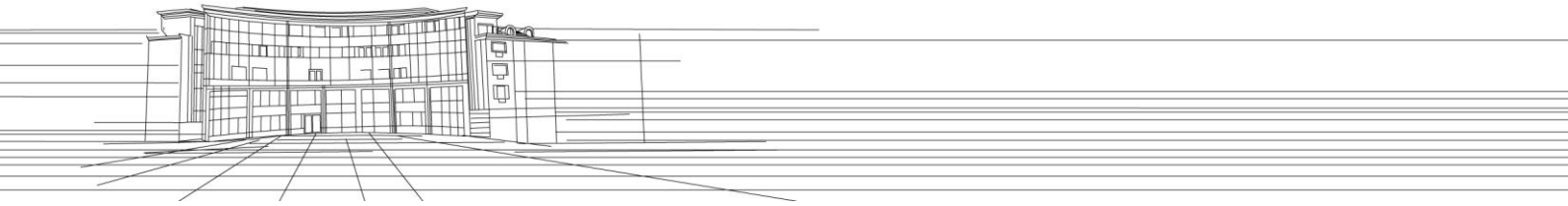

MASTER'S THESIS
INTERNATIONAL ADMINISTRATION
AND GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

Discussing Public Policy Online

The case of the European Commission's Digital Agenda Assembly 2012 online platform

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14.8.2013

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims at looking into whether democratic processes and deliberative policy discussion can take place online. In addition by using a grounded theory approach this thesis aims at expanding the current theories on how online public policy discussions work. As fears have been raised over decreasing citizen participation in political processes - which then again can cause problems of accountability and legitimacy - there have been attempts to find new and more deliberative ways to engage the citizens in the democratic decision making. This need for new places of policy discussion accompanied with the huge leaps in information and communications technologies have also resulted in attempts to bring policy discussions online. This thesis analyses the case of the European Commission's Digital Agenda online engagement platform and how one of the ten discussion groups on the platform facilitated public policy deliberation. The methodological approach in this study is grounded theory and the tool used for the analysis is qualitative content analysis. The results of this thesis firstly give inputs regarding how policy discussions take place online and secondly raises some concerns over the actual deliberativeness of the online discussion on the platform. These results however should not be seen as diminishing the power of Internet as a tool for crowdsourcing the public opinion, in which the case of this study succeeded very well. In the light of this case, the online public policy discussions could therefore act as an additional tool in democratic processes.

KEYWORDS

Democracy, deliberation, online participation, crowdsourcing, grounded theory

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ABBREVIATIONS

DA	Digital Agenda
DAA	Digital Agenda Assembly
DAE	Digital Agenda for Europe
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
EPG	Empowered Participatory Governance
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies

1 ELECTRONIC AGORA FOR DEMOCRACY

> ***"We believe citizen interaction in cyberspace deserves more attention from political scientists and public opinion analysts, for it has the potential to affect both the formation of public opinion and the conduct of democratic politics.***
>
> **…**
>
> ***In theory, the Internet provides a means to develop a new public space – an electronic agora if you will – that facilitates democratic participation."***
>
> Fisher *et al*. (1996:13)

This quote from the time before the Internet became an all-consuming part of our everyday lives, where everything and anything can take place online, depicts the basic idea behind this research; the theory of Internet facilitating public discussion and thus enhancing democratic participation. This is no longer a new idea, but it still remains rather sparsely researched when it comes to the possibilities of governments interacting with citizens online while creating public policies.

As the populations or areas to govern grow larger obvious problems arise with for example people's lack of access to information and exclusiveness of the traditional decision-making processes. This then gives rise to problems such as dissatisfaction with government policies, which in the end might end up decreasing the legitimacy of the government and of the way decisions are made. Arguably these problems, even though they are present to a large extent also on the national and local levels, are magnified as the area and heterogeneity of populations increases. The European Union and its governmental institute, the European Commission, could be regarded as an example of this phenomenon of democratic deficit that can lead to lack of legitimacy of decision-making and their implementation (Alessina 2003). In addition the absence of a European level public sphere is widely recognised (Wright 2007:1167) which further prevents pan-European public policy discussion (Eriksen 2005:358).

This is where the huge leaps taken in the area of information and communication technologies (ICT) – all the way from the telegraph in the 19th century to the mobile Internet of today – can be of importance as the time and space aspects of traditional communication and interaction methods are reduced (Scholte 2005). When looking at the situation from a European perspective, there are also

some social and economic transitions – e.g. increasing diversity, ageing population, changing consumer patterns etc. – taking place that require this existing paradigm of public services to be challenged. In addition the technological advances in ICT, such as its miniaturisation and increasing portability, suggest that in the near future technology will "*surround people and serve them in their roles as citizens, customers and professionals*" which will further increase the citizens' expectations on what kind of services the governments need to offer (Centeno *et al.* 2005:59).

This realization has then lead to new eGovernance and eDemocracy initiatives constantly being taken by public authorities. What this study looks into is what happens when the ICTs are utilised for democratic purposes and this "electronic agora" as named by Fisher *et al*. (1996:13) is put in practice. This thesis aims at looking into whether democratic processes and deliberative policy discussion can take place online. By using a grounded theory approach this thesis also wants to expand the current theories about the workings of online policy discussions.

To reach these aims this research looks into the deliberativeness of discussions on an online discussion platform put up by the European Commission (EC) in April 2012, where the Digital Agenda for Europe (DAE) -policy. What makes this forum interesting to study is the fact that it was the first time that the EC engaged with its stakeholders online on a discussion forum with not only the goal of discussing the existing policies, but also to gain new policy suggestions for the DAE policy by crowdsourcing. This research is also important as the same online platform is to be used by the EC in future interaction with stakeholders to discuss public policy online.

As the goal of the platform was to gain tangible policy suggestions to be turned into policy action, this research looks into the quality of the public policy discussion in the platform and whether the discussion was deliberative in its way of finding out the best arguments that would then be taken into account when formulating the future policy actions. The exploratory research question that marks the starting point for this paper and the analysis is *whether the Internet and especially government-driven online forums can facilitate deliberative public policy discussion?* The more specific research question in this paper then deals with *how well did the online forum designed for the Digital Agenda Assembly 2012 facilitate deliberation in the public discussion regarding the Digital Agenda for Europe policy.* Analysis of the case leading to these results will also give some

insights to the more descriptive question of *how do policy discussions take place on an online government-driven discussion forum.*

The results of this analysis are then used to expand the existing theories about how interactive public policy discussion forums are used in an international level; to map out the ways in which public policy discussion can work online; as well as to see whether this type of online discussion forums can be seen to be a part of the democratic process. eDemocracy, as is discussed in the next chapter, is one of the buzzwords of modernizing public administration today, and as the debates are on-going on whether and how well democracy can be practiced online, this makes this a prominent field of research.

As is discussed in the third chapter, this study is especially needed as the ways in which governments' engage with the citizens and stakeholders online is changing from the rather static polls, online surveys and consultations to more and more interactive online discussions that have not been studied as thoroughly in previous research. This paper will also give special insights on how this type of eDemocracy initiatives can be facilitated on a European level, as most of the previous research is mostly based on national or even more localised cases.

The methods used to analyse the comments and discussions on this online engagement platform are based on qualitative content analysis. The approach used in this study is that of grounded theory, which means that the data from the online discussions from the DA platform will be coded into organically sprung categories, instead of a fixed categorization stemming from previous research. This, as is explained in chapter five, will help to more authentically get to the bottom of how the discussions and conclusions were constructed on a platform of which kind has not existed nor therefore studied before.

To gain a deeper understanding of the topic of this research and to build the conceptual framework around the research question and aim, the following two chapters will discuss the concepts of democracy, deliberation and the public sphere and how the great advances in ICTs have changed the way we understand these concepts.

2 DEMOCRACY AND PARTICIPATION

Democracy, as the rule by the people is an ideal, for which the model of practicing it has changed dramatically from the ancient Greece, where the term was first used (Birch 2007:109). From the constructivist point of view democracy can therefore be seen as a 2000-year old, and still on-going, dialogue of how political processes are practiced (Qvortrup 2007:5). To make this a bit more tangible, in the modern sense of democracy, a differentiation can be made between 1) political representation, which bases on elected representatives and 2) political participation, which is a social activity through which people can participate in the process of governance (Birch 2007).

Out of these two, the importance of political participation in the policy making is emphasized in this paper, as especially, in the early stages of the decision-making it is often seen as crucial for the legitimacy of democratic decisions (Lowry 2010:40). It has been argued that in order for citizens to be able to take part in political processes they need to know how to do it. One way of learning democracy is by practicing it in smaller scale, for example through communal activities and civic organisations (Qvortrup 2007: 33) that have even been considered as the building blocks of a stable democracy (Tocqueville 1988). This has then lead to talking about the crisis of democracy as people no more take part in these small associations (Putnam 2000) and as voter turnout as well as political party memberships are said to be declining (Oates 2003:32).

The crisis of democracy can on the one hand be seen to stem from the extreme heterogeneity and size of what needs to be governed (Alessina 2003), but on the other hand, it can also be thought to be a matter of institutional forms and the mechanisms of political representation that are no more effective in this day and age (Fung *et al.* 2003:3). In any case, it has been stated that this has lead to a growing concern in developed democracies about the legitimacy and accountability of decision-making (Coleman *et al.* 2001). The need to solve this has then lead to calling for a democratic reform (Fishkin 1991) creating new kinds of participatory politics (Barber 2004) as well as the development of a new kind of deliberative civic culture (Levine *et al*. 2005).

This normative change in the democratic has also been named as citizen politics, where citizens are expected to be able to have an effective role in political processes, a prerequisite which has been argued to not have been present for the most part of the human history (Qvortrup 2007:15). This

citizen engagement can then be divided into two categories that are 1) voting and 2) other civic or political activities. These can be categorized into four types of citizen political participation. The differentiation between these types is that the participation can be initiated either by the elite or citizens and that it can take a reformist or static form (Qvortrup 2007:41, 44-45). As this paper looks into online discussion as a form of political citizen participation, the case of this study falls into the elite-initiated reformist participation as the forum is put in place by the EC and as it has a mandate possibly even to change existing policies based on the results of the discussion.

One way of thinking of this new type of democratic participation is to look at the concept of Empowered Participatory Governance, EPG. The three principles of EPG are to 1) focus on more specific and tangible issues, 2) involve the stakeholder affected by the problem in the discussions and to 3) come up with solutions to the problems in a deliberative way (Fung et al 2003:15). This *deepening of democracy* would put the focus back to what is central for democracy, that is people's active political participation and dialogue that together can produce public policies that make for a healthy society and economy (Fung et al. 2003).

What this discussion shows is that the traditional democratic processes and models of governance seem not to provide citizens with enough confidence to the legitimacy of policy formation (Coleman *et al.* 2001). The big question then remains about how to facilitate this normative change - as well as the tools - of the more citizen-oriented democratic processes and to increasingly engage the public in policy discussion.

2.1 eDEMOCRACY AND ePARTICIPATION

To look at these challenges of traditional democracy and deliberation, this chapter will focus on the theoretical explanations on how these concepts have changed or can change due to the advances in information and communication technologies. The huge leaps in the ICTs have not just changed our everyday lives but more and more also present governments and governmental institutions with the challenge of modernizing their administration (Meijer *et al.* 2012). The ICTs have not just made it possible for citizens to vote online, but as the ways of online public engagement have developed, also the skepticism towards internet as a public policy discussion forum have decreased (Qvortrup

2007:67). The starting point for explaining this birth of eDemocracy is to look at how the Internet has broadened the idea of how and where deliberative democracy can take place in the 21st century.

The effect of Internet might be debated in regard to the successes of online platforms in facilitating deliberative public discussion, but what is often agreed upon is that the new ICTs have potential to facilitate new kind of interactive policy-making (Coleman *et al*. 2001:16–17). This is done in online public spheres that can enable deliberative communication between citizens as well as between citizens and the authorities (Tsagarousianou 1999:195-196, Wright 2006:550). The three areas of potential benefits from the use of ICTs in the public policy area are related to providing information, engaging deliberation and participating in the decision making (Tsagarousianou 1999). Indeed, ICTs in increasing the participation through a discursive dialogue is often at the essence of how eDemocracy is defined (Keskinen 2004).

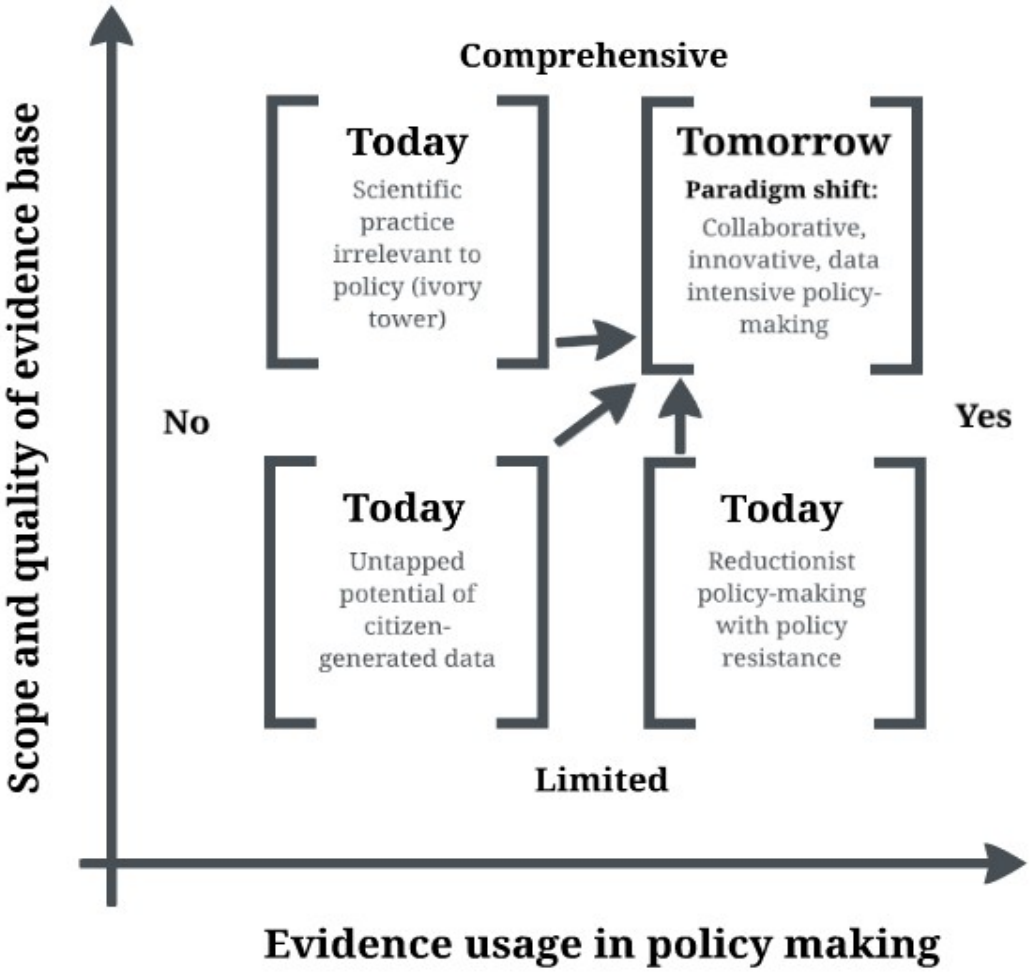
What is formally meant with eDemocracy is that communication processes between authorities and stakeholders (i.e. private individuals and companies) are simplified (Becker *et al.* 2004). In other words the ICTs are used to improve the quality of government services and information as well as to increase the accountability and transparency of the public sector to the citizens (Stylios *et al.* 2004). This transformation of reducing the gap between the governance and the governed (Oates 2003:33) as opposed to the traditional representative democracy has been said to make democracies more participatory and thus stronger (Held 1987) as it empowers "*all members of the community to more directly govern their own lives*" (Keskinen 2004:55).

