University students’ attitudes toward social media as an arena for political deliberation. A qualitative attitude approach.

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Since its creation the internet and especially SNSs (Social Networking Sites, e.g. Facebook, Twitter) have faced high expectations of political deliberation in the academic discussion. Empirical research has found both positive and negative evidence of online deliberation, although the majority of the research gives a rather discouraging image of internet’s potential to enhance political deliberation.

The aim of this thesis is to examine the potential of social media to serve as an arena for deliberation by looking at the attitudes toward the deliberative ideal. The research questions are the following. To what extent people see social media as a platform for political deliberation? When do people share their political or societal opinions online? What are the motivations behind the decisions of taking part to the discussion, that is, sharing societal or political opinions online?

Theoretical framework stems from the deliberative democracy theory. Deliberative democracy is a conception of democracy that underscores rational-critical discussion as a source of democratic legitimacy. John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas are often regarded as the most notable political writers of the last century and their writings have influenced greatly the deliberative democracy theory. In the theory section, Rawls’ and Habermas’ accounts regarding deliberation will be presented before taking a look at the deliberative democracy online.

Empirically the study utilises the qualitative attitude approach method (Vesala and Rantanen, 2007). In qualitative attitude approach attitudes are understood as stances that are constructed in human interaction. Qualitative attitude approach utilises its own empirical methodology. It is based on semi-structured interviews that consist of attitude statements. The presumption is that attitudes can be examined by analysing the verbal expressions. The interview data is analysed as a commentary that consists of comments and their reasoning. For this study, ten students were interviewed about their attitudes toward social media as an arena for political deliberation.

The results reflect the previous research. Participants agreed with the deliberative ideal but in practice they saw many obstacles for political deliberation online. When participating in online deliberation was evaluated positively, the reasons were that participating is important, political discussion online is educational, fun and easier as political discussion face-to-face and that by participating one can find support for own views. When participating in online deliberation was evaluated negatively, the reasons were fear of criticism, unwillingness to cause controversy, lack of interest and increased level of self-awareness.
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1. Introduction

Since its creation the internet and especially SNSs (Social Networking Sites, e.g. Facebook, Twitter) have faced high expectations of political deliberation. This is continuum to the e-democracy discussion that started in the 1990’s and spawned for example a lot of internet-based citizen democracy initiatives\(^1\). In the public discussion we have heard wishful thoughts of the democratic potential of the web: the internet could be a place free from old power structures and it could thereby serve as an arena for political discussion. Using the internet and social media it would be possible to create a habermasian public sphere, a place for equal political discussion where the best arguments would finally win in the debate. Deliberative democracy – an idealistic conception of democracy that underscores the rational-critical discussion as a source of democratic legitimacy – has been the dominant approach for studying the political activity online (about deliberative democracy as a framework for understanding political activity online, see e.g. Hindman, 2008; Dahlgren, 2009; Freelon, 2010).

This optimistic view on political activity online has been challenged by the lessons learned from real life. Political discussions on social media rarely look like textbook examples of rational-critical deliberation where well-reasoned arguments would be presented and critically elaborated by civilised and well-informed discussants that respect their peers and cherish the power of the best argument. Quite the contrary, social media is often claimed to be full of uninformed opinions, trivial fights, idle conversation, flaming and withdrawing from the general public arena to the “echo chambers” where the like-minded individuals reinforce their already existing views (about echo chambers and partisan selective exposure see e.g. Colleoni et al., 2014; Stroud, 2010; Sunstein, 2007, about flaming and

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\(^1\) A Finnish example of this is the [otakantaa.fi](http://otakantaa.fi) website. In 2015 many of the citizen services have and participation channels been moved to the [demokratia.fi](http://demokratia.fi) website.
uncivilized behaviour see e.g. Hmielowski et al., 2014; Anderson et al., 2014; Papacharissi, 2004; Davis, 1999).

Untangling the democratic potential of social media is challenged from many fronts. It has been noted that social media and SNSs are an important arena for self-presentation and identity work: individuals are very conscious about the opinions and other content they share online (see e.g. Silfverberg et al., 2011; Uski, 2015). Recent work has also shown that some people restrain themselves from discussions online because they do not want to seem too political or are afraid how they seem in the eyes of their network (see e.g. Gearhart and Weiwe, 2015; Storsul, 2014; Rainie and Smith, 2012).

All this creates an interesting juxtaposition: when these hardships are taken into consideration, can social media be a place for political deliberation? What inhibits the full bloom of political deliberation online? What advances it? Are people more motivated to create a favourable image of themselves than taking part to an open debate about politics? Or are there other reasons that hinder the possibilities of an open political discussion arena to emerge? How is social media different to other arenas of deliberation?

The significance of social media does not seem to be diminishing – quite the contrary an ever expanding amount of conversations are happening online in Social Networking Sites (SNS’s). It is important to study the nature of this relatively new medium and ask what kind of an impact it has on the political discussion. Facebook – which is the most popular social network service – has 1.55 billion active users around the world (Statista, 2015). In August 2015 Twitter had 316 million users worldwide, Google+ 300 million, Instagram 300 million and Snapchat 200 million (Statista, 2015).

In Finland more than half of the population are on social media. According to Statistics Finland, 58 percentage of Finns were following some social network service. Among 16-24 and 25-34-year-olds the shares were much higher: 93 percentage of 16-24-year-olds and 87 percentage of 25-34-year-olds followed some social network service in the past 3 months (Statistics Finland, 2015). Approximately
2.4 million Finns use Facebook (Pönkä, 2014). Use of Twitter is not as common, but Twitter still has nearly 400 000 active users in Finland (Nummela, 2016). Also YouTube with approximately 550 000 vloggers (Nummela, 2016) and Suomi24 online discussion board with 1.4 million visitors per week (Suomi24) are popular among Finns.

There is an increasing interest to study the political opinion online. In Finland the Digivaalit 2015 project looks at the digital publicity around the parliamentary election. Tviittien politiikkaa research project at the University of Tampere in Finland examined the use of Twitter by politicians and journalists. In the United Kingdom, among many other universities, Oxford Internet Institute conducts research on topics related to the internet and social media. Experiments on the political uses and impacts of social media are also made outside the universities in many think tanks and independent research institutes. For example think tank Demos UK’s Centre for the Analysis of Social Media (CASM) has been looking at the digital voice in Twitter in the context of EU politics and the possibilities of Twitter to increase the voter turnout in the UK. In the United States numerous universities research political phenomena linked to the rise of the social media. The elections, particularly the successful Obama campaigns in 2008 and 2012, have been of scholarly interest. Pew Research Centre is constantly conducting research on internet and social media related topics.

So far there has been a lot of quantitative research. Much of the research done on online deliberation uses synchronic or comparative statics research designs (see Wright, 2011: 252). The qualitative perspective has not been as popular in the field. It still remains unclear what characterizes the political discussion online and how much significance it has for the democracy and the functioning of the political process.

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This study utilises a qualitative attitude approach (in Finnish: laadullinen asennetutkimus) in order to gain knowledge about the deliberative potential of social media. The study looks at Finnish university students’ attitudes toward political discussion in social media and considers the significance of social media for political deliberation. Finns are in SNSs but only 7 percentage of Finns report having written their political or societal opinions on the Internet (Statistics Finland 2015). Again the shares among young people are higher than among the whole population. 8 percentage of 16-24-year-olds and 10 percentage of 25-34-year-olds have written their societal or political opinions online (Statistics Finland, 2015). For that reason it is important to look at both sides of the phenomenon and ask why some people decide to take part to the political deliberation online and why some restrain themselves from the debate.

Studying the whole Finnish population with qualitative research methods would not be possible. This study is a qualitative interview study that focuses on a group of university students. Ten students from the University of Helsinki were interviewed to find out about their attitudes toward the deliberative potential of the social media. Studying the attitudes of students is reasonable for a number of reasons. Firstly, young people use social media more than older generations. Secondly, they also write political and societal opinions on the internet more than other age groups (see more in next chapter). Among students the percentage of people who have written their political or societal opinions online is higher than in other categories: according to Statistics Finland 10 percentage of students have done this in the past three months (Statistics Finland, 2015)\(^4\).

In this study I lean on a notion presented by Diana Mutz (2006). She regrets political theorists’ inability (or unwillingness) to bring normative theories closer to the researched phenomena. A great deal of academic literature on deliberative democracy is based on normative ideals and theoretical

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assumptions. It is understandable that applying such a comprehensive theory in practical research is challenging. Yet this does not mean that it shouldn’t be done, at least in parts combining the theory and the practice is meaningful. Mutz refers to Robert Merton’s suggestion that social scientists should formulate “theories of the middle range”, that is to say, theories that are “not too far removed from the on-the-ground, operational research, yet not so narrow and specific as to be irrelevant to larger bodies of theory” (Mutz, 2006: 5). This request is relevant in the context of deliberative democracy research that has struggled to apply the ideas of the benefits of deliberative practices in the practice in a way that would seem credible. Indeed this a challenge, Mutz notes. Therefore she advocates a viewpoint of taking only small elements of the theory in empirical examination. Thus some practical knowledge about the researched phenomenon can be accumulated.

I describe in this study the theory and the origins of the deliberative democracy quite extensively, but empirically I wish to focus on a narrower element of deliberation, that is, how people think the ideal characteristics of deliberation can materialise on online discussion about politics. I am interested in the thoughts ordinary people have about the potential of online deliberation. Previous research has shown both positive and negative results of this potential (see e.g. Tsaliki, 2002; Witschge, 2004; Delli Carpini et al., 2004; Semaan et al., 2014; Storsul, 2014). I wish to look at the attitudes that people possess toward the online sphere (i.e. internet, social media) as a potential arena for deliberation. In addition to the perceived materialisation of the deliberative ideals in the online discussion, I am interested in the motives that either encourage or discourage the participation in the political discussion online. In other words, I am interested to know what are the reasons behind the willingness to take part in online deliberation, and vice versa what are the reasons that inhibit the participation. Therefore my research questions are:
Q1: To what extent do people see social media as a platform for political deliberation?

Q2: When do people share their political or societal opinions online?

Q3: What are the motivations behind the decisions of taking part in the discussion, that is, sharing societal or political opinions online?

The attitudes toward the political discussion on social media are important for a number of reasons. Although scholars hold different views about the relation between attitudes and behaviour, attitudes have significance for human behaviour at least to some degree (about attitude-behaviour consistency see e.g. Holland et al., 2002; Wicker, 1969). If people possess sceptical attitudes toward the meaningfulness of political deliberation online, it is unlikely that they would go online to deliberate. It has to be added though that attitudes are seldom very straightforward. Attitudes rarely fit on the dichotomist scale – people don’t usually have an either positive or negative attitude, or ‘a sceptical attitude’ or ‘a trusting attitude’. There is more to it. Researching the verbal expressions of attitudes provides subtle knowledge about the attitudes toward a certain matter. This study will utilise the qualitative attitude approach (Vesala and Rantanen, 2007) where interviewees comment on attitude statements presented to them.

In this study citizens’ political expression on social media will be explored from the perspective of deliberative democracy. I start by reviewing the theory of deliberative democracy. After reviewing the theoretical literature about the internet’s deliberative potential the theory is put to the test. Ten university students will be asked about their attitudes toward the political discussion online – do they see it as deliberation or do they give other meanings for it? Do they believe that online deliberation is possible? What restricts online deliberation? What advances it? Are they willing to deliberate online – and if not, why?

Looking at the attitudes can provide interesting information about the true democratic potential of the internet. There has been little research on this matter. Deliberative democracy theories, especially
Jürgen Habermas’ idea of the ideal public sphere have been criticised for being too normative and idealistic. It has been claimed that the habermasian public sphere could never work in real life. Yet there are scholars who say that social media or certain SNS’s can be treated as a habermasian public sphere (see e.g. Storsul, 2014). Yes, that can be done in theory. In the pursuit of functioning democracy in the internet age it is reasonable to look at the perceived deliberative potential of social media.

This study is an answer to the call of exploring the deliberative potential of the internet in more diverse ways. Tamara Witschge (2004) argued in her study about the deliberative potential of the internet that only few conclusions can be drawn from empirical studies that utilise either the quantitative methodology or qualitative content analysis. Similarly, the concern is shared by Delli Carpini et al. (2004) who call for more empirical research on the contextual factors that affect internet users’ willingness to deliberate online. Deeper understanding about internet’s prime features – like heterogeneity, anonymity and reduced social cues that Witschge (2004) names – and their impact on users’ willingness and manner to deliberate about politics requires asking the users how they see the potential. As Witschge (2004: 118) puts it:

“In order to comprehend the democratic possibilities of the Internet, we need to concentrate on trying to understand the users of the Internet. What drives people to discuss politics on the Internet instead of or in addition to discussing it offline?” (Witschge, 2002: 118.)

Moreover, this study also seeks to answer the question why some people decide to take part in deliberation and some not by interviewing also the social media users who do not participate in political discussion online. This element of study has been widely ignored. For example Hine (2000: 54) who suggests combining ethnographic methods with discourse analysis in her book about virtual ethnography, acknowledges the problem. Ethnographic methods as well as discourse analysis can only produce knowledge about the internet users whereas “potential interactants who choose to
remain silent, and potential authors who fail to write, are lost to the analysis” (Hine, 2000: 54). For understanding the deliberative potential of social media, the reasons for participating are just as important as the reasons to drop out of the discussion.

With the help of qualitative attitude approach methodology, that originates from the discipline of social psychology, ten university students were interviewed about their attitudes concerning the political discussion online. Therefore this study aims to contribute to the debate about the deliberative potential of social media by combining the theoretical ideals of deliberation with practical experiences about political deliberation online.

I start this study by defining the concept of social media and presenting a brief overview of studies on social media use and politics, especially in the Finnish context. In Chapter 3, I present the theoretical grounding of this study. I describe the origins of deliberative democracy and present the most notable thinkers in the field. After that the central characteristics of deliberative democracy will be presented and reviewed. The last subchapter links the theoretic ideals with the online context and presents some current research on this topic. In Chapter 4 I present my method, the qualitative attitude approach and explain how the interviews were structured and conducted. In the two last chapters I will present an analysis of the attitudes and discuss my results. In the discussion I will return to my research questions and link my results to the wider discussion about the democratic potential of the internet.
2. Background: Social media and politics

2.1 Social media
Defining the concept of social media is challenging. Janne Matikainen (2012) notes that the concept of “social media” has been used only for a couple of years and its origins are not in the academic discussion. The concept was developed for pragmatic reasons: new web services and portals simply needed a name. Matikainen defines social media as a phase in the development of the internet and the media in which the content production spreads out and the users generate an ever growing share of the content. (Matikainen, 2012.)

