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The Three Key Roles of Moderator

in

Municipal Online Forums

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ABSTRACT

The growing use of Internet discussion forums in city communication practices has raised hopes that new forms of deliberation may be opened up, at least partially freed up from the temporal constraints of face-to-face debates. It is also hoped that these new forms of deliberation may weaken social hierarchies and the power relations that exist in face-to-face debates. But just as the proliferation of debating spaces creates the need for mediators in the local sphere whose job it is to manage the interface between technology and politics (for example, commissioners for public inquiries, project managers, etc.), internet forums too require the presence of professionals (head of communications, webmaster) who ensure their smooth running. To what extent does their management of the electronic discussion influence the conditions and the modes of participation of the population?

We observed three main functions of the moderator: the manager, the referee and the intermediary. In the case of the management of the forum, the webmaster's contribution to debates clearly stimulates interest in the forum. In the exercise of his or her function as referee, the webmaster controls what can be said in the forum, and the manner or form that the messages are allowed to take. Finally, when the moderator assumes the function of intermediary between Internet users and politicians, s/he enjoys a clear political prerogative. Indeed, the process by which the contributions of Internet users are translated into the political sphere is opaque, which casts doubt on the 'democratic' nature of the intermediary's practices.

Key words. – discussion forums, webmaster, moderation, Internet, participation, local democracy.

INTRODUCTION

Local democracy is topical. Twenty years of French government reports, new legislation and pilot projects in various municipalities bear witness to the political will to involve constituents more fully in local decision-making. Town planning workshops and advisory councils of children or immigrants are some of the new mechanisms established to give elected leaders better insight into their constituencies (Bacqué, Rey and Sintomer, 2005).

Local politics is not what it was. First, local leaders can no longer expect to earn grassroots support for their decisions simply because they were democratically elected and have produced a few experts as back-up. Today, the usual tools of political action need to restructure public debate if they are to achieve a minimum of procedural legitimacy. This need shows up in recurring references to “participative” or “deliberative democracy” in political thinking. In other words, what makes a decision legitimate is no longer only who makes it, but also how.

Second, the growing number of communication channels for public debate that follows from the above also generates a need for mediators to link policy to action (Nonjon, 2005). Therefore, elected leaders are losing some of their decision-making powers to public inquiry investigators, urban renewal policymakers and “Bianco” committee members who now play an active role in the decision-making process.¹ Moreover, the presence of these new players in the channels affects both how constituents participate and how their participation will impact the final decision.

Third, the greater voice of constituents modifies the very role of elected local leaders and their experts. Elected leaders must now be more prepared to defend their decisions against confrontational feedback in a public arena from constituents.

Finally, the inclusion of participative and deliberative devices in the decision-making process correlates with an evolution in skill sets. Citizens now realize their right and capability to participate in public affairs, or at least to contribute to discussions. Thus, Rémi Lefebvre and Magali Nonjon note that district councils have successfully allowed the emergence of a “grassroots expertise” (Lefebvre and Nonjon, 2003 : 24).

In this context, the growing use of Internet discussion forums in city communication practices has raised hopes that new forms of deliberation may be opened up, at least partially freed up from the temporal constraints of face-to-face debates (Dutton, 1996). It is also hoped that these new forms of deliberation may weaken social hierarchies and the power relations that exist in face-to-face debates (Gastil, 2000). But just as the proliferation of debating spaces creates the need for mediators in the local sphere whose job it is to manage the interface between technology and politics (for example, commissioners for public inquiries, project managers, etc.) (Nonjon, 2005), internet forums too require the presence of professionals (head of communications, webmaster) who ensure their smooth

¹ The “Bianco” Decree (December 15, 2002) provides for consultation of affected citizens from the very beginning of major public works projects via an independent commission appointed and chaired by the prefect.

running. Indeed, the moderation of forums appears essential in order for the discussions to run smoothly (Davis, 2005) but also so that these discussions may be taken into consideration by the local authorities who initiate them (Coleman, Götze, 2001 ; Monnoyer-Smith, 2004). However, whereas the management of public debates is entrusted to “experts in participation” whose socio-professional profile is relatively well-identified, when it comes to the electronic forums accessible on the websites of public institutions, there is no precise procedures governing the appointment of moderators. Should they be specialists in computers? Or independant hosts? Experts in public policies? Or rather, experts in the specific field which is the focus of the debate? Or should the task of moderation be handed over to an impartial software package?

In this field, no rules are yet established and in certain cases, for example in the “Unchat”² experiment described by Beth Noveck, the moderators are even elected by the body of participants (Noveck, 2004). On the forums of the French municipalities, the role of moderator is generally taken on, “by default”, by the webmaster of the municipal website. However, it can be sometimes delegated to other municipal employees, especially those of the information-communication service. To what extent does their management of the electronic discussion influence the conditions and the modes of participation of the people? It is necessary to scrutinize the management and moderation of electronic exchanges, but also to see how the moderators ensure that these online debates have an effect on the local authorities’ decisions.

