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How Does eDeliberation work? A Study of French Local Electronic Forums

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Abstract. In a context where the efficiency and legitimacy of public action would seem to require a growing participation of citizens in collective decisions, our paper deals with the kind of deliberation that can be observed on electronic discussion forums provided by about thirty local French authorities on their websites. Indeed, the specific characteristics of forums (for example, asynchronous written exchanges, absence of face-to-face interaction, anonymity) lead us to reconsider the ways in which citizens may participate in the management of the city. The analysis of forums messages as well as interviews with the elected representatives and technicians have led to a more specific study of the rules, both formal and informal, which structure electronic exchanges, the arguments and skills used by net surfers in online discussions and the possible remodelling of cultural and social hierarchies which usually hinder citizens' expression.

Keywords: eDeliberation, municipalities, eParticipation, France, electronic forums.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, public policies are increasingly stressing the need for deliberation. Current weaknesses in the representative system reduce the capacity of political elites to take into account the daily difficulties encountered by citizens and to associate them with the decision-making processes. Deliberation, through its democratic imagery and the values it seems to represent (for example, equality), seems more likely to renew the way political power is exercised. In France, besides the usual functioning of institutions and the mechanisms of public decision-making, various procedures and techniques servicing this need for a better understanding of citizens' opinions have been set up: urbanism workshops, public inquiries, youth or wise men councils, district councils.

At the same time, major thoughts on deliberative democracy have emerged. Indeed, following Jürgen Habermas' theory of a model of a public sphere characterized by collective discussion and decision (1997), part of the Anglo-Saxon political philosophy (Bohman & Rehg, 1997) tries to ground contemporary democracies on the principle of deliberation, which is thought to provide an alternative to the current political arrangements based on the confrontation of plural interests settled by means of elections. Thus, according to John Dryzek democratic theory has encountered a "strong deliberative turn" (2000: 1). Moreover, if some authors consider that the participation of citizens represents a proper answer to the representative government's crisis, the local level appears particularly likely to accommodate the renewal of citizens' interest in the political sphere (Mansbridge, 1983).

In this context, the growing use of the Internet in city communication practices has provoked rising hopes about its contribution to greater participation in local democracy. Because of its interactivity – and, therefore, its potential for interaction – this medium appears as a tool likely to renew the dialogue between elected officials and citizens. The implementation of discussion forums by some town councils on their websites has raised questions about these new forms of political exchange.

At a local level, experiments in various countries (for instance, Sweden, United-States, Germany and Great Britain) have generated academic studies which in general share four main principles. First, they establish a parallel with the ideal model of public deliberation, inspired by Jürgen Habermas' theory. This theory introduces an ideal situation in which the search for public good goes through procedures of argumentation and reasoning among equal citizens. It sets up also four ideal requirements of deliberation. First, the participants are not bound by a previous commitment. Second, they are considered as equal meaning that existing inequalities of resources do not reduce their chances to influence deliberation. The third requirement demands that deliberation should work as a persuasive exchange, where the participants exchange reasons and claims in order to convince their interlocutors. The last requirement regards the search for rational consensus as the aim of ideal deliberation. Their analysis then consists of

underlining the gap between these ideal characteristics and the online deliberation that is actually being realised. For instance, Lincoln Dahlberg worked on the characteristics of the normative model of the public sphere developed from the work of Jürgen Habermas. According to Dahlberg, there are six important points: autonomy from state and economic power; exchange and critique of criticisable moral-practical validity claims; reflexivity (meaning that participants must critically examine their own cultural values, assumptions, and interests, as well as the larger social context); ideal role-taking (participants must attempt to understand the argument from the other's perspective); sincerity; discursive inclusion and equality. His analysis shows that vibrant exchange of positions and rational critique do take place within many online forums. However he stresses that there are also a number of factors limiting the expansion of the public sphere online. For example, these factors include the increasing colonisation of cyberspace by state and corporate interests, a lack of reflexivity, a lack of respectful listening to others, the exclusion of many people from online political forums and the domination of discourse by certain persons and groups (Dahlberg, 2001).

Second, these studies frequently compare online deliberation with traditional deliberative or participative practices. For example, J. W. Stanley and C. Weare (2003) analyzed a Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) experiment by comparing the comments received in the docket with those made through the web-based discussion. Thus they can emphasize the peculiarities of eParticipation. In the case of FMCSA, the authors have shown that the individuals who participated in the web discussion constituted a distinct group with differing motivations and expectations compared to those who participated in the docket.