The same phenomenon has been discussed under the concepts of web 2.0, peer-to-peer-media, peer-to-peer-network and social web. The concept of social media is also closely linked to the concept of user generated content (UGC). The content is often borrowed from somewhere or somehow remodelled. Also operating through networks and communities are central characteristics of social media. (Matikainen, 2012.) The concepts of internet, net, online space and cyberspace have been often used interchangeably in the academic discussion (cf. Dahlgren, 2009).

Bechmann and Lomborg (2012: 767) write that social media is “often associated with new digital media phenomena such as blogs, social network sites, location-based services, microblogs, photo- and videosharing sites, etc., in which ordinary users (i.e. not only media professionals) can communicate with each other and create and share content with others online through their personal networked computers and digital mobile devices”. In communication literature social media is often theorised through three characteristics. Firstly, communication is de-institutionalized, that is, social media allows users to create and distribute content freely. Secondly, the user is an active producer, not a mere recipient of content. And finally, communication is interactive and takes place in various networks. (Bechmann and Lomborg, 2012: 767.)
Lietsala and Sirkkunen (2008: 17) note that social media became a buzzword along web 2.0 rhetoric. They see the concept of social media as an umbrella term under which various online content and people engaged in producing and distributing that content can be studied. According to them it is almost impossible to define something that is constantly evolving but in their work they present a genre based model of social media that divides the social media services in six different genres: 1) content creation and publishing tools (blogs, wikis and podcasts), 2) content sharing sites (Flickr, YouTube), 3) social network sites (Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace), 4) collaborative productions (Wikipedia), 5) virtual worlds (Second Life) and 6) add-ons (GoogleMaps, RockYou).

Many scholars note that the term social media highlights something new in the characteristics of the web 2.0 (see e.g. Lietsala and Sirkkunen 2008; Scholz 2008) – something new, even something revolutionary is happening. Scholz (2008) notes that in addition to the new technologies and practices, web 2.0 is characterized through new ideological features like openness, increased democracy, the power and the intelligence of the masses (collective intelligence and crowd sourcing) and the claim of the end of the hierarchies. The high expectations toward the deliberative potential of social media are similar to the general ideas about the internet (Storsul, 2014: 18).

As Matikainen (2012) notes, social media can also be seen as a research subject rather than an academic concept. This study looks at social media not only as a set of tools but as a public space that could potentially serve as an arena for political deliberation. In the main focus are social network sites (SNS’s like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram) but no practices of social media usage will be excluded though. The interviewees in this study also talk about different blogs (like Tumbrl and popular Finnish blog portal Lily.fi) and discussion forums.

For example Dahlgren notes that the online public sphere has a “sprawling nature” – it is spread out across various online tools and users engage with each other using various technologies and platforms (Dahlgren, 2005). Also Jussi-Pekka Erkkola (2008) makes a notion about “the tapestrian nature” (in Finnish “kudelmaisuus”) of social media. By this notion he refers to the diverse and multidimensional
nature of social media as well as the usage of the social media which is not limited to only one platform at time, quite the contrary, the different services and technologies are linked closely to one another (Erkkola, 2008). For example people post pictures via Instagram but might publish them also on Facebook, or people write blog posts and tweet about them – it’s all linked together. For these reasons this study will not focus on one specific social media service (like Facebook or Twitter) but the whole spectrum. This will give a wider picture of the ways people think about social media as a public sphere.

Social media can be treated as a public space and a forum of citizen discussion. Storsul (2014: 20) notes that for example Facebook is such a wide-spread and inclusive social media service, especially among the youth, that it can be compared to the habermasian public sphere where, at least in theory, democratic deliberation could take place. Storsul uses Norway as an example but the Finnish population social media usage are similar – in 2015 more than half of Finns were using social network services. Among young age groups the numbers are even higher: 93 percent of 16-24-year-olds and 82 percent of 25-34-year-olds use social network services (Statistics Finland, 2015).

2.2 Finnish politics and social media
The impact of the internet on politics have been studied in Finland for almost two decades. In Finland the internet penetration has been high from early on which has made Finnish context interesting for empirical research (Carlson and Djupsund, 2001). Among other things, candidates’ websites (Carlson and Djupsund, 2001), online campaigning (e.g. Strandberg, 2009b) and new campaigning features like YouTube (Carlson and Strandberg, 2008) have been of scholarly interest. The first signs of the rise of the social media were evident in the 2007 parliamentary elections although the citizens’ use of social media was rather modest (Strandberg, 2009a). In the studies before 2010, the use of social media usually referred to blogs and online news.
Strandberg (2012: 79) notes that according to the election studies the internet has had less importance in Finnish national election campaigns than expected. The parties and candidates have been using the Internet actively in their campaign purposes – but voters have not been that much interested in elections-related online content (see e.g. below Borg and Grönlund, 2013; Moring, 2012). The national election studies from past years have also shown that social media is still far behind the traditional media (TV, newspapers) as an information source for voting decision (Strandberg, 2012: 79).

According to the Finnish National election study 2011, social media did not have a significant role as an information source for voters. Approximately 79 percent reported that they had paid no attention at all to the media coverage of the parliamentary elections on social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) while 2.8 percent said they had paid “a great deal of attention” and 6.2 percent said they had paid “a fair amount of attention” (Borg and Grönlund, 2013: 18). Additionally 83 percent said that they got no information from “so-called social media” for their voting decision. Only 0.7 percent reported they got information from social media “to a great extent”, 2.5 percent said they got information “to a rather large extent” and 6.1 percent said they got information “to some extent” (Moring, 2012: 42–43).

The number of people following politicians’ Facebook or Twitter sites was low as well as the number of people taking part to the political discussions on social media. Six percent reported following candidates’ Facebook or Twitter sites and three percent reported they had taken part to political discussion on social media (like Facebook or Twitter). (Mykkänen & Borg, 2013: 165.)

Strandberg (2012: 87) states that social media had no direct impact on voting decisions in the 2011 Finnish parliamentary elections. Also Mykkänen and Borg (2013: 164) sum up the results of the national election study 2011 by saying that the political role of social media remained marginal. The results of the national election study show that age is the only statistically significant variable that explains the use of social media as an information source for voting decision (Strandberg, 2012: 87).
On the other hand, scholars have seen that the 2011 parliamentary elections increased the citizens’ interest in politics. In a national study carried out after the elections, three quarters of people entitled to vote said that they were very or somewhat interested in politics. It was also reported that more people were discussing politics. 42 percent of survey participants said they were discussing politics “daily or almost daily” or “often”. In 2007 and 2003 the equivalent percentages were 28 and 19. (Borg et al., 2013: 69.)

Kim Strandberg with his colleagues have been studying online deliberation in the Finnish context quite extensively (see e.g. Strandberg, 2008; Strandberg, 2012; Strandberg and Grönlund, 2012; Strandberg and Berg, 2015). He has tested empirically many of the theoretical assumptions of the effects of deliberative democracy in the online context.

Prior to the parliamentary elections 2007 Strandberg (2008) researched the possibility of public deliberation to go online. He found out that people who are already politically active take part in online discussions about politics. Moreover, the content analysis of the discussions showed that the discussions were not very deliberative, that is, not many questions were asked, argumentation wasn’t rational, little mutual respect was shown and a great deal of messages were negative in tone. Strandberg concludes that deliberating might not be natural for Finns, although he notes that similar findings have been made in other countries too. He suggests that rules and codes of conducts might enhance the deliberative quality of the online discussions. (Strandberg, 2008.)

In prior to the parliamentary elections 2011 social media was becoming a phenomenon. Strandberg (2012) notes that there was a clear hype about the impact of the social media on the election: it was assumed that social media could be the link between different voter segments and serve as a platform for organising the campaign and the fundraising. Furthermore, social media could strengthen the messages picked from the traditional media and vice versa provide content for the traditional media. There was also encouraging empirical evidence of this phenomenon, so the hype was justified. (Strandberg, 2012: 1–4.) However, social media had a rather modest impact on the elections. Citizens’
use of social media for following the elections was minor and the impact of social media on the voting decisions was rather modest (Strandberg, 2012: 15–16).

In addition to the election related studies Strandberg et al. have been looking at the outcome of online deliberation (Strandberg and Grönlund, 2012) and the impact of temporality and identifiability on the deliberative quality of online discussions (Strandberg and Berg, 2015). The results show that technical issues can be a serious stumbling block for successful online deliberation and that the effects of deliberation (e.g. changing of opinions, increase in knowledge, trust and political efficacy) were “somewhat modest” (Strandberg and Grönlund, 2012). Identifiability doesn’t have a strong impact on the discussion quality, hence it doesn’t matter whether people are performing anonymous or with their own names, but the discussion quality seems to get better when the discussions are asynchronous (Strandberg and Berg, 2015). Strandberg and Berg (2015: 175) suppose the reason for the increased quality is that in asynchronous discussions people have more time to think their opinions through and to formulate their thoughts well.

In the most recent Finnish National Election Study from 2015 approximately 38 percent of people entitled to vote reported they discussed politics “daily or almost daily” or “often”. This number was slightly lower around the time of the previous parliamentary election in 2011. Social media had some significance for the voting decisions. 8.6 percent reported that they gained “a great deal of information” from social media and 18.2 percent said they gained “some information”. 14.8 percent said that they had followed the parliamentary election from the social media a lot or to some extent. (Grönlund and Wass, 2016.) The interest in politics had decreased from four years ago but still remained relatively stable. Now 22 percent reported they were very interested in politics and 47 percent reported they were somewhat interested (Kestilä-Kekkonen, 2015: 53).
3. Review of the literature: deliberative democracy theory

In recent years deliberative democracy has been the dominant theory in analysing and understanding the political activity online. A great deal of both theoretical literature as well as empirical studies have been utilising the theory. Despite its recent popularity, the theory is relatively old: the founding ideas of it can be traced to ancient Greece. Notable political thinkers through the times have been developing the idea of democracy where decisions get their legitimacy from rational-critical discussion between the parties who are affected by the decisions. In the last century John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas have been working on the conception of deliberative democracy and presented ideas that have had an important influence to the scholars who started to promote the idea of deliberation as a medicine to the ills of Western democracy in the end of twentieth century.

In this chapter I will first present a short history of deliberative democracy. I will define the notion of deliberation as well as deliberative democracy. The theory of deliberative democracy has got different meanings and goals in different times. Deliberative democrats disagree about the scope, value and goal of deliberations. The most important disputes among the proponents of the theory will be elaborated. Despite its popularity deliberative democracy has also been criticised a lot. I will present some important points of criticism before moving on to the online deliberation, and its advocates and critics.
3.1 The short history of deliberative democracy

The idea of deliberative democracy is not new. Elster (1998: 1) says exactly that the idea is “as old as the idea of democracy itself”. Among many other scholars, he dates the foundation of deliberative democracy to ancient Greece. The farewell speech of B.C. Pericles reflects this well (Elster, 1998: 1). Pericles said:

“Our public men have, besides politics, their private affairs to attend to, and our ordinary citizens, though occupied with the pursuits of the industry, are still fair judges of public matters; for unlike any other nation, we regard the citizen who takes no part in these duties not as unambitious but as useless, and we are able to judge proposals even if we cannot originate them; instead of looking on discussion as a stumbling-block in the way of action, we think it an indispensable preliminary to any wise action at all.” (Thucydides II.40, cit. according to Elster 1998: 1)

In Pericles’ speech, public discussion about public matters is encouraged. All citizens are advised to take part in the discussion. The unwillingness to participate in the discussion is considered as laziness and even idiocy. To participate in the public discussion is not only a right but a duty. Public discussion is the cornerstone of democracy and the way of making good decisions, as Pericles puts it, discussion is “an indispensable preliminary to any wise action at all.”

These are the fundamental premises of deliberative democracy. The idea came back to life at the end of twentieth century. At the time the early deliberative democrats were worried about the state of the western democracy. Citizens’ disinterest in politics and the low voter turn-out questioned the democratic legitimacy. Political coverage on the media was said to be low quality with attention on candidates and conflicts between them instead of covering the issues. Public debate was seen artificial because of the intense tempo of the television reporting. Politicians were said to have estranged from the public (see e.g. Fishkin, 1991).

Dryzek (2000) writes that “the deliberative turn” at the end of the twentieth century has roots in the criticism towards the liberal democracy theory as well as in the critical theory. Deliberative models were born as a criticism towards the practices of liberal democracy: aggregating and “strategic
behaviour encouraged by voting and bargaining” were resisted (Bohman, 1998: 400). Macedo (1999: 3) writes that critics of liberal political thought from both right and left fronts argued that liberal political theory was overemphasising the individual rights and therefore overlooked the problem of moral disagreement in the modern societies. Deliberative democrats cherished the old democratic ideals of open and reciprocal discussion as well as active citizenship. Consensus was named as the goal of the discussion instead of fair bargaining or compromise. Bohman (1998: 401) writes that the reason for the attraction of deliberative democracy was “its promise to go beyond the limits of liberalism and to recapture the stronger democratic ideal that government should embody the ‘will of the people’ formed through the public reasoning of the citizens.”

The incarnation of deliberative democracy was a continuation to the theories of more participatory forms of democracy that emerged in the late 1900s. Theories such as Carole Pateman’s idea about broadening the sphere of democratic participation outside the traditional institutes of representative democracy, and Benjamin Barber’s strong democracy, were criticising the dominant liberal democracy theories which understood democracy as a series of conflicts between different interest groups. Benjamin Barber’s strong democracy was a prelude to the so called “deliberative turn” in the democratic theory. (Dryzek, 2000.)

The term deliberative democracy was first introduced by American political scientist Joseph Bessette (Bohman and Rehg, 1997: xxi). In his article Deliberative Democracy: The Majority Principle in Republican Government (1980) Bessette describes a representative form of deliberative democracy where citizens delegate their power to their representatives in the Congress. The representatives then make decisions in a deliberative manner: they have rational discussions and work together toward the common good. Bessette’s model was not a pure form of deliberative democracy: it rather put the deliberative practices into the representative democracy’s context. However, after him more scholars started to consider the deliberative practices as a cure to the malaise of the Western democracy. Ideas
of both participatory democracy and deliberative democracy were born as criticism to the forms of representative democracy (Bohman and Rehg, 1997: xii–xiii.)

Deliberative democracy theory seeks to respond the critique toward the problems of the representative democracy by stressing the importance of the active public debate. According to deliberative democrats, the public discussion gives political decision making its legitimacy. The central argument of deliberative democracy theory is that through deliberation it is possible to change the interests of individual groups and find a solution that works for the common good (Bohman and Rehg, 1997; Dryzek 2000). Rational-critical discussion and the exchange of reasons is seen as the best and most valuable way of communication. Elstub (2006: 310) explains the focus on the use of reason: “The justification behind prioritizing reason is that preferences should be justified when making collective decisions and although these other forms of communication fulfil important functions conducive to deliberation only reason can achieve this.”

