

*THE MODERATOR AS AN EMERGING DEMOCRATIC INTERMEDIARY: THE ROLE OF THE MODERATOR IN INTERNET DISCUSSIONS ABOUT PUBLIC ISSUES* \* published in: *Information Polity* 7 (2002) 3-20

Arthur R. Edwards  
Department of Public Administration  
Erasmus University Rotterdam  
P.O. Box 1738  
3000 DR Rotterdam, The Netherlands  
e-mail: edwards@fsw.eur.nl

**Abstract:** A common approach towards the role of the moderator in Internet discussions is to see him as a filter. In this article I want to show that the moderator in government-initiated Internet discussions about public issues can be seen as a democratic intermediary, and that this role has the potential to enhance the quality of those discussions as forms of deliberative democracy. I develop a conceptual model of the management of Internet discussions. Five cases of Dutch Internet discussions about public issues are analyzed. The filter function of moderation appears to be of minor importance. Moderators do a lot more. They manage discussions. Particularly, they contribute to the interactivity and openness of discussions and to the accessibility of public administration and institutional politics. In most of the cases described, there had been independent, 'third party' moderation. As governments gain more experience with the Internet, moderation may shift to governmental agencies. In this perspective, it is important to stress the transparency and to care for the negotiability of moderation.

## **1. Introduction**

**Case 1** - In an Internet debate about sustainable economic growth, organized in 1999 by one of the provincial governments in the Netherlands, two representatives of political parties (one Christian Democrat, and one Liberal Democrat) became involved in a discussion about policy priorities. At a certain stage of the discussion, one of the politicians proposed to carry on the discussion 'in the assembly rooms of representative democracy' and to let others utilize 'the bytes of this new medium'. At that point the moderator intervened. He underlined the public role of representatives and urged them to participate in the debate, to exchange and defend their points of view, as well as to probe the points of view of citizens. The moderator continually tried to involve the politicians in the debate, for example by sending them e-mails when he considered them keeping silent for too long a time.

**Case 2** - In an Internet discussion about mobility, organized in 1996/97 by the Ministry of Transport, each month the moderator invited a politician to become the 'Politician of the Month'. The moderator selected a small number of contributions of participants and forwarded them to the politician to react. This enhanced the attractiveness of the site and stimulated the discussion. It also provoked a discussion about the way the politicians in general perform this job, in particular about their inclination to take non-committal positions.

What we see in these cases is the emergence of the moderator as a new democratic intermediary between citizens and government, next to already existing ones. Democratic regimes cannot function properly without intermediaries. Several intermediary roles can be discerned in the information and communication relationships between citizens and government. In representative

\*The author wishes to thank Ignace Snellen for his comments on earlier versions of this article. A first draft was presented at the CIPA'99 Conference 'Citizens and public administration in an information age', Tampere, Finland, August 18-20, 1999.

democracies political parties fulfil important intermediary roles. They assemble, express and process political demands and points of view, translating these into political programs. In the concepts of political systems theory, these are the articulation and aggregation functions of political parties (Almond & Powell, 1966). In this connection, political parties also represent to a certain extent the social and cultural diversity of society. In this representation function, a political party acts as a spokesman of certain interests, opinions and cultural or religious groups. And, of course, political parties fulfil a recruitment function for political and governmental positions. Other traditional democratic intermediaries are interest groups and journalists.

It has been claimed that one of the effects of the increasing use of ICT's in the political process will be that the positions of these intermediaries will be challenged, because ICT's will enable the citizens to bypass them<sup>1</sup>. Indirect democratic arrangements would be replaced by direct arrangements. Questions addressed in the literature are, whether the 'old' intermediaries will indeed lose their positions or take up new roles, and whether 'new' intermediaries will enter the arena and which roles they will perform<sup>2</sup>. Those empirical claims were often made in the context of a normative discourse. From the beginning, the advent of ICT's in society has been accompanied by visions of the realization of direct democracy, both in the plebiscitary form of a 'push button democracy' and in the deliberative ideal of a virtual 'agora' where people meet to conduct public discussions. ICT's would bring about the removal of 'distorting' intermediaries, thereby offering possibilities of a direct and 'unbiased' representation of citizens' demands (Bryan, Tsagarousianou & Tambini, 1998).

Against this background, it is interesting to look at the roles of old and new intermediaries within direct democracy. It is clear that certain intermediary roles of a purely informational nature have to be fulfilled also in direct democratic arrangements. In view of the permanent information overload, essential search and selection functions will have to be performed. Bardoel (1997) sets out that journalists can take up a new intermediary role in this by providing various information services to individuals or specific publics. It is less clear what will happen to those intermediary functions by which political demands are being processed (the 'volitional' intermediary functions; cf. Snellen, 1995). At least, it seems to be the point of direct democracy that the articulation and aggregation functions, as they are linked to political parties, will disappear. When we take a closer look, however, we can still discern certain intermediary roles of a volitional kind that have to be performed in a direct democracy. In the case of referenda, an essential task is the formulation of the issues or questions that are submitted to the citizenry. Which actors are involved in their formulation? Citizen groups, politicians, elected administrators, civil servants? Similar questions can be raised with regard to deliberative forms of direct democracy.

The relevance of this discussion for the actual development of democracy is that arrangements of direct democracy are penetrating into representative regimes and thus give rise to hybrid forms of democracy. For example, in the Netherlands many experiments are carried out with 'interactive policy making' between citizens, societal

---

<sup>1</sup> See for this discussion: W.B.H.J. van de Donk and P.W. Tops (1992). For an early discussion about the 'disintermediation' of politics as a consequence of the use of ICT's, see also: Benjamin (1982).

<sup>2</sup> As to political parties, see for instance: Depla and Tops (1995) and Smith (1998).

organizations, politicians and public officials. Experiments with Internet discussions about public issues, initiated by a (local, provincial or national) government, are part of this trend.

Dutch experiences with Internet discussions that were set up by various governments to discuss public issues with citizens show, that moderators perform an intermediary role. The two cases at the opening of this section illustrate this point. My claim is that the moderator can be characterized as a democratic intermediary and that this role is an important clue for our assessment of the Internet discussions as (incipient) forms of deliberative democracy.

