

Facilitating deliberation online:
What difference does it make?

– Draft –

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Introduction

The idea of deliberative democracy is central to those who believe the internet bears potential for further democratization in western societies: New media open up new opportunities for public deliberation because they provide efficient means to host interactive communication and easier access for citizens to take part. Indeed, in recent years governments and parliaments have utilized the internet in the policy-making process in order to gain evidence from citizens and engage in public discussions (e.g. online consultations of the British parliament).

Many case studies have pointed to facilitation as a crucial success factor for the quality of deliberation. However, not only is facilitation far from being ubiquitous in the practice of online deliberation but there are also very different approaches to facilitation. Therefore, the question of “how much structure” (or “how much facilitation”) is needed in deliberation remains virulent.

To reach a better understanding of facilitation, several challenges have to be overcome. First, there is a need for comparative studies to assess the effect of facilitation. Second, there is a lack of conceptual clarity as there are diverse notions of what “facilitation” means. To add to the confusion, the terms “moderation” and “mediation” are often used interchangeably with facilitation as well. Third, researching facilitation requires a shared notion of the purpose of facilitation which then can be used as a yardstick in evaluation. While the first challenge is dealt with in the empirical part of this paper, the second and third issues are subject to the following paragraphs.

Definition of facilitation

An overview of the practice of online deliberation yields different uses of the term “facilitation” which reflect different notions of what is an adequate role for third party intervention in deliberation. A typology includes at least two notions of facilitation:

According to the first notion, the facilitator is someone whose task is to safeguard the fairness and politeness of discussion. Here, facilitation implies the definition of fairness rules, monitoring of discussion and coercive interventions in the case rules are violated (issuing warnings, deleting messages, banning participants). In its most rigid form, monitoring is enacted through so called “pre-moderation”, that is a screening of messages prior to their publication in the discussion forum.

The second notion sees the facilitator as someone supporting the participants to improve their performance and efficiency in regard to a certain positive goal of communication (e.g. the number and quality of ideas generated through brainstorming). This is achieved by designing the communication process. Usually, this kind of facilitation requires social skills and experience with group dynamics as well as some knowledge of methods for structuring the communication processes.

These two notions of facilitation are not mutually exclusive but instead show a systematic overlap: Just as the first notion implies some basic support to participants when a topic for discussion is selected and framed in a certain way, so does the second notion imply some measures to ensure the fairness of discussion – even though this is usually done in a less coercive way (e.g. through the creation of social norms). Still, there are marked differences

between the two notions that mainly materialize in the degree of involvement (and cost) of the facilitator: While facilitators in the first notion stay largely anonymous and passive (they sometimes even remain invisible throughout the whole discussion process), facilitators in the second notion usually introduce themselves personally and are quite proactive in the course of discussion.

However, both notions share an important characteristic: interventions are meant to influence the discussion on the process level only, either in regard to fairness criteria or in regard to criteria derived from the goal of discussion (i.e. generating ideas). In contrast, censors or experts influence discussions on the content level, either through filtering opinions or through providing knowledge.

For reasons of conceptual clarity, it is suggested to rethink the widespread use of the term “facilitator” in the field of online deliberation. As mentioned above, the second notion implies active support for the discussion process, whereas the first notion is dominated by a more passive monitoring function. Therefore it seems more appropriate to confine the label “facilitator” to the second notion, and rather use the term “monitor” for the first notion (see Table 1). It is further suggested to use the terms “facilitator” and “moderator” interchangeably since there is no plausible criterium to distinguish between the two. Last but not least it is recommended to use the term “mediator” for situations in which a facilitator helps parties to reach consensus on a disputed issue, because “mediation” is a common method in conflict resolution.

Table 1: Third party intervention roles in online deliberation

| | passive / focusses on fairness criteria | proactive / focusses on goal-related and efficiency criteria |
|----------------------------------|---|--|
| Intervention on procedural level | Monitor | Facilitator |
| Intervention on content level | Censor, Expert | |

Purpose of facilitation

If the purpose of facilitation is to help groups reach their communicative goals, then the success of facilitation depends on whether and to what degree these goals are met. There are various goals groups can strive for, e.g. groups might aim to generate ideas, solve a logical problem, make a decision under uncertainty, resolve a dispute, etc. In online deliberation, where political decision makers invite citizens to inform the policy making process though deliberation on the internet, the goal is at least two-fold:

The first goal is to generate activity in the discussion forum and keep up participants motivation to engage in the discussion, especially when online deliberation is held in asynchronous communication modes and is planned to last for some period of time. Number of participants and number of messages posted by them are key indicators to assess the degree of activity. Facilitation fails if the communication process dies out due to high numbers of drop outs and a decline in motivation to write messages.