In line with this, in the previous research the basic assumptions on eDemocracy have been listed as the following. The first assumption is that ICTs are to be employed to make for better decision making procedures. Secondly the aim is to change existing power structures by empowering people (Woolpert *et al.* 1998). The third and an important assumption of eDemocracy is also that the representative model of democracy will not be completely replaced by eDemocracy, but that these new ICT driven tools of political participation are complementary to it (Marchi *et al.* 2001).

On a more radical note, the use of eDemocracy in increasing political participation online thus calls for a paradigm shift (see Figure 1) as it ask for how citizens can be empowered to take part in the policy formation process, whereas the classic and Newtonian systems of democracy were largely

based on hierarchy and dominance (Becker *et al*. 2004, Keskinen 2004:56). This means that tomorrow's policy making could have a more bottom-up approach as the Internet allows for more and more citizen-generated and user-based data to be generated that could then be innovatively combined with the traditional scientifically produced data and top-down policy-making (Misuraca 2013:53).

Figure 1: The paradigm shift in policy making in terms of evidence base and usage (adapted from Misuraca 2013:53).



Therefore one of the key aspects of eDemocracy and eGovernance is the new kind of management and use of knowledge, where the traditional more control-based public administration will more and more shift to service- and content-based public administration. Here the emphasis is also on

governmental learning, as new ways of creating and collecting information for decision-making can be constructed through new public spaces of policy deliberation (Centeno *et al.* 2005:61).

As the key aspect of the governmental learning in the information age is user-centricity, as in empowerment of the citizens and the creation of public value for them (Centeno *et al.* 2005:2). Therefore even with the new spaces for online participation, for the citizens to be able to participate in the democratic processes fully, certain elements – such as trust, access to relevant information, commitment from politicians to take into account the views of the citizens etc. – are required for the truly democratic participation to take place (Coleman *et al.* 2001).

The success of these shifts towards eGovernment and eDemocracy therefore depend on a number of issues such as the technology, the financial and organisational resources as well as legal and political frameworks and most importantly to the people using and operating them. The implementation of online democracy initiatives also has profound effects not just on the political process itself but also on the structures and delivery of services as well as to the administrative processes themselves, and if these are not paid enough attention and executed in a sustainable way there is an excessive risk of losing the long-term positive effects of the implemented eGovernment programmes (Aichholzer 2004:1-2).

This normative shift in the understanding of political processes thus calls for transformational politics - with the elements of chaos, probability and randomness - as there are different methods for interactive participatory and deliberative decision making between politicians, authorities and citizens and since there is no consensus on a global model that would suit everyone (Becker *et al*. 2004, Keskinen 2004:56).

2.1.1 INTERNET AS A TOOL OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

In the previous theorization of eDemocracy so far four models have been identified on how it can work. The first one is direct online democracy, which is though most often rejected due to its unmanageability. The second model is concerned with online communities and how the governments can connect with the online groups that already exist or how the governments can create and utilise new groups in policy making. The third model of eDemocracy deals with the extensive use of online techniques, such as online surveys and polls, in digging into the public

opinion. This model is currently the most common approach to eDemocracy by governments. However, to facilitate any deeper discussions in the process of forming public opinion a fourth model has been suggested, which deals with engaging the public in online policy deliberation (Coleman *et al.* 2001:5). This fourth as a more interactive model is also the one that this thesis is interested in.

This mix of different kinds of rather untested models of eDemocracy has led to a situation where governments around the world are setting up various eDemocracy trials (Aichholzer 2004:2). Within the modernization of public administration eDemocracy has become the buzzword of the day (Lenk 2002). This is no cause for wonder as the effective integration of ICT into government processes has been said to for example improve the quality of policy making, increase the speed of new policy formulation, enhance evidence-based policy making as well as to reinforce long-term policy planning (Misuraca 2013:49).

Within eGovernment initiatives, so far the ICT has most often been used to improve the quality and efficiency of existing public services by utilizing cheaper distribution channels or to complement existing services with online features. This means that the potential of ICTs in creating true democratic discourse has been rather unexplored (Oates 2003:33). This is because there are still many challenges to be solved for a democracy enhancing type of online public policy discussion to be possible. These challenges include for example the need for creation of new kinds of collective leadership roles within the public administration instead of the traditional bureaucratic roles. In addition the policy discussions need to be made more attractive to people online, by for example utilising gaming strategies. Finally there are some problems regarding security, especially in terms of how citizens need to identify themselves wen taking part in policy discussion online, so that people are not forced to disclose more than they feel comfortable (Meijer *et al.* 2012:60).

On the other hand there are also more somber views of the possibilities of the Internet for democracy, e.g. in regard to the cacophony of voices that talk without listening as mentioned before (e.g. Barber 1999:40). In addition fears have been vocalised about the even further fragmentation of public sphere due to the ICTs that would even further balkanize politics (Bellamy *et al.* 1999:169). So even though the potential of ICTs to change governance - especially in terms of how eDemocracy can increase the interactivity and participation of people in democratic processes - has sometimes been regarded as utopian (e.g. Norris 2010), what can be stated is that the use of ICTs is

already strengthening the link between citizens and public decision makers (OECD, 2003a). This is because eDemocracy can present an answer to some of the practical limitations of deliberation as the Internet, through for example discussion forums, can house political discussions in a scale that was impossible before (Coleman *et al.* 2001).

Therefore this technological determinism can be dealt with, as the fears regarding undeliberative and exclusive online behavior are in many ways symptoms of how the online discussions are designed and administered. Therefore also the degree of deliberation and the democratic possibilities of online activities are not "*a product of the technology as such, but of the ways in which it is constructed, by the way it is designed*" (Wright *et al.* 2007:850,853). The vitality of a virtual public sphere has been regarded as stemming from the three ingredients that have to do with the design of the platform. Firstly there is a need for human capacity regarding the skills and capacities of a person for example to ensure needed computer literacy. Secondly the public sphere needs to be inclusive in terms of that everyone affected needs to be able to access and participate in the discussion. Thirdly, and most importantly, the policy discussion needs to be deliberative in order for the public sphere to be considered to be democratic. (Wilhelm 2000:32-34). This paper is focusing on this third aspect of the public sphere and the following chapter will give some inputs on how the concept of deliberation is understood and how previous literature has studied deliberation online.

3 DELIBERATION

As democracy can be thought of as stemming from participation, the ways in which people participate is a crucial part of the story. Deliberation is often seen as the ideal of democracy (e.g. Wright *et al.* 2007), thus there is a call for deliberative public institutions and civic culture (Levine *et al.* 2005:1). This aspect of the current theorizing of democracy that focuses on deliberation has even lead to statements about the "deliberative turn" occurring in the theory of democracy (Steiner *et al.* 2004:17).

The widest definitions of deliberation argue that any interactive communication where actors seek to affect each other's' decisions by presenting politically relevant facts and values in order to change the others' beliefs should be regarded as democratic deliberation. This however does not differenti-

ate between deceitful and truthful communication and therefore a more narrow definition should be adopted, in which deliberation relies on discussants being honest about their arguments that they base on listening others' points of views and reasoning. In addition deliberation requires people to be open to changing their opinions based on emerging facts and information (Kamarck *et al.* 2002:23).

Deliberation is often explained as a way to reach political decisions, in which actors are willing to listen to each other's arguments while still trying to convince others with their own position (Naurin 2009:36-38). This means that the goal of a deliberative public discussion is preference formation instead of affirmation of previously set preferences (Coleman *et al.* 2001:20).Therefore at the core of a deliberative democracy is then the notion of citizens engaging by talking about their preferences instead of merely registering them (Wright *et al.* 2007:851). As deliberation is based on discussing, the way people talk is naturally of great importance. Here the key words are respect and argumentation. This means that the arguments made within the discussion are to be respected by others as well as that when better arguments come along, they will prevail in the discussion if they are seen to enhance the common good (Steiner *et al.* 2004:3-5).

For public deliberation to take place citizens need to be able to discuss and scrutinize competing policy options. This requires people to have access to information that is needed for preference formation, openness that allows the agenda of the discussion to take its course organically, freedom of ideas and free interaction between participants as well as enough time to look into the issues properly. In addition the ones involved in the deliberative discussion concerning a specific issue should be the ones who are affected by the issue at hand. This might also require efforts to reach those who represent the affected stakeholders (Coleman *et al.* 2001:6). Other conditions of deliberation that have been discussed before are that substantive political messages need to be able to be exchanged at length and that these messages need to be reflected and debated in order to test them against rivaling arguments in an interactive setting (Fishkin 1992).

In previous theorizing of deliberation, its positive sides have been described as 1) that the quality of the discussions is usually high (i.e. in-depth and serious) as motivated and knowledgeable participants take part in the discussion, 2) that the participants like to participate in the discussions, as well as 3) that the products of deliberative discussions are often excellent (Levine et al. 2005: 1-

2). The side-effects of deliberation have also been described as resulting in more legitimate decisions that then in turn stabilize political systems (Steiner et al. 2004:17).

On a more negative note deliberation has been described to be difficult to organize due to problems with the scalability of the discussions to a representative enough group of citizens. In addition it has been stated that deliberative public policy discussions are sometimes unable to reach consensus, and that this might be one of the reasons, why the outcomes of the discussions do not always lead to political action (Levine *et al.* 2005: 3-4).

For deliberation to take place the concept of a physical or a virtual public sphere is of great importance. This can be understood as the place where private people come together to form the public and where they can raise societal issues (Habermas 1991:176). Habermas' public sphere effectively is the "the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, hence, an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction", where also critical voices towards the state can be expressed (Fraser 1990:57).

This idea of an inclusive and openly accessible public sphere has however been dismissed as not fully functioning in the late-capitalist societies and the rethinking of the concept have been called for. Issues of for example inequality prevent people from participating in a peer-to-peer deliberation and where a multiplicity of public spheres might work better than a single public sphere (Fraser 1990:77). One of the solutions suggested to reinvigorate public deliberation is the concept of eDeliberation, where the Internet facilitates the discussions as will be discussed in the next section.

3.1 PREVIOUS L ITERATURE ON eDELIBERATION

The earlier academic papers conducted regarding online discussions did not give the most admiring picture of the phenomenon. A decade ago the summary of one of these studies was "[p]eople talking without listening, confirming rather than problematizing dogmas, convicting rather than convincing adversaries, passing along responsibility to others for everything that has gone wrong in their lives" (Barber 1999: 40). This criticism has then been rather commonly supported also in more recent literature and empirical analysis (Wright *et al.* 2007:852).

This however, should not be seen as proof for that there is no hope for democratic and deliberative discussions taking place online. This is because many of the previous political online discussions, that have been the subjects of empirical analyses, have been of a specific type, typically an unmoderated one (Wright *et al.* 2007:853). In addition many of the most recent studies point to the fact that – rather than being stuck with skepticism and technological determinism – online discussions can be *designed* in a way that does facilitate deliberation.

A study conducted on the government-run discussion forums both at the local and national levels in the United Kingdom has suggested that there are three types of designs for online discussions (Wright *et al.* 2007:854-855). These are

- Policy forums, that are highly structured and focused and where the inputs from the participants are made directly to the policymaking process;
- 'Have your say' forums, with relatively unstructured discussions, where people can post about issues that they want versus what the government wants to know about; and
- Mixed forums, with characteristics from both of the above mentioned forums (Wright *et al.* 2007:854-855).

This paper is looking into a mixed forum, as the case in point has a highly-defined topic of which to discuss about. However the discussion itself is rather open and unstructured so that people do not only have to write about the specific predefined aspects of the discussion topic.

In order for deliberation to take place on an online discussion forum, previous literature has defined some characteristics that can facilitate deliberative policy discussion. For example it has been stated that online deliberation needs to be moderated and rule-based if it is to contribute to democratic policy making (Coleman *et al.* 2001:20). In addition polls conducted in the United Kingdom and Denmark that asked about what kind of democratic engagement would suit the internet users themselves have revealed that most important parts of this process are the citizens' own skills regarding how to engage in constructive online deliberation. The same polls also suggested very strongly that the citizens need to feel that they are being heard as well as that the policy discussion are designed and conducted in a way that people can understand them and take part in them. This means that the language of the discussions needs to avoid the typical jargon of the governments (Coleman *et al.* 2001:23).

When looking at the discussion process itself previous content analysis conducted on policy forums has found four components that make the online policy discussion deliberative or not. First key question is whether the posts made on the discussion forum are merely about providing and seeking information than deliberative articulations of interests through which ideas are shared and negotiated. The second aspect of a deliberative discussion is that opinions should be exchanged in a way that incorporates and responds to other discussants' viewpoints. These two points answer the question of whether the online discussion is used to amplify one's own opinions or whether genuine deliberative interaction is taking place (Wilhelm 2000:88).

In addition the online public policy discussions should allow for a heterogeneous group to participate in this type of eDemocracy process. In this setting the key should be to avoid for example a situation, where the posts made on the forum are homogeneous in terms of for example political affiliations and opinions. The content of the arguments presented on an online forum should also be substantive and susceptible to criticism, so that they can be debated rationally (Wilhelm 2000:89-90).

3.2 STUDYING eDELIBERATION AND ePARTICIPATION

Past years have seen a surge in books about the potential effects of ICTs on democratic processes. However academic and empirical research on public policy initiatives online is still rather limited, which in turn provides some challenges to the compilation of the literature review (Kumar *et al.* 2007:65). Most of the examples found while compiling this literature review stem from the early 2000s or even earlier. Therefore these examples need to put into their context, in which the ICTs were still not presented in the everyday lives of people as they are now.

