KOME – An International Journal of Pure Communication Inquiry Vol. 13. No. 2. (2025) • 17–44.
DOI: 10.17646/KOME.of.25

ARTICLE

The Tricky Bits of Studying Agreement and Disagreement in Online Deliberation

Current Research Directions and Methods in the Field of Political Communication

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This article provides an overview of current studies dedicated to agreement and disagreement in online deliberation, and explains the relevance and challenges of exploring political disagreement in the digital sphere. Two dominant approaches to understanding disagreement that have existed since the early 2000s are defined that have provoked an acute scientific debate on the ambiguous impacts of disagreement on deliberative process and the participatory activity of citizens. A literature review outlines three main groups of works on the consequences of disagreement. This article contributes to the field of political communication in several ways. First, the current gaps in studying agreement and disagreement and their impact on political communication are indicated. Second, future research venues are proposed according to detected lacunas. Third, an explanation is provided of why the issue of disagreement in the field of political communication is so complex to study. Fourth, the methodologies for analysing agreement and disagreement in online deliberation, including computational methods of text

Article received on 16 April 2024. Article accepted on 31 January 2025.
Conflict of interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.
Funding: The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

analysis, are highlighted. Based on a methodological review, the parameters for agreement and disagreement analysis in political discussions are summarised and tested through empirical research.

Keywords: political communication, public deliberation, political participation, agreement, disagreement, social media

Introduction

Online deliberation of socio-political issues is one of the most scientifically discussed forms of political communication between citizens and authorities in the digital sphere today (Baek et al., 2012; Esau et al., 2017; Esau et al., 2020; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Wojcieszak et al., 2009; Filatova & Volkovskii, 2021). Ideally, online deliberation represents a process of public mutual, purposeful, reasoned, rational, respectful, and equal discussion in a dialogical form of communication using electronic tools for interaction, and with the aim of solving common problems and achieving consensus or cooperation (Volkovskii & Filatova, 2022b). Deliberative practices increase the social capital of society as more people progressively perceive deliberation as a civic activity (Fishkin, 1995; Putnam, 2000), and the legitimacy of the constitutional order grows as citizens have more opportunity to express their views and comprehend this order through an exchange of opinions (Chambers, 1996; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996); moreover, political actions and decisions taken both individually and collectively become more justified, obtaining greater support from government officials (Gastil, 2000, pp. 23–25). As a result, citizens become more aware of their own and others' socio-political positions, needs and experiences, resolve deep conflicts better and participate more actively in the political life of their society, perceiving the political system as legitimate, and leading a healthier civic life (Delli Carpini et al., 2004).

Social media platforms as spaces where citizens and authorities actively deliberate on various socio-political topics have recently received enormous scholarly attention (Alarabiat et al., 2016; Filatova & Chugunov, 2022; Gil de Zúñiga, 2015). Research has shown that there are increases in the quality of communication, the level of trust between state and citizens, the transparency of government structures, and the degree of citizen involvement in politics thanks to social networks (Bertot et al., 2010; Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018; Picazo-Vela et al., 2012). As for online deliberation, research has confirmed that social media acts as a catalyst for the digital deliberative process (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013) and encourages online users to conduct political conversations in a more deliberative manner (Savin, 2019), but simultaneously provides enormous access to heterogeneous information, which leads to political disagreements between people and state officials (Maia et al., 2021). Participants can often disagree with each other's opinions and arguments, as well as with government bodies, and openly confront them without modifying their positions, which allows disagreement to be viewed as both a condition of and a challenge to political communication (Esterling et al., 2015).

Do people tend to participate in online discussions in order to agree or to argue? (Yardi & Boyd, 2010). Recently, it has become clear that it is neither of these aims (Bodrunova, 2023).

It has been noted that people lack the deliberative qualities that were widely outlined in the theory of democratic deliberation (Bohman & Rehg, 1997; Cohen, 1997; Dryzek, 2000; Habermas, 1996) and that they do not initially aim at building consensus (Volkovskii & Filatova, 2022a). As a result, temporary or permanent patterns of disagreement are observed in mediated public discourse, which prevents the achievement of mutual comprehension both between citizens and with state officials (Rossini & Maia, 2021). Online users with opposing positions still make up the bulk of the discursive public, which causes fragmentation of the discussion through appearance of echo chambers, harsh clashes of opinions, and final disagreement. Although some research indicates that political discussions on the official social media pages of authorities are more reasoned and polite in comparison to discussions on informal Internet forums and conversations on the social media pages of ideologically polarised media (Chugunov, et al., 2016; Filatova & Volkovskii, 2020; Volkovskii & Filatova, 2022b; Volkovskii & Filatova, 2023; Volkovskii et al., 2024), disagreement still exists among citizens and with government and its public policy. As for the consequences of disagreement in online deliberation, there is still an intensive academic debate on whether disagreement is constructive or destructive for the dynamics and quality of discussion, and decision development (e.g. Huckfeldt et al., 2004a; Mutz, 2002a, 2002b; 2006).

The problem of agreement and disagreement between citizens and state officials on social media was evident during the major health crisis of the Covid–19 pandemic, which undermined political trust, here understood as a form of "generalised" or "diffuse" support aimed at a set of political objectives (Easton, 1975). Political trust is responsible for political participation, various forms of citizen engagement, and a functioning democracy (Davies et al., 2021), especially in times of crisis. The Covid–19 pandemic increased the spread of distrust in elites, government agencies and their arguments, as well as provoking a surge in conspiracy theories and mythologised thinking around the world (Lilleker et al., 2021). As a result, huge arrays of disparate pieces of information were generated without any proper contextualisation or fact-checking, which did lead to acute conflicts and disagreements between citizens, media, scientific experts and state officials in online discussions on various topics, including public policy measures. In non-democratic countries, the situation became even worse than it had been due to the previously formed "triangle of distrust" between political elites, media, and public (Bodrunova, 2021). This fact makes the study of the problem of agreement and disagreement between citizens and with government officials in online deliberation on significant political topics in crisis conditions extremely pertinent; in addition to the way disagreement, as expressed by citizens or government in relation to each other, affects the quality and dynamics of deliberation.