The second goal is to create a discussion process that approximates the ideal deliberative procedure as specified by theorists of deliberative democracy. Under this circumstance it is believed that deliberation adds legitimacy to political decisions. The second goal rests on the

first but goes beyond by asking to what degree the deliberation process meets the conditions for ideal deliberation. The following are among the most important:

Inclusiveness There should be equal opportunities to enter the deliberation process. Inclusiveness is at least partially achieved if a wide spectrum of views is represented in the discussion and if participants come from diverse backgrounds.

Coherence A collective learning process rests on the assumption that participants listen and refer to each other. rather than articulating their own views in an autistic fashion.

Rationality A core condition of deliberation is that it is held in an argumentative mode. For someone to make a convincing case, at least two requirements have to be met: First, validity claims have to be supported by reasons. Second, those reasons have to be framed in terms of the common good, so that the interests of those to be convinced are included.

Respect In the ideal deliberative procedure, participants should be ready for being convinced by others. This can only happen if participants show respect and empathy towards the other participants.

Thus, facilitation fails in online deliberation, if the discussion process is characterized by homogeneity in opinions and participant's backgrounds, if participants articulate their views in an autistic and unreasoned fashion, and if an offensive tone prevails.

Question

The aim of this paper is to shed some light on the effectiveness facilitation has in online deliberation. Hence, online deliberation cases with facilitators are tested against cases with monitors, the other common form of third party intervention in online deliberation. On the basis of this comparison, it should be possible to address the question: What difference does facilitation make?

Problems of facilitation

There are several reasons why monitoring might be preferred over facilitation. The most important is cost. Facilitation not only requires skilled personell but also can be very time-consuming. It is even argued that facilitation is one of the main obstacles for a further spread of online deliberation practice: The high cost of facilitation puts up a high threshold for decision makers to consult the public through online deliberation, especially in the case of large-scale participation projects which might bear the largest potential of e-democracy. In this view, the usefulness of facilitation is not questioned, but it is believed that less laborious third party intervention roles such as monitoring, although being suboptimal, might still be a workable solution.

Another critique of facilitation asserts that facilitation is simply unnecessary. According to this view, self-organizing forces in groups should not be underestimated. Often, some

participants are sensitive to the procedural level of communication and take on the facilitator's role themselves as the discussion unfolds.

The strongest opposition to facilitation emerges from those who believe that facilitation is a source of bias in deliberation. The structuring of communication is seen as a barrier to the free flow of information. Although facilitators claim to be neutral and not to intervene on the content level, they still do so subliminally, steering the discussion into a particular direction without participants noticing it.

The need for facilitation

Contrary to those critiques, it is assumed in this paper that facilitation is needed in online deliberation. There are a number of shortcomings on the participant's side that might flaw the quality of deliberation and thus have to be compensated for by facilitation.

First, in the course of discussion participants might easily lose an overview of what has been said, are unable to draw conclusions and become disoriented and frustrated. By summarizing discussions and proposing conclusions facilitators can help to focus the deliberation process (e.g. through the use of question techniques). By this means, facilitators build trust in a constructive exchange, thus preventing participants from becoming frustrated and dropping out of the discussion.

Second, it is most likely that the deliberation process is accompanied by perceived conflicts of interests. This might lead participants to bias the communication process in their favor, i.e. dominate the discussion and set the agenda. In this light, self-appointed facilitators pose a threat to deliberation since they might not be able or willing to remain impartial. If there is no neutral facilitator who balances the process (e.g. through acknowledging the minority view), groups tend to polarize, bully participants with views different from the majority and eventually see a decline in diversity of views.

Third, the same effect might occur when people from different cultural backgrounds meet, bringing with them very different customs and expectations in regard to the communication process (i.e. what tone is appropriate, the way people address each other, etc.). Unless there is a facilitator who takes care of a friendly and open climate, there is a real danger of the majority culture sidelining participants from different backgrounds, thus decreasing inclusiveness.

The last two arguments turn around the biasing-critique of facilitation: Deliberation becomes biased in the absence of a balancing factor. Much more trust should be given to professional and external facilitators who can be held accountable than to self-appointed facilitators or self-organizing forces in groups.

