

## **Anonymity and Asynchronicity as Key Design Dimensions for the Reciprocity of Online Democratic Deliberation**

The aim of this paper is to identify, given certain democratic normative standards regarding deliberation, some misses as well as hits in possible online deliberation designs due to variations in two key design dimensions: namely, asynchronicity and anonymity. In particular, we focus on one crucial aspect of deliberative argumentation: namely, its reciprocity, which puts interaction centre stage to capture the back-and-forth of reasons. More precisely, we focus on two essential features of the deliberative interaction: namely, its listening widely and listening carefully. We conclude that one sort of online deliberation that combines the two design features of anonymity and asynchronicity is likely to better promote the reciprocity required for democratic deliberation than both natural and designed offline deliberations (such as the designed deliberation in Deliberative Polling) and online simulations of them.

**Keywords:** Democratic Deliberation; Online Deliberation; Reciprocity; Anonymity; Asynchronicity.

In this paper we study different combinations of synchronicity/asynchronicity and identification/anonymity in the design of online deliberation.<sup>1</sup> In particular, we focus on one crucial aspect of deliberative argumentation: namely, its reciprocity, which puts interaction centre stage to capture the back-and-forth of reasons. More precisely, we focus on two essential features of the deliberative interaction: namely, its listening widely and listening carefully. We conclude that one sort of online deliberation that combines the two design features of anonymity and asynchronicity is likely to better promote the reciprocity required for democratic deliberation than both natural and designed offline deliberations (such as the designed deliberation in Deliberative Polling) and online simulations of them.

The paper proceeds as follows. In §§1-3, we introduce the deliberative model of democracy and the general notion of democratic deliberation that it often embraces. In particular, we introduce the reciprocity that is uncontroversially accepted as an essential feature of democratic deliberation. In §§4-6, we clarify the notion of online deliberation and present some design features, including asynchronicity and anonymity. In §6, we assess four different alternative designs given the two mentioned variables. In §7, we offer some brief concluding remarks.

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<sup>1</sup> Our emphasis is on design matters given certain normative standards and will not consider whether existing platforms, such as social media and news forums, are adequate deliberative spaces, like much literature seems to do (Esau, Friess & Eilders, 2017; Friess & Eilders, 2015; Strandberg & Grönlund, 2018).

## **1. Deliberative Democracy**

It is common to think of modern representative democracy in terms of regular and fair elections. Yet it is much more than that, involving a great variety of collective activities. For instance, voting is preceded by electoral campaigns where candidates, journalists, experts and ordinary citizens interact in the attempt to exchange information and reasons (Jacobs et al., 2009; Page, 1996). And after voting, citizens, experts and journalists are to hold elected authorities accountable for their decisions. Indeed, it is a basic commitment of modern democracy that people can participate in acts of protest, resistance and dissent and many of the freedoms protected by it, such as the freedoms of expression, of press and of association, are directly linked to that (Whelan, 2019). Dissenting citizens, even if they are a minority, can, in principle, deliberate and critique a given political decision and bring about social change, which shows our social aspiration for our collective lives to be guided by our better reasons: “by the unforced force of the better argument” (Habermas, 1996, p.306).

So a pivotal component of democracy is the free exchange of reasons and information in an attempt to argue with each other about what we collectively should do (Bohman, 1996; Landemore, 2013). Democracy can then be thought as consisting in the attempt to collectively determine via public deliberation the policies and actions that enjoy the support of our better reasons. In fact, one can take this deliberation to be the source of legitimacy of political decisions (Estlund, 2008; Manin, 1987). Indeed, three decades ago, democratic theory took a “deliberative turn” (Dryzek, 2000, p.v; Hansen, 2012) as a mixed group of theorists challenged models of democracy focusing on voting and turned their attention to the role played by public deliberation in political decision-making. Regarded as one of the most promising approaches in democratic theory and the predominant framework (Bächtiger et al., 2018; Talisse, 2019), deliberative democracy sees the communicative processes in which decision-making procedures are embedded as the primary source of political legitimacy. So this normative framework puts an emphasis on the notion of the public sphere and the discourse by which it is constituted, as well as highlighting the utmost importance of such political discourse being adequate.