This article aims (1) to analyse current lacunas and tendencies in the study of online disagreement and its impact on digital deliberation; (2) to explain why the issue of disagreement is not easy to study in the field of political communication; (3) to describe methodological approaches to analysing agreement and disagreement and proposing a methodology of content analysis that can be employed in the field of political communication studies; (4) to indicate potential future research directions. To achieve these objectives a descriptive method of literature review has been used. Consequently, the current overview contributes to a better understanding of the agreement and disagreement problem, as well as the state of contemporary deliberative studies exploring this issue. Furthermore, an analysis of empirical

findings and methods helps in shedding light on how they can be implemented in practice in terms of interaction between government officials and citizens. This aspect may be studied in such domains as political communication, public policy, e-participation, e-governance, e-democracy, informational autocracy. The article consists of the following sections: an introduction, the theoretical background, a review of methodologies, a conclusion and discussion. The research questions reflect the objectives of the current paper.

RQ1: What are the current gaps in studying agreement and disagreement and its impact on political communication?
RQ2: Why is the issue of disagreement not easy to study in the field of political communication?
RQ3: What methodologies for analysing agreement and disagreement in online deliberation currently exist?
RQ4: What future research venues can be proposed for this field?

Theoretical background

The necessity of reaching consensus through deliberation, and of studying agreement and disagreement in political communication in democratic and non-democratic countries

The field of public deliberation has become a central research agenda. It is a multidimensional theory studied in political philosophy (e.g. Cohen, 1997; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996), political communication (e.g. Carcasson et al., 2010; Gastil, 1993), and public opinion research (e.g. Gastil, 2008; Page, 1996). On the one hand, there are many definitions for deliberation (e.g. Volkovskii et al., 2023), since it is a complementary phenomenon; on the other hand, there is no unified term that could be verified empirically in a standardised way by all scientists due to the variant methods of conceptualisation and operationalisation of the term. Nevertheless, many researchers agree that deliberative practices eliminate inequality by expanding opportunities for engagement in political systems and promoting mutual respect, strengthening the epistemological quality of public opinion and ultimately ensuring the legitimacy of collective decisions (Mansbridge et al., 2012; Warren, 2017). An extensive literature review on individual and group experiences of deliberation shows that changes at the individual level include increased knowledge of issues and a desire to participate in political life and in the activities of their community (Kuyper, 2018). At the group level, it was found that participants' study of the views of other people with whom they disagree has a depolarising effect on association (Colombo, 2018; Grönlund et al., 2010). Some studies have shown that elements of the deliberative process, such as recognition of values and prejudices, justification of views, consideration of alternative opinions and preferences, can reduce intergroup hostility in post-conflict societies (Boyd-MacMillan et al., 2016) and in divisive public debates (Colombo, 2018). Thus, deliberation prevents polarisation (Kuyper, 2018). Furthermore, deliberation serves as a means of jointly resolving social problems and conflicts through mutual recognition of the legitimacy of disputed values

and identities (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2006). If there is no such recognition, politics, as a rule, becomes a struggle with no acceptance of losses and compromises (the aim of such a struggle is the destruction of the values of the opponent) (Dryzek, 2009). There may be different ways to solve problems (for example, through top-down, technocratic solutions), but the literature on public policy defines deliberation as a mutually acceptable solution with a good level of efficiency, especially when decisions taken "from top to bottom" do not work (Innes & Booher, 2003).

Despite ever more theoretical and empirical studies devoted to deliberative democracy and diverse aspects of deliberation, including innovative directions in deliberative research thought (Friess & Eilders, 2015; Strandberg & Grönlund, 2018), there is a crisis in deliberative democracy (Dryzek et al., 2019). Nowadays, the real world of political communication is far from a deliberative ideal due to some weighty factors: (1) diminishing civility in interactions among elected and legitimate representatives, uncivil behaviour among elites, and pathological mass communication all negatively influence the level of civic participation (Buchanan et al., 2022) and decrease the trust citizens have in democratic institutions (Dryzek et al., 2019); (2) extreme polarisation and preference of manipulative methods over dialogical ones, which makes citizens less motivated to listen to messages from the state or to follow them, and politically discourages participation (Lee, 2012; Lu et al., 2016); (3) the fragility and inefficiency of simplistic arguments and solutions for ambiguous and complex issues in combination with post-truth politics lead to "susceptibility by citizens to ill-reasoned, populist, and increasingly authoritarian appeals from political elites" (Dryzek et al., 2019; Buchanan et al., 2022). Nevertheless, there is accruing empirical evidence that deliberative practices, programs, and structures do have potential and offer some ways of mitigating the recessionary political situation. Moreover, an acute demand in deliberative practices by political actors in the international arena to solve various conflicts and find political consensus is extremely evident in the conditions of a painfully emerging new world order, the normative and institutional consolidation of which is still off in the distant future and depends on the influence of many barely predicted factors (Melville et al., 2023).

A recent literature review on online deliberation has clearly outlined a few significant gaps in deliberative studies (Volkovskii et al., 2023). The first gap refers to the predominance of institutional research venues in deliberation over productive and communicative ones. There have been almost no studies that investigate all three aspects of deliberation and their causal links (design–process–results). Empirical studies continue to concentrate more on deliberative communication as a dependent variable and the effects of design (input) on its processes (Alnemr, 2020; Gonçalves & Baranauskas, 2023) rather than on the effects of communication processes on deliberative outcomes (Price, 2006). However, increasing numbers of works on communicative throughput (Del Valle et al., 2020; Volkovskii et al., 2023), including research on political disagreement and achieving consensus, and on integrating automated and machine methods in particular (Fournier-Tombs & Di Marzo, 2020), have begun to emerge recently. The burgeoning empirical research in this field may be explained by the fact that governments can no longer overcome social problems on their own, they need to strive to cooperate with citizens and civil society to jointly share responsibility, offering more effective management methods and balanced collective decision-making (Shin & Rask, 2021; Torfing et al., 2019).