Hypothesis

From this line of reasoning follows that facilitated online deliberation processes are expected to result in a more favourable evaluation than monitored online deliberation processes. More specifically it is hypothesized in this study that facilitated groups show a higher degree of activity, that is

- H1a: In facilitated groups more messages are produced than in monitored groups.
H1b: Monitored groups have a decline in message production over time while this is not the case for facilitated groups.
H1c: Facilitated groups have more active participants than monitored groups.
H1d: Monitored groups have more drop outs of active participants over time than facilitated groups.
H1e: Compared to facilitated groups monitored groups have especially more drop outs of participants that are not highly affected and motivated by the issue of deliberation.

Further, facilitated groups are believed to be more inclusive, that is

- H2a: Drop out rates among those participants that stem from underprivileged socio-demographic groups (women, non-whites, people with lower education levels, older people) are higher in monitored groups than in facilitated groups.
H2b: Facilitated groups show a greater diversity of opinions expressed.

The investigation of the effect of facilitation on other dimensions of the quality of deliberation (coherence, rationality, respect) will be the subject of future studies.

Method

These hypothesis are tested in a comparative study. Originally, it was planned to use a number of facilitated and monitored online dialogues as the empirical basis. However, during the search the case of the “Listening to the City Online Dialogues” (LTC-O) was discovered. In this dialogue, participants were assigned to several parallel groups of which half were facilitated while the other half was monitored only. It was decided to concentrate on a comparison of those deliberation groups within the LTC-O since many context variables (e.g. software used, relevance for the policy process, topic) can be held constant this way.

Case description

The LTC-O were held over a period of 15 days from the 30th of July to 13th of August in 2002. Central town planning issues for Lower Manhattan after the attack on the World Trade Center on September the 11th 2001 were addressed: What should be built on the site of the former World Trade Center? What memorial should be build to commemorate the victims of that attack? How can Lower Manhattan as a whole be redeveloped?

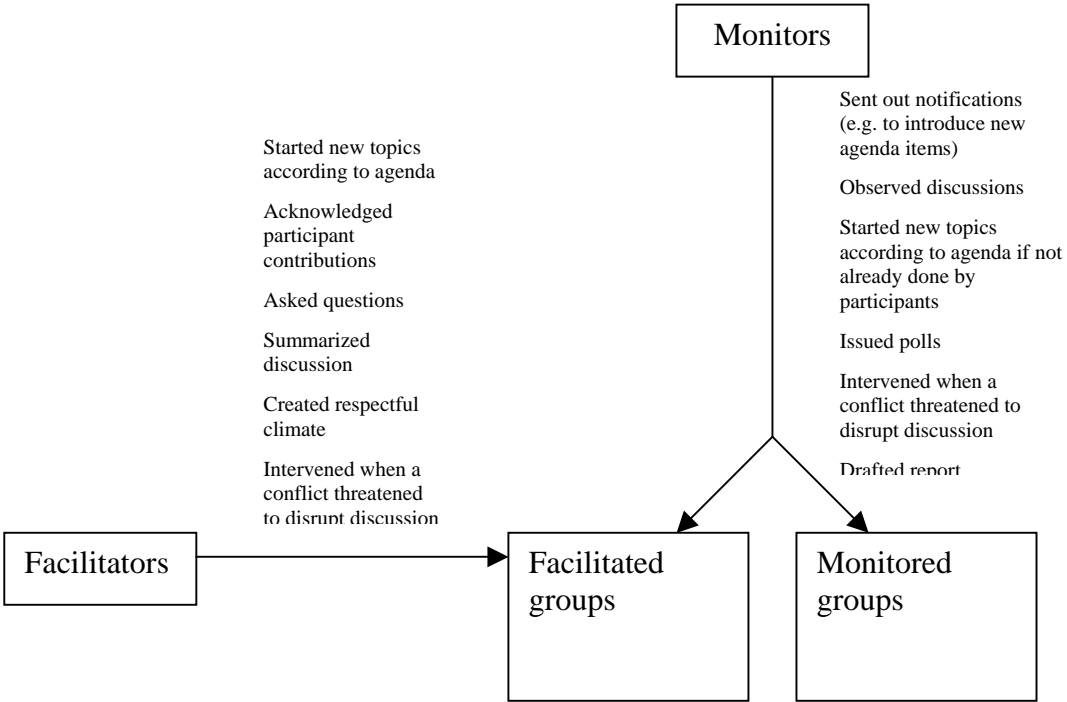
While the dialogues were initiated by a civil society organization representing residents and business owners in Lower Manhattan (Civic Alliance to Rebuild Downtown New York), two non-profit organizations were responsible to carry them out: Americaspeaks applied their method for large group meetings that they had developed in face-to-face settings to online dialogues, and Weblab supplied the technology for the online dialogues and coordinated the facilitators. The LTC-O received sponsoring from the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC), a state body that was charged with coordinating rebuilding and revitalization after the attacks on September 11th 2001 as well as the creation of a memorial commemorating the victims.