## **2. Public Sphere and Democratic Deliberation**

The political public sphere is a vital part of democratic society. It is constituted by complex, communicative networks, “where information, ideas and debate can circulate in society, and where political opinion can be formed”, which connects scattered people, sometimes across large

geographical areas (Dahlgren, 1995, p.ix; see also Fraser, 1990, p.57; Habermas, 1996, pp.360, 373-4). It promotes the shaping of opinion on political issues and two central communicative processes within it are the transmission of information relevant to those issues and the deliberative argumentation concerning them (Cohen, 1989; Habermas, 1996; Estlund, 2008). These communicative processes, like much public communication, have a general cooperative orientation: we share information and collaboratively search for the better position. Ideally, in the public sphere, information is shared, different perspectives are presented, the reasons behind them exchanged and, in the long run, the “unforced force of the better argument” prevails (and so participants of the debate are supposed to subject themselves to the force of the better reasons).

Of course there are different (sometimes vague) definitions of deliberation and public sphere within different fields of research and even within the sub-field of deliberative democracy (Bächtiger et al., 2018; Gripsrud et al., 2010; Wodak & Koller, 2008). Having said that, a useful outline of the deliberative procedure, and by extension the public sphere, which is consistent with the above crucial features, is provided by Habermas (1996, pp.305-6), following Cohen (1989). Among other things, the procedure is understood as: (a) an argumentative exchange of reasons and information among people who introduce and critically test proposals; (b) which is inclusive and public and where all the affected by the issue have equal chances to participate; (c) which is free of external constraints and the participants are only bound by the presuppositions of communication and rules of argumentation; and (d) which is equally free from internal constraints to the extent that every participant has the same opportunity to be heard when making contributions to the debate (see also Estlund, 2008; Bernstein, 2012).

This is of course an ideal and might (often) not be realized in the real world. But utopian as it may be, this ideal can anyway have a real world effect and, certainly, if it is not impossible to achieve (even if it is very unlikely to do so), there is no reason to reject it (Estlund, 2008). Minimally, the ideal “serves as a template against which to judge reality in order to identify and deal with deviations” (2008, p.199), even if the final result end up not being exactly the ideal situation (2008, pp.200-1). It is then the aim of this paper to identify, given the above normative standard, some misses as well as hits in online deliberations due to variations in two key design dimensions: namely, asynchronicity and anonymity (to be introduced below). In particular, we will focus on one key aspect of deliberative argumentation: namely, its reciprocity. In order to

carry out the proposed task, let us consider first the phenomenon of deliberative argumentation and its required reciprocity.

### **3. Deliberative Argumentation and Reciprocity**

Deliberative argumentation is the process by which individuals weight the epistemic merits of competing reasons in discussion together (Chambers, 2003; Mansbridge, 2015; Bachtiger & Parkinson, 2019). In particular, the individuals, conversing together, jointly explore the plausibility of some claim, typically each bringing a slightly different perspective to bear. The individuals are meant to defend those perspectives, which are challenged by their interlocutors. These challenges cannot be ignored and reasons (some of which are tailored to specific objections raised) are evaluated in this exchange. So each party attempts to rationally persuade the other parties by them seeing the quality of the reasons (not by, say, manipulating or bargaining with them). So deliberative argumentation is here to be understood as the “thinking together in a communicative way” (Estlund, 2008, p.177) that involves the production and evaluation of reasons in favour and against some claim, with the possible consequent revision of one’s view (see also Schwartz & Baker, 2017).

