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Public deliberation in an era of communicative plenty

This article introduces and develops the concept of 'communicative plenty' to capture the implications of the increasing volume of communication, both online and face-to-face, in contemporary democracies. Drawing on recent systems thinking in deliberative democracy, the article argues that communicative plenty can offer a viable context for large scale public deliberation provided that: i) the spaces for voice and expression are accompanied by sufficient spaces of reflection and listening; and that ii) collective decisions involve sequencing of first expression, then listening, and then reflection. To substantiate this proposal, two cases where conventional democratic practices were modified either formally or informally to promote greater listening and reflection are subjected to close empirical analysis. The analysis reveals that designing spaces of reflection and listening is a practical means to enhance public deliberation and so democracy, particularly in contexts vulnerable to an overload of expression and the democratic pathologies of communicative plenty.

In September 2015, *Dream Defenders*—a Florida-based organization that was part of the Black Lives Matter movement (with then 53,000 Twitter followers)—announced a six week 'social media sabbatical' from their organizational Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts. According to one of the chief organizers of the movement, Elijah Armstrong, social media provided an 'illusion of deep relationship' and connectedness among the movement members while in reality it hindered the prospects for 'real conversations'. Having said that, the organization did not seek to renounce social media permanently. Rather, it promised to resurface digitally after taking some time to reflect and get in touch with its base about who they are, what they do and how they do it

(Aronoff, 2015). During its 'online hiatus', the organization launched listening projects with local communities throughout Florida, and sought to create an opportunity for its members to listen and reconnect with one another (Dream Defenders, 2015).

The need to find such spaces for reflection and re-connection with constituencies is not unique to this movement. In recent years, responding to the expanded, fast and intensified communication, scholars have begun to emphasize the benefits of slowing down for democracies (Stoker et al, 2015). There is even a 'slow democracy' movement, which takes its name from the 'slow food' movement and calls for authentic, more reflective and local engagement with those that are affected by collective decisions (Clark and Teachout, 2012). Yet finding moments and spaces for slow political reflection has become increasingly more challenging in contemporary societies. Part of the challenge here is that in contemporary democracies there has been a proliferation of opportunities for citizens to voice their opinions, ideas and concerns (Flinders, 2015).

In this article, we use the term 'communicative plenty' to define this relatively new era in which there has been an expansion of opportunities for communication and information, both online and face-to-face. Commentators on this 'communicative explosion' stress especially the role of information technologies in transforming the communicative landscape and creating additional spaces (such as Blogs, Facebook, Twitter and other interactive sites) in and through which communication can take place (Allen and Light, 2015).

But communicative plenty is not only about increased digital communication. Today democracies also offer a growing number of spaces of face-to-face interaction created by government, community and private organizations seeking to connect and communicate with relevant constituents (Nabatchi et al, 2012). For example, citizens are increasingly being invited to express their opinion, deliberate and co-design policy programs (Evans and Terrey, 2016; Baiocchi and Ganuza, 2017). Not all these spaces are new; but what is new is their increasing density.

In this article, we consider the democratic implications of communicative plenty. We ask: whether and under which conditions communicative plenty can be associated with

more, and not less democracy? We respond to these questions from the perspective of deliberative democracy — a normative theory of legitimate democratic decision making that emphasizes the quality of political communication and not just the volume of it (Gastil et al, 2016). In line with the most recent iterations of deliberative democracy, we conceptualize public deliberation in systemic terms as a broad communication process occurring within and across multiple, diverse spaces (Elstub et al, 2016; Mansbridge et al., 2012). Given its emphasis on the multiplicity and diversity of political communication, a deliberative system perspective offers a valuable normative lens for evaluating the democratic potential of communicative plenty. In fact, as we show, it enables the evaluation of this era in ways that elude other democratic interpretations.

In what follows, we first take a close look at the main arguments of the enthusiasts and skeptics about the democratic potential of communicative plenty. We then introduce the deliberative system approach and define the conditions under which communicative plenty might lead to improved public deliberation understood in systemic terms. While we see the proliferation of communicative spaces as a positive move towards the realization of public deliberation at a system level, we take issue with the predominantly expression centric nature of these spaces. We argue that communicative plenty can enable public deliberation provided that: i) the spaces for voice and expression are accompanied by sufficient spaces of reflection and listening; and that ii) Collective decisions involve sequencing of first expression, then listening, and then reflection. To illustrate the institutional plausibility of this proposal, we discuss two cases where spaces of listening and reflection have been built into conventional democratic practices vulnerable to the pathologies of community plenty.

