

The Discourse Quality Index

A Critical Assessment of the application of Habermas' Discourse Ethics to Political Deliberation

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*Jürgen Habermas's work centres on his theory of communicative action. Habermas develops a set of theoretical tools that can be used to identify and analyse distortions in communication caused by power imbalances. He defines discourse as communication that raises moral questions and states that moral questions must be agreed upon in real discourse. Habermas sets out the conditions needed for real communication that would allow the members of a society to define their own institutions and societal structures. In *Measuring Political Deliberation*, Steenbergen et al attempt to apply Habermas's discourse ethics to the social challenge of deepening democracy by attempting to create a reliable and usable measurement instrument for the quality of discourse in political deliberation, a discourse quality index (DQI). This essay will explore the key aspects of Habermas's discourse ethics used in this application, critically assessing both Habermas's theory and this specific example of its application.*

Writing about political institutions and societal structures in the post-war period and heavily influenced by the rise of Nazism and the student-led protests of 1968, German intellectual Jürgen Habermas does not seek to provide a blueprint for reform – he does not believe that theories should. Indeed, at the heart of Habermas' thinking is the belief that theory can only be proved through deliberation and in its application. Habermas' work covers a wide range of academic fields, including philosophy, sociology, social policy and linguistics, and draws on and responds to a number of theories and theorists, notably Marxism and Weber's rationalization theory (Outhwaite 1996). He sets out the conditions needed for real communication that would allow the members of a society to define their own institutions and societal structures (Thomas McCarthy in Habermas 1973: viii). The broad scope of Habermas' work and its practical intent has led to its application to a diverse range of social problems in many different ways. Ricardo Blaug identifies three types of application of Habermas' Critical Theory: those that use his normative theory to generate cultural criticism; those that apply his theory as an empirical theory with which to study the social world, creating critical sociological research; and those that use his theory as a test for legitimacy (Blaug 1997: 102).

The defining feature of Critical Theory is its critique of modernity and the effects that modernity has on society and its power structures. Habermasian Critical Theory evaluates the way that modernity has led to the domination of goal-driven or instrumental rationality (driven by the need to make material gain) over communicative rationality (driven by the need to reach understanding).

Communication is a central tenet of Habermas' thought, grounded in an analysis of the presuppositions of meaningful speech. Habermas states that every communicative action, any speech act that makes a claim or statement, is based on certain presuppositions – most importantly that what the speaker says is true, that it is sincerely meant, and that it is normatively appropriate (Outhwaite, 1996, pg 11). Habermas defines discourse as communication that questions normative claims, being specific to moral

questions. He applies his theory of communicative action to create discourse ethics and states that moral judgements must be agreed upon in real discourse or deliberation in order to be held as legitimate by participants. Habermas establishes a series of rules that discourse must follow, creating the criteria for an Ideal Speech Situation (ISS). Habermas developed the ISS as an analytical tool used to assess the distortions of communication caused by imbalances in power relations. The ISS sets out the conditions necessary for communication free from distortions and is used as yardstick with which to measure real communication. Habermas claims “the social substratum for the realization of the system of rights consists [...] in the currents of communication and public opinion that, emerging from civil society and the public sphere, are converted into communicative power through democratic procedures” (Outhwaite 1996: 20). Deliberative democracy is the political institutionalisation of discourse ethics; democratic procedures ensure that moral questions are raised through real discourse.

This paper will critically assess a specific application of Habermas’ work, “Measuring Political Deliberation: A Discourse Quality Index”, exploring the strengths and weaknesses both of Habermas’ work and of this application. “Measuring Political Deliberation” falls into the final type of application identified by Blaug, as it tests the legitimacy of political deliberation by measuring the extent to which it meets the conditions of the Ideal Speech Situation. In “Measuring Political Deliberation”, Marco R. Steenbergen et. al. apply Habermas’ discourse theory, in particular the ISS, to the social challenge of deepening democracy by attempting to create a reliable and usable instrument for measuring the quality of discourse in political deliberation.

This paper will first outline Habermas’ work, which must be seen as the culmination of a set of different theories and sub-theories (Strydom, 1990, pg 541) that detail the structural transformation of the public sphere and create a theory of society with communicative action at its core. It will then explore the specific concepts used in the application, as mentioned above, illustrating how they have been incorporated into the measurement instrument and its various components.

