TRUTH OR DARE: ONLINE DELIBERATION.

A CASE STUDY OF TWO INTERNET BASED DELIBERATIVE

PLATFORMS

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Abstract: In this article, I attempt to discuss how the internet can be used to stimulate an effective communication between citizens and decision-makers. In particular, I will aim to see if it can facilitate a greater degree of deliberation among citizens, if it can make democracy more inclusive and if it can make decision makers more responsible. I will first look at the definition and characteristics of deliberative democracy. Then after looking at what has been written so far about the effect of online discussions on democracy, I shall analyze the role the internet played in two case studies: web based participatory budgeting (PB) and domnuleprimar.ro (DearMrMayor.ro). Both of these platforms were designed to create a closer bond between decision-makers and citizens and will thus prove relevant to the discussion. Finally, I conclude that while the two case studies seem to favor increased inclusiveness, it only partially increases accountability and does not register any significant progress with regard to deliberation. Still, I argue that reasons for optimism exist even with regard to the deliberative aspect. Since the debate regarding the value of online deliberation is far from over, more research is needed in order to perhaps design a framework which will allow us to exploit the democratic value of the internet to its full potential.

Key words: internet, communication, deliberative democracy, participatory budgeting

1.1. Problems in Communication for Today's Democracy

The present crisis in public communication has been researched by a number of scholars[1]. Also, many of them seem to agree that the root of all evil

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[1]   J.G. Blumer, M, Gurevitch, *The Crisis of Public Communication*. Routledge, London, 1995

may be traditional media and journalism which tends to instil a certain amount of cynicism and disengagement, leading people to distrust politicians and political institutions[2]. In this essay I will argue that the Internet has the potential to overcome the setbacks of the traditional media by sustaining, encouraging and maintain a grass-root communication flow, by generating a bottom-up system of inter-communication and closing or at least narrowing the deliberative gap.

The question of whether the internet can act as a new space of appearance in order for governments to surpass their deliberative democratic deficit, cannot be given a straight black or white answer. To tackle this task I will first have to put some order into the question and start by defining some key concepts: "constructive and consequential dialogue" I will translate into "deliberative talk"; also the internet will not remain a new form of media for a long time[3], however, in my essay, I will refer to the internet as new media, and also as an alternative to the more traditional forms of communication.

To set up a suitable conceptual framework, I will refer to Habermas and his view on the public sphere and deliberative politics. Then I will bring into the discussion two case studies in order to see how the Internet might be a space useful for Governments in order to create a more deliberative and participatory democracy. First I will argue the role of the internet in the case of participatory budgeting in Belo Horizonte. Afterwards I will present the case of a Romanian website called *domnuleprimar.ro* (dearMrMayor.ro). Finally, in the end I will draw some relevant conclusions in accordance with the literature review and also with the case studies.

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[2]   J Capella, K.H. Jamieson, *Spiral of Cynicism, The Press and the Public Good*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997
[3]   S Coleman and J Blumer, *The Internet and Democratic Citizenship. Theory Practice and Policy,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009, p. 8

1.2. A Plea for Deliberation

I will start this paper by talking about deliberative dialogue and why it is desirable, why is it a goal we want to achieve, and perhaps most importantly, is this feasible or is just a utopian ideal? In order to outline a proper conceptual framework that would help answer this question I shall cross from political science to the realm of philosophy, and the interpretations of the public sphere this discipline provides. A public sphere cannot exist without a minimum right of free speech granted to citizens and starting from this very basic characteristic, four distinct definitions can be identified. There is the Aristotelic definition, which emphasises the role of rhetoric and power of persuasion in order to rally support for one's cause, Hannah Arendt's model which underlines plurality and the difficulties in achieving a consensus and postmodernist approaches which are based on consensus and homogeneity but view this from multiple and more fluid perspectives[4]. A fourth definition, and the one I shall apply, belongs to one of the most famous advocates of critical theory, Jurgen Habermas. His model of the public sphere is probably one of the best known ones for achieving deliberation:

> The bourgeoisie public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; soon they claimed the public sphere regulated from above, against the public authorities themselves, to engage in a debate over the general rules of governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity, exchange and social labour[5].

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[4] C Lucaci,*, Mass-media şi schimbarea socială: aspecte socio-politice, juridice şi organizaţionale ale instituţionalizării purtătorului de cuvânt (Mass-media and social change: social, political, juridical and organizational aspects of the institutionalization of spokesperson)*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Bucharest, 2010, Available online: http://www.unibuc.ro/studies/Doctorate2010Iunie/Lukacsi%20Claudiu%20-%20Mass-media%20si%20schimbarea%20sociala/Rezumat%20TEZA%20doctorat%20Claudiu%20Lukacsi.pdf [Accessed 20 March, 2011] p. 4

[5] J Habermas, *The structural transformation of the Public Sphere,* Polity Press, Cambridge, 1992, p.27

The core of this definition is outlined by N. Fraser as: private people meeting to discuss matters of public interest[6]. The bourgeois class that emerged in Europe during the 18th century eventually managed to challenge and replace the ruling class[7]. They gathered in British coffee houses, French saloons and German table societies. Habermas describes these places as being inclusive, with a complete disregard of status and where only those issues that belonged to the domain of common concern were discussed[8]. Beginning in the late 19th century however, as private interests started to gain more political roles and as the state began playing an ever bigger role in the private realm, the public sphere was systematically invaded and its role began to decline. Citizens started being reduced to consumers with public opinion being increasingly influenced by economic, political and media elites and thus, the initial bourgeoisie public sphere fell victim to the imperatives of money and power[9].

