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Online Citizens
- Does the Net Add Something New to the Local Public and Local Politics?

To what extent does online political communication add something more and something new to the local public and local politics? On the basis of case studies from three Danish municipalities, some of the skeptical views regarding ICT-mediated forms of political information and deliberation are confirmed. However, it is also shown that the introduction of ICT add both something more and something new to the political public and political decision-making.

Contrary to previous discussions between 'utopians' and 'dysutopians', discussions concerning the democratic potentials of the Internet have recently assumed a more pragmatic position. On the one hand, it is widely recognized that the Net includes certain interactive potentials that are also relevant for democratic decision-making and implementation on various levels. On the other hand, these potentials should not be exaggerated. As some of the skeptics have indicated, politics appear to be proceeding as usual; whether for better or for worse. Few are engaged in political online discussions and those who are resemble those who are active *off-line*, namely the well-educated, middle-aged men, who are already most attentive to the traditional news media. What is added to the political public, the skeptics say, is therefore at best something more, not something else or something new. Furthermore, many online publics are seen to be isolated from conventional offline political publics and are therefore only perceived as being marginally relevant for policy-making and public opinion-formation. It is occasionally also stated that online discussions are more uncivilized than discussions in the traditional media; participants do not listen to and respond to one another.

Are these observations confirmed when confronted with experiences from e-participation in the local Danish context? This is discussed in the following. The first section outlines what is meant by a political public and how the Net can support the communication of indivi-duals and authorities within their environment. The next sections include a brief presentation of the data-material originating from three case municipalities in Denmark and the e-tools used to enhance participation. The analysis in the three following sections concentrates on the question of whether and how the use of these tools by the citizens adds partly something more, partly something new to the local political public, and to what extent it is possible to trace any effect of online deliberation on local public opinion-formation and decision-making.

The Internet as a political public

In relation to democracy, the Internet can be regarded as a particular structure of communication that, like other media, supports individuals communicating with their environment. McNair (2003) has indicated five democratic functions of the media: 1) to *inform* citizens of what is happening around them; 2) to *educate* as regards the meaning and significance of the facts; 3) to provide a platform for *public, political discourse*; 4) to provide *publicity* for governmental and political institutions; and 5) to serve as a channel for the *advocacy* of political viewpoints. The basis of these five functions is a notion of the free formation of will and opinion applying equally to all citizens and which is supported by a public sphere based on two major principles: a principle of *transparency* including free access to information and a principle of *public deliberation*. While the former principle is present in all modern theories of democracy,

the latter is more specifically associated with deliberative democratic theory. For a deliberative democrat, the principle of transparency constitutes but one part of that which is necessary to secure the free formation of will and opinion. Of equal importance is that the matters to be decided are deliberated in public (Loftager 2004).

"Democratic talk is not essentially spontaneous, but essentially rule-governed; it is not an end unto itself; rather, it is oriented to problem-solving and good governance."

In the famous Habermasian interpretation, public deliberation is equated with dialogue as a unique form of rational communication. In a perfectly functioning public sphere, particular interests are excluded; only rational, impartial arguments count (Eriksen & Weigaard 2003: 277). The ideal process of will-formation and decision-making is thus conceived as a peaceful conversation concerning the common good. This understanding has met some criticism. Not only has it been deemed unrealistic, it has also been rejected on a normative basis on the grounds that it misconceives the nature of political decision-making in modern, pluralistic societies. As Michael Schudson (1997) has indicated, 'democratic talk' should not be equated with a conversation. Democratic talk is not essentially spontaneous, but essentially rule-governed; it is not an end unto itself; rather, it is oriented to problem-solving and good governance. It does not merely unfold among people who are equal and hold the same values but also among people with conflicting values, interests and resources. To this can be added that democratic talk should not be treated as isolated from but rather as an integrated aspect of modern systems of mass-communication (Slevin 2000; Thompson 2001).

