

# Virtual democratic dialogue? Bringing together citizens and politicians

Jakob Linaa Jensen

*Department of Political Science, University of Aarhus, Universitetsparken, DK-8000 Aarhus C, Denmark*

*Tel.: +45 89421260; Fax: +45 86139839; E-mail: Jakob.linaa@ps.au.dk*

**Abstract.** How to realize the potential of the Internet for creating virtual public spheres for democratic dialogue has been widely discussed. It has been argued that government should play a more active role in that process. This paper examines a Danish case sponsored by a local government where citizens and politicians were invited to debate via the Internet. It is concluded that the project was quite a success. The overall tone of the debate was respectful and the levels of argumentation, information and deliberation were generally high. Further, the presence of politicians created a debate space consisting of two dimensions and five relations. Two main processes took place within that space: general debates and consultation processes between citizens and politicians. As such, the project achieved a double purpose. Problematically, the project did not succeed in mobilising new groups for political debate. Further, it was a tendency that the politicians tended to dominate the debate leaving less space for debates among citizens.

Keywords: Public spheres, deliberation, consultation, E-democracy

## 1. Introduction

It has often been claimed that the Internet can be regarded as a new public sphere. The possibilities of linking citizens together in deliberative discussion fora have been stressed. Further, it has been stated that the Internet tends to diminish the barriers between citizens and politicians, thus contributing to enhanced democratic dialogue and narrowing the often claimed “gap” between the groups.<sup>1</sup>

The concepts of the public sphere and democratic dialogue has attracted widespread academic attention during the last decades within the rising theoretical school of deliberative democracy. Here it is emphasized that democracy is a matter about dialogue, mutual relations and democratic enlightenment rather than elections and formal institutions. Examples of works on deliberative democracy are [4,11] and Fishkin [10]. Debates about deliberative democracy experienced a boost from 1989 and onwards when the German sociologist Jürgen Habermas’ famous work from 1962, “The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere” was translated into English and thereby available to those not reading German [12].

Inspired by Habermas the concept of democratic dialogue is frequently linked to a possible renewal of the public sphere [2]. It is argued that the citizens through enhanced dialogue and participation can regain the control of the public sphere and thereby the policy process, which has come more and more

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<sup>1</sup>The gap between politicians and citizens and the affiliated apathy among the latter have been widely discussed in literature. Examples of these discussions can be found in [2, p. xvii], [5, p. 3] and [17, pp. 21,22].

in the hands of organisations, professional politicians and media conglomerates. At the same time it is a basic idea in deliberative democracy theories that participation and dialogue itself tend to make citizens more informed and enlightened, and thereby better equipped as democratic citizens.

For a deliberative process to succeed, it is important that certain conditions are fulfilled. For example, the debate has to be focused and factual and the tone of the debate has to be respectful and open-minded in order to ensure that all participants get a fair and equal opportunity to air their opinion.

Main elements in the deliberative process are argumentation, information and reciprocity. The core principle of a deliberative process is argumentation where the citizens through rational argumentation come to a mutual understanding on the overall interests and goals of society.<sup>2</sup> The discussion has to be based on a high level of information. Further, when debating the participants has to take into account other participants and their views. Narrow interests and egoistic motives have to be excluded to achieve a higher societal outcome. That is the principle of reciprocity [11, pp. 52,53].

Finally, to ensure the citizens' influence on political decisions it is important that the deliberative process is connected to the wider political and societal agenda. Thereby, deliberative process must also be evaluated on the basis of their contact to wider societal agendas.<sup>3</sup>

For two reasons the Internet has been affiliated with a possible realisation of the ideals of deliberative democracy: First, the Internet has an outstanding potential for fast and unhindered communication among citizens and between citizens and politicians. Second, the rise of the Internet coincides with a period where theories of deliberative democracy have been "fashionable".

As there has been no shortage of theoretical accounts on the Internet in relation to the public sphere and democratic dialogue, comprehensive empirical studies of concrete initiatives have been sparse. This is particularly true for the government-sponsored initiatives in creating online democratic dialogue.

In this article, I present and discuss Nordpol.dk, an ambitious Danish project on establishment of an online public sphere of democratic dialogue. Nordpol.dk was launched by the county council of Nordjylland in Northern Denmark prior to the regional elections of 2001. The purpose was to create a forum for dialogue via the Internet for politicians as well as citizens.

In the following I will describe, analyse and discuss the project in order to answer the question of whether active government involvement can contribute to fulfilling some of the democratic promises often associated with the Internet. In particular I will show how the presence of both politicians and citizens creates two dimensions and several relations of the debate. Through various kinds of analyses it is possible to draw a picture of the debate in the different dimensions and relations as well as in general. It is thereby possible to conclude on the extent to which the debate has achieved democratic core functions such as dialogue, enlightenment of participants and agenda-setting.<sup>4</sup>

I start by presenting the project of Nordpol.dk. After discussing the research method, I will try to draw an overall, quantitative picture of the project. Then I examine the conditions of the debate: To what extent does the debate take place in an open setting with respectful participants? Next, I investigate the content of the debates. Generally, I focus on the deliberative processes of the debate and

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<sup>2</sup>This belief in democratic consensus differs from a liberal or pluralist democratic view, where the public sphere is seen as a struggle and eventual a compromise between different interests and values [6,7].

<sup>3</sup>There are disagreements among scholars within the theories of deliberative democracy about the main purpose of a deliberative process. For example, Fishkin [10] and [11] would emphasize the enlightening processes of the democratic dialogue.

<sup>4</sup>I will not discuss these concepts in detail here as this is meant as an empirical account of online public spheres. For discussions of democratic key concepts, especially related to the rise of the Internet, see the rich body of more theoretical discussions referred to elsewhere in the text.

hereby investigate deliberation and enlightenment among citizens and political agenda-setting in a wider perspective. Finally, I touch upon the participants themselves in order to test whether the Internet tends to mobilize new groups or whether it is the chosen few that participate in online debates.

Last but not least, it has to be added that the debate of Nordpol.dk includes citizens as well as politicians thereby adding the interesting question of whether the proceedings of Nordpol.dk tend to enhance the dialogue between citizens and politicians and thereby bring the two groups closer together.

## **2. Nordpol.dk – background and purpose**

Nordpol.dk has been one of the most ambitious government initiatives in Scandinavia so far in creating a democratic dialogue via the Internet. The project, initiated by a county government in Northern Denmark prior to regional elections in 2001, was part of a bigger project of digitizing the entire county government administration in order to make it more transparent and open to the public. The explicit goal of the project was to enhance citizens' interest in and knowledge of politics and to strengthen the dialogue among citizens and politicians [15, pp. 3,4].

