democracy and Difference* (S. Benhabib ed.), Princeton University Press, Princeton, p. 95.

⁷ Iris Morion Young, *Communication and the other: Beyond deliberative democracy*, In *Democracy and Difference* (S. Benhabib ed.), Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1996, p.121.

⁸ Jürgen Habermas, *Kamusalığın Yapısal Dönüşümü*, (9th ed.). (T. Bora & M. Sancar trans.) İletişim, İstanbul, p. 44.

say that a series of theoretical studies by Habermas lie at the heart of these pre-conditions. *The Theory of Communicative Action* written by Habermas in German in 1981 analyzes the economic-political and social structures thus taking an active role in revealing the rationalism potential inherent in the communicative activity of the “lifeworld”. In this study, Habermas places discussions among citizens and the communicative behaviors on a rationalistic foundation. In *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (1991) and *Between Fact and Norms* (1996), Habermas has advanced the ideal procedures of discussion processes. Habermas places fairness and equity in participation on universal foundations with his study on discourse ethics.

In his study entitled *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1984) Habermas defines communicative action as the communication style inherent to the life-world which he specifies as the constructs where criticism of the present systems is carried out. “In communicative action one actor seeks *rationally* to motivate another by relying on the illocutionary binding/bonding effect of the offer contained in his speech act”.⁹ Rationality requires that the presenting of arguments and counter-arguments with their justifications. The justification of arguments lays the way for the participants to take these arguments into account. In this context, the “strength” of an argument is measured in a given context by the soundness of the reasons.¹⁰ These reasons also play a role in the process of reflexivity. “The person who accepts the strength of his/her justifications should be ready to accept his/her mistakes when necessary.”¹¹ In this context, a rationalistic discussion is a reciprocal process during which participants are in continuous dialogue, listen to the claims of one another along with their reasons and try to understand them. A claim (or counter-claim) is valid and acceptable by other debaters only when supported by reasons. According to this theory the person is not acting rationally if he/she neglects claims and reasons or responds by dogmatic assertions.

In addition, each claim made during the discussion process should be based on some universal ethical pre-conditions regardless of its context. In his discourse ethics studies, Habermas puts forth that pre-conditions such as free and equal participation in discussions and the determination of the public agenda should be the pre-conditions of qualified discussions. Habermas¹² includes Cohen’s¹³ comprehension as “ideal procedures” in the organization of the discussion environment and process:

- (a) Processes of deliberation take place in argumentative form, that is, through the regulated exchange of information and reasons among parties who introduce and critically test proposals.

⁹ Jürgen Habermas, *Moral consciousness and communicative action* (4th ed.), (C. Lenhardt & S. W. Nicholsen trans.) MIT, Massachusetts, 2007, p. 58.

¹⁰ Habermas, *The Theory of...*, p.18.

¹¹ Jürgen Habermas, *İletişimsel eylem kuramı*. (M. Tüzel trans.). Kabalcı, İstanbul, 2001, p.46.

¹² Habermas, *Between fact and...*, p: 305.

¹³ Joshua Cohen, *Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy*. In *The good polity: Normative analysis of the state*. (A.P. Hamlin ed.) Blackwell, Oxford, 1989, p. 23.

- (b) Deliberations are inclusive and public. No one may be excluded in principle; all of those who are possibly affected by the decisions have equal chances to enter and take part,
- (c) Deliberations are free of any external coercion. The participants are sovereign insofar as they are bound only by the presuppositions of communication and rules of argumentation.
- (d) Deliberations are free of any internal coercion that could detract from the equality of the participants. Each has an equal opportunity to be heard, to introduce topics, to make contributions, to suggest and criticize proposals. The taking of yes/no positions is motivated solely by the unforced force of the better argument.

Together with the principles of argumentation, these definitions puts into a rule the separation of qualified discussion from simple discussion with respect to rationality and ethicalness along with the actualization of a interaction in a common good consciousness and base a discussion process on pragmatic and universal principles. Hence, 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.