Is communicative plenty good for democracy?

The term 'communicative plenty' refers to the increased volume of information, communication and activities on offer in online and face-to-face forms in contemporary democracies. The concept recognizes that today the contestation of public issues is performed in numerous spaces well-beyond conventional spaces of public debate such as parliaments, mass media, policy inquires or protests. In addition, there are many non-traditional communicative spaces emerging – some formal, some informal, some

online, some face-to-face, some participatory while others more elite. Taken together, these spaces imply a significant increase in the volume of communication on issues of public concern.

Communicative plenty does not solely mean the expansion of the communicative spaces and opportunities; it has further transformative implications for the way democracy is understood and practiced. It alters the terms of who can participate in democratic politics, where and how. As such it also shifts the logic of how we can think about democratic collective action, and invites us to reconsider the established understandings of actors, spaces and repertoires of democratic participation. The online communicative spaces in particular make possible the emergence of a new type of usually large-scale publics 'whose footprints are potentially or actually global in scope, and whose membership cuts across and underneath the boundaries of territorial states' (Keane, 2013: 64). For citizens, communicative plenty means there is much to access, understand, digest, listen to, reflect upon and discuss. For decision makers, communicative plenty means much more noise but also more discursive opportunities. What then are the democratic opportunities and challenges posed by this era of communicative plenty?

At first glance the proliferation of communicative spaces seems to be good news for democracy. After all they offer a diverse array of opportunities for individuals to participate in politics and to have 'the feeling of being counted' (Coleman, 2013). In this context, digital technologies and the consequent rise of online spaces are particularly celebrated for enabling access to both information and public conversation. Enthusiasts of new digital technologies celebrate these technologies for leading to significant political transformation, even to revolutions, as observed in Egypt and elsewhere in 2011 (Papacharissi, 2015). They praise the age of communicative plenty for lowering barriers and costs to communication and participation, and thus facilitating the inclusion of previously disengaged or marginalized groups in democratic debate and decision-making (Vromen et al, 2016) The online spaces has also been seen as a potential solution to the problem of scale when attempting to expand citizen participation. In some cases, small local conversations can lead to national public debates, as observed for instance in Germany when an ad-hoc Twitter conversation on

everyday sexism sparked a national debate within 24 hours (Maireder and Schlögl, 2014).

As noted before, the democratic opportunities that come with communicative plenty are not confined to the proliferation of online spaces. There are also many democratic opportunities opened up by the expansion of face-to-face spaces of political expression and engagement. For example, government and international institutions actively promote the use of civic and stakeholder engagement as important means to enhance public service and accountability (OECD, 2009). Similarly governance networks are celebrated for bringing together knowledge and resources to better manage collective problems contemporary societies face (Koppenjan and Klijn, 2004). Alongside co-governance arrangements, ordinary citizens are increasingly being offered opportunities to participate in surveys, focus groups, community projects, open days, public hearings, town hall meetings, and deliberative forums such as participatory budgeting and citizens' juries. Examples can be found both within the existing political and administrative institutions of representative democracy and as stand-alone democratic innovations (e.g. Nabatchi et al, 2012).

There are various factors that explain the increase in spaces and volume of communication in recent times especially in contemporary liberal democracies. The development and prolific uptake of information and communication technologies is a significant factor behind this expansion. But there are factors to consider here as well, such as rising citizen demand to participate in political issues, and the growth in managerial and democratic agendas to make governments and service delivery more responsive, effective and accountable to citizens needs (Baiocchi and Ganuza 2017). In some cases, the communicative expansion occurs as a result of genuine democratization efforts to facilitate the inclusion of previously excluded individuals or groups in public discourse (see for example Nabatchi et al, 2012). Yet in other cases it could be the result of a neoliberal agenda, where governments intentionally seek to encourage citizen participation to reduce their costs and responsibilities (see Lee et al, 2015). Such spaces are also actively promoted and 'sold' by a growing industry of community engagement professionals (Lee, 2015; Hendriks and Carson 2008).