There are however some examples of studies that have engaged for example in empirical-analytical analysis, on case study and ethnographic approaches as well as surveys, content analysis and experimental design when looking at online participation (Wilhelm 2000:24,27). Most of these studies have been interested in the different ways in which the ICTs have changed democratic processes through mechanisms such as electronic voting, providing information online as well as online polls and surveys and to a far lesser extent on actual policy discussion online.

A number of case studies that have been conducted on the workings of eDemocracy have been focused on local and regional level of analysis, for example taking the national or even more often citywide programs as the unit of analysis (Tsagarousianou 1999:169). The obvious problem with conclusions from this type of case studies is their lack of generalizability to other cases (Wilhelm 2000:25) such as the case of this study, where the discussions take place on an international level.

Some ethnographic studies have also been conducted to look into the context of taking part in political communication (Geertz 1973). One example of this type of study comes from a research basing on interviews with 15 users of the PeaceNet online forum (Sachs 1995). The results of this study were however more about how the communication on the forum was rather jumpy and nonlinear, than about the impact of online life in the long-term (Wilhelm 2000:26).

One of the least used methods of studying online democracy is the survey research. The problems with this are for example reaching all of the users and not just the ones online at the given time (Wilhelm 2000:26). This has resulted in studies showing very different results for who are participating online and who are lacking behind (see e.g. Birdsell *et al.* 1998 as well as Hoffman *et al.* 1998). One way to try to avoid this is to have as large´and as representative sample as possible in order to be able to compare the results with census data (Wilhelm 2000:27). Some of the most noted large-n survey studies (Bimber 1998a N=2,034 and Bimber 1998b N=13,031) that looked into the political participation online have noted that it is rather unlikely that Internet would change the existing patterns of participation and citizen-to-government participation.

The problem with these studies is naturally that they might not have been able to project the huge leaps in information and communication technologies that have been taken in last decade or so. Some later surveys on online participation have indeed shown that when looking into the 'contextualised' model of online political activity, there is support for the idea of Internet bringing new people to become politically active as people that are inactive in the traditional forms of political participation are in fact presented in political discussions online (Gibson *et al.* 2005 N=1,972).

The studies on online political discussions have also been based on finding the causes and effects through experimental design. This method is however rather complicated by the lack of equivalent comparison groups, to be able to detect the changes in behaviour for groups with and without the treatment. The possibilities of this method however lie in the valuable information about whether being online makes a difference compared to interacting in a face-to-face public sphere (Wilhelm 2000:29).

For this paper the previous studies using content analysis as their method are the most relevant as they have been looking into the the actual content of and how people interact in the online discussions. One of the earliest studies about online political participation that used content analysis, was about the US-based Usenet forums looking into how messages were exchanged on three of the forums. The results of this study showed that to be able to avoid the cacophony of the discussion, moderated forums were the best solution to create meaningful political discussion (Davis 1999).

Similar results have also been found while using content analysis to study the degree of deliberativeness of the discussions on the Usenet forums. In this particular research the content was analysed through eight categories. The messages were coded as 1) providing information, 2) seeking information, 3) planting a seed for discussions, 4) incorporating opinions and ideas from other posts, 5) responding to other posts as well as messages, 6) validating and rationalizing preferences and those that 7) do not present any validity nor reason for the presented opinions. In addition the deliberativeness of the discussions was assessed based on how 8) homogeneous the preferences presented in the posts were (Wilhelm 2000:94). The results of this study showed that the deliberativeness of the discussions was rather flailing as for example posts focusing on the reinforcement of one's own ideas were rather frequent (Wilhelm 2000:102).

When studying the European Commission's online discussion platform FUTURUM (used during 2001-2003), a contradicting result was however received while using the same methodology and categorisation as in the Usenet study (Wright 2007). This study however looked at the deliberativeness of the discussions as one of the parts in a more general study on whether the FUTURUM platform could be considered as a public sphere in its traditional sense. The result of this study showed that the debates on FUTURUM were in fact discursive and that because of this

there is "*potential for a general transnational public sphere ... to be created by participation in an online discussion fora*" (Wright 2007:1178).

The political discussions on the Usenet as well as on the FUTURUM platforms looked into in these previous studies differ however extensively from the case chosen for this paper as Usenet is based on so called "newsgroups" where people can post comments and ideas without a predefined topic. In a similar sense also the EU's FUTURUM platform, as it aimed at housing "*public debate on the future of Europe*" (European Commission 2001) made the discussions drastically different from the discussions on the Digital Agenda discussion platform. This is because on both of these previously studied platforms there was no goal of directly affecting policy making in the same way as through the discussions on the DA discussion forum. In addition the active involvement of officials or government representatives in the discussions is missing in both of these cases. Indeed, what has previously been identified as a gap in this field of research is looking into the innovative eDemocracy models where the governments are attempting to engage and share information with large audiences in order to format policies that are directed at solving collective issues (Misuraca 2013:62).

One of the earlier studies looking into engaging public to deliberate and discuss policy online in interaction with policy-makers comes from the UK, where in local mayor's elections, a study was conducted about how eDemocracy can work to reinvigorate local politics. This small experiment where 23 students were given a change to discuss with the mayoral candidates was however somewhat discouraging as the study found that no real dialogue between the citizens and their representatives emerged. This was however though to be more of a problem about educating people about eDemocracy than whether the online public policy discussion itself can work (Oates 2003).

On the other end of online deliberation studies there have been some attempts to understanding cross-border mass-deliberation online (Velikanov 2010). This particular study has however been rather about exploring and experimenting with the possibilities of this type of deliberation, instead of looking into a real-life case that are utilising it. This gap in the eDeliberation literature therefore calls for empirical evidence on how actual government initiatives on international mass-deliberation on public policy work.

In this literature review the discussion first took off from literature on the potential of online discussions. After this the discussion was then expanded to cover some of the previous empirical analysis of online public policy discussions, of which little is known in terms of how they work on an international level when the goal of the forum is to engage with the public in order to form policy suggestions. This paper is interested in exploring this gap. This is also one of the reasons why the research question of this paper will benefit from an operationalization that does not solely rely on these previous categorisations of online discussions.

This is also where the grounded theory approach chosen for this study becomes useful as the analysis of the data will not be predefined to fit any certain categorisation or a coding scheme as will be explained in the chapter five. Grounded theory will also be helpful to avoid the problem identified in most of the previous research on online policy discussion, which is that the analysis has been largely driven by the deliberative criteria. This then means that researchers might have neglected some other, even crucial, characteristics of online discussions that cannot be classified under this analytical framework (Freelon 2010:1175).

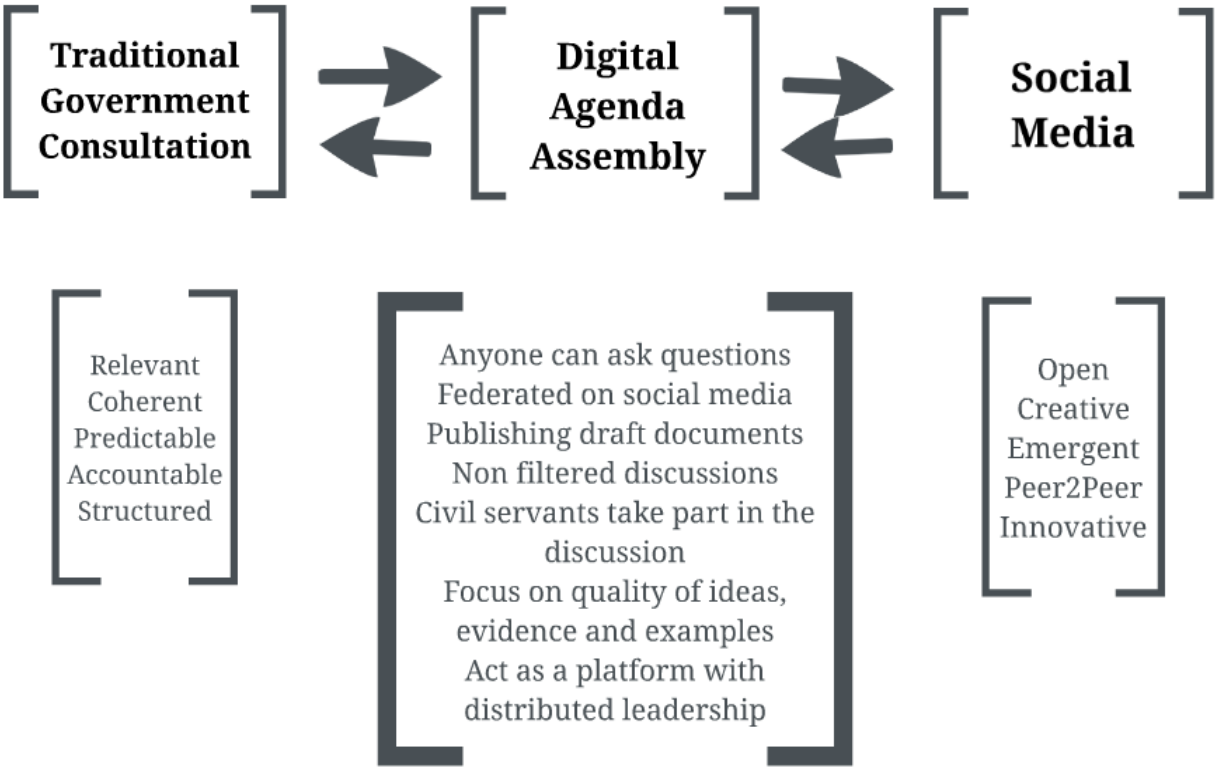
4 THE CASE AND THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The case looked into in this study is that of the Digital Agenda (DA) online engagement platform put up by the European Commission in the spring of 2012 to discuss the Digital Agenda for Europe (DAE) policy. This online platform was to house discussion prior to the second Digital Agenda Assembly (DAA), where the progress made in the DAE is assessed (European Commission 2013).

What makes this attempt unique compared to other EC online consultations (see Figure 2) is that the main goal of the platform is not to merely get feedback from stakeholders, but to generate discussion that will then provide for policy inputs. The outcome of the online discussion thus is not a "statistically valid representation of the opinions of stakeholders, but rather the leverage of collective intelligence and insights" and that the goal of the platform is not to reach consensus, but to foster new ideas for action. An additional goal of the online platform was to ease the entry to policy discussion for those outside of Brussels (European Commission 2012:30). In addition to getting the stakeholders' inputs online, the 40 most liked participants on the discussion platform

were also invited to come to the Brussels to the Digital Agenda Assembly to present their views (2012:44).

Figure 2: The Digital Agenda online engagement platform compared to other types of online outreach by the European Commission (adapted from European Commission 2012:30).



Officially the online forum was launched by the Vice-President of the European Commission Neelie Kroes on the 19th of April 2012 to precede the discussions to be held at the second annual Digital Agenda Assembly that took place in June 2012. The intentions behind the platform were argued by Ms. Kroes to be to get "active involvement of all those people [stakeholders and citizens] who are out there and interested in making it [the digital agenda] happen" (Kroes 2012).

When looking at the quantity of the online discussions prior to the DAA 2012, the success of the platform is evident as the number of comments and users on the platform went well beyond the EC's expectations. The DA platform went from the expected 150 users to the actual 1,400 users and from the expected 500 contributions to the actual 2,000 contributions; as well to 10,000 unique

visitors during the time frame from the launch to the start of the DAA (European Commission 2012).

However, what this study is mainly interested in are the deliberative aspects of the online discussion in order to assess its usefulness in facilitating democratic processes. This thesis has two aims. Firstly to look into whether democratic processes and deliberative policy discussion can take place online and secondly, by using a grounded theory approach, to expand the current theories on how online policy discussions work.

To reach the first aim, the following two research questions have been formulated

> Question 1: *Can the Internet and especially government-driven online forums facilitate deliberative public policy discussion?*
>
> Question 2: *How well did the online forum designed for the Digital Agenda Assembly 2012 facilitate deliberation in the public discussion regarding the Digital Agenda for Europe policy?*

To reach the second aim and to be able to answer the first two research question a third, more descriptive, subquestion has been formulated:

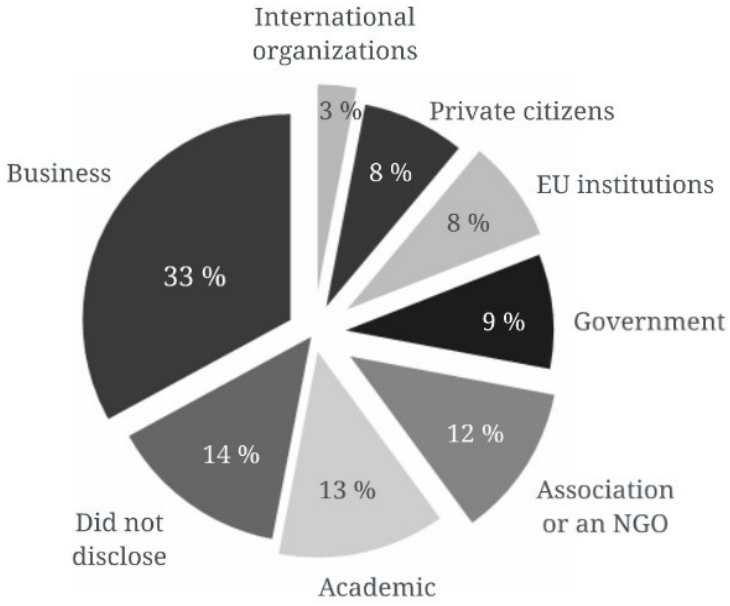
> Question 3: *How do policy discussions take place on a government-driven online discussion forum?*

The starting point for assessing the deliberative power of the EU-governed discussion platform that is looked into in this study should therefore start with how well it logically fits into the criteria of an online public sphere. The obvious limitations to the democratic power of the case stem already from its context as for example the inclusiveness of the platform will evidently always fall short of including in the discussions everyone who is affected by the policy that is being discussed. This problem is being acknowledge by the moderators of the platform as there are attempts to trying to reach stakeholders by the EC as well as the platform is kept open for anyone. However this still does not mean that all relevant people, even if one would reach them, would have the skills needed to take part in the online discussions.

On a more positive note what can be seen when looking at the qualities of the participants is that all of the EU-member countries were in fact presented in the DA online discussions (see Figure 3), albeit that some of the countries, such as Spain, United Kingdom and especially Belgium were overrepresented, whereas the Eastern-European countries were underrepresented. In addition, what is also positive, is that the discussants did represent a wide arrange of affiliations (see Figure 4), with the largest group of participants – with business affiliations – only taking up to 33 per cent of all the slots.