TYPOLOGIES ON MODERATORS

The role of moderators in online debates has given rise to several typologies or models (Coleman, Götze, 2001 ; Edwards, 2002, White, 2000 ; Wright, 2006) which seem to us able to shed light on the moderation practices that we have observed in the forums of French municipal websites. Thus, Scott Wright detects no less than eleven functions which may be given to the moderator. For example, by posing new questions and topics, the moderator assumes the role of a “conversation stimulator”; s/he can also act as a mediator when participants come into conflict; s/he can facilitate debate between elected representatives and citizens by summarizing the main points of the various messages; s/he can be an “open censor” by removing messages disrespecting the forum’s rules, whilst at the same time providing senders with explanations concerning the censorship so that they can re-word the contentious message (Wright, 2006).

Picking up on the work of Nancy White (2000), Stephen Coleman and John Götze (2001) distinguish seven kinds of moderators: social host, team manager, community of pratice, cybrarian,

² Technical platform whose features are supposed to respect the theoretical principles of deliberation, as defined by Beth Noveck, for example, the acessibility to debates, the absence of censorship, the equality of participants, the transparency of the rules of the debate...

help desk, referee and janitor (Coleman, Gøtze, 2001). The social host is the longest-established online facilitation model. S/he helps create an environment where the members feel comfortable to participate: “Part conversationalist, part counselor, [...] and sometimes even part bouncer. They are also usually part of the conversation” (Coleman, Gøtze, 2001 : 18). The manager leads the discussion and pays attention to adherence to focus, timelines, task lists, commitments and process. This can be aided by the use of static web pages to organize information and also the regular use of summaries and reviews. More difficult to grasp, the “community of practice” facilitates exchanges amongst the participants, facilitating group interaction and highlighting points of agreement as they emerge. The cybrarian participates as an expert on a specific topic, stimulating discussions by providing relevant information as needed. The help desk provides simple technical pointers on using the software. The referee is probably the best-known moderator role, in that his/her actions are aimed at making participants respect the rules of the debate and keeping them ‘on topic’. Lastly, the janitor tidies up forgotten topics by freezing and archiving and redirects activity if it is in the wrong area. Of course, these roles are not mutually exclusive, and may overlap in the activity of any given moderator.

On the forums offered by French municipal websites, the webmaster generally undertakes the role of moderator. However, this role may also be fulfilled by other municipal employees, especially amongst those of the information-communication service. Drawing in part upon the classifications proposed by Wright on the one hand by Coleman and Gøtze on the other, we suggest a simplified typology of the moderator’s activities as observable on electronic discussion forums provided by some French cities. Indeed, some of the roles discussed by these authors are not exercised by the moderators of the French forums (such as for example the community of practice), or else they are exercised only marginally (e.g. the help desk function). Further, it seems to us that some of the tasks mentioned above can be grouped together within a single category. For example, providing further information (cybrarian) during a debate can be a part of the manager’s activities, whose aim is to run the discussion and facilitate the interactions between participants. We have therefore identified the following moderator roles: the manager, the referee and the intermediary. This reflection on the mediation work performed by moderators ultimately leads us to explore the conditions of expression and participation peculiar to discussion forum. It also leads us to question the relationship of these professionals towards those in political authority, especially their degree of autonomy.

EMPIRICAL GROUND AND METHODS

The outcomes presented here are based on an analysis of several forums established by French municipal authorities between 2002 and 2005:

- In 2002, we worked on the forums of eight municipalities, with varying numbers of inhabitants, in Southwest France: Anglet (Pyrénées-Atlantiques), Carmaux (Tarn), Cenon (Gironde), Condom

(Gers), Luchon (Haute-Garonne), Montpellier (Hérault), Tarbes (Hautes-Pyrénées) and Vauvert (Gard)³.

In 2003, we did eighteen in-depth interviews with municipal employees from these towns, mainly politicians (deputy mayor in charge of communication and local democracy, town councillors and principal private secretaries) and those in charge of communication (heads of communication and webmasters). We have furthermore studied the messages posted on the forums. Thus, all of the messages published in the forums since their opening until February 15th, 2002 have been collected, that is to say seven hundred and thirty messages sent by four hundred and seventeen net-surfers. We must say that this is more an estimation liable to slight variations than final numbers because the same person can send several messages under different fictitious names.

- Then, between 2003 and 2005, we studied the forums of other French cities which are particularly meaningful because of their previous interest in information and communication technologies (ICT), for example, Issy-les-Moulineaux (Hauts-de-Seine), Rennes (Ille-et-Vilaine) or Vandoeuvre-lès-Nancy (Meurthe-et-Moselle).

- Lastly, in 2005, we observed the forums available on the municipal websites of the following cities with over 80 000 inhabitants: Amiens (Somme), Besançon (Doubs), Boulogne-Billancourt (Hauts-de-Seine), Limoges (Haute-Vienne), Montpellier, Mulhouse (Haut-Rhin), Nanterre (Hauts-de-Seine), Orléans (Loiret) and Saint-Denis (Seine-Saint-Denis).

Besides interviews with council actors and forum content analysis, our methodology includes a comparative analysis with other kinds of online forums and with face-to-face debates such as district councils or public meetings. The comparison has double relevance. First, the comparison allows us to bypass the simple measurement of the gap between the theoretical models of deliberation, sometimes used in the discourses of politicians, and the observable practices. Second, the specificities of online moderation can be illuminated with the help of comparisons made by various authors especially on district councils.