The second gap is a lack of understanding of the role and quality of deliberation in the context of exogenous shocks. Online deliberation and its quality have traditionally been studied during periods of social certainty, however, when this issue is considered in crisis conditions, there is a noticeable research lacuna. Crisis can be interpreted in different ways depending on the field of research, but a generally accepted definition of crisis is "a threat that is somehow perceived as existential" (Boin et al., 2018, p. 24). While crises (war, terrorism, pandemic, natural or financial disaster) vary in the type, speed and the scale of government response to them, the feelings of insecurity, panic and fear they cause in society that lead to political disagreement and a loss of political trust and genuine dialogue between citizens and government are scientifically recognised (Cristea et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2016). The Covid–19 pandemic was an existential threat because it was beyond (or very weakly under) the control of governments, it caused deep fear among people regarding the lethality of the disease, and undermined established rules and ideas about safety, health, and well-being in society (Kachanoff et al., 2021). This crisis led to great uncertainty about infection, and the effectiveness and duration of government protective measures (Taylor, 2019). Taking into account this point, it is not surprising that citizens disagreed so frequently with public policy measures.

Some empirical works have confirmed how closely political trust is linked to people's willingness to follow the laws and regulations imposed by the government in response to crises (e.g. Marien & Hooghe, 2021); and other studies have examined changes in political trust in the early stages of the Covid–19 pandemic. Thus, it was found that the first wave of the crisis led to a general increase in political trust and government approval in all democratic countries (Baekgaard et al., 2020; Davies, et al., 2021; Sibley et al., 2020). It is worth noting that the study of the impact of the Covid–19 pandemic on political trust is still being actively pursued in the scientific field (Devine et al., 2021). There are two main areas of research on political trust in the context of Covid–19: the first examines how trust affects citizens' acceptance of measures to combat infection (e.g. Bargain & Aminjonov, 2020; Jørgensen et al., 2021; Raude et al., 2020); the second examines the impact of implementing measures to combat the pandemic on political trust (Baekgaard et al., 2020; Bol et al., 2020; Schraff, 2020; Sibley et al., 2020). As the problem of political trust correlates with the problem of expressing and achieving consensus between citizens and authorities, the two flows of research mentioned above actualise the study of the political agreement and disagreement of citizens with power structures on public policy measures. In addition, most studies have focused on Western democracies and the level of trust in their governments in the early stages of the crisis (e.g. Bol et al., 2020; Schraff, 2020).

Besides the fear and panic it seeded in the world, the pandemic dramatically altered the role and quality of political communication among citizens and government officials. The transformations and challenges were as follows.

A highly personalised approach to political communication

Political leaders such as prime ministers and presidents, and even some ministers and medical experts, have become major communication figures and key actors in policy responses. While

on the one hand, the main communicators were able to deliver a unifying message and make important decisions, this could not, on the other hand, guarantee public trust and unity because there were some figures who expressed fundamental differences of opinion and conflicts about the response that should have been made in countering the crisis. Such diverse positions expressed by different opinion leaders was able to cause a wave of disagreements and protests in the online sphere.

Growing mediatisation and importance of the media in overcoming the crisis

This was a consequence of the new media system and one of the triggers of a personalised style of political communication (Altheide, 2020). Governments received support from various media outlets that had previously criticised them. Thus, overt opposition rhetoric was reduced. Two factors mattered: (a) an awareness of the importance of national unity, and (b) changes and new measures being announced so rapidly that the ability of the media to analyse them and offer adequate solutions was reduced. This did not, however, mean that governments and the media were fully united in national efforts, even as leaders called for unity. Some differences were apparent in the communication strategies and agendas of political and state institutions on the one hand, and the media and information systems on the other. As a result, battles and conflicts arose between the media and political institutions about the agenda. Even a crisis as serious as the pandemic failed to harmonise the difficult relationship between politics and the media.

The dual role of social networks: strengthening a negative function

Although social media benefited society during the Covid–19 pandemic (it allowed for continued greater economic and social activity; provided new flexible ways of online work and study; encouraged solidarity and communication with community initiatives, etc.), more recent research has focused on the more negative impact of digital media due to the unprecedented level of misinformation that has affected the communication environment (Lilleker et al., 2021). The Covid–19 pandemic was accompanied by an "infodemic" (Bridgman et al., 2021) that mainly spread around the world through social media. Although it is impossible to confirm whether the false information was an acute problem or the main result of the increased use of social media, there were public clashes between political factions, low political trust in government, polarisation in politics and the media, as well as open challenges to experts and science.

In this section, the significance of studying agreement and disagreement between citizens and authorities in political communication has been considered. The problem of achieving consensus via deliberation has been much discussed in the literature and apparent in empirical research; however, it became more evident in the context of the Covid–19 crisis as political communication and deliberative interaction between citizens and state officials

was transformed. We have, therefore, highlighted some gaps in the study of deliberation that may indirectly refer to studying agreement and disagreement.

Extant research on agreement and disagreement in political communication

Social media platforms are a deliberative environment in which citizens and government bodies can discuss a variety of socio-political issues (Barbera, 2014; Kim et al., 2013). Social networks are often used by people from different regions of the world with contrasting experiences and opinions (Brundidge, 2010). Consequently, there is a high probability that users may encounter the political disagreements that often arise in online conversations (Yang et al., 2017). Interestingly, one study posits that people do not necessarily need to participate in discussions on social media as they may encounter disagreements in scrolling through their social media feeds (Goyanes et al., 2021). The use of social media platforms provides citizens with an opportunity to learn about views of other people through their access to information variety, which is one of the main values of informal political discussion from the point of view of deliberative democracy (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Mutz, 2006). Although many people might refrain from unpleasant face-to-face conversations, some works indicate that digital platforms could potentially provide platforms for engagement in such debates (Stromer-Galley et al., 2015; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). For example, it was found that consensus is less likely to be achieved in an online than an offline environment (Baek et al., 2012). This statement is slightly pessimistic and based on the observation that online deliberation contributed to the polarisation of opinions rather than consensus-building (Sunstein, 2001). Another study, however, showed that "high agreement and low disagreement, and vice versa, affect satisfaction more strongly than balanced combinations of agreement and disagreement" (Stromer-Galley & Muhlberger, 2009). In addition, it was concluded that higher satisfaction with deliberation was associated with increased motivation for future participation and perceived legitimacy of the political choice of participants in a discussion. However, the question of whether the analysis of agreement and disagreement is a necessary parameter for determining deliberative quality remains to be answered.