Shortly before the LTC-O dialogues, the LMDC released six concept plans for the WTC site together with a set of questions it sought feedback on. The reactions to all of these plans by LTC-O dialogues (and other public hearings) were overwhelmingly negative. Later, the LMDC dropped the initial plans and issued an international design competition, which eventually was won by Daniel Libeskind’s “Freedom Tower” in February 2003.

The technology behind the LTC-O dialogues was the Small Group Dialogue (SGD) Technique. This platform supports asynchronous text-based many-to-many interaction, i.e. anybody can communicate with anybody within their group. After a log-in procedure participants can open up topics for discussion and write messages in those topics. Within topics, all messages are displayed sequentially in the order they were posted.

Besides these general characteristics, SGD provides some special features that primarily were designed to personalize the dialogues and increase the participants’ commitment: participants are assigned to multiple small groups, biographic information is displayed for each participant, time span for discussion is limited, messages are editable within 30 minutes after posting, and all participants received a daily digest of their group’s activity by email (this service can be personalized, e.g. participants can subscribe to certain topics).

Box 1:



Participants were assigned to small groups (30 participants each) and were iteratively subjected to a total of 23 poll questions during the debate. The split between facilitated and monitored groups reflected different approaches by the organizers: Amenciaspeaks was used to employ facilitators in their face-to-face townhall meetings while Weblab had made good experiences with the SGD framework that previously had worked without facilitators. Both organizers wanted to use the opportunity to conduct a field experiment. The two conditions are explained in more detail in box 1.

Volunteering facilitators were recruited through mailing lists. All facilitators had some formal training in facilitation and/or were experienced in online facilitation. They also received instructions to make sure that they knew their tasks (see box 1).

Enough participants registered to open up 26 discussion groups, 13 facilitated and 13 monitored. Assignment to groups was stratified: participants were randomly chosen for each group, but it was taken care so as to keep the number of participants across groups even for gender, age, education, income, ethnicity and their relation to 9/11 and Lower Manhattan. However, for this study groups 23 to 26 were excluded from analysis since they had less time to discuss the agenda as they started a few days later than the other groups, and because the monitored groups 24 and 26 were merged half way through the dialogue due to a lack of participation in both.

Strategies for analysis

The discussion protocols were analyzed to find out how many messages were written by whom and at what points in time. These data were combined with information participants provided about themselves when they registered for the dialogues: their gender, age, ethnicity, income level and highest level of education as well as their relation to 9/11 (family member of victim, survivor) and their relation to Lower Manhattan (resident, employee, business owner). Further, the group results for those polling questions which referred to the topic of discussion were analyzed. The variance of responses was taken as a proxy measure for the diversity of opinions in each group.

Differences of means between facilitated and monitored groups were tested using inferential statistics. T-tests were employed to assess the difference between facilitated and monitored groups on the number of messages and active participants (i.e. those that write messages). Repeated measures one-way analysis of variance was applied to test whether there is an interaction between the effect of facilitation and time. Hence, the period of deliberation was cut into halves (first half from day 1 to day 7, and second half from day 8 to 15) to see whether facilitated and monitored groups differed on the number of drop outs in the second half. Last but not least repeated measures one-way analysis of covariance (with Roy-Bargmann stepdown analysis) was utilized to test the unique effect of facilitation and time on underprivileged (women, older people, lower education and income level, non-whites) and lower motivated participants (those with no direct relation to 9/11 or Lower Manhattan), that is after controlling for the effect facilitation and time has on privileged and highly motivated participants.