Technically, the main element of the project was a website, [www.nordpol.dk](http://www.nordpol.dk), containing information about county administration, the candidates for the election and topics within the county's political resort areas. The most important part of the site, however, was the debate forum where citizens and politicians were invited to debate. The county government had involved the users in the process of creating the project by inviting voters to attend focus group meetings and to contribute ideas for the design. Special attention was paid to first-time voters. The reason was their traditionally low political participation and the belief that they might be the easiest voters to mobilize for the use of new media for political participation. The young voters constituted a large share of the focus group members and gained influence on the project design, young candidates for the county council were particularly active in order to try to attract the voters of the same age and the project was particularly marketed in media and forums with a young audience, e.g. cinemas, schools and local radio stations.

The technology of the project was provided and maintained by an external company while county civil servants were responsible for the "content". They set up clear rules and guidelines: postings had to be relevant to county politics, no confident information could be posted, and all defamations were prohibited. The moderators reserved the right to delete postings violating the rules but this action had to be taken only two times. As such the forum was only lightly moderated.

The debate was a priori divided into eight topics relevant to county politics: "Business conditions", "culture", "health issues", "education", "roads and traffic", "social services and psychiatry", "nature and environment" and "other topics". Together with the rules and guidelines this structure set up a clear frame for the debate.

The project used the experiences gained from Internet projects launched prior to Danish local and regional elections in 1997 which turned into quite a fiasco mainly due to a lack of Internet access and ICT competence in the general population and little interest among the candidates in using the Internet for campaigning [13, pp. 81,82]. Since then, the share of Danes with Internet access has tripled and competences in and motivation for using the technology are estimated to have shown a similar trend. Further, the entire project was heavily marketed throughout the county in TV and radio commercials, bus hangers and written material. Expectations for the project were, therefore, quite positive.

### 3. Method and research design

So far, many analyses of online political communities and groups have focused on quantitative figures: counts of postings, posters or activities in general. The results have often proved that the number of participants who are online is very low, especially when comparing the figures to political participation in traditional media. The Internet as a tool for political action is still in its infancy.<sup>5</sup>

More thorough accounts of the qualitative characteristics of the debates, the content of discussions and the outcome of the activities have been sparse and data on the participants of the groups have only been collected to a very limited extent.<sup>6</sup>

In order to get a comprehensive picture of Nordpol.dk as a public sphere, I have found it necessary to include several different sets of data, thereby applying different methods. The analysis is based on three sets of data:

- Quantitative data on the scope of the debate and the number of posters helping to draw an overall picture of Nordpol.dk
- Data on the debate collected through content analysis. These data constitute the primary data source informing us on the procedures and tone of the debate, the deliberative processes and the extent of contact to external agendas.
- Survey data on participants helping us understand who the people behind the postings are and to address the inclusion question. Further, the participants' answers inform us about the extent of enlightenment and democratic "education" they might have experienced throughout the debate

Besides, I have read the comments from the citizens' and politicians' focus group meetings following the end of the project period.

It might be necessary to discuss the content analysis method and data a little more in detail. As content analysis is a time-demanding process it was necessary to sample a portion of the postings. To grasp the structures and logics of entire debates the sample was based on topics rather than postings. Thus, all postings from half of the eight topics were included in the sample. The four topics "roads and traffic", "social services and psychiatry", "nature and environment" and "other topics" were selected in order to cover as different topics as possible and to include both lively and less lively debated topics. Altogether, the sample comprised 239 postings, a little more than half of the debate. Of the 239 postings, 59% originate from politicians versus 67% for the entire debate. This small skewness is balanced by the fact that more citizens than politicians participated in the debates. An explorative reading of all 450 postings showed that the sample postings in overall are similar to those not included. I thus conclude that the sample is quite representative for the entire debate.

The sample was coded and analysed with the program MaxQda. In the process I have coded all postings on ten different variables. They were selected and constructed to reflect the theoretical concept of deliberation mentioned above. Of course, it can always be argued that some variables could have been omitted and others included. As this is an attempt to establish a brand new framework for analyses of deliberative processes online, the method should very much be regarded as a work under construction.

The first four variables address the overall procedures and characteristics of the debate:

*Form:* Is the posting relevant to the debate, is it non-topical and/or does it reflect on the debate thereby contributing to upholding or revising the procedures of the debate?

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<sup>5</sup>This "reductionism" is sketched and discussed in [13, p. 45].

<sup>6</sup>One of the notable exceptions is [19].

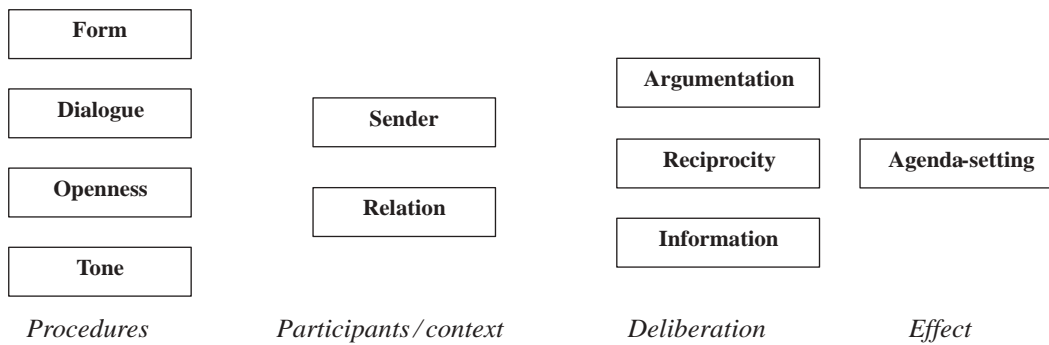


Fig. 1. Overview of the variables.

*Dialogue:* What role does the posting play in the overall debate? Is it initiating, a reply to another posting or is it just monological in character?

*Openness:* Does the poster reveal his/her identity (as requested by the debate moderators)?

*Tone:* How is the tone of the posting? Is it respectful, hateful or in between?

Further, two variables are constructed to cover the context of the debate and to identify the sender and relation of the single posting:

*Sender:* Is it a citizen or a politician posting?

*Relation:* With two groups of participants there are four possible relations of which a posting can be part: citizen to citizen, citizen to politician, politician to politician and politician to citizen. Further, a posting can be like an outcry in “Speakers’ Corner” with no particular relation. Thereby, we can distinguish between five relations. This distinction can later be used in analyses giving us an insight into the internal dynamics of the debate.

