

## Online Incivility and Public Discourse

When newspaper reporter Marnie Eisenstadt<sup>1</sup> posted her story online about poverty in an Upstate New York community, predictably it received a slew of comments. Within a day, more than 500 people commented on the April 2016 story about poverty in the mid-sized city of Syracuse. They shared opinions, raised questions, and criticized the piece. Eisenstadt jumped into the fray frequently, answering questions and offering additional information all in a rational manner. For example, when ColdColdGoAway wrote: “How about finding the poor jobs?????????? So they won’t be poor!”<sup>2</sup> Eisenstadt offered a reasoned response: “@ColdColdGoAway: We have examined this, as well, in our series, The Cost of Poverty.”<sup>3</sup> Then she provided a link to the previous story. When ColdColdGoAway persisted, writing: “I remember that story. That was one person’s story,”<sup>4</sup> Eisenstadt was undaunted. “It was the beginning of an examination of a program that helped more than 100 people find and keep employment,”<sup>5</sup> she explained and again provided a link to the rest of the series on poverty. When another poster, kayak, criticized a premise of the story that one way to solve the community’s poverty crisis was to build public housing within suburbs, Eisenstadt joined the conversation again. “There is not simple, easy one-size fits all answers to Syracuse’s complex poverty. There are many small answers, ways of doing things differently that might work. Here, the suggestion is not vast development of public housing in the suburbs. It is mixed income housing in places of opportunity. It’s not an answer for everyone, but data shows it could substantially change the lives of some.”<sup>6</sup>

What is notable about Eisenstadt's actions is that she is demonstrating a "deliberative moment"<sup>7</sup> in the public talk of a comment stream on an online news site. She is rational and clear, and she bolsters her view with evidence. She is reciprocal, meaning she leaves room for other views and even disagreement. She comes across as understanding what others are saying, not just spouting off her own ideas.<sup>8</sup> Certainly, the commenters she is responding to are pointed—but not uncivil. Also, she is not necessarily solving a public problem or fostering consensus,<sup>9</sup> as deliberation aims to do, but she is trying to inform. Even if she does not intend to, she is claiming the comment stream as the "broader deliberative arena to which journalism contributes."<sup>10</sup> She is fostering an environment in the virtual public sphere that is hospitable to the robust give-and-take of public debate that is vital to a healthy democracy.<sup>11</sup> She is creating a climate that offers the hope for the online space to "revive the public sphere"<sup>12</sup> as a place of "deliberative democracy" that sociologist and social psychologist Gabriel de Tarde envisioned in the salons and cafés of eighteenth century Paris.<sup>13</sup> In his day, de Tarde saw what he called "dispersed crowds,"<sup>14</sup> which were brought together by the newspaper to debate important issues of the day.<sup>15</sup> Eisenstadt, in her small way, is creating that experience in her newspaper's online space.

This chapter focuses on the virtual versions of these cafés and salons, the comment streams of American newspapers where today's dispersed crowds gather to debate and banter and talk. I will explore the concept of deliberative democracy, specifically within the context of online discussions. I will argue that this deliberation—including disagreement—is essential to the vigorous public debate that is the hallmark of a democratic society.<sup>16</sup> Disagreement—both civil and uncivil—involves a challenge to one's views.<sup>17</sup> This challenge can create feelings of uneasiness or internal conflict called cognitive dissonance<sup>18</sup> as people reconcile their views with others' opinions. This deliberation is essential to the democratic process because it allows all people to take part in the decisions that may highlight what topics are most urgent in our society. This form of communication takes on increased urgency online because the computer-mediated sphere offers more opportunity for people to speak out, so more informed voices might be drowned out. Or, as in the case of Eisenstadt, more rational voices may set a tone of deliberation. Deliberation is often associated with political talk,<sup>19</sup> but in this chapter I explore the concept more broadly to topics outside of politics that are important to air publicly. For example, clearly an online debate about the merits of presidential contenders is political talk that is improved if it is deliberative. However, an online discussion about

the benefits of composting or growing one's own vegetables is not political per se, but it also offers more value to society as a whole if it also follows the guidelines of public deliberation. I will begin by explaining the concept of public deliberation in greater detail, and then I will explore specifically how disagreement fits into deliberation. Next I will explain how deliberation may operate online by synthesizing prior research.