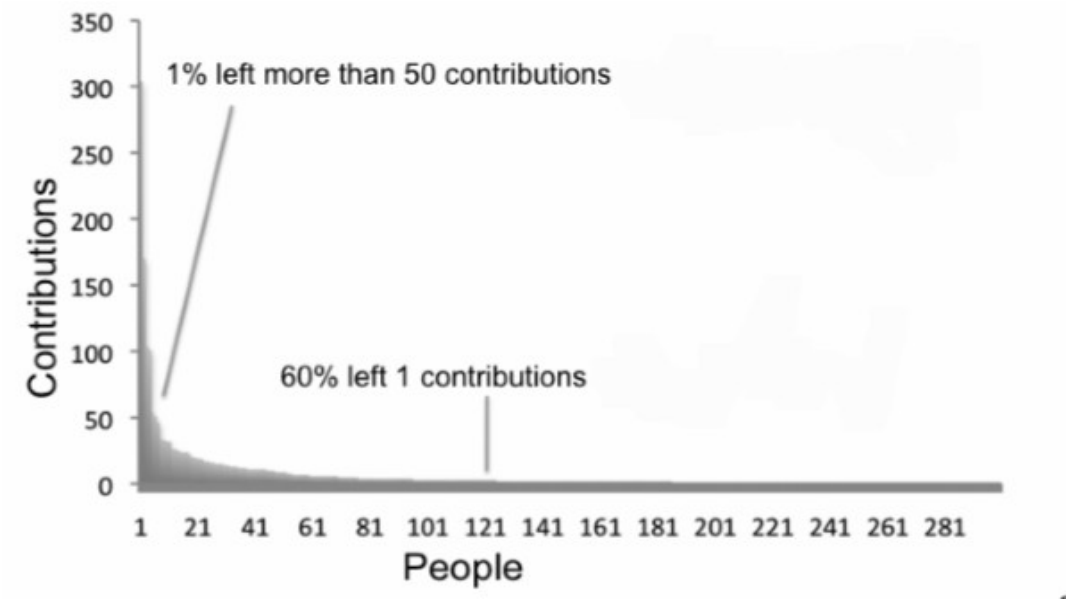
Figure 3: Map of the origins of the participants on the DA12 online platform (European Commission 2012)

Figure 4 The affiliation of the participants on the DA12 online discussion platform (European Commission 2012)



However even provided with skills to take part in the discussion, Figure 5 shows that representativeness still was an issue within the discussions as 1 per cent of all of the participants on the DA12 platform were responsible for more than 50 contributions each, whereas 60 per cent of all of the participants only left 1 contribution.

Figure 5: Participation on the DA12 online discussion platform (European Commission 2012)



Beside the problems of inclusiveness and human capacity, the DA platform as an online public sphere is however rather unique in its goal of interaction between the people and the government as it aims at listening and hearing the European citizens as well as talking with them on the platform as EC-representatives are also taking part in the discussion. This then again can be regarded as a solid premise for deliberation to take place. In addition as the discussion is online, the participants are given a lot of time to find information and read others contributions before posting their own take on the issue, which again could lead to more deliberative policy discussion and more qualified contributions. Both of these accounts are also highlighted in an online feedback form sent to all of the registered participants of the online platform after the DAA12. Here most of the survey respondents did indeed feel that they were able to interact with the EC (see Figure 6) and that they were able to contribute to the policy discussion (see Figure 7).

Figure 6: How satisfied the DAA participants felt with the interaction with the EC (European Commission 2012)**.**

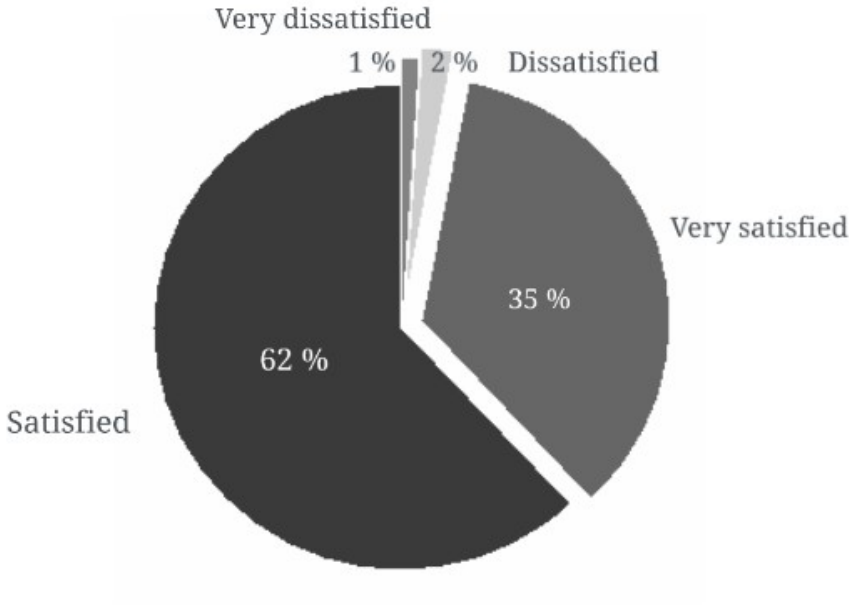
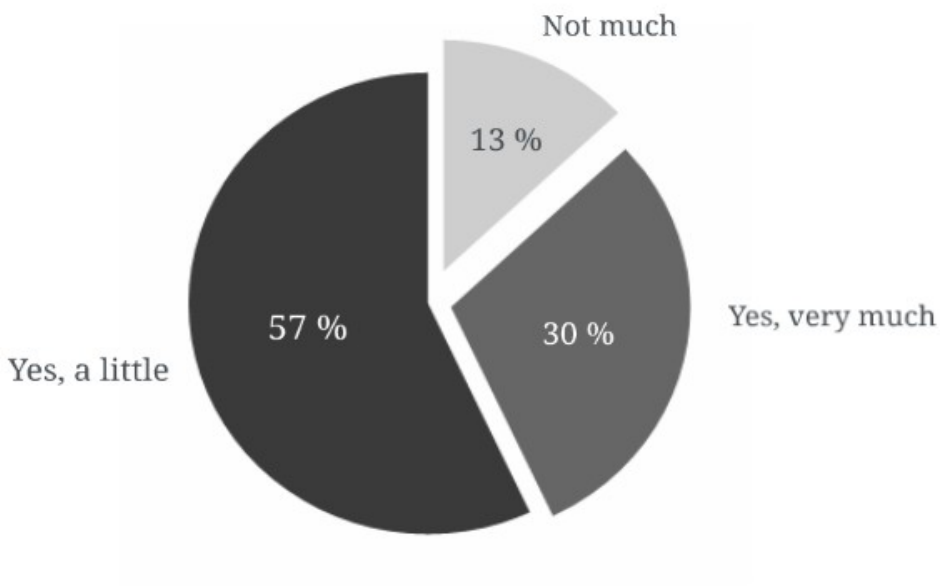


Figure 7: How much the DAA participants felt that they were able to contribute in the discussions with the EC (European Commission 2012).



This therefore gives some insights to the deliberative power of the platform in terms of its interactiveness; albeit that the number of answers to the survey was rather low with only 199 participants out of the 1400 registered users answering. Therefore it is indeed needed to take a more in-depth look into how the discussions took place and how the platform was able to facilitate interactive discussions and whether this interaction on the platform was also present between the participants and the actual ideas that were presented.

4.1 DISCUSSIONS ON THE DIGITAL AGENDA ONLINE PLATFORM

In the design of this study the case looked into is the Digital Agenda online engagement platform and more specifically the discussion group *Innovation and Entrepreneurs*. As the units of observation, this study uses all of the posts made on the chosen discussion group.

The discussions on the online engagement platform have been released as an open data file by the European Commission. In addition some the comments and discussions have been cross referenced to the discussions and comments available on the discussion forum, as the data file had some discrepancies to the actual discussions that took place online. This was detected as some of the

posts were incomplete (e.g. no author of the posts was mentioned or the sentences were incomplete) in the datafile released by the EC.

In the original data file all of the discussion openings and the comments were compiled by discussions groups to ten separate files, in which the posts were presented in chronological order. For the purposes of this study, the actual discussion threads have then been recreated in order to be able to make conclusions on how the posts interact with each other. All of the discussions analysed in this study took place between the 10th of April 2012 and the 20th of June 2012. This is the time between the launch of the platform and the beginning of the Digital Agenda Assembly 2012 conference on the 21st of June 2012.

On the platform the discussions were divided into ten different groups. For the purposes of this paper one of the discussion groups, Group 8: Innovation and Entrepreneurs, is chosen as to be analysed[1]. This discussion group was the one group that resulted in the highest amount of concrete policy actions and commitments to be undertaken by the European Commission in the aftermath of the DAA 2012 (European Commission 2012:103), which makes it the most interesting group to study regarding how these policy suggestions came to be.

On average the discussion groups had 238 contributions and 92 participants, whereas the discussion group chosen this study had 132 participants and 332 platform contributions posted in 44 different discussion threads ranging from *policy support to start-ups* to *web entrepreneurs* and *social innovation*. In terms of contributions, as seen in Figure 8, this was the third most used discussion group and in terms of participants the second biggest (European Commission 2012:37). Out of these 332 platform contributions in the end 237 posts by 103 participants were included in the analysis, as for example some posts were posted twice and a few were posted in a Spanish, even though the language of the platform is English[2]. Most of them were however excluded from this analysis as they were posted on the platform after the beginning of the DAA, which means that these posts were not included in the policy input during the assembly.

1 For an example of the data see APPENDIX 2. The whole data set is not presented in the paper regarding issues of space and the full data set for all of the 44 discussions is available from the author as a datafile.

2 In addition coding and analysing of the Spanish language comments was not done due to language restrictions and thus to avoid deviations and mistakes in the coding process.

Figure 8: Participants and contributions on the DA online engagement platform based on the discussion groups. The discussion group analysed in this study is highlighted (adapted from European Commission 2012).

Discussion group	Contributions	Participants
Convergent media platforms	138	75
High-speed connections	396	76
E-commerce	173	62
Social media	393	163
Data and content	227	109
Cloud	129	113
Security	291	77
Innovation and entrepreneurs	332	132
Public services	158	42
Jobs and skills	140	69

The discussion group that has been chosen for the study has more contributions and participants than the average, which makes it relevant for the study as with more units of observation there is a higher chance for saturation needed to make meaningful categorisations from the data. Still the discussion group remains more generalizable to the rest of the case of the Digital Agenda online platform as it is not an extreme regarding neither the number of participants nor the amount of posts.

Applying a comparative analysis between multiple units of analysis, i.e. two or more discussion groups, could of course give more reliable results to be generalized to the case and its deliberative power. However limiting the number of observations to a single unit of analysis is needed regarding the scope of the study as content analysis is a very labor-intensive method of research (Lewis-Beck *et al.* 2004:187). The reason why sampling has not been used to limit the number of observations and to be able to pick them from multiple discussion groups is that that would make it more difficult, or even impossible, to get a coherent understanding of the workings of the discussions and how the posts in different discussion threads interact with each other within a discussion group.

5 CONTENT ANALYSIS BASED ON GROUNDED THEORY

This study is based on the grounded theory approach, which means that it rests on the idea of discovering rather than testing variables. The aim for qualitative research, such as this, is therefore firstly to describe, secondly to conceptualize and ultimately also to theorize the subject of the study. (Corbin *et al.* 2008:53). For the grounded theory approach conceptualization is at the core of the research process (Glaser 2001:9). This is done with the help of qualitative analysis and interpreting of data to gain empirical knowledge and to create meaning. Grounded theory is especially well suited to study phenomena that are not that well studied (Corbin *et al.* 2008:1), which is also why it has been chosen as the approach of this study.

For some researchers grounded theory is at its core qualitative (e.g. Corbin et al. 2008, Strauss *et al.* 1998), whereas others do not limit grounded theory to qualitative methods or to the constructivist perspective (Charmaz 2003:251). The main difference between the constructivist and objectivist grounded theory lies in the way they perceive the world. The constructivist research does not discover aspects of reality as it is the researcher-data interaction that shapes what will be measured and how it will be defined and analysed. As the opposite, within objectivist/positivist view of research, the external world can be analysed and explained to some extent and within the conditions that prevail (Charmaz 2003:273-274).

For this study the line between the two above mentioned strands of research are rather mixed as the goal is to create interpretations of the data in order to show something of how the case in point functions. This is done with the premise of subjectivity of the interaction between the data and the researcher as the main analytical tool used to code the data is qualitative content analysis. However, this study will also aid the analysis with some quantitative tools of analysis in order to handle the amount of data that is looked into. The goal of the research is also to be able to make conclusions of the case that can be generalized to other cases that fulfill similar conditions.

As explained in the literature review of this paper, the previous research has made generalisations about online public spheres based on for example case study approaches, survey methodologies as well as content analysis, or experimental design (Wilhelm 2000:24). At its core this study wants to challenge and expand the existing categorisations of online discussions and the theorizing of the democratic potential of online forums and to come up with a framework of concepts and categories

suitable for theorizing about this specific type of public policy discussion online. To be able to do this as freely as possible in this study the categorisation of the discussions and comments is performed without a pre-defined set of categories into which the data should fall in. Instead the categorisation is done organically, with the help of the tools of content analysis related to the grounded theory approach.

The empirical analysis of the data used in this study starts with similar tools as used in qualitative content analysis approach, where the characteristics of the text are identified systematically and objectively (Wilhelm 2000:28). Content analysis in this study is considered as a method of analysing data rather than an approach to analysis. Here this method is used to making valid and replicable inferences between the data and its context (Krippendorff 1980) with the aim of describing a phenomenon by creating models or conceptual systems through coding data into concepts and categories (Elo *et al.* 2007:108). For this study the reason for using content analysis is to look precisely into what is said and how others react to what is being said in order to evaluate whether online forums are useful for articulating political issues (Wilhelm 2000:28).

A study using content analysis can be designed in two ways, of which in the traditional one the categories in which the text is coded into are constructed based on hypotheses derived from theories (Weber 1990). This deductive content analysis is however not as usable when previous knowledge the phenomenon of the study is limited or fragmented and when the purpose of the study is not to test existing theories (Elo *et al.* 2007:109). Therefore in this study in line with the grounded theory approach, the content analysis starts free of a pre-designed coding scheme in order to detect all possible meanings that can be found in the data. As this inductive process of analysis continues the characteristics of the data will ultimately be turned into concepts that can vary in levels of abstraction, from the basic level concepts to more broader and explanatory categories (Corbin *et al.* 2008:52).

Within the grounded theory approach the coding practices can be divided into three different levels. The first step of the process is referred to as *open coding*, where the data is broken down into concepts by examining the data. In the second level of the coding process the data is then put back together, so to say, by building relationships and making connections between the concepts to form

categories. This is called *axial coding*. Finally *selective coding* is used to form core categories that depict the relationships between other categories (Strauss *et al.* 1990).