The last four variables address the core elements of the deliberative processes and the agenda-setting effect of the debate.

*Argumentation:* Are the arguments based on validations or mere allegations?

*Reciprocity:*<sup>7</sup> How does a posting take into account and relate to other postings and arguments?

*Information:* Is new information sought or provided which contributes to an enlightened debate?

*Agenda-setting:* Does a posting show any contact with external agendas, thereby possibly affecting the wider political process?

Figure 1 outlines all ten variables. All postings have been coded for the variables related to procedures and participants. It has not been possible to code all postings for all of the variables related to deliberation and effect, as different postings contribute differently to the process. As an example, some postings can add new information to the debate while others heavily contribute to the progress and deliberation of the debate. Both these functions are important parts of a democratic process.

#### 4. The scope and procedures of Nordpol

The debate went on for more than two months, from the launch of the project on September 10th 2001 until the local elections on November 20th 2001. In the period 450 postings were made, very

<sup>7</sup>The concept of reciprocity is taken from [11, p. 52], although I have operationalized it in a slightly different way. I have analysed how the postings relate to other postings and posters, whereas Gutman & Thompson describe reciprocity primarily as an internal process going on prior to the act of posting.

Table 1  
Character of the postings compared with dk.politik

	Nordpol.dk		dk.politik	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Initiating debates	52	21.8	18	5.8
Replies	168	70.3	261	83.9
Monologue	19	7.9	32	10.3
Total	239	100	311	100
Average length of threads <sup>a</sup>	4.6 postings		17.2 postings <sup>b</sup>	
Degree of dialogue <sup>c</sup>	8.8		8.2	

<sup>a</sup>Calculated as the total number of postings divided by the number of initiating postings.

<sup>b</sup>This number is calculated based on the sample. We have to remember that some threads were cut to 20 postings for sampling purposes. The true number might be higher.

<sup>c</sup>Calculated as the number of replies divided by the number of monological postings.

much exceeding the county government's initial expectation of 200 postings which was set up as a quantitative criterion of success.<sup>8</sup> 120 different participants posted in the debate. Of these, 46 were politicians/candidates and 74 were citizens. However, the politicians made 300 postings where as the citizens did 150. On average, the politicians did 6.5 postings each versus 2 for the citizens. Thus it can be argued that the politicians have dominated the debate. On the other hand, the project was heavily marketed among this group. Certain politicians were hand-picked to initiate debates, hopefully causing lively discussion with the citizens. The following will show that this goal was achieved to a wide extent.

It is a widespread concern about political online debates that many postings are irrelevant to the debate and that debate fora often contain burdens of "spam" [16]: 30–31. 94.6% of all postings on Nordpol are topical and related to the debate while only 4% must be characterised as non-topical. A small portion of the postings reflects on the character of other postings and contributes to the self-regulation of the debate. I will return to that issue later.

When looking at the role of the specific postings in the overall debate, 52 initiate a debate, 168 are replies and 19 must be labelled monological. To contextualise these figures, I have compared with dk.politik, an "anarchic" Danish Usenet group I have analysed in a different context. The results are shown in Table 1.

What is immediately obvious is that the threads of Nordpol.dk are much shorter than on dk.politik. It is like a "letter to the editor" – or a consultancy-based exchange of arguments with relatively few, but long, postings within each thread. On the other hand, the main characteristic of dk.politik is long threads with very short exchanges of arguments, and sometimes people communicate almost simultaneously. As such, it suggests more of an informal debate among friends or colleagues.

At the debate website, the county government of Northern Jutland urged the participants to identify themselves by their full names and e-mail addresses. In 82.8% of the postings the participants overt their full name and e-mail address while only 2.9% are totally anonymous. Compared with dk.politik, this is high number of "open" participants. The groups are compared in Fig. 2.

Finally, I address the general tone among participants of Nordpol.dk. For many theorists on democracy, for example Jürgen Habermas, it is a fundamental prerequisite of the ideal speech situation of a democratic debate that the participants use a decent and respectful tone in the proceedings. Conversely, it has been

<sup>8</sup>The expectations were based on prior experiences where local planning issues were debated online.

Table 2  
Tone among politicians and citizens, respectively

	Politicians		Citizens		Total	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Respect (+2)	15	10.7	6	6.1	<b>21</b>	<b>8.8</b>
Factual (+1)	75	53.6	46	46.5	<b>121</b>	<b>50.6</b>
Neutral (0)	31	22.1	28	28.3	<b>59</b>	<b>24.7</b>
Negative (-1)	15	10.7	12	12.1	<b>27</b>	<b>11.3</b>
Hate (-2)	4	2.9	7	7.1	<b>11</b>	<b>4.6</b>
Total	140	100	99	100	<b>239</b>	<b>100</b>
Index <sup>a</sup>	0.59		0.32		<b>0.47</b>	

<sup>a</sup>The index has been constructed by the help of the category values (-2 – +2). The index expresses a weighted average of the postings constructed by multiplying values by frequencies and adding together the scores.

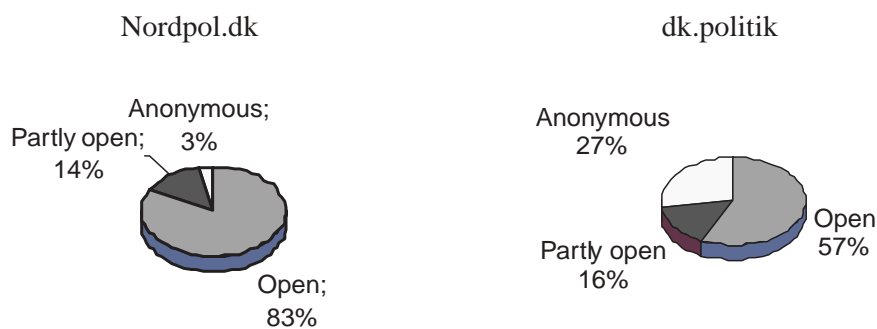


Fig. 2. Openness or anonymity among participants of nordpol.dk and dk.politik measured by number of postings. N is respectively 239 and 311.

claimed that the tone of online debates is often rough, unfriendly and dominated by “flaming” and people insulting each other. One of the reasons is that online communities do not put the social constraints on participants associated with physical communities.<sup>9</sup>

Prior to the beginning of the discussions, the moderators of Nordpol had designed a “netiquette” with basic guidelines for the debate. It was very loosely formulated asking participants to respect the privacy of other people and not distributing sensitive information. Besides, participants were asked to respect existing Danish legislation on offensive comments, racism, etc.