Based on these premises, I will understand public deliberation as non-coercive forms of arguments circulated between transmitters and receivers in open spaces based on mutual expectations of being listened to and receiving some sort of response. On the one hand, public deliberation is a broader term than dialogue. On the other hand, it excludes propaganda, advertising, etc. in which a response is not expected. Open spaces refers to spaces in which activities are visible and to which access is unrestricted. Finally, deliberations do not aim for consensus

(Dryzek 2002); rather, the ideal can be stated as an open-ended contestation of discourses, where consensus is a possibility, not a necessity nor even a normative ideal.

The focus is thus on the role of the Internet as vehicle for, on the one hand, political transparency, including free access to information and, on the other hand, public, political deliberation. In media theory, the concept of communicative affordance is used to describe the opportunities of a certain media to support the communication of individuals and authorities with their environment (Finnemann 2005; Jensen & Helles 2005). A parallel concept is used in theories of democracy, namely political opportunity structures. The focus here is on the specific properties characterizing various channels connecting citizens with political authorities. Both types of theories thus indicate that the media or channels in question enable certain forms of action and interaction. In this context, the primary focus is upon how the Internet has been shaped as a new channel between citizens and local authorities. Opportunity structures may vary from locality to locality depending on how the new channels are shaped. Speaking in economic terms, one can say that the creation of opportunity structures represents the 'supply-side' of the local political public, while the 'demand-side' can be understood to be the way the citizens use these structures (Norris 2004). By holding the two sides against one another, one may receive a more realistic account of the democratic potentials of the Net contrary to the exaggerated positive and negative statements regarding the role of the Net that have flourished in the last ten years.

In theories of deliberative democracy, political information is often treated as an integrated aspect of deliberation; as a necessary precondition for a fair deliberation process. One can, however, argue that access to political information unto itself plays an important democratic role, both in relation to opinion-formation and as regards the control of government (Dahl, 1989). Consequently, a distinction is drawn between ICT-mediated forms of political information and ICT-mediated forms of political deliberation. The analytical approach is illustrated in Figure 1, where political information and political deliberation are considered from the perspectives of the supply of e-tools and demand for e-tools and in relation to their possible effects on the political process. By filling the boxes in the scheme with quantitative and

FIGURE 1: Analytical Scheme.

	Supply of e-tools	Demand for e-tools	Effects on opinion-formation and policy-making
Public information	Low/high	Low/high	Low/high
Public deliberation	Low/high	Low/high	Low/high

qualitative types of data, we ought to be able to provide a picture of how the structuring of ICT-mediated political communication affects the political public.[1]

The overall question is what the Net actually adds to the political public with regard to political information and political deliberation. Does the supply of ICT-mediated information and deliberation structures lead to an extension of the local political public? Firstly, in terms of more citizens becoming involved in matters of public concern; and secondly, in terms of new citizens becoming involved and new issues being brought up in the public; and thirdly, in terms of the possible effects on political opinion-formation and policy-making.

The data-material

From 2002 to 2004, a number of experiments with digital democracy took place in the Danish municipality of Hals, outside of the city of Aalborg. These included various institutions from the local community level to the entire municipality. In this article, I shall concentrate on the municipal level. During this period, four major online consultations were held: two concerning the budget in 2002 and 2003, respectively, one concerning a new development plan for the municipality, and one concerning a proposal from a national commission to amalgamate smaller municipalities. In addition to these four consultations, a free debate took place on the web-portal *hals.dk* in which everybody was invited to express opinions and make proposals.

Hals is the primary case for this investigation, but in order to attain a sense of perspective on the data from Hals, we have also included data from two other Danish municipalities, namely Soelleroed, a Copenhagen suburb, and Odder, located south of Aarhus in Jutland. Together, the three municipalities cover the main features of the various Danish municipalities.[2] A population survey has been carried out in each of the three municipali-

ties: in Odder and Soelleroed in 2003, in Hals in 2001 and again in 2004 (Olsen et al. 2004; Hoff & Marckmann 2004; Torpe 2005). Additional data consists of interviews with politicians, civil servants and citizens in the three municipalities, but data is also included from a nationwide survey concerning the use of media (Hoff & Jauert 2005; Olsen & Rieper 2005; Torpe et al. 2005).