Moreover, the epistemic benefits of this sort of interpersonal argumentation compared to a personal one has been widely noticed. For example, we are more likely to detect errors due to different cognitive skills, counteract and neutralize cognitive biases, and reduce motivated reasoning (Chong, 2013; [Removed for Anonymity]; Karpowitz & Mendelberg, 2018; Mercier & Sperber, 2017). But for these benefits to realize, a certain reciprocity needs to be instantiated, as the above standard suggests (see also Mackie, 2015; Mansbridge, 2015; Bachtiger & Parkinson, 2019). In particular, for the argumentation to involve a back-and-forth of reasons that can allow “the unforced force of the better argument” to prevail, it requires to be an interactional, two-way communicative exchange of reasons. Importantly, this process of giving and taking reasons includes responding to the reasons others have for their views and against one’s. In this sense deliberative argumentation is a reciprocal process, where reasons are not only introduced by the different parties but also responded to. For this to be the case then, it is not only important to give voice to the different viewpoints but also to listen to them (since letting others speak is not enough for there to be effective communication; Dobson, 2012). It is clear that if there is to be a to-and-fro of reasons, interlocutors need to listen to each other (of course there are other forms of

communicative receptivity aside from this aural one, but for simplicity-sake we will speak of listening).

Importantly, this listening needs to be equally attentive to all parties: in other words, the taking in of others' reasons should not be restricted to some of the reasons voiced in the deliberation. So a proper deliberation requires attentive silence in order for one to listen to the others, not merely hear their speech (that is, remaining merely silent so to respect their right to speak is not enough for proper deliberation). Moreover, it is not enough simply to listen to the other's reasons (let alone hear them, like one hears a noise). One is also to carefully listen to the other's reasons if one is to respond appropriately to them. One is to make the effort to adequately grasp the other's position (that is, to understand the other's reasons—Chambers, 1996; Young, 2000) and for that careful, effortful listening is required. So, if democratic deliberation is to be a dialogue in which we really address each other's reasons, as opposed to a series of rather disjointed monologues, deliberators need not only listen *widely* to all deliberators' reasons but also listen *carefully* to understand their reasons correctly (Morrell, 2018; cf. Gunn, 2019).

Here we focus on these two essential features of deliberative interaction and below we consider how certain design features of online deliberation platforms can affect these two reciprocity aspects. Before that, however, we introduce the phenomenon of online deliberation to then present some design features that will concern us, including asynchronicity and anonymity.

#### **4. Online Deliberation**

The notion of *online* has become as complex and subtle as *deliberation* itself. Usually the term is used as antonym to "offline", meaning an activity done by means of, or using, Internet technologies understood as communication media (Baek et al., 2012; Friess & Eilders, 2015). "Online conversation" is also used as synonym of "interpersonal communication on social media" and opposed to in person, face-to-face and offline (Beauchamp, 2020). So the notion of online could be highly polysemic and complex in different settings.

The subject of Online Deliberation has given rise in the last two decades to research projects, software applications, international conferences, workshops and events around this topic (Davies & Gangadharan, 2009). Nevertheless, the term "online" seems to keep its vague (or ample) sense, referring to many types of discussions or exchanges online (Strandberg & Grönlund, 2018). An informal categorization of such spaces today includes (digital) social networks (e.g. Facebook, Google+), media sharing platforms (e.g. Instagram, YouTube), discussion and news

forums (e.g. Reddit, ask.fm), academic and content networks (e.g. ResearchGate, Academia.edu), blogging and publishing (e.g. Tumblr, vk.com). All of them point to complex forms of human activity mediated by digital technology that, in many ways, are embedded in the world of (material) social relationships and social processes (Agre, 1999). On the political realm, it includes e-signing an e-petition, e-voting, political groups in social networks, discussing politics in forums, donating money via websites, writing political blogs and contacting public officials via email, among other things (Berg, 2017).

The apparently clear notion of *online* hides the subtle particularities of different technologies that become substantial when considering the notion of online deliberation (e.g. degrees of interactivity, centralization, type of media support, etc.). Thus the analysis of the online requires meticulous attention to the technologies involved (Nardi, 2015). Last, but not least, all of them are based on a physical-logical infrastructure, the global system of interconnected computer networks called Internet (Abbate, 1999) and over it, the protocols of the World Wide Web (Berners-Lee & Fishetti, 2001). Considering the above, the notion of *online deliberation* here is taken to encompass deliberations taking place in both applications and tools designed specifically to achieve online discussions, as well as deliberations performed in virtual spaces designed originally for other purposes (social networks, social media, online press, etc.) in which people can discuss diverse topics.