In investigating the tone of Nordpol the postings have been coded on a continuum from respect (+2) to hate (-2). The frequencies are shown in Table 2.

About 60% of all postings fall in the two upper categories indicating a predominantly respectful and factual debate. Less than 5% of the postings are specifically hateful. To put these figures into a context, an index score of 0.47 is high compared to the similar score for the anarchic forum dk.politik, i.e. 0.09.

Finally, the figures show that the politicians tend to be more respectful than the citizens. This tendency is confirmed when looking at the index scores of 0.59 versus 0.32. During the election campaign, exceptions from that tendency could be found. Especially among politicians from the biggest parties the postings now and then addressed person issues rather than topics. For example, a young candidate was accused of being too young to qualify for the debate.

<sup>9</sup>As argued for instance by [14, p. 3].

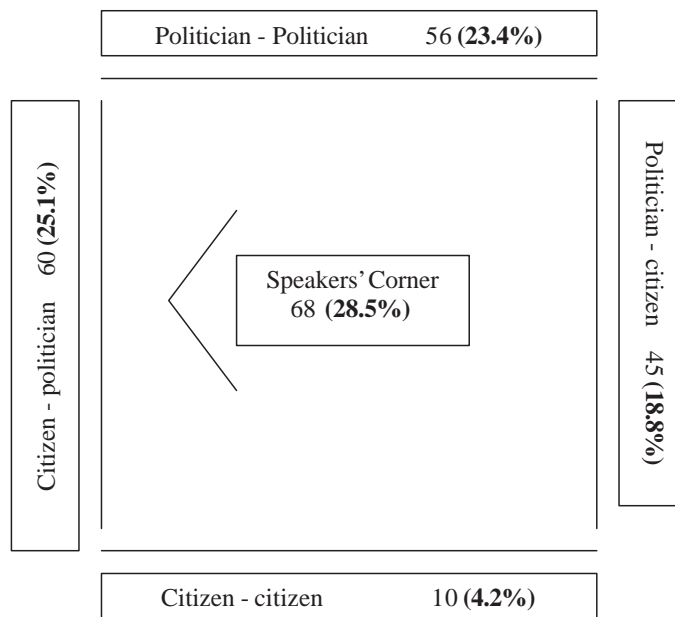


Fig. 3. Number of postings within each relation.

## 5. The spatial structure of the debate

Compared with other attempts at creating public spheres on the Internet, the unique feature of Nord-pol.dk is the inclusion of politicians as well as citizens. Thereby, as mentioned earlier, the debate contains five relations altogether.

Before investigating the debate in detail, it could be interesting to outline the overall numbers of postings within each relation in order to achieve a “spatial” image of the debate. Figure 3 is an attempt to draw such a picture.

We see that the postings are almost equally distributed on four out of five relations whereas there seems to be only little citizen-to-citizen debate. Later I will return to the main functions of the postings within each relation, thereby drawing a more substantial picture of the debate.

## 6. The functions of the debate

I now turn to the content of the postings and can thereby start answering questions about the specific functions of the debate. In analysing the content of the postings I have focused on three characteristics of importance for enlightenment: argumentation, reciprocity and information.

In most literature about democracy, debates and deliberation, an important normative assumption is that argumentation is a central part of a qualified debate. Through arguments you try to convince others to adopt your view or you challenge other conceptions presented in the debate. In this tradition, allegations and claims without arguments are considered bad form or counter-productive for the debate.

Reciprocity is at the core of the phenomenon of deliberation, a concept that has generated an enormous body of literature. In the broadest sense, many of the measures and variables touched upon here can be said to be aspects of deliberation. The concept of reciprocity used here addresses how posters take into account the arguments and opinions of the other posters.



Table 3  
Degree of argumentation for different senders, relations and in total

	Argumentation						Total number of postings with argumentation		Index
	External validation		Internal validation		Allegation		Freq.	%	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%			
<i>Sender</i>									
Politicians	49	40.5	61	50.4	11	9.1	<b>121</b>	<b>86.4</b>	<b>0.71</b>
Citizens	25	34.7	39	54.2	8	11.1	<b>72</b>	<b>72.7</b>	<b>0.57</b>
<i>Relation</i>									
Politician → politician	25	50	21	42	4	8	<b>50</b>	<b>89.3</b>	<b>0.75</b>
Politician → citizen	13	37.1	19	54.3	3	8.6	<b>35</b>	<b>77.8</b>	<b>0.64</b>
Citizen → citizen	1	16.7	5	83.3	0	0	<b>6</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>0.60</b>
Citizen → politician	14	34.1	22	53.7	5	12.2	<b>41</b>	<b>68.3</b>	<b>0.52</b>
“Speakers’ Corner”	21	34.4	33	54.1	7	11.5	<b>61</b>	<b>89.7</b>	<b>0.69</b>
<i>Total</i>	<b>74</b>	<b>38.3</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>51.8</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>9.8</b>	<b>193</b>	<b>80.8</b>	<b>0.65</b>

Information is a third key concept to be analysed. Since Jefferson, it has been a common theme in most theoretical accounts on democracy that participants in a democratic debate ought to be as informed and enlightened as possible, creating the ground for rational, factual discussions. As such, it is of the highest importance that new information is provided and generated within a democratic debate.

### 6.1. Argumentation

The implicit assumption when constructing this variable is that rational, validated argumentation contributes to enhancing the “quality” of a debate, while pure allegations are seen as somehow damaging. As such, I have coded the postings for validated arguments as well as allegations. The variable categories are:

- External validation; the debater seeks to validate the argument by external information, sources and arguments
- Internal validation; the debater seeks to validate the argument by own information, opinions and views
- Allegation; the debater in no ways tries to validate the argument<sup>10</sup>

In this way it is possible to take into account arguments as well as allegations, thereby drawing a more comprehensive picture of the argumentation level of the debate than had been possible just by counting pure arguments. Further, I have been able to construct an index for the overall level of argumentation in total and within each relation.<sup>11</sup>

All the frequencies for different senders, relations and in total are found in Table 3.

Basically, argumentation (or allegation) is found in about 80% of all postings. The politicians in general use more argumentation than the citizens, whereas no remarkable difference can be traced in the ways in which the two groups argue.