The supply of tools for e-participation

Tools for e-participation are occasionally divided as regards tools related to information, consultation and active participation (Coleman et al. 2005). The latter category refers to tools in which citizens themselves decide the matter. In that respect, none of the three municipalities have used e-tools for active participation, but only tools related to the two former categories. Tools for information include e.g. information about the local council and political committees, agendas and minutes from council meetings, appendices to council meetings, information about the budget, lists of incoming posts and information about local services. Such information is also widely available offline. In that respect, the Net does not provide citizens with new opportunities; rather, it makes the existing information faster and easier to obtain.

"The overall question is what the Net actually adds to the political public with regard to political information and political deliberation."

In recent years, such tools for e-information have expanded at the local level. The same is the case for e-tools for deliberation, mainly in the form of *e-consultation* in specific areas but also in the form of free debate in which citizens can bring up issues for online discussions (Torpe & Nielsen 2004; Torpe et al., 2005). A survey from 2005 has shown that 25 percent of all Danish

municipalities, including the three case municipalities, have established online discussion forums. Within a number of broad ethical guidelines, the access to these forums is free. All three of the forums in Hals, Odder and Soelleroed are used for free debate, to consult citizens on specific matters, and to collect feedback.

According to several evaluations, the Hals, Odder and Soelleroed websites are among the best municipal websites in Denmark (www.bedstpaanettet.dk ; Torpe & Nielsen 2004). In 2004 and 2005, Odder has even been ranked first among all municipalities. Odder has paid special attention to the information aspect by hiring a journalist to edit and present the local material; however, Odder has also made a deliberate effort to include citizens by inviting them to establish their own website linked to the municipal website and offered support to do so. Hals differs from most other municipalities in Denmark by having organized several e-consultations on different matters from 2002 to 2004. These consultations were part of some experiments with e-democracy in Hals supported by a regional ICT-program entitled *The Digital North Denmark*. In assessing such consultations, it should be underlined that supply is not merely a matter of web design; it is also a matter of investing time and money in collecting and presenting information as well as organizing and marketing political debates via the Net.

The use of e-instruments for political information
More information does not in itself increase political knowledge. Rather, it should be regarded as a necessary precondition for an 'informed citizenry'. Important parameters in an assessment of the contribution of e-information to the political public are therefore whether more information on local common affairs is provided and whether this information actually reaches a greater number of citizens. As indicated in Table 1, the political use of the website is much more pronounced in Odder than in Soelleroed and Hals. This may partly be explained by a more participant-oriented local political culture in Odder than in Søllerød and Hals (see above); however, it hardly explains the variations between the three municipalities as regards 'reading news'. The high percentage in Odder reading news on the website reflects the special effort made by Odder in this field; though the development of the website in Hals has also provided a greater number of users. The percentage that at least once monthly has received information from the website thus rose from 17 percent of the Internet-users in 2001 to 25 percent in 2004 (Torpe et al. 2005).

TABLE 1: The use of e-tools for political information.
Percentage of Internet-users who use the municipal website occasionally, i.e. weekly, monthly or less frequently.

	Hals 2004 (N=1010)	Soelleroed 2003 (N=1102)	Odder 2003 (N=545)
Have read local news	52	44	73
Have read minutes from Council meetings	37	20	46
Have searched for information about public services	53	55	70
Have searched for information about politicians	31	18	38
Have used the self-service system	48	49	50

The results indicate that the website has growing importance as a source of information. Something *more* is thus added to the local political public; however, as regards 'reading news', nothing indicates that the Net has replaced other sources of information or that new groups of people are included in the information activities. The group reading news on the municipal website is almost the same as the group following local politics in newspapers, radio and television (Torpe et al. 2005). This also applies for the younger generations, where some might otherwise have expected that the new media in itself would make a difference. In one case, however, something *new* also appears to have been added. If we for example consider the number now looking at 'read minutes' from the council meetings, the proportion has doubtlessly increased with the opportunity to download this item of information.