The contribution of these additional spaces to the realisation of democracy is highly contested (Baiocchi and Ganuza, 2017; Johnson 2015). Sceptics raise concerns about

the prevailing tendency to quickly associate the proliferation of new spaces with democratisation. They argue that despite best intentions, the new spaces tend to reinforce, rather than challenge existing inequalities and power relations, and at worst introduce a host of communicative pathologies, especially when it comes to the quality and diversity of information circulating in the public sphere (Morozov, 2011). So for example while online media pluralize avenues for political expression, they do not necessarily generate democratizing developments (see for example, Papacharissi, 2015). Some go even further and argue that rather than democratization the expanded and intensified communication lead to an exacerbated fragmentation in the public sphere. The multiplicity of communication spaces where participants are encouraged to voice their opinions hinders 'opportunities for linking together political struggles' and thus the formation of strong counter-hegemonies' (Dean, 2015: 52f.). Similarly, John Keane (2013) speaks of the 'media decadence' accompanying 'communicative abundance', involving silencing of dissident voices, the control of spin by governments, the spread and acceptance of untruths, and media populism. Cass Sunstein (2017) for his part warns of polarization and the loss of common public life as individuals gravitate to enclaves where their views can be reinforced in interactions with like-minded others and driven to extremes. He argues that central features of Internet and computer-mediated communication generally undermine the sort of public sphere and political interaction that is required for genuine democratic deliberation.

Similar arguments can be made for the democratic potential of face-to-face communication spaces. The proliferation of door-to-door and telephone surveys (Hiller et al, 2012), focus groups, participatory forums (Nabatchi et al, 2012) and governance networks and partnerships across the world do not necessarily mean more democracy – just more noise, more homogenization, more manipulation (Lee et al., 2015). Communication under the conditions of communicative plenty is regarded as 'increasingly loud, brash, and sectional' (Flinders, 2015: 13). Interactive, cooperative and networked modes of governing can also be exclusionary; opportunities for debate and discussion are largely for elites and experts away from public scrutiny (Papadopoulos, 2012). Many of these new face-to-face spaces challenge and even undermine conventional democratic norms of accountability, representation and legitimacy (Papadopoulos and Warin, 2007). At the same time, they risk reducing democratic participation to a technocratic mechanism (Voss and Amelung, 2016), or

worse a commodified artefact that can be bought and sold (Hendriks and Carson, 2008).

It is possible to extend the list of concerns raised against the rapid expansion of online and face-to-face communication spaces. However, in this article, rather than taking sides either with enthusiasts or skeptics of communicative plenty, we explore its potential from the perspective of deliberative democracy understood in systemic terms. This perspective enables evaluation of this era in ways that elude other understandings of democratic politics by directing the attention to the division of labour among different communication spaces and the connections between them.

A deliberative systems approach to communicative plenty: From pluralization to democratization

Deliberative democracy is a growing branch of democratic theory that is also influential in practice (Curato et al, 2017). In broad terms, it is a normative theory of democratic legitimacy based on the idea that those affected by a collective decision have the right, opportunity, and capacity to participate in consequential deliberation about the content of decisions. Deliberation involves mutual justification of positions, reflection, and efforts to reach and understand those with different frames. A functioning deliberative democracy requires not just deliberative forums, but also a larger process of broad scale public deliberation encapsulated most recently in the concept of a deliberative system (Mansbridge et al., 2012). A deliberative system consists of differentiated yet linked communicative spaces that might range from highly structured forums (such as legislatures) to loose informal social gatherings and public interactions. Different communicative spaces vary in their intrinsic deliberative quality; some may be truth seeking, inclusive and egalitarian, while others may be exclusive and closed to competing discourses.

In a healthy deliberative system different spaces should not only be diverse but they should be integrated (Hendriks 2006). This integration occurs not only through inclusion and transmission (see Boswell et al, 2016; Mendonca, 2016) but also through a particular type of 'division of labour' across different spaces over time (see Goodin 2005). The latter points to two important yet neglected aspects of communication in a deliberative system i) we cannot expect each communicative space to fulfil the same

set of normative criteria and perform same or similar functions at the system level, and ii) nor can we expect that communication occurs simultaneously in each space.

To form a deliberative democratic system, the spaces that function to gather and amplify 'voice' primarily (*expressive function*) should be linked first with the spaces that place an explicit emphasis on reflection and listening (*reflective function*), which should then be followed by spaces that perform a *decision-making function*. From a deliberative systems perspective, expressive, reflective and decision-making functions need not be sought to the same degree in all persons or in every space in the system. What matters is that there is linkage and transmission across spaces with these functions over time. Transmission involves the flow of communication across different spaces of the system making the formal spaces of decision-making responsive and accountable to the informal spaces of opinion-formation (Boswell et al, 2016; Mansbridge et al, 2012).

