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The Poetics of Digital Children and Designing Online Democratic Deliberations

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Abstract: The article explores the dynamic intersection of poetics and democratic deliberation in the digital environment, offering a special focus on the role and potential of the child (online) deliberator. Despite significant advances in deliberative democracy, especially in online contexts, the concept of deliberative poetics, and its implications for children’s online engagement remains under-developed. The article advocates for the reimagining of online deliberative processes in a manner that supports child-driven deliberative poetics, as well as aligns with the aims of deliberative processes, leverages the unique advantages of the digital environment, and enables the meaningful engagement children. Drawing on the insights gained from children’s experiences with video-conferencing during the COVID-19 pandemic, the article offers key recommendations for designing child-centered video-conference-facilitated deliberative processes and proposes the establishment of a designated digital hub for children’s participation and deliberation. These initiatives aim to enhance children’s engagement in online democratic deliberations, and maximize their potential in terms of poetic, technological, and policy outcomes.

Keywords: deliberative democracy; digital environment; children’s rights; video-conferencing; deliberative poetics

1 Introduction

In a 2023 interview, Weisband, a German former politician and current participation educator, commented on the intrinsic nature of democracy, stating that it “begins on the inside” and fosters an attitude under which the citizen is not a victim or consumer of his or her society, “but a creator”.¹ This sentiment resonates with the core themes explored in this article, which concern the dynamic environment of online

1 Laura Giesen, “From Consumer to Creator: Experiencing Digital Democracy in Schools”, *Democracy Technologies* (March 31, 2023). <https://democracy-technologies.org/participation/from-consumer-to-creator-experiencing-digital-democracy-in-schools/>.

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deliberative democracy, particularly in relation to children and their expressive and deliberative poetics.

Essentially, the deliberative democracy approach is based on the fundamental principle that every individual affected by a political decisions should have the opportunity to engage in deliberation to influence those decisions and policy outcomes. Thus, deliberative democracy advocates for ‘talk-centric’ processes that are characterized by equal and inclusive participation, thoughtful reflection, and reasoned, constructive public deliberation in public decision-making.² This approach is built on the belief that deliberation is an essential element in democracy and that deliberative processes generate better, fairer, and more legitimate decisions. Furthermore, these processes contribute to the development of deliberative and democratic skills among citizens; promote inclusivity; and foster trust, respect, and engagement both within and across societal groups and between citizens and their government.³

Over the years, deliberative democracy gained prominence as one of the most influential democratic and political theories, undergoing both theoretical and practical developments. These resulted in the creation of a range of models, tools and mechanisms designed to engage citizens in decision-making processes, both online and offline.⁴ Significantly, there is a growing recognition—resting on both democratic and child rights-based consideration—of the importance of including children in deliberation, particularly in those conducted online.⁵

This article seeks to introduce the concept of poetics to the dynamic domain of online democratic deliberations, with a particular focus on the engagement of

2 Denise Bulling, Lyn Carson, Mark DeKraai, Alexis Garcia, Harri Raisio, “Deliberation Models featuring Youth Participation”, *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies*, 3(1), (2013): 409–432, 400–401, 411; James Bohman, “Survey Article: The coming of age of deliberative democracy”, *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 6 (1998): 400–425, 400–401; Jürg Steiner, *The Foundations of Deliberative Democracy: Empirical Research and Normative Implications* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 32.

3 Bohman, “The Coming of Age of Deliberative Democracy”, 400–401; Edana Beauvais & Andre Baechtiger, “Taking the goals of deliberation seriously: A differentiated view on equality and equity in deliberative designs and processes”, *Journal of Public Deliberation*, 12(2), (2016): 1–18, 1–3; Stephen Elstub & Peter McLaverty, “Introduction: Issues and Cases in Deliberative Democracy”, in *Deliberative Democracy: Issues and Cases*, ed. Stephen Elstub & Peter McLaverty (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 1–2.

4 Elstub & McLaverty, “Issues and Cases in Deliberative Democracy”, 1; Steiner, “The Foundations of Deliberative Democracy”, 26.