In the next section, I present a theoretical framework for the description of the roles of the moderator. In section 3, five cases of Internet discussions are presented, that were initiated either by an agency at the national level or by a local or provincial government (sometimes in cooperation with societal organizations) to discuss policy issues with citizens. In all these cases, a provision was made for moderation, in one form or another. In section 4, I give a further analysis of the role and position of the moderator. I will look at the empirical findings in the light of the main features of a deliberative democracy. On this basis, an assessment is made of the Internet discussions we have dealt with and of the significance of the role of the moderator.

## ***2. The management of Internet discussions about public issues and the roles of the moderator***

My research object are moderated Internet discussions that are initiated by a government to start a deliberation with citizens about a public issue. This means that my research is limited in two ways. First of all, only Internet discussions about public issues are looked at that are initiated (or at least co-initiated) by a government. Secondly, from this set of discussions only moderated ones are examined. I define a moderated discussion as *a discussion in which a person (or group of persons), acting as 'the moderator', reviews the postings of the discussants.*

With the first restriction, I exclude all those discussions that are initiated and organized by (associations of) citizens. Although I fully agree with Schalken (1998) that such autonomous initiatives of citizens on the Internet constitute at least incipient 'public spheres', that are a part of deliberative democracy, I made this choice because the government-led initiatives generally have the explicit aim to give citizens the opportunity to exert influence on policymaking in an early phase.

To give citizens an opportunity to influence policymaking implies that the initiating government makes at least a minimal commitment towards the public to consider the results of the discussion. This sets the goal of the discussion at a fairly high level: at least it should be clear which issues were being discussed, which points of view were expressed, including the main argumentation lines pro and contra, which conclusions were reached and on which points of view there was consensus or not. This, in turn, implies that an agenda for the discussion has to be prepared, that a certain monitoring of the argumentation process in view of the agenda has to take place and that the conclusions of the discussion have to be consolidated. Probably, also certain rules of the game have to be formulated and maintained. Discussions of this kind have to be carefully prepared and managed. This justifies a focus on moderated discussions.

In a Dutch Internet dictionary the moderator is defined as ‘a person who exercises censorship on a mailing list or newsgroup’.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, in the libertarian tradition of the Internet, moderation can be viewed as conflicting with free speech and unrestrained communication. Tsagarousianou (1998) sees “the ‘moderation versus freedom of speech’ dilemma as a central issue in electronic democracy, and, as yet, an unresolved one”. However, as the history of the famous PEN-experiment (Public Electronic Network) in Santa Monica (1990-96) already suggests, the free speech principle has to be weighed against other legitimate concerns, like the need to facilitate a genuine discussion and to counteract possible abuses of the medium (Docter & Dutton, 1998). My claim is that a ‘free speech approach’ towards moderation, although fully legitimate in itself, is too narrow in relation to what moderation involves in practice. I will argue that the main issue is whether the moderation contributes to the deliberative quality of the discussion, notably its *interactivity* and *openness*, and whether the moderation itself is *transparent* and *negotiable*.

In order to substantiate this claim, we need a more thorough picture of the roles of the moderator. These roles have been discussed since the inception of the Internet community. In a discussion list on ‘Interpersonal computing and technology’ (1992), on which a very interesting discussion about the pros and cons of moderation can be read, Zane Berge listed nine roles of the moderator in a scholarly discussion group: facilitator, administrator, filter, expert, editor, promoter, marketer, helper and fireman. By collapsing some roles into others, he ends up at the following five: facilitator (including promoter and fireman), administrator (including marketer), filter, expert (including helper) and editor. In Kent Landfield’s NetNews Moderator’s Handbook (1996, site) three purposes of newsgroup moderation are mentioned. The first purpose is to prevent or remove inappropriate postings to the newsgroup, such as chain letters or postings on topics that are specifically excluded from the charter of the group. The second purpose of moderation is to facilitate the discussion, for example to end up certain repetitive or endless uninformative discussions. Interestingly, we see that also the facilitating role is illustrated by Landfield in ‘negative’ terms. The third role of the moderator is to answer questions or to give help. Using Berge’s terminology, we can designate these roles as ‘filter’, ‘facilitator’ and ‘helper’. The Guide for Electronic Citizen Consultation, published by the Dutch Ministry of the Interior (1998a), also mentions three roles. First, the Guide mentions the role as ‘host’. As a host, the moderator attends to it that the participants feel at ease; he shows them the way in the discussion, how it works, where information can be found etc. Second, the moderator is seen as a ‘discussion leader’. In this role, he furthers the progress of the discussion. Also, he stimulates that all participants actually take part in the discussion. Third, the moderator has a role as an ‘arbiter’. He may designate certain postings as inappropriate and decide to remove them. These three roles are of the same nature as the roles as ‘helper’, ‘facilitator’ and ‘filter’.

All these distinctions are useful, as they give a good impression of the variety of possible roles of the moderator. However, in order to get a more systematic description of roles, I developed a conceptual model of the management of Internet discussions and used that model as a research instrument to discover what moderators do. The choice for a ‘management approach’ is purely instrumental, and can be justified by the orientation of government-initiated discussions with citizens on reaching certain results that can have an impact on decision making. Later in this

---

<sup>3</sup> Het Internet Woordenboek, Furore Informatica: [www.furore.nl/iw000164.htm](http://www.furore.nl/iw000164.htm)

paper, I will embed this approach in the normative perspective of deliberative democracy.

A management approach suggests that certain general ‘management functions’ have to be performed. I distinguish three functions for the management of Internet discussions: (1) the strategic function, (2) the conditioning function and (3) the process function (see figure 1).

The *strategic* function is to establish the boundaries of the discussion and to embed it in the political and organizational environment. It includes the following tasks:

- . to establish the goals that are aimed at with the discussion, both towards the citizenry and towards the institutional decision making system;
- . to obtain political and organizational support for the discussion;
- . to establish the status of the discussion in terms of influence on decision making;
- . to establish and maintain the substantive domain of the discussion, i.e. the boundaries of the agenda within which themes and issues may be raised;
- . to ensure that the results of the discussion will actually be carried over into the decision making process.