Habermas referred to this tendency as the systematic colonisation of the life world. The life world is basically a platform of opinion and will formation, where spheres of social interaction are open to analysis through consciously achieved agreement[10] [11]. When this platform starts to be subjected to increased pressure by governmental and capitalist interests, the colonisation process begins. The problem is that the life world and interest groups operate under a different type of rationality. The latter 'are governed by instrumental rationality, that is, they are determined by a need for efficiency in realising

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[6]   N Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', *Social Text*, No 25/26, 1990
[7]   Habermas, p. xi
[8]   *Ibid*., p. 36-37
[9]   S Berdal, *Public deliberation on the Web: A Habermasian inquiry into online discourse*, Master Thesis, University of Oslo, 2004, Available online:
< http://heim.ifi.uio.no/~simonb/hjemmeside2/publications/thesis.pdf>, [Accessed 20 March 2011], pp. 30-31
[10]   *Ibid* p. 32
[11]   S.K. White, 'Reason, modernity and Democracy', in S.K. White (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Habermas*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, pp. 3-19, p. 8

given objectives'[12] while the former is grounded in communicative rationality in which reason is 'based upon evaluation of language and statements exchanged amongst at least two actors, grounded in claims of truth (of facts), rightness (of norms) and sincerity (of actors)'[13]. Habermas is by no means arguing that instrumental rationality is bad or that the two cannot coexist. Rather, the strain occurs when there is no balance between them; when instrumental rationality displaces communicative rationality to such an extent that social actors cannot challenge or understand the rules that govern their actions[14].

Still, even the seemingly ideal bourgeois public sphere is not without its flaws. Nancy Fraser provides a very useful critique to this notion of the public sphere which outlines some very serious shortcomings. The most obvious one is neglecting to theorise a post-bourgeois model for a public sphere, since it is clear that in today's mass democracies, Habermas's model becomes unfeasible. Also, the inclusiveness of the bourgeois public sphere is contested. Quoting scholars such as Joan Landes, Mary Ryan, and Geoff Eley, Fraser outlines that women and the lower classes were excluded. The fact that someone's status was disregarded did not mean that the de facto inequalities were eliminated[15] and arguments in favour of multiple public spheres, as opposed to the singular one promoted by Habermas are also brought up[16]. She also disagrees with the idea that only issues of common concern should be discussed as this could potentially lead to an exclusion of minorities[17] and finally she calls into question the 'extra governmental character' of this public

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[12] Berdal, *Public deliberation on the Web: A Habermasian inquiry into online discourse*, p. 33
[13] *Ibid*
[14] *Ibid* p. 34
[15] Fraser, *Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy'* op cit.
[16] *Ibid*, p.70
[17] *Ibid,* p.71

sphere[18] which can lead to publics that cannon make any decisions and limit themselves to forming opinions.

Hannah Arendt also notices some weaknesses in the Habermasian public sphere. She distances herself from the idea that the public sphere should be depicted in terms of a specific type of interaction and the rationality appropriate to it[19]. Instead she focuses on plurality, which is not only a condition, but an achievement of political action and speech and action is viewed as an end in itself. In addition, unlike Habermas, she considers that the rationalization of communicative action and the introduction of consensual politics will lead to docile and passive subjects[20]. She is arguing in favour of a public sphere that favours 'plurality, difference, spontaneity, and initiation against the regularizing apparatus of consensus'[21].

Taking into account the criticisms to the bourgeoisie public sphere, a slightly more refined interpretation would prove useful. Thus I shall adopt a citizen-oriented view, which considers citizenship not only as a legal status within a state, but also as a guarantee that interaction between individuals will not be hindered the institutions of the state. Consequently, the public sphere implies free political and/or activist movements, free speech and the claiming of rights, even if these are directed against the state[22].

John Gastil points out some important aspects relating to deliberative democracy and mentions three criteria for deliberative process: inclusion, participation opportunities and enlightened understanding. Inclusion relates to the welcoming of all adults into the political process, participation opportunities must give equal and adequate chances of expressing and putting your views on the agenda and afterwards vote for them. Finally, the third

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[18] *Ibid*, p.75
[19] D.R. Villa, 'Postmodernism and the Public Sphere', *The American Political Science Review*. Vol. 86, No. 3, 1992, pp. 712-721, p. 716
[20] *Ibid,* p.717
[21] *Ibid,* p.719
[22] Lucaci, op.cit, p. 5

criteria and in my opinion the problematic one, is the "enlightened understanding". This is the criterion, which, as the author suggests, makes the difference between a deliberative and an unreflective system. Also, this criterion is particularly demanding: 'only when people learn how to study issues and reflect carefully on their values – as well as those of their fellow citizens – will the public become well informed enough to speak, act, and vote in accordance with their enlightened self-interest, let alone for the greater public good'[23].

We must admit that this is a rather challenging demand for a citizen who, if we judge by the rational choice theory, cannot find immediate benefits from this kind of behaviour; and also, who barely bothers to vote, let alone involve in a rational and consequential talk with a fellow citizen. The deliberative potential of the democracy might be difficult to attain to its fullest; however, the author underlines that the value of deliberation stands in its standard by which one can judge the political communication practices[24].