Political scientists have defined the deliberation in different ways and have given different norms and goals to the deliberative practices. John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas are often named as the most influential scholars on the field. After them the second generation of deliberative democrats (e.g. Gutmann and Thompson, Dryzek, Bohman etc.) have been defining deliberation and formulating the deliberative practices. Next I will present the founding ideas of deliberative democracy and offer definitions of deliberative democracy by different authors. After that I link the discussion about the deliberative democracy to the emergence of the internet and social media and its deliberative potential.
3.2 The concepts: Deliberation and deliberative democracy

Broadly defined, deliberation is a process of changing thoughts, weighing options, using logic and reason and aiming at a result that satisfies all participants. In deliberation all participants should have equal access and opportunity to take part in the process. All participants should have chance to speak and to be heard. Logic and reason should be used when weighing the options. In the course of the deliberation the best argument will win. If there is enough time, the inevitable outcome of the process will be consensus.

The dictionary definition of deliberation will help to understand the idea. According to the Oxford Dictionary, deliberation means 1) long and careful consideration or discussion and 2) slow and careful movement or thought. The verb to deliberate means “engage in long and careful consideration” or to “consider (a question) carefully” 5. The word origins from Latin word deliberatus, 'considered carefully', past participle of deliberate, from de- 'down' + librare 'weigh' (from libra 'scales'). (Oxford English Dictionary.)

Scholars have defined deliberation in a multiple ways. According to Dahlgren (2005: 156) “the idea of deliberation points to the procedures of open discussion aimed at achieving rationally motivated consensus.” Bohman (1996: 27) writes that deliberation is “a dialogical process of exchanging reasons for the purpose of resolving problematic situations that cannot be settled without interpersonal coordination and cooperation.” Chambers (2003: 309) states that “deliberation is debate and discussion aimed at producing reasonable, well-informed opinions in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information, and claims made by fellow participants.” According to Gutmann and Thompson (2004: 7) deliberation is “a form of government in which free and equal citizens (and their representatives), justify decisions in a process which they give one other reasons that are mutually acceptable and generally accessible,

with the aim of reaching conclusions that are binding in the present on all citizens but open to challenge in the future.”

Deliberative democracy then is a form of democracy that underscores deliberation as a prerequisite of democracy. Jon Elster (1998: 8) has named the basic principles of deliberative democracy. According to him, deliberative democracy is a collective decision-making process. Everyone who is affected by the decisions are included in the decision-making process. This can be done directly by the participants or through their representatives. Elster calls this precondition “the democratic part”. Secondly, the decision-making process is done by exchanging arguments “offered by and to participants who are committed to the values of rationality and impartiality”. This is the “deliberative part” of deliberative democracy. (Elster, 1998: 8.)

Stephen Elstub (2006: 303) follows Elster’s (1998) approach and defines the word combination “deliberative democracy” as follows:

“The democratic part is collective decision making through the participation of all relevant actors. When interpreting the definition of democracy, a key problem is what kind of participation is envisaged for the people. For deliberative democrats the answer is in the deliberative strand and participation should be the give and take of rational arguments, with a reason being ‘a consideration that counts in favour of something: in particular, a belief, or action’.” (Elstub 2006: 303.)

Elstub (2006: 303) names four aspects that belong to the core of the deliberative democracy. Firstly, deliberative democracy means the making of collective decisions. Secondly, it involves the participation of the relevant actors. Thirdly, it works through the consideration and the exchange of reasons. And finally, deliberative democracy aims at transformation of preferences. (Elstub 2006: 303.)

Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson (2004), who see deliberative democracy as a way for solving moral conflicts, define the concept of deliberative democracy through four different characteristics. Firstly, deliberative democracy requires reason-giving. In deliberative democracy, societal agents
take part in political process by presenting and responding to reasons. The reasons should appeal to the principles that “individuals who are trying to find fair terms of cooperation cannot reasonably reject”. The reasons should not be “merely procedural” nor “purely substantive”. (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004: 3–4.)

Secondly, deliberative democracy requires the reasons given to be accessible to all citizens. The reasons must be public in two senses: the process of reasoning has to take place in public and the reasons used have to be understandable for the public. This does not mean that citizens would have to understand the content and the background of every single public matter – citizens can though listen to the experts but the reasons given by the experts should be comprehensible for the public. (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004: 4–5.)

Thirdly, deliberative democracy aims at making binding decisions through deliberation. Deliberation should always have an outcome – a decision, law or action. The fourth characteristic of deliberative democracy is that its process is dynamic. The dialogue should never end. Citizens should always have a chance to start deliberation about a certain issue again. Even though the decisions made through deliberation are made to last a certain period of time, they are always provisional, open for critique. (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004: 3–7.)

It has to be noted that despite different definitions deliberation is not any kind of communication but a process where preferences can be changed with the help of arguments instead of aggregating, voting or any type of coercion, manipulation or deception (Dryzek, 2000: 1). Despite the different views, deliberative democrats do agree about at least two things. Bohman and Rehg (1997: xiii) name one: “(…) the political process involves more than self-interested competition governed by bargaining and aggregative mechanisms.” In addition to this, there is a consensus that legitimate decisions are best made by deliberating. Deliberative democrats are unanimous about the presumption that preferences can be changed through deliberation. Finding consensus is not always possible nor desirable but narrowing the disagreement is possible at least.
3.3 The founding fathers: John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas

John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas are often named as the most important political theorists of twentieth century (see e.g. Dryzek, 2000: 2). They were both interested in the questions of justifiable political process and its elements. Interestingly, despite their different approaches, both Rawls and Habermas identified themselves as deliberative democrats (Rawls, 1993; Habermas 1996a, cit. according to Dryzek, 2000: 2). Their legacy for the theory of deliberative democracy has been prominent. The next generation of deliberative democrats have largely built on their work and further developed the notion of deliberative democracy as well as its practices.

American John Rawls (1921–2002) is one of the major thinkers in liberal political philosophy and best known for his theory of social justice where he motivates “the principles of justice” through the so called “original position” where the citizens are purely equal because of their unawareness about their societal positions (Rawls, 1971). In his later work Political Liberalism (1993) Rawls presents the idea of “the use public reason” as a way to ensure the legitimacy in the political and societal decision making. German political theorist Jürgen Habermas (1929) belongs to the most notable academics of our time. A proponent of the critical theory and member of the Frankfurt School, Habermas is best known for his work on communicative rationality and the public sphere. In this chapter, I will briefly present the core ideas in Rawls’ and Habermas’ thinking. I will pay special attention to their thoughts on the deliberative process and the use of reason.

Rawls’ most significant works are the books A Theory of Justice (1971), Political Liberalism (1993) and The Law of Peoples (1999)⁶. In Theory of Justice Rawls develops the theory about “justice as fairness”. Rawls’ attempt in the book is to demonstrate that freedom and equality don’t have to be conflicting values in the democratic society.

⁶ The Law of Peoples was first published as an article in 1993. Later Rawls expanded it and added another essay The Idea of Public Reason Revisited to it. In 1999 The Law of Peoples was published as a full-length book.
In *Political Liberalism* Rawls moves on from the basic principles of justice and asks how we can ensure their functioning in the modern society that is full of disagreements. As a solution Rawls proposes the use of public reason. The starting point for the development of Rawls’ political liberalism was the notion that much of Anglo-American political philosophy was at the time concerned with forms of utilitarianism. Rawls thought that despite the perspicacious criticism that the scholars presented, a convincing alternative conception was missing. As a solution Rawls presented the idea of justice as fairness in his book *A Theory of Justice*. Later he thought that the idea was too idealistic: it overlooked the inevitable moral disagreements within modern societies and took for granted that all citizens would agree on the principles of justice. (Rawls 1993: xvi–xviii.)

In the introduction of *Political Liberalism* Rawls (1993) admits the shortcomings related to moral and societal disagreements and formulates the central problem of political liberalism. Rawls lists the key questions that political liberalism has to be able to answer:

“How is it possible that there may exist over time a stable and just society of free and equal citizens profoundly divided by reasonable though incompatible religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines? […] How is it possible that deeply opposed though reasonable comprehensive doctrines may live together and all affirm the political conception of a constitutional regime? What is the structure and content of a political conception that can gain the support of such an overlapping consensus?” (Rawls 1993: xviii)

To overcome the existence of incompatible views in society Rawls introduces idea of the use of public reason. Rawls’ central claim is that in a pluralist society it is difficult if not impossible to come up with agreement. According to Rawls, no view or doctrine is superior to the other as long as they both are reasonable. By reasonableness Rawls means that presented views have to be in accordance with the basic principles of democracy and constitutional state. In society there are many competing and reasonable views. Total reconcilement of them would be challenging.
Therefore the aim should be to find a balanced and reasonable political solution to these points of contention. The method for it is the use of public reason. (Rawls, 1993.)

In Rawls’ thinking public reason is a key feature of democracy. It is “characteristic of a democratic people: it is the reason of its citizens, of those sharing the status of equal citizenship” (Rawls, 1993: 213). In an essay from 1997 Rawls explains that the idea of public reason consists of five aspects: (1) the fundamental political questions to which it applies; (2) the persons to whom it applies; (3) its content as given by a family of reasonable political conceptions of justice; (4) the application of these conceptions in discussions of coercive norms to be enacted in the form of legitimate law for a democratic people; (5) citizens’ checking that the principles derived from their conception of justice satisfy the criterion of reciprocity. (Rawls, 1997: 442.)

Rawlsian public reason is public in three meanings. Firstly, it refers to the reason of free and equal citizens, therefore it is the reason of the public. Secondly, it concerns matters that are linked to the common goods, that is the fundamental questions of political justice such as constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice. Finally, its nature and content are public, which means it should be expressed via public reasoning and by respecting the criterion of reciprocity. (Rawls, 1997: 442.)

Interestingly, despite its name the use of public reason doesn’t penetrate the whole society and its agents. Nor does it suit for deliberating all kinds of matters. Rawls limits the use of public reason to the official political institutions of the society. That is the “public political forum” where the judges of the supreme court, government officials (especially chief executives and legislators) as well as candidates for public office act (Rawls, 1997: 443). Consequently public reason only concerns questions that are in the core of the constitutional state – which means questions linked to constitution, civil rights and fundamental questions about justice. Rawls argues that it is politicians’ and other formal powerholders duty in the democracy to motivate their decisions by using public reason – presenting political arguments that all citizens can accept. Therefore the arguments can’t
originate from moral or philosophical doctrines – although they can support the actual political arguments. (Rawls, 1993: 212–247.)

Although Rawls rules out unofficial political forums from the scope of deliberation, he advises the wider usage of it. This links to the distinction between the domain of the political and the domain of the social. Rawls (1993: 14) calls the sphere that contains all kinds of comprehensive doctrines the “background culture of the civil society”. Background culture belongs to the realm of social, not the political, and therefore the demand of the use of public reason doesn’t apply to it (Rawls, 1993: 14). Nor does the use of public reason apply to the media (Rawls, 1997: 444). Still understanding the idea of public reason is part of ideal citizenship. Rawls states that citizens should be able to “explain the basis of their actions to one another in terms each could reasonably expect that others might endorse as consistent with their freedom and equality” (Rawls, 1993: 218).

Rawls notes (1997: 444) that the idea of public reason should be distinguished from the ideal of the public reason. The ideal is realised when government officials explain their acts to the citizens by using arguments guided by the public reason, that is, arguments they see as most reasonable, and that citizens can understand and accept. This manner is what Rawls calls the duty of civility (Rawls, 1997: 444). The use of public reason, hence deliberation, belongs to the formal political arenas but citizens should respect the ideal of public reasons and “think of themselves as if they were legislators” and deliberate what they see as most reasonable to enact (Rawls, 1997: 444). When citizens vote to choose the formal powerholders, they take part to the process of public reasoning. By doing so they fulfill their duty of civility and respect the idea of public reason (Rawls, 1997: 444–445.)

Rawlsian form of deliberation – the use of public reason – is actually close to deliberation’s dictionary definition, “long and careful consideration” and “slow and careful thought”. Many scholars have pointed out (see e.g. Dryzek, 2000: 15) that Rawlsian deliberation does not acknowledge the communicative aspect but focuses on the content and the style of argumentation.
For Rawls the arguments need to be reasonable: aiming at common good and motivated so that all citizens can accept them. Because of this nature of argumentation Rawls believes that interaction is not necessarily needed: if everyone uses the public reason in the way it should be used, they will end up with the same conclusions. Dryzek (2002: 15) calls this “deliberation of a sort – but only in terms of the weighing of arguments in the mind, not testing them in real political interaction.”

Habermas’ relation to deliberation is slightly different. Habermas is known as one of the major thinkers of the critical theory. Habermas has presented key notions and conceptions for the deliberative democracy theory and influenced scholars within many disciplines. His ideas of “public sphere” and “communicative rationality” will be elaborated here.

*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) was Habermas’ first major work. In the book he discussed the emergence of the public sphere in eighteenth century Europe. According to Habermas, public sphere is “made of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society within the state” (Habermas, 1989 [1962]: 176). The emergence of the public sphere was part of bigger societal trajectory that spawned the civil society, the bourgeois society. At this particular historical time and context, the emergence of the public sphere was possible because of the growing world trade. The situation forced the state that acted on the realm of the political to diverge from the new apolitical realm that was dominated by the market mechanisms as well as the civil society. (Habermas, 1989 [1962]: 14–20.)

Public sphere was very different from the sphere of the feudalist state. Public sphere didn’t exist in the same sense: it was representative publicity that was carried out by monarchs and the nobility. The words that nowadays refer to public, used to refer to things that were linked to higher authority. As Habermas (1989 [1962]: 7) explains it: “…publicness […] of representation was not constituted

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7 The book was originally published in German under the title *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (1962). The book was translated into English in 1989 by Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence. I have used the English translation.
as a social realm, that is, a public sphere; rather, it was something like a status attribute…”.
(Habermas, 1989 [1962]: 5–12.)

Public sphere did exist earlier – in ancient Greece. The public sphere was polis where free men gathered to talk about politics. Polis was different to oikos, the private sphere of the individual. The public life, bios politikos, took place on the market place, agora. Agora was the place where free citizens gathered to do business and sports, discuss politics and meet fellow citizens. With the fall of the city-states of ancient Greece the public sphere disappeared. The Middle Ages didn’t realise the existence of the public sphere. (Habermas, 1989 [1962]: 3–5.)

The expansion of world trade led to the development of the early newspapers. First these papers were only read by traders and the members of the royal courts but whilst literacy spread the newspapers got a wider audience and started to publish guidelines, reviews and other writings alongside trade news. A communicative place for the civil society arose. Naturally this made the rulers worried. Habermas writes that the bourgeois public sphere emerged when the new bourgeois strata challenged the monarchist rule about the rules of the trade. This was the genesis of the political debate. (Habermas, 1989 [1962]: 14–27; Roberts and Crossley, 2004.)