What is important for our purposes is that we are in the presence of new dimensions of human activity made available by these technologies. Although systematizing them is beyond the scope of this paper,<sup>2</sup> let us introduce some salient and usually highlighted features which are relevant for our purposes. The most obvious of them is the reshaping of place, that is, the possibility of co-presence with geographical distance (Couclelis, 2009). Another one is the modality and the flexibility of formats and media that is made available to users. Current technologies allow conversation and discussion via text, images, voice, videos, and all sort of combinations and variations on them. They enrich the communication (Lister et al., 2009) and allow more easily (than offline variants) for possibilities like the obfuscation of identities (Brunton & Nissenbaum, 2016). Another design feature is *moderation*. Most networks have explicitly or implicitly implemented different levels of moderation about the focus of discussion and etiquette regarding

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<sup>2</sup> The diversity, scope and limits of these novel dimensions are a matter of rich and ongoing research in different disciplines (Gibson & Gibbs, 2006; Valenzuela et al., 2012; Nardi, 2015; Friess & Eilders, 2015).

language, via rules to become a user and semi-automatic and automatic tools (such as bots) to avoid flaming and other asocial behaviour (Wise et al., 2006; Langvardt, 2018). Other design features, which introduce significant differences in terms of reciprocity between online designs and to offline options are asynchrony and anonymity, to which we now turn.

## **5. Anonymity and Asynchronicity in the Online World**

Anonymity is an online design feature that has attracted lately much attention in the political sphere, although still deserves further theoretical development (Asenbaum, 2018; Moore, 2018). It is not however a new feature brought about by the online world and has been present in many forms of political activity like voting, campaign funding, debates in newspapers and expressions like manifestos, pamphlets, and graffiti (Asenbaum, 2018). Traditional discussions around anonymity concern the possibility of acting or participating while remaining out of reach in the material world. In fact, the traditional conception of anonymity focuses on identity concealment or negation. But in the online world, anonymity is also about creation of identity and so it has the dual nature of identity negation and identity creation (Asenbaum, 2018).

We will here understand anonymity as non-coordinatability of traits in a given respect, that is, the inability to relate or link a given feature of a person (say, her opinion) to another of her features (say, her race or gender). In this regard, anonymity is not social unknowability (e.g. somebody withdrawn from the society) but an enabler of social relationships where certain features of individuals are inaccessible (Wallace, 1999). So anonymity allows for the possibility of acting while remaining out of reach in certain facets of life, particularly the material world in which one is forced to give explanations and apologies and there is punishment or payment involved (Nissenbaum, 1999). Importantly, the anonymity/identification distinction is not binary but represents a continuum with diverse types and degrees (Pfitzmann & Köhntopp, 2001). In most social network and Web applications today, users must identify themselves by means of electronic mails or cellular phones (and implicitly tracked by IP numbers and geo-localization). Many applications also ask for credit cards or other forms of strong "material" traits. This practice avoids extreme negative effects of anonymity, minimally forcing users to behave according to national laws. Once registered in the application, users can create anonymous identities by presenting themselves with an avatar, a pseudonym, a username, etc. Within this continuum we can distinguish different variants of anonymity: from full anonymity, where neither the platform nor the other users have access to certain features, to, say, some light

anonymity, where the platform has access to certain features but not the other users, to full identification, where both the platform and the other users have access to certain features (Kang et al., 2013; Keipi, 2014).

Asynchrony has long been regarded as a key feature in the communication practices over Internet and an entirely new mode of human contact that combines the permanence of writing and the synchronicity of speaking (Zhao, 2006; Gernsbacher, 2014). Here we understand by synchronous communication the simultaneous delivery and reception of messages and so, in the case of deliberation, it entails the possibility to address (send a message to) the entire group "live". Usual face-to-face offline deliberation is synchronous in the sense that there is co-presence and co-occurrence of attention. An asynchronous process is an exchange process whose timing is differed by some protocol and whose effects cannot happen immediately. There are many asynchronous group exchanges today, say, through email or Web applications, like Reddit or WhatsApp. By enabling a high degree of asynchronicity, the digital world is impacting social exchanges by incorporating asynchrony as part of the standard communication practices (Gernsbacher, 2014). Deliberation is not an exception (Boehme-Neßler, 2020).