Results

In the 22 discussion groups that were included in the analysis, 11 facilitated and 11 monitored, there were 486 active participants that contributed a total of 7638 messages to the dialogues. As table 2 shows, significant differences between facilitated and monitored groups can neither been found for the number of messages nor in regard the number of active participants. In both facilitated and monitored groups, of those 30 participants that were assigned to each group around 22 entered the discussion, contributing about 350 messages in each group. Therefore, hypothesis H1a and H1c have to be rejected.

Table 2
t-test^a for differences between facilitated and monitored groups

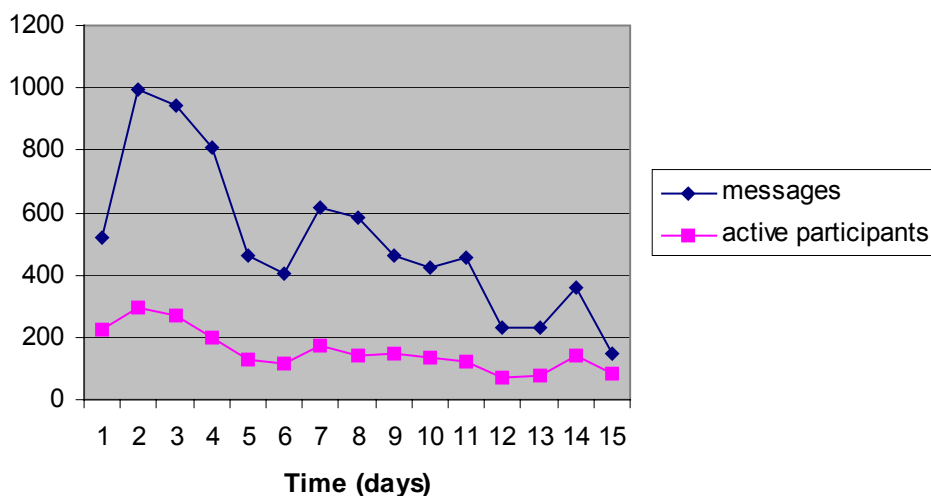
| Dependent variables | M_{fac} | M_{mon} | t | df | $\alpha_{(1-tailed)}$ | η^2 |
|--|-----------|-----------|-------|------|-----------------------|----------|
| Messages by participants | 321,82 | 372,55 | -0,57 | 20 | ns | |
| Active participants | 22,64 | 21,55 | 1,24 | 20 | ns | |
| Diversity of poll responses ^b | | | | | | |
| Green spaces? | 1,71 | 1,33 | 2,60 | 20 | .01 | .25 |
| How tall? | 1,82 | 1,62 | 1,85 | 20 | .05 | .15 |
| Finance industry first? | 1,44 | 1,17 | 1,77 | 20 | .05 | .14 |
| Open space? | 0,94 | 0,84 | 1,72 | 20 | ns | |
| Add to skyline? | 1,37 | 1,16 | 1,34 | 20 | ns | |
| Transportation hub? | 1,09 | 0,85 | 1,10 | 20 | ns | |
| No new housing? | 1,67 | 1,45 | 0,92 | 20 | ns | |
| Build unique? | 1,02 | 0,86 | 0,60 | 20 | ns | |
| Environmentally friendly? | 1,38 | 1,33 | 0,40 | 20 | ns | |
| Mixed-use area? | 1,24 | 1,22 | 0,11 | 20 | ns | |
| Restore street grid? | 1,44 | 1,51 | -0,56 | 20 | ns | |
| Cultural centers? | 1,35 | 1,45 | -0,67 | 20 | ns | |
| Multiple income housing? | 1,53 | 1,68 | -0,83 | 20 | ns | |
| West street crossing? | 0,97 | 1,29 | -1,75 | 20 | .05 | .13 |

^a Independent samples

^b mean standard deviation

Table 2 also shows that the variance of poll responses is significantly larger in facilitated groups for three polling questions, but not for the majority of polls. There is even one poll in which variance was larger in monitored groups. Overall, hypothesis H2b can be regarded as tentatively supported because there are far more polls in which differences in variance have the expected direction than polls in which is not the case. Also, the question that probably received most attention and attracted some conflict, the question of how tall the buildings on the former World Trade Center site ought to be, is among those polls were facilitated groups clearly show a greater variance in poll responses compared to monitored groups.

Diagram 1: Messages and active participants over time



The number of active participants and messages written declined steadily over time (see diagram 1). As table 3 shows, facilitated groups were as much affected by this decline in message numbers as were monitored groups, thus hypothesis H1b is rejected. However, there is a considerable effect of facilitation on the number of active participants over time, with more drop outs in the monitored groups. Therefore, hypothesis H1d is supported.