## PUBLIC DELIBERATION

At its core, public deliberation is about giving people room to speak out. The idea encompasses the value of equality that is embedded in American culture, although not always lived out. For deliberation to occur everyone must be allowed a voice and what those voices express should be rooted in reason.<sup>20</sup> The goal is to promote consensus, but deliberation provides room for people to disagree and debate. Deliberation also should be reciprocal, meaning it embraces different views.<sup>21</sup> It should be conducted publicly, and it requires that people offer some sort of evidence to justify their viewpoints.<sup>22</sup> In the best case, it offers solutions, not just problems, and it allows people to retain their own dignity throughout the debate.<sup>23</sup> As political communication scholars John Gastil and Laura W. Black explain: "When people deliberate, they carefully examine a problem and arrive at a well-reasoned solution after a period of inclusive, respectful consideration of diverse points of view."<sup>24</sup> Some scholars include participation in public forums or even contrasting media messages as forms of deliberation. Most theorists agree that public deliberation includes some type of "public talking"<sup>25</sup> that contributes to public opinion. Deliberation is about the discussion, the conversation, the exchange of ideas. It is about speaking out, so that others can hear, understand, and respond to what one is saying. It provides a sense of voice that is pivotal to how a free society should operate. People can form their own opinions and tell others, contributing to public good in society. Deliberation is not just a benefit of a free society but essential to maintaining that freedom. People must be part of the decision-making of government if a nation is to be of the people and for the people. As political scientist Harold D. Lasswell explained years ago: "Democratic governments act upon public opinion and public opinion acts openly and continually upon government. This open interplay of opinion and policy is the distinguishing mark of popular rule."<sup>26</sup>

The concept of public deliberation grew out of political thought. In fact, Gastil and Black argue it is the organizing principle of all political

communication.<sup>27</sup> Theorist Hannah Arendt suggested that to be political means that decisions are made through discussion and persuasion not fights. “Everyone sees and hears from a different position,”<sup>28</sup> she explained. This give and take is at the heart of the type of debate that generates the “communicative power”<sup>29</sup> to influence political elections and legislation. Deliberation relies on the idea that a group may have knowledge greater than the individuals who comprise that group.<sup>30</sup> As a result, sharing ideas might improve decision-making. Deliberation happens or should happen in Congress, the courts, the media, and in the “land of middle democracy,”<sup>31</sup> which is any place where people gather. James Madison considered deliberation so vital to America’s democracy that he included it as one of the nation’s core values, along with equality and the absence of tyranny, when he penned *The Federalist Papers*.<sup>32</sup> Of course, talking about a problem may give those in power a sense of what the public thinks and feels, and thereby, inform the political process,<sup>33</sup> but that does not mean change will occur. True deliberation requires that people listen, not just speak,<sup>34</sup> that people act, not just listen.

Critics of the concept of public deliberation worry that speaking is not enough. Journalism scholar Michael Schudson, for instance, argues that the emphasis on spontaneous conversation is misplaced because the real goal should be talk that is not just public, but egalitarian—encompassing the ideas of many with different values and backgrounds.<sup>35</sup> Others view public deliberation as too idealistic because it assumes small efforts can bring about large changes, or they suggest deliberation is impossible in a complicated democratic system.<sup>36</sup> Public deliberation also has been criticized for being too narrow and perpetuating the same voices that always get heard and leaving out socially marginalized groups, such as women, people of color, and other minorities.<sup>37</sup> I embrace these criticisms, and suggest that public deliberation is not perfect. It is merely a start. We are a better society if we foster reciprocal conversations from a diversity of viewpoints about important issues, but deliberation alone cannot solve all our ills. I discuss these criticisms later in this chapter and in Part II.

In this book, I take a broad view of public deliberation. It is not reserved just for political talk. In fact, I argue that the concepts of public deliberation apply as well to discussion about almost any important issues, as they do to political topics. Part of the reason for my belief is that many topics, even those that are not overtly political, may offer political undertones. A debate over whether climate change is caused by how people have abused the environment or a natural process is not overtly political on the

face of it. It becomes political as people take partisan sides on the issue, and different viewpoints become aligned with particular parties. But the important part of the issue is the discussion that may or may not bring about understanding and change.