This paper will then consider whether Steenburgen et. al. have accurately incorporated and presented Habermas’ theory, and what insight this application can offer us. Overall, the ISS provides a working analytical tool that facilitates the analysis of distortions within communication. However, as shown in the application, certain elements of the ISS have difficulty in making the transition from theory to practice; not all elements of the ISS can be measured in a precise and accurate way. Steenbergen et al demonstrate the application of the Discourse Quality Index (DQI) to a debate within the House of Commons. This example gets lost in the details of one specific example of discourse, offering a limited insight into the factors affecting the quality of discourse and how to shape them. Steenbergen et. al. acknowledge the fact that the DQI does not account for the contextual conditions of discourse. Therefore we must conclude that while the DQI is not without its uses, it cannot provide a complete analysis of discourse.

Critical Theory seeks to reach new ways of understanding society and the social world. It distinguishes itself from other theories with its practical purpose to reach

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human emancipation through the development of an interdisciplinary and critical social theory situated between practical philosophy and social science (Benhabib, 1986, pg 281). Critical Theory was first associated with the Frankfurt School under the leadership of Max Horkheimer. In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and fellow Critical Theorist Theodor Adorno set out a detailed and damning critique of the Enlightenment and of modernity, centred around the issue of the instrumentalisation of reason and the central role given to science and progress. Habermas sought to create his own critical social theory that would sit between the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School and modern social-political theory, between Marxist and non-Marxist thought and between modernity and its critics, placing interaction and labour – the two forms of reproduction – at the core of historical study (Outhwaite, 1996, pg 3). Habermas' Critical Theory would be normatively grounded and would provide the foundation for a social sciences research programme (Outhwaite 1996: 1-2) aimed at re-linking the Enlightenment and emancipation (Benhabib 1986: 329).

Habermas has pursued, over the last 35 years, a coherent intellectual and political project: to reanimate in new and expanded forms the critical thrust and the practical impulse of Marxist philosophy and social theory, recombining theory and practice in a manner which can be defended in the modern world. (Outhwaite 1996: 4)

One of the central themes in Habermas' work is modernity. In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, he draws on Weber's theory of rationalisation, which links modernity with "Occidental rationalism", an instrumental rationality driven by goals. According to Weber, the secularization of culture takes place as humanity becomes disenchanted with religious worldviews; society is no longer driven by a broad-based belief system or a common interest (Outhwaite 1996: 337). Weber describes Occidental rationalism as the rationalisation of culture into separate spheres of value (science, art and law) each operating with its own internal logic, each according to its own interests. As well as cultural secularization, Occidental rationalism entails of the growing independence of market and administrative structures, removing them from the realm of public discussion and agreement, so that they too operate according to their specific interests rather than the interests of the society as a whole.

Habermas adopts Weber's theory as a useful way of analysing changing social relations, but disagrees with Weber's notion that this process will inevitably end in the domination of individuals by this rationality, trapped in an "iron cage" of administration, and instead affirms the possibility of controlling such processes (Outhwaite 1996: 14). Habermas states that there exists another kind of rationality besides Weber's instrumental type: communicative rationality. The rationalisation that occurred as a result of modernisation was therefore one-sided, leading to the domination of communicative rationality by instrumental, goal-orientated rationality. This distinction between different types of rationality is key to understanding the work of Habermas.

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), Habermas explores the notion of public opinion by detailing the transformation of the public sphere, which he calls the "refeudalisation" of the public sphere. This is characterized by a

shift from a public sphere defined by openness and a critical public, to a public sphere determined by the self-interest of dominant elites (Habermas 1989: 195), including the domination of the press by private interests. We can see here Habermas' concept of the domination of instrumental rationality over communicative rationality, as the public sphere becomes shaped by individual interests rather than by the common interest of reaching understanding.

In *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1984), Habermas begins to explore the notion of communicative rationality in detail. He identifies three types of action: instrumental action, which follows technical rules and assesses efficiency; strategic action, which follows rules of rational choice; and communicative action. Instrumental and strategic actions are both driven by the achievement of a specific goal or gain. Habermas' focus is on communicative action, which, in contrast to the first two, is geared towards reaching understanding (Outhwaite 1996: 160-161). He sets out an analysis of communication and establishes what he understands as the rules of engagement. Here, he draws on Karl-Otto Apel's work on the 'normative conditions of the possibility of understanding'; the conditions necessary in communication for there to be the possibility of reaching understanding. According to Habermas, communication is based on a series of unexpressed "validity claims" which must be raised and vindicated in any speech action. Put simply, communication is based on a set of criteria that must be met in any communicative action for understanding to be reached. The first validity claim is comprehensibility, which indicates that participants must speak so as to be understood. The second is truth, which means that a speaker must have the intention of communicating a true proposition; that is, the speaker must not intend to misinform or mislead. The rightness validity claim states that participants must express intentions truthfully. The final validity claim is sincerity, which means that participants must choose an utterance that is right (Habermas 1979: 1-3).