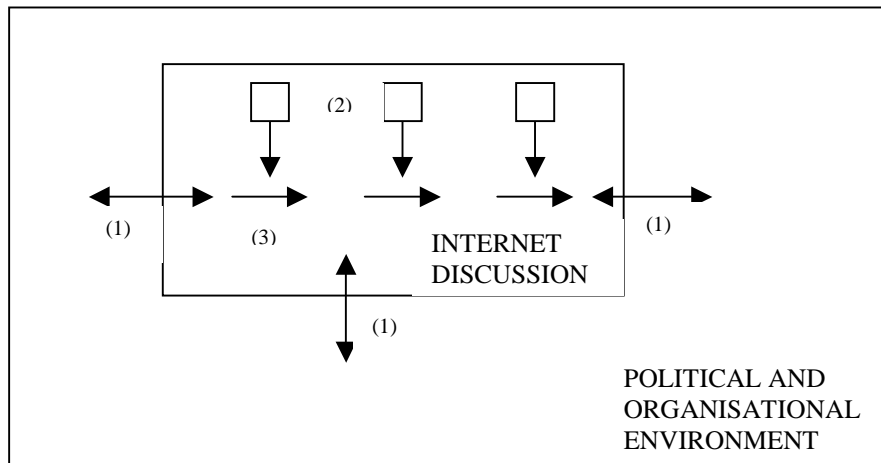
The *conditioning* function is to translate this strategic outline into all kinds of conditions and provisions for the discussion. This may include:

- . the information provision;
- . the provision of supporting technologies, such as simulation models and visualization;
- . soliciting people to join the discussion as participants.
- . the provision of a moderator

The *process* function includes all tasks that have to do with the discussion process itself as a collective, purposeful activity. This includes the following tasks:

- . to set the interactional goal of the discussion, i.e. the kind of results to be reached by the participants within the discussion. For instance: exploration of problem definitions or consensus building about policy measures;
- . to specify the agenda of the discussion, within the substantive domain that has been established: questions, propositions or themes;
- . to set the schedule of the discussion;
- . to manage the discussion in view of its interactional goal, its agenda and its schedule. For example: assigning postings to discussion lines or opening new discussion lines, making summaries during the discussion;
- . to stir up participants to take part in the discussion, to invite them to give reactions to specific contributions etc.
- . setting and maintaining the rules of the game.

Figure 1: the management of Internet discussions



- (1) strategic function: establishing the boundaries of the discussion and embedding it in the political and organizational environment
- (2) conditioning function: taking care of conditions and provisions
- (3) process function: furthering the progress of the discussion itself as a collective, purposeful activity.

Two kinds of decisions have to be made regarding the management of Internet discussions itself. The first decision is the choice of the moderator, particularly the choice between an independent moderator and a moderator from the governmental staff. The aforementioned Guide for Electronic Citizen Consultation (1998a) of the Dutch Ministry of the Interior recommends independent moderation. The second decision refers to the organizational arrangements in which the discussion is embedded. Among other things, in these arrangements the position of the moderator vis-à-vis the initiating governmental agency is laid down. Both decisions can be seen as part of the conditioning function, but they do not refer to provisions for the discussion, but to conditions under which the management of the discussion will evolve. They may be crucial for understanding the role of the moderator as a democratic intermediary.

### 3. Introduction of the research

Five cases have been investigated: two cases of Internet discussions initiated by a department at the national level of government, two cases at the provincial level and one case at the municipal level. The cases will be presented in chronological order<sup>4</sup>:

<sup>4</sup> To document these cases, I used the following kinds of sources:

- a. Evaluations of researchers. The first four cases are, among others, described in a report on 'First experiences' published by the Ministry of the Interior (1998) and in a thesis by Scheele (1997). There is also an extensive scientific evaluation of the third case by Leeuwis et al. (1997). The fifth case has been evaluated by Van Kempen et al. (1999).
- b. Evaluations by the moderator. In four cases there were written evaluations available from the moderator. In case 1 this evaluation is part of the evaluation report published by the Ministry of the Interior (1996). Of the other reports, one is unpublished (Van den Bosch, 1997: case 2), an other one placed on the Net (case 4), and the last one has been published (Lenos, 1999: case 5).
- c. Interviews. I interviewed three moderators, responsible for the moderation of the discussions 1, 2, 4 and 5. I also interviewed a staff member of the Ministry of Transport and Public Works (case 2) and a member of the board of the Digital City of Amsterdam.

1. *Ministry of the Interior*, March-May 1995  
Electronic public service delivery, digital participation, information provision
2. *Ministry of Transport and Public Works*, October 1996-March 1997  
Mobility and accessibility
3. *Province North-Brabant*, November 1996  
Spatial policy/land use
4. *District Amsterdam-North*, May-June 1997/April-May 1998  
Masterplan Central Zone
5. *Province Overijssel*, February 1999  
Sustainability (economy vs. ecology)

The case descriptions will be structured in three subsections. In the first subsection, a broad outline of the case will be presented: it will be indicated who took the *initiative*, which *strategic aims* were pursued and which were the *organizational arrangements* of the discussion. In the second subsection, I look at the *discussion process*, viz. the interactional goal(s) of the discussion, its agenda and the participants. In the third section, the focus will be specifically directed on the *moderator*.

*Case 1: Information policy for the public sector (Ministry of the Interior, March-May 1995)*

- outline of the case

The Dutch Ministry of the Interior is a main actor in the development of information policy for the public sector in the Netherlands. During the preparation of a policy document in 1995, the Ministry took the initiative to set up an electronic discussion. This was the first electronic discussion initiated by a department at the central governmental level. It was meant as an experiment to test the possibilities of the new media for citizen participation in policy making. In strategic perspective, the initiative had also important political and PR functions, showing the pioneering and leading role of the Ministry in the arena of information policy.

The factual organization of the discussion was delegated to the Digital City of Amsterdam, an initiative of an independent political-cultural institute and a group of former computer activists, launched in 1994, with the aim to enhance democracy by electronic means (Francissen & Brants, 1998).

- the discussion process

The interactional goal of the discussion was to probe the opinions of citizens on certain themes of information policy. The Ministry committed itself to consider the points of view raised by the participating citizens in the drawing up of its information policy. The following three themes were chosen by the ministry as the agenda of the discussion:

- a. digital public service delivery;
- b. digital participation in the democratic process;
- c. the accessibility and transparency of information through electronic media.

The discussion took place between March 18 and May 6 1995. The discussion was followed by 150 people, from which a third took part in the discussion. An effort was

---

d. Full texts of discussions: the full text of the discussions 4 and 5 on the Net. Also, the full text on paper of discussion 2 has been consulted (archive of the Ministry of Transport and Public Works).

made to involve politicians in the discussion, but only a few were prepared to do so. The participation of officials was also very low. Their involvement, however, was not prompted.