The opportunities afforded by communicative plenty could contribute to a more inclusive deliberative system. The proliferation of online and face-to-face spaces creates more venues for people to participate in political activities. In some cases, individual spaces might be more accessible to those previously excluded or marginalized in opinion formation and decision-making processes (Mansbridge and Latura, 2016). Some of these online and face-to-face spaces might initially facilitate enclave publics – recruiting and mobilizing like-minded people. Such spaces might be safe and potentially emancipatory spaces where silent or marginalized voices can find a voice (Setälä, 2014). However, in a healthy deliberative system it is essential that various spaces of communication eventually connect. There are many more opportunities to foster connections between different spaces in the context of communicative plenty. The online spaces in particular can play a crucial role in establishing connections across different publics (Papacharissi, 2015) and facilitate transmissions in deliberative systems (Boswell et al, 2016).

When seen from a deliberative systems perspective, communicative plenty is problematic if it only proliferates spaces with *expressive functions*. We contend that 'voice' alone is no guarantee that the aspirations of deliberative democracy can be realized. Deliberative democracy requires not only broadening but also deepening of public conversations by providing opportunities for reflection and listening (Ercan and

Dryzek 2015). It also requires spaces and instances of decision-making (Chambers, 2012) Communicative plenty, in contrast emphasizes expression and privileges 'voice-as-democratic-participation' (Crawford, 2009) to the detriment of reflection and/or decision-making. Furthermore, the ever-increasing volume of expression creates the impression that issues are always undecided or unresolved (Welch, 2013).

If a deliberative system suffers from an attention deficit that precludes the interaction (and transmission) across spaces with different functions, then simply including more voices can be ineffective for democratic deliberation. In their recent study of global environmental discourses on climate change policy, for instance, Stevenson and Dryzek (2014) find that are multiple spaces of deliberation and contestation, but communication often did not get beyond enclaves of like-minded individuals, be they elites or activists. Similarly, studies of the role of online media in climate change communication find that new media appears to fragment debate into disconnected sub-publics with limited connection across them (Rogers and Zellman, 2002). Obviously it is impossible to listen to something that does not reach you, let alone to reflect upon it.

A deliberative system can help address this issue provided that it entails spaces going beyond simple expression (*expressive function*) to inducing listening and reflection (*reflective function*) before decision-making. In fact, it is the latter function, the reflective function, that differentiates deliberation from mere talk. Deliberation requires a process of mutual justification where participants offer reasons for their positions, listen to the views of others, and reconsider their preferences in the light of new information and arguments. In other words, deliberation is not just about expressing one's views on an issue at stake, it involves listening closely to what others have to say (Dobson, 2014), and a reflective willingness to change one's mind in response to what one hears (Goodin, 2003).

The importance of reflection and listening for the realization of deliberative democracy may strike some as an obvious point, but it is frequently forgotten as democracy is commonly associated with a practice of expression only, that is of finding a voice, speaking up, making oneself heard (Lacey, 2013; Crawford, 2009). Voice can contribute to democracy only if it is linked with listening and reflection. As Kate Lacey (2013) rightly puts it, listening is essential for expression to operate not only as speech, but as communication. Similarly, to facilitate democratization, communicative plenty

requires not only the proliferation of the spaces for expression but also opportunities to listen and reflect. But where might we locate such opportunities at a system level?

In a traditional undifferentiated account of democratic deliberation, expression, listening, and reflection would be sought for the same people in the same place at the same time. On this account, deliberation is usually understood as a face-to-face communication and not an encounter involving multiple diverse inputs. Face-to-face deliberation also implies an immediate exchange of positions at the same time. This is problematic even at the level of personality; individuals who can make a case very well are not necessarily the same as individuals who are capable of weighing what they hear and possibly changing their position in response (Jennstål and Niemeyer, 2014). In a world of communicative plenty this traditional approach is more unrealistic still, partly because this world rewards expressive rather than reflective personality types. In that world, there is (almost by definition) a surfeit of expression, but at the same time a deficit of listening and reflection. How then might this deficit be corrected?

We can begin an answer through reference to a landscape of (by now) familiar sorts of deliberative forums, which can be viewed as integral parts of a deliberative system (Curato and Böker, 2016). The forums in question are legislatures and minipublics, the latter composed of non-partisan lay citizens (examples include citizens' juries, citizens' assemblies, consensus conferences, deliberative polls). In the context of such forums, reflection is usually associated with the justifications for the positions taken by participants. In an ideal deliberative setting, reflection and reason-giving should also be accompanied by active listening. Such listening does not have to result in consensus among conflicting viewpoints. It is about 'paying attention'—an intentional effort to engage with the speaking and thinking of others (Lacey, 2013). It is only through listening attentively to one another that interlocutors can adjust their own positions and develop respect for each other.