Habermas divides the public sphere into different categories. In addition to the abovementioned political sphere there was the literary public sphere where the cultural products were reviewed. This was also the domain where civilised townsfolk gathered to have well-reasoned debates about politics. In this sphere reasoning was practiced. According to Habermas a civilized private man turned into a citizen in the public sphere where he participated in the deliberative discussion about public matters. Public sphere was different to private sphere, the domain of the home and private matters. In the middle of private realm and sphere of the public authority was also the “town” – the “life center” of civil society – both a place for trade and cultural-political debate. (Habermas, 1989 [1962]: 27–31.)
The ideal public sphere was accessible and based on the rational-critical arguing. Habermas (1989 [1962]) argues that the rational-critical debate in the public sphere formed public opinion. Public opinion was the result of discursive will-formation of the people and the rulers of the state were to respect it. The habermasian public sphere had its prime in the eighteenth century.

By the nineteenth century public sphere was not what it used to be. Roberts and Crossley (2004: 4–6) list four reasons that Habermas saw as causes for the erosion of the ideal public sphere. Firstly, the diverge between the state and society, that was an important prerequisite for the formation of the public sphere, has blurred. The welfare state intervenes in peoples’ lives in various ways and concurrently interest groups, instead of private citizens, have taken over the public sphere. Secondly, much of the political debate that was once done by the private individuals in public places like coffee-salons is now done by the professional politicians behind doors that are closed from the public. Thirdly, public opinion has lost its original meaning: instead of meaning the opinion of the private individuals formatted through rational-critical discourse, public opinion refers to the results of polling surveys. Finally, Habermas argues, the emergence of commercial mass media has led to “dumbing down” of the public sphere. In the hands of big businesses mass media cannot form a public sphere that would foster self-education, cultivation and rational-critical debate. Instead it seeks to benefit the advertisers and media-owners who prioritise a big audience instead of civilized debate about politics. (Roberts and Crossley, 2004: 4–6.)

A lot of Habermas’ later work has been adding to Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (Roberts and Crossley, 2004). Later work like Theory of Communicative Action (1981) has reasserted the normative claims Habermas presented in his theory about the public sphere. In this book Habermas presents the idea of communicative rationality and delineates the criteria for an ideal speech situation. According to Habermas, an ideal speech situation is open for everyone. In ideal speech situation the discussion is free from manipulation or forms of coercion. The discussion aims at enhancing the understanding between the participants. Last but not least, the participants of
the discussion have committed to the principle of the communicative rationality which means that the only thing that weighs in the discussion is the well-reasoned argument. (Huttunen, 2014.)

Habermas stresses consensus in his theory of communicative action. Idealistically when the participants are given long enough time to debate, they will finally find a consensus, both on matters of morality and truth (Huttunen, 2014). It has to be noted that Habermas’ understanding of consensus is very strictly defined. Habermas separates consensus from mere agreement: according to him consensus means that individuals support the decision for exactly same reasons (Dryzek, 2000: 48). Huttunen (2014) makes a reference to the often made misinterpretation that Habermas always demands consensus: Habermas wrote that consensus can be found when the matter is discursive, which disregards for example questions that are linked to world views.

In this regard Habermas’ understanding of deliberative democracy differs significantly from Rawls’: Rawls thinks that if the discussants use public reason, interaction won’t be needed, because inevitably they will end up with the same result. Habermas thinks the opposite. Roberts and Crossley (2004: 7) make the notion by saying: “Claims as to what ‘any reasonable person’ would accept as right can only be justified, Habermas argues, by putting them to the test.”

The abovementioned difference between the Rawlsian and Habermasian deliberation is essential. For Rawls deliberation is a thought-process made by individuals independently, whereas for Habermas deliberation is something that happens in the human interaction. Rawls posits deliberation in the formal political institutions, whereas for Habermas deliberation is something that happens in the public sphere.

For Habermas the fact that deliberation takes place in the public sphere is very important. In the habermasian version of deliberative democracy public opinion is created in the public sphere. Public opinion converts into communicative power via elections. Communicative power, that is the
result of the elections, entitles the administrative power which is practised via law-making. (Dryzek, 2000: 51.)

Both Habermas and Rawls set certain limits for deliberation. Both of the scholars only accept the use of reason and strictly rule out other forms of communication. Habermas rules out certain deception, self-deception, manipulation, strategizing and coercion, even rhetoric because that is linked to emotions, not reason, which means it can’t be part of the rational discourse (Dryzek, 2000: 52–54). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Rawls thinks that arguments should not originate from moral or philosophical doctrines – although they can support the actual political arguments (Rawls, 1993: 212–247). Disregarding of other forms of communication, especially rhetoric, has received a lot of criticism from the second generation of deliberative democrats (e.g. Gutmann and Thompson, 1996: 135–136; Rehg, 1997; Young, 1996, 1998, cit. according to Dryzek, 2000: 53). The main criticisms will be discussed in the next chapter.

Despite the differences in Rawls’ and Habermas’ thinking, they also have a lot in common. As Elster (1998: 5) puts it: “Yet the arguments advanced by Habermas and Rawls do seem to have a common core: political choice, to be legitimate, must be the outcome of deliberation about ends among free, equal, and rational agents.” Both accounts of deliberative democracy are normative and possibly a bit elitist. Where Rawls sees deliberation as a singular activity, Habermas claims that deliberation takes place in human interaction. Where Rawls locates deliberation to the established political institutions of the state, Habermas sees the public sphere as the domain for deliberation.
3.4 Theoretical tensions among the deliberative democrats: value, goal and scope

Scholars in the field of deliberative democracy have given deliberation different definitions and goals. As became clear already from the differences between Rawls’ and Habermas’ thinking, there is a disagreement about the inclusiveness of the deliberation process (who is allowed to the deliberation process) and the general features of the deliberation (what kind of communication counts as deliberation).

Gutmann and Thompson (2004: 21–39) have made an extensive listing about the most important disputes among the deliberative democrats. This list is helpful in understanding the diverse scope of the deliberative democracy theory. Among them are the value of deliberation (instrumental or expressive), the goal of deliberation and the scope of deliberation.

Deliberative democrats disagree about the value of deliberation. Some see that deliberation has a rather instrumental value. This means that deliberation as a process is the best way to produce good decisions. The others, who think that deliberation has an expressive value, argue that deliberation has value as such. They value the process where everyone gets to participate and have a say. This gives the right message to the public and demonstrates values such as respect and reciprocity. (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004: 21–22.)

There is also disagreement about the goal of deliberation. Some see that the goal of deliberation should be about finding a consensus, whereas others think that this is neither possible nor desirable. The ones who support the argument of finding consensus, do admit that finding a consensus is a goal that will be never reached but is notwithstanding a worthwhile aim. Pluralists don’t see disagreements as an issue. Rather, they are a certainty in the modern complex societies and often linked to the “moral and empirical understandings”. The aim of deliberation, pluralists say, should not be the elimination of disagreements but finding ways to get by with them. (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004: 26–29.)
In addition to these, deliberative democrats disagree about the scope of deliberation: whether deliberation should happen only within the official political institutions or in the civil society as well. Some scholars advocate the view that would keep deliberation only in the official decision making arenas, whereas others such as Joshua Cohen (1997) and Jane Mansbridge (1999) argue that deliberation should not be limited to official arenas but should take place in different political and civic forums, such as workplaces and labour unions. (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004: 29–39.)

3.5 Criticism toward deliberative democracy
From the very beginning, deliberative democracy had its advocates and its opponents. In the ancient Greece, the birthplace of democracy, some argued that discussion improves decision making, whereas others saw it as a stumbling block for good decision making. Moreover, it has also been said that deliberation has no impact for neither good nor the bad. (Elster, 1998: 2.)

Critical reviewing of the deliberative democracy – both its theoretical presumptions as well as its practical assumptions – have continued until the present day. Deliberative democracy certainly has its flaws – even the deliberative democrats disagree about the foundations of the theory, as we have learned in the previous chapters. In Elstub’s (2006: 315) words: “Deliberative democracy is unfinished business and, like democracy, business that will never be finished.”

In this chapter I will present the some of the most important criticisms toward the theory of deliberative democracy. It has to be noted though that deliberative democracy is not a coherent account and therefore the criticism presented here is certainly not comprehensive. However, I will present some critical notions that I find relevant for this study. I have structured the criticism in three viewpoints. Firstly, deliberative democracy has been criticised for having fundamentally wrong theoretical premises. For example the advocates of liberal political thought see politics as a struggle between opposing views, thus there is no room for deliberation. For these critics deliberating is not the best or even possible way to overcome disagreement. A similar account is
also presented by Chantal Mouffe (2005) whose theory of agonistic democracy not only accepts the perpetual presence of conflict but celebrates it as a vital feature of democracy.

Secondly, deliberative democracy has been criticised for being too utopian and disregarding lessons of social psychology, that is, the uneasiness people might feel when confronted with debates, let alone political debates. There is a great deal of research concerning the difficulty to speak up and the impact our environment has on our willingness to express our thoughts. One example of this is Noelle-Neumann’s (1982) theory of spiral of silence that explains the awkwardness that people feel when expressing their opinions (especially if they think they are in the minority with their opinions). This perspective is important because it provides understanding of the possibility of deliberative democracy to function in the context of real life.

Thirdly, deliberative democracy has been criticised for putting too much value on the use of logic and reason and thus disregarding other forms of communication. This is problematic for at least two reasons. Firstly, overemphasizing the reason brushes aside a lot of communication forms that might well be relevant for political communication. Secondly, entangling in the use of reason might hinder some social groups and individuals to participate in deliberation process, which obviously is in contradiction with another premise of deliberation, that is, accessibility. Overplaying the rational-critical discourse, critics say, is particularly problematic when the theory is to be applied in practice. I will next present criticism from the abovementioned perspectives. In the end of this chapter I shall argue why deliberative democracy, is despite the criticism, a relevant theoretical frame for understanding the research subject of this study.

As mentioned earlier, some scholars think deliberative democracy is simply a too idealistic and normative model that has a wrong axiom about the nature of politics and no real offering for solving the problems that democracy is facing in the present day. One of these views is the agonistic democracy that assumes that conflict is a vital feature of politics; politics lives from conflict and without conflict there would hardly be any politics. Removal of conflict can hardly ever be the aim
of any democratic society because democratic society should treasure and celebrate pluralism. The absence of conflict can easily mean totalitarianism.

Chantal Mouffe (2005) presents agonistic view. Mouffe is a well-known critic of deliberative democracy, especially in rawlsian and habermasian forms. According to Mouffe, the current paradox of democracy is the impossible endeavour to reconcile equality and liberty. Reconciliation of these grounding principles of the liberal democracy is not possible since preferring one will always happen on the other’s expense. Mouffe sees Rawls’ and Habermas’ attempts to reconcile these opposing values as unsuccessful, given that equality and liberty are simply incompatible. Seeking consensus is not a worthwhile goal. Instead Mouffe suggests we should accept – and even cherish the fact that conflict will always be part of political life and democracy. As a solution to this problem Mouffe proposes her account of “agonistic pluralism” (Mouffe, 2005: 1–8.)

Mouffe’s point of departure is acknowledging and respecting the pluralism of modern societies. Pluralism results inevitably in the existence of opposing views. The struggle between the opposing views should be seen as a source of democracy – not an obstacle that should be overcome by deliberating. (Mouffe, 2005: 80–105.)

Deliberative democracy has also been criticized for its idealism. As good as deliberative democracy as a model is in theory and as noble its goals are, in the real life it is often the case that people simply don’t want to deliberate. Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann’s (1982) theory of spiral of silence explains the uneasiness many people might feel when encountering conversations with controversial topics. To be explained in a nutshell, the spiral of silence is a process that encourages the majority opinion holders to speak up and the minority opinion holders to remain silent. This process starts from the notion that humans are social beings and naturally keen to be part of a group. Given this characteristic, humans are trained from childhood on to observe the opinion climate around them and look for cues of socially accepted behavior. This leads easily to a situation where opinions that are accepted widely in social circles are presented gladly. If an individual notices that


s/he is holding an opinion that is not shared with one’s reference group, s/he remains silent. When these situations continue, the majority opinions take over and minority opinions die because no one is willing say them out loud. (Noelle-Neumann 1982.) The much disputed theory has relevance in the internet era. Gearhart and Weiwu (2015) found evidence for the working of the spiral of silence theory in social media context. In their article they conclude that “encountering agreeable political content predicts speaking out, while encountering disagreeable postings stifles opinion expression” (Gearhart & Weiwu, 2015: 208).

There are a number of perfectly sound reasons for reluctance to deliberate. These reasons are linked to political apathy and social fear among other things. Dahlgren (2009: 88–89) points out that true deliberation is very different to normal conversation. Deliberation – especially political deliberation – acknowledges the presence of conflict and demands discussants to give well-reasoned arguments to support their claims. This is neither easy nor tempting. By taking part to a debate about controversial topic people take a risk to become criticised. “Political discussion can be uncomfortable, and it is perfectly reasonable that people will often shy away from it.” (Dahlgren, 2009: 89)

Diana Mutz (2006) has studied the willingness to participate in political deliberation and the consequences of political deliberation. In her study she found out that people who have a network that shares similar political and societal views with them are more likely to be politically active. Accordingly, people who have a network with differing political viewpoints were less likely to be politically active. This observation means, according to Mutz, that deliberation is actually not likely to further participation, quite the opposite: talking politics with people who hold similar views encourages people to engage in politics. As she sums up her results:

“Social environments that include close contact among people of differing perspectives may promote a give and take of political ideas, but they are unlikely to foster political fervor. Thus the prospects for truly deliberative encounters may be improving while the prospects for participation and political activism are declining.” (Mutz, 2006: 3.)
This result obviously raises the question of favorableness of deliberative democracy. According to Mutz’ study deliberation does good for broadening horizons and advancing tolerance but the impact on democracy might be minimal since the talk does not seem to lead to action.

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, deliberative democracy has also received a lot of criticism for committing too tightly to the ideal of rational argument. Some scholars have been calling for more diverse repertoire of communication forms to ensure the true possibilities of participation for all social groups. Among these critics are Jane Mansbridge, Lynn Sanders and Iris Marion Young whose thoughts will be presented next.