But how can we define deliberative democracy? Jon Elster describes it as a system which 'includes collective decision making with the participation of all who will be affected by the decision or their representatives'[25]. Above all this, the decision making process includes arguments from and to participants, who are dedicated to the values of impartiality and rationality. To continue with, Gastil brings into the discussion Habermas and the ideal speech situation which is in its most basic understanding a rational exchange of views resulting in enlightened understanding. Furthermore, the author quotes Barber who boldly states that 'At the heart of strong democracy is talk'[26]. It has to be outlined though that Habermas finds a lot of shortcomings in the idea that the

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[23]   J Gastil, *Political Communication and Deliberation*, Sage Publications, London, 2008, p.7
[24]   *Ibid,* p. 8
[25]   J Elster, 'Introduction' in *Deliberative Democracy*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Elster J (ed.), 1998 pp.1-18, p. 8
[26]   Gastil, op.cit, p. 19

ethical value of discussions is sufficient 'Political questions may not be reduced to the type of ethical questions where we, as members of the community, ask who we are and who we would like to be'[27]. He considers it idealistic to make the democratic process dependent on the virtue of citizens and their ability to come to an ethical consensus. Political issues will be subordinate to moral as well as pragmatic questions and to multiple forms of will-formation. Thus,

> Deliberative politics should be conceived as a syndrome that depends on a network of fairly regulated bargaining processes and of various forms of argumentation, including pragmatic, ethical and moral discourses, each of with relies on different communicative presuppositions and procedures[28]

J. Gastil does indeed seem to follow this approach. As the author suggests, this is not any ordinary talk; it is rather a conversation with an open-end, which is as much mutual discovery as it is problem solving. This kind of conversation includes brainstorming, taking into serious considerations other people's opinions and maybe never reaching a decision. The author mentions that we should take all of this as guidelines of measuring the quality of a talk (comprehension, equal access, consideration, rationalism) because otherwise it is almost impossible to live up to these ideal requirements[29]. Jason Barabas has similar views, outlining the need for procedural requirements and the condition that participants relax any strong held views 'deliberation and discussion really do differ in important ways'[30].

We must clarify why such a complicated and at times idealistic approach is desirable, apart from the obvious qualitative improvements it can

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[27]   J Habermas, 'Three Normative Models of Democracy', in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, S. Benhabib (ed.) Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1996, pp. 21-31, p. 24

[28]   *Ibid,* p. 25

[29]   Gastil, op.cit, p. 22

[30]   J Barabas, 'How Deliberation Affects Policy Opinions', *The American Political Science Review*. Vol. 98, No. 4, 2004, pp. 687-701, p. 699

bring to a debate. Why do we really need such a creed? The idea that discussion improves the decision making process is backed up by J.D Fearon with six arguments: (1) it reveals private information, (2) it lessens or overcomes the impact of bounded rationality, (3) forces or encourages a particular mode of justifying demands or claims, (4) helps render the ultimate choice legitimate in the eyes of the group, (5) improves the moral or intellectual qualities of the participants and (6) because it's the 'right thing'[31]. Elster emphasizes the effect deliberation can have on preventing self-interested proposals from coming up on the agenda due to a 'civilizing force of hypocrisy'[32]. Stephen Coleman and Jay Blumler adequately agree upon three important arguments about why a deliberating public has to have a concrete shape, as opposed to having the elected representative doing all the deliberation. In a democratic state, differing arguments regarding a policy have to be given a fair chance and a thorough debate in order to attain the best decisions. Also, the democratic debate should involve the public through the variety of channels available out there: from the media and the Internet, to more direct participation such as pressure groups, public meetings and contact with representatives[33].

Furthermore, the authors also state that the most legitimate and democratic policies are the ones which are understood and accepted by the people, and in particular, those affected by them. The best way to reach this goal is 'to enable the public to take some ownership of such policies and decisions'[34]. The benefits of public deliberation can lead to better decisions, influenced by the public's collective and colourful expertise; also, this kind of citizens who are using rational and deliberative tools are more likely to find

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[31] J.D. Faeron, 'Deliberation as Discussion' in *Deliberative Democracy*, Elster J (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, pp. 44-68, p. 45
[32] Elster, op.cit, p.12
[33] Coleman and Blumler, op.cit., p. 17
[34] *Ibid*

more suitable and just policy conclusions than the elites and finally, the public can become more tightly knit together, and more civically engaged[35].

Not taking into account for a moment the realistic applicability of such a deliberative world, the two authors can't help but notice the fact that many Western well established liberal democracies offer surprisingly few channels for deliberative principles to be implemented. The parliaments, congresses or national assemblies represent only a top-down communication process, which more than often is remote and disparate from the people. Also, the more important aspect here is the fact that the absence of places and spaces for deliberation and public talk on matters of common interest are a cause but also an effect to the downfall in civic engagement[36]. Bound to create cynicism is also the lack of adequate communication between the governors and the governed. A simple voting ballot once every four or three years seems to be insufficient. A strong relationship presumes the existence of incessant communication between the state and the people. Another solution to this can be an increasing awareness of institutions to people's needs. The interaction between should reach an outcome and also to leave its mark[37].

1.2. The Dare: Bringing in the Internet

Mixed opinions have emerged regarding the role online discussions can have on democracy. Cass Sunstein argues that users might look for likeminded opinions and thus wall themselves off from any opposing views and other authors[38]. Schlozman et al find that offline patterns of Socio-Economic-Status end up being reproduced online, which might end up

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[35]   *Ibid*
[36]   *Ibid*, p.19
[37]   *Ibid*, p.166
[38]   C. Sunstein, Republic.com, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2001

excluding disadvantaged categories from any online deliberation[39]. However, reasons for optimism still remain.

In the context of cyber chatting as a form of deliberative conversation, Gastil quotes an American survey which reveals that the Internet can make politics and civic affairs more appealing to young people who would otherwise be unlikely to engage in these issues. Furthermore, 'the internet may draw in some of the non-voting, politically disaffected younger demographic, which includes anyone less than thirty years of age'[40]. Also he mentions another study which discovers a relationship between social capital or political participation and the use of internet for information exchange. N. Fenton claims that internet usage helps the diffusion of identities and the circulation of struggle while encouraging 'affinity groups (self organized, self governing groups based on a commonality of values and interests)'[41]. A survey also suggests that 'internet users are more tolerant and open minded than non-users'[42]. The large number of people who engage in online civic activities such as: commenting on the BBC website on subjects related to politics (in the first month of the Iraq war, the site received 350 000 emails) signing petitions or just addressing local council related issues[43] are also worth taking into account.