Types of expression for agreement and disagreement have been thoroughly studied in the literature on political communication and deliberation (Huckfeldt et al., 2004a; Mutz, 2002a, 2006; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009; Wojcieszak & Price, 2010), some of which are described in the review on methodological approaches. Other studies have been devoted to identifying the impact of agreement and disagreement on information retrieval, attitude change, and various types of civic practice and political participation (Esterling et al., 2015; Hong & Rojas, 2016; Klofstad et al., 2013). The empirical consequences of political disagreement correlating with changes in political preferences and behaviours have been investigated in the work of Klofstad, Sokhey, and McClurg (2013). Their article revealed the main empirical approaches to studying disagreement and demonstrated that the selection of measures matters. It showed that while those citizens who are exposed to general political disagreement (disagreement that would be evident to all parties involved) tend to have weaker political preferences, those who experience partisanship-based interpersonal

political disagreement (it means that people have different views but do not necessarily experience high degrees of conflict) tend to have stronger political preferences. Their study also presented a summarisation of the effects the distinct conceptualisations of disagreement have across the nine political results (vote certainty, strength of party identification, strength of ideology, media use, political interest, external and internal efficacy, political discussion, and 2008 voter turnout in the USA) that could be explored in more detail in future research involving a variety of case studies. Different types of disagreement may reflect a variety of social processes and different effects when it comes to individual political preferences and patterns of political engagement. This statement must be developed in upcoming research using both democratic and non-democratic contexts.

There was also an experimental study that sought to determine whether disagreement at both group and individual levels influenced participants' experiences of deliberation (Grönlund et al., 2023) and contributed to a better understanding of deliberative mini-publics and their role in democratic decision-making. The study confirmed that citizens who take part in organised and formal deliberation seem to be satisfied with the process in general, including participants displaying a high level of internal disagreement or radical positions deviating from collective opinion. Furthermore, research suggested detailed study of factors influencing participant's experiences – such as the theme of deliberation and the activity of moderators – since the empirical reality and findings vary from deliberation to deliberation. Another line of studies investigated individual responses to social-mediated political disagreements (Zhang et al., 2022), which may include constructive argumentation (Maia et al., 2021) or other means such as fighting, trading insults, or avoiding stressful argumentation (Bakshy et al., 2015; Maia & Rezende, 2016; Nikolov et al., 2015; Sunstein, 2017). Zhang, Lin, and Dutton's study (2022) used a two-wave online panel survey conducted in a non-Western Asian context (Hong Kong) and contributed to the investigation of affective polarisation, people's reactions to political disagreement, and its political consequences in social networks. It also provided a clearer understanding of how citizens employ social media platforms to respond to political conflicts in a highly politically polarised society.

The current research agenda focuses on the frequency and intensity of disagreements (Lee et al., 2015; Strickler, 2018; Wojcieszak & Price, 2010), the contrast between perceived and actually expressed disagreements during discussions (Stromer-Galley et al., 2015; Wojcieszak & Price, 2012), types of agreement and disagreement in terms of argumentation, (un)civil, (in)tolerant culture of communication (Rossini & Maia, 2021), correlation of disagreement and argumentation—i.e., which types of disagreement contribute to greater or lesser justification of opinion (Maia et al., 2021), as well as forms/tactics in expressions of disagreement (Fischer et al., 2022), which are summarised in Table 1 and presented in the methodological section of this paper. In the work of Stromer-Galley, Bryant, and Bimber (2015), the differences between expressions of disagreement in online and offline mediums were explored, showing that the communication environment matters through its indication that face-to-face communication space implies more usage of bold disagreements than nonverbal signals to make disagreements softer. However, the study was conducted in experimental settings that limit their generalisability and, thus, more work and the employment of alternative methodologies is required in this field to understand whether the patterns discovered remain the same and can be confirmed. The study by Rossini and

Maia (2021) contributed to filling a gap in the literature on how citizens use various digital platforms to debate politics and get engaged in political dialogue in modern non-English-speaking democracies (the case of Brazil) and pointed out that more research should be conducted on types of disagreement in terms of incivility and intolerance in order to better understand the challengers for engagement in deliberative practices. Another study by Maia et al. (2021) systematically analysed the relationship between citizens' disagreement and reasoning in the various media environments by differentiating between different ways of expressing disagreement and argument. This study operationalised such relevant variables as online discussion context, personal stance on the point of view, and the message target, and argued that a context had an impact on shaping digital communication and expressing bold and soft disagreements as forms of articulating difference, thus contributing to an understanding of fruitful ways of disagreeing with distinct groups of opponents that should be developed in future research venues.

Why studying disagreement and its consequences in online deliberation is not so easy

Disagreement can be both a condition of and a challenge for deliberation because some citizens may welcome diverse discussions and be open to new knowledge, while others may refrain from these debates and become more attached to their own positions. Today, there are still conflicting opinions on what disagreement is and how it can be measured effectively. The roots of this scientific debate go back to the early 2000s when the topic of disagreements in political networks and discussions became the subject of detailed analysis. At that time, two dominant approaches to studying disagreements were proposed. The first was offered by Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague (2004), who determined disagreement as discrepancy in the vote choice of a respondent and his/her interlocutor, even if they had no preference towards the elected candidate. This approach focused on "measuring the lack of agreement, not the presence of disagreement" (Klofstad et al., 2013). The second approach was developed by the political scientist Diana Mutz (2006) who measured the degree of disagreement between survey respondents and other participants in discussion. She attempted to generate an index of disagreement, based on data from the survey questions. Thus, these approaches marked the beginning of "disagreements over disagreements" (Klofstad et al., 2013, p. 1), which later became one of the reasons for more acute scientific debate over the consequences of political disagreement, namely of whether it was a constructive or destructive element in the dynamics and quality of deliberation and political decision-making. There is huge quantity of empirical research analysing the impact of political disagreements on the activity of civil society, and not only in online discussions. These works can be divided into the following three categories.