Jane Mansbridge (1999) highlights the significance of “everyday talk” in the deliberative system. Mansbridge argues that everyday discussions and actions have a lot of political relevance. According to her (1999: 214) political is “‘that which the public ought to discuss’ when that discussion part of some, perhaps highly informal, version of a collective ‘decision.’” Mansbridge (1999: 212) suggests broadening the scope of deliberation from not only the formal political institutions but from grass root organizations, hospital committees, and sports and professional associations (about broadening the scope of deliberation, see Gutmann and Thompson, 1996: 113, 359) to everyday talk, media, interest groups and other venues of discussion. Mansbridge’s central claim is that everyday talk is a vital part of well-functioning deliberative system and should not be limited from the scope of observation because “[t]he full process of citizen deliberation, the different parts of the deliberative system mutually influence one another in ways that are not easy to parse out.” (Mansbridge, 1999: 213)

Lynn Sanders (1997) excoriates the deliberative democracy theory as anti-democratic in her article Against Deliberation. Sanders thinks that some of the prerequisites of deliberative democracy – namely the rational-critical argumentation – result in an undemocratic outcome. According to
Sanders the “materialised prerequisites” of deliberation, such as ability to reciprocal exchange of reasons, are unequally distributed. Some people are simply better than the others in arguing their views. These people are often the already more disadvantaged. That would mean that the people whose ability to deliberate is weak will not be able to participate in the decision making, or if they are able their views might not be regarded as valuable. Sanders (1997: 351–352) states that “Even on this truest, best version, deliberation still provides no solution for, and possibly exacerbates, the hardest problem for democrats, and therefore misses by its own standards.” She suggests alternative forms for deliberation, forms of communication that would not necessary demand rational-critical and moderate discussion. One of these communication forms is testimony, sharing one’s personal story to a wider audience. The benefit of giving a testimony is that it “might be a model that allows for the expression of different perspectives rather than seeking what's common.” (Sanders, 1997: 371) This is important especially when the discussants come from such different worlds that finding a common ground is difficult.

Similarly Iris Marion Young (1996) criticises the deliberative democracy for overemphasising critical reasoning. According to Young, the requirement of critical reasoning narrows out or silences certain societal groups, which can’t be seen as desirable from democratic perspective. Moreover, she questions the basis of deliberative democracy by stating that it is wrong to assume that a discussion that aims at deepening the understanding between opposing parties needs to start with either shared understandings, or to work toward a common goal. (Young, 1996: 120.)

For Young the main issue in deliberative democracy is disregarding the power relations that are present in every communication situation. She refers to studies that show that the disadvantaged groups, often women and racial minorities, talk less in deliberative forums and often instead of arguing they listen, provide information and ask questions. Deliberation is “dispassionate and disembodied” and “privileges male speaking styles over female”. (Young, 1996: 123–125.)
Young (1996: 120) argues that differences between the discussants – let them be differences in sex, gender, culture, social status – shouldn’t be seen as obstacles to overcome but as vital sources of democratic discussion. In this respect Young’s account resembles Mouffe’s criticism. Young calls for “communicative democracy”, a broadened form of deliberative democracy, that respects cultural differences and values alongside rational argument other forms of communication. Young (1996) proposes that greeting, rhetoric and storytelling will be added to the repertoire of democratic communication.

3.6 Deliberative democracy online
The internet and its potential for democracy has been a popular and much disputed topic in the academic discussion since the first web browsers became available for masses. Scholars in the field of political communication have greeted the emergence of the internet with excitement. Peter Dahlgren writes (2009: 10):

“The ever-developing, inexpensive, and easy-to-use tools, together with the network character of the social relations it engenders, open up a new chapter in the history of democracy. The net represents the emergence of a nonmarket, peer-produced alternative to corporate mass media, yet it remains unclear as to extent its potential can be developed. There are a number of issues and reservations we need to keep in mind, but at present, net remains an exciting democratic utility.” (Dahlgren, 2009: 10.)

In recent years deliberative democracy has been the dominant theory in analysing and understanding the political discussion online (see e.g. Hindman, 2008: 7; Dahlgren, 2009). Many scholars have named quite a simple reason for this: at the same time as the worry about the malaise of western democracy\(^8\) – with lowering voter-turn out, the alienation of the political elite from the electorate and citizens’ lack of trust towards the representative system – intensified, the internet

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started to become available for the masses. Deliberative democracy⁹ was seen as the (see e.g. Dryzek, 1990) solution for the ills of representative democracy in the late modern times. Deliberative democrats cherished the age-old ideals of public debate as the cornerstone of democracy and justification for decision-making. With the help of old ideals, the current decline of democracy could be healed.

It didn’t take too long for the researchers to link these two phenomena. The internet was a new, exciting technology that provided a global public space with diverse possibilities for commerce, communication and community-building. The character of the internet that is open, accessible and easy to use was cut out for the wishes of the deliberative democrats. It was easy to imagine the internet becoming a home for civic communities, political movements, new forms of citizen participation, public debate and political deliberation. The habermasian idea of public sphere and an ideal communication situation seemed possible using the internet.

The reason for the popularity of deliberative democracy theory in understanding political activity online and especially social media makes sense also conceptually. Deliberative democracy theory that underscores deliberating and rational-critical discourse as the best method for making decisions, obviously needs a place for deliberation to happen. For John Rawls, who saw deliberating as a singular activity, the place was the formal political arenas, whereas Jürgen Habermas thought deliberation was a process that happened between people and in the public sphere. Public sphere was the place for political discussion. The same notion is repeated by Colleoni et al. (2014: 318): “A public sphere should allow public dialogue and reasoning through the advancement of claims and information that lead to deliberation.” According to Habermas, the bourgeois public sphere where individuals gathered in coffee salons to deliberate about politics was

⁹ Dryzek (1990) uses the term “discursive democracy”. In his later work (e.g. Deliberative Democracy and Beyond. Liberals, Critics, Contestation, published in 2000) he started to use the term “deliberative democracy” often interchangeably with the first-mentioned.
taken over by the mass media which concentrates on performances instead of rational debate about politics (Herkman, 2011: 33). From the perspective of deliberative democrats, excitement over internet and social media seems understandable, when one considers the characteristics of the internet: in comparison to traditional mass media it is a place where individuals can meet. Social media can be interpreted as a political public sphere where individuals have a possibility to discuss – in habermasian terms – public matters that stem from their private sphere.

Freelon (2010) structures the relatively short history of online deliberation research in two phases. In the first phase, scholars adopted a very straight-forward way of utilising the deliberative ideals given for online public spheres. They would name criteria for deliberation and look at different online discussion boards and platforms using the deliberative ideals as a yardstick. Freelon uses Schneider’s (1997) study of a Usenet discussion group as a textbook example of this approach. In the study Schneider named four variables (argument quality, equality, reciprocity and diversity) and evaluated the discussion based on this criteria. The flaw of this approach was naturally disregarding all other types of communication that didn’t fit in the framework of deliberation. (Freelon, 2010: 1174–1175.)

In the second phase scholars started to analyse and name different kinds of public spheres (see e.g. Papacharissi, 2004; Strandberg, 2008; Dahlgren, 2005). Freelon gives credit for this approach shift to Nancy Fraser (1990), one of the most well-known critics of Habermas, and her writings about the notion that there is no unitary public sphere but numerous ‘counterpublic spheres’. Researchers have identified different public spheres based on their communicative character, content and the site-provider. The aim of this approach was to identify and recognise different forms of political activity online and to provide an analytical tool for interpreting them. According to Freelon, many of these classifications have not succeeded in deepening the understanding of online participation. (Freelon, 2010: 1175–1176.)
A lot of criticism towards using deliberative democracy theory in understanding online political activity is similar to the general criticism towards the theory. Deliberation is seen as a too narrow, idealistic and normative tool for exploring the vast array of different communication happening online. Especially in the online context, the strict definition of deliberation is problematic. Sticking to a very strict theoretical frame can lead to disregarding a great deal of communication that may still be significant for politics. Dahlgren (2009: 89) makes this notion by saying that a “strong” view of deliberation excludes “an awful lot of discussion that can have political relevance”.

It has also been argued that even though the internet can be interpreted as a public sphere and serve as an arena for political deliberation, the other uses of the internet (like commerce, entertainment and search for information) are way more common. For example the notable deliberative democrats Gutmann and Thompson (2004: 36) are skeptical about the deliberative potential of the internet:

“In the most common forms of surfing and posting on the internet, citizens have both less need and less incentive to seek out sites and groups that embrace a broad range of interests and bring together a wide range of perspectives, as genuine deliberation requires. Furthermore, most of the activity on the internet is not political but rather related to entertainment, shopping, travel, sex, and personal relationships.” (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004: 36)

The empirical research on deliberative democracy online has shown both positive and negative evidence of online deliberation. Yet most of the research in recent years has come to the conclusion that the deliberative ideals are not working in the online context. Witschge (2004: 109–122) found out in her study that the internet does not meet the criteria of political deliberation and ideal public sphere. In the article she discusses the empirical results of the deliberative potential of the internet from three different perspectives that have said to lower the barrier to participate in online deliberation. According to her, internet does not seem to increase heterogeneity of discussions. Nor does it advance the deliberative ideals of active participation by offering a chance to express opinions anonymously or with reduced social cues. This does not mean though that the internet
could not enhance democracy. Witschge calls for more empirical research to understand the
democratic potential of the Internet. (Witschge, 2004: 109–122.)

Delli Carpini et al. (2004: 315–334) found more positive results of public deliberation online in
their literature review. They conclude that the internet has the potential to enhance democratic
participation and public deliberation. Yet they highlight that the conclusions are tentative and that
the effects of online deliberation depend on the research methodology and most of all the context of
deliberation:

“[m]ost important, the impact of deliberation and other forms of discursive politics is
highly context dependent. It varies with the purpose of the deliberation, the subject
under discussion, who participates, the connection to authoritative decision makers,
the rules governing interactions, the information provided, prior beliefs, substantive
outcomes, and real-world conditions. As a result, although the research summarized in
this essay demonstrates numerous positive benefits of deliberation, it also suggests
that deliberation, under less optimal circumstances, can be ineffective at best and
counterproductive at worst.” (Delli Carpini et al., 2004: 336.)

Encouraging evidence about online deliberation have also been found in Tsaliki’s (2002) study of
discussion forums in Greece, Netherlands and in the UK. She found “a high level of interactive
communication, high degree of search for information, diversity of opinions and publics and a
moderate degree of substantiated argumentation indicating an enlargement of public space in
principle.” Semaan et al. (2014: 1409) found in their study that “social media supported the
interactional dimensions of deliberative democracy—the interaction with media and the interaction
between people.” They also found that “people were purposefully seeking diverse information and
discussants” and even that “some individuals altered their views as a result of the interactions
they were having in the online public sphere.” (Semaan et al., 2014: 1409)

It has to be added though that expectations toward the democratic potential of the internet have
often been too high. Wright (2011) criticises the unrealistic expectations that scholars have given
for online deliberation. According to Wright, this is mainly due to the dominant
revolution/normalization framework which has oversimplified the academic discussion about the political impact of the internet to the question *does internet revolutionize the politics or does it work as any other medium where the structural hierarchies determine the discussion*. He thinks that this dichotomy has led to interpreting even positive and encouraging empirical research findings as insignificant.

When one considers the idealistic and normative nature of the deliberative democracy theory, it is not surprising that through deliberative democrats’ lenses empirical findings about the political discussion online can seem disappointing. Therefore many scholars have argued for widening the definition of deliberation or giving space for alternative communication forms. This is an important notion. Political discussion online can’t always be considered as a practice of deliberative democracy. Yet it would be a mistake to ignore this talk in social media because it may well have implications for public opinion and even political activity.

Despite the criticism there has not been a lot of alternative theoretical frames for exploring the democratic potential of the internet. Even many of the scholars who see deliberative democracy or the ideal public sphere as overly narrow frames for understanding the political activity on the internet have used them as a starting point for their own research. Alternative perspectives have been presented though. Below some of them are listed.

Dahlgren (2005, 2009) suggests “civic cultures” as an additional way to understand political activity online. Civic cultures is “a framework intended to help analyze the conditions that are necessary for – that promote or hinder – civic engagement” (Dahlgren, 2009: 103). The framework’s starting point is the understanding of citizens as “social agents” who can enact citizenship in different ways. Civic cultures helps to identify the cultural factors that have an impact on civic agency or its absence. Civic cultures “is anchored in the mind-sets and symbolic milieu of everyday life” (Dahlgren, 2005: 158) and include following parameters: values, affinity, knowledge, identities and practices. The most important from the practices is civic interaction that has taken many new forms
in online public spheres. Dahlgren argues that civic cultures help to understand *why people participate* in online deliberation. (Dahlgren, 2005: 147–162; Dahlgren, 2009.)

Parkkulainen (2014) considered the offering of the deliberative democracy theory in understanding the political discussion online. She concluded that deliberative democracy theory offers a too narrow frame for understanding the democratic potential of the political discussion online. She suggests broadening the traditional, institutionalised definition of deliberation and including other norms for communication such as communitarianism and individualism. By acknowledging the communicative possibilities for community-building and free expression of opinion the whole democratic potential of the online discussions can be examined. (Parkkulainen, 2014.)

Despite its shortcomings, deliberative democracy offers a reasonable theoretical framework for analysing and understanding political discussion online. Using Dahlberg’s (2005: 156) formulation: deliberative democracy “provides a useful compass for envisioning what enhanced online public spheres could be.” Scholars have been working on the key assumptions of the deliberative democracy and broadened the scope of deliberation. The empirical evidence from research on political online forums has shown both positive and negative results of online deliberation. This means that at least in some contexts deliberation can happen (see e.g. Tsaliki, 2002) and for some people the internet can even be a better place to deliberate than a face-to-face situation (see e.g. Stromer-Galley, 2002). For these reasons, using it as a theoretical frame is justifiable.

Yet the above mentioned criticisms towards deliberative democracy as a theoretical framework have relevance for this study. In this study I support a broad definition of deliberation which acknowledges alongside pure logic and reason also other forms of communication forms presented above, such as storytelling, rhetoric and testimony and accepts the fact that finding a consensus is not always possible, yet a valuable goal. The study attempts to look at the reasons behind decisions to deliberate or to remain silent (cf. Dahlberg, 2005, 2009).
4. Method: Qualitative attitude approach

As outlined in the introduction, the aim of this study is to analyse Finnish university students’ attitudes toward political discussion in social media. The study wants to answer the question how is the political discussion online seen and what does it mean to the people. Furthermore the study attempts to understand the thoughts behind deciding whether or not to take part to the political discussion online. It also tries to define the motives that affect the decisions of participating the discussion or remaining silent.

The method of this study is qualitative attitude approach (see e.g. Vesala and Rantanen, 2007, also known as rhetoric attitude analysis, see Billig, 1996). Data gathering as well as the analysis is guided by this method.

Qualitative attitude approach is a qualitative method that utilises attitude statements in a semi-structured interview. It has its own theoretical understanding of attitudes’ rhetorical nature and a set method for analysing the interview data. The method was chosen for this study because using provocative or thought-provoking statements was seen as the best way to make interviewees talk about their attitudes toward the topic. Using provocative statements in the interview can be a good way to chart attitudes.