More interesting, however, are the differences in argumentation mode within the respective relations. The highest level of external validation is found when the politicians debate each other while the citizens

<sup>10</sup>Naming an allegation as an argument can be seen as problematic. Here it is placed within the category of argument because it is essentially seen as an anti-argument. In the index construction (see below) it is associated with a negative value.

<sup>11</sup>The index has been constructed by adding the percentage of postings with external and internal validation and subtracting the percentage of allegations. These numbers have been multiplied by the percentage of postings containing argumentation at all. The index provides us with an estimate of argumentation level across and within relations, forming a basis for comparisons.

Table 4  
Degree of reciprocity for different senders, relations and in total

	Persuasion		Progress		Radicalisation		Postings with reciprocity		Index <sup>a</sup>
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	
<i>Sender</i>									
Politician	5	6.4	71	91	2	2.5	<b>78</b>	<b>55.7</b>	<b>0.55</b>
Citizen	6	15	30	75	4	10	<b>40</b>	<b>40.4</b>	<b>0.34</b>
<i>Relation</i>									
Politician → Politician	2	4.7	39	90.7	2	4.7	<b>43</b>	<b>76.8</b>	<b>0.70</b>
Politician → Citizen	2	7.7	24	92.3	0	0	<b>26</b>	<b>57.8</b>	<b>0.62</b>
Citizen → Citizen	2	40	3	60	0	0	<b>5</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>0.70</b>
Citizen → Politician	4	14.3	21	75	3	10.7	<b>28</b>	<b>46.7</b>	<b>0.38</b>
Speakers' Corner	1	6.3	14	87.5	1	6.3	<b>16</b>	<b>23.5</b>	<b>0.21</b>
<i>Total</i>	<b>11</b>	<b>9.3</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>85.6</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>5.1</b>	<b>118</b>	<b>49.4</b>	<b>0.46</b>

The index is constructed in the following way: Persuasion is given the value +2, progress +1, and radicalisation -2. Subsequently, the weighted averages are calculated and multiplied by the relevant percentage of postings with reciprocity. Of course, this method can be questioned, especially the assignment of values to the categories. I have chosen to say that persuasion is the best in terms of reciprocity which is of course a judgement. However, the index construction allows us to include the negative contributions, thereby making a more coherent measure which can be compared across groups and relations.

rather tend to argue on the basis of internal validation, e.g. own opinions and formations. This shows us that, when fighting an election campaign, the politicians tend to be very factual whereas the citizens use the place to test own opinions, often in dialogue with politicians. There are no remarkable differences in the levels of allegations across groups and relations although slightly higher frequencies can be found when citizens address politicians and when somebody uses the forum as a Speakers' Corner.

## 6.2. Reciprocity

Where argumentation can be regarded as a quality inherent in the posting, reciprocity addresses the relations between postings. In this context, I have investigated how certain postings relate and react to other postings. In other words: how does a poster take into account the contributions of other posters?

Again, I have used three categories for the coding in order to grasp postings contributing positively as well as negatively seen through the lense of ideal deliberation Table 4:

- Persuasion; the poster seems to be persuaded by another poster's opinions or arguments
- Progress; another posting is taken into account and the debater tries to bring the debate forward by reflecting and bringing in new opinions, arguments and points
- Radicalisation; another posting is taken into account in a negative manner; the debater radicalises his/her points and/or the disagreements are augmented

About half of all postings contain elements of reciprocity. A vast majority of the postings show progress and about 10% show explicit signs of persuasion.<sup>12</sup> There are only few examples of radicalisation. This confirms the impression from the qualitative reading of the debate that only a limited number of quarrels took place and that the participants in general were considerate and respectful to each other. An outstanding exception from that tendency was a citizen's defamations towards a private company. Later, the citizen was forced to post an official excuse in the forum as well as in a newspaper.

<sup>12</sup>We have to be careful when examining differences for these categories as we often get too few observations to make any sound generalisations.

Table 5  
Flow of information across groups, relations and in total

	Information				Postings adding or seeking information	
	Added		Sought		Freq.	%
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%		
<i>Sender</i>						
Politician	63	98.4	1	1.6	64	45.7
Citizen	25	59.5	17	40.5	42	42.4
<i>Relation</i>						
Politician → Politician	21	95.5	1	4.5	22	39.3
Politician → Citizen	25	100	0	0	25	55.6
Citizen → Citizen	2	100	0	0	2	20
Citizen → Politician	13	48.1	14	51.9	27	45
Speakers' Corner	27	90	3	10	30	44.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>44.4</b>

It is immediately obvious that the politicians in general show more reciprocity than the citizens. This is evident when examining both the number of postings and the estimated index. Looking at reciprocity across relations, there is a higher degree of reciprocity within the groups of politicians and citizens, respectively, than across the groups. In other words, the horizontal reciprocity seems to be stronger than the vertical.

On the vertical dimension, the politicians seem to be more attentive to the postings of the citizens than the other way around. The index scores (0.62 versus 0.38) mostly show us that a higher proportion of politicians take into account the citizens' postings than vice versa.

The lowest degree of reciprocity is shown in the "Speakers' Corner" postings. This is quite natural, as in general these postings are not targeted at a specific posting or poster. Besides, it shows that the "Speakers' Corner" postings are often not real contributions to the debate. Rather they have the character of candidate promotion or are copies of letters to the editor previously published in physical media. Some of the postings in this category, however, are initial postings that some politicians were asked to write in order to start the debate. Naturally, those cannot relate to existing postings.

### 6.3. Information

A third important dimension of a deliberative debate is enlightenment. Since the 1970's and the first experiments with teledemocracy, it has been regarded as an important feature of such projects that they contribute to enlightening the citizens and thus making a better foundation for democratic debate [1]. As such, it was an explicit goal for the county government that the project was to enhance the citizens' interest in and knowledge of politics.

Whether this goal has been achieved or not, is investigated in two ways; first by looking at the debate, secondly by asking the participants whether they feel more informed after participating in the debate.

Further, an investigation is made of whether the postings contribute new information to the debate or, alternatively, whether they seek information. The last characteristic is included in order to trace the information flow in the debate and to investigate if there are differences in the ways in which politicians and citizens, respectively, act in this process. Table 5 shows the results of the codings of all postings on the information variable.

All in all, 44.4% of the postings can be coded on the information variable. There are five times as many postings contributing than seeking information. Within the groups, it is characteristic that the

Table 6  
The citizens' outcome of participating in Nordpol.dk

	Yes, indeed	Yes, somehow	Not really	Not at all	Do not know	Total (N = 82)
More knowledge about county politics?	11.0 %	41.5 %	31.7 %	8.5%	7.3 %	100%
More qualified for voting in election?	12.2 %	30.5 %	31.7 %	21.9 %	3.7 %	100%

politicians almost exclusively contribute information whereas the citizens' postings are more evenly divided between adding and seeking information.

