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MEDIATED META-DELIBERATION: MAKING SENSE OF THE AUSTRALIAN CITIZENS' PARLIAMENT

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Most of the chapters in this volume look inside the Australian Citizens' Parliament (ACP) to study the practical and political challenges of deliberating together in an assembly of ordinary citizens. However, the ACP also created the possibility for a kind of deliberation that can occur only through mass communication.¹ The news coverage of the ACP had the potential to spark a *mediated deliberation*—a process whereby newspapers, online news outlets, and other media help the wider public understand and think through issues in at least a quasi-deliberative way.

In our view, projects like the ACP succeed or fail not only based on their internal quality but also depending on how they engage the media and, ultimately, the broader public. This essay presents a particular aspect of this larger public engagement, which we call “mediated meta-deliberation.” In simple terms, a meta-deliberation involves deliberation *about* deliberation, or how we talk about this special kind of talk. In the context of this chapter, we focus specifically on how the media do this, hence the term “*mediated meta-deliberation*.”

In the sections that follow, we explain why organizers of deliberative initiatives should care about the mediated meta-deliberation that occurs regarding their activities. We then apply this concept to the ACP and present a comprehensive analysis of the quantity and character of news coverage generated by the ACP in Australian print media.

Mediated Meta-deliberation

Deliberative-democratic theory has helped give rise to discrete public-engagement processes, such as the ACP, but its origins lie in a broader concern about the quality of reasoning that occurs among the larger body of citizens in larger public venues and across diffuse public spaces or “public spheres.” The normative ideal envisions public spheres as places of inclusive, reason-based, and civil exchanges of ideas aimed at discerning the value, legitimacy, and validity of various claims made in the public interest.² Robust public spheres help us understand what practices, processes, and policies best serve the collective good.

Research addressing the role that media plays in such public processes sometimes refers to itself as the study of mediated deliberation. Typically using content analysis to categorize and compare media coverage of political issues, events, and actors, mediated-deliberation research provides a relatively new paradigm for understanding the normative implications of modern, large-scale communication systems for deliberative democracy.³

The concept of mediated deliberation has not yet been formulated in a unified fashion, and we do not have an integrated theory available that would reconcile rival conceptions of this phenomenon. For instance, some scholars focus on how mediated deliberation emerges from a “division of labor” between media outlets that complement each other in a society-wide process of deliberation, whereas others focus more on comparisons of individual media outlets’ contributions to societal deliberation (i.e., on their “internal” mediated deliberations).⁴ In this chapter, we adopt the latter approach to examine the quantity and quality of ACP coverage across the Australian print media system.

Our research constitutes a case study of meta-deliberation because we study how the media deliberated about a deliberative event, namely, the ACP. To render collective judgments about the quality of ostensibly deliberative public processes and institutions, it is imperative that such meta-deliberation take place.⁵ When this process of analysis and judgment takes place through the mass media, we refer to it as mediated meta-deliberation. Mediated meta-deliberation fulfills an important function by conferring legitimacy onto some processes while denying it to others. In this manner, it serves an important function by subjecting political communication to critical mediated inquiry, including the fundamental question of what place deliberation should have in it.⁶