The use of e-instruments for political deliberation
As mentioned above, 25 percent of all Danish municipalities have an electronic debate board; however, a spot-check in January 2005 revealed that there were no postings in more than 60 percent of the municipalities. There were only two municipalities in which there were more than 10 postings found during an entire month, namely in Odder (43 postings) and Hals (221 postings). Even with only one posting, Soelleroed is above the average. From this, one could easily receive the impression that citizens are uninterested in discussing local politics online. But this is a hasty conclusion, because unlike Odder and Hals, most municipalities have invested little time and money stimulating the debate. In fact, many of the municipalities have done nothing other than provide the software.

In Hals, more than 1800 letters were posted on the debate forum over a three-year period: from approximately 200 in the first year to over almost 600 the next year to more than 1000 the third year (Torpe et al., 2005). As indicated in Table 2, however, these postings are distributed by only four percent of the Internet users, corresponding to 3 percent of the entire population in Hals. Moreover, 10 persons account for 60 percent of all the postings (Torpe et al. 2005), i.e. it is the same few people who are active in the discussions. Among these are four council members, including the Social Democratic mayor and his liberal opponent.

The majority in Hals are spectators. 38 percent have visited the debate forum once, but only 18 percent are 'regular spectators' in terms of having visited hals. dk at least once a month. Nevertheless, this is a somewhat higher proportion than in Odder and Soelleroed and a difference that cannot be explained by merely referring to individual resources or to participation-readiness. The only possible explanation is that greater effort has been invested in Hals to motivate citizens to participate in online deliberations. The rather modest proportion of Net participants should hardly come as a surprise; it corresponds to similar findings in other countries (Davis 2005; Ward et al. 2003). More interesting than the figures themselves, however, is considering them in relation to similar offline activities, e.g. letters to the editors of the local newspapers and town meetings. Citizens can be consulted both by holding a physical town meeting or a 'virtual' town meeting. In both contexts, most of the participants are spectators. In the first context, they listen to various speakers; in the second context, they read various postings online.

TABLE 2: The use of e-tools for public deliberation.
Percentage of Internet-users who use the on-line forums of Hals, Odder and Søllerød.

	Hals N=1012	Odder N=546/950	Soelleroed N=1102
Have sent postings to online local debate forums	4	3	1
Are spectators to online local debate	38	31	11
Are regular spectators to online local debate*	18	5	1
Have written a letter about local affairs to the local newspaper	5	4	2

*defined as having visited the discussion forum at least once a month

In Hals, a consultation concerning a new municipal development plan took place both offline and online. The plan was made available to the public on the municipal website, meetings were arranged in three local communities, and citizens were invited to comment on and discuss the plans via the online discussion forum. Approximately the same percentage of people were engaged in writing letters to the local newspapers and sending postings to the online discussion forum (Torpe et al. 2005). However, while four percent state that they have attended at least one of the meetings, eight percent of all citizens have read the debate contributions on hals.dk. Thus, twice as many followed the debate online as offline.

"The influence of citizens on agenda-setting represents a possible effect of the free online debate, where citizens are invited to bring up new issues."

As expected, there is an overlap between online and offline spectators. Almost one-third of those who followed the debate online also attended one of the meetings. However, the two-thirds who only watched the debate online represent a genuine expansion of the public in this field. Thus, not only something more but also something 'new' is added. Such an expansion of the public also appears to have taken place over time, because nothing indicates that online discussions have replaced 'face-to-face' meetings. The same proportion that attended a town meeting in 2001 has also attended a town meeting in 2004, namely 12 percent. So even if the expansion may be less than some would have expected, the Net did add something more to the public as regards political deliberation in Hals. Furthermore, the case above also indicates that something new was added; at least in this one instance. Is it also more generally the case that something new is added?