Third, some of them adopt a prescriptive orientation in enumerating the conditions for the success of discussion forums such as, for example, the identification of participants and the involvement of politicians in the discussion.

Lastly, growing attention has been paid to moderation and its consequences on the quality of discussions (Coleman & Gøtze, 2001; Wright, 2005).

In this paper, our aim is not to draw a strict parallel between the Habermasian approach of deliberation and online forums. So the “deliberative degree” of online discussions will be not assessed. We propose first to analyse the real constraints that shape the organisation of electronic debates. In other words, we try to establish both formal and informal rules which structure online deliberation. Second, we will look at the different ways residents participate in local online forums. What issues do Internet users talk about? Moreover, with the forum content analysis, we will deal with the kind of claims sent by Internet users. This analysis will allow us to offer a typology of the messages collected on forums. Finally, we will try to establish whether the electronic forums strengthen or weaken the social and cultural hierarchies among people who want to speak in public.

2. Empirical ground and method

The outcomes presented here are based on an analysis of several forums established by French municipal authorities between 2002 and 2005:

- In 2002, we worked on the forums of eight municipalities, with varying numbers of inhabitants, in Southwest France: Anglet (Pyrénées-Atlantiques), Carmaux (Tarn), Cenon (Gironde), Condom (Gers), Luchon (Haute-Garonne), Montpellier (Hérault), Tarbes (Hautes-Pyrénées) and Vauvert (Gard). We put into brackets the *département* of the town. The *département* is an administrative division of the French territory.

- In 2003, we did eighteen in-depth interviews with municipal employees from these towns, mainly politicians (deputy mayor in charge of communication and local democracy, town councillors and principal private secretaries) and those in charge of communication (heads of communication and webmasters). We have furthermore studied the messages posted on the forums. Thus, all of the messages published in the forum since its opening until February 15th, 2002 (date of our study) have been collected, that is to say seven hundred and thirty messages sent by four hundred and seventeen net-surfers. We must say that this is more an estimation liable to slight variations than final numbers because the same person can send several messages under different fictitious names.

- Then, between 2003 and 2005, we studied the forums of other French cities which are particularly meaningful because of their previous interest in information and communication technologies (ICT). For example, some extracts of the forums of Issy-les-Moulineaux (Hauts-de-Seine) or Vandoeuvre-lès-Nancy (Meurthe-et-Moselle) will illustrate our comments.

- Lastly, in 2005, we observed the forums available on the municipal websites of the following cities with over 80 000 inhabitants: Amiens (Somme), Besançon (Doubs), Boulogne-Billancourt (Hauts-de-Seine), Limoges (Haute-Vienne), Montpellier, Mulhouse (Haut-Rhin), Nanterre (Hauts-de-Seine), Orléans (Loiret) and Saint-Denis (Seine-Saint-Denis).

Besides interviews with council actors and forum content analysis, our methodology includes a comparative analysis with face-to-face debates such as district councils or public meetings. The comparison has double relevance. First, the comparison allows us to bypass the simple measurement of the gap between the theoretical models of deliberation, sometimes used in the discourses of politicians, and the observable practices. Second, the specificities of online deliberation can be illuminated with the help of quasi-systematic comparisons made by various authors especially on district councils.

3. Main Characteristics of Online Forums

3. 1. Forums as subjugated spaces

During public debates in face-to-face interactions, institutional authorities control both the agenda and the organisation of the exchanges. They also try to find a balance between allocating a comparable amount of time to members and letting the discussion go its own way, in a relatively precise time. Similarly, electronic debates respond to norms determining how free Internet users are when they try to express themselves. On discussion forums, which are continuous spaces and do not bring people physically together, how is speech cast? What are the rules, both formal and informal, which structure electronic exchanges?