Deliberation Principles Online

As Internet technology became widespread in 1990s, online discussion activities started to be carried out both by individual and organized (such as the Minnesota e-democracy project) initiatives. The handling of online discussion activities within the context of deliberative theory has brought up the studies of the normative pre-conditions with regard to online environments. Especially some studies¹⁴ that aim to evaluate the quality of online discussions carry out theoretical and methodological discussions about what the principles are and how they are evaluated. In these studies the ideal discussion pre-conditions are conceptualized based on the work of Habermas and that various expansions specific to the nature of online environments are included. Approaches regarding the conceptualization and measurement of these principles have been varied during this process. The conceptualization of principles may differ as can be seen below. In addition, it is possible to state that based on the communicative action theory (1984) and discourse ethics (1991, 1996) approaches of Habermas are taken as the foundation, lexical overlap has been partially provided despite the differentiation in the conceptualization. It is possible to list the prominent principles as such:

- inclusion/openness/accessibility
- discursive equality,
- sincerity/truthfulness,

¹⁴ Dahlberg, *ibid*; Todd Steven Graham, "Needles in a haystack: A new approach for identifying and assessing political talk in non-political discussion forums", *Javnost-The Public*, 2008, 15(2), 17-36; Jankowski & van Os, *ibid*; Jensen, *ibid*; Schneider, *ibid*; Marco R. Steenbergen, Andre Bächtiger, Markus Spörmli, Jürg Steiner. Measuring political deliberation: A discourse quality index. *Comparative European Politics*, 2003, 1, p. 21-48; Anthony G. Wilhelm, *Democracy in the digital age: Challenges to political life in cyberspace*. Routledge, New York, 2002.

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- censorship/freedom/autonomy from the state and economic power,
 - reciprocity/dialogue/interactivity/engagement/continuity,
 - justification/reasoning,
 - reflexivity,
 - respect/respectful listening/tone.

“The requirement of *inclusion* implies that all who are affected by the issues under discussion, or more generally all who are interested, should be able to participate”.¹⁵ According to this principle whoever desires can have access to discussion environments and participate in discussions. In this context, online discourse environments should be open to public and every citizen should be able to participate. On the other hand, digital divide and the some restrictive practices of various powers elites comprise an obstacle for the access to online public spaces. The fact that net-based environments are as a rule open to everyone does not mean that all can have access to these forums. For example, even though the number of Internet users is on the rise in Turkey; there is still a digital divide regarding the urban-rural, age, gender and education variables.¹⁶ From the perspective of its effect on the discussions, digital divide should be evaluated in the context of hardware ownership, Internet access, and skills. These online public environments should be free from the effects of the digital divide and should include diversity in terms of population.

Another factor that can damage the accessibility principle is the restriction that can be imposed by the political or economic powers.¹⁷ Besides the access prevention attempts of the government such as blocking various sites, Internet service providers or some platform owners (Facebook, Second Life etc.) can prohibit the access to forums and participation in discussions (via blocking the discussion forum, cancelling user account, filtering the messages etc.). In addition, it is also possible to say that the forum management can become a dominant power that can block off access to the discussion platforms (such as membership practices).

The principle of *discourse equality* indicates that all participants have equal rights to let their voice be heard and to contribute to the discussions. Despite the fact that online environments are where interpersonal communication can take place more equally thanks to the anonymity provided, they are areas in which various other inequalities occur such as domination due to intense messaging from some participants. It is possible during these discussions that some participants create and send more frequent messages and thus dominate the session. Therefore, the discussion design (discussion rules) and management should be tailored so that discourse equality is pursued.

The principle of *autonomy* includes the actualization of discussions free of the pressure from state and economic powers.¹⁸ Online discussion places are open to surveillance that participants may feel less free when expressing themselves due to the

¹⁵ Janssen, D. ve Kies, R. (2004). Online forums and deliberative democracy: Hypotheses, variables and methodologies. Presented at “Empirical Approaches to Deliberative Politics”, European University Institute, Florence, 22-23 May 2004, p. 23.