Habermas develops his theory of communication further by claiming that these rules be used to analyse distortions. Analysis of distortions in communication allows further analysis of different political and social practices and the distinction between real and distorted public discussion.

Habermas does not, of course, suppose that all want of political liberty is equivalent to a want of real communication and real consensus about social needs and values. What he does insist upon is that distorted communication is the inevitable concomitant of the ideological suppression of social needs and generalizable interests; and further, that without real consensus and true communication the appearance of freedom must be illusory. (Bernstein 1995: 47)

As communication is distorted by power and money, the objective of reaching understanding becomes dominated by the protection of specific interests. Habermas then claims that these rules of communication should be applied to moral questions through discourse ethics; norms can be judged as valid if they can be agreed upon in discourse free from distortion by all participating. As we have already seen, he makes a distinction between communication and discourse; discourse occurs when validity claims are called

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into question and is specific to moral questions.

As opposed to ordinary communication ('interaction'), the goal of discourse is systematically to examine and test problematic truth and normative claims in their own right. (Bernstein 1995: 50)

Norms, such as economic and political rights, must be legitimated within the parameters of communicative rationality. As Habermas states, democratic procedures counteract the subversion of the political public sphere by power (Outhwaite, 1996, pg 217). By institutionalising communicative rationality through democratic procedures, the process of rationalisation (as described by Weber) can be controlled.

In order for discourse to be free from distortion, Habermas believes it must be open to participation by all, without exclusion. 'No one should be prevented from exercising these rights due to internal or external coercion' (Steenbergen et. al. 2003: 25). Participants must justify their assertions and validity claims during discourse. 'One has the possibility of taking a yes or no position to a criticisable validity claim only if the other is willing to justify the claim raised by her speech act, should this be necessary' (Habermas 1996: 119). Participants must consider the common good and show respect for other participants, and for other interests and demands. 'Political deliberation, however, must be concluded by majority decision in view of pressures to decide [...] majority rule justifies the presumption that the fallible majority opinion may be considered a reasonable basis until further notice, namely, until the minority convinces the majority that their (the minority's) views are correct' (Habermas 1996: 306). Participants' claims must also be authentic or sincere, so that discourse is free from deception. One can see the reflection of the validity claims in this rule. Discourse should also arrive at a rationally motivated consensus, forming what Habermas calls constructive politics. (Steenbergen 2003: 25-26). 'The goal of coming to an understanding is to bring about an agreement that terminates in the intersubjective mutuality of reciprocal understanding, shared knowledge, mutual trust, and accord with one another' (Habermas 1979: 3). The ideal of discourse free from communication is referred to as the Ideal Speech Situation (Bernstein 1995: 50), which Habermas uses as a universal with which to critique other principles or beliefs (Blaug 1994: 54).

Habermas builds on the theory of procedural justice developed by German intellect Immanuel Kant and his successor John Rawls. In it, the process rather than the outcome determines legitimacy. Norms are legitimate if they are produced through a discursive process. The value of discourse is not what it produces but in the conditions under which it takes place. However, Habermas differs from Kant and Rawls because he states that norms must be accepted through a real process of 'argumentation and persuasion', rather than through their justification in a hypothetical situation (Habermas 1990: 62-76).

Finally, the characteristic that distinguishes Habermas' work from that of many other theorists is the importance he gives to the balance between theory and

practice, combining philosophy and the social sciences. Critical Theory, particularly the work of Habermas, analyses both the 'context of genesis' and the 'context of application' (Benhabib, 1986, pg 281); it tests concepts both on paper and in the field. A purely theoretical approach, by comparison, is devoid of any historical context and insight, while a purely practical approach risks relativism and has no possibility of looking beyond the present state of affairs. Theory must be constantly tested through its application to real social situations. Habermas supports a reflexive relationship between theory and practice, in the same way that theory informs practice; theory must be tested and legitimised through its application. Habermas carves a path between hermeneutics and historical materialism, uniting theory and practice through the study of communication.

Having outlined the general structure of Habermas' work, we now will explore the application and the key concepts that it employs. Steenbergen et. al. attempt to create a Discourse Quality Index (DQI) in order to measure the 'quality' of discourse in deliberation. The application proposes this index in response to the rise of deliberative politics to the forefront of political theory (Steenbergen et. al. 2003: 21). Deliberative politics distinguishes itself by its focus on broad public discussion, in which participants debate issues of public concern, allowing them to influence the decision-making process (Vitale 2006: 745).