THE MANAGER

One of the roles that can be observed on the forums available on French municipal websites is that of “manager”, which consists of organizing and leading online discussions. The simplest modality of this role is to greet Internet users, a function performed by the webmaster in almost every forum that we have observed. An example of this kind of message, designed to open the debate, can be seen in the forum of Soissons (Aisne): “You are logged on to the Soissons forum. You can leave a

³ We put into brackets the *département* of the town. The *département* is an administrative division of the French territory.

message, which will be published, like the one you are now reading. It can be addressed to an individual, or may simply take the form of an announcement. You can talk about anything you want (within certain obvious limits of course)⁴.

The webmaster-manager can also be a “conversation stimulator” inasmuch as, during electronic discussions, s/he asks new questions or introduces new topics (Wright, 2006 : 554). So, in some cases, s/he can be – as noted by Arthur Edwards (2002), involved in choosing and formulating the topics which Internet users are invited to discuss. For example, in Luchon where the municipal forum in 2002 included a range of themes, the webmaster explains that he has chosen the new topics for discussion after consultation with the different municipal services. With their assent, the webmaster implemented a new forum which was structured around six topics, which were in turn sometimes divided into sub-topics⁵. This example reflects the idea that the use of professionals or technicians in city communications brings its own dynamic, and influences the content of policies of municipal communication (Pailliant, 1993). The choice of topics made by the webmaster sometimes has a significant effect on Internet users’ participation. In Montpellier, following a proposal by the webmaster, and after agreement by the Mayor’s staff, there are seven forums on offer corresponding to the division of the town into its seven districts, each recording very unequal levels of participation. Indeed, inhabitants of the more ‘favoured’ districts such as “Montpellier Centre” express themselves more than those of “Mosson”, “Les Cévennes” or “Croix d’Argent”. Consequently, the concerns which are broached on the forum come from individuals who, even if they do not have the same social profile, at least share the same geographical space and the same concerns relating to its occupancy (for example, the cleanliness of the historical city centre on the forum “Montpellier Centre”). So it seems that, due to a choice initially made by the webmaster, the cultural, social and economic disparities amongst the different districts of this town are duplicated in its online forums.

Beyond the choice of topics, leading the electronic discussion is another important facet of the manager’s work. S/he attempts then to stimulate and to sharpen the thoughts of participants. For example, the webmaster of Boulogne-Billancourt intervenes in the debates relating to the future of “l’Ile Seguin”, addressing net-surfers as follows: “[...] But don’t forget that it is an industrial estate that you wish to commemorate. So it is also a factory, with its assembly-line work, its immigrant workers, and so on. So its past is less significant, less consensual, than that of, I don’t know...The Louvre, for example, isn’t it ?⁶”. Consequently, the relevance of forums appears mainly reliant on the webmaster and his resourcefulness faced with the Internet users’ entreaties.

⁴ Webmaster, 29/08/00, Bienvenue à tous !, Soissons, <<http://www.ville-soissons.fr>>, August 4th, 2002. The forum of Soissons does not exist any more today.

⁵ “General” (made of forums entitled “Luchon” and “Improvement of the forum”), “Animation” (with the forums “Ideas”, “Flowers battle” and “Film festival”), “Sports service” (with “Comments”, “Sport in general” and “Associations”), “Informatics” (“Informatics”, “Problems” and “Links”), “Links” and “Messages to webmasters”. See <<http://www.mairie-luchon.fr>>

⁶ Le Modérateur, 14/03/05, forum « L’avenir de l’Ile Séguin », Sujet « noms de rue », Boulogne-Billancourt, <<http://www.boulognebillancourt.fr/cms/index.php>>, March 2nd, 2006. We quote the messages in this manner: Name of the

From a quantitative point of view, most of the messages posted by the members of the municipality are sent by the webmaster. Thus, among the seven hundred and thirty-two messages available on the forums in Southwest France, fifty-five were sent by webmasters, forty-six by municipal services and only eight by elected representatives (Wojcik, 2005). From a qualitative point of view, the host's management activities appear minimal, especially in comparison with the practices which can be observed in face-to-face debates. For example, as regards the participative devices relating to job applications and local authority housing for inhabitants of popular areas, Marion Carrel notes that the organizers of the debates pay particular attention to inhabitants who do not usually express themselves, to enable them to express themselves publicly (Carrel, 2006). Even if the moderators of electronic debates should, according to Richard Davis (2005), encourage the participation of those who do not usually participate, with a view to making their voices heard during the deliberative process, more often the moderator's interventions are restricted to reminding participants of the rules of the debate or of the rules concerning participants' behaviour, and to replying to participants who request specific practical information. The messages of municipal employees and of the webmaster consist mainly of answers given to Internet users who are asking for particular pieces of information. In this case, the replies often contain links to other websites, enriching in this manner the information initially provided. For example, in reply to the message from the net-surfer "Jefekoi" (fictitious name) on the Mulhouse forum, asking whether roadworks are in progress in Gutenberg and Flammarion streets⁷, the webmaster provides further information on the fact that these roadworks will last till mid-June and invites the addressee to visit the website "www.tram-train.net" in order to see a map of the diversions in place in this area⁸.