Is something new added to the local political public?
More recent research has revealed that those engaging via e-channels are not only fewer in number; they also largely resemble the traditional political participants (Ward et al. 2005). This is also the case with the online discussion forum in Hals (Torpe et al. 2005). The 'democratic divide' is thus almost the same online as offline. It

might even be the same persons participating and the same issues being discussed online as offline. If that is the case, the function of the Internet is only to facilitate communication between those who would communicate anyway. Is this correct?

The answer is both 'yes' and 'no' (Torpe et al. 2005): 'yes' on the grounds that there is an overlap of issues discussed in the local newspapers and the digital forum; but also 'no', as some of the issues raised in the digital debate forum do not appear in the newspapers, and visa-versa. There is a general tendency that issues close to the citizens occupy more space in the online discussion forum than in the newspapers. In the online discussion forum, we meet clients who complain over the manner in which their cases have been handled by the local administration, and we meet people who are worried about the local traffic and unsatisfied with the way the municipality manages things such as snow clearing.

Secondly, 'yes', because there is a massive overlap of persons engaged in local political activities offline and online. Almost half of those participating in town meetings also follow the debate on hals.dk. Even more pronounced is the overlap for the active citizens online. 61 percent of the online activists have attended a town meeting during the last year, 32 percent are members of a political party, and 36 percent have written a letter to the editor. Moreover, the frequent users of hals.dk constitute a rather small group for whom it has become part of their identity to comment on local political issues. As one of them states: "On hals.dk you almost feel like a family" [interview].

At the same time, however, 'no', because further investigations reveal a more subtle distinction (Torpe et al. 2005): very few of the participants, less than 10 percent, have never been active in politics before. Furthermore, a comparison between those writing letters to the editor and those sending postings to hals.dk reveals that there are more representatives of the local elite in the local newspapers, whereas 'ordinary citizens' occupy more space in the online discussion forum.

We can therefore conclude that at least some new participants have been mobilized via the Net. In that sense: that which has been added to the local political public is not merely something more, but also something *new*; both in terms of the issues raised and persons involved.

Effects on opinion-formation and policy-making
Not all talk is equally important in relation to public opinion-formation and policy-making, and as we may recall, skeptics say that Internet discussion forums are isolated from the wider public and, as such, do not play a significant role in relation to public opinion-formation and policy-making. Do we find support for these statements in our empirical material? The answer again is both 'yes' and 'no'.

The policy process includes agenda-setting, decision-making, implementation and evaluation, and at each level, deliberations take place as a more or less formalized system of governance. Consequently, political opinions are confirmed or changed in an ongoing process affecting that which is decided and implemented. This is particularly emphasized by deliberative democrats. The role of the media in that process is also disputed and not easy to determine. In the following, we shall assess the impact of the online discussion forum on the local policy process in Hals: are there indications that the online hals.dk discussion forum has affected local agenda-setting and local opinion-formation and decision-making in ways that would not have been possible via other media? We will draw on several sources to answer this question, e.g. qualitative interviews with key politicians and civil servants, observations from one case in which a decision was made, together with results from several citizen surveys. We shall start with agenda-setting, which may be separated in two: agenda-setting 'from above', where the agenda is set by the local council, e.g. through consultations; and agenda-setting 'from below', where the agenda is set by the citizens themselves.

Agenda-setting 'from below'
The influence of citizens on agenda-setting represents a possible effect of the free online debate, where citizens are invited to bring up new issues. In most of the cases in which issues have been brought up, however, it is not possible to trace any independent effect on agenda-setting. Firstly, they overlap with offline media in many cases, as seen above. It is therefore not possible to isolate the effect of online discussions. Secondly, some issues brought up online are that which can be referred to as 'non-issues' in the sense that they do not constitute a problem for the wider public. Thirdly, some issues brought up are easily included in existing plans and pro-

grams, i.e. can be added to a previously fixed agenda. This only leaves a few cases to be studied as possible examples of how agenda-setting is influenced 'from below', and in only one case during the period we have studied is it actually possible to trace an effect from hals.dk to the political agenda-setting and later to changes in the administrative routines. In this case, hals.dk was used by some former and present social clients to register complaints regarding the handling of the assignment of illness benefits by the local authorities. The details are of no relevance here.