¹⁶ TÜİK, <http://tuik.gov.tr>, December 13, 2012.

¹⁷ Dahlberg, *ibid*, p.34.

¹⁸ Graham, *ibid*, p.21; Jansen & Kies, *ibid*, p. 25.

fact that the act of surveillance can have some results on those who are surveyed (such as prosecution). Hence, some discussants who participate in the discussions at online forums which they think are under surveillance by political powers may filter their own messages or transfer their discussions from public spheres to private spheres.¹⁹ It is possible to state that the forum management and discussion moderators in online environments have also emerged as another dominant power. Some practices and observations carried out to ensure forum and discussion session order may turn into a censorship and oppression factor. These practices mean that the principle of autonomy is damaged.

Another principle that aims to secure discussions with respect to rationalism is the *principle of justification*. According to Benhabib²⁰ individuals must provide good reasons that support their opinions when presenting their views and positions to others. The declaration of good reasons in public forces the individual to think about what will be a good reason for the other participants. Therefore, the people who are active in the discussion are forced to think from the point of view of those he/she is in conflict with. The expression of claims along with their reasons is required for a discussion to reach an agreement.

According to the *reflexivity principle*, accepting that one's own position and thoughts might be changeable and the ability to abandon them according to the strength of the counter claim. 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".²¹ Reflexivity seems close to persuasion; however it reflects a broader process in terms of the expression of one's own discourse and thoughts during which he/she evaluates them critically. A discussant with a self-reflexive viewpoint should be able to transcend his/her opinions by taking the opinions of others into account and by emphatic listening. "Such a process is necessary in order to transform privately oriented individuals into publicly-oriented citizens."²²

The requirement of *reciprocity* which is another basic principle of deliberation, includes replying the assertions of other arguers by understanding (listening/responding) their reasons.²³ According to this principle that emphasizes dialogue instead of monologue, it is possible for the participants to reach an agreement only by mutual message transfer. If a participant states only his/her opinions about a discussion topic and does not listen to others or does not give responds to anyone then the discussion will not be interactive and discursive. From a wider perspective, this principle also includes continuity of the participants in the discussion sessions. In an ideal discussion activity, participants should stay in the

¹⁹ Demet Gençer Kasap, "Sanal iletişim ortamlarının katılımcı demokrasi süreçlerine etkisi: Web temelli forum, toplumsal paylaşım ağı ve üç boyutlu sanal dünyalarda gerçekleştirilen tartışma etkinlikleri üzerine bir araştırma", Anadolu University Social Sciences Institute, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Eskişehir, 2013, p. 252

²⁰ Benhabib, *ibid*, p. 71

²¹ Jankowski and van Os, *ibid*, p.184.

²² Lincoln Dahlberg, The Internet and democratic discourse: Exploring the prospects of online deliberative forums extending the public sphere. *Information, Communication & Society*, 2001, 4(4), p.5.

²³ Todd Steven Graham. "What's wife swap got to do with it? Talking politics in the net-based public sphere", *University of Amsterdam*, Amsterdam, 2009, p.18.

discussion and continue to participate instead of just expressing their ideas and moving aside.

The *sincerity* principle expresses honesty and truthfulness in the discourse of the discussants. In the context of his studies on discourse ethics Habermas²⁴ states that each speaker can only talk about what he/she truly believes in. Accordingly, it is important that there is no trickery when participants share their thoughts in order to develop an open and honest discourse. “Moreover, participants should be sincere about the information they use to support their arguments.”²⁵

The element of *respect* is about the participants paying attention to each other and approaching other participants and their thoughts in a respectful manner. This principle includes the participants’ interactions aiming at listening and understanding each other. In addition, anonymity and telepresence psychology in online interaction can enable harsh and disturbing communication behavior and the use of an aggressive language more easily than face-to-face communication in the physical life.²⁶ Thus, this situation makes the respect principle more sensitive for discussions in online places.