Empirical evidence from deliberative forums shows that level of reflection and thus justification is much higher in legislatures than in mini-publics (Pedrini, 2014). At the same time, studies show that respect for the positions of other participants and thus listening is much higher in minipublics than in legislators. Parliamentary debate consists largely of performance, and legislators are rarely if ever persuaded by the

argument of somebody from the other side. In this light, it is not surprising that minipublics feature a higher deliberative quality than parliaments, in that participants actually respond to each other (Landwehr and Holzinger, 2010). There is substantial evidence that effective reflection does occur in minipublics (Niemeyer, 2011), but little comparable evidence that it can be found in parliaments (which are unfortunately much harder to study than minipublics in these terms).

These findings have substantial implications for deliberative systems and the way we think about the conditions for effective communication at a system level, especially in the world of communicative plenty. First, they suggest that it is important to identify and/or intentionally create spaces for reflection and listening. Secondly, and relatedly we need to think harder about how to join spaces of expression, reflection and listening and decision making more effectively in the systems light. It is possible to think about various spaces that can assume listening and reflection functions both within and outside of the conventional institutions of representative democracy, both online and face-to-face. Some scholars, such as Dobson (2014: 186), suggest giving up online spaces when it comes to deliberative listening, but a limited number of self-consciously deliberative places do exist, for example, when moderators are used to enhance the quality of the online talk and listening (Coleman and Moss, 2010).

Many spaces for listening and reflection already exist in contemporary democracies. The structured listening processes organized by Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) in the U.S are, for example, often viewed as successful cases of listening in practice (Coles, 2004). IAF organizers regularly interview members of the community to find out who they are, what motivates them and what their interests and concerns are (Mansbridge and Latura, 2016: 46). Similarly, some government agencies explicitly seek out spaces of policy reflection in order to facilitate 'reflexive governance' amid communicative plenty (e.g. Hendriks and Grin 2009). Sometimes, the spaces for listening are demanded and created by citizens in more spontaneous fashion. The Occupy protest movements, for example placed a strong emphasis on listening as a way of bridging differences across individuals and groups with different interests and identities (Mendonca and Ercan 2015). From a deliberative system perspective, the problem is not the lack of spaces for listening and reflection, but whether these spaces

are integrated with spaces involving expressive function and decision making in the context of communicative plenty.

In what follows, we discuss two cases that demonstrate how listening and reflection can be designed into existing democratic practices, especially those vulnerable to the democratic dangers of communicative plenty. Our discussion of each case is informed by relevant secondary material, including scholarly articles, media articles, press statements and policy documents.

Case 1: Designing reflection and listening into referenda

Our first case, the Oregon Citizens' Initiative Review (CIR) offers an example of how reflection and listening can be promoted around ballot initiatives and referenda. The CIR has been well-studied (see for example Gastil et al, 2016; Knobloch et al, 2013), but not in the terms we have developed here.

The Oregon state legislature created the CIR in 2009 for the purposes of helping citizens to make better judgments about the overwhelming number of state-wide referenda (Warren and Gastil, 2015). Oregon is one of a number of states that host citizen-initiated referendums, under which a measure can get on the state-wide ballot provided it has enough signatures from citizens in support. Every two years voters are then confronted with on average about 12 measures to vote upon. If a measure is passed, it becomes state law. Often the measures are written in technical language, or language that invokes symbols but may do precisely the opposite of what is suggested (for example, anti-discrimination measures that in fact are designed to perpetuate discrimination by abolishing affirmative action, see Gastil et al., 2007) and it is often not obvious to citizens what they are actually voting for or against. Rival measures can be introduced by powerful interests to confuse voters and minimize the chance these interests will be regulated effectively (Gastil et al., 2007: 1447). Signature gatherers can be paid, which means that wealthy interests can get measures on the ballot – and then conduct expensive media campaigns to convince voters to support them. Given measures are considered individually, they are not weighed alongside competing uses of government resources. Measures are all or nothing: there is no room for compromise of the sort that

can occur in legislative negotiation. With time, accumulated successful measures severely restrict the freedom of action of state government.