These constraints can relate to the kind of subjects selected for discussion but they can also be editorial (for example, the obligation to respect the law). Indeed, the topics on which the claims of net-surfers have to focus are, in some cases, chosen by local authorities themselves. For example, in March 2002, the Internet users of Rueil-Malmaison (Hauts-de-Seine) could only express themselves on the topic of security, which is the only forum offered on the municipal website. In June 2005, Marcq-en-Baroeul (Nord) proposed a single forum regarding sustainable development. Sometimes, the topics have very few links with the municipal activities. For example, in February 2004, Orléans (Loiret) submitted to the Internet users a forum entitled “How to be a father today?⁷” and, in Autumn 2004, another forum entitled “Is stress motivating or inhibiting for you?⁸”

Moreover, the forms and even the content of the messages are also decided by the local authorities. For example, in Chalon-sur-Saône (Saône-et-Loire) net-surfers must not “monopolize the conversation”. Their messages must also comply with “the editorial line of the website⁹”, which is an especially vague expression. In all cases, rules guiding the decision to publish a message or not are extremely ambiguous. Thus, in the forum of Annecy (Haute-Savoie), Internet users are warned in an extremely authoritative and emphatic way: “we are the only judge of messages which must be removed from or added to the website.” In Miramas (Bouches-du-Rhône), the omnipotence of municipal editors is rigidly established by the editorial charter of the forum, since they have the right to “delete, publish and shift any of the topics at anytime¹⁰.”

Their intention to master the discursive content is increased by the permanent character of discussion forums. Indeed, because of the possible durability of criticism by Internet users against municipal policies or staff, local authorities may be tempted to remove a lot of messages. Traceability of messages is admittedly an asset of the forum compared to other means of participation for which the discussions are fleeting. Indeed, the forum keeps participants’ speeches on a long-term basis. But at the same time, this traceability is considered as a weapon of accountability likely to backfire on the local authorities. For example,

7 <http://www.ville-orleans.fr/EspaceNet/forum_archive_message.cfm?discusId=16>

8 <http://www.ville-orleans.fr/EspaceNet/forum_archive_message.cfm?discusId=22>

9 <<http://www.chalonsursaone.fr>>, August 2002.

10 <<http://www.ville-annecy.fr>>, November 2002 and <<http://www.miramas.org/plus/forum/charte.asp>>, August 2004.

they may be forced to fulfil their previous publicly expressed promises. In this way, forums work like a mirror which is always held up to politicians, as it may reflect the gaps between the real actions of the municipality and the speeches of its leaders. Thus, within the framework of a “continuous democracy” evoked by Dominique Rousseau, forums may be considered as a space for “the ongoing exercise of a civic and critical gaze reducing the margin of independence of those who have been elected” (1999: 5). In the same way, the wide visibility of words abroad may increase their mistrust of discussion forums.

There are three factors that underlying the elaboration of both formal and informal rules of online discussion. All these rules lead us to consider the municipality itself as the only guarantor for the legitimacy of messages that may be published, even if these limitations are not strictly implemented in practice.

First, municipal publishers try to attract some participants according to their “familiarity” with the discussed topics, but also because of their skill in using rhetorical and well-argued discourse. Even if the municipality does not really seek expertise from citizens, it wishes for informed and relevant people who will express their views first in order to define the parameters of a “good” discussion. Then, the construction of common good is stopped by the very choice of topics made by local authorities. Internet users do not always like local authorities’ selection of topics, as denounced by this inhabitant of Saint-Denis (Seine-Saint-Denis):

“It’s my pleasure to open this forum!!! The first message, what a delight Honestly, it makes me laugh. 1) Topics on which Saint-Denis’ unhabitants can express their views are IMPOSED ...This might be democracy (...)”¹¹

Finally, electronic debates might only handle issues linked to the local area. For example, Montpellier (Hérault) proposes seven discussion forums that precisely relate to seven areas of this town. This is also the case of Agen (Lot-et-Garonne) and Morsang-sur-Orge (Essonne), which propose forums based respectively on five and eight areas of these towns. From a technical point of view, the forum actually allows the citizens who do not live in a certain area to express their views. But this possibility cannot arise when the local authorities restrict the access to the forum in such a way that only net-surfers living in a given neighbourhood can speak.

Thus, this opening of local political space is inevitably accompanied by the local authorities’ will to control the expression of popular speeches. However, eDeliberation introduces some elements of change compared to traditional face-to-face deliberation schemes. This erodes local authorities’ hold, because the discussion management slips in part out of their hands. First, the supervision of discursive contents is made by webmasters, with no direct supervision from elected representatives. Second, it is impossible to define whose turn it is to speak - such is the case in face-to-face debates. This situation leads to the levelling of the participants’ status (who can, for example, express their opinions without being cut by the authorities). Furthermore, some net-surfers twist the initial aims

¹¹ “Changeons Saint-Denis”, 01/02/05, *Commerçants d'alimentation ?????*, Saint-Denis, forum “La halle du marché entièrement rénovée”. We quote the messages in this manner: “Name of the Internet user”, date of the message i.e day/month/year, *title of the message*, city, “title of the forum”. Because these informations cannot be easily translated, we have chosen to keep the French words.

of the forum. For example, in Tarbes (Hautes-Pyrénées), they expressed their views after the webmaster's hours of duty in order to avoid its censorship.