In other cases, the webmaster passes on the net-surfers' questions to the relevant people. For example, in Chalon-sur-Saône, the net-surfer "Un pêcheur" (fictitious name) asks when the refuse collectors come to the lake of the ZUP⁹; the webmaster answers: "However, the waste management is a part of the domain of the urban community Chalon Val de Bourgogne. Your request has been passed on to them today¹⁰". We must add that when the Internet users' messages are not requests for practical information, the webmaster does not have a free hand, since his answers are generally subject to ratification by elected representatives or by the manager of the information-communication service.

Otherwise, even if s/he does not take on the role of "cybrarian" – who, according to Scott Wright (2005: 554), is an expert on a specific topic – the webmaster sometimes shows accurate knowledge,

Internet user, date of the message (i.e day/month/year), title of the message (if it does exist), name of the forum, topic (when it is the case), town. Because these informations cannot be easily translated, we have chosen to keep the French words.

⁷ « Jefekoi », 13/05/04, *Porte Haute (rue Gutenberg)*, forum « Plan de circulation », Mulhouse, <<http://www.ville-mulhouse.fr/forum/viewforum.php?f=3&sid=d3d5e79a954e54f1fad9ae599c4dda64>>, March 10th, 2006.

⁸ Administrateur, 26/05/04, forum « Plan de circulation », Mulhouse, <<http://www.ville-mulhouse.fr/forum/viewforum.php?f=3&sid=d3d5e79a954e54f1fad9ae599c4dda64>>, March 10th, 2006.

⁹ « Un pêcheur... », 29/07/02, *Propreté ??????*, forum « Parlez à vos élus », Chalon-sur-Saône, <<http://www.ville-soissons.fr>>, August 4th, 2002.

¹⁰ webmaster, 29/07/02, *RE: Propreté ??????*, forum « Parlez à vos élus », Chalon-sur-Saône, <<http://www.ville-soissons.fr>>, August 4th, 2002.

implying that s/he has probably sought information before supplying the answer to the Internet user. For example, in response to the repeated messages from “Ploum” (fictitious name), on the forum of Boulogne-Billancourt, who claimed that a street in this town should be named “Talamoni”¹¹, the webmaster provides the following information: “Talamoni, who was a former soldier in Algeria, shot a soldier in the heart at point-blank range after he had been found distributing leaflets in front of the Renault factory. This murder was tried by French courts (if, that is, you attach importance to the Penal Code) and he was sentenced to a prison term. He was released after four years. This was neither “invasion” nor “self-defence”: it was murder¹²”.

Finally, the manager classifies and archives the messages posted on the forum (Coleman, Götze, 2001). For example, the webmaster of Montpellier explains that some net-surfers post their messages on all the forums available, without taking into account the specific topics. So a message relating to town planning might be sent to forums entitled “The Euro: have your say” or “Culture and Leisures”. In this case, the webmaster determines in which forum the message really belongs and deletes it from the other forums to which it was initially sent. If the Montpellier webmaster never seems to doubt her ability to classify the messages in the correct thematic forums, we must stress that other webmasters are very hesitant regarding what a thematic forum should contain. Because of this uncertainty, the filing of messages can be very random. Thus, in Carmaux, the two moderators have very different ideas of what the “Forum Citoyen” offered on the municipal website should contain. For one of them, this forum deals mainly with town councils and plans; but for his colleague, this same forum – “without saying that it is a hotchpotch” – allows “people to speak, to launch debate on a topic that they deem important, connected with Carmaux city¹³”.

If the moderator plays a part – together with the administrative employees and the politicians – in defining the topics of the electronic discussion, his/her function is strategic above all to the extent that s/he is charged with maintaining the boundaries of the agenda of topics on which participants are allowed to express themselves. Indeed, s/he deletes the messages which are not connected to the selected topic, classifies them and archives them for a period which is often at her/his discretion.

THE REFEREE

The most well-known role of the moderator is related to the management of the content of the forum which consists of removing the messages which do not respect certain rules in general given in a “charter” available on the municipal website. For example, the messages which do not respect the

¹¹ « Ploum », 16/06/05, forum « L’avenir de l’Ile Seguin », sujet « noms de rue », Boulogne-Billancourt, <<http://www.boulognebillancourt.fr/cms/index.php>>, March 2nd, 2006.

¹² Le modérateur, 17/06/05, forum « L’avenir de l’Ile Seguin », sujet « noms de rue », Boulogne-Billancourt, <<http://www.boulognebillancourt.fr/cms/index.php>>, March 2nd, 2006.

¹³ Interview, Webmaster, Carmaux, January 7th, 2003.

law and accepted standards of good behaviour are not published. In this role of referee, the moderator has an autonomy which varies between limited freedom and slack control from political authorities.