The citizens' initiated referendum process has, then, long featured (mis)information overload. The more recent context also features communication overload due to the proliferation of online communication spaces around ballot initiatives, as well as the attendant polarization of American politics. Beginning in the 1990s, there was systematic campaign led by conservative activist Bill Sizemore to get a series of conservative measures on the ballot. Thus the process became politicized in partisan terms, with labor unions funding efforts to restrict access to the initiative process. There is substantial campaign and social media activity around ballot initiatives– so for example the Fairness project coordinates social media activity in a number of states to try to give voters an opportunity to express their opinions, and 'do what politicians cannot or will not', such as raising the state-mandated minimum wage levels (Fairness Project, 2017).

The CIR process offers one promising way of dealing with the expanded spaces of expression around ballot initiatives. It counterbalances the spaces with expressive function with the spaces designed particularly for reflective function. It does so by establishing a citizens' panel of around 18-24 people to review a particular referendum question. The CIR has now been applied to measures including the legalization of medical marijuana, mandatory sentencing for criminal offences, rules for voter eligibility in primary elections, and corporate tax reform. Panel members are ordinary citizens selected by stratified random sampling. The core communicative activity in the initial phase of the panel meeting is listening and reflection. The panel members meet over 4-5 days to listen to the existing positions on a proposed measure and to hear directly from proponents and opponents of the measure, as well as relevant experts, before deliberating among themselves. At the end of the process they produce a one-page Citizens' Statement that is published in the voters' pamphlet sent to all voters in the state. The pamphlet also contains advocacy by proponents and opponents, as well as an explanatory statement and a short report on the fiscal implications of a measure.

The Citizens' Statement contains a summary of what the panel considers key findings about what the measure would do, and the best arguments both for and against the

measure in question. These are presented as the arguments that have survived citizen deliberation. The vote of the panellists is also reported, though from a deliberative point of view, it might be better if it were not. For the point of the report should be to induce reflection on the part of voters reading it – not to provide a shortcut to determine their vote. The general theoretical lesson here is that deliberative systems can benefit not just from the establishment of effective linkages, but also from the removal of dysfunctional linkages.

In deliberative system terms, the CIR establishes a space of reflection that is located after advocacy (expression) and prior to decision. Ideally that reflection would involve not just the panellists, but also voters who read and think about the Citizens' Statement. The existing research analysing the broader uptake of the Statement using a sample survey find that majority of the respondents (42%) are by election time aware of the CIR process (Gastil et al., 2014: 66). More importantly, research shows that large number of voters trust the information and analysis provided in one-page statements created by CIR as a result of reflective deliberative processes (Warren and Gastil, 2015). Based on this, Gastil et al (2014: 68) conclude that 'the Oregon CIR's *Statements* held considerable value for many Oregon voters' though one can 'judge the deliberative glass as half empty or half full' given the majority of voters did not seemingly engage. But even though only a minority of voters does engage, that still entails the establishment of a space of reflection in the larger public sphere – not just within the confines of the citizens' panel itself. This space enabled those who engaged it to cut the morass of communicative plenty to locate a concise summary of well-reasoned arguments that had survived intense reflective scrutiny to inform their judgment on the issue in question. The morass is however still there. One way to enhance the reflective space would be to eliminate the numerous statements of advocacy and opposition from the Voters' Pamphlet and so leave the Citizens' Statement the main source of information on the measure in question. This would not entail suppression of advocacy, which would of course still exist in the broader communicative environment.

The CIR case shows how spaces for reflection and listening can be designed into democratic procedures such as referenda to counterbalance the voice and expression focused spaces of communicative plenty. But institutions of direct democracy are not the only place where we can find spaces of reflection and listening. As our second case

shows, it is also possible for spaces of reflection to emerge in the everyday practices of electoral politics, for example, as elected representatives engage with their constituents.

Case 2: Building reflection and listening into electoral politics

Our second case discusses how informal spaces of reflection and listening can emerge and strengthen constituency-representative relations amid all the expressive elements of electoral politics. Contemporary elected representatives operate in a highly expressive and voice-centric environment where spin and populism abound (Keane, 2013). One consequence of the mediatised environment of modern politics is that elected representatives need to work to actively to create relations with different publics (Hajer, 2009). An important component of this relationship building is listening effectively to constituency needs (Dobson, 2014).

An example of how reflection and listening can be incorporated into the everyday practices of constituency-representative relations was observed in Australia between 2013 and 2017 in the Australian Federal rural electorate of Indi, in north-east Victoria. Here a newly elected independent member, Independent MP Cathy McGowan AO, used a variety of informal participatory processes to listen to her constituents to guide her legislative work. As a political representative McGowan is deeply committed to listening. In her maiden speech she pledged: 'I will listen… I will bring the voices and community of Indi to Canberra' (McGowan, 2013).