Speaking about the role of the Internet in the democratic and political sphere, Coleman and Blumler assert that it is the new political space of appearance in which everybody needs to establish and have some sort of web

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[39]   K.L. Schlozman, S Verba, H.E. Brady, 'Weapon of the Strong? Participatory Inequality and the Internet', *Perspectives on Politics*. Vol. 8, No. 2, 2010, pp. 487-509

[40]   Gastil, op.cit., p. 30

[41]   N Fenton, 'Mediating solidarity', *Global Media and Communication*. Vol. 4, No. 1, 2008, pp. 37–57, pp.50

[42]   RK Garret, 'Protest in an Information Society: a review of literature on social movements and new ICTs'. *Information, Communication & Society*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2006, pp. 202-224, p.208

[43]   Coleman and Blumer, op.cit., p.189

presence[44]. It is indeed becoming more difficult to find well known public figures (weather they are politicians or from the entertainment industry) that don't any sort of online presence (whether it be a website, blog or social media account). To continue with, I feel compelled to quote again the two authors when making this wonderful and relevant comparison of the Internet with a Greek agora. Only that now, everybody can post, blog, comment, chat, twit, broadcast, Google, upload, download and share as much or as little as they desire. The sky is the limit when it comes to the Internet. Giving the much talk surrounding it, I also have to mention the authors' definition of it:

> The internet is an empty space of power which is both vulnerable to state-centric (and for that matter, corporate) strategies and open to occupation by citizens who have few other spaces available for them to express themselves in constructive democratic ways[45]

Another important point made by the authors is that an impoverishment of the mainstream political communication is taking place. And so, interactive and digital media have a potential (although vulnerable) to improve public communications and enrich democracy[46]. Given all this, can the internet be a viable solution for a new kind of democracy? Can governments implement a more deliberative and consequential dialogue with the citizens via the web? As tempting as a straightforward "yes" may sound, there are some setbacks of the virtual environment worth bearing in mind. For example the lack of infrastructure, the digital gap, exclusion of the underprivileged or turning a deaf ear to opposing views.

Steffen Albrecht approaches the issue of internet usage in politics by balancing some optimistic vs. sceptical arguments. He mentions that its role as a transmitter of political information is immense: 'the Internet is one of the fastest, cheapest and most reliable channels for distributing political

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[44]   *Ibid*, p.8
[45]   *Ibid,* p.9
[46]   *Ibid,* p.11

information'[47]. Quoting Dryzek, Albrecht states that deliberation is presumed to accommodate communication regarding political matters in society and to reinforce the legitimacy of decisions. Therefore, it seems particularly well suited to tackle the crisis of democracy and also giving the multitude of emerging technologies created to back everything up[48]. On the other hand he also points out some of the gloomiest aspects of the use of Internet, or rather the not usage part: the digital divide. This is basically the unequal distribution of access to internet which 'follows well-known factors of inequality, such as income, education, gender, age and race'[49]. Thus the consequences for online deliberation are dire: 'instead of balancing the traditional inequality of access to politics, the Internet reinforces existing problems'[50]. Furthermore, Ann Macintosh accurately summarizes some main arguments about online deliberation. She quotes Barber (1984) when saying that 'the use of technology could diminish the sense of face-to-face confrontation and increase the dangers of elite manipulation'[51]. She also points out the definition Coleman and Goetze (2001) give deliberative engagement:

> Methods of public engagement can be described as deliberative when they encourage citizens to scrutinize, discuss and weigh up competing values and policy options. Such methods encourage preference formation rather than simple preference assertion.[52]

Finally, other works provide an image of how different online initiatives have fared. S. Albrecht gives the example of an online deliberation

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[47] S Albrecht, 'Whose voice is heard in online deliberation?: A study of participation and representation in political debates on the internet'. *Information, Communication & Society*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2006, pp.62 - 82, p.63
[48] *Ibid,* p.63
[49] *Ibid*, p.64
[50] *Ibid*
[51] A Macintosh, 'Using information and communication technologies to enhance citizen engagement in the policy process', In: *Promises and Problems of E-Democracy: Challenges of online citizen engagement*. Paris: OECD, 2004, Available online: <http://www1.oecd.org/publications/e-book/4204011E.PDF> [Accessed December 10, 2010], p.7
[52] *Ibid,* p.8

in Hamburg as part of the DEMOS project. This took place in Nov 2002, and Citizens were invited to participate with ideas for the future development of the city on a web-based forum system for asynchronous communication[53]. He found that, while a gender gap and an under-representation of more elderly people was observed, the quality of deliberations was high and that no participant had been capable of monopolising the discussion[54]. A. Chadwick talks about numerous online projects among which: Blacksburg Electronic Village (BEV), Camfield Estates – MIT C3 Project and Ennis Information Age Town or the Minnesota E-democracy project[55]. The latter is particularly interesting, because it involved people from a larger geographical space (the others were just community networks). This was based on an email discussion and while it was dominated by issues regarding Minnesota, national and international issues were also brought up. There was a moderator who would intervene to uphold the rules and steer some discussions but they refrained from heavily modifying the content. Here, meaningful deliberation was again achieved and it was noticed that participants were willing to modify their positions[56]. The last example I will mention is net mums, a U.K based online group that aimed to connect mothers and help them socialize, form groups, seek advice or meet offline as well[57]. It is hugely successful, and due to its size and ability to enact responses it has managed to bring certain issues to the attention of Whitehall and Westminster. 'It conducted a survey on postnatal depression that highlighted the role of health visitors in identifying sufferers, providing support and in some cases treatment'[58] and highlighted a shortage of health visitors.