Called “referee” (Coleman, Götze, 2001: 19) or “censor” (Wright, 2005: 554), the moderator first makes sure that the exchanges are proper and go smoothly. However, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish moderation from censorship characterized by rules that are too restrictive rules or which are not clearly specific and visible to the Internet users’ eyes. The lack of precision of the moderation rules is for example illustrated in the forum of Montpellier, where “discussion is free, all the opinions are welcomed, but the inappropriate messages will not be published¹⁴” and in Cenon too, where “the webmaster reserves the right to publish or not the messages sent on the website¹⁵”. The rules enacted by some editorial charters related to the decision to publish a message or not can be drawn up in a very particularly firm way, showing the crucial importance of the moderator in the framing of electronic discussion. For example, in the forum of Saint-Martin d’Hères (Isère), “the moderators reserve the right to implement these rules. Their decisions cannot be disputed.” In the forum of Annecy (Haute-Savoie), Internet users are warned in an extremely authoritative and emphatic way: “we are the only judge of messages which must be removed from or added to the website¹⁶”. In Miramas (Bouches-du-Rhône), the omnipotence of municipal editors is rigidly established by the editorial charter of the forum, since they have the right to “delete, publish and shift any of the topics at anytime¹⁷”. Unlike the moderation which can be observed in other kinds of forums, such as the forums available on the websites of national daily papers, the municipal moderator does not do any editing. Indeed, unlike the moderators of *Le Monde* or *Libération*’ s forums (Falguères, 2005), s/he does not change the content of messages, does not modify them in any way, and – judging by the messages seen on screen – does not correct grammatical or spelling mistakes either. Here, the moderation consists in simply accepting or rejecting the messages in full.

In an implicit way, the moderator sometimes adopts other rules aiming in particularly at the fact that municipal policies are not too systematically denigrated (Wojcik, 2005). In general, the elected representatives are not much interested in their municipal websites, adopting towards them a “benevolent indifference” (Loiseau, 2003: 97) and thus fostering the webmasters’ autonomy. However, they are more finicky with regards to the management of the interactive rubrics, at least as far as the potential deletion of messages destined for the forum of their city is concerned. In this context, the webmasters have a limited autonomy since in case of a message which could be a disruptive influence on the course of the debate, they are in general required (or think they are required) to refer themselves to elected representatives or administrative manager to whom they are

¹⁴ Website of the Montpellier city, <<http://www.ville-montpellier.fr>>, February 13rd, 2002.

¹⁵ Website of Cenon, <<http://www.ville-cenon.fr>>, February 13rd, 2002.

¹⁶ Website of Saint-Martin-d’Hères, <<http://www.ville-st-martin-dheres.fr>> and website of Annecy, <<http://www.ville-annecy.fr>>, November 2002.

¹⁷ Website of Miramas, « Charter for the use of forums », <<http://www.miramas.org/plus/forum/charte.asp>>, August 22nd, 2004.

answerable¹⁸ and who decide whether it will be published or not. For example, in Tarbes, the moderator had to frequently consult the principal private secretary when he was faced with a controversial message: “It needed between a quarter and half an hour. I had to print the message then to go downstairs to the Mayor’s office, to corner the principal secretary and to tell him: “I have a message, what will I do ?”¹⁹ Similarly, it is tricky to bring up municipal elections as this message of the moderator of Boulogne-Billancourt shows: “Hello everybody. Some messages have been removed. Why ? Because they had nothing to do with the discussion and this forum is not used for settling the electoral campaign problems in 2000²⁰”. Their intention to master the discursive content is increased by the permanent character of discussion forums. Indeed, because of the possible durability of criticism by Internet users against municipal policies or staff, local authorities may be tempted to remove a lot of messages. Traceability of messages is admittedly an asset of the forum compared to other means of participation for which the discussions are fleeting. Indeed, the forum keeps participants’ speeches on a long-term basis. But at the same time, this traceability is considered as a weapon of accountability likely to backfire on the local authorities. For example, they may be forced to fulfil their previous publicly expressed promises. In this way, forums work like a mirror which is always held up to politicians, as it may reflect the gaps between the real actions of the municipality and the speeches of its leaders. Thus, within the framework of a “continuous democracy” evoked by Dominique Rousseau, forums may be considered as a space for “the ongoing exercise of a civic and critical gaze reducing the margin of independence of those who have been elected” (1999: 5). In the same way, the wide visibility of words abroad may increase their mistrust of discussion forums.

Other criteria for moderation, defined by the webmaster himself, also govern the publication of messages. For example, the charter of Chalon-sur-Saône (Saône-et-Loire) requires that participants “do not monopolize the discussion space”. This instruction may, further, be interpreted in a very broad sense by the forum moderator, for whom this threshold of “monopolization” is not always easy to define. For some of the webmasters, the “relevance” of a message is valued according to its insertion in the discussion process. Thus, one of the moderators of Carmaux’s forums explains that a former message can initiate a debate and give rise to interesting answers later, in this case this initial message must not be deleted. Therefore, the relevance of a message, assessed by the moderator, will be decisive and how long the message has been in the forum will not inevitably be a reason to delete it. This assessment of what is “relevant” and what are “interesting” answers depends solely upon the moderator, for her/him, it is first and foremost the ‘isolated’ messages, generating no reaction from other participants, which will be removed from the Carmaux forum.