A complete picture of the effects of synchronicity over human communication are still a matter of research.<sup>3</sup> However, regarding reflection and, in particular, the analysis of arguments, there is evidence that asynchrony has positive effects (Andresen, 2009), which has to do with the capacity for recording and preserving media (text, audio, video, etc). Digital text messages and recorded media preserves or freezes a text or a speech, thus capturing and preserving the flow of expressed subjectivity that could be later retrieved or examined more carefully (Morin et al., 2020; Zhao, 2006).

## **6. Four Alternative Designs**

Given the above two variables, we can consider four different design combinations: namely, (a) identification and synchronicity, (b) identification and asynchronicity, (c) anonymity and synchronicity, and (d) anonymity and asynchronicity. In what follows, we consider how these four alternatives fare with regard to the reciprocity required for democratic deliberation and, more particularly, with regard to the listening widely and carefully that it requires. Moreover, the assessment is comparative in nature since we are interested in evaluating the advantages and

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<sup>3</sup> In fact, there is much ongoing research on the issue in the educational and psychological fields (Peterson et al., 2018; Mogan et al., 2017).



disadvantages that these alternatives have in relation to face-to-face, offline deliberations. In particular, we are interested in contrasting these four online alternatives to one particular kind of offline deliberation which takes place within Deliberative Polling (Fishkin, 2011) and which is often regarded as instantiating better quality deliberations than other offline alternatives, including within the reciprocity dimension (Fishkin, 2018; Mansbridge, 2010). Importantly given our purposes, the deliberation in these cases takes place within a small/medium-size group of people who are randomly chosen.<sup>4</sup> The deliberators then are normally strangers to each other. Moreover, this sort of deliberation is facilitated by trained, neutral moderators that aim to ensure, among other things, that participants voice their opinions and the discussion is respectful.

#### ***a. Identification and Synchronicity***

James Fishkin and colleagues developed the Stanford Online Deliberation Platform, whose intended application is primarily to serve as the deliberative space for online Deliberative Polls.<sup>5</sup> This platform is meant to provide the online simulation of the offline deliberation that takes place within Deliberative Polls. The platform is designed so to enforce a speaking queue, so every participant has a chance to voice their views for a limited length of time, and to transcribe the active speaker in real-time and monitor for offensive content (Fishkin et al., *ms*, p.2). The semi-automated moderator bot is meant to, among other things, maintain civility in the discussion and if “offensive content is detected [...], the bot solicits feedback from the participants to decide whether to block a user” (Fishkin et al., *ms*, p.2). Moreover, and importantly for our purposes, the deliberators, who are identifiable, participate via videoconferencing in a synchronous way.

Given that this particular instantiation of identification and synchronicity is intended as a simulation of the offline deliberation in Deliberative Polling, no significant reciprocity advantage is expected. Having said that, this sort of platform can more easily be friendly to people with hearing and sight impediments (as well as mute people) so to facilitate the reception (and voicing) of viewpoints. However, a significant disadvantage with regard to both the listening widely and the listening carefully that is expected of the deliberators seems likely in the online

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<sup>4</sup> Given our purposes, the maximum number of people that make up a medium-size group will depend on the maximum number of people which makes offline deliberations viable.

<sup>5</sup> See the Stanford University Center for Deliberative Democracy website: <https://cdd.stanford.edu/2019/automateddeliberationplatform/>. Other platforms, such as Zoom and Google Meet, can be exploited in a similar way. However, they lack some important features like the semi-automated moderator bot, as we'll see below.

synchronous version. In particular, there exists the manifest risk of performance decrement due to the multitasking that online distractions might trigger (Fried, 2008; Risko et al., 2013; Srivastava, 2013). When being online then, one is likely to be distracted or interrupted by the often various online applications as well as by the local physical environment of each participant (Jin & Dabbisch, 2009; Rose, 2010).<sup>6</sup> So it is likely that a participant might be distracted and not listen to the contribution of some interlocutor, hence having a negative effect with regard to the listening widely that one is expected to do. Similarly, it is likely that a participant might be distracted when listening to the contribution of some interlocutor, hence having a negative effect with regard to the listening carefully that one is expected to do.