The strategies that can be included in the grounded theory conceptualizing process described above are the simultaneous collection and analysis of data, comparative methods, memo writing as a tool for conceptual analysis, sampling as a tool to refine the emerging theories and finally the integration of the theoretical framework (Charmaz 2003:251). The results of the grounded theory approach are therefore *concepts* as the building blocks of theory, *categories* that represent the real-world phenomenon that is being studied, *hypotheses* about the relationships between the concepts as well as *theory* as a systematically related set of well-developed categories (Strauss *et al.* 1998 and Bryman 2012:570).

In this research the coding of the data into concepts and categories will be done with the aid of the NVivo qualitative data analysis program that is designed to catch the underlying structures of a text in order to form concepts (called *nodes* in NVivo) (Lee *et al.* 2007:138). However, the computer-assisted tools of analysis, such as NVivo, are still merely assisting the analysis done by the researcher (Yin 2009:129) and are in this study not used to replace the manual coding and interpretation of the data, which bases on reading and re-reading the data as many times as is needed for the saturation of the categories. This means that the data is to be studied again and again as long as there are no more categories emerging while re-reading the data. Nevertheless the NVivo programme is highly useful for this study as it allows for building relationships - hierarchical, associative or sequential - between the codes stemming from the data, as well as since it makes it possible to use overlapping codes to explore all possible meanings of the text (Lee *et al.* 2007:139).

5.1 VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY OF THE STUDY

The generalizability of the chosen discussion group to the whole case of the Digital Agenda Assembly online platform can also be argued on the basis that all of the discussion groups on the platform have the same design for the discussions to take place, i.e. same rules, formats etc. For example on all of the discussions on the platform anyone was able to register and then start discussion threads, as well as to comment on existing discussions and/or to endorse all the comments as well as discussion openings by “liking” the post. All of the discussion groups also had

moderators kept the discussion going, started some discussion threads as well as promoted the online forum for stakeholders for example via social media and tools such as Twitter and LinkedIn (European Commission 2012).

The external validity (see e.g. Yin 2009:43) of this research stems from the fact that the results of this study will be generalizable to other public policy discussions on the platform, assuming that they follow a similar design. This is important as the EC is still using and planning on using this same online platform for policy discussion and interaction with stakeholders (European Commission 2012), which arguably points to the importance of understanding whether these online public policy discussions are indeed deliberative.

To be able to make well-founded conclusions based on the chosen methodology it is important to look at the reliability of the research design. Regarding content analysis reliability can be looked through three different concepts that are stability, reproducibility and accuracy (Krippendorff 1980: 130–154). The first aspect of reliability, s*tability,* refers to the coding and categorisation of the content being invariant over time, meaning that if the content is coded again by the same researcher, the categories stemming from the data will not change (Weber 1990). In this paper as the time scope of the research limits the number of times the same data can be coded stability is the weakest form of reliability, even though the coding of the data has been done more than once. The second aspect of reliability, reproducibility, means that the categories stemming from the data are the same even when more than one researcher is coding the same data separately (see e.g. Lee *et al.* 2007). In this study as the data is coded by just one researcher the reproducibility aspect of reliability can be enforced by conducting the research in a way that makes it possible for someone to repeat the procedures of analysis on the same case (Yin 2009:45).

Argued as the strongest form of reliability, accuracy means that the categorisation of the data corresponds strongly to a standard or a norm (Weber 1990). For this study this means that the categorisation of the discussions should to some extent fit to the existing theories of online public policy discussion. However as the type of case that is analysed in this paper is rather unstudied and as the grounded theory approach is used because of this, this form of reliability based on a norm is to be regarded with caution in this case. However as a source for accuracy one can look into how

the categorisation of the data and the theoretical conclusions derived from it respond to the overall understanding of online public policy discussions.

6 ANALYSIS

The analysis of this thesis begins by the coding and categorising of posts in the discussion group *Innovation and Entrepreneurs* on the DA online platform. The initial coding process has been repeated three times with the data consisting of 237 posts in order to reach a saturation of categories. This means that the data has been coded and re-coded multiple times in order to make logical judgments on what concepts and categories are relevant and to see how they relate to each other.

During this process 265 concepts and categories have emerged from the data that range from *basic information* (i.e. the author of post and how many votes it got etc.) to the *content of the posts.* To see all of the concepts, see APPENDIX 1 where all of the nodes from Nvivo are presented. With these concepts a hierarchy of categories based on the relationships of the codings has then been built as a logical process while the coding has advanced (see the hierarchy of concepts also in APPENDIX 1).

The data was coded so that if there was an element of any concept presented in the post, the post in its entirety has been coded to the concept. All of the 237 posts were firstly coded based on the *Basic information* about the posts, after which the actual *content of the posts* has been coded. In regard to their content the same posts were coded into as many different concepts and categories as was relevant. For an example of how the data was coded see APPENDIX 2, where the codings for Discussion thread 1 are presented.

6.1 CORE CATEGORIES

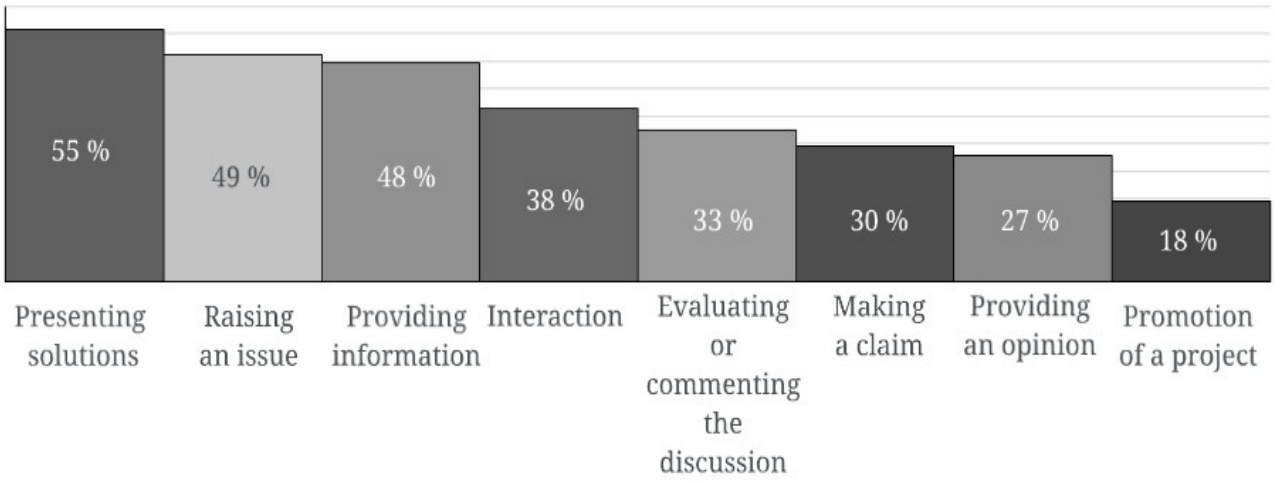
The grounded theory based content analysis used in this study resulted in the following eight core categories into which the content of the posts on this online platform were coded:

1. Presenting solutions
2. Raising an issue
3. Providing information
4. Interaction within discussions

5. Evaluating and/or commenting the discussion
6. Making a claim
7. Providing an opinion
8. Promotion of a project

To provide a more in-depth picture of how these categories were presented in the discussions group, Figure 9 shows how much space the different solutions got within the discussions[3]. This analysis shows that that *solutions were presented* in the majority of the data on this Innovation and Entrepreneurs discussion group, since more than half of the data was coded in to this category.

Figure 9: The percentage of the data that was coded into the different core categories.



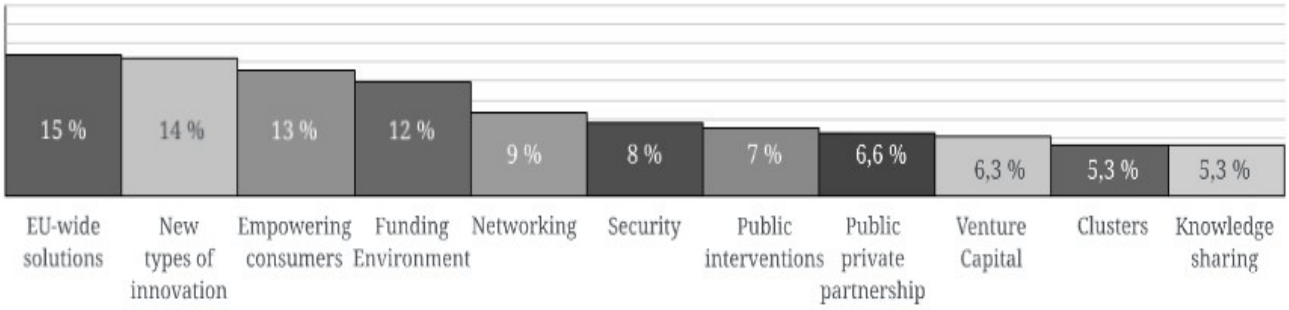
The second biggest category is *raising issues* for example about the current situation in Europe or about certain solutions that were presented. The third biggest category dealt with *providing information* and the fourth biggest category in terms of the percentage of the data shows how often the discussants *interacted* with each other. The fifth biggest category was about *evaluating and commenting the discussions*. The two following, almost equally big, categories are about *making claims* and *providing opinions* without presenting any information to back them. Finally 18 percent of the data was coded as *promoting projects*.

3 The percentage of the data has been chosen as the primary tool of analysis, since it can be regarded as the most accurate presentation on how much presence certain elements of the data got in the discussions. The other option would had been to look at the number of posts that fitted into the different categories. However as the length of the individual posts varied greatly from one-liners to many A4 pages, this would not had been the most representative way of describing the discussions and is therefore discarded from the analysis.

6.1.1 PRESENTING SOLUTIONS

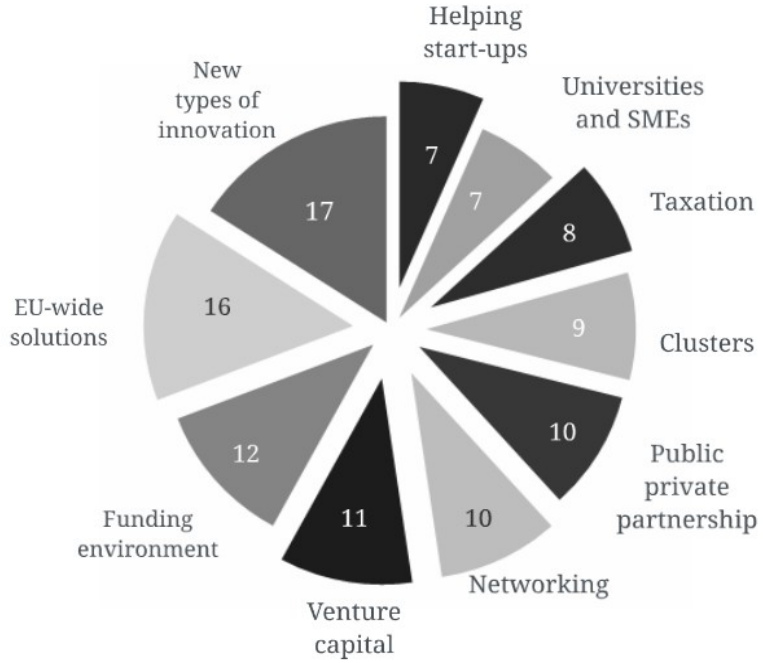
The first core category presented in the online discussions had to do with the solutions that were presented in the discussions regarding what would make Europe more innovative and entrepreneurial. This category includes the 46 different solutions presented in the posts, which ranged from e.g. *renewing taxation* and *gathering best practice* to *networking* and *public private partnerships*. Solutions were presented in roughly 55 per cent of all of the data. To see how much presense certain solutions got in the discussions an analysis was made regarding how many percentages of the data presented solutions (see Figure 10). The most often mentioned solutions were any *EU-wide solutions* that took up 15 per cent of the entire data and the *new types of innovation* (14 per cent of the data) including the concepts of *open, social* and *co-innovation*, through which the innovation processes should be made inclusive between companies and citizens in a way that new products and services are more user-based and built interactively with the users.

Figure 10: The most common solutions ranked by the percentage of the data mentioning them. Only the solutions with more than five per cent are presented.



Another relevant aspect for figuring out the most important solutions presented on the platform is how many unique discussion participants wrote about them (Figure 11). This changes the ranking of the most common solutions around as *security* and *empowering consumers* no more fit to the list and are replaced by *helping start-ups* as well the cooperation between *universities and SMEs* as well as changes in *taxation.* This is explained by the fact that both increasing online *security* and e*mpowering consumers* were presented as solutions – albeit in great length – only by one of the discussions participants.

Figure 11: The most common solutions ranked by the number of discussion participants mentioning them. Solutions mentioned by more than five users are included.



When analysing the most common solutions this way it can be seen that *the new types of innovation* were talked about by 17 of the total 103 active users on the discussion group. This was however very tightly followed by the need for *EU-wide solutions* that were presented as a solution to European innovativeness and entrepreneurialism by 16 discussion participants.

The other concrete solutions that were frequently mentioned by many participants were improving the *funding environment* in Europe. More specifically action was also required on improving companies' access to *venture capital.* In addition *networking* among European actors and the creation of p*ublic private partnerships* was seen as crucial for European innovativeness and entrepreneurship by 10 discussion participants. Other most often mentioned solutions by the discussion participants were the strengthening and supporting of *clusters* as well as making *taxation* more business friendly. In addition seven discussion participants mentioned the potential of *universities cooperating and helping small- and medium-sized enterprises* as well as other kinds of methods for *helping start-ups* to get off the ground.

When looking at the percentages of the data that the different solutions got in the discussion group other types of *public interventions* as well as *knowledge sharing* e.g. between different actors and countries could be added to the list of the most common solutions to help Europe innovate and be more entrepreneurial that were mentioned on the platform.