3. 2. Forums as conflictual political spaces

Apart from electoral mobilisations, expression of public opinions in representative democracy seems to be relatively sporadic. This applies to the local scale where public meetings, district councils, local referendums or public inquiries in urban affairs are only occasional. For this reason, electronic forums seem exceptional as they allow an unbroken opinion flow, at least in theory. What issues do Internet users talk about?

In our successive analysis of various municipal forums we have separated messages concerning the city's problems that may initiate or pursue political discussion from those which merely ask for practical information, unlikely to arouse debates among participants.

Within political messages we found some which were related to the policies of the city. This is the case, for example, in this message from an inhabitant of Tarbes:

“I have a question for the town councillor (or technician) who is in charge of the parks: could the town council technically and financially make some plantations of trees which may relieve the bareness and the cold and austere appearance of the boulevards situated between the roundabout of the hospital and the tax collection office's buildings?¹²”

In this category of political messages, there are also other messages that deal with the city's administrative and political management.

There are also messages linked to the democratic function of discussion forums, such as this one:

“What is this forum for? A censor moderator, perturbing questions and censored, cleaned-up truths, organized propaganda. The freedom of speech in Boulogne-Billancourt goes in only one direction: the one prescribed by the municipal team¹³.”

Finally, social issues are also political messages, which do not directly deal with the local action but seem to come within a broader political arena. These messages concern national or international matters whose lack of political treatment (at a broader level - other than local) is precisely the cause of the speech in the forum.

We have applied this categorization to five hundred and twenty-two messages posted on the free forums of several websites¹⁴. Our studies show that eParticipation in forums is closely linked to general interest in politics, and especially in local affairs: 68% of the messages are political and within them, those related to the city policies are the most frequent (27%), followed by

¹² “Fabienne Duprat”, 01/02/02, *arbres*, Tarbes.

¹³ “ju92”, 19/09/05, *A quoi sert ce forum ?*, Boulogne-Billancourt, forum “Discussion générale”.

¹⁴ Here the forums observed are : Anglet (Pyrénées-Atlantiques), Luchon (Haute-Garonne), Tarbes (Hautes-Pyrénées), Vauvert (Gard) and the forums “Miscellaneous” of Condom (Gers) and “Citizenship” of Carmaux (Tarn).

messages about management (21%). Social issues and forum criticism reach 8% and 12% respectively.

Furthermore, the interest in politics is expressed through conflicts and criticisms concerning the authorities' activities and other participants' opinions. For example, in the forum of a very small town, Luchon (Haute-Garonne), the discussions often took on a rather acrimonious and heated tone. About the cleanliness in town, a net-surfer, «Hôtelier en rage» wrote:

“It's useless always moving the chief of the cleaning services because the town is really very dirty this year. We bided our time until hearing the complaints of our customers and we hope that you are going to restore everything to its proper order. We hoteliers are permanently compelled to take hygiene measures and it would only be right that the same principles be applied to the pavements. Thanks¹⁵.”

One of his fellow citizens, «Winston Smith» answered him:

“The city is dirty because we welcome little pigs (the tourists) and who wants the little pigs to come? Hoteliers. And who moans because the city is dirty??? So let's increase the taxes of those who need the public spending in order to favour its profitable trade¹⁶.”

But we know that consensus represents a very important point in the Habermasian deliberation. On the contrary, John Dryzek asserts that deliberation is not bound to end with consensus (2000). Amy Gutman and Dennis Thompson evoke the idea of “deliberative disagreements”, characterized by discussion between participants who show respect for each other (1996). In that way, electronic forums create local tensions and visible problems and are therefore relevant to John Dryzek's perspective (2000).