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[53]   Albrecht, op.cit, p. 69
[54]   Albrecht, op.cit, p.74
[55]   A Chadwick, *Internet Politics, States, Citizens, and New Communication Technologies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006
[56]   *Ibid*, p. 98
[57]   Coleman and Blumler, op.cit., p.128
[58]   *Ibid*, p.131

These successes are not however guaranteed 'the road to e-democracy is littered with burnt-out hulks of failed projects'[59]. Furthermore, even when successful deliberations occur, it might not always influence decision makers so much[60], especially if the platform does not have a direct relationship with government[61].Thus, in order to shed a little more light on this situation, I will bring into discussion the first case study which represents a bottom-up communication flow.

1.4. 1st Case Study: Web Based Participatory Budgeting – a Deliberative Heaven?

Participatory budgeting (PB) is gaining more ground by each year: from the 1988 Porto Allegre success, by 2003, almost 200 municipalities all over the world undertook it[62] and it seems only fair to do this as the benefits for the citizens and their relationship with the authorities are pretty obvious. As De Souza and Maciel pin it, PB is today a consolidated process in the government and, since it was first established in Belo Horizonte, 'almost one thousand public constructions have been initiated and delivered to the population, a fruit of the population's choice'[63].

 This is a process that allows citizens to participate directly in the decision-making by having a say in the allocation of the public budget. This is made in public assemblies, assuring people an equal right on the decision

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[59]   Chadwick, op.cit, p.102

[60]   *Ibid,* p. 111

[61]   Coleman and Blumler, op.cit, p.131

[62]   J Rios, et al. 'Participatory Budget Formation Through the Web', in M. BOHLEN et al. (ed.) *E-Government: Towards Electronic Democracy*, Springer, Berlin, 2005, pp. 268-277, p. 269

[63]   G.P. De Souza and C.Maciel, 'The Voting Processes in Digital Participative Budget: A Case Study', in *3rd international Conference on Electronic Voting 2008*, 6-9 Aug, Eds. Robert Krimmer & Rüdiger Grimm, Castle Hofen, Bregenz Austria, 2008 <http://www.e-voting.cc/static/evoting/files/pereira-de-souza_maciel_processes-in-digital-participative-budget_249-262.pdf>[Accessed January 10, 2010], p. 250

making process, no matter their political affiliation and moreover not giving privileges to any of them[64]. The characteristic and also benefits of this process include legitimating, approaching decisions to citizens, making public decisions in a public matter (therefore transparency), and last but not least it is also 'a mitigation of alienation and apathy'[65]. Participatory budgeting is a process which requires much more than casting a vote, it employs engagement and debate, and can develop a strong connection between local authorities and citizens by allowing the later to involve directly[66]. So, also taking into account the plea for deliberative democracy, participatory budgeting seems to meet the demands of this but can it raise up to challenges of doing it online?

The literature[67] [68] discusses the fact that in 2006 the city of Belo Horizonte allocated 11 million dollars for the Digital Participatory Budgeting Project, a scheme where the registered electors can vote online for 1 out of 4 public works for each of the nine districts of the city. The scope of this was to enlarge citizens' participation in the PB (in the last four years an average of 1.46% of the city electors were involved in the PB and they were mainly elderly people from a less affluent background). Therefore, the purpose of the administration was to increase participation among the middle class, especially the young, and they resorted to the internet to achieve this[69]. Also, the administration was trying to modernize the PB through the use of technology and to increase awareness of the public works that are to be voted (this works will be beneficial to all the residents of the city, not only to some from particular districts). The purpose of the internet in this was also to reduce

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[64] *Ibid,* p.249
[65] Rios, op.cit, p.269
[66] *Ibid,* p.268
[67] De Souza and Maciel, op.cit
[68] T. Peixoto, *e-Participatory Budgeting: e-Democracy from theory to success?*. Working paper, 2008, Available online:< http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1273554> [Accessed January 10, 2010]
[69] *Ibid,* p.11

citizens' costs like transportation and time. Therefore, now within 42 days they have the possibility to vote upon a project from their own home. Furthermore, in the e-PB, citizens are able to vote in other districts as well ('In the e-PB citizens could select only one public work per district with a budget of US$1.2 million allocated to each district, in order to address demands of greater scope'[70]).

But how this e-participatory model works? And furthermore, can it really improve the system? De Souza and Maciel explain that the citizens can express their preferences by accessing the online e-PB platform from the city's official website. This provides information by addressing frequently asked questions about PB (explains who, how, and until when can somebody cast their vote). It also presents and explains each proposition (36, 4 per district) along with further details like costs, geographical situation in the city and even videos in which the proposals were further explained and justified (by officials).

Interactivity is achieved by providing email addresses to the people from the administration responsible for the e-BP, who will answer queries and further explain any concerns. Multilateral interactivity is achieved by assuring an online forum with 9 different threads of discussion (one for each district), moderated by an objective facilitator who makes sure that the forum will not be misused and that the people focus on the subjects. He will eventually clarify the eventual misinterpretations or wrong assumptions about the projects[71].