In the evaluation of the discussion by the initiators, the discussion was characterized as a free (and lively) public debate about the challenges of the information society, rather than as a business-like deliberation about themes of information policy. The direct usefulness of the discussion for policy making was considered as limited.

- the moderator

The Digital City of Amsterdam provided the moderator of this discussion. All postings first entered the mailbox of the moderator. So, filtering took place *ex ante*. From the outset, the moderator made it clear that he would actively perform his role as a filter. He announced that he would filter all contributions that he considered as 'noise'. This elicited some sharp reactions. The moderator set out that this discussion was moderated to enhance the quality of the discussion in view of its goal. This would justify certain limits on the free forum model, as it is common elsewhere on the Internet.

The moderator also made use of several possibilities to enhance the quality of the discussion, for example by posting summaries, inciting participants to react or by introducing new topics for discussion. At some occasions, he intervened on individual contributions, by mailing a contribution back to the sender with the request to review it (to make it clearer or more to the point).

Also, the moderator took responsibility for a good atmosphere and certain manners of social intercourse ('netiquette'). He intervened only on one occasion, by uttering some admonishing words to participants.

It can be concluded that the moderator filled in his role entirely within the *process function*, by:

- maintaining the agenda of the discussion;
- making summaries;
- inciting participants to react;
- asking participants to review their own contribution;
- maintaining certain (implicit) rules of the game.

In his evaluation, the moderator described his role in terms of 'the art of keeping the balance'. Some participants suggested that the criteria for moderation should be fixed and made known at the outset of the discussion. The moderator pointed to the practical impossibility of setting clearcut criteria.

*Case 2: 'A Digital Traffic Junction' (Ministry of Transport and Public Works, October 1996-March 1997)*

- outline of the case

In October 1996 the Ministry of Transport and Public Works started an Internet discussion on questions of mobility and accessibility, themes with a strong emotional dimension, as became apparent from the course of events during this discussion. The initiators were a group of officials within the Ministry, who eventually gained support from the departmental top management, eager to experiment with forms of 'interactive' policy making. A discussion site was set up, called 'Digital Traffic Junction' (Digitaal Verkeersplein). This first discussion was meant as a pilot. The strategic aim was essentially explorative: to find out whether Internet discussions with



citizens can contribute to the quality of public policy making; in which stages of the policy making process Internet discussions are meaningful; which issues lend themselves to such discussions; and what the specific qualities are of Internet compared with other media. As it was seen as a pilot, the Ministry did not intend to commit itself to use the results of the discussion in policy making.

The organization of the discussion was taken care of by a project group of staff members of the department of Informatization Projects of the Ministry. A steering committee, on which the members of the project group were sitting, as well as representatives of relevant interest groups, decided on the content of the discussion, in particular on the questions to be discussed. Finally, a discussion group on which the members of the project group were sitting as well as officials within the Ministry who were involved in the policy making on mobility, decided on the contributions of the participating officials.

- the discussion process

In the line of the strategic aims mentioned above, the interactional goal of the discussion was to gather innovative ideas and perspectives. During the seven months of the discussion, six propositions were submitted to the participants. Every 4-6 weeks a new proposition was introduced, after the previous discussion was brought to an end. In view of the pilot character of the discussion, the following propositions of diverse scopes, 'broad' propositions as well as 'narrow' ones, were formulated:

- a. We all have to do something about traffic jams, otherwise this problem will never be solved;
- b. Why do you use your car for short drives?
- c. We cannot avoid road-pricing as a solution.
- d. When I drive aggressively, I'll reach my destination earlier;
- e. The car is the most beautiful invention of the last century;
- f. Freedom of mobility limits the freedom of ...?

Partly due to the publicity given to the opening of the site, the first proposition attracted a lot of participants. During the month of October 1996, 127 citizens participated (with 299 contributions), as many participants as in the remaining 6 months together. In the discussion on the last proposition 26 people participated with 110 contributions.

- the moderator

The initiators consulted the Digital City of Amsterdam about the organization and the moderation of the discussion. On its suggestion, a journalist with experience as chairman of face-to-face discussions, was asked to act as the moderator.

In contrast with the preceding case, the contributions were automatically placed on the discussion site. Filtering had to take place ex post. According to the moderator, the overwhelming number of reactions in the first month made it practically impossible to manage the discussion as a purposeful activity and to draw conclusions. His first intervention, in the third week, was to replace a number of contributions by summaries. This meant that the original contributions were removed completely, as there was no technical provision to archive them. This intervention encountered some angry reactions of participants, who accused the moderator of being partisan. During the following two months, the discussion polarized more and more. Gradually, a group of seven participants manifested themselves as fierce car-supporters, who tried to dominate the discussion. Also, this group attacked the moderator again as

being partisan. In a lengthy contribution the moderator defended his moderation policy and stated to welcome suggestions. In his evaluation, the moderator described the postings of these participants as ‘closed pro-car’, ‘a hard and often unfriendly tone’, ‘sometimes scolding’. According to the moderator, an effect of their behavior was that several other participants left the discussion and newcomers were deterred. After consultations between the organizers and the moderator, a new start was made with the following rules and provisions:

- a ‘netiquette’ was introduced, along with an active moderation to maintain the rules: improper contributions would be removed;
- a ‘parking place’ was set up for irrelevant contributions;
- ‘side streets’ were created to offer participants a provision to discuss other themes than directly related to the proposition under discussion;
- staff members of the Ministry agreed to react more swiftly than they had done till then;
- a publicity campaign was started to attract new participants.

These new rules and provisions were a success, except the side streets that were seldom used.

One of the ideas of the moderator was to aim at involving politicians in the discussion. Every month, after a new proposition was introduced, he invited a politician to become the ‘Politician of the Month’. The moderator selected three or four contributions of participants and forwarded them to the politician to react. This enhanced the attractiveness of the site and stimulated the discussion, although several participants were not always satisfied about the way in which the politicians performed their job (taking non-committal positions).

To sum up, the moderator fulfilled the following tasks:

#### *Conditioning function*

- At some occasions, the moderator drew the attention of the participants to certain sources of information.
- Efforts were made to involve politicians as participants in the discussion.