The method has been used in various studies that have tried to understand attitudes and stands of certain social groups toward different things. In Finland Silfverberg et al. (2011) used provocative statements to explore the phenomenon of having a public profile in a SNS. Matikainen (2002) researched attitudes toward the internet and virtual learning environment in small and medium-sized enterprises with the help of qualitative attitude approach. Other topics have been for example academic students’ attitudes toward entrepreneurship (Tonttila, 2007) and reconciliation of entrepreneurship and holding a religious belief (Heinonen, 2007).
4.1 The concept of attitude

Attitude is one of the most central concepts in social psychology. In this chapter I will explain briefly about the manifold ways attitude has been defined and then present the definition of attitude within qualitative attitude approach (cf. Vesala and Rantanen, 2007).

The notion of attitude has been a troublesome one in the history of social psychology. Attitude has been defined in a myriad of ways. Some psychologists argue that attitudes are habits of thinking whilst others think attitudes reflect our emotions. Attitudes have also been seen as neurological states of readiness. (Billig, 1987: 177.)

Attitude is also a term that is being used in everyday life a lot. People possess attitudes to various topics ranging from politics to child care, alcohol policies, immigration and equality. It is a common thing to hear that someone has got “a good or a bad attitude” toward something. In the news we could hear about studies telling us that attitudes toward something have been toughened. Regardless of the familiarity of the word attitude, it is a relatively modern concept. The present meaning of attitude has only arisen in the past hundred and fifty years (Billig, 1987: 176). Before this period which has seen the emergence of mass media, mass politics and dictators (who like to believe they represent the attitudes of their subjects), the word attitude referred “to the bodily poses of figures in paintings” (Billig, 1987: 176). This links attitudes also to the notion of public sphere: before the emergence of the public sphere, attitudes were not as relevant as they nowadays are.

In social sciences, a common way to define attitude is to say that an attitude is “a hypothetical construct involving the evaluation of some object” (Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2008). Attitude is a hypothetical construct because observing it directly is impossible. Therefore different methods for measuring attitudes indirectly have been developed. Attitude refers to evaluating something either positively or negatively and it presents a reaction toward an object, let it be a small thing such as ticket prices in public transportation or a wider belief or ideology such as deliberative democracy. (Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2008.)
The definition for attitude varies but as mentioned in the previous paragraph, most definitions link attitude with evaluation (Vesala and Rantanen, 2007: 19; Billig, 1987: 176). According to Billig (1987: 176) “attitudes refer to evaluations which are for or against things, issues, people or whatever”. Billig (1987: 176) adds that “A number of social psychologists have suggested that the evaluative aspect of an attitude is its most important, or essential, component.” According to Martin Fishbein (1997: 79) attitude is a “relatively simple construct that refers to a person’s overall favourableness or unfavourableness with respect to an object”. William McGuire (1985: 239) says that attitude means “placing the object on the scale of judgement”.

Within qualitative attitude approach, attitude is seen as a social phenomenon. Attitude is a communicative phenomenon that is linked to relationships and interaction between individuals. Attitudes refer to evaluations that individuals make but they and their meanings are constructed in the social reality. (Vesala and Rantanen, 2007: 28–29.)

The understanding of attitude within the qualitative approach originates from the criticism toward the traditional ways of defining attitude. In social psychology, attitude has traditionally been conceptualised “as an internal disposition to respond to an object of evaluation in a particular manner, either favourably or unfavorably” (Peltola and Vesala, 2013: 28). Therefore attitudes are seen as relatively permanent and stable (Vesala and Rantanen, 2007: 19). This theoretical premise has been popular since the world wars. One of the reasons for the popularity is its “promise” to explain the behaviour of an individual: according to the proponents of the dispositional theory an attitude guides the behaviour of an individual. (Vesala and Rantanen, 2007: 19–20.)

Vesala and Rantanen (2007) structure the criticism toward the dispositional theory in three categories. Firstly, cognitive theorists have highlighted the importance of the context when interpreting the attitudes. This viewpoint doesn’t challenge the dispositional approach as such but prefers defining the research subject strictly and researching very context-specific behaviour. Secondly, critics like Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell (1987) have stated that social
psychology should leave attitude research behind because of the issues of dispositional understanding of attitudes and instead focus on the verbal construction of the social reality. Vesala and Rantanen (2007) present the third type of criticism that states that attitude is by nature a social phenomenon rather than a phenomenon of the individual psychology. (Vesala and Rantanen, 2007: 19–23.)

In qualitative attitude approach attitudes are understood as stances that are constructed as a result of the human interaction. The verbal expressions of attitudes are of scholarly interest. Qualitative attitude approach leans on the work Michael Billig’s rhetorical approach to attitudes. According to Billig (1987: 176–177) the rhetorical or argumentative context of the attitudes is largely ignored. Attitudes are not just linked to individual motives. This becomes visible when we look on what issues people have attitudes about. The issues – whether political, moral, religious or commercial – are controversial and make people take pro or con stances. In Billig’s words “an attitude represents an evaluation of a controversial issue or sometimes a controversial individual, such as a president or a queen.” (Billig, 1987: 177).

The social approach on attitudes is also backed by the notion shared of attitudes among groups of people. Political parties and worker’s unions are examples of this. Moreover, the attitudes can be only identified in a social context, in interaction. (Vesala and Rantanen, 2007: 25.) Therefore “an attitude is studied as a communicative and evaluative viewpoint, either positive or negative, to a particular issue in a particular social context” (Peltola and Vesala, 2013: 30).
4.2 Qualitative attitude approach methodology

Qualitative attitude approach aims at understanding attitudes by analysing argumentative speech. The key question for scholars is to identify what people are actually evaluating when they are commenting attitude statements presented to them. The scholars are interested in the comments as well the reasons. In addition, the tone of arguing and reasoning as well as the position that the people take, are observed. (Vesala and Rantanen, 2007.)

Qualitative attitude approach utilises its own empirical methodology. It is based on semi-structured interviews that consist of attitude statements. The presumption is that attitudes can be examined by analysing the verbal expressions. The interview data is analysed as a commentary that consists of comments and their reasoning (Vesala and Rantanen, 2007: 11). Qualitative attitude approach can be understood as an implicit way of measuring attitudes (about implicit attitudes see Fazio, 2003), because interviewees are not asked to define their attitudes directly but through attitude statements. Therefore the expression of an attitude is not as conscious as it would be if used Likert’s scale. The argumentative speech that interviewees produce while commenting the statements presented to them is analysed by the researchers and the attitudes with their reasons are identified.

In the qualitative attitude approach the interviewer doesn’t define the concepts that are being used in the statements for the interviewee. For example, in this study the interviewees defined the concept of politics. Defining is left for the interviewees to do. In the course of the interview, the interviewer presents the attitude statements to the interviewee. The interviewees comment on each statement, take a stand and justify their comments by using their own words. The task of the interviewer is to make people speak about their views and encourage them to justify them. Still the interviewer must remain as neutral as possible. Follow-up questions can be asked to ensure valid understanding of the expressed view. (Vesala and Rantanen, 2007; Vesala, 2008, Peltola and Vesala, 2013.)
The analysis is always made on two levels: first on a classifying and then on an interpretative level. Classifying analysis stays on verbatim level and with its help similar stances can be identified and categorised. (Vesala and Rantanen, 2007: 12.) Interpretative analysis takes a step further: it “brings these categories into a conceptual dialogue with theoretical concepts and discussions relevant to the particular study at hand” (Peltola and Vesala, 2013: 31).

Classifying analysis is made as follows. The different stands that interviewees took toward each attitude statement are identified and categorised. The analysis is made deeper through identifying also the arguments the interviewees used to justify their stands. Finally “an overall view of multiple stand-justification combinations observable in the material can be obtained” (Peltola and Vesala, 2013: 31). The positivity and negativity or the directness and indirectness of the stand-taking can be used as criteria when classifying the interview data. (Vesala and Rantanen, 2007; Peltola and Vesala, 2013.)

The interpretative analysis furthers the understanding. The aim at this stage is to “identify general patterns” which can be read as different attitudes (Peltola and Vesala, 2013: 31). The interpretative analysis links the identified attitudes with the researched phenomenon and posits them in a dialogue with the concepts of the researched phenomena. (Peltola and Vesala, 2013; Vesala and Rantanen, 2007). In this study the analysis aims at answering the research questions about the deliberative potential of the social media.
4.3 Data gathering: interviews
Ten students from University of Helsinki (7 females, 3 males) were interviewed for the study. They were aged from 24 to 37 and are students of different subjects. Six of the interviewees reported that they had written their societal or political opinions online within the past six months and four of them reported they hadn’t.

The interviews were made between the period of 11.5.–15.5.2015. This was a bit less than a month after the parliamentary elections. During the week the interviews were made the government formation talks, led by Mr Juha Sipilä (The Centre Party) were still ongoing. The interviews were conducted at the university. They lasted from a good half an hour to one and half hours. The interviewees were found via posting an invitation on student associations’ mailing lists. Each participant received a movie ticket as a reward for taking part in the study.

The interview was semi-structured and based on attitude statements. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. There were 17 attitude statements in the interview guide (see below). If it was seen necessary, follow-up questions were asked after presenting a statement. The aim of the interviews was to produce evaluative speech about social media and politics that would help to understand the nature of social media as a potential place for political discussion. The statements concerned the general views on political discussion in social media, the reasons to participate in the discussion or to remain silent and the aspects that might challenge the willingness to take part.

Before the attitude statements the interviewees were asked to answer a few warm-up questions about political discussion in social media. The interviewees were asked where in the social media they thought political discussions take place, what political discussions they had been following.

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10 The parliamentary elections 2015 were held in Finland on 19th of April. The Centre Party won the election with 21.1 % share of the votes and gained 49 seats in the parliament. Two second biggest parties were The Finn Party (17.7 %) with 38 seats and The National Coalition Party (18.2 %) with 37 seats. The chairman of the Centre Part Mr. Juha Sipilä began the government formation talks on 20th of April. Sipilä’s government was appointed on 29th of May 2015. Source: Finnish Government http://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/government-formation-talks.
recently and what recent discussions they had thought were good and what not. The attitude statements were presented one-by-one in the order shown below. The actual statements utilised were the following:

“"I think social media is a good place to discuss politics."
"I find it important to participate in political discussion online."
"On social media citizens have equal possibilities to take part in political discussion."
"On social media, everyone’s opinion is equally valued."
"It is easy to follow politics through social media."
"I would rather have a political conversation face-to-face with my family members or friends than on social media."
"I think that conversations on social media can have an actual impact on politics and current affairs in general."
"The way I discuss politics on social media is different than other mediums I am having conversations in."
"I think about my network’s opinions and compare them to my own before I post."
"I don’t want to seem too political in the eyes of my network."
"I enjoy good political debates online."
"I am sometimes worried that I get criticism on social media."
"I think following a politician on social media is a sign of follower’s political views."
"I rather share links on social media than write my own opinions."
"I am annoyed by people who always want to discuss politics online."
"Getting a lot of likes (or re-tweets) is important for me."
"I think political discussions on social media have changed my own views."

After the interview the participants were asked to fill a background information form about their age, field of study, level of education (under-graduate, post-graduate or PhD level), the social media services they used, the other forms of political or civic activity they were participating in, the party they voted and the parties they thought the members of their network had voted.

Seven of the interviewees were females and three were males. The numbers reflect the gender distribution at the University of Helsinki. Most of the participants (8/10) were doing their masters, two had graduated with masters already and were either doing PhD or studying another subject on undergraduate level. The interviewees had voted for different parties (Centre Party, The Greens, Left Alliance, National Coalition Party and The Social Democratic Party of Finland) but six of the

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11 In 2014 University of Helsinki had 34 833 students of whom 12 702 (36 %) were men and 22 131 (64 %) women. 
Source: Statistics Finland.
interviewees reported that they had voted for The Greens. The participants used different social network services. Most of them reported using Facebook, blogs and Twitter. Also online forums and Instagram were in use. Other services the participants used were Tumbrl, YouTube and Dreamwidth.

It can be asked how many of the participants of this study actually take part in online deliberation. Every participant reported using social media. Therefore a conclusion can be made that every participant is exposed to political content and/or political discussion online (about inadvertent exposure to political content on social media, see Brundidge, 2010). Six of the participants reported participating in political discussion online, whereas four of the participants reported not participating in it. Hence, an assumption can be made that six of the participants deliberate – given that the manner they discuss politics online is deliberative, that is, it follows the principles that characterise deliberative discussion. Although if we lean on Rawls’ definition of deliberation – that deliberation can be a singular activity – also the ones who didn’t report participating in online deliberation, can be counted. Moreover, Smith et al. (2009: 14) have pointed out, that also the non-participants who don’t actively participate in the discussion by writing their own opinions – often referred to as “lurkers” – can be considered as participants of deliberation, because deliberation also means listening to others and reflecting own thoughts. Therefore Smith et al. (2009: 14) suggest that everyone who logs in, should be treated as a participant of deliberation regardless of their tendency to post. However, since the aim of this study is to look at the reasons behind willingness to participate in online deliberation, participating and “non-participating” are equally interesting phenomena. All of the participants are users of SNS’s and see political content and discussion in them, hence they are able to comment the phenomenon.
Table 1. Participants’ political participation online.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant (p)</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Participates in political discussion online</th>
<th>Other forms of civic or political participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>p1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p2</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p3</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p4</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Organizational activities, new civic movements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p5</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p6</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p7</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p8</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p9</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Organizational activities, new civic movements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p10</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Social Network Services (SNS’s) used by participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SNS</th>
<th>Number of users [participants (p)]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>9 (p1-p4, p6-p10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>7 (p1-p2, p6-p10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogs</td>
<td>9 (p2-p10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online forums</td>
<td>6 (p3-p8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instagram</td>
<td>4 (p2, p5, p8, p9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (e.g. YouTube, Tumblr)</td>
<td>2 (p8, p10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Analysis

In the analysis, I have structured the interview data in three categories each of which corresponds to a research question that has been outlined in the introductory chapter. The first section presents interviewees’ general views on political discussion and social media. The second section discusses the interviewees’ attitudes toward deliberative potential of social media. Finally, the third section concentrates on the motivations to participate in political discussion online. I have marked the comments of each interviewee with number (participant 1, 2, 3… p1, p2, p3 etc.). The analysis looks at the stances the interviewees took as well as the reasons they gave for their expression of attitudes.

5.1 Political discussion in social media

The statements “It is easy to follow politics through social media”, “I think conversations on social media can have an actual impact on politics and current affairs in general”, “I think following a politician is a sign of follower’s political views” and “I rather share links than write my own opinions” were included in the interview guide to chart general views on social media and politics.