Measurement of Online Deliberation Criteria

The evaluation regarding to what extent and in what way deliberation principles reflect on discussions carried out in the physical or online environments and thus the determination whether discussions have a deliberative characteristic or not requires a thorough evaluation encompassing all principles. In this context, it is required that different qualitative and quantitative data collection methods are used, data collection sources such as discussion texts and participants is adopted in order to ensure that all principles are observed fully and truly. In addition, diversity provides a greater validity of findings (Jankowski & van Selm, 2008:8).²⁷ On the other hand, Dahlberg criticizes previous researches that focus on deliberation principles mostly use a quantitative approach. According to Dahlberg “the fundamental problem is that operationalization requires researchers to focus upon those aspects of the public sphere for which narrowly defined and measurable indicators can be found, thus neglecting other aspects less amenable to quantification. The result is a serious loss of meaning”²⁸. In this regard, it can sometimes be seen that some researchers take one or a few of the normative principles into their studies due to they are limited with a certain data collection method leaving the rest of the principles out of the scope of the study. For instance, Min²⁹ has adopted content analysis in her study and states that it is almost impossible to analyze all deliberation criteria using only content analysis therefore taking into account only the criteria of “justification” and “equal participation”.

²⁴ Habermas, *Moral consciousness ...*, p.88.

²⁵ Graham, *What’s wife swap ...*, p.35.

²⁶ Susan Barnes, *Computer-Mediated Communication: Human to Human Communication Across The Internet*. Person, Boston, 2003, p.247; Martin Lea, Russell Spears & Daphne de Groot. Knowing me, knowing you: Anonymity effects on social identity process within groups. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 2001, 27(5), 534.

²⁷ Nicholas Warren Jankowski & Matine Van Selm. Internet-based political communication research: Illustrations, challenges and innovations. *Javnost-The Public*, 2008, 15(2), 8.

²⁸ Dahlberg, *Net-public sphere...*, p. 31.

²⁹ Seong-Jae Min, “Deliberation, east meets west: Exploring the cultural dimension of citizen”, *Ohio State University*, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Ohio, 2009, p.72.

Therefore, deliberation researches that aim to evaluate discussions with the Habermasian approach should adopt a complex design including multiple data collection and analysis techniques.

Even though there are various approaches regarding the examination of each deliberation principle in online discussions, some authors specify the techniques that can be used according to the aims, properties and the nature of the principles (Table 1):

Table 1: Methods for the Measurement of Deliberation Principles

<i>Deliberation criteria</i>	<i>Data collection technique(s)</i>	<i>Author(s)</i>
<i>Reciprocity</i>	Content analysis	Graham, 2009; Graham & Witschge, 2003; Jankowski & van Os, 2005; Jansen & Kies, 2004; Jensen, 2003; Strandberg, 2008; Stromer-Galley, 2007
<i>Justification</i>	Content analysis	Dahlberg, 2004; Graham & Witschge, 2003; Jansen & Kies, 2004; Jensen, 2003; Steenbergen et al 2003; Strandberg, 2008; Stromer-Galley, 2007
<i>Reflexivity</i>	Content analysis	Dahlberg, 2001; Graham, 2009; Jansen & Kies, 2004; Schneider, 1997
	Participant evaluation (survey or interview)	Dahlberg, 2004; Graham & Witschge, 2003; Jansen & Kies, 2004
	Participant observation	Dahlberg, 2004
	Discourse analysis	Dahlberg, 2004
<i>Respect</i>	Content analysis	Black et al, 2011; Jensen, 2003; Steenbergen et al 2003; Strandberg, 2008
	Participant evaluation (survey or interview)	Gençer Kasap, 2013