¹⁸ Who can be : deputy mayor for Communication, Culture, Local Democracy or ICT, head of communications, principal private secretary.

¹⁹ Interview, Webmaster, Tarbes, January 17th, 2003.

²⁰ Le Modérateur, 03/10/05, forum « Discussion générale », Sujet « château rotschild », Boulogne-Billancourt, <<http://www.boulognebillancourt.fr/cms/index.php>>, March 2nd, 2006.

Moreover, if according to some authors to speak in an institutional space leads to “domesticate” the citizens’ speeches, other authors notice that the procedural rules restricting them cannot prevent the inhabitants from expressing strongly some views in conflict with the institutional views or those of other participants. On the one hand, according to Marie-Hélène Bacqué and Yves Sintomer (1999), the councils in working-class social housing areas, which they studied in Aubervilliers (Seine-Saint-Denis), Rouen (Seine-Maritime) and Saint-Denis (Seine-Saint-Denis), generally allow the pacification of social conflicts. On the other hand, during public meetings in connection with the construction of a very high-voltage line in the area of Lot, Eric Drocourt and Isabelle Ras noted the public’s unrest: “people pronounced in favour or against, shouted and insulted RTE [manager of the Electricity Transport Network], the administration’s representatives, indeed the scrutineers” (Drocourt and Ras, 2004: 330), the latter being delegated by the Commission of Public Debate.

In online forums, the frequent use of fictitious names and the looseness of writing which follows are accompanied by the tendency of the participants to denounce vehemently what is, to their eyes, reprehensible behaviour from politicians, but also errors of judgement from the other participants in the forums. Therefore, the Viviane Serfaty’s statement regarding the American newsgroup *talk.politics.misc* can be shared. In this newsgroup, as in the forums that we have observed, the dialogue works indeed as a “revelation of conflict” (Serfaty, 2002: 411). Consequently, an essential task of the webmaster will be the management of conflicts and controversies which emerge easily in online forums. This role of referee amongst antagonistic points of view is especially shown by the activity of the moderator of Boulogne-Billancourt. Up to a point, he can warn Internet users if they express their views too sharply. For example, to the net-surfer “Raphaël” denouncing Mr. Pinault’s attitude, the moderator addressed him in these words: “will you please for the last time, Raphaël, tone down your remarks. I understand your anger, we are all disappointed by the turn of events concerning the Pinault Foundation, we must now keep our composure and capacities for analysis [...]”²¹. In case of particularly violent exchanges, when the spokespersons’ positions become more intense as discussion goes by, the moderator can try to close the debate. For example, the building of a mosque in the town bringing into conflict two net-surfers, the moderator interrupted in this way: “Hello, to prevent things from getting out of hand, let’s leave it there, one (fotito) and another (ploum)”²². For lack of the webmaster’s ability to check the sharpness of controversies, the durability of the forum can be affected. Thus, in Tarbes, some caustic and mocking speeches, indeed aggressive and rude, caused of course the increase of moderation, but also the participants’ weariness, who withdrew from the forum.

Just as the public in the district councils of Paris (as observed by Loïc Blondiaux) should, in the eyes of the local authorities, possess a certain number of characteristics, the arbitration effected by the

²¹ Le Modérateur, 10/04/05, forum « Terrains Renault : la concertation continue », sujet « J’ai honte ! », Boulogne-Billancourt, <<http://www.boulognebillancourt.fr/cms/index.php>>, March 2nd, 2006.

²² L’administrateur, 25/10/05, forum « Discussion générale », sujet « une mosquée à Boulogne-Billancourt », page 2, Boulogne-Billancourt, <<http://www.boulognebillancourt.fr/cms/index.php>>, March 2nd, 2006.

moderator in discussion forums reflects what an online debate should be and brings with it a normative conception of the participants. Thus, even though it may not always be the case in practice, a peaceable debate is favoured, where controversies and polemic are limited, criticism of the local authorities is tempered, and where mutual respect between participants must prevail. In any case, it is the municipality – operating via the moderator – which demarcates the boundaries of a space for self-expression in which it alone is able to judge the legitimacy of messages posted and the criteria which are meant to guarantee this legitimacy – and this without any possible scope for being contested.

THE INTERMEDIARY

Lastly, the role of moderator seems essential concerning the forwarding of net-surfers' messages to politicians. Our analysis shows that the elected representatives or the directors of municipal services themselves only seldom check their municipality's discussion forum. Similarly, it is rare for them to take part in it spontaneously²³. To use the words of the head of information-communication service in Anglet, the elected representatives are not "continuously wakeful on the forum."²⁴ Indeed, despite the fact that they have a strong presence in face-to-face debates, politicians are very rarely present on the electronic discussion forums. Their reluctance to speak on forums, and their obvious preference for public meetings where people are physically present, result in part from their conceptualisation of citizen participation and the experience they have of it. Public meetings or district councils are places which facilitate the explanation of municipal policy to inhabitants, on one or more specific subjects. On electronic forums, by contrast, such systematic pedagogical communication is rendered uncertain because of the multiple claims with which the elected representatives have to deal. Therefore, their contributions are dependent upon messages which have forwarded as considered necessary by certain municipal employees, the webmaster and/or head of communications. This point is also noted by Gersende Blanchard in relation to the websites of political parties: "[...] Whether or not the party leader becomes aware of net-surfers' comments is uncertain to say the least, or dependent upon on the assessment of these webmaster-intermediaries [...]" (Blanchard, 2006: 104). Far from being direct and immediate, the relationship between Internet users and those whom they seek to address most often pass through the filter of these employees. In the municipal forums, many exchanges illustrated the forwarding of messages by the webmaster to the politicians. For example, "Fabienne Duprat" asked whether "it would be technically and financially possible for the town council to plant avenues of trees to relieve the bareness and the cold and austere