The first group of studies points out that disagreement has a positive or statistically irrelevant impact on participation (Nir, 2005; Rojas, 2008; Scheufele et al., 2004), indicating that disagreement leads to a growth of awareness on the issue and a deeper "argument repertoire" for both the proponent's and the opponent's political views (Price et al., 2002), including higher tolerance for various positions and comprehension of oppositional views

(Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009), an increase in user willingness to participate in networked conversations and public forums (Eveland, 2004; Moy & Gastil, 2006), voting (McLeod & Lee, 2012), and campaign activities (McClurg, 2006a, 2006b; Pattie & Johnston, 2009), spurring the pace of discussions, "us–them" demarcation, and contextualisation of the discussed problematic (Bodrunova et al., 2021a).

A large array of other works highlights that disagreement raises political polarisation (Weeks et al., 2017), increases opinion ambivalence (Mutz, 2002a, 2006) and, thus, prevents dialogue across polarised segments of the disputing publics; it makes citizens more politically passive in online deliberation and promotes political apathy (Hyun, 2018; Mutz, 2002b) or completely discourages participation (Lu et al., 2016). Some scholars have also determined further oppositional effects of political dissent, such as ignoring other communicators, stress of participants, retreat from discussion, offending or insulting those who disagree (Bächtiger & Gerber, 2014; Esterling et al., 2015; Gastil, 2018). Exposure to political disagreement on social media may encourage online users to filter their communication networks by using such tools as unfriending, unfollowing, muting, and blocking others (Bode, 2016; Yang et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2022).

The third line of research shows no evidence of disagreement and decreased participatory level (Huckfeldt et al., 2004b; Klofstad et al., 2013) and assumes that such outcomes are exaggerated as they are conditioned by other factors comprised of various attributes of social media (Huckfeldt et al., 2004a; McClurg, 2006a; Nir, 2005). Diving into this discussion, some scholars point to the methodological disparities in measuring exposure to disagreement in political dialogue (Eveland & Hively, 2009; Klofstad et al., 2013; Pattie & Johnston, 2009) or the different types of political participation considered across studies (Lee, 2012). Moreover, some studies that take into account the specifics of the network have not found any significant link between exposure to political disagreements and avoiding disputes (Campbell, 2013), although there are works that confirm that avoiding disagreements can help citizens remain involved and informed (Dubois & Szwarc, 2018).

Thus, three categories of studies on the consequences of disagreement have been outlined here, and due to the different approaches in understanding disagreement, research design, usage of methods, and interpretation of outcomes, we can trace such a variety of outcomes and effects.

Methodological approaches to studying agreement and disagreement in online deliberation: focus on qualitative methodology

Since the main goal of this section is to provide a methodology that allows us to analyse agreement and disagreement in online deliberation in more detail and in a unified fashion, the particular studies were selected that matched this objective and that employ content or discourse analysis. An important criterion was that these studies did not contradict each other and could mutually complement each other. As a result, the methodological elaborations of these works have been analysed and summarised in order to formulate a unified approach that can be used in political science, communication research, and public

policy analysis. Before presenting a modified version of content analysis, however, there is a need to turn to previous research findings and ideas. One relevant contribution to agreement and disagreement analysis was made in the work of Jennifer Stromer-Galley (2007, 2009), who proposed a systematic way of measuring what happens during discussions in an article that presented a simple procedure for coding and analysing agreement and disagreement. Thus, agreement was determined as a signal of support for something said by the preceding speaker. The presence of agreement promotes rapprochement between different users and improves the rational assessment of the user's arguments (Stromer-Galley & Muhlberger, 2009). Agreement includes a comment that explicitly or implicitly agrees with the statements of other users (Stromer-Galley et al., 2015). A statement of agreement is a statement of concurring opinion. Disagreement is understood as a statement that signals a contradiction of something said by a previous speaker, including the moderator. The presence of disagreement is an essential condition for discussion, which requires a clash of different points of view to avoid cognitive errors and biases (Bohman, 2006). Moreover, the reaction to disagreement indicates the attitude of users towards other opinions and a desire to achieve recognition. Messages are encoded as disagreement when they (1) disagree with the general tone of the discussion (considering the previous message in the topic as the base one), which indicates heterogeneity in the topic; (2) clearly disagree with another commentator in the form of a name tag or response. Thus, disagreement is encoded if, at least, one of two conditions is fulfilled. If two comments criticise one idea, and the other commentator subsequently defends it, then such a message is encoded as disagreement. In addition to phrases such as "I disagree", "I'm not sure about this", "This is wrong", a statement of disagreement may repeat some of the thoughts of the previous speaker, changing small elements to signal a contradiction. The statements may begin with "I agree with this, but ..." or contain a "but" statement, which is meant as a refutation of something said by the previous speaker.

Stromer-Galley, Bryant and Bimber took a step forward and proposed a classification of types of expression of disagreement using the methodology of discourse analysis (2015). The article analysed the ways of initiating/signalling disagreements, qualitative differences in the forms of expression of disagreement in offline and online deliberation, as well as how strongly disagreement is supported in the online environment. One of the difficulties of the study was the classification of types of disagreements in the category of communication culture: soft and bold expressions of disagreement. Soft expressions of disagreement are those that mitigate disagreement with phrases such as "Okay, but", "I agree, but", etc. These phrases are forms of prior agreement. They show a preference for agreement in the sense that they postpone disagreement (Goodwin, 1983). In this sense, the mitigation of differences is closer to what Laden called an "invitation" to reasoning, that is, mutual interaction, "through which we tune in and develop the space of causes in which we inhabit" (Laden, 2012, p. 214). It is assumed that communicative signs such as "I understand your point of view, but", "I'm not sure about this" and "This is not quite right" signal that the speaker thinks about what others say, and therefore may be open to other statements and evaluative points of view. In this way, the speaker modulates his own deliberative participation, pretending that he/she allows other areas of research or remains open to further interaction. A bold disagreement implies a sharp challenge and a direct expression of disagreement. By expressing, for instance, "You are wrong" or "I disagree", the speaker is asserting that the other is wrong or that a certain

consideration has not been taken into account (or it may even be irrational) in a manner that signals the absence of common ground in the conversation. In such a situation, the speaker presents themselves as less open to movement based on a common set of reasons (Laden, 2012, p. 214). In this case, decisive disagreements are not considered to be an invitation to joint discussion. Therefore, it is expected that, unlike soft ones, they may entail less motivation to explain the reasoning.