<i>Sincerity</i>	Not evaluated	Bächtiger vd., 2011; Kies, 2010; Monnoyer-Smith & Wojcik, 2010
	Content analysis	Graham & Witschge, 2003
	Survey (perceived sincerity of other participants)	Graham, 2009; Jansen & Kies, 2004
	Participant evaluation (survey or interview)	Dahlberg, 2004; Gençer Kasap, 2013
	Participant observation	Dahlberg, 2004
<i>Inclusion</i>	Survey (age, gender, education, location or political interest)	Jansen & Kies, 2004; Jensen, 2003
	Survey (Net access, skills, or time)	Dahlberg, 2004; Gençer Kasap, 2013
	Participant evaluation (perceived forum regulation)	Witschge, 2008
	Discourse analysis (Formal restrictions by state or forum management) (site blocking or forum rules)	Witschge, 2008
<i>Discursive Equality</i>	Participant evaluation (perceived equality / scale, survey or in-depth interview), survey (questions concerning personal and other participants behaviours)	Dahlberg, 2004; Jansen & Kies, 2004
	Discourse analysis,	Dahlberg, 2004; Gençer Kasap, 2013; Witschge, 2008
	Content analysis (%participant - %contributions' statistic),	Dahlberg, 2004; Graham, 2009; Jansen & Kies, 2004; Schneider, 1997; Stromer-Galley, 2007
<i>Autonomy from the state and economic power</i>	Participant evaluation (perceived freedom of speech), participant observation, content and discourse analysis, interview (with site organizers).	Dahlberg, 2004

As can be seen in Table I, a descriptive study that includes the deliberation principles should use different data collection techniques separately or together for some principles (such as reciprocity) can be examined using a single data collection technique; triangulation is required to understand others (such as equality, respect). For example it is seen that the *discursive equality* principle is examined via content analysis technique in some studies³⁰. According to Janssen & Kies³¹ even though content analysis is the right approach, this technique can cause some deceptive inferences when used by itself. Dahlberg³² proposes a more thorough analysis and points out that it should be determined whether this participation is due to the preferences of the participants (not wanting to talk, being there to listen) or the pressure that is created in the environment. It is possible that some participants do not prefer to talk even though they have a chance to participate or to be there only to get information or to listen to the discussion. On the other hand, it is also possible that one person or a group will become more dominant during the discussion and keep others from exercising their own right to talk. Hence, it is not describing contributions only quantitatively does not seem sufficient to determine the discursive equality in the environment. In this context, it is required that participants are asked about the perceived equality and domination in the environment and that the power and domination in the forum is analyzed via techniques such as critical discourse analysis and participant observation.

The sincerity is a very difficult principle to observe since it is a more internal process.³³ The sincerity principle is based on the assumption of Habermas in his discourse ethics that “each participant can only express what he/she believes in”³⁴. Since sincerity is an internal process, it is not possible to observe it directly during the discussion. Regarding the determination of this principle, Janssen and Kies³⁵ suggest that participants should be questioned to learn about the honesties of themselves or other participants; whereas Graham (2008) suggests the observation of the questioning of honesty by the participants via content analysis. In addition, Steenbergen et.al, (2003) points out that the problematic nature of such a judgment may lead to significant (systematic) measurement errors.

According to Dahlberg³⁶ (2004: 34) *the accessibility* (inclusion) principle can be evaluated through the digital divide (access, time, and skills) and formal restrictions. In this context, participants should be asked demographic survey such as their age, income level etc. in addition to the hardware ownership, Internet access and skills. The obtained data is very informative in determining to what extent the effects of the digital divide reflect on discussion environments and to what extent the environment reflects population diversity. In addition, the access limitations of the government regarding discussion areas along with the restricting practices of economic powers

³⁰ Graham, *What's wife swap...* p.59 Schneider, *ibid*, p.73; Stomer-Galley, *ibid*, p. 6.

³¹ Jansen & Kies, *ibid*, p. 24.

³² Dahlberg, *Net-public sphere...*, p.35.

³³ Dahlberg, *Net-public sphere...*, p.34; Graham, *Needles in a haystack...* p.31 ; Jansen & Kies, *Online forums ...* p.22; Raphael Kies & Stephanic Wojcik, *European Web-deliberation: Lessons from the European Citizen Consultation*. Paper presented at Fourth International Conference, Leeds University, 2010, p. 200; Steenbergen et al, *ibid*, p.26.