"More recent research has revealed that those engaging via e-channels are not only fewer in number, they also largely resemble the traditional political participants."

As a result of the publicity and the debate, however, the issue was raised among council members and in the local administration and led to some minor changes in the administrative procedures. Furthermore, the online discussion forum helped create contacts and to form a network between clients with the same problems. As one says: those contacts were important "both to find out that I was not the only one who had difficulties with the local authority and because we had the opportunity to talk together about the problems, there were..." [interview]. On the other hand, local politicians and civil servants were unhappy with the complaints, and it was difficult for them to respond in public due to their personal character.

Would it have been possible for the same persons to raise the same issues with the same strength in the traditional local media? There are reasons to doubt whether this be so. In fact, one social client initially attempted to raise her case in the local daily newspaper, but was refused. She benefited from the fact that the online discussion forum has no filter, contrary to newspapers. The open character of online debate forums may generally favor persons with low educational skills. Furthermore, it may be easier for many persons to post letters on an online discussion forum than to take the floor at a public meeting. This was expressed by one-fourth of the active online participants. All in all, the case reveals that an online discussion forum can serve as an alternative

channel for raising issues that – for some reason or another – go ignored in the traditional media.

In general, the members of the Council had difficulty pointing out concrete examples of political effects of the online hals.dk discussion forum. Nevertheless, some did indicate that they had been influenced by the arguments presented on hals.dk, and most of them stated that the online discussion forum had helped draw attention to something that otherwise could have gone unnoticed. As expressed by the Mayor: "One becomes more aware of a case if it receives interest ... otherwise it might go forgotten ... And it really doesn't take that much ..." [interview]. A very simple condition for making oneself heard is that someone must be listening. In that respect, it is most important that those who are in a position to take action, namely the local politicians, are among the listeners. A question to the council members reveals that 40 percent follow the discussions on a daily basis, 30 percent follow them several times a week, 15 percent follow them less frequently, and only 15 percent never follow the discussions.[3] All of the leading council members are among those who follow hals.dk most frequently. The proportion of the Council that follow the online discussion is thus somewhat larger than the proportion of the citizens following hals.dk on a regular basis, namely 18 percent of the Internet-users, corresponding to 12 percent of the general population.

We also asked the council members to assess the importance of hals.dk compared to other media and channels. From this it becomes apparent that hals.dk has become a more important medium in the eyes of the politicians. In 2002, only four council members stated that hals.dk is an important medium. In 2004, this number increased to nine. Among them are all of the leading politicians. Nonetheless, Hals.dk continues to be regarded as a less important medium than local newspapers and also regarded as less important than e.g. 'face-to-face' contact with citizens. There is undoubtedly a threshold for a new media to pass to break through in public. An important factor is the number of citizens using the medium, as this at least somewhat determines how much attention the political elite pays to the forum. It is impossible to say how many citizens must follow the discussions before this threshold is passed, but with no more than 12 percent of the entire population participating regularly, the discussion forum

could easily be overlooked by the politicians. As we have seen, this was not the case in Hals. One reason for this being the case could be that hals.dk was part of an experiment with e-democracy supported by The Digital North Denmark. We are therefore unable to observe the situation under more 'normal' circumstances. But it may also have contributed to strengthening the attentiveness of the politicians that during the period there were several examples of interplay between hals.dk and the local newspapers.

Agenda setting 'from above'

Contrary to agenda-setting 'from below', agendas are set 'from above' when the locally elected representatives consult citizens on certain matters. From this perspective, the question is how effective the online medium is for obtaining response from the citizens. As mentioned above, four major online consultations were held in Hals from 2002 to 2004. One of them was a consultation regarding the future structure of the municipality as part of an overall reform of the local political-administrative structure in Denmark. For Hals, there were several options: amalgamating with a smaller neighbor municipality; amalgamating with two smaller neighbor municipalities; or amalgamating with Aalborg, the nearby big city. The e-consultation on the matter took place during spring 2004. Ultimately, a referendum was held in September 2004 wherein a majority voted for an amalgamation with Aalborg, which was also the final result.

