



## Democracy in Disguise

The use of social media in reviewing the Icelandic constitution

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# What's this about?

- ...to scrutinize the participative processes enabled by social media services in the collaborative rewriting of the Icelandic Constitution...
- ...what kind of participative processes were generated on the Constitutional Council's **Facebook**, **Twitter**, **Flickr** and **YouTube** profiles – and on **stjornlagarad.is**...
- Or – put differently...
- The aim is to inspect what kind of civic agency was expressed through the online networked publics operating on the social media services and whether these interactions had impact on the decision taking in the Council



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# Background – from **Assembly** to **Council**

- 4 November 2009 the Prime Minister submits a bill about and advisory Constitutional Assembly
- Changes made on the bill before it became an Act (reduced time, National Assembly, Constitutional Committee....supported by 39 votes – 1 against, 12 absent, 11 abstained)
- 522 candidates expressed interest in being voted to the Assembly – **25** delegates chosen – **35.95%** of the population voted
- December 2010 – the elections were invalidated
- Parliamentary resolution changed the **Assembly** to a **Council** (30 supported, 21 against, 7 abstained, 5 absent)



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# CC working procedures

- *Divided in 3 groups:*
  - - **Group A** (citizenship, national language, natural resources, human rights, environmental issues...)
  - - **Group B** (foundation of the Constitution, President, Parliament, government, municipalities...)
  - - **Group C** (democratic participation of the public, judicial courts, state authority, parliamentary elections, international contracts, foreign affairs...)
- **Mondays & Tuesdays:** Groups work separately
- **Wednesdays:** Propositions presented and discussed with other delegates
- **Thursdays:** Recommendations introduced at open Council meeting – recommendations put on the Council’s webpage and into a **progress document** where people were encouraged to participate through Facebook’s ‘reply system’



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# Method

- *Qualitative content analysis – inductive category development followed by a deductive category application* (Mayring, 2000; Hsieh & Shannon 2005)
- The Council's **Facebook** profile
- The Council's **Twitter** profile
- The Council's **YouTube** channel
- The Council's **Flickr** profile
- **stjornlagarad.is**
- Identified following themes:
- *Practical information; exclamations; the 'loop of dissemination'; and the deliberation-statement axis*



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# 3 kinds of publics

- **Strong public** of the elected **MPs** with clear decision making mandate from the general public
- **Intermediate public** consisting of the elected 25 delegates in the **Constitutional Council** which despite their legitimacy – are considerably weakened after the invalidation of the elections
- **Weak networked publics** acting mainly within the online communicative spheres of stjornlagarad.is, Facebook, YouTube, Flickr and Twitter
- **Networked publics** – persistence, replicability, scalability, searchability, invisibility of audiences, lack of spatial, social and temporal boundaries – constituted as a space and a collective of people at the same time



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# Democracy in disguise – social media services

- YouTube – 51 videos, few views, very few comments, no discussion, no deliberation
- Flickr – 522 photos, 0 comments, no discussion, no deliberation
- Twitter – 171 tweets, 522 followers, practical meta communication, dissemination loop, comments, no deliberation
- Facebook/stjornlagarad.is – practical information, exclamations, dissemination, statements – and fractures of deliberation



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# Democracy in disguise – Analysis

- ***Practical information*** –
- ‘The Constitutional Council’s 9<sup>th</sup> news letter has been published. It is possible to register on the Council’s webpage, stjornlagarad.is’ (Council’s profile on Facebook, 20.6.2011)
- ‘The 14<sup>th</sup> meeting continues – Elections and the participation of the general public’ (Council’s Twitter profile, 27.6.2011)
  
- ***Exclamations*** –
- ‘Long live revolution 3.0!’ (Council’s Facebook profile, 30.12.2011)
- ‘Greece invented democracy and Iceland brought it into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century!! All my respect for the people of Iceland’ (Council’s Facebook profile, 23.2.2012)
- ‘Iceland rocks!’ (Council’s Facebook profile, 30.12.2011)





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# Democracy in disguise – Analysis

- ***The ‘dissemination loop’***–
- Lot of communication pointing towards and linking to appearances by Council members in Icelandic media
- Later the loop started taking off – ending up in venues such as mashable.com, CNN, Al Jazeera, USA Today, Guardian, ABC News and Libération
  
- ***Deliberation – statement axis*** –
- 330 errands submitted – the sender frequently absent in the discussions
- The progress document generated more concrete and focused discussions, usually framed as statements – not deliberation
- ‘A similar proposition was put forward in the Council but it was not accepted’ (Council’s Facebook profile, 26.7.2011) – ‘Ok, understand, thanks’ ...
- ‘Thank you for your many comments and clear communication. We have gone through your comments and discussed them in the committee. Some of it has been incorporated in the text, and some have not’ (stjornlagarad.is, 22.6.2011)



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# Conclusion

- The affordances of social media worked well when providing practical information, to disseminate information and to respond to positive exclamations
- These affordances worked well in terms of providing statements
- Came short when reaching deliberation ('...we discussed this in the Council and decided not to...', ...'thank you for your comments, we will look into it...') – deliberation as 'an inter-subjective performative process that involves the transformation of privately-oriented selves into publicly-oriented 'citizens', and pre-deliberate positions into critical-reflexive public opinions' (Dahlberg)
- Clear hierarchy between the **weak networked publics** operating on social media; the stronger, but disempowered **Constitutional Council**; and the **strong publics** of elected MPs
- This is NOT a Constitution of networked publics – but networked publics were constituted in the rewriting process – they are just disempowered



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# Conclusion

- There is always hierarchy
- The communication spiral needs to be analysed as an ecosystem of connective media
- Van Dijck (technology, users/usage, content, business models, regulation, ownership)
- By conducting a communicative-structural analysis of different online media environments – you get closer to the conditionality of participation patterns that each platform entails
- ...but it is not only the interface that tailors patterns of participation, but the wider framework of political economy (both offline and online)...