Moreover, according to Habermas (1997), publicity of views implies that citizens should be able to distance themselves from their own interests. Therefore, they should be open to the arguments of other people and willing to reconsider the value of their own reasons. Jon Elster also supports the opinion that, in a public context, citizens should put their private interests in brackets for fear of sanctions from the group (1999). However, this idea is confronted by Nina Eliasoph who asserts that the public arena, because of the kind of interaction it produces, simply cannot allow ordinary citizens to make a politicized speech (1998). In fact, the controversial aspect of electronic exchanges includes concerns for general interest. Some participants try to connect their personal objections to more general issues regarding their community and also to more abstract principles of justice. For example, access to public goods for all is claimed in the forum of Tarbes (Hautes-Pyrénées) by “un habitant de la Gespe” (an inhabitant of the Gespe). He directly confronts the mayor, Gérard Trémège, about the lack of post offices in the southwest of the town:

“Will M. Trémège have this injustice put right and ask the general management of the post office to create an office next to La Gespe, Solazur or the University?¹⁷”

So it seems that electronic forums fall rather within Jon Elster's logic of generalization (1997). Indeed the public nature of the proceedings, in spite of the

15 “Hotelier en rage”, 31/08/01, *Propreté de la ville*, Luchon.

16 “Winston Smith”, 08/09/01, *la propreté affaires de chacun ou de tous ?*, Luchon.

17 “un habitant de la Gespe”, 08/01/02, *services publics à la Gespe-Solazur-Bastillac*, Tarbes.

absence of citizens, does not stop them from attempting to justify their claims and resorting to general affirmations – even if this desire for generalization coexists with the expression of selfish interests.

3. 3. Forums as unequal spaces

Although access to the Internet and the problem of the ‘digital divide’ are very important we do not discuss them here. Rather, we focus on equality within eDeliberation by asking whether the use of discussion forums requires specific skills and more broadly if they challenge or enhance cultural and social hierarchies which usually limit citizens’ expression opportunities.

It is, in effect, very rare that individuals are equally involved in the deliberation process. In a radical way, Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright conclude that deliberative governance, if democratic benefits are really to be expected from it, needs a significant opposition force. For them, it means a “set of mechanics that can weaken, indeed neutralize, power and political prerogatives of the main organized and leading forces in society” (Fung & Wright, 2005: 50). Actually, the balance of power is not naturally neutralized in the public sphere as Jürgen Habermas postulates. We need to consider the various restrictions that hinder citizens’ participation. Speeches, for example during district councils meetings, depend on the symbolic capital (fund of knowledge, social and economical status and so on) of each citizen (Bacqué & Sintomer, 1999). In accordance with this view, Lynn Sanders criticizes the Habermasian approach because of the unequal ability of citizens to carry weight in deliberation and to be heard. In the case of citizens’ juries she noticed that people who have a high social and cultural status are the ones who speak most often and lead the others (Sanders, 1997).

Apart from actual accessibility of the Internet, several facts should be considered in order to assess the democratic potential of online discussions and their ability to reconfigure social and cultural hierarchies which can usually be observed in face-to-face public debates. On the one hand, as Tamara Witschge comments, “the Internet is often praised for its possibility to liberate us from the social hierarchies and power relations that exist offline” (Witschge, 2004: 116). This feature is one of the most important arguments for eDeliberation: “If computer-mediated interaction can consistently reduce the independent influence of status, it will have a powerful advantage over face-to-face deliberation” (Gastil, 2000: 359). On the other hand, the specific mode of communication can entail some additional exclusions of people who have a poor grasp of written language and can be deprived of access to these forums.

While electronic writing may lead to a more flexible style than in traditional mail, it seems to remain a more accurate conveyor of rational argumentation than oral language. But the necessity of writing can be an additional constraint for some individuals. Cécile Blatrix stressed this in her examination of the compulsory use of writing in public inquiry. The fact of expressing their remarks in writing on a register in the town hall is “a painful step for some participants who are less familiarized with this kind of situation” (Blatrix, 1999: 164).

It is clear that social status markers do exist online. Indeed, messages that include inappropriate vocabulary, too much informal speech, a lot of grammatical and spelling mistakes or typing errors, are discredited in the eyes of political representatives but also of other participants. Beside this, it is possible that some particularly clumsy or wrongly spelt messages will not be published anymore. The willingness, declared by the interviewed local authorities, to assure the quality of proceedings is linked also to their perception about the way in which net-surfers should express their views. According to Stéphane Verdier, moderator of the forums of Cenon (Gironde), the quality of the participants' expression (and not only of the proceedings) worries the municipal officials. So these forums are moderated *a priori* and a message can only be published when it is not contrary to accepted standards of good behaviour, it does not undermine the elected and also when "the expression is right"¹⁸. Therefore the disadvantaged sectors of the population are excluded from forums because of factors inherent in the written means of communication.