390 postings were produced during the e-consultation period, though a relatively modest number of persons was behind most of them. To acquire an impression of the impact of the e-consultation on the formation of opinions on the matter and later for the final outcome, a panel of 50 persons was randomly selected. These persons committed themselves to follow the discussions on the online forum and to answer a questionnaire at the beginning and end of the consultation. In both surveys, each of the panel members was asked to indicate which of the three options he or she preferred. A comparison of the answers in the first round with the answers in the second round shows that 41 percent of the panel members have changed their attitudes toward the amalgamation: the amalgamation with one or two of the smaller neighbor municipalities became less popular during the consultation, while the amalgamation with Aalborg

became more popular. At the same time, the panel members developed more positive attitudes toward the prospect of being a part of a big municipality such as Aalborg. Fewer respondents feared that an amalgamation with Aalborg would lead to the closure of the small schools in Hals and a greater number appeared to think that bigger municipalities would provide better service for less money.

Obviously we cannot conclude on this basis that the decision to amalgamate with Aalborg was a consequence of the e-consultation. Even if we assume that the panel is representative for the group following the online debate, this group only constitutes a small part of the total population of Hals. It is also possible that sources other than the online debate have influenced the panel members. Regardless, a debate of a similar scope would not have been possible to hold in any other local medium. It is thus likely that the online consultation contributed to the decision to hold a consultative referendum; and to some extent also to the final result.

Analyzing the content of the debate does not confirm that which is often stated, i.e. that online participants do not listen to and respond to one another (Ulrich 2005). In fact, most of the deliberations that took place can be characterized as a dialogue if one considers the degree to which the participants relate to each other and if one examines the degree to which reasons are indicated for the various statements expressed. Neither does the forum generally suffer from a lack of civility. There are, however, conspicuous exceptions, where a small – but loud – number of persons have used the forum to express their personal frustrations with the local authority and some of the representatives.

Conclusion

Are the skeptical views regarding the democratic potentials of the Net as outlined in the introduction of this article confirmed? Some of them are: it is true that in most Danish municipalities, the interactive potentials of the Net for constructing two-way communication with the citizens are not utilized. This is also part of a general picture including public authorities, companies and NGOs (Jensen & Helles, 2005).It is also true that where the interactive potentials are used, relatively few citizens are actively involved in political deliberation activities on the Net. Even in Hals, where citizens were

invited to participate, less than 20 percent have followed the discussions on a regular basis. Furthermore, it is true that online participants resemble those active offline, and it is also true that much of that which is discussed in the online discussion forum is quite similar to that which is discussed in the local newspapers.

However, the skeptics are not entirely on the mark. The information provided via the municipal website and the online discussion forum did not merely add something more to the political public. Something new was also added in terms of the persons involved and issues discussed.

With regard to the impact of the new medium on opinion-formation and decision-making, the skeptics may also be correct in claiming that the influence of the new medium is rather modest. However, there were also indications that the particularly comprehensive online debate on the future structure of the municipality of Hals had an impact on at least some opinions regarding that issue. Furthermore, at least in one case during the two-year period in which we followed hals.dk, the discussions influenced the public agenda and led to a change in the implementation of policies.

It is generally true that compared to the public of the conventional media, the online public remains of minor importance; however, we have seen that the online forum can serve as an alternative channel for issues that are neglected by the conventional media. It is furthermore incorrect to claim that the online discussion forum in Hals is isolated from the remaining publics.