E-voting is another characteristic of this online procedure. A database with people's unique electoral id number was useful in order to assure that they will only be allowed to vote once. Also security was reinforced by 'the captcha resource used to avoid frauds (anti-robot function) in the voting

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[70]   *Ibid*
[71]   *Ibid,* p. 14

screen, as well as a secure HTTPS system and certified digitals in the servers where the application was hosted'[72]. The freedom given by the platform was large: it allowed the people to vote in their own time 'for example, the elector could vote for all the districts at the same moment, or log out and log in later to vote for the remaining districts'[73]. Moreover, according to the author, you can view in real time the number of votes already allocated for each proposition. In order to bridge the digital divide, the council installed in different area of the city 178 public voting points, accompanied by trained invigilators. Also, a team equipped with computers with access to the Internet was available in busy areas (such as the city centre) and also in the poor outskirts of the city with no internet access[74]. Peixoto[75], also mentions some disadvantages that this model ran into: for example supporters of particular ideas posted on the discussion forum links to other pages that were not deliberative and presented bias opinion towards a specific work.

Although he could not measure the effects of e-PB on people, here are the results: 172,938 of citizens took part in the ballot (9, 98% of the electors, seven times more participants than the normal PB of Belo Horizonte held that same year) The results of having this process online seem impressive: 'This is, without a doubt, the highest level of participation ever seen if compared to the traditional Participatory Budgeting processes from around the world'[76]. Not only did the online environment increased participation but it also cost much less. However this time it was a bottom down process as the propositions towards change were made by the authorities for people to vote on them and in the traditional model the list was made by the people and forwarded to the council for consideration.

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[72]   De Souza and Maciel, op.cit, p. 257
[73]   Peixoto, op. cit
[74]   De Souza and Maciel, op.cit, p. 258
[75]   *Ibid*
[76]   *Ibid,* p.18

Why online? Because, as Insua, Kersten and Rios (2008) assert, the conventional participation involves discussion during face to face meetings and the use of voting by raising hands. This kind of meetings can be less suitable for people with problems of communication. Also, the young and the poor proved to be less likely to involve in the process. Given the expected rise in the popularity of e-PB, the authors think that is important to devise a more accurate and successful mechanism that can suit the demands of a worldwide growing trend[77]. They devise a system call PARBUD, conceived to support e-participatory budgeting and which claims that it can solve issues such as decision support, problem structuring, formal qualification of citizens' preferences, and lack of group decision support tools[78]. The system they refer to acts as a facilitator (an objective outside help), who collects private data from participants permitting a FOTID framework (full, open and truthful intermediary disclosure). In this way:

> The system will know the participants' true preferences, which will not be disclosed to counterparts. The FOTID framework enables, e.g., to detect whether the outcome is dominated and, in such case, improve it in a negotiated manner, suggesting efficient and equitable budgets for possible acceptance based on knowledge of the participants' preferences and some concept of fairness, until one is jointly accepted[79].

In conclusion, the authors propose the replacement of physical meetings, with virtual ones in which participants can debate the issues and 'explore the consequences through an integrative methodology, confidential revelation of preferences to the system, and negotiation for conflict

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[77] D.R Insua , G.E. Kersten, J. Rios, 'Towards Decision Support for Participatory Democracy'. *InterNed Research Papers*, 2008, Available online at: http://interneg.concordia.ca/interneg/research/papers/2007/04.pdf [Accessed January 10, 2010], p. 8
[78] *Ibid*
[79] *Ibid,* p. 26

resolution'[80]. For an extensive explanation of the proposed technical details see Rios et al[81].

1.5. 2nd Case Study: The Romanian Website: www.domnuleprimar.ro (DearMrMayor.ro)

In order to bring a more personal note to the discussion I chose this website, established in 2005, by the team of HotNews.ro (a private news agency - *http://english.hotnews.ro/*). I chose this website due to its singularity at the time in the Romanian online environment (more recently, in September 2010, the platform *parlamentultau.ro,* − yourparliament.ro −   was launched by the Qvorum Institute. Its aim is to stimulate debate among concerned citizens regarding the activities of members of parliament[82]). It is also a popular website, which manages to attract tens of thousands of unique visitors each month, sometimes even over a hundred thousand. Trafic.ro, a Romanian website that monitors the online, places it first in Romania in the NGO category[83]. Its lack of affiliation with political parties or institutions was also unique. Most of the websites that cover communication with local authorities are run by these. Amongst the ones that seemed to harness some kind of minimal interaction was the one of the Bucharest's sector 1, the city halls of Brasov and Cluj Napoca but these either had very few members, lacked any recent updates or had no activity what so ever. Another alternative for my case study would have been the blogosphere; however I did not manage to find any kind of similar initiatives outside the politicians' spectrum.

According to the website's description, *http://www.domnuleprimar.ro* became a virtual public environment dedicated to the local communities

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[80]   *Ibid*
[81]   Rios, op. cit, p. 273
[82]   parlamentultau.ro
[83]   trafic.ro

where the citizens can contact their mayors directly in order to express their appreciations/discontents or to signal public interest issues/concerns related to the activity of the local administration. This is described to be 'an efficient means of promotion and debate of the projects and programs initiated by the local administration'[84].

How it works: all the city halls receive an invitation to participate in this permanent online dialogue. This invitation also includes guidelines about how to operate the software, the contact address for technical assistance, a password for accessing it online and interact with the programme. The team *domnuleprimar.ro* phones and emails the mayors in order to receive the confirmation that they want to get involved in the project. If the mayors of some cities disapprove of this or cannot dialogue online with people for technical reasons, this will be mentioned on the website for the specific city.

What can the people do with this? According to the website, the citizens can send notifications along with scanned documents or even pictures through the form they have available on the website. The notification is automatically updated on the site and in the same time sent to the afferent mayor. With the confidential password he received, the mayor can access the website and answer the notifications, queries or complaints. The answer will be automatically updated under the citizen's question.