Moreover we have noticed a phenomenon similar to that found by Michael S. Schneider in his study of participation in the forum *talk.abortion*. According to him, more than 80 percent of the postings are posted by fewer than 5 percent of the participants (Schneider, 1997: 85). Indeed, the electronic debates that we have observed are often monopolized by a small number of Internet users. For instance, among the 395 Internet users¹⁹ who took part in the forums of Southwest France in 2002, 303 of them — 76 percent — posted only one message. Only one percent of Internet users posted ten or more messages. Another example: among the forty participants in the forum of Limoges, entitled "Agenda 21" about sustainable development²⁰, twenty-five — 62,5% — sent only one message. Four participants (ten percent) posted ten messages or more. This monopolization of the forum hinders the variety of opinions expressed.

Nevertheless, we have to stress that electronic communication reduces, above all, the general pre-eminence of speeches made by politicians. This weakening of the domination of discourse by the municipal institution can be explained on two grounds. The first is that symbols of power are not visible online (in particular because of the lack of material space for debates). The second is that debates are excluded from the terms demanded by the authorities that organize them. Concerning the later, we can conclude that online forums bring some changes: the loss of municipal monopoly on the answers provided to citizens' questions, the non-selective entry of participants, the impossibility of using technical assistance such as graphics boards, budget charts, maps or urban development plans and the lack of control on the distribution of speaking time.

4. Conclusions

¹⁸ Interview, Stéphane Verdier, Webmaster, Cenon, January 2003.

¹⁹ A net-surfer could send several messages with various fictitious names.

²⁰ This forum has been implemented the November 30th, 2004; the last message was published on February 6th, 2006.

To conclude, we would like to pay attention to the weak link between electronic debates and public decisions. In French practice, mechanisms for participation are mostly divorced from the processes of decision-making. For example, urban consultations do not give power to residents; local referendums deal more with information that is embedded in the decisional process, than with decision itself; district councils can only make consultative proclamations. In fact, discussion forums do not have much impact on political decision for at least two reasons. First, despite the fact that they have a strong hold in face-to-face debates, politicians are not very present on electronic forums²¹. Their reluctance to speak on forums and their obvious preference for public meetings are in part the result of their conceptualisation of citizen participation. Public meetings or district councils are places which facilitate the explanation of arguments or of important information concerning municipal policies to inhabitants. On electronic forums, such systematic pedagogical communication is uncertain because of the numerous claims with which the elected representatives must deal. Secondly, citizens who participate in forums are not representative of the local population. Only a small number of Internet users take part in electronic debates and so the pluralism of ideas is necessarily restricted.

However, discussion forums have some effects on the local public sphere. Sometimes a forum can be a means of organizing collective actions against local policies. Furthermore, the conjunction between the public nature of proceedings, their written character and their permanency may allow for revitalisation of the link between public opinion and the ancient idea of the supervision of the representatives by the citizens. Nevertheless, local authorities have intuitively understood this “risk”: potential traceability of electronic criticisms leads them to increase censorship on forums. Unlike deliberative and participative devices, electronic debates stay public for a longer time. Thus, everyone can assess the adequacy of the elected representatives’ written interventions and their real fulfilments.

In the light of the fragmentary outcomes of our analysis, we have taken a look back to some of the questions linked to deliberation: the rules of discussion established by local authorities, the fluctuation of the discursive exchanges between cooperation and conflict and the hierarchies amongst participants. We would like to stress three points:

- First, online forums can constitute conflicting political spaces in which the attempts made by Internet users to justify their claims, their attempts to appeal to general affirmations are not excluded;
- The expression of Internet users on our observed forums is restricted by local authorities, who in fact delegate this censorship and moderation task to the employees in charge of communication and to webmasters;

²¹ On forums in Southwest France that we studied in 2002, 84,5 percent of postings are posted by the citizens, only 1 percent are it by the town councillors, 6 percent by municipal services and 8 percent by webmasters.

- Forums appear to be rather unequal spaces even if the discursive hierarchies are somewhat eroded, as the management of the tool slips out of politicians control.

But our conclusions leave many questions unanswered. For example, the combination of face-to-face and online devices, implemented by local authorities, may produce new forms of public debates at the local level, whose modes are at the moment still unexplored.

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