Furthermore, in the offline version the eyes of other participants (as well as the moderator's) police one's attention. One is socially expected to pay attention both widely and carefully and a violation of such expectation reflects badly on oneself. In face-to-face, offline meetings is easy to see who is not paying attention (say, checking their smart phone or simply daydreaming). But this policing is certainly more difficult to carry out successfully via synchronous online platforms (e.g. videoconferencing). So violations are more likely to go unnoticed and consequently we feel less pressure to conform to others' expectations. Therefore, given this and the above sources of distraction, this online simulation is likely to fare worse regarding the listening widely and carefully that reciprocity requires than its offline original version.

### ***b. Identification and Asynchronicity***

What happens if one introduces asynchronicity in the deliberative process? In particular, can such a design fare any better with regard to reciprocity than the online simulation (a) and even the traditional offline version? Most social media allow participants, who are identifiable, to interact in an asynchronous manner. But, as they lack some important features of the Stanford Online Deliberation Platform, such as semi-automated moderation, it would be unfair to compare these media to this platform. It is anyway interesting to consider the effects that an asynchronous but otherwise similar design might have on the two reciprocity dimensions that concerns us

With regard to the online simulation (a), this online version, given its asynchronicity, can mitigate the effects of the distraction caused by the digital and local physical environments. After

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<sup>6</sup> Note the online distractions can be either internal or external to the deliberative platform, for example, due to features of the platform, such as the agenda management elements (Fishkin et al., *ms*), or other apps, respectively. Also note Deliberative Polls group people to deliberate together in a particular deliberation room where they can be free from these distractions.

all, due to the asynchronous time frame, participants can go through the contributions of other participants as many times as wished, check information and reflect in their own time about the issues presented (Janssen & Kies, 2005; Smith et al., 2013). All this can promote a deeper understanding of the contributions and so to listening carefully. Similarly, in relation to listening widely, if one is distracted, one can, in principle, go back and listen to the contribution missed. In this sense then, this online alternative seems to be a better option than option (a) as far as these two dimensions of reciprocity are concerned. And, in fact, it also seems to hold some advantage with regard to the listening carefully dimension over the offline version. This is due to the fact that, as seen, the asynchronicity allows the interlocutors to listen as many times as necessary to some contribution in order to better process the information and reflect about it, as well as searching for and checking information that might contribute towards its proper understanding.

Having said that, one might object that in this online version, due to the asynchronicity, there might be a loss of motivation to listen widely and carefully compared to a live, synchronous event (Mogan et al., 2017). But there is evidence to suggest that the participants in an asynchronous discussion are far more reflective, frank and willing to discuss sensitive issues than similar discussions in the live, face-to-face version (MacNamara et al., 2020; Andresen, 2009, p.254). Moreover, given that the people who participate in online political discussions are likely to be those who are already highly politically motivated in the offline world (in fact, the metadata suggests that it is the offline activity that leads to the online activity; Boulianne & Theocharis, 2018),<sup>7</sup> one would not even expect a significant loss of motivation, especially given the fact that people are given the opportunity to participate in their own time and so accommodating their personal lives better to the activity (Davies & Gangadharan, 2009).

### ***c. Anonymity and Synchronicity***

There is a third online alternative that is rather rare in practice, which combines anonymity and synchronicity.<sup>8</sup> Would this design hold some comparative advantage to the online simulation (a) and the offline version? Of course that, given its synchronicity, this combination will suffer the disadvantages of the online simulation (a): namely, the possibility of distraction when listening widely and carefully is more significant than in the offline alternative.