## DELIBERATION BEYOND POLITICS

I submit that even topics without political undertones may be ripe for public deliberation. For example, online sites proliferate, on which people talk about all types of issues, from stories in that day's newspaper to the basics of child rearing or even ratings of the best restaurant in town. When people are recommending the best spot for barbecue on a foodie Facebook page, the discourse is improved if people state their beliefs rationally, are open to others' opinions, and offer evidence for their point of view. In the realm of interpersonal communication, these concepts suggest a form of discussion that makes communication more open and more valuable. In that sense, deliberative qualities in any type of speech offer benefits for society as a whole. It is always best to listen, not just talk; to be open to other's ideas; to offer a grounded rationale for one's thinking. The topics that are examined in this book—the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, the debate over removing vestiges of the Confederacy from government spaces, and the continuing fight for marriage equality—certainly have political ramifications. However, I believe the principles outlined in this chapter and throughout the book apply more broadly. It is better for democracy when people can publicly deliberate about politics. Similarly, it is good for society when people can publicly deliberate about any subject. As such, deliberation cuts across a wide swatch of fields beyond political science, including interpersonal communication, mass communication, public affairs, social psychology, and sociology.<sup>38</sup> Yes, public deliberation is important for democracy. It is also important for life.

For example, consider what erupted on Twitter after a Texas school district decided not to cancel classes on a particularly rain-soaked day in May 2016.<sup>39</sup> The district tweeted that classes remained in session, and urged people to stay safe getting to school. People challenged the decision somewhat politely on Twitter, joking they would enjoy swimming through school hallways or needed a sailboat to get to class. Then they turned to memes, which are “socially constructed public discourses”<sup>40</sup> circulated online to make a point. One meme used an animated image file called a gif to show President Barack Obama, shaking his head and saying, “No,” as if

the president were disagreeing with the school district's decision to keep classes open. Another meme used a gif of a baby clenching his hands in disgust, apparently at the district's ruling. While this is certainly not the public deliberation that Madison, the Father of the Constitution, likely imagined, I submit these tweets follow much of the conventions of public deliberation. They allowed a variety of people from a cross-section of the community to speak directly to the government and challenge a government decision. These tweets did not offer much evidence or seek to solve a problem through consensus, but they did make a rational point: It is flooding too much for school to remain in session. Certainly, it would be an overstatement to label this public deliberation. But it offers a deliberative moment; deliberation light, if you will. Society gains because the school district learns what the public thinks about its actions. People gain because they have a chance to speak, to air their grievances publicly. In a very real sense, this online exchange demonstrates the ideals of democratic deliberation, a belief that the public use of arguments and reasoning among free and equal individuals is vital to society.<sup>41</sup>

### DELIBERATIVE DISAGREEMENT

Of course, true deliberation often may be “profoundly uncomfortable”<sup>42</sup> because it requires talk among people who are different from each other. As a result, exposure to disagreement is a key aspect of much deliberation.<sup>43</sup> In fact, political scientists Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson assert that “moral disagreement”<sup>44</sup>—conflict about fundamental issues—is the root of deliberation. This is not disagreement just to be disagreeable. This is not taking an alternative view only to be contrary. In this type of disagreement, people feel an intense moral rightness deep in their beings. So when people challenge their view,<sup>45</sup> it hurts. In this sense, the online discussions about barbecue or a school closing lack the potential for true deliberation because the stakes are not high enough. These issues certainly can offer deliberative moments, and society is improved by those discourses. But for deliberation writ large, people must care enough about their viewpoint to feel a sense of loss when it is threatened. It requires morally loaded topics, such as abortion, immigration, or the #BlackLivesMatter movement that rose up in response to the shooting deaths of unarmed black men at the hands of police.<sup>46</sup> These are also the type of issues most likely to elicit strong opinions<sup>47</sup> and generate online comments.<sup>48</sup> Our need to speak out is strongest when we feel the

most passionate about a topic. In addition, society benefits the most from deliberation on topics that elicit this passion.