Table 3
Analysis of variance for the effect of facilitation over time^a

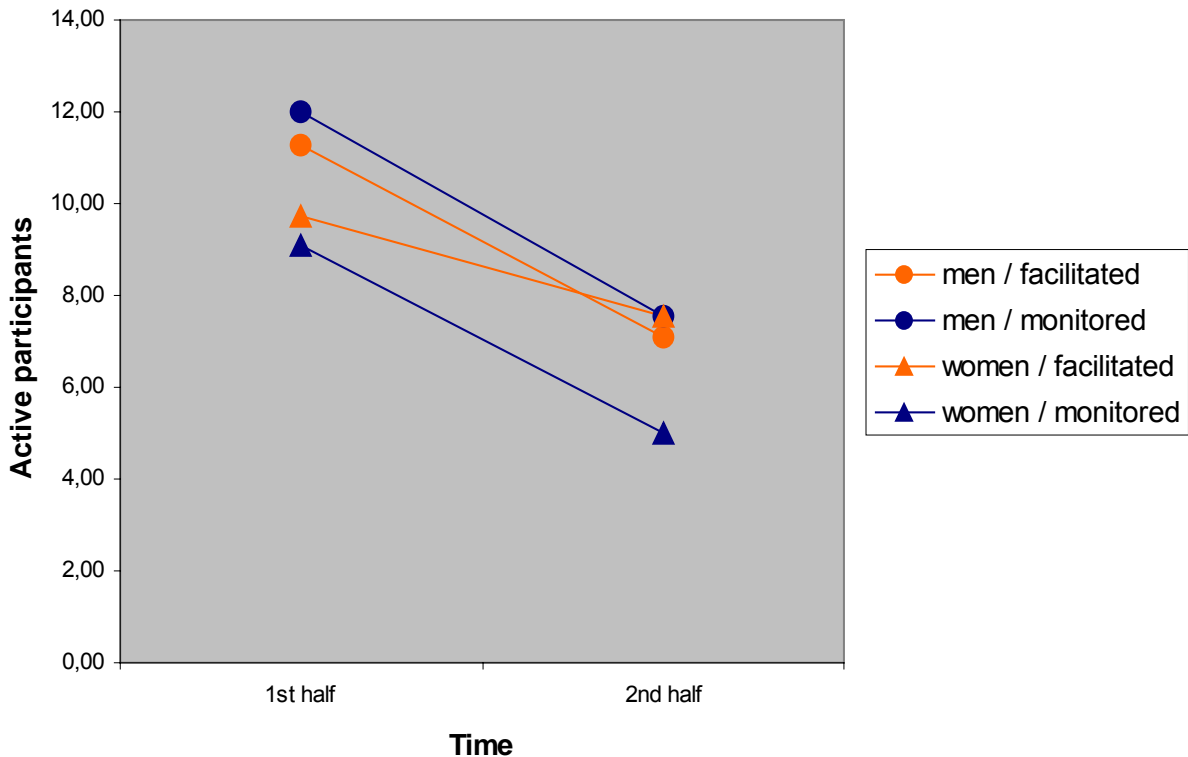
| Dependent variables | <i>M1_{fac}</i> | <i>M2_{fac}</i> | <i>M1_{mon}</i> | <i>M2_{mon}</i> | <i>F</i> | <i>df</i> | $\alpha_{(1\text{-tailed})}$ | η_p^2 |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|-----------|------------------------------|------------|
| messages | 210,73 | 111,09 | 220,64 | 151,91 | 0,63 | 1 | ns | |
| active participants | 21,00 | 14,64 | 21,09 | 12,55 | 3,99 | 1 | .05 | ,17 |
| active participants by SES | | | | | | | | |
| gender | | | | | | | | |
| male | 11,27 | 7,09 | 12,00 | 7,55 | 0,15 | 1, 20 | ns | |
| female | 9,73 | 7,55 | 9,09 | 5,00 | 4,15 ^b | 1, 19 | .05 | ,18 |
| age | | | | | | | | |
| < 55 | 19,27 | 13,18 | 19,45 | 11,82 | 2,36 | 1, 20 | ns | |
| ≥ 55 | 1,64 | 1,45 | 1,64 | 0,73 | 3,34 ^b | 1, 19 | .05 | ,15 |
| education level | | | | | | | | |
| ≥ BA degree | 15,91 | 11,00 | 14,36 | 8,45 | 0,86 | 1, 20 | ns | |
| < BA degree | 3,55 | 2,45 | 4,82 | 2,64 | 4,54 ^b | 1, 19 | .05 | ,19 |
| annual income | | | | | | | | |
| ≥ \$50.000 | 15,73 | 10,73 | 14,64 | 8,73 | 1,79 | 1, 20 | ns | |
| < \$50.000 | 5,18 | 3,91 | 6,45 | 4,09 | 2,03 ^b | 1, 19 | ns | |
| ethnicity | | | | | | | | |
| white | 16,18 | 11,09 | 17,27 | 10,36 | 2,72 | 1, 20 | ns | |
| non-white | 4,73 | 3,55 | 3,82 | 2,18 | 1,60 ^b | 1, 19 | ns | |
| active participants by motivation | | | | | | | | |
| direct relation to Lower Manhattan | | | | | | | | |
| yes | 8,91 | 5,82 | 8,09 | 5,18 | 0,06 | 1, 20 | ns | |
| no | 12,00 | 8,82 | 13,00 | 7,36 | 6,28 ^b | 1, 19 | .05 | ,25 |
| direct relation to 9/11 | | | | | | | | |
| yes | 4,73 | 3,45 | 5,00 | 3,18 | 0,97 | 1, 20 | ns | |
| no | 16,18 | 11,18 | 16,09 | 9,36 | 3,20 ^b | 1, 19 | .05 | ,14 |