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<sup>7</sup> This then suggests that it is wrong to think that online political deliberations are likely to generate more political participation in the offline world.

<sup>8</sup> Perhaps some online discussion forums do so. Anyhow, notice that, although anonymity is very common in the online world, it is rather rare and requires much effort to achieve offline (Samuel, 2004).

With anonymity, prejudices can, depending on the medium exploited (say, text or video), be more or less reduced.<sup>9</sup> This is due to the fact that we normally consider the trustworthiness of the sources before considering testimony and arguments offered by them (Hovland et al., 1953; Chaiken, 1980; Han et al., 2009). In these assessments, prejudices can, and normally do, interfere (Moshman, 2021; Perloff, 2017; Young, 2000). Stereotypes related to social identities concerning gender, race, sexual orientation and religion, to mention some, can make people not to listen to someone. After all, it is still thought by many today that, for example, women have nothing to contribute to politics (given that politics is a “man’s game”; Karpowitz & Mendelberg, 2018). In this way then, prejudices can interfere with listening widely. Moreover, in cases where the interlocutor is not completely discredited, prejudices can interfere with listening carefully, given that the (unfairly) lower credibility attributed to the interlocutor can render it pragmatically irrational to spend the cognitive resources to make the effort to be as charitable as possible about the viewpoint offered, and hence to promote proper understanding.<sup>10</sup> So anonymity can help us focus on what is said rather than who says it (Samuel, 2004).

Does this anonymity-related advantage outruns the synchronicity-related disadvantage of this online alternative? In other words, regarding reciprocity, would this online alternative be better than the previous one (b)? It is difficult to say without the relevant empirical research,<sup>11</sup> but this online alternative seems anyway better, in terms of reciprocity, than the online simulation (a) and the offline version. Now, some might worry that anonymity incentivizes bad behaviours (Suler, 2004; Santana, 2014), which would cancel any reciprocity-related advantage due to the reduction of prejudice interference. But concerns about flaming and other uncivil behaviours can be dealt with by moderation (McGillicuddy et al., 2016; Wright & Street, 2007). Having said that, the moderation ought to be low (i.e. concerning only disrespectful exchanges), given that more comprehensive moderation can have unwanted effects related to participation (that is, people do not contribute as much in such cases; Gibson, 2019; Perrault & Zhang, 2019).

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<sup>9</sup> For example, non-obfuscated video allows to obtain more information (and more easily) about the interlocutors (say, regarding their gender, race, age, social-economic status, etc.) than text and so to trigger more prejudices.

<sup>10</sup> These sort of cases are standard cases of epistemic injustice, where less credibility than they deserve is attributed to people. See Fricker, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Although there exists some research that tentatively suggests that asynchronicity has a more significant influence in the quality of the deliberation than anonymity (Strandberg & Berg, 2015). However, the small number of participants that took place in the experiment plus the fact that the two dimensions of reciprocity that concern us here were not considered and that it is not clear what sort of anonymity was adopted.

Some might further worry that anonymity does not allow for communicative accountability given that participants cannot be identified. To address this worry, it is important to recall that there are different variants of anonymity. Communicative accountability can be enforced—without reducing prejudice interference—with the use of pseudonyms that allow for stable online identities and allow that the different contributions of participants can be identified (Moore, 2018). So one might be held accountable for, say, stating at different times thoughts that are incoherent. But one might still worry that anonymity is likely to prompt a motivational issue: namely, not taking seriously the deliberation (Suler, 2004). After all, one could, say, make coherent contributions in jest. But this is unlikely to happen given that, as noticed above, people who participate in online political discussions are likely to be those who are already highly politically motivated.

So some light anonymity (one which only entails anonymity among the interlocutors and allows for stable pseudonyms, e.g. by enforcing registering in the platform) together with some low moderation (which only concerns disrespectful exchanges) can help reduce prejudice interference without introducing other reciprocity-related disadvantages due to the anonymity. Given this, one can also expect this online alternative to fare better with regard to reciprocity than both the online simulation and the offline version.