The classification of bold and soft types of disagreement refers to the issue of employing a civil culture of communication when studying online deliberation. These two concepts are related, but they are not the same. Scholarly excitement about bold and soft disagreement comprised a different kind of assessment, and it highlights the ways in which people express their views in dialogue with others whose views do not coincide. The analysis of civility requires a judgment on whether the expression has the intention or effect of showing or failing to show respect to individuals or groups (Steffensmeier & Schenk-Hamlin, 2008). The expression of civil disagreement can be bold or soft. Uncivil expression is never polite, and while bold types of disagreement can lead to disrespect, the analysis eventually limited itself to the fact that there were no complaints about the participants' efforts to express themselves. Instead, the researchers focused on studying the expressions themselves and the ways in which disagreements are conveyed to others, namely, whether disagreement has been formulated in tentative terms that signal a desire to reach agreement. Using this approach, the authors have moved away from the traditional focus on inciting and other aggressive, disinhibited conflicts on the Internet to look for more subtle signs that people who express disagreement signal awareness of social norms of cooperation, politeness and honesty.

Some other researchers have proposed a broader classification of disagreement types, where the focus is shifted to the distinction between uncivil and intolerant expressions of disagreement (Rossini & Maia, 2021). In addition to analysing the presence/absence of disagreement on various discussion platforms, including news sites and Facebook, the question of how much disagreement is associated with such deliberative behaviour as argumentation was considered. The study indicates that the expression of disagreement can be both justified, i.e., encoded, when there is any explanation or clarification to substantiate an opinion, and also unjustified, i.e., encoded as any remark that reveals the commentator's point of view on a topic without any elaboration. However, a more detailed analysis of the forms of reasoned disagreement in terms of the quality of arguments has not yet been found in this work. However, this is an important factor that could contribute to a better understanding of the conditions and challenges for deliberative involvement of citizens in discussions, the impact of disagreement on deliberative process, and its quality.

Another study explored the relationship of disagreement and reasoning in deliberation (Maia et al., 2021). The focus was on analysing real online discussions on forums of legislatures, media and activists in order to study a set of factors influencing reasonable disagreement in the digital environment. A group of traditional studies is devoted to the impact of disagreement on civic and political participation; this study, however, uncovered forms of disagreement that retain a fundamental connection with justification. The results demonstrated that context is significant in shaping online communication, but other variables have even stronger correlations. In particular, mitigation of disagreement, classified as a way of expressing disagreement that signals agreement in a conversation, greatly increases the

likelihood of justifying behaviour, and occurs in more categories than decisive disagreement. It was a good attempt to understand the relationship of disagreement and argumentation (simple and complex), but the forms of disagreement and their corresponding consequences deserve more empirical and normative attention for a critical understanding of communicative complexities in the new media landscape.

Another direction of disagreement analysis, ways/tactics in expression, can be seen in the work of Fischer et al. (2022) where a typology of various forms of argumentation (inductive, deductive, causal, analogical, expressing uncertainty and questions) and disagreement were developed. Four main forms of disagreement were identified in deliberation. The empirical examples from this study are provided as well (see Table 1).

As already noted, there is still no research and methodology on the context of analysing the impact of disagreement expressed by participants on further patterns of disagreement in online deliberation. It is important to understand whether it is possible to investigate the impact of disagreement on further stages of agreeing and disagreeing both during and at the end of a discussion process. When it comes to reaching agreement between participants within a discussion, analysing the impact of disagreement on the possibility of reaching agreement, the emphasis is on the communication process and its quality, i.e. how consensus is constructed. When referring to reaching consensus at the end, investigating the impact of expressing disagreement on overall outcome, and achieving mutual understanding, research focus is shifted to the result of a discussion. Therefore, the impact of disagreement on agreement and consensus should be analysed from these two positions in order to understand both the procedural side of deliberation and its effectiveness.

Thus, as a continuation of the ideas of the researchers expressed and disclosed in the earlier studies described above, the methodology may contain the following components of agreement and disagreement analysis:

1. Frequency (analysis of the presence and absence of agreement and disagreement)
2. Initiator (citizen or state official, for example)
3. The subject or object with whom a communicator agrees or disagrees (citizen, state official, politics, information/post on social media, abstract agreement or disagreement)
4. Type of agreement/disagreement in terms of justification (justified/unjustified)
5. Type of disagreement in terms of (in)civility (civil/uncivil; if civil, bold or soft)
6. Forms/tactics of expressing disagreement: question, repackaging: reframing/rephrasing the position, minimising the problem/downplaying the problem, making semantic distinctions, emphasising the vagueness of the formulation of the proposal/evidence, agreeing to disagree; discrediting participants/sources

The general disadvantage of the studies reviewed above is that the coding processes were carried out manually, which could provoke cognitive and coding faults. Undoubtedly, the presented methodology can be automatised, which would enable an acceleration of the coding process, avoid errors of interpretation – especially if the amount of empirical data is very great – expand the scale of traditional text analysis, and identify large-scale patterns and tendencies. It would also solve the problems around coders and the reliability of results. Currently, social sciences offer a vast number of computational methods for text analysis.

Table 1:
Various forms of disagreement in online political conversations

Typology of forms	Description	Examples
Question	The question is not always accusatory; sometimes participants may ask questions to express uncertainty or to demand clarity. Thus, a question can be both a form of argumentation and a method of expressing disagreement.	"How many jobs would it really create? How many people do you need?"
Repackaging: reframing/rephrasing the content/position, minimising the problem/downplaying the problem, making semantic distinctions, emphasising the vagueness of the wording of a sentence or evidence	Some participants may take information from experts, media, opinion leaders (or from their own experience) and use their evidence to repeat comments or questions. Reframing can be used to shift the focus of a conversation, as a method of expressing disagreement. The material can be repackaged by reformulating the position, minimising previously stated problems, making semantic distinctions and emphasising the vagueness of the wording of the sentence or previous evidence.	"I don't, for example, know that there's going to be that big of a problem with increased crime around these dispensaries. That's not my main concern." *(minimising problems)* "That's not something that I would be able to answer either. I'm sorry; I can just give information on the rulemaking process." *(vagueness)*
Agreeing to disagree	Agreeing to disagree means refusing to argue or literally saying, "I disagree with her/him on this issue". Agreeing to disagree expresses disagreement and helps the discussion process continue without lengthy debate over seemingly irreconcilable differences.	"So, we disagree – three of us disagree."
Discrediting other participants or sources	Sometimes participants have to step back from sources or messages to justify disagreements about the argument. Discrediting sources can be combined with other forms of expressing disagreement (for example, agreeing to disagree).	"But it does shed a light on her testimony. I think her testimony is biased. It shouldn't even be included."