Most of the interviewees agreed that it is easy to follow politics through social media. Social media brings news and commentaries to the same place and there is a huge amount of content to explore. The ones who disagreed with the statement said that social media is not good for following politics because “it creates bubbles” and it doesn’t really give information about politics but rather shows “discussion around it”. It has to be added that the interviewees who agreed with the statement pointed out that social media as the only medium for following politics gives a rather biased picture of politics. Following politics from other channels, like news media and political blogs, was recommended. Still social media keeps them up to date about current affairs and shows what their network is interested in.
The idea that social media discussions can have an actual impact on politics gave a varied response among the interviewees. Both the proponents and the opponents shared the view that discussion on social media must gain a lot of volume before it can have an impact. Many noted that if traditional news media picks up a story or a campaign from social media, then it can become a thing that can actually have an impact on politics. The ones who expressed careful agreement with the statement mentioned encouraging examples of social media driven campaigns and initiatives. Among them were the citizen initiative of same-sex marriage that was featured with a social media driven campaign with hashtags and rainbow-colored profile pictures\(^{12}\). One interviewee also mentioned the initiative aiming at cutting student funding. She thought the response, partly on social media, became so intense that in the government decided to withdraw the suggestion.

The impact on the opinion climate was seen as an indirect and slow process. When certain opinions are repeated, people may start changing their views. The comments to the statement also show interestingly what the understanding of what “politics” is. Many of the interviewees said that political discussions may have an impact on opinion climate but hardly on “actual politics”. Politics was understood often as the political decisions made in parliament.

Interviewees tended to think that following a politician in social media is a sign of follower’s political views. Many reported that the politicians they were following were politicians they could

vote or had voted. For many following meant showing support. But everyone added that this assumption can’t be taken for granted. Participant 5’s comment that it “certainly tells something” sums up the answers quite well. Participants also pointed out that it may well be that the follower thinks the opposite – or maybe knows the person, or is just interested for some other reason.

Sharing a link was seen as a mild way to express an opinion. Writing a status update was considered as a more powerful way to take a stand on a matter. Thus people reasoned their habit of sharing links or own writings. Some said it was “annoying” to share a link without taking a stance whereas others argued that sharing a link is nicer, a more diplomatic way of bringing up their own thoughts. All in all, sharing a link was “a mild way” to express an opinion, or maybe just to provoke a thought. The comment below illuminates the thought well.

Ehkä vähän tuntuu siltä, että jos itse kirjoittaa jotakin, niin silloin niin kun istuu alas, ja nyt minä kerron kaikille, että mitä mieltä mä olen. Silleen että nyt tulee minun mielipiteeni tästä… Mutta sit jos jakaa jonkun linkin, niin se on ehkä enemmän niin kun, että ”kattokaa, tää on hyvä juttu”. että tää voi kiinnostaa jotenkin. (p2)

Attitudes toward sharing links was considered relevant for this study because some scholars (see e.g. Agre, 2004) have argued that deliberative democracy doesn’t work in the present day because people are not presenting their own views but rather repeating views of “professional opinion-makers” such as politicians and journalists. Sharing a link to a commentary or column on a SNS seems like a clear act of repeating an opinion rather than reasoning it individually. Interviewees seem to agree with the view. Writing an opinion is an actual statement and therefore and a deliberative act, whereas sharing someone else’s well formulated thought is a remark or an opening for discussion.
5.2 Social media as a place for deliberation

Statements 1, 3, 4, 11 and 17 were included in the interview guide to examine the deliberative potential of social media. The participants commented on statements about the suitability of social media for political discussion as well as the impact they thought political discussion has had on their own opinions.

A bit more than half of the interviewees thought social media is a good place to discuss politics. The rest agreed that social media is a good place for political discussion in theory but in practice there are many flaws. Accessibility and popularity of SNS’s were often named as the main reasons for supporting the statement: social media was seen as an easy and casual place to discuss politics because it is free and “everyone is there already”.

Some interviewees also thought that social media enables discussion with a good variety of people, not only with like-minded friends. This was considered mostly as a positive thing although one interviewee said social media is a good place for discussing politics given that she gets to “stay in the bubble” and only share thoughts with like-minded people without fear of criticism. Others thought that publicity can have a positive impact on the discussion quality, as can be seen from comments below.

Voin yhtyä siihen väittämään, että mielestäni se on hyvä paikka. Että jos ajattelee, no Facebookia, niin se tavoittaa varsinkin, no siellä on paljon nuorta väkeä. (…) Siellä niitä keskusteluita syntyy. Ja musta se on aika luonteva kanava. Siellä on hyvin helppo keskustella, sitä on helppo seurata. (p7)

Some interviewees also thought that social media enables discussion with a good variety of people, not only with like-minded friends. This was considered mostly as a positive thing although one interviewee said social media is a good place for discussing politics given that she gets to “stay in the bubble” and only share thoughts with like-minded people without fear of criticism. Others thought that publicity can have a positive impact on the discussion quality, as can be seen from comments below.

Silleen, että se on helppo paikka ja siellä niin kun pääsee helposti keskustelemaan ehkä ihmisten kaa, jotka on eri mieltä kuin ite on, tai tälleen niin kun, kellä on erilaiset näkemykset kuin itellä on. Et siellä niin kun helppo kohdata tälleen. (p9)

Että siinä on just se silleen aika hyvä mixi, että siellä yleensä just puhutaan enemmän kavereiden kanssa, mutta sitten muutkin näkee ja sitten tulee mukaan keskusteluun. Että se ei vaan oo just sellaisia niin kun kahvilakeskusteluja, missä ollaan vaan omassa porukassa, että jotain ulkoisia ärsykkeitä tulee aina. (p2)
Yet almost everyone saw some downsides in the social media discussion. It was said that social media “can’t be the only place” for discussing politics because it doesn’t have a real effect on politics. One of the interviewee thought it was problematic that “social media is lacking certain communicative features”: irony and sarcasm are harder to express without face-to-face contact and for this reason there are often misunderstandings. The most common argument was that people lose their temper easily and the discussion gets inappropriate features like naming and indiscreet commenting.

Interestingly some of the people who said that the inappropriateness of the discussions is a bad feature of social media, also said that they in a way enjoy following bad discussion. It was seen as “good entertainment”. The same observation can be made from the comments to statement "I enjoy good political debate online".

Et sit taas se loanheitto on viihdyttävää, vaikka se ei olisakaan perusteltua. Että siinä on just näitä ristiriitaisia puolia. (p8)

Jos aattelee ihan viihdearvon kannalta, niin sitten mä tykkiään semmoisissa keskusteluissa, joissa on joku on jotain... jollain on jotain mun mielestä ihan tyhmiä mielipiteitä. (…) Niin tavallaan mä joskus tykkään siitä, että kun ihmisillä voi olla niin absurdiri otoja mielipiteitä, että ei perustu ainakaan mihinkään tieteelliseen. Ne yrittää puolustaa niitä mitä ihmeellisimmillä keinoilla, niin semmoisen seuraaminen on viihteellistä. (p7)

[k]auheen julmaan sanoo, mutta ois kiva, jos se kirjoittaja ärssyntyy. En tiää mikä se on musta kivaa – joku pimeä voima mussa joka haluu ihmissä kiusata, se kuulostaa ihan kauheelta – mut on kiva, et joku sanoo vähän rumasti, ja sit kaikki alkaa puolustaa sitä kirjoittajaa ja sit kirjoittaja puolustaa ite ja sit mä oon sen kirjoittajan puolella siinä kyllä ja se joka sano rumasti, on niin kun ärssytävä. Mut sit kuitenkin musta sellainen tasainen välittely, että toi on ihan totta, on niin tylsää. (…) Vaikka on niin kun kyllä julmaa, koska mä ajattelen näin ja siks mä en halu olla netissä, koska joku vois tehä mulle saman. (p5)
Nine of the ten interviewees agreed with the statement "I enjoy good political debate online", although only one interviewee did so with no reservation. The reasons for enjoying political debates online were manifold: it was said that following a debate is interesting and educational and participating in it is exciting and also important. The interviewees defined “good debate” similar ways. Good debate was close to deliberative ideal: appropriate, informed, well-reasoned and free from uncivilised behaviour. Pure commenting wasn’t respected, people wanted to hear good arguments and reasons that were based on facts. Emotions should be kept aside but a little bit rhetoric was seen as a plus. For many this strict definition led to a problem: they said they would enjoy good political discussion if they saw it.

An overly like-minded network was seen as feature that hampered the possibility for good discussions to emerge. Provocative statements were seen as a way to get more attention in the form of likes, not to advance dialogue. As mentioned earlier “bad discussion” wasn’t necessarily a bad thing: three of the interviewees said they enjoyed watching people getting angry and expressing “stupid opinions”. The only interviewee who took a clear negative stand toward the statement said that she simply doesn’t follow political discussions in social media, because she thought they are too provocative and somehow unfruitful.

The statements “On social media citizens have equal opportunities to take part in political discussion” and “On social media everyone’s opinion is equally valued” were testing attitudes toward accessibility. Interviewees had controversial attitudes toward the statement that everyone
can participate equally. A possibility to participate is not the same as the ability to do so. Half of the people thought that in theory everyone has the same opportunities to use SNS’s because they are free and nowadays almost everyone can use the internet. It was noted that the people who have a wide network that encourages – or at least tolerates – political discussion – are privileged in relation to people who have a rather small network. Moreover, it was seen that the already loudest are heard more than the others.

One of the interviewees gave an example of the reactions that one of his comments caused. He had commented on a statement made by a military representative and the comment was disregarded because of the fact that the commentator had done a non-military service. Similar opinions were expressed to comment on the statement about the equality of opinions (“I think in social media everyone’s opinion is equally valued”). The majority of the interviewees agreed with the statement “in principle”. Many things hindered the equal expression of opinions: social status, the status in the network, the size of the network as well as the ability to well-reasoned arguing all have an impact.

In this regard the comments of the interviewees are similar to the criticism presented by Sanders (1997) and Young (1996): lacking a certain status can hinder the possibilities to participate in deliberation. The interviewees also noted that if an opinion is simply different to the general views in one’s network, the opinion is often ignored. Provocative statements were seen as an issue
because they receive a lot of attention but they are not necessarily good. One interviewee made reference to trolls, another stated that not all opinions are even based on facts.


Changing preferences has been defined as one of the most important features of deliberation. The statement “I think political discussions on social media have changed my own views” was to test this ideal. Defining what “change” is determined the answers. Three of the interviewees disagreed with the statement and the rest agreed with it with moderation.

There were roughly three arguments for the claim that social media hasn’t changed views. One participant said that she doesn’t really read social media discussions that much because she thinks there are no well-reasoned arguments. Another participant simply presented that social media is for verifying already existing opinions, although “cementing them is also a type of a change”. The third argument was that instead of changing preferences social media shows what is being thought and discussed in one’s network. The interviewee below thought that there is no change as such but social media could have even bigger impact if she was politically more active.

The ones who agreed with the statement referred in their justifications especially to matters that were not in their area of expertise. If a certain topic was new to them, social media could actually form an opinion concerning that matter. This becomes evident for example of the statement of Participant 2:

[kyllä mä sanoisin, että se on varmaan jollain tavalla vaikuttanut. Nyt on vaikee sanoo miten. Mut kyl mä sanoisin, että juuri sellaisissa jutuissa, missä mä en oikeen oo ite mitenkään ekspertti, tai tiedä niin paljoa asiasta, niin… silloin mä en ehkä oo samalla tavalla myöskään ehkä osallistunut keskusteluun, mutta sieltä kyllä oppii, kun muut tietää sit paremmin. (…) Se ei ehkä vaikuta, mutta se enemmän… niin kun luo sen mielipiteen. (p2)]

Moreover, the ones who agreed with the statement were able to list a lot of ways social media discussions had influenced their thinking. They stated they had received more information, were exposed to new perspectives and broadened their views. Three of the interviewees even said they had noticed that they have been “wrong” with their opinions and two were able to name examples of discussions that had changed their opinion on a certain matter. One interviewee also noted that through social media he has been able to find out that some politicians that come from a party he doesn’t vote for are “smart” and “have smart opinions”. Thus social media is seen to increase knowledge and understanding of opposing parties. This becomes evident especially from Participant 5 comment:

[Tuntuu, että on tullut vähän valveutuneempi ihminen. Ja vähän myös suvaitsevaisempi. Ja tiedostavampi. Omasta mielestään siis, kun on lukenut netistä hyviä keskusteluja. (H5)]

The attitudes toward the change of opinions were moderate and rather indirect than direct, but all in all positive. This notion backs the potential of social media to serve as an arena for political deliberation.
5.3 Willingness to participate in deliberation

Quite a few statements (2, 6, 8, 9, 10, 12, 14, 15, 16) were selected to gain understanding of possible obstacles for participating in political discussion. The statements aim at illuminating the reasons for dropping out from the discussion. In light of past research results, interviewees were asked whether they found it important to participate in political discussion online, whether or not they preferred online discussion to face-to-face discussion, how much they thought about their image on social media and what their thoughts were about people who are very active in discussing politics online.

The deliberative ideal is based on active citizenship. It is taken for granted that citizens are keen to participate in discussion about politics. The emergence of the internet has inspired these thoughts again. However, seven of the interviewees disagreed with the statement “I find it important to participate in political discussion online”. The main reason was that people were not willing to share their political or societal opinions “to the whole world”. The reasons for this were that they were afraid of criticism or that they didn’t want to expose too much about themselves. One participant formulated it so that she doesn’t want to close any doors on future career possibilities by her comments. Being criticised or being somehow stigmatized were the most important reasons to remain silent.

The ones who agreed with the statement said participating is important simply because “political discussion is important”. Other reasons were personal: it was said that discussing politics is
educational and fun. One interviewee also reasoned the willingness to participate in online discussion by his anticipation to discuss politics face-to-face.

Statements "I would rather have political conversation face-to-face with my family members or friends than on social media” and “The way I discuss politics on social media is different to the ways I use in other mediums” are closely linked to the reasons of the previous statement. Eight of the interviewees agreed that they prefer discussing politics face-to-face. The reasons were that the discussion is better, there is a smaller risk of misunderstanding and there is no fear of criticism. It was also noted by the interviewees that in the social media they have no control over who sees or reads the conversations – and that bothers them. This notion has also been made by Marwick and boyd (2010) who discuss the abstinent behaviour caused by the awareness of the inclusive arena under the term “collapse of the social context”.

The ones who disagreed with the statement said they rather discuss politics online, because they express themselves better in written form. They enjoyed that they had time to formulate their thoughts and search for background information. It was also said that the feeling of distance on social media allows them to disagree and present their thoughts more freely. Moreover, it was said that discussing politics on social media suits a bit shy or extrovert people better than having a face-
to-face discussion. The possibility to use a pseudonym when presenting potentially controversial comments, was considered as a positive feature of social media.