Steenbergen et. al. acknowledge the importance of combining both theory and practice, which is central to Habermas' work. 'A measure of the nature of discourse can serve as a bridge between political theory and empirical scholarship only if it does justice to the former and provides guidance to the latter.' (Steenbergen et. al. 2003: 22) The application introduces the index with a summary of the key concepts from Habermas' work that it draws on, showing a theoretical understanding of these concepts and their implications. The index is theoretically grounded in Habermas' discourse ethics, in particular the concept of validity claims and the Ideal Speech Situation, which are at the heart of his concept of deliberative democracy. (Steenbergen et. al. 2003: 21-22)

The DQI measures the quality of discourse in political deliberation by indicating whether a discourse adheres to the rules mentioned above. The index grades the discourse according to the following components: participation, justification, content of justifications, respect, and its appropriateness to constructive politics. 'Content of justifications' refers to whether the justifications are made in terms of narrow group interests or the common good. The index allows for measurement of varying degrees of adherence, for example providing four levels of justification, ranging from 'no justification' to 'sophisticated', following the intended purpose of the Ideal Speech Situation. As Blaug comments, "the ideal [of complete fairness in discourse] functions not to show that all instances of communication are imperfect, but to illuminate the degree of imperfection" (Blaug 1997: 108).

The DQI doesn't include a measure of authenticity because it was found to be unrealistic to try and measure such an intangible factor. (Steenbergen et. al. 2003: 26) Authenticity is indeed a difficult quality to measure, and Habermas offers no method to do so. This suggests that it would be problematic to apply it in its entirety. Even if

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discourse could live up to all the other criteria defined in the ISS, without authenticity it would become invalid. Measuring the quality of discourse itself becomes intangible without a realistic measure of authenticity. Steenbergen et al understand the significance of Habermas' theory but are aware of its limitations. They conclude that the omission of authenticity does not detract from their claim that "the DQI is a very good fit to discourse ethics" (Steenbergen et. al. 2003: 43). Authenticity is a key part of the ISS and cannot be omitted without some analysis of the effect that this will have on the results produced, which Steenbergen et. al. fail to provide.

In the application the DQI is used to evaluate a debate in the British House of Commons on women's issues. For the purpose of the DQI, a written format of the debate was judged by two coders. The idea of focusing solely on the words spoken and not on the physical debate reflects Habermas' theory. In his discourse ethics, Habermas states that he wants 'to single out explicit speech actions from other forms of communicative action' ignoring non-verbalized actions and bodily expressions. (Habermas 1979: 1). The index distinguishes between relevant and irrelevant speech acts. Relevant speech acts are defined as those that contain a demand, giving them normative character, placing them at the centre of discourse ethics (Steenbergen et. al. 2003: 27) This reflects the previous definition of discourse as the challenging of validity claims. Once the coders have made their independent evaluations they compare their results.

In cases where there was a disagreement, the coders read through the speech again and discussed the merits of the rival codes. At the end of this deliberative process, they settled on a particular code, but not until each coder had been convinced of the accuracy of that code (Steenbergen et. al. 2003: 31).

At this point the application has incorporated Habermas into the index both theoretically and practically with the use of the concepts of deliberation and consensus in the evaluation of the discourse. Having collected all of the information from the coders the results are combined using indicators of intercoder agreement to produce one discourse quality index.

We have seen how the DQI uses Habermas' discourse theory, in particular his concepts of validity claims and the Ideal Speech Situation, to create a measurement instrument for the quality of discourse in political deliberation. Steenbergen et al apply the ISS in a thorough and practical way and demonstrate how it can be used. The DQI measures the various components that contribute to the conditions of communication. It allows us to see how discourse in political deliberation falls short of the Ideal Speech Situation, and there is scope with this application to compare different examples of discourse as it identifies different components that can be measured individually. The DQI therefore has potential as a regulative tool within the decision-making process or the public discussion that influences it. It seems then that we must classify this application as a test of legitimacy as it evaluates the quality of discourse in political deliberation,

ensuring that democratic outcomes are produced by democratic procedures. In terms of practicality, the application is a successful application of Habermas' thought. However, the DQI has limitations and cannot fulfil the intended purpose of Habermas' discourse ethics.