²³ On forums in Southwest France that we studied in 2002, 84,5 percent of postings are posted by the citizens, only 1 percent are it by the town councillors, 6 percent by municipal services and 8 percent by webmasters.

²⁴ Interview, Head of Communications, Anglet, January 21st, 2003.

appearance of the boulevards situated between the hospital roundabout and the tax office buildings?²⁵”; the webmaster answered: “I am forwarding your suggestion to the politicians and relevant services. I shall inform you without fail about the answers I receive²⁶”. Further to several messages from “cécile et olivier” complaining about the dangers caused by careless drivers in the street where they live²⁷, the webmaster of Chalon-sur-Saône commented: “the message you sent today has been forwarded to Mr. Alex, Mayor of Chalon-sur-Saône²⁸”. In Boulogne-Billancourt, in the context of a discussion concerning the cleanliness of the town, and further to a message sent by “Pierre” who specifically requested that politicians join the forum²⁹, the webmaster answered : “Hello, further to your request, I have today sent a message to Mister Alain Juliard, town councillor in charge of cleanliness, with a link to your discussion³⁰”.

The moderators can consequently become “democratic intermediaries” (Edwards, 2002: 16) and play a key role in allowing electronic messages to access the political space. Indeed, these agents – usually without specific instructions to this effect – define the conditions determining whether a given message will or will not actually be taken into consideration by an elected member or the Mayor. In the absence of precise criteria, many messages may thus be sent to politicians because the civil servants in charge of the management of the forum are uncertain as to the best course to follow. This is illustrated by the comments of the webmaster of Anglet: “I have worked on the assumption that politics influences everything. If for example, it was a question about road maintenance, I sent it straight to the Mayor because I knew that afterwards, it would be passed back down to the relevant people. Since the Mayor is responsible for what it happens in town, I passed on to him practically all information of a technical nature and all information which was genuinely political³¹”. In the same way, the webmaster of Tarbes collates net-surfers’ messages, classifying them according to their topic, and sends them on to the Mayor and to the relevant elected representatives³². In some French cities, the procedure is more codified. In the case of the ten forums given over to the budget of the city of Rennes in 2003, Hugues Aubin, who was in charge of internet activity, describes thus the administrative pathway of messages posted on these forums: “The questions are automatically forwarded to ten correspondents in the local government, these people in turn submit their answers to the relevant local councillor for that section (empowered to amend the content directly). There is a guarantee that a response will be received within two working days. If the local councillor does not

²⁵ « Fabienne Duprat », 01/02/2002, *arbres*, Tarbes, <<http://www.tarbes.fr>>, February 14th, 2002. The forum of Tarbes does not exist any more today.

²⁶ WEBMASTER, 01/02/02, *RE : arbres*, Tarbes, <<http://www.tarbes.fr>>, February 14th, 2002.

²⁷ « cécile & olivier », 15/05/02, *RE : rue de strasbourg* ; 04/08/02, *RE: rue de strasbourg*, forum « Parlez à vos élus », Chalon-sur-Saône, <<http://www.ville-soissons.fr>>, August 4th, 2002.

²⁸ Webmaster, 05/08/02, *RE: rue de strasbourg*, forum « Parlez à vos élus », Chalon-sur-Saône, <<http://www.ville-soissons.fr>>, August 9th, 2002.

²⁹ « pierre », 16/01/06, forum « discussion générale », sujet « saleté des rues », Boulogne-Billancourt, <<http://www.boulognebillancourt.fr/cms/index.php>>, March 2nd, 2006.

³⁰ L'administrateur, 16/01/06, forum « discussion générale », sujet « saleté des rues », Boulogne-Billancourt, <<http://www.boulognebillancourt.fr/cms/index.php>>, March 2nd, 2006.

³¹ Interview, Webmaster, Anglet, January 21st, 2003.

³² Interview, Principal private secretary, Tarbes, January 17th, 2003.

ratify within the time limit, the deputy mayor in charge of public funds must amend, sign and ratify the answer instead of him/her” (Aubin, 2003). For the Rennes forums, published messages must pertain to the selected topic, the city’s budget, and are therefore more likely to directly concern the local authorities. This topic also justifies the implementation of a rigorous procedure for forwarding messages to the relevant councillors.

Therefore, the webmaster acts not only as an intermediary – “whose contribution is restricted to bringing two different worlds into contact with each other” (Darras, 2004: 21) – but above all as a mediator, in the sense that he is a key player in the communication process, because he determines the ways in which citizens are able to contact the political authorities.