Also, 'the city hall's administration has the liberty to update the city's page at anytime with whatever thinks it is important: from press releases to emitted decisions, from city projects to any other information they believe to be necessary, and the people can generate a debate and a dialogue around it'[85]. The team describes the system as working independently from political affiliation, with the purpose of giving more freedom of expression to members

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[84]   domnuleprimar.ro
[85]   *Ibid*

of the local communities and also to underline the places where the local authority represent the needs and necessities of its members with acuity.

Users are obliged to give real information regarding their identity and contact details, maintain a decent tone and submit short and accurate requests. Credible information regarding the complaints/queries/notification should be provided and the issues should be of concern to the local administration.

Wanting to know more about this I also wrote an email to office@domnuleprimar.ro. I chose this method because as W. Foddy outlines, asking questions is not only cost-efficient but at times it can be sole way of collecting knowledge 'about past behavior and experiences, private actions and motives, and beliefs, values and attitudes (i.e. subjective variables that cannot be measured directly)'[86]. Amongst other things, I asked about the demographics of the website: for example the average age, the social background, educational level and the proportion of the rural vs. urban people who post on the site. The answer from the administrator was that they are not yet interested in these sociological aspects of the people who access the platform. However, as she is one of the only three employees, and also being there from the beginning, she suspects that the users are mainly from the urban area (giving that in the villages, the local city councils don't even have computers or specialized personnel to manage this activity). Another interesting aspect she states is that: 'Neither the more important city halls – from developed cities – don't consider this a necessary form of interaction with the citizens'[87]. Concerning the educational level, the employee showed disappointment:

> There are very few users with higher education levels, most of them having only basic high school degree, they are mostly vulgar, simple

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[86]   W Foddy, *Constructing questions for interviews and questionnaires: Theory and practice in Social Research,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, p. 1
[87]   Email to a staff member of the website domnuleprimar.ro, December 8, 2009

people who barely know how to write a petition and more often than not, they don't know under what category to post their messages.

Finally she seemed again affected by the low quality of people's arguments: basically, she says, there is no written text without spelling errors, and sometimes, these are so bad that the team has to 'translate' the messages in order to become comprehensible[88].

Relating with my question about the time period in which a mayor answers to a notification, she said that there are several situations. For example, at the beginning of the project, they thought that a relationship will form between the mayor and the citizens. However, as time showed, it proved that the mayors preferred to delegate someone to attend the questions. This person is more than often arbitrary, and is usual a clerk from the institution who will offer a formal answer just to get out of the legal responsibility of offering an answer to petitions (Law 544 states that the public has the right to information on matters of public interest[89]). As a time frame, she said that the answer to the citizen can come in a day or a month, depending of the complexity of the query and of the arbitrary from the city hall.

Also, I was very keen on finding out if the notifications are solved and if so, in what percentage. However, since the *domnuleprimar.ro* team does not monitor these things (being a private firm), and since they just offer the services, the administrator did not know about this. Nonetheless, she told me that the rate of answers is from 0 to 92%. Taking a look at the website I calculated the total amount of posted messages at the national level and the total amount of answers from the officials. From a total of 31 152 notifications, 24 736 have received an answer from the officials – which counts as 79%. There are three people who work on this platform on all of its sections. From filtering the messages to management of the website:

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[88]   *Ibid*
[89]   Law no. 54 regarding free access to public information, October 10, 2001.

> We preferred to hire people with multiple qualifications who have computer skills but also some programming, writing and editing skills, can work with images, footage, audio bits and also can be good communicators with the citizens and with personnel from city halls.[90]

Also interesting is the receptiveness of the city halls to this initiative. For example, the city hall of Sector 1 Bucharest was highly receptive but then developed its own system of communicating with the citizens and abandoned the *domnuleprimar.ro* platform. The same happened with the City of Constanta where the mayor has its own blog and website and prefers a more direct contact with his citizens. Although at the time of the writing, the blog was not used since 2009. Quoting the website's representative, it needs to be pointed out that some city halls are overzealous on the website, either for political reasons, either to have a better image. Here, the website staff member gives the example of the Cluj Napoca City Hall: at first they moved the activity of interacting with the people on the *domnuleprimar.ro* platform because their website was permanently hacked. However, later on, it became some sort of ambition for the mayor to see his name on the top of the list as the most active mayors of the country. So now, Cluj Napoca's city hall's personnel use the platform intensively. And this gave an example for other mayors from the same party (The Democratic Liberal Party, PD-L) who followed Cluj Napoca's trend. Also, she informed me that they have enrolled the first City hall of a commune, with three notifications and all of them posted and answered by the mayor. Another interesting case was the city of Slobozia where the mayor was so irritated by the citizens' interpellations that he declared that he will no longer collaborate because he felt offended.

There are also mayors who completely ignore people's requests from the platform saying that they should use the one provided by the city hall's official website (this is the case of Brasov). The mayor, therefore deliberately

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[90]   Email to a staff member of the website domnuleprimar.ro, December 8, 2009

doesn't follow the law (he is obliged to answer all petitions, even the electronic ones in a maximum of 30 days). A lot of city halls have sections dedicated to citizens' petitions, but the law mentions that they should answer them no matter the medium they use to transmit them. They hardly answer to notifications, relates the employee, giving that the platform doesn't have any media attention or advertising whatsoever; moreover, she mentions that overall, the whole situation is embedded with a strong political attitude giving that a lot of mayors have communication problems with the ones who are not affiliated with their party. The representative of the website also told me that the team is permanently trying to ignore any political partisanship in their day to day relations with the city hall's personnel. They also have to ban many political messages that people try to post on the website. And finally, according to her, some people seem understand the platform as a way to receive charity and she reports touching stories regarding social cases or requests for money for the less privileged.