#### *Process function*

- Together with staff members of the Ministry the moderator formulated the specific topics of the discussion.
- He selected some contributions of participating citizens and submitted these to politicians to react;
- During the discussion, specific provisions for the structuring of the discussion in discussion lines were created<sup>5</sup>.
- He furthered a more active participation of staff of the Ministry in the discussion.
- During the discussion, certain rules of the game were introduced.

#### *Case 3: Spatial policy (province North-Brabant, november 1996)*

- outline of the discussion

This discussion was initiated by two independent institutes, active in the field of social development and citizenship, the Institute for Public and Politics (IPP) and the Institute for Advise, Research and Development in North-Brabant (PON). They approached one of the Aldermen of the province with the question whether the

---

<sup>5</sup> As far as these provisions, such as the creation of side streets, did allow for discussions outside the boundaries of the original agenda, this intervention had a strategic dimension as well.

province would be ready to start an experiment with an Internet discussion. The Alderman, responsible for the portfolio of 'administrative innovation' as well as town and country planning, reacted positively. The IPP had developed a digital method to support group opinion formation and interactive decision making and sought for an opportunity to test the method and software. The two institutes and the Alderman agreed on spatial policy as the subject matter of the discussion and more specifically on the actual and future use of space in view of various demands, as from agriculture, housing and industry. It was considered that the insights from this discussion would be used in the long term spatial policy making. The strategic aims of the province were to experiment with new forms of communication between government and citizens and, also, to gain more public support and attention for spatial policy. The organization of the discussion was in the hands of an 'editorial group' consisting of staff members of the initiating institutes (IPP and PON) and a moderator from the Catholic University of Brabant (KUB).

- the discussion process

The interactional goal of the province was to get new ideas out of the discussion. The discussion was structured in three phases. The first phase was meant to discuss the problem. The central question of this phase was: "Is the province running short of space?" In the second phase, possible solutions were to be discussed. In the third phase, the discussion was to be concluded by an opinion poll. In practice, the discussions about problem and solutions ran parallel.

All in all, 45 participants in the discussion posted together 335 contributions.

- the moderator

The editorial group took the main responsibility for the daily management tasks. In this case, the 'moderator' only had a technical function and implemented the decisions of the editorial group.

The group fulfilled the following roles in the discussion:

*Conditioning function*

- Information provision: the policy of the editorial group was to rely on interest groups as information providers. Interest groups were invited to formulate and document their points of view. In general, the interest groups did respond to this.
- Also, these interest groups were solicited to join the discussion as participants.

*Process function*

- It was indicated that contributions that were beside the question, or contained intimidations, would be removed. Once removed, they would be placed in the so-called 'sand box'. In this way, all contributions remained publicly accessible. From the 335 contributions 37 were removed. This happened for various technical reasons, but did not have to do with substantial violations of the rules. For example, several faulty contributions were removed, such as contributions that only had a title, but no content.
- The editorial board made weekly summaries of the debate, which were highly appreciated by the participants.
- The active participation of the interest groups in the debate was very low. Much effort has been made 'behind the scenes' to stir up their involvement. These efforts were in vain.

Looking back, the editorial group would have preferred a more active role as a discussion leader, for example by asking participants to split long contributions in smaller ones (that pertain to different discussion lines) or by moving a contribution from one discussion line to another. It is striking that, in their evaluation of the discussion, the participants themselves advocated a more active moderation.

*Case 4: Masterplan Amsterdam-North (22 May-12 June 1997; 1 April- 1 June 1998)*

- outline of the case

In the District of Northern Amsterdam two Internet-discussions have been held about the so-called 'Masterplan Central Zone Amsterdam-North'. The initiative for the first debate came from the Communications Department of the District. This discussion was meant as a pilot to test the possibilities of Internet-discussions for improving the relationship between government and citizens, and for enhancing the quality of the spatial policy of the District, in view of the wishes and needs of the inhabitants.

The initiator of the second debate was the Project Group responsible for drafting the Masterplan. In this case, the discussion was intended as having a PR-function for the Project Group.

In contrast to the other cases, these two Internet discussions were not separate projects but were part of a broader scheme of citizen consultations.

The preparation and implementation (but not the moderation) of the first discussion were contracted out to a consultancy firm. A supervisory role was played by a team, in which the head of the Communications Department, the manager of the Project Group, two Aldermen and the moderator were sitting. The second debate was managed by the moderator himself, in consultation with staff members of the Communications Department and the Project Group, as well as with one of the Aldermen. For this debate, there was no supervisory team.

- the discussion process

The interactional goal of both discussions was to get additional information and new ideas, and to enter into discussion with other people than those who belong to the circles involved in the ordinary consultations with the District.

The agenda of the first discussion was broadly formulated and concerned the general outline of the plan in relation to the special, partly rural character of the district. The agenda of the second discussion was more specific, regarding specific functions (housing, offices, public transport etc.) and facilities.

The first discussion had 40 participants, the second one 20. In both cases, it was tried to attract participants by publicity in the local press and by information material.

- the moderator

A journalist (formerly a communications official of the province North-Holland) was invited by the District to moderate both discussions.

The moderator fulfilled the following tasks:

*Strategic function:*

- He formulated the conclusions of the discussions and presented them to the council and Aldermen of the District. The conclusions of the second discussion were publicly handed over to the Alderman responsible for spatial planning. This event was announced on the discussion site.

*Conditioning function:*

- In the preparation of both discussions the moderator put a lot of effort in the information provision to participants.

*Process function:*

- He contributed to the specification of the agenda. The themes were a joint product of the moderator and officials of the District. During the second discussion, the moderator added a new issue on the agenda that was raised in several contributions of participants. It had to do with the attractiveness of the District, as to facilities, relative to other parts of Amsterdam. This issue stayed within the boundaries of the discussion agenda.
- He stimulated participants to react to each other, and, in particular, he stirred the officials to react to contributions of citizens. This activity mostly took place 'behind the scenes' and required much of his attention.

In the interview, the moderator set out as his philosophy that the moderator should use the possibilities of the Internet to enhance the accessibility of public administration for the citizens. Therefore, he invested much energy in stirring up the Alderman to react. Also, he used his position to urge officials to answer specific questions of citizens. Once, during the second discussion, the moderator posted the following reaction on an earlier question of a citizen:

" I have forwarded your question to the staff of the Project Bureau Central Zone. When I get their answers (within a few days), I'll place them immediately on the site, and also mail them directly to you. I'm sorry that I cannot answer you at once. I'm only the discussion leader, not a planner of the District".