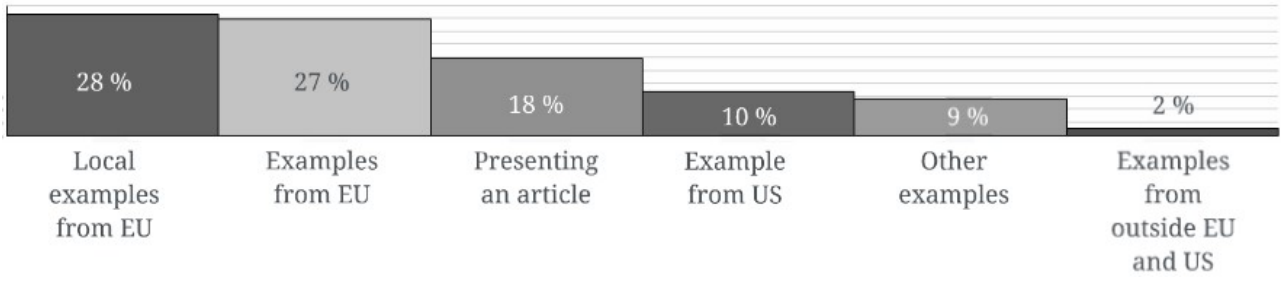
6.1.2 RAISING AN ISSUE

The second core category dealt with *raising issues* within the posts. In total 49 per cent of the data was coded within this category and issues were raised by 29 discussion participants out of the 103 active participants. This was done for example through statements along the lines of ”I sincerely believe that it is difficult to simplify the problem; again, the conditions in Silicon Valley […] are not replicable here in an exact form”. Most of the discussion participants only raised issues ones or twice within the discussions, however one of the most active users, Engberg, did this 23 times.

6.1.3 PROVIDING INFORMATION

The third core category, *providing information*, includes all kinds of posts that had some kind of external, neutrally provided information that the participants shared with others. This means backing up the posts and what is said in them by for example linking to and *presenting articles* and providing real-life *examples from Europe* and *US.* This was done in 48 per cent of the data as can be seen from Figure 12.

Figure 12: The types of information ranked by the percentage of the data mentioning them.



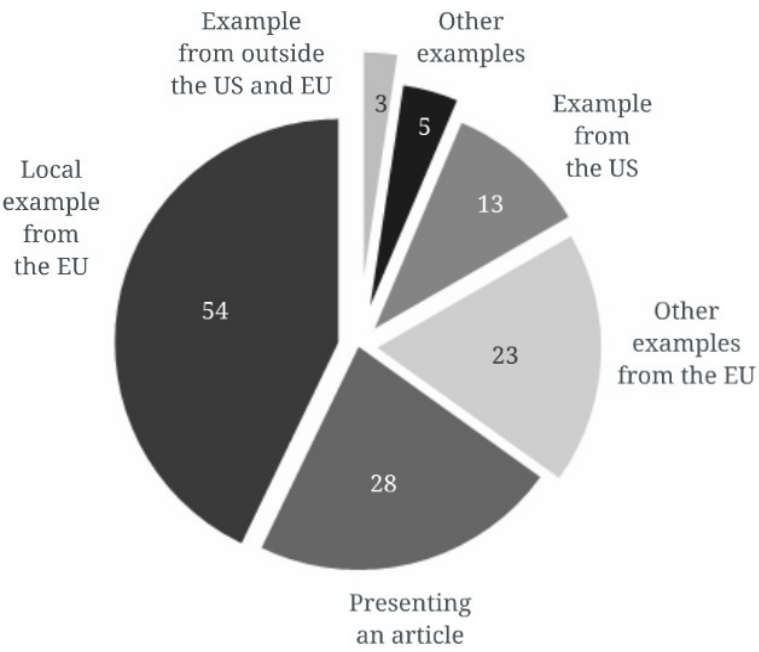
The most often provided information based on the percentage of the data were local examples from the EU as they were presented 28 per cent of the data. This category involves any examples of e.g. projects or companies that were presented as being geographically from the EU. A little over one third of all of these local examples presented a certain local social innovation project in Spain called Quadalinfo.

The second biggest group included any other examples from the EU that were not geographically located to any specific place and/or were active on the EU-level. Here for example the

entrepreneurial culture in Europe was discussed as well as examples were provided of a pan-European venture capital firm.

The third biggest category within providing information dealt with *presenting or providing links to any external articles or texts* about the topic at hand. This was done in 18 per cent of the discussions. However when looking at this category from the point of view of how many discussion participants presented articles (see figure 13), this category jumps to the most used way of presenting information.

Figure 13: The types of information ranked by the number of users mentioning them



After these examples from the EU and different kinds of articles, examples from the US were the fourth most common way of providing information. This was most often done in a way where Europe was compared to the US, e.g. ”[u]p to now the US had regulatory barriers to crowdfunding that do not necessarily exist in EU states”.

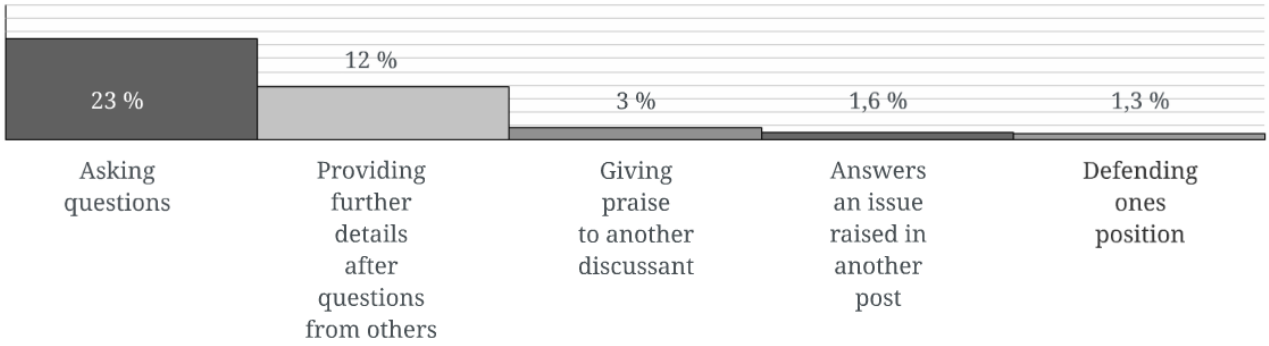
In addition there were *other types of examples* presented that were not geographically located anywhere, e.g. global companies that were mentioned as well as a few *examples also from outside of Europe and the US*. These were mostly from Israel, where a rather successful public private partnership has been implemented to help companies to get started and to grow.

6.1.4 INTERACTION WITHIN THE DISCUSSIONS

The fourth core category includes all kinds of *interaction within the discussions*. About 38 per cent of the discussion in the group had some kind of interactive element to them, with the biggest type of interaction being *asking questions* such as asking for views and opinions, asking for information and asking for further details.

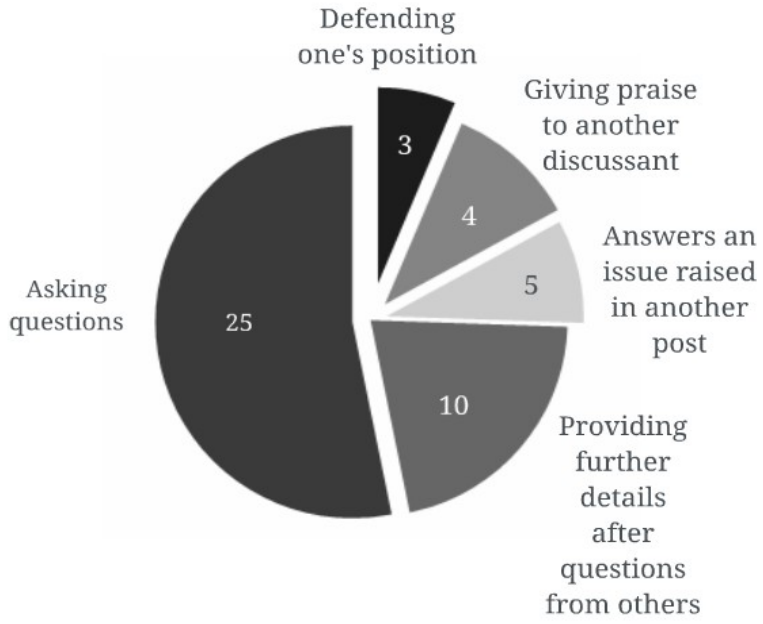
All in all 23 per cent of the data asked some kind of questions from other discussion participants. Most of the questions were directed to any discussion participant e.g.”[t]o what extent can we adopt these measures to grow our European digital-based economy?” but some were also directed towards a certain discussant that had presented a solution or raised an issue in a previous post e.g. ”[d]o you think that the startup Partnership suggested could have a program that could unlock access to capital to fuel web startup growth?”. Out of the 25 discussion participants who asked questions most did this once or twice, whereas the moderator of the discussions, user Ipujol, did this 25 times.

Figure 14: The types of interaction ranked by the percentage of the data mentioning them.



When looking at the number of discussion participants interacting in their posts, *asking questions* is still the biggest category (see Figure 15). The second biggest category is also the same as when looking at the percentage of data as a total of ten discussants *provided further information after questions from other discussants*. With the third biggest category there is however a discrepancy between when looking at the percentage of data vs. the number of discussion participants. According to the percentage this third place goes to *giving praise to another discussant* to which posts that have e.g. the following elements in them have been coded into ”Great points Tomi [...]”. The moderator, Ipujol, was also the most active discussant within this category.

Figure 15: The types of interaction ranked by the number of discussion participants mentioning them.



A small percentage of the interactiveness within the discussions also dealt with *answering an issue raised in another post*. What can be seen from the figures is that there was a big difference between how much of the data was about asking questions and how much about answering them. This does however not mean that many of the questions were left completely without answers, but that in the posts it was not mentioned that this is an answer to a specific question before, but the solutions etc. were presented in a no-interactive way without addressing the other posts or users. An example of where the answer to a question is code into this core-category of interaction is ”[t]o the questions "are there similar initiatives in European countries?" there is one that I consider really interesting [...]”.

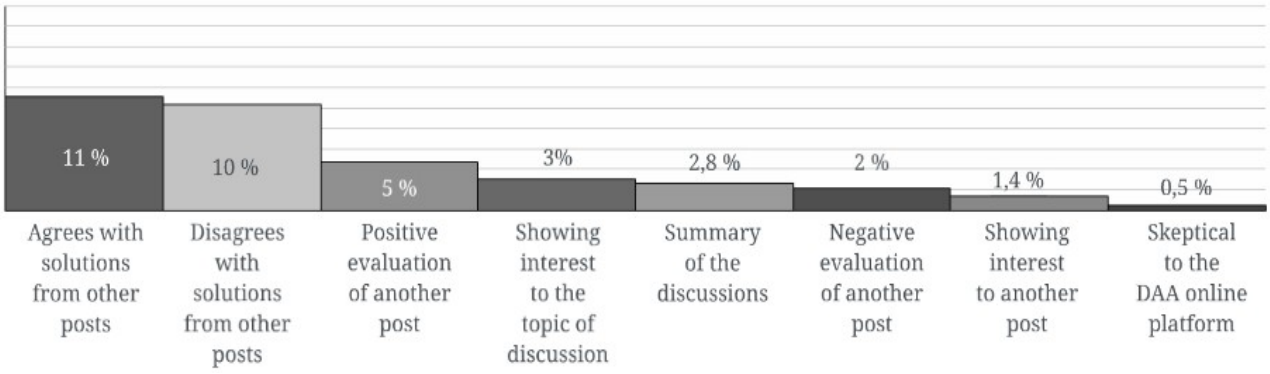
The least used type of interaction was about *defending one's position*, a category to which posts are coded if they can be interpreted as defensive towards another post. An example of this is e.g. ”I do not necessarily endorse the ideas that are present in the articles that I post as reference. I post them because they are relatively argumented, and relevant, and can bring useful discussions and idea (which has been the case here)”.

6.1.5 EVALUATING OR COMMENTING THE DISCUSSION

The fifth biggest core category that emerged from the discussions *was evaluating and/or commenting the discussions*. This was done in 33 per cent of the data and this category differs from the interaction within discussions -category as this deals more with the discussion topics than the interaction between participants. The biggest subcategories here are *agrees with the solutions presented in other posts* as well as *disagrees with the solutions presented in other posts* which got respectively 11 and 10 per cent of all of the posts (see Figure 16). After which the third biggest were posts that *positively evaluated* other posts. In this category there are posts such as ”[p]ractical measure to boost entrepreneurship. I like it.”.

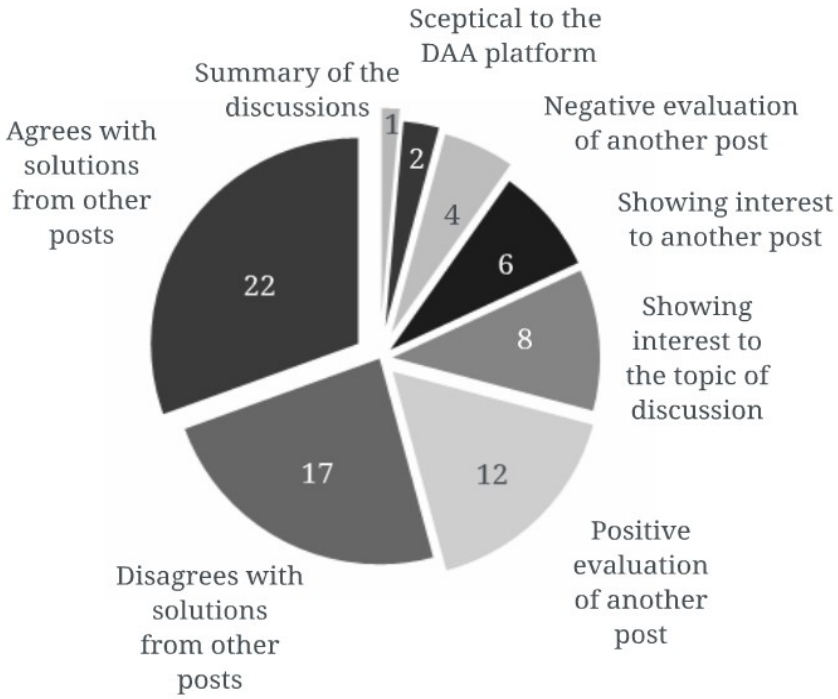
In addition this core-category hosts posts that have been coded to s*how interest to the topic of the discussions* as well as posts that *summarize the discussions*. As the smallest categories there are also *negative evaluations of another post* as well as *showing interest to another post* and the posts that were *sceptical to using the DA online platform* for meaningfull policy discussion.

Figure 16: The types of evaluations or comments made about the discussions ranked by the percentage of the data mentioning them.



When analysed from the point of view of how many discussion participants engaged in evaluating and or commenting the posts, the order of the sub-categories is same as when looking at the percentages except for the four least represented categories (see Figure 17). For example even though showing interest to another post only got 1.4 per cent of the total data, there were still six discussion participants that did this in their posts.

Figure 17: The types of evaluations or comments made about the discussions ranked by the number of discussion participants mentioning them.