### EMOTION AND REASON

This also suggests that while deliberation should be rational, it cannot be divorced from emotion. While some assert that deliberation requires a lack of emotion, I support the view of affective intelligence theory,<sup>49</sup> which argues that emotions and reason can and should co-exist and actually complement each other. Theories differ regarding whether emotions are automatic responses to an experience<sup>50</sup> or if they only occur if people have thought about how they feel.<sup>51</sup> My intent is not to resolve this debate, which has raged for decades. However, it seems clear that emotions by their very nature help people evaluate stimuli and make decisions about what to do.<sup>52</sup> Emotions are temporary states that can range from positive to negative in response to a specific situation.<sup>53</sup> The very nature of emotions is to help in people's survival by providing clues about how they should proceed.<sup>54</sup> So when people are deciding their opinion on important issues, it seems natural that emotions—their responses to those issues—would be part of how they make up their minds. This is the heart of affective intelligence theory,<sup>55</sup> which proposes that cognitive processes—the thinking about things—are not separate from the emotional processes—the feeling about things. So how can one be rational while still emotional? The paradox relies on balance between the two. Often, we assign a negative connotation to emotion (“thinking with one's heart rather than one's head,” for example). Or we see emotions as dichotomous—either bad or good—rather than merely spontaneous, natural human responses to stimuli. However, the word emotion actually stems from the Latin root of the word “to move.”<sup>56</sup> Emotions are what move us to act in many cases. These emotional responses may help us understand important issues more fully than reason alone. Consider abortion. A person may reach a decision to support abortion rights after much thought and research but also by being emotionally moved by the story of woman impregnated during rape who seeks the freedom to end the pregnancy. Similarly, someone who opposes abortion may reach that decision through careful analysis but may also be influenced by an emotional response to seeing a premature baby live outside the womb. The moment when emotion and reason depart from any potential for deliberation is when emotion takes over completely: “To be

passionate is to be gripped, seized, or possessed by primordial forces beyond one's rational control."<sup>57</sup> When emotion and reason remain in balance, deliberation can occur. In fact, it seems unlikely that people could make a reasoned argument, supported by fact, and open to others' viewpoints without feeling some passion on the subject. I certainly would not want to spend much time with a person who only thought but never felt. Nor would I appreciate a person who only felt but never thought. Balance is the key here.

### PROS AND CONS OF DISAGREEMENT

A great deal of research suggests that exposing people to viewpoints that differ from their own opinions has merit. These so-called crosscutting arguments help people become more familiar with others' viewpoints and the reasons they may hold these opinions.<sup>58</sup> This may not persuade people to change their outlook, but it may help them at least see where those who disagree with them are coming from. It may make people see the legitimate reasons for others holding divergent views, even if they still passionately disagree. "What makes opinion deliberative is not merely that it has been built upon careful contemplation, evidence, and supportive arguments, but also that it has grasped and taken into consideration the opposing views of others,"<sup>59</sup> as several political communication scholars put it. Exposure to disagreement may increase tolerance for difference<sup>60</sup> and could create a more informed populace, as people reflect on why they hold their own beliefs when those opinions are challenged.<sup>61</sup> Here is how this works: As people try to justify their own beliefs, they may turn to factual information or concrete arguments, which increase their own knowledge<sup>62</sup> even if it does not change their opinions. This is the cognitive dissonance<sup>63</sup> explanation for disagreement, which argues that people try to relieve the discomfort they feel because other people see things differently than they do. People employ interpersonal strategies, such as changing their own viewpoint or trying to convert others, to relieve this discomfort.<sup>64</sup> There is also some evidence that exposure to disagreement leads to less political polarization.<sup>65</sup>

However, other research suggests that exposure to crosscutting viewpoints does not deepen people's knowledge of their own position<sup>66</sup> but merely makes people more entrenched. In this scenario, people dig in their heels and become more certain of their opinions when they are challenged. Another negative consequence of disagreement is that it may foster



ambivalence or make people less sure of their own beliefs.<sup>67</sup> As a result, people may withdraw from participating in the democratic process by shunning such as activities as voting, handing out leaflets for a cause, or protesting at an event. The reasoning is that people step back as they are trying to resolve their internal conflict about how they feel regarding the issue. For some, it may seem easier to withdraw than to resolve this conflict. This is the heart of the cross-pressures hypothesis,<sup>68</sup> which posits that exposure to disagreement in one's social group demobilizes people from participating politically. Sometimes this is termed the "deliberation-participation paradox"<sup>69</sup> because exposure to diverse views is a core tenet of deliberation but it may actually lead to less participation, which is the opposite of deliberation's goal to increase societal participation. This puts deliberation and political participation at cross-purposes. Increasing one decreases the other. Disagreement also may "thwart self-expression" because people are afraid of social rejection if they speak out, leading to a "silencing effect."<sup>70</sup> Another negative effect of disagreement is that people perceive those who disagree with them as biased. This creates the potential for a "bias-perception conflict spiral,"<sup>71</sup> where people perceive those who disagree with them as biased and that leads them to take conflict-escalating actions against them, which reinforce this sense of bias.<sup>72</sup> These conflict-escalation actions could include some of the common aspects of uncivil online debate, such as name-calling, insults, profanity, or an outright accusation of bias. No one is left better by such an exchange.