These tendencies are augmented when looking at postings across relations. Among the politicians and from politicians to citizens, information is (almost) entirely added whereas a vast majority of the postings seeking information fall on the citizen – politician relation.

Last, many of the "Speakers' Corner" postings contribute information as well. Many of these postings come from politicians who candidate for office and provide information about themselves and their policies. Another group of postings are from the politicians who were specifically asked to initiate debates. A third group contains postings from citizens who ask the politicians in general for information and as such do not relate the request to a specific politician.

The general picture of the flow of information is that much information is added from politicians to citizens whereas, the other way around, citizens often request information from politicians as well as provide information themselves.

The fact that almost 40% of all postings bring in new information to the debate indicates quite a high level of enlightenment. To investigate that topic further the citizen group has been asked whether the debate has made them more informed about county politics and whether they feel more qualified for voting in the election.

As the figures in Table 6 show, a little more than half of the citizens answering the survey felt that they knew more about county politics and a little more than 40% felt more qualified for voting. The figures tell us that the debate and the project in general at least seem to have had some effect on the level of enlightenment, a tendency supported by other parts of the analysis.

Further, the citizens were asked which part of the information on the project websites they found particularly useful. It was characteristic that the citizens found the debate itself and the adjacent information on candidates and parties most useful, whereas they found features such as a calendar, a quiz and links to external news sources less relevant. This indicates that the participants prefer more traditional styles of information rather than new innovative attempts to motivate and create political interest.<sup>13</sup>

#### 6.4. *Some trends of the debate*

Now it is time to summarize some of our findings so far. As we have seen, a vast majority of the postings contain explicit argumentation. At the same time, relatively few postings are pure allegations, altogether indicating quite a high level of factual argumentation.

Concerning reciprocity, there are interesting differences between the vertical and the horizontal dimensions. There seems to be a higher degree of deliberation within the groups of politicians and citizens, respectively, than across the groups. On the other hand, acts of communications between citizens and

<sup>13</sup>Concerning news sources, it has to be added that the citizens had many alternative news sources, both among traditional media and on other Internet sites.

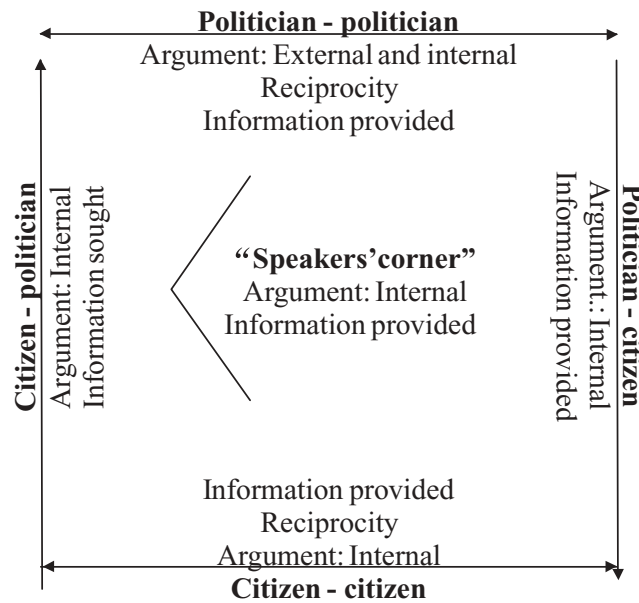


Fig. 4. Overall trends of the proceedings of Nordpol.dk. Although the figure highlights the most important trends, it cannot give a full picture of all the details described in the text.

politicians and vice versa contain more information than the rest of the postings. Thus, a large part of the demand for information arises among citizens contacting politicians while the politicians, for their part, supply a great deal of information. In short: the deliberation tends to be strongest on the horizontal dimensions whereas the exchange of information mainly takes place in the vertical dimension.

As such, besides the image of a debate, we get a picture of consultation processes between citizens and politicians. Figure 4 summarizes the overall trends of the proceedings.<sup>14</sup>

To complete the picture it could be relevant to shed light on how the participants have perceived the proceedings of Nordpol.dk. One third of the respondents evaluate the debate as an open process of deliberation, while less than 20% consider it a chain of monologues. Although the figures indicate an overall positive impression, we have to add that almost half the participants considered the debate to be something in between. Further, only 59 of 82 had read the debate to an extent where they felt competent to evaluate it.

We have seen that the county council succeeded in the explicit goal of creating dialogue between citizens and politicians, as almost half the total number of postings are found within the vertical dimension. Next, it is relevant to ask whether the debate seems to have contributed to narrowing the often claimed gap between the groups. The citizens in general affirm that this goal has been achieved, as 59% of them are confident that the politicians listen to the citizens and act accordingly. Only 15% show little or no confidence.<sup>15</sup> However, it has to be added that, once again, only 59 participants have read the debate and subsequently answered the question.

<sup>14</sup>This process is well-known, especially in an Anglosaxon political tradition where candidates in general are more affiliated with a geographical constituency than in continental Europe.

<sup>15</sup>Even though the citizens were the target group of the survey, one cannot preclude that politicians might have answered the survey and thus contributed to a too positive impression of this issue.

Table 7  
The participants' impressions of the proceedings

Question: What is your impression of the debate on Nordpol.dk?	Frequency	% (N = 59)
It is an open dialogue where the participants deliberate and try to reach each other through arguments	20	33.9%
It is mainly a chain of monologues, statements and the participants in general do not listen to each other	10	17.9%
It is something in between the claims above	27	45.8%
Do not know	2	3.4%
Total	59	100%

## 7. Nordpol and the political agenda

It is often claimed that, although they might seem qualitative, deliberative and fruitful, online political discussions do not relate to external agendas and as such have no effect on the broader societal life and political decisions.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, the debates resemble the coffee houses of the 18th century described by Jürgen Habermas: closed circles for the few well-educated citizens with little or no external effect.

There were several reasons to expect a closer contact with the wider political agenda in the case of Nordpol: the project was promoted in other media, co-operation was established with local newspapers and TV media and the project was closely connected to the regional election campaign.