#### ***d. Anonymity and Asynchronicity***

The fourth combination, which concerns anonymity and asynchronicity, is rare in the offline world but quite common in the online world. This is moreover the combination that gathers the reciprocity-related advantages of the previous two online alternatives, (b) and (c), given their asynchronicity and anonymity, respectively. Asynchronicity makes distractions less likely to have a deleterious effect on the listening and allows time to reflect on the contributions and search for information that can help us understand them better, thus improving the listening widely and carefully required for reciprocity. On the other hand, even light versions of anonymity make prejudices less likely to interfere in the assessments of sources and so less likely to reduce reciprocity, on both dimensions considered.<sup>12</sup> So this online alternative, which combines both anonymity and asynchronicity, is likely to outperform, in terms of reciprocity,

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<sup>12</sup> Moreover, notice that the asynchronicity of this alternative also seems to dissipate the above anonymity-related motivational worry (c); see Janssen & Kies, 2005, p.321. And some have emphasised the need for low moderation to keep anonymous discussion respectful (e.g. Coleman & Götze, 2001).

both the online simulation (a) and the other combinations considered (b & c) as well as the offline version.

If this is correct, then online deliberation should not be viewed as an enhanced version of what works best in the offline world. At least, with regard to the reciprocity required for democratic deliberation, what works best in the online case differs significantly from the natural and designed offline cases (such as the designed deliberation in Deliberative Polling). In fact, what works best in the online case is likely to outperform these offline cases given the identification and synchronicity they involve.

## **7. Conclusion**

The online world and its possibilities for democracy were soon seen by some in a positive light (e.g. Rheingold, 1993; Price 2009), while others saw it in a negative light (e.g. Sunstein, 2001; Curran et al., 2012). The optimists thought that this world would strengthen our democracies and solve its many offline problems. For example, deliberative democracy is sometimes wrongly thought to require a State-wide democratic deliberation (Tanasoca, 2020; see also Young, 2000, pp.44-45).<sup>13</sup> However, a State-wide, face-to-face deliberation is rightly thought to be unfeasible (cf. Ackerman & Fishkin, 2004). Given this, with the advent of the online world, some thought that online deliberation could help solve this alleged scaling-up problem facing deliberative democracy, given that it does not require co-presence and co-temporality.

Nevertheless, presently, it appears unlikely that State-wide online deliberations will be feasible in the short term. There have been some large-scale attempts, which involve thousands of people. However, some resemble more a crowdsourcing platform with strong moderation than a deliberative one (Klein, 2015). And others resemble more the sort of deliberative network (that is, a system where different deliberative groups are interconnected) that shows that no State-wide deliberation is required (Ito et al., 2017). More importantly, even if some such deliberation were feasible, it would require more advanced and intrusive automated assistance (such as sorting out different types of views, synthesising them, making all the views, rather than all the people, interact and helping with their evaluation) that would alter the notion of deliberation as understood above. In fact, the idea of collective self-government would be undermined given this

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<sup>13</sup> As Tanasoca (2020) suggests, the deliberative process can be distributed across (existing) informal and formal communicative networks, through which different direct deliberations are interconnected, and so the micro-level democratic deliberations should not be extended to the macro level. If this is so, there is no reason to think that micro-deliberations should be scaled-up in order for deliberative democracy to succeed.

highly machine-assisted deliberation (in particular, given that we would significantly lose control over the deliberative process), let alone the fact that opportunities for self-development would also be thwarted.

This, however, need not transform us into pessimists about the online world and its possibilities for democracy. After all, we have argued that at least one sort of (small/medium-size) online deliberation, that combines the two design features of anonymity and asynchronicity (d), is likely to better promote the reciprocity required for democratic deliberation and, in particular, its listening-widely and listening-carefully aspects, than both offline deliberations and online simulations of them. So, although online democratic deliberation might not be able to be scaled-up as some hoped it could so to solve the alleged scaling-up problem of deliberative democracy, current research indicates that online deliberation can anyway help us improve the quality of democratic deliberation, in terms of its reciprocity, and so in turn help us reach less error-prone as well as more legitimate democratic decisions.

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