6.1.6 MAKING CLAIMS

The sixth core category is the opposite of the second one, providing information, as here posts *make claims* in a way that the reasoning behind the claims is not presented in the post. This means that the statements are presented as true but lack the reasoning behind them. This was done in 30 per cent of the data and by 26 discussion participants. The posts that have been coded in to this category make claims for example by stating ”[l]earning from successful startups is equally important to learning from those who failed” and not presenting anything ,e.g. examples or articles, to back the claim. Another example of this is the following satement ”[s]ocial innovations are becoming increasingly important as a central concept for theories of society and politics”. Most of the 26 discussion participants made claims ones or twice within the discussions, however the user Engberg again did this 23 times.

6.1.7 PROVIDING OPINIONS

This seventh core category of *provding opinions* is similar to the fifth one as posts within this

category also lack reasonging behind the presented opinions. Instead the participant backed their statement e.g. by saying ”I believe that...” or ”In my opinion...”, which was done in 27 per cent of the discussions and by 31 discussion participants. When looking at the amount of users this core-category of providing opinions actually ends up being bigger than for example the similar category of making claims abd the core-category of raising issues. Most of the 31 users who provided opinions did this again only once or twice, except for one, Engberg, who provided opinions six times.

6.1.8 PROMOTION OF A PROJECT

The smallest core category was *promotion of a project* to which 18 per cent of the data was coded into. However, as many as 36 discussion participants wrote posts where they promoted a project. This category includes posts that were about a certain project that was either on-going or beginning and that were being promoted through the platform. The most radical examples of this are in line with the following statements ”I am a partner at JVP (www.jvpvc.com), one of the leading European Vcs. We have close to $1Bn under management and are actively investing in digital media initiatives.” and ”It is an excellent project, I help create new opportunities for entrepreneurs ...”. Most of the posts in this category are though more about providing local examples from Europe, but they are presented in a way that can be interpreted as a promotional activity, for example the following statement ”I believe in Guadalinfo”, which was posted by multiple discussants that work with the project in question.

6.2 ADDITIONAL CATEGORIES

In addition to the eight core categories, the content of the posts has also been coded from other perspectives in order to make further analysis more meaningful. The first ones of these categories are whether the post fit within the topic of the discussion group or the topic of a specific discussion thread as well as whether the level of the discussion is concrete or theoretical/abstract.

Within the discussions almost all of the data stayed *on the topic of the discussion forum*, i.e. how to make Europe more innovative and entrepreneurial. Only 1,2 per cent of the data and four posts out of the 237 were coded to be totally *off the topic of the discussion forum*. In addition 1,9 per cent of

the data and five posts were *off the topic of the discussion thread* that the comments were posted in. However the level of the discussions often changed within a single discussion thread so that the topic for example started from a *concrete* example and then turned into a more *theoretical* analysis of the issues or solutions to the issues. All in all a little over half of the data was coded to be more theoretical or abstract and little less than half concrete. When looking at the number of the posts, however the result is however turned around as the actual number of posts that were concrete exceeded the number of posts coded as theoretical or abstract by a few.

In addition the posts are coded based on *how many votes* they got from other discussion participants. Most of the posts - 121 individual posts - received no votes at all, and 50 of the posts only got one vote so there were some vast differences regarding how the posts were voted on as the single most liked post received a staggering 239 votes, whereas the next one received only 20 votes. The post with the most votes, was also the opening comment on a discussion thread that received the highest number of comments as there were in total 38 posts within this discussion thread. This discussion also in other ways stood out from the others as it was mostly about promoting a project and judging by the content on the posts and the usernames of the discussants, the people voting and commenting were somehow involved in the work of the project that was being promoted. Overall this one single discussion took up almost 11 per cent of all of the data.

What was also important was the amount of posts and data created by different discussion particpants, i.e. *users*. The most active user, Engberg, created all in all 22 per cent off all of the data in the discussions by writing 27 posts. These posts were mostly theoretical or abstract (24 of the posts) and made claims and raised issues (23 posts coded to both of these). Eleven of this user's posts also spoke for the idea of empowering consumers (by e.g. lessening surveillance and data being gathered about citizens and used to steer their consumption, improving internet security and individuals rights as well as breaking cartells in order for new players to be able to emerge etc.) as a solution to the lack of European innovations and entrepreneurship. This message was then amplified by the user disagreeing with other solutions in seven posts as well as by providing opinions in 9 of the posts. Only seven of the posts also provided some sort of information e.g. articles or examples to back the statements that were presented.

The second most active user in the discussion group was the moderator of the discussions, user Ipujol, by writing 25 posts and slightly above 8 per cent of the data. These were mostly about

asking questions in order to keep the discussion going. This same user also wrote the second most voted discussion post, with 20 votes. This post was a discussion opener that presented some solutions that had been emerging from the previous dicussions and raised some issues regarding them as well as asked for views and opinion on how to take the topic further. Even though some of the participants were rather active on the discussion forum, more than half, 58, out of the 103 discussion participants only wrote one article.

6.3 THE DELIBERATIVENESS OF THE DISCUSSION

The concepts that in previous theorization of deliberation (as is discussed in chapter three) have been found important for the deliberativeness of discussions are:

- inclusiveness of all parties affected by the issue and equality (Coleman *et al.* 2001),
- the interactiveness of the discussions and listening to each other's arguments (Naurin 2009),
- reflecting and debating preferances instead of merely registering them, (Wright *et al.* 2007),
- people being willing to change their opinions based on the information presented (Kamarck *et al.* 2002).
- the goal of reaching the common good (or solutions) of the group through consensus (Steiner *et al.* 2004),
- respectfulness of the discussions (Steiner *et al.* 2004), and
- access to information and substantiality of the messages (Fishkin 1992).

In this section the results of the content analysis of the discussions from the DAA discussion group Innovation and entrepreneurs will be analysed in terms of how they fit into these criteria of deliberation.

6.3.1 INCLUSIVENESS

For the first, even though the platform was open to anyone, the inclusiveness and equality of the discussions was not very well present since more than one fifth of the discussions were written by just one person out of the 103 active users. In addition the two most active users together wrote as

much as nearly one third of all of the discussions. Secondly, as the goal with deliberativeness would be for anyone affected by the issue to be presented also at the discussion, the analysis of the inclusiveness of the platform would also benefit from looking at who the discussion participants on this discussion group were. However due to lack of data about the users from the EC, this cannot be done within the scope of this paper.

However some inputs to this can be given as there were some worries presented in the platform regarding this by the discussants themselves, as one of them stated that ”I think an inherited problem with this platform is that everybody can chime in, in any capacity with any topic no matter how relevant it is. An entrepreneur might actually leave before he or she puts the first comment in :)”. In a sense then the openness of the online discussions might actually work against its inclusiveness as it in this case might have even scared off some of the stakeholders that would had been more affected by the issue at hand than the actual participants on the platform.

6.3.2 INTERACTIVENESS

The second criterion for deliberativeness that is looked here is the interactiveness of the discussions. This can on one hand be looked through how many comments the discussion threads got as this can give some inputs on how responsive the discussions were. On average each of the discussion threads got 3.6 comments. There were however big differences in the number of comments for the discussion threads as 14 of the 44 discussion threads did not get any comments and one of the discussion threads got 37 comments and the second most commented discussion had 19 comments.

On the other hand the interactiveness can be looked through how much of the discussions were coded to be interactive in the content analysis. All in all more than one third of the data (38 %) was coded to have been interactive, with the most emphasis put on asking questions from the other discussion participants. This was done by 25 of the 103 active discussion participants. Even though this many participants did engage in asking questions, the most of the questions were still asked by the moderator of the discussions, who did this in all of her 25 posts. The other forms of interactiveness were much less used by the participants and all in all this core-category of interactiveness got only the fourth most space in the discussions.

6.3.3 REFLECTING AND DEBATING IDEAS

When it comes to reflecting and debating preferences instead of merely registering them, the platform did not do so well, as more than half of the discussion participants only wrote one article

and therefore did not engage in debating their preferences online. What is more is that nearly one fifth of the discussions were about promoting different projects, which does not invite others to debate on the issue.

On the other hand when looking at the discussion threads, the discussions that did have more than one post did also show some reflections of ideas, since the level of the discussions varied within the discussion threads from concrete to abstract and vice versa. In addition many of the discussion posts were also asking for other's opinions, which suggest that the discussion participants were at least ready to listen to other discussants' views.

6.3.4 WILLINGNESS TO CHANGE PREFERENCES

As the participants were presenting their solution, many of them did not deviate from their original solutions in the course of the discussions. Even though the level of the discussions might had sometimes shifted from concrete to more abstract the ideas discussed still stayed within the discussants original preferences even when there were other's disagreeing with the solutions or ideas presented. However some of the discussion participants were also showing interest to other people's posts and gave positive evaluations about the ideas presented in them. This however does not necessarily speak to one’s willingness to change one's own preferences.

Also what tells of the lack of willingness to change one's preferences is the large amount of claims being made during the discussions. These claims are in some sense stricter than if a discussant provided their opinion, as claims were presented as truths without diminishing them by saying that what is presented is just an opinion.

6.3.5 REACHING COMMON GOOD

Evaluating the deliberativeness of the platform from the goal of reaching the common good through consensus, there are some issues regarding how the best solutions resulting from the discussions should be picked. This is because there are some discrepancies regarding whether the solutions were presented by a lot of users and whether they got a lot of space on the discussions. Taking both of these into account it can be stated that there is not even a rough consensus reached, as in no case there is a majority of the users or space dedicated to any single solution.

On the other hand some of the solutions did get a landslide of votes from the discussion participants. However this is because there was one post, where all these solutions were mentioned,

that reached the notable 239 votes. Therefore it cannot be stated that this would be a consensus seeking way to reach a decision, as there were not nearly as many votes given to other posts with the same solutions.

6.3.6 RESPECTFULLNESS

The discussions were mostly done in a neutral or positive fashion as the evaluations and comments made about the discussions were mostly about agreeing with others. In addition to this there were more positive evaluations of other posts than negative evaluations and some of the discussions also showed interest towards other post. In addition some posts were made where the other discussants were given praise for their discussion contributions.

Even when the discussants were disagreeing with each other or evaluating other posts negatively, the tone of the discussions was still respectful and almost always the criticism was made toward the topics and issues discussed instead of the other discussants, with only a very few post in the whole discussion group deviating from this. The disrespectful posts were often also followed by posts where the original positions of the one being disrespected were defended.

6.3.7 SUBSTANTIALITY

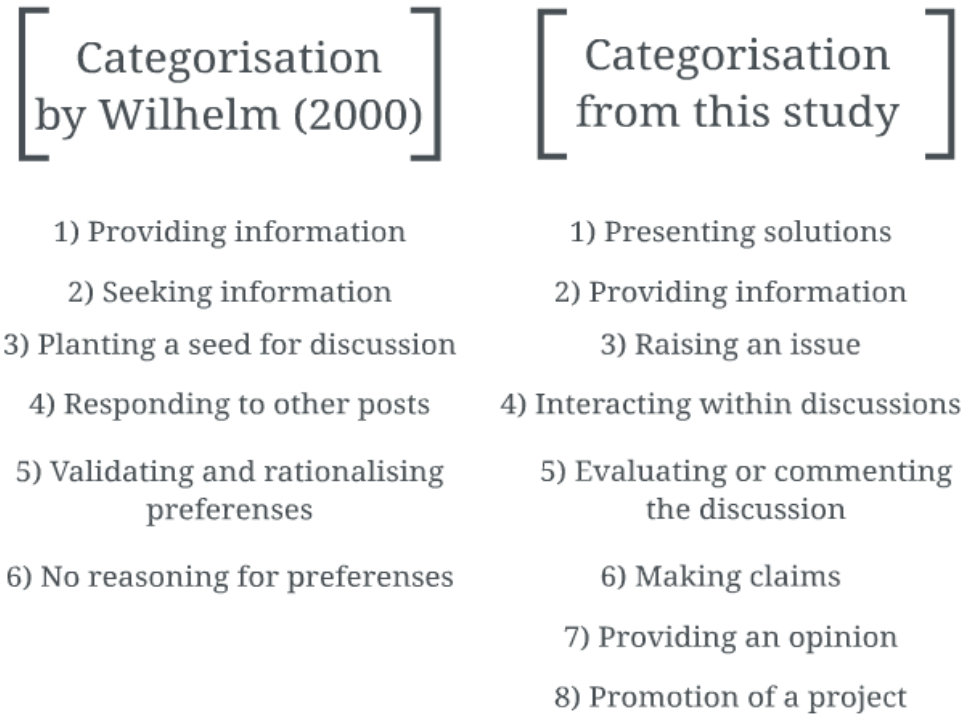
The substantiality of the messages can be measured by how big percentage of the discussions backs their claims with e.g. examples and articles. During the course of this discussion group many examples were indeed presented and many posts referred to further information that the other discussions could then see for themselves if they wished. This can be explained by the fact that on this type of discussion forums, there is also time to reflect on what is being said and to look for further information before taking part in the discussions. This is not always possible in a real-life political discussion, and the time-aspect and possibility of presenting and checking up information can therefore be seen as one of the obvious benefits of online deliberation, if this possibility would be used. In this discussion group almost half of the data presented some kind of information behind their statements; however the percentage of data presenting un-backed claims and opinions was even higher at 57 per cent.

7 CONCLUSIONS

In order to answer the three research questions set out for this paper, this section will start from the bottom-up and answer the third, most descriptive question first. Here the goal was to get inputs on *how policy discussions take place on a government-driven online discussion forum.* In previous theorization there have been some accounts on how these discussions take place and this study having used a grounded theory approach (due to the uniqueness of the case in question) has resulted in both strengthening and expanding these previous categorisations of the content of online discussions.

As can be seen from Figure 18, the results of this grounded theory study can be seen to fit to some extent to the previous research. However also some new core-categories have emerged that can in part help explaining how the discussions take place on online public policy discussion forums. These new categories are *Promotion of a project* as well as *Presenting solutions* of which the latter one is the single most used category on the Innovation and Entrepreneurs discussion forum.

Figure 18: Comparing categorisations of the content of the posts on online discussion forums.



In addition one of the categories by Wilhelm (2000) is divided into two further categories as in this content analysis *Making claims* and *Providing opinions* emerged as their own categories instead of

just having one category of *no reasoning for preferences*. Also Wilhelm's category of *Responding to other posts* has been in this case replaced by two categories: *Interacting within discussion* (which in a sense also includes Wilhelm's category of *seeking information* as in this study *asking questions* is included in this category) and *Evaluating and commenting the discussions.*

To answer Question 3, firstly there were two totally new categories emerging from this study, which would suggest that there is a need to study further the notion of how policy discussion takes place online in order to see whether these results of this case and the two new categories are something specific only to this case, or whether they can be found also in other online public policy discussion forums.