Much depends on how people encounter disagreement. People who are in the political minority in their community may be less likely to vote or get involved politically because they feel unsupported in their viewpoints, but disagreement has little effect on those in the political majority.<sup>73</sup> For those in the political minority, the principles of deliberation and participatory democracy are at cross-purposes.<sup>74</sup> If you encourage one, you decrease the likelihood of the other. It is worth pointing out that this is also an unlikely scenario because most people cannot sustain a social network where they feel so isolated without joining a more hospitable group.<sup>75</sup> The more common scenario is to be in a group where most people think like you or where you are confronted with a mixture of viewpoints. Research has shown in these cases that disagreement does not hamper political participation.<sup>76</sup> In fact, when people are faced with a mix of opinions, exposure to opposing viewpoints may speed the process toward participation: "Cross-pressures may actually help some voters make up their minds, rather than hinder the crystallization of their voting preferences."<sup>77</sup> If

political participation is defined as more than just voting, people may be more likely to volunteer for a cause or get involved with their political party when they encounter disagreement. Another study found that encouraging uncivil—but not civil—disagreement initiated a chain reaction that led to increased aggressive intentions and then greater likelihood to get politically involved in an issue.<sup>78</sup> So in that sense the incivility actually sparks an emotional response that boosts intention to participate politically.

## DIGITAL DELIBERATION

Public deliberation started in face-to-face communication, through collective discussion groups, such as formal meetings or informal meetings in salons and cafés.<sup>79</sup> However, in this book I am focusing solely on deliberation in the digital sphere. In the early days of the Internet, two competing ideals surfaced about whether the web would be a more egalitarian space for public debate. The “cybertopia” viewpoint saw the web as an anonymous space that muted differences between people, fostered cohesion, and gave the power to speak out to groups who did not have that opportunity offline.<sup>80</sup> A cartoon by Peter Steiner that appeared in *The New Yorker* magazine in 1993 and became an icon of the early Internet age exemplifies this view. The cartoon depicts a dog sitting at a computer with the caption: “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.”<sup>81</sup> The idea was that anyone could speak out online, so more voices would get heard. Also, online communication fosters *weak ties* between people,<sup>82</sup> and these weak ties were thought to encourage diversity in digital connections.<sup>83</sup> In contrast, critics of this utopian view espoused the “cyberghetto”<sup>84</sup> philosophy. This viewpoint held that the Internet reinforced the biases in the offline world because it retained “vestiges of traditional communities with similar hierarchical social linkages and class-structured relationships.”<sup>85</sup> In other words, the same people who got heard in the offline world, largely white men, continued to have the greatest voice online because the same societal structures are in place in both spheres. In fact, the digital divide, a term used to describe the fact that some people cannot afford Internet access or computers, may have exacerbated the problem. People who had little voice offline may have had even less online because they could not even afford to join the conversation.

What really happened was a mixture of both. In the earliest days, voices of the marginalized groups, such as women or people of color, were largely absent online. But that changed in time. Blogging in particular offered a

promise of digital equality because people could do it for free.<sup>86</sup> For example, the mommy blogging movement of the late 1990s and early 2000s gave women by the millions a voice, and these women saw the web as a tangible means to express themselves in ways they could not before.<sup>87</sup> The web became empowering for marginalized groups, such as African-American women, low-income families, and sexual minorities,<sup>88</sup> in part because people could more easily find others like them online.

Social media also opened up opportunities to speak out for women and people of color. For example, after police shot an unarmed black man in Ferguson, MO, in 2014, social media gave African-Americans a format to challenge what traditional media were reporting about the shooting.<sup>89</sup> In addition, hashtags—keywords signified with a pound or hash sign—started being used on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube as a potent, although limited, tool to give voice to the silenced and to galvanize activism efforts. For example, #BlackLivesMatter was used to highlight challenges to the discourse surrounding marginalization of African-Americans. #YesAllWomen was used to speak out against female subjugation after a man in California went on a killing spree in 2014, motivated by his revenge against females for rejecting his advances.<sup>90</sup> However, a digital inequality that mirrored the inequities based on race, class, gender, and education perpetuated offline also held sway online. For example, while men and women were equally likely to blog, male blogs gained greater attention from the media.<sup>91</sup> Even as women's numbers online are soaring, research has shown their voices are often muted, as they are offline,<sup>92</sup> or they get verbally attacked for what they say.<sup>93</sup> Also, the idea that people would gather with people different from them online largely failed to materialize. In fact, online groups tend to be as homogenous online as off.<sup>94</sup> If anything, the web may amplify the tendency people have to interact with those like them because people have more power to find out others' beliefs before choosing discussion partners through online platforms than they would in their own neighborhoods.<sup>95</sup> So they can continually expose themselves to people who think as they do.