Even though it is impossible to give a complete picture of all relations to external agendas, as that effort might demand a complete reading of all the media within the period, the detailed content analysis has enabled me to analyse the relations to external agendas as far as they are evident in the postings of the debate. Since I was interested in relations both to and from external agendas, I coded on three subcategories within the variable:

- From other media; explicit references to topics, postings or events in other (traditional) media such as TV, radio, newspapers and magazines
- From other external agendas; explicit references to the remainder of the on-going political or societal agenda, e.g. discussions with friends and colleagues plus other online discussions
- To external agenda; explicit signs that the agenda is sought extended beyond the case. Examples could be that citizens try to attract the attention of politicians or authorities, propose (physical) political actions and happenings or refer to an external effect of the online discussions.

The figures on contact to external agendas are shown in Table 8.

First of all, 25% of the entire body of postings show relations to or from an external agenda. This is a considerably high figure compared with other net debates. In dk.politik, for instance, the corresponding figure is only 8.7%.

Within the postings, a majority represents attempts to bring issues to the political agenda (60%) while 20% refer to other media and other agendas. The tendency to bring issues to the political agenda is strongest within postings from citizens to politicians and those in the category of "Speakers' Corner". Examples of citizens succeeding in bringing issues to the further political agenda can be found in areas such as alcohol treatment, health care and transportation of disabled people. In the latter case, a citizen succeeded in getting a meeting with the relevant county council committee, resulting in a specific political initiative. As such, in the case of Nordpol.dk, it seems to be easier to bring specific rather than more

<sup>16</sup>That claim is found for instance in [14]: 22.

Table 8  
Contact to and from external agendas for the different relations and in total

	From other media		From other external agendas		To external agenda		"Agenda postings" in total	
Politician → politician	4	36.4%	4	36.4%	3	27.3%	11	19.6%
Politician → citizen	1	33.3%	1	33.3%	1	33.3%	3	6.7%
Citizen → citizen	1	100%	0	0	0	0	1	10%
Citizen → politician	2	9.5%	3	14.3%	16	76.2%	21	35%
"Speakers' Corner"	4	16.7%	4	16.7%	16	66.7%	24	35.3%
Total	12	20%	12	20%	36	60%	60	25.1%

general issues to the political agenda. There is no reaction when citizens ask for the politicians' attitude to environmental or public works policy in general. These tendencies confirm the picture that Nordpol.dk to a great extent resembles a consultation process.

### 7.1. *The influence of external factors on the debate*

Last but not least, it could be relevant to address the extent to which the focus of the debate, county politics, was disturbed by other issues or external factors.

Net debates are often dominated by discussion of "symbol politics" such as crime and immigrants [9, 18]. In the case of Nordpol, several postings on violence, rapes and crime appeared in the debate. Most of those came from the same person who did not even live in the county and who used the debate to promote his own website. He was kindly asked to post his opinions somewhere else, an example on how the debate was to a large extent self-regulatory.

Two sudden events could have affected and changed the scope of the debate more profoundly. The terrorist attack of September 11th took place the day after the initiation of the debate. Four postings appeared on that topic, three from the same person. Again he was kindly asked to stick to the topic, county politics. After one month of the project, the Danish Prime minister called for a general election to take place on the same day as the local and regional elections. In Denmark, national politics often attract much more attention than local politics. Thus, the probability of a total shift of the focus of the debate was an obvious possibility. However, the call for election only resulted in three specific postings. The participants were able to distinguish between the different policy levels and national issues did not interfere in the regional debate.

## 8. The Nordpol participants

To complete the picture of the debate and address the participants specifically, a survey was placed on the project website for four weeks around the election.<sup>17</sup> Eighty-two persons answered the survey<sup>18</sup> and even though this figure is too small to infer statistically significant findings, it gives us a picture of the participants which could not be achieved in other ways. The general distribution of the respondents

<sup>17</sup>Online surveys are always problematic. One cannot control whether the respondents represent the group of participants in general. In other investigations the author has posted surveys direct to participants. By the method applied here, we get answers from some "lurkers" who do not participate actively. In short, no method is perfect yet and the development of Internet surveys is still a method in its cradle.

<sup>18</sup>Among the respondents there were equal shares of first-time, frequent and very frequent users of the debate forum.

Table 9  
General political activity of the Nordpol participants

Question asked: in which ways have you been politically active during the last 12 months? ( <i>N</i> = 82) <sup>a</sup>		
<i>Formal political participation</i>		
Member of a political party	21	25.6%
Member of organisation, grass root movement, etc.	17	20.7%
Member of users' councils, etc.	9	11.0%
Member of or candidate for parliament, county council or city council	8	9.8%
<i>Informal political participation</i>		
Discussing politics with friends, family and colleagues	66	80.5%
Participating in other online political debates	34	41.5%
Participating in town meetings, hearings and other political meetings	32	39.0%
Contacting a politician or a civil servant regarding a political matter	16	19.5%
Writing a letter to the editor	10	12.2%
No political activity	6	7.3%

<sup>a</sup>The participants were asked to check all categories that applied and the percentages are calculated in relation to the total number of respondents.

shows us that 57.3% are "lurkers", 33% have contributed with one or two postings, 6% with three to five postings, while less than 4% have made more than five contributions.

There are very few international surveys on participants of online political debates. The sparsely known figures show that most participants are very politically active and engaged prior to their online political involvement. This trend is confirmed for Nordpol.dk. More than 25% are members of political parties, 20% are members of a political organisation and 10% are members of various sorts of local councils. These figures are significantly higher than the national average.<sup>19</sup>

Considering informal political participation, 41.5% have engaged in other online political debates while public hearings, direct contact to politicians and general political discussions are well known to a large number of participants. Only 7.3% have not engaged in other political activities Table 9.

Another tendency from other online debates found on Nordpol.dk is the overweight of male participants, 70.7%, while 29.3% are female. Even though this is a significant skewness it is a much more equal distribution than for dk.politik where only 10% of the participants were female.

The age distribution is more equal although there are almost no participants older than 60 years. The project managers have to a certain extent achieved the goal of mobilising first-time voters (18 to 22 years old) while the largest group of participants can be found within the second- and third-time voters (23 to 29 years old).

The presence of a large group in this age cohort is related to the proportion of students within the body of participants. Almost 30% of the respondents are students. An even larger proportion, 35.4%, fall within the category of "White collar and civil servants". The total distribution of participants on occupation is shown in Table 10.

The Nordpol participants seem to be a well-educated group. More than one-third have finished or attend advanced studies of five years or more and more than 60% have finished or attend advanced studies. The figures are shown in Table 11.