Secondly, regarding Question 3, the results of this study give inputs on whether the discussions can fulfill the goals set out for them, or whether the discussions might end up being a little bit all over the place, as also is predicted by some of the previous research. In the case looked into in this study the discussions did stay on topic of the discussions, and as the goal of the platform was to gain policy input, the result of having the largest part of the discussion falling into the core-category of *presenting solutions* is indeed an excellent result in this remark.

In regard to the research Question 2 about *how well the Digital Agenda 2012 online forum can facilitate deliberation* the results suggest that - in the light of the analysis of one out of the ten discussion groups on the platform - the deliberativeness of the discussions was not at the main focus on the platform. There were some parts of the deliberative discussion present - i.e. respectfulness, some interactiveness as well as the substantiality of the posts - however the main focus of the posts was on presenting as many policy suggestions and actions as possible. However as was stated by the EC when describing the goal of the platform, it was to *gain policy input*, at which the platform did succeed as many solutions were presented and discussed.

Finally regarding Question 1 on *whether the Internet and especially government-driven online forums can facilitate deliberative public policy discussion*, the result of having rather undeliberative discussions on the DA online forum might seem rather disencouraging for the potential of internet in facilitating democratic processes. This result should however not be regarded as totally underestimating the potential of Internet playing a part in the democratic process, especially in regard to mining the public opinion via crowdsourcing. This is because the case in this study focused on getting policy input from stakeholders, and in the end the discussions indeed did result in some solutions to the issue at hand, albeit at the expense of having a deliberative discussion. In

this sense the online policy discussions can act as a valuable *additional tool* in policy-making beside the more traditional decision-making processes.

7.1 EVALUATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In the analysis of this paper the grounded theory approach was suitable for answering the third, descriptive, research question as it made it possible for the analysis of the discussions to emerge from the actual data. Not having a fixed categorisation on to which to code the data in terms of how deliberative it was, however might had made it more difficult to gain relevant information from the data regarding the second and the first research questions. It is not clear whether this is because the information about the deliberativeness is there in the data but is just not coded, or whether the information that would be relevant to the study of deliberativeness, actually might not be that relevant to the study of (this specific) online public policy discussion as is suggested by the analysis made in this paper.

With this the idea is that maybe online policy discussions can have a value that comes also from outside of and beyond the idea of deliberation. What the discussions analysed in this study show, is that even though the actual online discussion might not have been that deliberative, there were still 46 different solutions presented for the issue of European innovation and entrepreneurship that was the topic of the discussions. Out of these many were also talked about and endorsed by multiple discussion participants. In this case the value created by the platform might then lie in the creation of user-based data and the bottom-up approach in policy-making, that can then have relevance to e.g. the legitimacy of decisions.

As the discussions on this platform did produce a number of concrete policy suggestion the natural direction for further studies could therefore be whether, and more importantly, how these suggestions actually were used by the European Commission. In addition the design and efforts behind setting up an online policy discussion platform could be researched further in order to be able to gather best practice and to see what kind of designs actually produce the wanted results. The further research into the case of the Digital Agenda Assembly 2012 online discussion platform could also be useful in this sense as the platform did indeed manage to reach the goals set out for it, regardless of the actual level of deliberativeness of the discussions.

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APPENDIX 1 CATEGORISATION OF NODES FROM NVivo

Category	Sub-category	Items	Sub-items
Basic information			
Users (usernames of the discussion aprticipants)		103 in total	
Votes		0,1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,12,13,14,15,17,18,19,20,239	
Discussion threads		44 threads	
Discussion openings and comments		Discussion opening; Frist, second and third level	
Content of the posts			
Level of discussion		Theoretical or abstract	
		Concrete	
Topic		On topic of the discussion	
		Off topic of the discussion thread	
		Off topic of the discussion group	
Evaluating and or commenting the discussion		Sceptical to the DAA online paltform	
		Summary of the discussions	

	Evaluation of another posts	Negative evaluation	
		Positive evaluation	
	Showing interest	Showing interest to another post	
		Showing interest to the topic of discussion	
	Agreement	Agrees with another post	
		Disagrees with another post	
Promotion of a project			
Raising an issue			
Making a claim			
Providing an opinion			
Interaction in discussions	Asking questions	Asking for further discussion in person	
		Asking for information	
		Asking for further details for an issue raised in another comment	
		Asking for views and opinions	
	Providing further information after		

	questions from other discussants	
	Answers an issue raised in another post	
	Defending one's position	
Providing information	Example from Europe	Local examples from Europe
		Quadalinfo
	Example from the US	
	Example from outside of Europe and the US	
	Providing an example	
	Presenting an article	
Presenting solutions	Existing tools to be scaled up	
	Marketing support	
	Gamification	
	Involving stakeholders	
	Legal help	
	Open data	

	Bootstrapping	
	Entrepreneurial culture	
	Data protection	
	E-commerce	
	Regulation needed	
	Benchmarking	
	Stopping protectionism	
	Decentralising the EU administration	
	Infrastructure support	
	Bureaucracy simplification	
	R&D Support	
	Gathering best practice	
	Whether EU-wide solutions are needed	Sceptical towards EU-wide solutions
		EU-wide solutions
		EU framework programmes

	Seed capital	
	Education	Universities and SMEs
	Security	
	Incubators	
	Knowledge sharing	
	Empowerment	Empowering young entrepreneurs
		Empowering customers
	New types of innovation (the sixth wave of innovation)	Social innovation
		Open innovation
		Co-innovation
	Helping start-ups	
	Taxation	
	Public interventions	
	Networking	
	Clusters	

	Funding environment	SME financing
		Encouraging foreign investment
		Start-up financing
		Corwdfunding
		Venture capital
	Public Private partnership	

APPENDIX 2 AN EXAMPLE OF THE DATA AND CODING

Discussion	Nodes
1 DISCUSSION: RAISING MONEY FOR START-UPS, WHAT POLICY SUPPORT, IS THE US RIGTH? Submitted by miguel.gonzalez... on Thu, 2012-04-12 07:44 I just read this interesting news: "Crowdfunding bill backed by US House of Representatives" http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-17535660 That's rigth, the US Congress has overwhelmingly voted the "Jumpstart Our Business Startups Act (Jobs)", which would help firms to "crowdfund" capital from small investors. - Are there similar initiatives in European countries? - What should be done at EU level on start-up financing? Group audience: Innovation and entrepreneurs **13 users have voted.**	**Basic information:** Discussion opening Discussion 1 user: miguel.conzales 13 votes **Content of the posts:** Asking for information Asking for views and opinions Concrete Start-up financing Example from the US
COMMENTS	
1.1. I remember an interesting Submitted by aserocarmela on Thu, 2012-04-12 22:22 I remember an interesting discussion I and some INFSO colleagues had, time ago, with a couple of EBAN (the European Trade Association for Business Angels, Seed Funds and other Early Stages Market Players - http://www.eban.org/) representatives on these aspects. The main topic was how new applications, technologies or services developed within FP7 could go to the market and foster the birth of new startups with growth potential beyond national borders through venture capital support. I think they may bring interesting ideas and comments to this discussion. 2 users have voted.	**Basic information:** Discussion 1 user: aserocarmela 2 votes **Content of the posts:** Venture capital EU Framework Programmes On topic Concrete

1.1.1 This is very interesting! Submitted by agnes on Mon, 2012-04-16 11:13 This is very interesting! 0 users have voted.	**Basic information:** Discussion 1 user: agnes 0 votes **Content of the posts:** Showing interest to another comment On topic
1.2. To the questions "are there Submitted by ana.garcia on Fri, 2012-04-13 10:32 To the questions "are there similar initiatives in European countries?" there is one that I consider really interesting: www.goteo.org (in Spanish, English), "Goteo is a social network for crowdfunding and distributed collaboration (services, infrastructures, microtasks and other resources) for encouraging the independent development of creative and innovative initiatives that contribute to the common good, free knowledge, and open code" (source: http://www.goteo.org/about?lang=en). This is a fantastic example of social innovation + crowdfunding. Fantastic tool for social innovators and very interesting projects. It would be interesting to gather best practices of this kind all over Europe to understand what their main challenges are, the impact that they are generating and how they can be better supported from a European Policy perspective. 1 user has voted.	**Basic information:** Discussion 1 user: ana.garcia 1 vote **Content of the posts:** Asnwering an issue raised in another comment Crowdfunding Gathering best practice Social innovation Local example from the EU Concrete On topic
1.3. Up to now the US had Submitted by griff on Mon, 2012-04-16 19:18 Up to now the US had regulatory barriers to crowdfunding that do not necessarily exist in EU states. In the UK many debt and equity and even debt factoring crowdsourcing companies have appeared with no need for regulation. There is a UK industry body but when I spoke with them about going pan-European they baulked at perceived local interest issues. This fear of broadening national interest groups to a European level needs to be addressed. Examples of companies include Zopa, FundingCircle, Seedrs, and Ratesetter.	**Basic information:** Discussion 1 user: griff 1 vote **Content of the posts:** Raising an issue Crowdfunding Example from the US Local example from the EU Concrete On topic

1 user has voted.	
1.4. Pan-European private funding Submitted by miguel.gonzalez... on Sun, 2012-04-22 22:46 Pan-European private funding schemes for SMEs, there seems to be an issue with that and the EC made some proposals at the end of last year to stimulate such pan-European schemes. If the matter is about local knowledge I guess one must try to set up a sort of market place with transparent and reliable information about candidates for funding (and their potential clients). I think such platforms exist but not in the scale desired. So, how to scale up, especially in these times of crisis? (crisis, by the way, may stimulate new approaches, considering the crunch in teaditional funding sources like banks) 0 users have voted.	**Basic information:** Discussion 1 user: miguel.gonzales 0 votes **Content of the posts:** Agrees with another post Asking for views and opinions EU-wide solutions SME financing Scaling existing tools Providing an opinion Theoretical On topic
1.5. There are various initatives Submitted by adavila on Tue, 2012-04-24 16:22 There are various initatives in Europe around crowdsourcing with different models, even one where you crowdsource a venture fund that then behaves as a regular VC. Crowdsourcing is an important tool but will not be the solution. It has important issues of adverse selection. 0 users have voted.	**Basic information:** Discussion 1 user: adavila 0 votes **Content of the posts:** Raising an issue Making a claim Example from EU Theoretical + Concrete On topic
1.6. Great point, Toni. Which are Submitted by lpujol on Tue, 2012-04-24 20:05 Great point, Toni. Which are the issues of adverse selection you mentioned? what would you suggest in EU level to support start-ups to raise money then? ..Any inspiring example from elsewhere to replicate? 0 users have voted.	**Basic information:** Discussion 1 user: lpujol 0 votes **Content of the posts:** Positive evaluation of another comment Giving praise to another discussant Asking for further details on an issue raised in another comment Asking for information

	Asking for views and opinions Concrete + Theoretical On topic
1.7. The JOBS act is superb in my Submitted by Laurence on Wed, 2012-05-02 21:07 The JOBS act is superb in my view for the US. One of the key things it hopefully achieves is bring back the ability to IPO for mid market companies. Great article in the economist last week on this topic and the Act overall - worth reading if you subscribe. 0 users have voted.	**Basic information:** Discussion 1 user: Laurence 0 votes **Content of the posts:** Providing an opinion Example from the US Presenting an article Theoretical On topic
1.8. This is an extremely Submitted by javimaker on Fri, 2012-05-11 15:39 This is an extremely interesting topic, and in my opinion one of the key ones that need to be discussed among stakeholders. While crowdfunding projects like Goteo are operating right now, it is /very/ unclear whether this model fits the Spanish and Europeans regulations so far at this moment. A specific normative regarding crowdfunding should be developed and implemented along the EU, in order to allow healthy competition among crowdfund managers (like Goteo) and make sure this new money source flows to start-ups or projects demanding it. Also, we need to state clearly the conditions that would regulate the situations where things go wrong, which is something that remais unclear among these platforms and would provide much more confidence to all the parties involved. Regarding VCs, what do you think about this article? http://www.kernelmag.com/comment/opinion/2151/a-necessary-contraction/ 0 users have voted.	**Basic information:** Discussion 1 user: javimaker 0 votes **Content of the posts:** Showing interest to the topic of the discussion Raising an issue Providing an opinion Presenting an article Asking for views and opinions Start-up financing Venture capital Crowdfunding EU-wide solutions Theoretical On topic
1.9. Venture capital and public Submitted by miguel.gonzalez... on Fri, 2012-05-11 22:39	**Basic information:** Discussion 1 user: miguel.gonzales

Venture capital and public funding sound quite opposite. The idea raises memories of local authorities going bankrupt further to risky financial investments. Regulation of vc private market seems a more appropriate way of public intervention. What would be key the elements of such regulation? 1. tax treatment, 2, 3, 4...? Very interesting article by the way. Thanks for sharing 1 user has voted.	1 vote **Content of the posts:** Disagrees + Agrees with another post Showing interest to another comment Asking for views and opinions Providing an opinion Taxation Public intervention Venture capital Theoretical On topic
1.10. Interesting discussion here. Submitted by fergal on Thu, 2012-05-24 17:33 Interesting discussion here. The article on EU VC is particularly interesting. I suppose there is no one silver bullet in this domain. There is a spectrum of interventions required in the following three areas: Bureaucracy simplification for startups Supports for Firm from marketing to R&D An attractive funding environment for founders and investors. (all underpinned by a strong education system obviously) We need to identify best practice recognising that some EU states have got many pieces right, but we need blend these into overall significant momentum now for progress. For VC market specifically, low capital taxes for are important. EU should allow differentiated tax regimes for difference policy interventions. It should regulate on the basis of over all net taxation, not headline gross taxation which is often far less than the rate enforced once the various exemptions and credits are claimed. 6 users have voted.	**Basic information:** Discussion 1 user: fergal 6 votes **Content of the posts:** Showing interest to the topic of the discussion + to another comment Providing an opinion Taxation Marketing + R&D support Public interventions Helping start-ups Gathering best practice Venture capital Education Bureaucracy simplification Concrete On topic

1.11. p.s. there is a healthy Submitted by fergal on Thu, 2012-05-24 17:35 p.s. there is a healthy crowdfunding scene in Ireland (well, angel funding really). There are now many examples of startups who have engaged in all fundraising through linkedin for example. 6 users have voted.	**Basic information:** Discussion 1 user: fergal 6 vote **Content of the posts:** Local example from the EU Crowdfunding Concrete On topic
1.12. This is a proposal that Submitted by EvangelosA on Thu, 2012-06-21 10:02 This is a proposal that solves the underlining problem and it is designed to operate in Pan European level. Please read with open mind... http://daa.ec.europa.eu/content/can-democracy-power-web-be-upgraded-and-... 0 users have voted.	**Basic information:** Discussion 1 user: EvangelosA 0 votes **Content of the posts:** Presenting an article EU-wide solutions Theoretical On topic