^a Repeated measures one-way ANOVA

^b Roy-Bargmann StepDown *F*

Furtermore, table 3 reveals that hypothesis H2a has to be accepted as well since participants from underprivileged backgrounds, at least in regard to gender, age and education level, have significantly lower numbers of drop outs if their groups were facilitated (e.g. see diagram 2 for the effect of facilitation on the number of drop outs among females). This is also the case for participants who are not directly affected by the issue of discussion: Among these participants, who are expected to have a lower motivation to take part than those directly affected (either by having a direct relation to 9/11 or Lower Manhattan), fewer drop out over the course of the discussion if their group is facilitated, leading us to accept hypothesis H1e.

Diagram 2: The effect of time and facilitation on the number of active participants



Discussion

The empirical evidence from this study suggests that monitored and facilitated deliberation processes are quite similar on the face level since number of participants and messages do not differ. Also, monitored deliberation is not more likely to suffer from a break down in participant activity than facilitated deliberation. However, this is only valid for the number of messages written.

There are also clear signs that more participants stop their activity prematurely unless there is a facilitator. Only those participants that are highly motivated because they are directly affected by the topic of discussion have the same (low) drop out rates in the facilitated and monitored condition. In contrast, those participants that are not highly motivated due to direct affection have much higher drop out rates in the monitored condition. Therefore, it seems as if facilitation provides some extra motivation (or prevents frustration) for participants that are not already motivated enough to stay in the process no matter what happens. Facilitation does not increase the number of messages in deliberation, but it prevents the less motivated participants from dropping out.

The findings also suggest that facilitation leads to more inclusive deliberation as participants from underprivileged backgrounds are more likely to stay in the discussion than in monitored deliberation. In the monitored condition, deliberation groups grow more and more homogeneous over time which might truncate the spectrum of views represented in the deliberation process. This maybe why there is tentative evidence that monitored groups have a lower variance of responses to polling questions, or in other words: a lower diversity of

opinions. Hence, this study suggests that facilitation can balance deliberation to make sure that participants from diverse backgrounds are included.

It might be difficult to generalise the motivating and empowering effect of facilitation beyond the case of the LTC-O dialogues. There are many different facilitation styles and factors that interact with facilitation. However, it can be concluded from this study that facilitation potentially has a motivating and empowering effect and will have so most likely under similar conditions as in the LTC-O dialogues (e.g. if facilitators are selected to similar criteria, if they are instructed in a similar way, etc.).

Yet, this study poses more new questions than it attempted to answer. Why can we observe the motivating and empowering effect of facilitation? Is it because facilitators acknowledged the participant's efforts repeatedly? And what is the effect of facilitation on other dimensions of the quality of deliberation, namely coherence, rationality and respect? Those questions should be subjected to future research which would need to build on content analysis of the discussion protocols.

References

to be completed...