Like most contemporary elected representatives, McGowan works in an abundant communicative context - much of it expressive. She is regularly in the local and national press, and has an active website and social media accounts. While these expressive spaces serve important communicative functions, McGowan has also created informal spaces aimed at inducing reflection and listening between citizens, as well as between citizens and their elected representative. One reflective procedure, Kitchen Table Conversations (KTCs) is particularly worth noting in the context of this article since illustrates how spaces with expressive function can be coupled with the spaces featuring a reflective function.

KTC are small–scale and informal participatory practices run by people in local communities. They typically involve a group of around 10 people meeting at a host's house to participate in a facilitated discussion guided by a set of questions (Capper, 2013). They have been used by community groups in Australia to generate public debate on controversial themes such as privatization of public assets and water reform (VWT, 2007). In the electorate of Indi, KTCs were used by McGowan (and the social movement, Voices4Indi, that brought her to power) to engage over 440 citizens in discussions about political issues that matter to them (Klose and Haines, 2013). After being elected, McGowan ran another series of KTCs in Indi to listen to her constituency about what's working in the community, and what issues need addressing. These conversations were used to generate a list of community priorities that continue to guide McGowan's work in parliament (McGowan, 2015a).

Procedurally KTCs conversations are guided by a number of key values that promote reflection including: welcoming diversity of opinion, openness, listening, respect, and recording everyone's views. Interestingly the primary focus of the conversations is 'listening and understanding… not attempting to convince others of your view' (McGowan, 2015b). The KTCs provided a reflective space for constituency relations that counteracted some of the negative aspects of communicative plenty, here potential confusion over political responsibilities, and community differences about key issues and ways forward.

Informal listening spaces in the electorate of Indi have also been created in periods of great expressive political discourse, such as in the wake of the 2015 Federal Budget. Rather than rely on elite opinions and potential misinformation in the media, the elected representative conducted a 'Budget Impact Tour' which involved a series of informal 'Listening Posts' throughout the electorate, as well as surveys, so she could hear her constituents' views on how the Federal Budget will impact them. McGowan then used these inputs to inform her parliamentary response to the Budget (McGowan, 2015c). This is an example of an elected representative actively seeking ways to listen to the views of everyday citizens in a context that is typically dominated by the louder voices of opinion leaders and expert commentators.

The use of community participation and listening has had a number of democratic effects in Indi (Hendriks 2017). First, it opened up the possibility for voters in Indi to look beyond the major two political parties to consider and connect with a new candidate, an Independent member, Cathy McGowan AO. Second, once successfully elected, McGowan's listening sessions provided opportunities for her to hear the views of her constituencies on various local and national issues, which she then used as a guide for her parliamentary work. Third, McGowan's successful re-election in the 2016 Federal Election demonstrates that the Indi electorate trust and value the way she is listening and working as an elected representative.

From a deliberative systems perspective, communicative plenty can distort the transmission of opinions from citizens in the public sphere to decision makers in empowered spaces, such as parliament. What the Indi case demonstrates is that spaces of reflection can be used to strengthen the capacity of elected representatives to hear from, and communicate with their constituencies. What we also learn from Indi is that citizens will elect and reward political representatives who take time to stop, reflect and actively listen to their needs, and who then focus on representing those in the legislative process. Indi also suggests that multiple spaces of reflection can collectively cultivate a form of 'civic cultures' in which competent citizens actively engage in public deliberation (Dahlgren, 2005). Today local residents in Indi report how the electorate is now politically 'switched on' and engaging in the democratic process more broadly (Klose and Haines, 2013). A number of everyday citizens in the electorate have been empowered to promote democratic reform (see Hendriks, 2016).

Implications for institutional design

It is not enough to say simply that democratic practices such as Citizen's Initiative Review and Kitchen Table Conversations or Listening Posts should be welcomed and highlighted as integral parts of deliberative systems, and strengthened to counterbalance the avalanche of expression that accompanies communicative plenty. As things stand, the problem with most of these spaces is that they are seen as feeding into other spaces, which are not especially reflective in themselves, and are exposed to a deluge of communication from expressive spaces. In other words, they are generally

found in the wrong place in the deliberative system. This misplacement means that the systemic benefits of reflective practices can go unrealized, if they are overwhelmed by the deluge. Indeed, if they appear to have no standing different from other practices, they may seem just another ingredient of communicative plenty. This appearance may help explain the often meagre impact of designed citizen deliberations.