According to the moderator, the publicness of the Internet can be used as a power resource vis-à-vis public administration.

*Case 5: A sustainability debate (Province Overijssel, 3 February-3 March 1999)*

- outline of the case

The initiative for this discussion came from the National Commission for International Cooperation and Sustainable Development (NCDO). The commission wanted to set up an Internet discussion in two provinces on the possibilities for provinces, in cooperation with citizens and organizations, to work for a sustainable future. The NCDO approached the Institute for Public and Politics (IPP) to find two provinces to sponsor this idea. The provinces Overijssel and North-Brabant joined the initiative. The discussions took place in the month before the elections of the provincial parliaments (Provinciale Staten). They formed part of the endeavour of the NCDO to gain more attention and support in Dutch society for 'sustainable development'. By using the Internet, the NCDO hoped to reach other people than the circle of specialists. The Province of Overijssel saw in this debate an opportunity to revive the discussion on her 'Strategic vision 2020'.

The organization of the discussion was a cooperative effort of the NCDO, the Province, the IPP and two regional organizations on the field of environment and international cooperation. The IPP provided an (experienced) moderator. The participating parties formed a small editorial group.

- the discussion process

The interactional goal of the discussion was to find out which issues and points of view with regard to 'sustainability' are really important for the public at large.

With regard to its agenda, the discussion was conducted in two parts:

- a. 'growth and green': is it possible for the province to realize economic growth, and at the same time remain 'green'?
- b. 'me, we and the rest': how do we cope with social changes as individualization and multi-cultural society, the development of a 24 hours economy and the like?

These themes and their operationalization were formulated in the editorial group. The debate attracted 43 participants, who posted 145 contributions. In contrast to other Internet discussions, the participation of politicians was substantial (about one-third of all contributions). Also, some regional organizations were active participants. However, the number of participating ordinary citizens was somewhat disappointing.

- the moderator

The moderator, who designated himself as 'the host', fulfilled the following tasks:

*Strategic function*

- The weekly summaries were joint together in his final report and carried over to the policy makers.

*Conditioning function*

- He invited societal organizations and political parties to join the discussion as participants.
- Information provision: he asked the societal organizations and political parties to provide a formulation of their view on sustainability as well as two short standpoints as starting-points for the discussion.
- He opened the discussion with a short informative introduction of the question.

*Process function*

- He tried to enhance the interactivity of the debate, in particular by stirring the organizations and political parties to react. He did so 'behind the scenes' (by e-mail, fax or phone), and sometimes by intervening in the discussion (see case 2, Introduction).
- He made weekly summaries. The summaries were placed on the discussion page and also e-mailed to participants who had left their e-mail address.
- He formulated the 'rules of the game'. The moderator set two rules, (a) 'stick to the subject of the discussion', (b) 'the host acts as the discussion leader. He may remove contributions on his own discretion, in view of a meaningful and pleasant debate'.
- On one occasion he intervened as a filter. He removed five contributions that urged for 'closing our frontiers for foreigners'. This intervention was not his own initiative. He had called some politicians to react upon these contributions. They pointed out to him that the contributions were 'beyond the scope of the discussion'.

In the interview, the moderator underlined that he considered it as his primary task to enhance the interactivity of the discussion. He refrained from steering the discussion

on its content to enhance the argumentative quality of the discussion. This could be done, for instance, by asking participants to support their points of view by arguments. In his evaluation of this discussion, Van Kempen et al. (1999) found that about 40% of the contributions were points of view without argumentation. The moderator saw this as a responsibility of the participants: the participant is autonomous.

#### ***4. An analysis of the role and position of the moderator***

I have looked at the practice of moderation with a framework in which three functions are distinguished for the management of Internet discussions:

- the strategic function: establishing the boundaries of the discussion and embedding it in the political and organizational environment;
- the conditioning function: taking care of conditions and provisions for the discussion;
- the process function: managing the discussion process as a collective, purposeful activity.

Our empirical findings indicate that moderators are involved in all three functions, but that they fill in this role in different ways. With regard to the strategic function, we saw in some cases that moderators are involved in carrying over the results of the discussion to the policy makers. Moderators can further that the discussion will have some real influence on decision making. Another strategic task that is performed by the moderator is maintaining the boundaries of the agenda of the discussion. In the first instance, this is a monitoring task, which may be visible only occasionally in concrete interventions. It seems plausible that other strategic tasks (establishing the strategic goals of the discussion, its status and its substantive domain, as well as obtaining organizational and political support) are accomplished by the initiators themselves.

As far as the conditioning function is concerned, moderators are often involved in the information provision. They may do this by inviting others, notably interest groups and political parties, to provide their views on the subject. They are also engaged in soliciting citizens, societal organizations, politicians or officials to join the discussion as participants.

Their primary involvement, however, is in the process function. First of all, the moderators put a lot of effort in enhancing the *interactivity* of the discussion. Moderators use various methods and devices for this. We have seen that many of these activities take place 'behind the scenes'. Especially in cases, when moderators are stirring politicians and other institutional actors to react to contributions of citizens, they fulfill an intermediary role. Moderators are also involved in the formulation of the discussion themes (*specifying the agenda*). In most cases this takes place in cooperation with staff members of the initiating agency. Moderators are in the position to keep the agenda open to amendments and additions of citizens. In case 2 (about mobility and accessibility) 'side streets' were created to offer participants a space to discuss other issues than directly related to the proposition under discussion. In the two Amsterdam-North discussions the moderator regarded the discussion site as an open channel for questions and issues raised by citizens. In this case, the moderator fulfilled an intermediary role as to agenda-setting. Furthermore, to keep the discussion on track as a *purposeful* activity, moderators manage discussion lines and

make summaries. Finally, moderators set and maintain some rules of the game, although their actual interventions as a filter are relatively seldom. We conclude that our findings corroborate our proposition that moderators may act as intermediaries between citizens and public administration. By enhancing the interactivity of the discussion, stimulating the participation of citizens as well as politicians and administrators, by their involvement in the agenda-setting and the management of discussion lines, by providing information, and by their efforts to carry over the results of the discussion to the policy makers, the moderators establish themselves as part of the *information and communication infrastructure* between citizens and public administration.