Source: Compiled by the author.

Computational Text Analysis (CTA) is an umbrella term for an array of digital tools and techniques that utilises computers and software to analyse digital texts, from individual texts to big data. CTA techniques comprise keyword analysis, named entity recognition, sentiment analysis, stylometry, topic modelling and word embedding modelling. One of the most widespread methodologies of textual analysis is opinion mining, which includes the elements of: identification of relevant text corpora; identification of texts containing opinion among selected text corpuses; determination of the tonality of the utterance of the authors' texts and clustering of documents according to the identified tonality (Bodrunova, 2018). For example, in order to determine pro-government and pro-opposition comments and cross-cutting disagreement on YouTube, Zinnatullin (2023) used a supervised machine

learning model of keyword selection, based on a glossary of derogatory words applied to Navalny and his supporters, Putin and the Russian government. The author also managed to detect the potential and constraints of incivility in political discussions as an affective polarisation characteristic, and how people interacted with the pro-government narrative, as presented in the Navalny community. The findings showed that users did not tend to dispute with those who spread extreme forms of incivility and toxicity with a zero potential to deliberate. Moreover, pro-government comments strongly attracted Navalny's supporters, who answered the out-group criticism, and contributed to the emergence of pockets of a pro-government narrative. The study by Stukal et al. (2017) proposed a methodology for distinguishing bots from humans on Twitter. It allowed scholars not only to identify bots among currently active accounts but also to conduct a retrospective analysis, uncovering the dynamics of the use of bots over time. The method provided a conservative evaluation of the bots' spread among all Russian accounts that Tweeted at least 10 times on politically related themes from 2014 to 2015, and revealed that the daily proportion of bots among actively Tweeting Russian accounts in their collection reached as high as 85% during that time. In another work, the same authors presented a deep neural network classifier (multilayer perceptron [MLP]) that employed a wide range of textual features including words, word pairs, links, mentions, and hashtags to separate four contextually relevant types of bots: pro-Kremlin, neutral/other, pro-opposition, and pro-Kiev (2019). Due to the computational complexity of training MLPs, they split the labelled set into training (80%), development (10%), and test (10%) sets instead of performing cross-validation. Their method relied on supervised machine learning and a new large set of labelled accounts, rather than externally obtained account affiliations or elites' orientation. The researchers demonstrated the usage of their method by applying it to bots operating on Russian political Twitter from 2015 to 2017 and showed that both pro- and anti-Kremlin bots had a substantial presence on Twitter. Continuing the consideration of usage of various computational methods for text analysis on social networks, it is worth noting thematic modelling as a data analysis method, which enables the identification of themes or hidden meanings within a large volume of textual data. It is used to automatically categorise documents based on the similarity of their contents. Thematic modelling clusters texts by topics isolated from a set of words or phrases that are frequently found in those texts. Each cluster corresponds to a specific topic and can be described by a set of keywords. These keywords reflect the content of the texts in the cluster. This simplifies the analysis of textual data, allowing hidden connections and patterns to be identified, and helping informed decisions to be made based on the data. For example, such a tool was employed in analysing Russian comments from the Telegram messenger and VK.com social network in research by Nizomutdinov and Filatova (2023) who used the Gensim thematic model, which is based on the LDA (Latent Dirichlet Allocation) algorithm. This algorithm aims to search out hidden topics in a large amount of text data. The LDA algorithm enables the identification of the most likely topics in text collections.

Conclusion and discussion of future research venues

The overview demonstrated a variety of deliberative studies on agreement and disagreement, including methodological approaches, employed in political communication research. Although the scholarship contained some works on agreement in political conversations, it explicitly and predominantly focused on the issue of disagreement since this represents a greater threat to democratic deliberation and civic engagement, especially in conditions of exogenous shock. In the work, a few gaps were detected (RQ1) and a few directions have accordingly been proposed (RQ4). The first lacuna is the lack of research on productive and communicative directions in online deliberation. It was concluded that the institutional input currently dominates the deliberative agenda. Agreement and disagreement can be considered both as results of online deliberation and as endogenous parameters of political discussions that may generally influence a deliberative process and its dynamics. It is, therefore, relevant to distinguish the research problem, and not mix these approaches. There were no works that systematically analysed the relationship between expressions of disagreement and agreement, the influence of these parameters on each other and on further processes of conversation. Moreover, as proposed by previous studies, it is necessary to continue research on factors that influence the participant's experiences and the amount of disagreement as a theme of deliberation and moderator activity. Since the ideal purpose of deliberation is to achieve consensus or cooperation – which may be accompanied by an enormous number of disagreements and agreements on certain positions – this gap is a missed opportunity in understanding the processes of agreeing and disagreeing. Investigating the impact of agreement and disagreement on final consensus (which can be absent, indeed) seems to be acutely worthy of consideration in future research. The second gap correlates with a lack of understanding of the dynamics and types of agreement and disagreement in online discussions, and the factors that may provoke an increase or decrease them in the periods of crises. As an issue of rational and independent political communication still exists, it is evident that these issues should be more attentively studied. It has been noted that online deliberation and its quality are habitually explored during periods of socio-economic and political certainty; however, how do agreeing and disagreeing patterns in networked political conversations of citizens and state officials transform? Can citizens and government agencies find a solution together and collectively make reasonable decisions in such conditions? Therefore, the ways in which consensus/cooperation can be achieved in the discussions on different online platforms in the crisis should be studied in detail. The result would allow us to see how the government structures should interact with citizens and respond to their disagreements or complaints in a constructive manner, rather than moderating or deleting them.