³⁴ Habermas, *Moral consciousness...*, p. 87.

³⁵ Jansen & Kies, *ibid*, p. 23.

³⁶ Dahlberg, *Net-public sphere...*, p.34.

should be observed. Forum policies and user agreements of platform providing companies (such as Facebook) should be evaluated in this context. In addition, data collection techniques such as participant evaluations and observation are helpful for determination of some inclusion problems. For instance, Gençer Kasap³⁷ states in the study using participatory observation that the user accounts of two discussants were cancelled by the Linden Company during a discussion without any prior warning and that these users could get back to the environment only by using new avatars. This is in turn one of the indicators of the dominance of economic powers that own these platforms on the virtual geographies.

The *justification and reciprocity principles* can be evaluated using content analysis method more directly in comparison with other principles. The justification principle can be analyzed with this method with regards to whether a claim or a situation defended has a reason or not. The reciprocity principle can again be analyzed with content analysis techniques with respect to whether the message is a reply to previous messages, claims, and participants or not.

It is also possible to observe the *respect principle* within the context of respect and disrespect. The respect in the discussions (such as appreciation of the opposing claim) and disrespectful behavior (such as spamming or sloganic posting) provides some information for the description of this principle. According to Dahlberg³⁸ “online discussions contain some clear indicators of inconsiderate behaviors: lack of reciprocation, dogmatic ranting, abusive posting, and spam or prolific posting that dominates space and attention”. It is possible to determine these statements and behaviors via content analysis to be applied on discussion texts. On the other hand, participant evaluations (in depth interview, surveys, etc.) help in the determination of the respect level perceived by the participants or their thoughts about the subject.

Since *reflexivity* principle is an internal process, it is possible to state that its observation is more difficult in comparison with other principles. Nonetheless, Dahlberg³⁹ states that discussion texts may include clues about the changes in the thoughts and standing of the person thereby suggesting content analysis. Graham⁴⁰ also examines this principles using discussion texts via content analysis in the context of whether the opposing views and the information/proofs that support this opposing view are seen in the post of a participant or not. In addition, it is possible that the even though their positions change, the participants do not let this affect their discussions. Therefore, an analysis regarding reflexivity principle should also include participant evaluations (such as survey or interview techniques).

It is also possible to determine through the participants and the discussion texts to what extent and in what way the *autonomy principle* reflect on the discussion processes. Statements of participants about their thoughts on being observed by political or economic powers and the possibility to be punished because of their discourse (shutting down of user accounts, punishment in the physical world etc.) are informative about the oppression that the participants feel during the discussion. Hence, content analysis to be applied on discussion texts can be used within this

³⁷ Gençer Kasap, *ibid*, p. 171.

³⁸ Dahlberg, *Net-public sphere...*, p.33.

³⁹ Dahlberg, *Net-public sphere...*, p.33.

⁴⁰ Graham, *Needles in a haystack...*, p. 20.

context. On the other hand, it is not enough to observe this principle only through the discussion texts. Participants may not always reflect their feelings/thoughts to the discussion text since this requires diverging from the discussion topic. Therefore, participant evaluations (survey or in-depth interview) should also be used to determine the freedom or pressure that the participants feel during the discussion.

Result

As Internet technology became more widespread in 1990s, participatory activities also moved onto online environments. It can be stated that these environments have the potential for democracy to ease citizen interaction and participation since Internet may overcome the time and space limitations. The contributions of these environments to democracy are possible especially when online discussions include a qualified process. Hence, it should be evaluated to what extent ethical and rational principles reflect on online discussion activities. The researches that will be carried out in online deliberation should have an approach encompassing all principles. In order to observe these principles, it is suggested that the researchers use qualitative and quantitative methods together along with different data collection sources such as participants and texts. Thus, it is ensured that the study can observe these principles completely and deeply while preventing measurement errors thereby providing a higher validity.

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