The significance of this role can be clarified further, when we relate our findings to the features of *a deliberative procedure*.

In a deliberative democracy citizens “share a commitment to the resolution of problems of collective choice through public reasoning, and regard their basic institutions as legitimate in so far as they establish the framework for free public deliberation” (Cohen, 1989). We may take an approach to discussion groups on the Internet as providing fora for free public deliberation (cf. Schalken, 1998; Tsagarousianou, 1998), and not in the least with regard to government-initiated discussions. From Benhabib (1994) I derive three basic features or principles that constitute a deliberative procedure.

The first principle states that the participation in deliberation is governed by the norms of equality and symmetry. This principle reflects Habermas’s ‘ideal speech situation’. It stipulates that all citizens should have equal opportunities to start or to enter a public discussion, as well as to advance stands or proposals and to oppose the stands or proposals of others. Furthermore, the participants are required to defend their proposals by arguments and to refrain from using power (Habermas, 1975). Or, as it is formulated by Cohen (1989), the existing distribution of power should not shape citizens’ chances to participate in a discussion, nor should it play an authoritative role in settling the dispute. In terms of my conceptual model of Internet discussions, I place this principle within the process function. It refers to the interaction between the discussants.

Benhabib’s second principle states that “all have the right to question the assigned topics of conversation”. The third principle is that “all have the right to initiate reflexive arguments about the very rules of the discourse procedure and the way in which they are applied or carried out”. The second principle refers to the specification of the agenda of the discussion (process function), but it also refers to strategic aspects of the discussion, as soon as the very boundaries of the agenda are being questioned. For example, in a discussion about mobility and accessibility a discussant may wish to shift the boundaries to include the question ‘Why economic growth?’. The third principle refers to the task of setting and maintaining discussion rules (process function).

What do the cases learn us about the implementation of these principles? As to the first principle, the efforts of moderators to enhance the interactivity of the discussion and, particularly, to create a forum on which politicians and other institutional actors make explicit their points of view and expose them to critical discussion with ordinary citizens, can be seen as contributing to an ideal speech situation. Moderators see to it that participants refrain from using power during the discussion, so that only ‘the force of arguments’ can settle the dispute. In principle, moderators can do more in



order to ensure that ‘participants defend their proposals by arguments’. I referred to the study of Van Kempen (1999) which shows that 40% of the contributions in the sustainability debate (case 5) were merely points of view without argumentation. A similar conclusion was made by Leeuwis et.al. (1997) in their evaluation of the Brabant debate (case 3). This suggests that the argumentative quality of Internet discussions, at least in this respect, may be rather poor. Moderators could take a more active attitude on this. However, the consideration of one of the interviewed moderators that interventions in the argumentative substance of contributions would encroach on the autonomy of the participant, seems to be legitimate. According to normative argumentation theory, a discussant is not obliged to give an argumentation when he advances a point of view. He is only obliged to do so, when his point of view is attacked by another discussant (Van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984). In this line, a moderator is (only) legitimated to intervene if a participant does not react when a point of view that he advanced earlier in the discussion is attacked by another participant.

Benhabib’s second principle, the right of participants ‘to question the assigned topics of conversation’, is a complex one. Of course, the initiating government may decide on the theme of the discussion, such as ‘road-pricing’ or ‘sustainable economic growth’. But the specific questions or propositions that have been formulated, should at least be handled not too rigidly. A more fundamental approach would entail that the agenda of the discussion, i.e. the boundaries of the substantive domain of the discussion, as well as the specification of it in questions or propositions, is presented at the start of the discussion as a proposal that is open to amendments of participants. In that case, the agenda can be consolidated in a commonly agreed charter of the discussion group. We did not find this procedure in our cases. Benhabib’s last principle suggests that the moderation policy should be transparent and negotiable. In two cases, some discussion rules were formulated at the start of the discussion. In one case they were introduced during the discussion.

I conclude that the intermediary role that is played by the moderator has the potential to enhance the quality of Internet discussions as forms of deliberative democracy. In some respects, the moderators in our cases did not fully exploit their possibilities.

Why can moderators play this role? In all cases the moderation was accomplished by an independent ‘third party’ moderator. In the Internet discussions we looked at, the person of the moderator was there as the ‘host’, publicly visible and accessible for the participants; as an independent party he took up a position in the interface between the initiating or organizing government and the participating citizens. In most cases (with the exception of case 3, the Brabant debate) the moderator was embedded in organizational arrangements in which he had to deal with one of his ‘principals’, i.e. the government and/or societal organizations which initiated the discussion.

Moreover, the initiators establish the strategic outline of the discussion. Still, the moderator is in the position to acknowledge in the practice of his moderation that he has an other principal as well, the citizenry.

The figure of an independent moderator, however, is not a sure thing. The role of the moderator could also be performed by staff members of the initiating agency. The procedure would then involve that all contributions would first enter the mailbox of the Communications Department of the Ministry, municipality or province, be filtered and then be placed on the discussion site. This model was in fact used during the Internet discussion organized by the Ministry of Defense as part of the Strategic Discussion on the Future of Defense, a discussion that took place in spring 1999.

I surmise that as government agencies get more experience with the Internet, moderation tasks will shift to these agencies, notably the communications departments. This trend would support Snellen's general proposition that bureaucracies are outrunning classical institutions as democratic intermediaries in the information society (Snellen, 1995).

I do not suggest that moderation by governmental staff is necessarily harmful for the openness of the discussion and its moderation. But specific attention has to be paid to conditions under which the moderation can be such *as if* it was performed by an independent party.

## **5. Concluding remarks**

Moderators can be seen as (emerging) new intermediaries in ICT-facilitated forms of deliberative democratic arrangements. In so far as these arrangements of direct democracy will enter more and more in representative regimes, moderators will establish themselves as elements of the information and communication infrastructure between the citizenry and public administration.