Finally, the participants are very active Internet users, as 89% attend the Internet on a daily basis while the rest are online at least twice every week. This indicates that online political participation is conditioned by a daily presence on the Internet.

<sup>19</sup>As counting methods vary, it is difficult to get exact figures on the average political participation. However, for political party membership most experts estimate the Danish figure at 5 to 7%.



Table 10  
Occupation of the participants

Employment: Question asked: What is your present occupation		
Unskilled worker	2	2.4 %
Skilled worker	8	9.8 %
White collar/civil servant	29	35.4%
Employer	4	4.9%
Student	24	29.3%
Trainee etc.	1	1.2%
Retired etc.	7	8.5%
Unemployed	4	4.9%
Other	3	3.7%

Table 11  
Educational background of the participants

Education: Question asked: Mark the highest level of education finished or attending ( $N = 82$ )		
Nine years of schooling or less	6	7.3%
Vocational education	10	12.2%
High school/merchant school	14	17.1%
Advanced studies, 1–2 years	3	3.7%
Advanced studies, 3–4 years	16	19.5%
Advanced studies, 5 years or more	31	37.8%
Other	2	2.4%

The general picture of the participants of Nordpol shows a group of well-educated, politically active people, mainly students, public employees or persons in other administrative functions. Finally, they are very frequent users of the Internet and almost everybody have access from home. The last finding indicates that Internet access in the home is the first barrier which has to be overcome in order to engage in online political activities.

## 9. Conclusion

The overall conclusion on the debate of Nordpol.dk is that it was a democratic success when evaluated in the light of the prior quantitative expectations and experiences from other online debates. The participants in general were quite open-minded and the debate was lively and respectful within all dimensions and relations, apart from the debate among the citizens. Further, the debate showed certain relations to and from an external agenda. Even though the extent was not impressive, Nordpol fared better on that issue than many other Internet fora.

In the following I will briefly summarize some of the causes of that success, I will address issues where Nordpol.dk turned out less successful and, last but not least, I will recall an overall outline of the dynamics of the debate.

In the subsequent evaluation, both citizens and politicians in general agreed that the project was a democratic success. Even politicians who were quite sceptical prior to the project found that the debate had been useful for themselves as well as for the participants. Additionally, some politicians in the older age cohorts took the opportunity to learn using the Internet.

Among politicians as well as citizens there was general agreement that the regional focus, a certain moderation and the presence of politicians were key factors for the relative success of Nordpol.<sup>20</sup> For

<sup>20</sup>Similar findings appear in the conclusions on Minnesota E-democracy, one of the world's largest and most successful

the regional focus it was a widespread impression that it is easiest to engage people in a debate on issues close to the daily life of the citizens. Further, the regional bounds contributed to maintaining the focus of the debate. As we have seen, it was the exception rather than the rule that postings did not address regional topics.

The debate was not heavily moderated but the county council reserved the right to remove insults or privacy violations. This rule had to be used only once while in another case, a user was forced to post an official excuse for insults against a private company. In the cases of irrelevant postings or spam the debate tended to be quite self-regulatory, as kind requests to stay with the topic and avoid spamming were adhered to.

Finally, the presence of the politicians seems to have contributed to the respectful tone and the factuality of the debate. Of course, the politicians themselves contribute to that trend as they behave more respectfully and factually than the citizens, but it also seems as if the citizens behave more respectfully when the politicians are present. On the negative side, some could argue that the presence of politicians limit the citizens eagerness to engage in discussions with other citizens. Further, some citizens stated that the politicians used the debate forum for election campaigns and to tease candidates from other parties. The presence of politicians thus seems to be a two-edged sword.

More problematic from a democratic perspective is the limited inclusive effect. After the debate, the politicians pointed out that, despite the surprisingly high number of postings, only 120 different persons participated in the debates of which 74 were citizens. A commonly heard claim is that this is only a very limited proportion of the citizens residing in the county. On the other hand, according to some of the citizens, the figure corresponds closely with the normal number of participants in the newspaper debate prior to county elections in Northern Jutland. In that respect, the scope of participation on the Internet can be compared to more traditional forms of political engagement. However, political participation on the Internet is an exclusive activity still in its infancy and it is reasonable to believe that the Nordpol project has played only a minor role in the overall election campaign. The Internet has not substituted other participation channels such as TV, radio and physical meetings. If a future project shall play a larger role, it is important that much more citizens and politicians involve. Both parts mention the limited presence of the other group as a reason to participate somewhere else than the Internet. It seems as if we are still some way from a "critical mass" in order for online participation to kick off.

Another inclusion issue is the skewedness of the body of participants compared to the population in general. The typical participant of Nordpol.dk is a younger, highly educated male who uses the Internet on a daily basis. Thus, the Internet seems to magnify existing trends of political participation where the socio-economic status is normally highly decisive for political engagement. Even though, for example, more woman are now active on the Internet, certain biases prevail and it seems that many barriers, not only access but also skills, motivation and enhanced civic culture, have to be overcome to realize the participation utopia of the Internet often promised by optimists.

Last, looking at the main functions of Nordpol.dk, we have clearly identified both a vertical and a horizontal dimension. While a process similar to a traditional newspaper debate has been running in both dimensions, it was very obvious that the processes of the vertical dimension were dominated by consultation processes where the citizens used the politicians for asking questions, gaining new knowledge or bringing issues to the political agenda. The politicians, for their part, showed great responsiveness to the citizens' postings.

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projects of online democracy. Geographical bounds and a limited, but consequent, moderation were ascribed as criteria for the success and the long life of the project. See [8].

The two functions of Nordpol are confirmed by the participants who are asked to compare the project with other forms of political participation.<sup>21</sup> 52% compare it to a newspaper debate and almost 25% to an informal political debate with friends, colleagues or family. On the other hand, about 25% find that Nordpol resembles a town meeting and a slightly higher number, 28% that it is like writing letters to or talking to politicians. Both functions can be considered traditional elements of a consultation process.

The experiences from Nordpol.dk do not provide us with a complete set of solutions for innovating future initiatives on online political participation. But we have seen that the Internet can contribute to enhanced dialogue between citizens and politicians and thereby eventually narrow the often claimed gap between the groups. At the same time, debate and consultation can take place at the same time. Finally, conclusions from other projects on the importance of geographical bounds and certain moderations are confirmed.

Democratic online dialogue seems possible under the right circumstances, taking the necessary precautions and clarifying the purpose and the goal in advance.

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<sup>21</sup>The participants are asked to state one to three forms and thus the percentages sum up to more than 100%.

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