The solution may then lie in thinking about where to place spaces and moments of reception and reflection in the deliberative system. This requires shifting the attention from a potentially rigid view of stages of 'decision-making' towards more nuanced view of sequences, or what Michael Saward (2003) called 'phases' of enacting democracy. The current implicit sequence is almost always reflection then expression/justification then decision. This sequence applies for example when a public hearing or a minipublic is conducted prior to legislative debate or executive decision, or seen as a contribution to public opinion formation; where a (deliberative) social movement is seen as one source of inputs to national or transnational decision making; or where legislative committees operate prior to floor debate. In a deliberative systems light, the sequence generally ought to be expression/justification then reflection then decision. That is, spaces of reflection should operate after justification and expression, and before spaces of decision. Ideally ideas are expressed and arguments are made which are then reflected upon in the public arena before decisions are made.

While the specific character of the relevant spaces can vary, we believe there is something universal about the applicability of this sequence. It is consistent with the idea that human judgment, whether individual or collective, should follow a weighing of reasons. This universal applicability does not mean purging moments of reflection that occur out of this sequence. After a decision has been made, citizens may well reflect upon whether the decision is well-justified and legitimate. This is indeed what some inquisitorial public inquiries, such as royal commissions, are intended to do, but in practice they can exclude many publics, and typically focus on policy disasters (Salter, 2007). Ideally if deliberative systems are iterative, reflection on the results of decisions can usefully inform the next round of justification.

This more defensible sequence is actually found in the case of the OCIR, where reflection follows advocacy and immediately precedes decision. This is also the way

jury trials operate. Expression and justification (but little reflection) occur in the main courtroom as advocates argue the cases of their clients. Reflection then occurs in the jury room where of course the advocates are not allowed; the jury room is also eventually the site of decision. When constitutional courts intervene in policy processes, their reflective task comes after expression and justification in the larger public sphere and legislature, immediately prior to their own decisive decision. In a deliberative systems light, the problem with constitutional courts is that they are not democratic institutions (even if they are deliberative).

These sorts of considerations have radical implications for institutional design especially in the context of communicative plenty. In systems of government – especially national parliamentary systems of government – it is often accepted that chambers of justification have the last word. Perhaps they should not: there should be a chamber of reflection next. This is not so far from the old idea that upper houses in parliamentary systems should be chambers of review. The problem is that upper houses rarely operate like this; instead they replicate the domination of justification and expression that is seen in the lower house. Proposals to replace existing upper houses with reflective chambers composed of more or less randomly selected citizens (for example, the Demos Think Tank proposal to replace the House of Lords) have failed to advance very far (Barnett and Carly, 1998).

Conclusion

Communicative plenty has implications for how contemporary deliberative systems operate. Most significantly, the explosion of online and face-to-face spaces of political communication broadens where public conversations take place and increases their volume, but it does not deepen the quality of these conversations. In this context, what seems to matter is the circulation of individual ideas, not their interaction and communication with each other. Communicative plenty exacerbates the reflection deficit of democracies. In this context, all the momentum and the preferred modes of collective decision-making seem to bypass reflection in favor of expression. The consequences of decision-making amid abundant expression (with few opportunities

for collective reflection) are currently being felt in the United Kingdom as its leaders seek to implement the outcome of the 2016 Brexit referendum on leaving the European Union. Indeed, it is interesting to note that post-Brexit a series of reflective spaces have emerged. One such space is the Brexit Citizens' Assembly, which seeks to fill the reflection gap in the process by allowing 'members of the public to listen, reflect, and come up with considered views' (Renwick and McKee, 2017). This is a valid but untimely intervention. The sequence of expression – decision – reflection proves to be unsatisfactory for citizens and democracy alike.

The era of communicative plenty requires that we pay more attention to the opportunities for reflection and listening in democracies. The deliberative system approach presented in this article helps to identify spaces with different democratic functions. We have argued that if accompanied by sufficient opportunities for and spaces of, reflection and listening, a deliberative system can counteract the negatives of communicative plenty, and retain its positives. From a systems perspective, listening requires injecting sufficient spaces of reflection between expression/justification and decision-making. Our examples from Oregon and Indi demonstrate the potential to use different kinds of institutional remedies to address the reflection deficit of communicative plenty. To realize the democratic possibilities of communicative plenty scholars and practitioners of deliberative democracy need to ensure that political expression and decision making are accompanied by greater opportunities for listening and reflection.

Acknowledgements

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