Finally, it is true that one can find examples of abusive language in the discussion forum, just as many citizens are unhappy with the discussion content. On the other hand, a majority of the hals.dk users and the politicians agree that hals.dk is a good place to draw attention to certain matters. Furthermore, it ought to be added that participants generally respond to one another and provide reasons for their statements. With some few but rather conspicuous exceptions, the deliberations are conducted in a civilized manner. It is, however, presumably correct that the tone is more direct and rough on hals.dk than is common in the newspapers. This has something to do with the different forms of communication, but the hals.dk medium might also reflect the political voice of 'ordinary man' and – for better or for worse – more so than the conventional media.

NOTES

[1] Adding effects on opinion-formation and decision-making to the scheme signals that participation is not an end unto itself; rather, that it relates to the attempts of citizens to influence opinion-formation and/or policy-making (as underlined in liberal democratic theory) or to find common solutions (as underlined in deliberative and republican theories of democracy). Contrary to participatory theories of democracy where it is seen as a democratization effect in itself if more instruments of participation are afforded and if more citizen-activity is consequently generated.

[2] Hals lies in the countryside: Approximately 11,000 inhabitants in an area of 190 km2. The municipality of Odder has approximately 20,000 inhabitants and covers and area of 220 km2. Contrary to Hals, however, most of the inhabitants live in the provincial town of Odder. A Copenhagen suburb, Soelleroed has approximately 32,000 citizens in an area of 40 km2. The population density is thus more than 13 times as great in Soelleroed as in Hals, with Odder in the middle.

[3] 13 of the 17 council members responded to the question.

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Politics Backstage
- Television Documentaries, Politics and Politicians.

The mediation of politics and the images of politicians have changed with the development of television and other audiovisual media. The media have moved much closer to the backstage of political processes as well as to the more private and personal spheres of the politicians. This article discusses this development and analyses documentary programs in the light of changes in the public sphere and political discourse.

"Every generation gets the Thomas Jefferson it deserves (...) The Jefferson today is one of sex, scandal and hypocrisy." So wrote American Journalist Ellen Goodman in 1998 (Goodmann 1998). She was referring to a shift from political substance towards politics backstage, both in terms of media increasingly focusing on the private and 'dirty' aspects of the political game behind the scenes. The commercial nature of American media probably led to this development earlier than in Europe.

However, the breakthrough of television around 1960 as the dominant journalistic and political medium initiated this development globally. From that time on, politics and political figures have endured a greater degree of media exposure and worked under constant observation and in a veritable crossfire from journalists. The need for political 'drama', visual reporting and storytelling on television created a mediated political 'persona' in which the private sphere, the sphere of political institutions and processes and the sphere of the public and popular have become deeply intertwined in public opinion and communication (Corner 2003).

The television documentary, the political portrait and reports from political processes play an important aspect in this development, although of course the day-to-day news and journalistic programs are more dominant. In 1960, Drew and Leacock made the first of these documentary films, aired on ABC: Primary. Here, we follow John F. Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey during their respective campaigns for nomination as candidates for the impending presidential election. It is a discrete, observational documentary without an authoritative voice-over telling us how to interpret what we are witnessing. We are able to witness politics as it unfolds and we are close to political persons without any filter or interpreter.

This feeling of being present is even stronger in Drew and Leacock's *Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment* (1963), with President Kennedy in direct political confrontation with Governor George Wallace in Alabama on a race issue. This is political drama, a watershed event in the reformation of civil rights and liberty, which the Kennedy administration strongly advocated and practiced. We are close to the political process and the private residences of the two adversaries, providing us with a backstage visualization of the contrast between southern conservative culture and an eastern, modern and academic lifestyle.

The transformation of visibility

This development led to a subtle struggle over the control of media exposure, media images and media performance. The political system developed its own staff of spin doctors in order to match the increase in media exposure. As Corner (2003: 73) points out: the strategic projection of political and private identity into the public became more important, and the branding of politicians became professionalized. One aspect of this mediatization of politics and political figures was that politicians allowed camera crews and journalists backstage in political journalism: exposing the political process became more common, as 'openness' could be perceived as a sign of democracy and honesty. At the same time, the branding of the political 'persona' as a private person became more clearly integrated in the projection