Stromer-Galley (2002) made the same observation in her study of the preferred context to talk about politics. In her survey study of Americans she found that there are a number of people who are willing to discuss politics online but not in person. This group seemed to be categorically different from the group who enjoyed having political discussions face-to-face with friends and families. Stromer-Galley concluded that the “Internet conversation context seems to create distance between interlocutors – distance that may liberate some people to express views and ideas that they would not do face-to-face because of the perceived risk of social repercussions.” (Stromer-Galley, 2002: 36).

Abovementioned observations were also evident in comments to the statement 8 (“The way I discuss politics on social media is different to the ways I use in other mediums”). Regardless of their stand, the interviewees would be more self-aware of their comments on social media and would advise others to think their thoughts through before writing to avoid misunderstandings. This is interesting, because earlier many of interviewees thought that people lose their temper easily online and say things they wouldn’t necessarily say face-to-face.
Almost all of the interviewees agreed that they don’t want to seem too political in the eyes of their network and that they do think about the reactions of their network before they post anything. Being somehow “political” was considered stigmatizing. Posting too much about politics is annoying, said one interviewee.

Other reasons for unwillingness to post about politics were the perceived lack of knowledge (“I don’t know enough about politics to participate in the discussion”) and unwillingness to cause controversy. Politics is controversial and can cause a stigma.

Two interviewees said that they had blocked friends for reasons linked to political activity: they were either friends who represent opposing political views or friends that simply post too much about politics. Similar observations were made in the Pew Internet and American Life Project.
(Rainie and Smith, 2012) where 10 percentage of the survey participants said they had blocked, unfriended or hidden a connection because of too frequent posting about political topics and 4 percentage said that they had done one of the following measures to connections that disagree with them about political issues\(^{13}\). Interestingly only a few participants agreed with the statement “I am annoyed by people who always want to discuss politics”. The most common justification was that it is easy to ignore those people and conversations. It became noticeable from the comments though that carrying on and on about the same topic gets on people’s nerves as well as too frequent posting. Many people mentioned that not everything has to be politics. Attempts to “politicise everything” were regarded annoying.

\(^{13}\) Summary post of the results *Social networking sites and politics* by Lee Rainie and Aaron Smith: [http://www.pewinternet.org/2012/03/12/social-networking-sites-and-politics/](http://www.pewinternet.org/2012/03/12/social-networking-sites-and-politics/). Accessed 8.2.2016.
5.4 Evaluation, reasons and justification for the attitudes

The goal of qualitative attitude approach is to find attitudes and the reasons and justifications behind them. Table 3 below presents the attitudes toward political discussion in social media and gives an idea of the reasons behind the willingness to participate, or vice versa to stay out of the discussion.

The table was created in a process that included three stages. First the interview data was looked as a whole. Parts of the interview data that expressed either positivity or negativity toward participating in political discussion online were identified. After that the reasons given to the positive or negative expressions of participating in political discussion online were examined. Finally the justifications behind the reasons to evaluate participating in political discussions online were identified. The table sums up the findings of the analysis and shows what kind of attitudes the participants possessed toward participating in political discussion online. The similarities with the deliberative democracy theory as well as the current empirical findings of online deliberation will be discussed in the next chapter.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation</th>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>Justifications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PARTICIPATING IN ONLINE DELIBERATION</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POSITIVE</td>
<td>political discussion is important</td>
<td>important &quot;as such&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>refuting &quot;wrong&quot; opinions is important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>political discussion online is preferred to face-to-face discussion</td>
<td>expressing opinions in a written form is easier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>distance in comparison to face-to-face discussion</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>nickname allows presenting controversial views without fear of criticism or stigma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>no obligation to sustain cheerful atmosphere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>political discussion online is educational and fun</td>
<td>learning argumentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>broadening views</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>getting new information and perspectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>encouragement for own opinions and argumentation</td>
<td>winning an argument feels good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>finding support for own beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEGATIVE</td>
<td>fear of criticism</td>
<td>perceived lack of political knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>unwillingness to be in the centre of attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>unwillingness to cause controversy</td>
<td>personal trait</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>feeling of inability or unwillingness to defend one’s views</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>lack of interest</td>
<td>political discussion online doesn’t have real impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>political discussion online is low quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>no time for participating in online discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>increased level of self-awareness of the possible audience</td>
<td>expressing political opinions can be stigmatizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>what is written stays in the internet for ever</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>incapability to choose the audience (“the collapse of the context”)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Discussion

In this study I have looked at university students’ attitudes toward political discussion in social media. The study has aimed at furthering the understanding of deliberative potential of the social media and SNS’s by looking at the reasons to participate in the debate as well as the reasons to drop out from the discussion. In addition to this the general views on the political discussion on social media have been examined.

In the introduction I have outlined the research questions of this study. The first research question was that to what extent social media is seen as a platform for political discussion. As presented in the literature review, there is some evidence of people using social media for political deliberation purposes but most of the research shows rather discouraging evidence of political deliberation online. Yet it has been said that more empirical research is needed in order to understand the phenomenon better. There has been a call for more empirical research on this matter, and also a call to research political discussion on social media in more diverse ways that would take into consideration also the people who are not actively participating online. This study has been an attempt to fill these gaps in research.

The results show that social media is being used for different purposes, and serving as a deliberative arena is only one of them. Most of the participants held positive attitudes toward social media as an arena for political discussion. The participants also had shared understanding of the characteristics of good political discussion: it was to be appropriate, loyal to the facts, based on good arguments and careful reasoning and directed to the audience. This was close to the deliberative ideal. The features the interviewees named for good political discussion reflect Habermas’ (1981) criteria for ideal speech situation.

But in practice interviewees saw a lot of difficulties for good political discussion. It was said that on social media it is hard to hear opposing views because the discussion usually happens with like-
minded individuals. On social media the most provocative and extreme opinions get the most
attention instead of the best arguments. Civility is sometimes lost and the interlocutors are judged
instead of their arguments. Even the participants who used social media for political discussion,
stated that it didn’t always fulfil their thoughts of good political discussion. These negative attitudes
are backed by previous research results that warn about echo chambers (e.g. Sunstein, 2007) and
uncivilized behaviour on social media (Papacharissi, 2004).

The interviewees’ attitudes toward the possibilities of social media to offer a good arena for
political discussion were in general positive but when they were asked to describe their attitudes in
more detail, it turned out that for many, social media was a good place for political discussion in
theory only. This phenomenon is known from previous attitude studies. Westie (1965) found out in
his classic study The American Dilemma that participants agreed with general attitude of fairness
but disagreed then with the applications of the general principle.

It has to be added also that even the opportunity to use social media for political discussion is used
by a minority. As mentioned in the introduction, only 7 percentage of Finns report having written
societal or political opinions on the internet (Statistics Finland, 2015). This also hinders the
possibility of social media to be the arena for political deliberation. Political discussion in social
media doesn’t appeal to many. According to this study, the reasons vary. The unwillingness to
participate in political discussion on social media is caused by fear of criticism, unwillingness to
talk about one’s own political thoughts, lack of interest and time as well as the increased level of
self-awareness. Discussing anonymously was sometimes used as a way to defend oneself from
criticism. Interestingly, many of the interviewees also noted that they use irony – my interpretation
is that it is a way to defend from criticism as well.

What this study showed is that even the ones that don’t actively participate, enjoy following the
discussion. At its best, following and reading the discussion is educational and mind-broadening.
Also the following of very non-deliberative discussion was also worthwhile: it was seen as
enjoyable “good entertainment”. So bad discussion isn’t necessarily a bad thing because it has entertainment value. This is an interesting finding, which isn’t though necessarily good news for deliberative democracy.

The research questions two and three asked when people share their political or societal opinions online and what are the motivations to participate. The table 3 sums up answers to these questions. The reasons people use social media for political discussion are that it is seen as important and fun or that it is a better forum for debating than for example face-to-face discussion. Social media is also a place for finding support for one’s own views. According to the interviewees in this study, the reasons people don’t want to participate in political discussion online are linked to fear of criticism, uneasiness to discuss politics and the collapse of the context. The results reflect the previous research. Tanja Storsul (2014) found out in her focus group study that politically active Norwegian teenagers were reluctant to stand out as highly political on social media. According to Storsul this is because “social media integrates different media forms and makes the political and social contexts collapse” (Storsul, 2014: 26–27). By “collapse of the context” Storsul refers to an observation in Marwick and boyd’s (2010) study of Twitter users where they noted that “[s]ocial media technologies collapse multiple audiences into single contexts, making it difficult for people to use the same techniques online that they do to handle multiplicity in face-to-face conversation.” (Marwick & boyd, 2010: 1).

The phenomenon of talking politics (or any controversial topic) rather with like-minded is known from before (see e.g. Dahlgren, 2009: 89). Dahlgren (2009: 89) writes that this kind of talk is not deliberation in the formal sense because the political conflict is absent. Fear of conflict was indeed for many people the reason not to discuss politics online. Interestingly some of the interviewees thought that there is less of a feeling of conflict in social media discussion (cf. Stromer-Galley, 2002). Still most of them thought that talking with their friends is safer.
The interviews show hints of deliberation. Most of the people said they rather discuss politics in person with their friends and family than on social media. Yet, social media can be a deliberative forum. The users decide to which direction the use of social media will develop. In the future when lives online and offline merge tighter together, the question of social media as a deliberative arena, remains important. More research on the topic is needed to understand better the characteristic of the discussion.

6.1 Evaluation of the research
In this and the following chapter I will present some criticism toward my account and try to come up with ideas for further research.

This study was a qualitative case study that utilised the qualitative approach to attitudes. The theoretical assumptions about the nature of political discussion online came from the deliberative democracy theory. It could have been interesting to try a different theoretical framework. As popular as deliberative democracy framework has lately been, the evidence from empirical studies has been rather discouraging. Looking the opinion expression from the point of self-presentation could have been another good option.

The aim of this study was to deepen the understanding of the potential of social media to serve as an arena for political deliberation by looking at the attitudes people possess toward political discussion online. Deliberative potential of the internet have been mainly researched with either quantitative methodology or with qualitative content analysis. This study was able to produce subtle knowledge about the attitudes that may have an impact on the development of social media as an arena of deliberation. Moreover, this study was able to produce knowledge about the reasons to drop out from the discussion – a viewpoint that has been largely ignored.

The sample of this study, ten interviews, is too small for generalising the results. The results are not representative. The interviewees formed a group that is young, lives in a city and studies at the
university. Many of the interviewees reported voting The Greens. Yet this is not surprising since the 
it is known that the Greens are strong in the cities and especially among young and high-educated 
people. The fact that the interviewees were university students in capital city, probably has more 
impact on their answers than their political views.

6.2 Suggestions for further research
It would be interesting to continue with the same research topic and extend the number of the 
interviewees. Conducting a survey would be a good way to gain more knowledge about students’ 
attitudes toward political discussion on social media. Moreover, it would be interesting to research 
separately people who are participating in the debate and the people who rather stay out of the 
discussion. Comparing the answers of discussants and non-discussants would be a great way to 
understand the reasons for participating.

Another way of deepening the understanding of deliberative potential of social media would be to 
look at different SNS’s (e.g. Facebook vs. Twitter) separately. Despite the fact that SNS’s are 
intertwined they have different characteristics that may have impact on the attitudes of their users.

The same research design would be interesting to conduct among different social groups, for 
example with voters of a certain party or among different age groups. By so doing it would be 
possible to find out what characterises different social groups as political users of social media. 
Furthermore, it would deepen the knowledge about the general features that increase the likeliness 
to participate in political discussion online.
7. References


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## Appendix

### Table 4. Use of the internet for writing messages (any) and political or societal opinions 2015. Source: Statistics Finland.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Has written on the internet (excluding emails)</th>
<th>Has written political or societal opinions on the internet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of population</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16–24</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–34</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35–44</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45–54</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55–64</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65–74</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75–89</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pensioner</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compleated comprehensive school</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compleated upper secondary or vocational school</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has an academic degree</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helsinki metropolitan area</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big cities</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other city-like towns</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Towns, villages and rural areas</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
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<td>16–89</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16–74</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interview guide.

Digivaalit 2015
Kansalaisten poliittinen keskustelu sosiaalisessa mediassa
Gradututkielma
Iiris Lagus
Kevät 2015

Haastattelurunko


Missä sosiaalisen median palveluissa käydään mielestäsi poliittista keskustelua?
Mitä sosiaalisen median poliittisia keskusteluita olet seurannut viime aikoina?
Mitkä sosiaalisen median poliittiset keskustelut ovat tuohduttaneet sinua viime aikoina?
Mitkä sosiaalisen median poliittiset keskustelut ovat ilahduttaneet sinua viime aikoina?

Sosiaalinen media on hyvä paikka poliittiselle keskustelulle.
Minulle on tärkeää osallistua poliittiseen keskusteluun sosiaalisessa mediassa.
Sosiaalisessa mediassa kansalaisilla on tasapuoliset mahdollisuudet osallistua julkiseen keskusteluun.
Sosiaalisessa mediassa kaikkien mielipide on yhtä arvokas.
Sosiaalisen median kautta on helppo seurata politiikkaa.
Käyn poliittista keskustelua mieluummin kasvokkain esimerkiksi ystävien tai perheeni kanssa kuin sosiaalisessa mediassa.
Sosiaalisessa mediassa käydyillä keskusteluilla on mielestäni oikeasti vaikutusta politiikkaan ja yhteiskunnan nykytilaan.

Tapani keskustella poliittikasta ja yhteiskunnallisista asioista sosiaalisessa mediassa eroaa muista tavoin, joilla käyn keskustelua näistä aiheista.
Mietin verkostoni reaktioita mielipiteeeseni ennen kuin julkaisen sosiaalisessa mediassa.
En tahdo leimautua verkostoni silmissä liian poliittiseksi.
Pidän kunnon poliittista väättelyistä sosialaisessa mediassa.
Olen joskus huolissani siitä, että saan kritiikkiä sosiaalisessa mediassa.
Se, että seuraa jotakuta politiikkoja sosiaalisessa mediassa, kertoo myös poliittisista näkemyksistä.

Jaan mieluummin linkkejä sosiaalisessa mediassa kuin kirjoitan omia mielipiteitäni.
Minua ärsyttävät ihmiset, jotka jatkuvasti tahtovat keskustella poliittikaa verkossa.
Tykkäysten, re-twiittien ja favourit-twiittien saaminen on minulle tärkeää.
Sosiaalisessa mediassa käydyillä poliittisilla keskusteluilla on ollut vaikutusta mielipiteisiin.