However, this broad conception of what counts as “politics” is not shared by all webmasters. Some of them ignore certain messages which seem to them devoid of political interest. For example, some of the interviewed webmasters will forward only those messages directly involving an elected representative of the party in power. Consequently, Pierre Bourdieu’s criticism – expressed initially in relation to the premises underlying opinion polls – according to which not all opinions have the same social power within the political and social spheres in that they do not all have the same chance to be heard by politicians is here more relevant than ever (Bourdieu, 1980). Indeed, this double process of mediation – the technical one inherent in forums, and the human one relating to its inclusion in the political and administrative municipal organization – seems likely to restrict still further which opinions are able to gain access to the political space.

Furthermore, we find reappearing here, relatively speaking, the phenomenon of “politicisation of the civil service” within an administrative body which means the permeability of administrative and political domains (Eymeri, 2003). Indeed, the civil servants decide what counts as “political” – and therefore what might be passed on to elected members – whereas “administrative” matters coming only within the compass of the municipal services. These services can then act on these matters, that is (in the case in point) by publishing a response on the forum.

The moderators have considerable leeway in describing the kind of the messages they receive. This description can run counter to the conceptions of the citizens participating in the forums. While the messages of a traditionally political nature – i.e. the messages related to political parties, politicians, election and party-political struggles – are carefully considered by the local authorities, messages pertaining to a different aspect of politics – that associated with plans and actions with a view to settling or improving social problems (Gaxie, 2001) – make it past the moderator’s cognitive filter only in a haphazard manner.

CONCLUSION

The webmaster's moderation practices shape the conditions under which users of Internet forums participate. This occurs through the three main functions that we described previously: the manager, the referee and the intermediary. In the case of the management of the forum, the webmaster's contribution to debates (especially through the answers s/he provides to questions) clearly stimulates interest in the forum. In the exercise of his or her function of referee, the webmaster controls what can be said (the content) in the forum, and the manner or form that the messages are allowed to take. As such, s/he partakes in a "formatting of others' words" (Veitl, 2005: 22), which is a privilege peculiar to experts of participation. Finally, when the moderator assumes the function of intermediary between Internet users and politicians – selecting messages according to criteria that appear quite vague – s/he enjoys a clear political prerogative. Indeed, the process by which the contributions of Internet users are translated into the political sphere is opaque, which only casts doubt on the 'democratic' nature of the intermediary's practices.

In the everyday running and functioning of forums, webmasters play a predominant role: they foster electronic discussion, implement (and sometimes define) the rules of online debates, and forward messages from the forum to politicians. Since elected representatives rarely follow discussions on forums themselves, the latter is an indispensable role. And yet, the webmaster has neither democratic legitimacy nor legitimacy that is linked to technical or scientific expertise or knowledge³³. The webmaster cannot take advantage of a role of expertise such as "professional of participation", through codified procedures of public debate, as Magali Nonjon defines it: "capacity to make diagnosis, to intervene and to assess but also [...] ability for organizing public debate and for arbitrating between the work, customs and the interests of the various actors in town: elected representatives, technicians and inhabitants" (Nonjon, 2005 : 210).

Nevertheless, many of the webmaster's tasks tally with such professionals. Just like the professional who intervenes in public debate, the webmaster is able to distribute people's right to speak (insofar as s/he controls the publication and filing of messages) and is able to establish (in some cases) and enforce the rules of discussion. But compared to mediators of public debates (sometimes compelled to speak on behalf of political authorities) the webmasters activities are far more flexible. Indeed, they can be the spokespersons for: citizens taking part in the forum (when they forward messages to politicians); municipal services (when they provide answers to ask for practical information from net-surfers); and elected representatives of the city council (when they relay their political decisions and choices to the forum).

In key respects, though, the webmaster is different from those who lead institutionalized and face-to-face debates. Whereas the professional of participation is able to claim independence³⁴, the position

³³ However, scientific or technical knowledge is not the only requirement to be able to take advantage of a status of an expert and to establish one's legitimacy.

³⁴ There are however situations where the professional of participation is if not in league with public services and local government, is at least compelled not to criticize its action. That is the case, for example, of the commissioner in the procedure of public inquiry (Blatrix, 1999).

of the webmaster is more ambiguous, since s/he is part of the municipality. The autonomy that the webmaster enjoys in the management of online discussion is actually delegated from local authorities, and therefore does not provide the genuine independence that would ensure authority and legitimacy in the eyes of Internet users. Also, moderation appears rather random compared with well-ordered procedures of debate. The moderator does not summarize the debates that take place on the forums, in contrast with institutionalized debates, which are better integrated in the implementation of public policy, precisely because they follow an accurate rational-bureaucratic method (Veitl, 2005). Above all, the actions of the moderator are hardly those of a mediator in the sense understood by Pierre Lascoumes and Jean-Pierre Le Bourhis. According to them, from the expression of singular viewpoints “the mediator should act as an enlightener (in a chemical sense), constructing the general interest through negotiation and/or imposition” (Lascoumes and Le Bourhis, 1998: 39). The upshot, unfortunately, is that online discussions often appear decoupled from political decisions.

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