In the context of public deliberation, experts are also divided on the potential for it online. Some argue that if people communicate with people different from them online, the potential for deliberation is limited because people are more likely to argue than deliberate.<sup>96</sup> However, liked-minded people may not deliberate either because they are just repeating what others say, creating an echo chamber of ideas. Some scholars have found evidence of deliberation online, through comments streams and other forms of

engagement. For example, a content analysis of 2,107 comments posted on the Facebook walls of presidential candidates in 2008 and 2012 showed that sites like Facebook “represent spaces that accommodate a new public sphere,”<sup>97</sup> with 40% of the commenters offering some rationale for their views, and another 11% providing concrete evidence, such as links to other sites, statistics, or data. In-depth interviews with 69 people in a separate study found that people felt more comfortable sharing their views online, compared with discussing them with a neighbor who might not agree.<sup>98</sup> Another study found that comments posted on news stories of *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* websites demonstrated attributes of deliberation, including respectfulness, diversity of ideas, and disagreement.<sup>99</sup> The same study, however, found that comments posted on stories from other news organizations expressed little diversity, were often derogatory, and did not express openness to others’ ideas. Similarly, in a survey of 435 newspaper journalists,<sup>100</sup> 65% of the sample reported that they did not see comment streams as promoting the civil discourse that makes up deliberation. Some argue that the online context is less valuable for deliberation because computer-mediated communication offers fewer cues for communicating the nuances of speech, such as emotion, but others suggest this weakness is a strength because true deliberation should allow for rational discussion without too much emotion.<sup>101</sup> Certainly, there are differences between the experiences of deliberating online versus offline. Young white males with at least a bachelor’s degree are over-represented among online deliberators, compared to people who deliberate offline.<sup>102</sup> Online deliberators also view the digital climate to be more politically and racially diverse than those who debate only face to face.<sup>103</sup> Online deliberation tends to foment more negative emotions and is less likely to lead to consensus or political actions, such as working for a campaign, compared to face-to-face deliberation.<sup>104</sup> Both types increase people’s knowledge of issues and general political understanding.<sup>105</sup> In summary, these studies suggest that the Internet holds potential for deliberation,<sup>106</sup> but how much the online space has realized that potential is not fully understood.

## CONCLUSION

So what does all this mean for the potential for deliberation on social media or on news story comment streams? For these digital spaces to become fully realized as a deliberative space, people must act more like Eisenstadt, the

journalist mentioned at the start of this chapter. These spaces hold promise, but that promise cannot be realized without a conscious effort on the part of all people, not just journalists or politicians, to actively deliberate online. The conversation space on the web developed in the freewheeling early days, back when the Internet was called the World Wide Web. It grew from the earlier forms of online conversations, such as computer-conferencing systems like the Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link (WELL), and later listservs, user groups, and chat rooms.<sup>107</sup> Then came news story comment streams and social-networking sites. People learned to use a pound sign to signify the topic of a tweet or add a smile emoticon to soften a message, but they did not claim the space as deliberative.

An anything-goes attitude seemed to develop online, and newspaper comment streams in particular became quickly mired in non-deliberative speech. Despite this early rocky start, I believe that some deliberation does take place in online comments, and this form of discourse is important to encourage. The goal should be to foster deliberative speech through creating a normative atmosphere for this discourse, rather than focusing on the limitations of online communication. The more people like Eisenstadt stop, listen, answer questions, provide evidence, and remain rational, the closer we will be to realizing a deliberative space online that truly rejuvenates the public sphere<sup>108</sup> as a spot for the discussion about politics and other important issues of the day, like the cafés and salons of an earlier time.<sup>109</sup> The online space can become the type of space that influences politics and elections,<sup>110</sup> and informs the public in way that is not imagined today.

### CLASSROOM DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. Explain the core principles of public deliberation. What attributes must communication include to be considered “deliberative”?
2. The author makes a distinction between public deliberation and “deliberative moments.” Define each and provide an example.
3. Do online comments have potential to be deliberative? Explain why or why not.
4. Using a type of online communication you are familiar with (e.g. tweets, Instagram posts, SnapChat), explain its potential for deliberative discourse. What could be done to make discourse on this platform more deliberative?

## NOTES

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