I embarked on the claim that a 'free speech approach' towards moderation, in which the moderator is primarily seen as a filter, is too narrow in relation to what moderation involves in practice. I examined this practice with a conceptual model of the management of Internet discussions, in which three basic functions are distinguished, the strategic function, the conditioning function and the process function. The conclusion was reached that moderators fulfill important tasks in organizing all kinds of conditions and provisions for the discussion (conditioning function) and in the management of the discussion process itself as a collective, purposeful activity (process function). In some respects, they are also involved in the strategic function, but the strategic outline of the discussion is generally determined by the initiating agencies. In performing these tasks, moderators fulfill an intermediary role, and in this role they contribute to the interactivity and openness of Internet discussions. In the analysis, I emphasized the moderator's (potential) contribution to the deliberative quality of Internet discussions. Independent, 'third party' moderation seems to be an important condition for this, especially in government-initiated Internet discussions that are always under a certain 'shadow of control'. However, also independent moderators work within the strategic outline set by the initiators. In their management of the discussion process they have to cooperate with public officials. Against this background, moderators have to strike a balance as to their orientation towards the initiating government and towards the citizenry. In the organizational arrangements of the discussion, in the procedures and discussion rules attention has to be paid to the transparency and negotiability of the moderation.

## **References**

Abramson, J.B., F.C. Arterton and G.R. Orren (1988), *The electronic commonwealth: The impact of new technologies upon democratic politics*, New York Basic Books.

Almond, G.A. and G.B. Powell jr. (1966), *Comparative politics; a developmental approach*, Boston.

- Bardoel, J. (1997), *Journalistiek in de informatiesamenleving [Journalism in the information society]*, Amsterdam: Cramwinckel.
- Benhabib, S. (1994), 'Deliberative rationality and models of democratic legitimacy', *Constellations (1)*, 26-52.
- Benjamin, G. (1982), 'Innovations in telecommunications and politics', G. Benjamin (ed.), *The communications revolution in politics*, Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science, New York.
- Berge, Z.L. (1992), 'The role of the moderator in a scholarly discussion group (SDG)', <http://star.ucc.nau.edu/~mauri/moderate/zlbmod.html>
- Bosch, K. van den (1997), *Evaluatie Digitaal verkeersplein* (unpublished).
- Bryan, C., R. Tsagarousianou, D. Tambini (1998), 'Electronic democracy and the civic networking movement in context', in: R. Tsagarousianou, D. Tambini and C. Bryan (eds.), *Cyberdemocracy. Technology, cities and civic networks*, London & New York: Routledge.
- Cohen, J. (1989), 'Deliberation and democratic legitimacy', in: A. Hamlin, P. Pettit (eds.), *The good polity: normative analysis of the state*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.
- Depla, P.F.G. and P.W. Tops (1995), 'Political parties in the digital era: The technological challenge?', in: W.B.H.J. van de Donk, I.Th.M. Snellen and P.W. Tops (eds.), *Orwell in Athens. A perspective on informatization and democracy*, Amsterdam etc.: IOS Press.
- Docter, S. and W.H. Dutton (1998), 'The First Amendment online; Santa Monica's public electronic Network', in: R. Tsagarousianou, D. Tambini and C. Bryan (eds.), *Cyberdemocracy; technology, cities and civic networks*, London & New York: Routledge.
- W.B.H.J. van de Donk and P.W. Tops (1992), 'Informatization and democracy: Orwell or Athens?', in: *Informatization and the Public Sector*, 169-196.
- Eemeren, F.H. and R. Grootendorst (1984), *Speech acts in argumentative discussions*, Dordrecht: Foris Publications.
- Francissen, L. and K. Brants (1998), 'Virtually going places; square shopping in Amsterdam's Digital City', in: R. Tsagarousianou, D. Tambini and C. Bryan (eds.), *Cyberdemocracy: technology, cities and civic networks*, London & New York: Routledge.
- Habermas, J. (1971), *Toward a rational society*, London: Heineman.
- Kempen, H. van, S. Penseel, K. Brants (1999), *Digitale debatten over duurzaamheid in Noord-Brabant en Overijssel [Digital debates about sustainability in North*

*Brabant and Overijssel*], Amsterdam: Amsterdam School of Communication Research.

Landfield, K. (1996), *Netnews Moderator's Handbook*, <http://www.landfield.com/usenet/moderators/handbook/>

Leeuwis, C., W.N. Jankowski, P.J. Martin and others (1997), *Besliswijzer beproefd; een onderzoek naar teledemocratie in de provincie [The decision manual tested; a research into teledemocracy in the province of North Brabant]*, Amsterdam: Instituut voor Publiek en Politiek.

Lenos, S. (1999), *Digitaal Duurzaamheidsdebat Overijssel*, Amsterdam Instituut voor Publiek en Politiek.

Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken (1995), *Discussie op de snelweg: ervaringen met elektronische burgerparticipatie [Discussion on the Electronic Highway; experiences with electronic citizen participation]*, Den Haag: BiZa.

Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken/ Directie Interbestuurlijke Betrekkingen (1988), *Elektronische Burgerconsultatie; eerste ervaringen [Electronic Citizen Consultation; first experiences]*, Den Haag: BiZa.

Ministerie van Binnenlandse zaken/ Directie Interbestuurlijke Betrekkingen (1988), *Elektronische Burgerconsultatie; Handleiding [Electronic Citizen Consultation; A Manual]*, Den Haag: BiZa.

Schalken, C.A.T. (1998), 'Internet as new public sphere for democracy', in: I.Th. M. Snellen and W.B.H.J. van de Donk (eds.), *Public administration in an information age; A Handbook*, Amsterdam etc.: IOS Press.

Scheele, R.J. (1997), *Inspraak interactief? Internet-discussie, een nieuwe vorm van inspraak?[Interactive participation? Internet discussions; a new form of participation?]*, Universiteit Utrecht (master thesis).

Smith, C., (1998), 'Political parties in the information age: From 'mass party' to leadership organization?', in: I.Th.M. Snellen and W.B.H.J. (eds.), *Public administration in an information age; A Handbook*, Amsterdam etc.: IOS Press.

Snellen, I.Th.M. (1995), 'Channelling democratic influences through bureaucracies', in: W.B.H.J. van de Donk, I.Th.M. Snellen and P.W. Tops (eds.), *Orwell in Athens; a perspective on informatization and democracy*, Amsterdam: IOS Press.

Tossijn, T. (1998), *Eindconclusies uit het tweede Internet debat over het Masterplan Centrale Zone Amsterdam-Noord*.

Tsagarousianou, R. (1998), 'Electronic democracy and the public sphere. Opportunities, challenges', in: R. Tsagarousianou, D. Tambini and C. Bryan (eds.), *Cyberdemocracy; technology, cities and civic networks*, London & New York: Routledge.