Habermas' theory is characterised by its analysis of both detail and system structures. It stresses the importance of both theory and practice. This application seems to be reluctant in putting forward any reasoning for the results it produces, or indeed for the presence or absence of distortions. The theory is used to analyse discourse but the results are not used in a way that could explain distortions in discourse and, in turn, inform theory. In the context of the example that Steenbergen et al use, perhaps the index would offer more insight if it could be enhanced by the feedback of the participants themselves. Malhotra's studies with mature women students attempted to create the conditions of the Ideal Speech Situation by allowing them a space in which to communicate freely. At one point the participants even suggested changes in the experiment themselves (Blaug 1997: 106). By involving the participants one could gain feedback on the reasons behind the distortions, for example feelings of intimidation or lack of information. The DQI could therefore gain from a more interactive element, which could provide it with some enlightening conclusions.

One debate within the House of Commons, the representative body of the British Houses of Parliament, is actually the outcome of a complex political procedure that can include general elections, election campaigns, lobbying and the effectiveness of party whips. One thing that the DQI cannot measure or account for is the political and social context in which discourse takes place. The value of discourse within the House of Commons would be determined by how much consultation Members of Parliament had undertaken with constituents or by the effects of party politics. The index allows us to judge the quality of discourse in political deliberation, but offers no suggestions for improving this quality nor proposes any solutions for maintaining and institutionalizing better discursive procedure¹. For the index to fulfil its full potential it must give an insight into the context specific issues of political deliberation but also into the systemic trends that cause them. Habermas' work on the public sphere and the conditions necessary for critical public discussion, notably in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, would provide theoretical grounding for suggestions for improving the quality of political deliberation, suggestions that could then be tested using the DQI. This application has chosen a very specific example of discourse as its subject and analyses the minute details of this discourse. The DQI would offer more insight if it were applied to the political system within which this discourse took place. In the context of a debate in the House of Commons, the DQI could be applied to questions of political engagement and participation. Participation is one of the assessment criteria of the DQI, which

1. For an application that goes further in proposing the forms that institutions based on deliberative democracy would take, see J. Dryzek, 'Discursive Designs: Critical Theory and Political Institutions', *American Journal of Political Science*, 1987, 31.

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could be applied to the issue of low turnout figures in British elections and the apathy and lack of political engagement that this signifies. Steenbergen et. al. acknowledge that the DQI cannot account for the broader context of political deliberation. We are forced to conclude that the DQI can only offer insight into the factors affecting discourse when used as part of a wider study. The DQI is therefore an incomplete study of discourse.

In conclusion, Habermas analyses the developments in social relations linked to modernity, including the rationalisation of culture and the transformation of the public sphere, distinguishing between different types of action that are driven by different types of rationality. While he does criticise the instrumentalisation of reason that has arisen from the Enlightenment and modernity, his focus is on reigniting the emancipatory democratic potential of the Enlightenment by countering the domination of instrumental rationality over communicative rationality through democratic practices that would institutionalise communicative rationality. Habermas sets out a detailed discourse theory based on the rules of communication that can be used to judge the validity of norms and questions of morality. His theories provide a solid theoretical grounding for a discourse quality measurement, using the Ideal Speech Situation as a procedural test, facilitating the measurement of the quality of political deliberation at the heart of democratic practices and institutions. In practice, discourse theory does face some limitations: it is based on criteria that cannot be measured fully in practice. Steenbergen et al, for justifiable reasons, omit authenticity from the DQI because it is intangible. Yet this does completely change the value of discourse ethics and the ISS if it is to be put into practice, as Habermas would intend. Discourse may meet all other criteria but, as Habermas states, is completely devalued without authenticity, even more so as its subject matter is questions of morality. Habermas makes a compelling argument for the importance of communicative rationality and its institutionalisation through deliberative democracy. However, the ISS is limited in its use as a practical measurement instrument.

Measuring Political Deliberation uses Habermas' theory as the foundation for its own analytical tool and his theory is applied in a useable way. The methodology is clear and precise. However, Steenburgen et al offer no insight into the factors affecting the quality of discourse, offering isolated case-specific results of the DQI. The application does propose ways that the index could be used to address these issues: as a predictor of substantive policy outputs and as a dependent variable to explain the changing quality of discourse in political deliberation (Steenbergen et. al. 2003: 42). Here we have concluded that the Discourse Quality Index could potentially offer a vital insight into political deliberation in modern democratic practices and institutions, but only when applied to the broader context in which discourse takes place as well as the specific details of discourse. This in turn could lead to further institutionalisation of political discourse and improved public debate or 'critical publicity', goals which are central to the work of Jürgen Habermas. Democratic practices can serve to curb the influence of instrumental rationality and protect the place of communicative rationality, ensuring that the public has the possibility to participate in the moral and legal judgements that affect them.

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