The third lacuna corresponds to the political context where a problem of agreement and disagreement is explored. Predominantly, studies consider online deliberation in democratic countries, however, there is a huge gap in comprehending the role and quality of digital deliberation in non-democratic states such as China and Russia, for example. Thus, it is necessary to go beyond democratic conditions as that would give a broader view of the role of disagreement in political communication and the way non-democratic governments react or respond to it. As for Russian studies, the number of empirical studies

focused particularly on patterns of disagreement in online discussions on socio-political issues is very limited (Bodrunova et al., 2021b; Volkovskii et al., 2024) as disagreement usually serves as a variable of quality in deliberative discussion (Savin, 2019) or in the context of social media influence on political behaviour of participants and their digital activity (Bodrunova, 2021). However, there are already some empirical results confirming that, in some cases, the more state officials respond to comments containing complaints from citizens or opposition to the state's position, the worse they get, and the number of complaints or disagreements from citizens increases (the government, therefore, prefers not to respond in order not to increase the flow of disagreement and negative statements) (Enikeeva et al., 2023). To reconsider the role of agreement and disagreement in those countries where government agencies employ authoritarian deliberation practices would be significant and address the concept of deliberative authoritarianism, which was proposed by a Chinese political scientist (He, 2006). The combination of authoritarian governance and deliberative mechanisms has been studied in China where deliberation functions as an information resource through which the government forms public policy, receives support from citizens, and eliminates disagreements and those who express them. The government has a monopoly on decision-making, while citizens only take part in deliberative processes without having any impact on them. As a result, the discussion about political deliberation in non-democracies raises a theoretical discussion on what concept should be put in the theoretical carcass of deliberative studies. It is evident that a Habermasian understanding of democratic deliberation is no longer applicable to the study of online deliberative process as it appeals to normative claims and principles of political communication that are impossible even in the most developed contemporary democracies. Furthermore, the political context matters, so if studies correlate with an exploration of the deliberative mechanisms used by non-democratic governments, the concept of democratic deliberation proposed by Habermas or other deliberative democracy theorists would automatically be nullified. In this case, the concept of authoritarian deliberation proposed by He, should be employed. However, there is more one problem linked to political regime and communication tools because the practice of authoritarian deliberation can be traced even in the Western democracies. We should be careful in these details and use an individual approach to case studies. More research on this phenomenon should be conducted in order to clarify how theoretical claims on deliberation can correspond to empirical reality.

The fourth gap concerns the relationship between incivility and disagreement/agreement. The link between these elements calls for further study, taking into account the impact of such factors as political regime, crisis/non-crisis situations, digital platform, topic, moderation, and the activity of bots. As indicated in earlier works (Volkovskii et al., 2023), the deliberative theory argues that political discussions should be polite and respectful towards communicators and their views. However, some empirical research confirms that not all networked political dialogues are civil in nature because elements of hate speech are often present (Bodrunova et al., 2021b; Volkovskii & Filatova, 2023). The analysis suggests that uncivil messages can be produced by any user, not only by trolls and bots (Theocharis et al., 2020), and users distinctly consider using incivility, intolerance, and violent threats, despite such intolerance and incivility eliciting similar content moderation responses (Pradel et al., 2024). All these findings prompt study of the way disagreement correlates with

incivility, intolerance and violent threats; whether or not there is moderation, and where there is, which factors influence it. In this regard, the theory of cumulative deliberation could be an important theoretical basis for such studies, interpreted as (1) the process of accumulation, redistribution and dispersion of public opinion (opinions) created by the participation of Internet users with a variety of institutional status in online discursive activities; and (2) the influence of accumulated opinions on the positions of institutional actors and discourses, including the work of the media and policymaking (Bodrunova, 2023). The basic contribution of this theory is that it accepts the deliberative imperfection of user thinking and their behaviour, which may include the use of uncivil speech elements but within the terms of the legislation. This statement causes us to reconsider the normative prism of online communication and broaden the research of communication culture, going beyond the borders of classic theories of deliberation. Thus, some scientists have even pointed out the constructive functions of aggressive and obscene speech, urging that it should not be removed from online discussions by automatic filtering (Masullo Chen et al., 2019; Bodrunova et al., 2021a) because it can play a constructive role – both in stimulating heated discussion and in contextualising it.

In this research, three groups of studies dedicated to the effects of political disagreement have been highlighted (RQ2). On the one hand, the research value of timely and thematically varied works is great when exploring the consequences of disagreement because they provide a clear view of the state of the research field and of what has been investigated previously by scholars. In this way it is possible to confirm or reject the current outcomes by providing more new studies in the domain that can contribute to a better understanding of research design and methods and the various types of interpretation techniques for results, as well as clarifying the differences and challenges posed for researchers in the field of political communication. On the other hand, it makes constructing general theoretical claims that might be used for composing hypotheses and explaining how theory might help scholars comprehend the empirical reality rather complicated and tricky. This is because the quality of political communication varies from one example to another because many endogenous and exogenous factors can influence it. This is, therefore, a motivation to precisely discover what has a considerable impact on communication, including agreement and disagreement, as relevant elements of that. Also, great attention should be paid to the accuracy of research design and methods as they influence the results, as well as their role in the general theoretical context, which in turn may trigger debates among scholars and impede the achievement of consensus.

As for methodological approaches in analysing agreement and disagreement in online deliberation (RQ3), a few significant examples were considered, which enabled the formulation of some general parameters for analysis such as the presence/absence of agreement and disagreement; the initiator; the subject or object with whom a debater agrees or disagrees; type of agreement/disagreement in terms of justification and (in)civility; forms/tactics of expressing disagreement. This methodological elaboration can be developed in further research and be integrated into studies of political communication and public policy. However, if research employs large amounts of textual data, then computational methods of text analyses are relevant, some of which have been highlighted in this work. Furthermore, it was noticed that researchers had mainly employed survey methods or experiments in order

to study agreement/disagreement and its effects on political discussion. Consequently, more studies using computational methods of text analysis based on real empirical data need to be conducted in order to fully comprehend the nature of online disagreement, the factors that trigger it and its consequences for the further dynamics of deliberation.

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