1.6. Online Deliberation – Fool's Gold?

In developing my idea, I have tried to find case studies that resemble the public sphere described by Habermas (also taking into account the critiques of N. Fraser and H. Arendt) and that can be seen as having the potential to meet the requirements of deliberation. I have briefly discussed how participatory budgeting meets the requirements of deliberation and how the Internet might help this. Also, I was surprised to find in Romania such an innovative idea developing with the website domnuleprimar.ro. However, how much deliberation was going on in the end in the two cases presented above?

Taking into consideration the definitions on deliberation provided by Gastil and Elster in the previous pages, I will draw the conclusion that the

case of the e-PB of Belo Horizonte was less deliberative than the previous model, in which people had to gather and establish their own priorities. However, this time the number of people participating was higher.

In the case of *domnuleprimar.ro*, we can easily observe that there was even less deliberation, almost none. People used this platform only to speculate and complain about different local administrative issues. There is no forum of ongoing ideas, no exchange of information, no technologies employed that could generate discussions among people. Rarely do users comment on other users' notifications. Citizens mainly used this website not to deliberate but to make petitions. Also, an important aspect is that *domnuleprimar.ro* is neither a bottom-up procedure, nor a top-down approach. From the staff member's sayings (and also from the terms and conditions page of the platform), this is the initiative of a news agency to put together an easier system for citizens to reach their city halls.

The case of *domnuleprimar.ro* underlines that the Internet plays a major part in facilitating the relationship between the authorities and the citizens. If some mayors do it out of pride and not out of genuine interest this is not what I want to inquire. Some people after having their problems solved (e.g. having their street lights fixed or recycle bins placed in their neighbourhood) come back on the website and post thank you messages such us "Thank you Mr Mayor, keep up the good work". Some people seeing that the mayor is responsive and deals with issues, even post suggestions about what they think should be done in the city. In my opinion this is good start for a more participatory democracy and in this case the internet has the potential to engage the disengaged, to bridge a communicational gap and create a sense of civic awareness.

In the case of Belo Horizonte's web experience it is safe to say I think, considering the literature, that the Internet has increased participation. Although praising the e-PB model, Peixoto also mentions a particular

problem, the lack of information regarding how well informed the people where when voting and also if the e-PB really involved the middle class and the young. Filho, Alexander, and Batista argue that the security of e-voting in Brazil is still insufficient. They also state that if well established western democracies fear adopting this method due to security reasons, then fragile democracies like Brazil should abstain from this procedure[91]. Also the Superior Electoral Court of Brazil (known as the Electoral Justice) has recognized that the funds allocated for implementing e-voting were much higher than the expenditures for social programs. The authors also argue that the technology trend is part of market oriented governance, adopting a system not yet needed which is dominating and driving the policy agenda[92]. However there are those scholars who accentuate the need for online political interaction. As De Souza and Maciel put it, online democracy is beneficial for both parts.

> Citizens can assume a more active role in society, exercising their opinion power with ease and agility. Therefore, the digital revolution means more power for the people. For the government, unable as it is to turn its back on digital society, e-Democracy allows administration gains, transparency and more control over society through Internet centralized data[93].

Observations regarding more technical aspects can also be drawn from the two case studies. Both of them show the effort needed in order to engage people in this type of participation (especially in the case of e-PB). In the case of domnuleprimar.ro, we can see the crucial importance of moderators, who not only make sure the conversations are on topic (which is expected of them), but also ensure greater inclusion, by "translating" the messages of less

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[91]   J.R Filho, C.J. Alexander, L.C. Batista, 'E-Voting in Brazil - The Risks to Democracy', in *Electronic Voting 2006 2nd International Workshop*, 2-4 Aug 2006, (ed.) Robert Krimmer, Available online: < http://www.e-voting.cc/static/evoting/files/rodrigues_e-voting_in_brazil_p85_94.pdf> [Accessed December 10, 2010], p. 88
[92]   *Ibid*, p. 93
[93]   De Souza and Maciel, op.cit, p. 261

educated people or making sure their message ends up in the right category. Finally, both examples point out to the possibility of decision makers trying to limit citizen-based input. In the case of e-PB, propositions were now made by the authorities instead of deliberating citizens and in the Romanian case many mayors were simply ignoring the messages (either refusing to answer or assigning them over to a clerk).

In conclusion, drawing from the above cases, and also from the literature review, there are mixed feelings regarding the potential of the Internet for deliberation. Although it can bring some incontestable advantages, such as spreading political information to the disengaged and unaware citizens, it can also be a means to corporate or government ends (like Filho, Alexander, and Batista argued for the case of Brazil). The case studies I discussed showed an ability to increase participation and bring certain issues under the spotlight (even if decision makers were sometimes reticent), but lacked on the deliberative aspect.

In the case of *domnuleprimar.ro,* we should be careful not to overstate the criticism. It is still a relatively recent project, still has a promising future, and if it manages to increase its traffic, become even more interesting for mayors and utilise new developments in online communication, then it has a chance to adjust this issue. This, and the fact that other platforms mentioned above have managed to achieve deliberation (while lacking in some other areas like continuity for the DEMOS project or the distance from decision makers in the case of Minnesota E-democracy and net mums) tilts the balance slightly in favour of the internet's ability to foster a better connection between citizens and decision makers and also bring more deliberation into our democracies. It is however clear that my case studies lacked an infrastructure that would have aided deliberation. While it is definitely too soon to positively state what the role of the internet can be in narrowing the gap between citizens and politics, it is clear that more research and observation on deliberative

platforms similar to the ones mentioned in this paper will help shed some light on the issue. Ideally, it should lead to the development of guidelines on how to design and moderate the platforms, how to communicate on them and who should be in charge of them in order to encompass as many beneficial characteristics as possible.

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