5 Daniella Zlotnik Raz & Shulamit Almog, “Deliberating the Rights of the Child: The Inclusion of Children in Deliberative Democracy and Some Insights from Israel” in *Deliberative Constitution-Making: Opportunities and Challenges*, ed. Min Reuchamps & Yanina Welp (Routledge, 2024), 91–109; Kei Nishiyama, “Deliberators, not Future Citizens: Children in Democracy”, *Journal of Public Deliberation*, 13(1), (2017): 1–24.

children. Poetics can be defined as a system of aesthetic principles that seek to determine the nature of a particular phenomenon, as well as reveal how its representations, be they linguistic, visual, or textual, “govern the construction of meaning within a certain area”. While originally created as a means to understand literary texts, poetics today has evolved to find widespread application in diverse contexts, to ascertain how meanings are produced and generated, and why they are accepted.⁶

But what precisely does the poetics of [online] deliberation mean, and why is it of importance? This article maintains that simply ‘transplanting’ physical deliberation processes into the digital environment, without certain poetic and aesthetic adaptations, falls short of realizing the deliberative and technological potential and value of such processes. This may result in processes reduced to blinking, rectangular screens; cameras being switched on and off; and ineffective reproductions of participant-led discussions, that lack the benefits of either physical or digital environments. This inevitably leads to deliberative failures, characterized by underuse, misuse, or overuse of poetics, and resulting in an incapacity to generate and effectively transmit meaning.⁷

An illustration of this kind of deliberative process that, without poetic adaptations, fails to realize its deliberative and technological potential is video-conferencing. Video-conferencing gained immense popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic. The ‘Zoom’ application, in particular, emerged as the leading digital tool for various social, educational, and participatory purposes, including for children. However, the excessive utilization of video-conferencing platforms also had adverse effects on children’s learning and engagement. The Israel’s National Student Council, for example, took to social media to comment against students transforming into ‘*zombies*’,⁸ thereby implying that students have become fatigued and disengaged due to the excessive, prolonged, and monotonous type of such digital interactions. By delving into the insights and lessons learned from children’s engagement in video-conferencing during COVID-19, this article aims to explore how these experiences can inform the poetic design of video-conference-facilitated deliberative processes.

At present, the issue of deliberative poetics, especially its distinct manifestation within the digital environment, and its implications for child deliberators, remains under-developed. This gap is particularly noticeable given the increasing academic and practical attention to deliberative democracy and its intricate ties with the digital environment, as well as to the potential of child deliberators and the

6 Shulamit Almog, “Creating Representations of Justice in the Third Millennium: Legal Poetics in Digital Times”, *Rutgers Computer & Technology Law Journal*, 32, (2006): 183–245, 195–196.

7 Almog, “Creating Representations of Justice in the Third Millennium”, 212; Shulamit Almog, “Law and Literature in the Digital Age” (Nevo Publication, 2007), 54–56. [Hebrew].

8 Israel National Student Council, *Facebook*, (November 3, 2020) [Hebrew]. <https://www.facebook.com/moatzaty/posts/pfbid0oaiTxpwiBb2RjnqrjGw98rcoyuj7vovoid5ciBEKR1JYXgAEQfyLw6JDKs3EK4HLL>.

recognition of children's political and discursive rights.⁹ Consequently, it becomes imperative and timely to consider deliberative digital poetics, and explore its legal, democratic, aesthetic, and social dimensions.

This article seeks to contribute to these emerging themes by presenting a poetic perspective and exploring its role in shaping designing meaningful online deliberative processes for children. Specifically, it will aim to establish some groundwork for video-conference-facilitated deliberative processes, as well as for designated digital hubs for children's online participation and deliberation. This proposed technological and poetic architecture is meant to align with the aims of the deliberative process, leverage the unique advantages of the digital environment, and actively engage children as a significant participant-group in such online deliberations.

2 Poetics and Online Democratic Deliberations for Children

Originating from the Greek term *poietes*—meaning poet or creator—the concept of poetics was initially developed by Aristotle in relation to tragedy. In his work, Aristotle systematically examined the mechanisms through which a literary text either succeeds or fails to elicit specific responses from its intended audience. Over time, the exploration of poetics has transcended the boundaries of the literary form, broadening its scope and usage to examine diverse phenomenon and research fields. It now seeks to understand how meanings are constructed, generated, accepted, and what their impact is on the respective academic or practical domain.¹⁰

Yet, the poetic aspects of democratic deliberations, and their distinct patterns and processes remain under-explored. As described, the deliberative democracy approach is premised on democratic decision-making facilitated through inclusive deliberative processes involving those affected by specific policies or decisions, including children. Deliberations, then, necessitate active listening, freedom of expression, exchange of views and information, and engagement in meaningful discourse. Consequently, deliberations hinge on employing a variety of poetic means

⁹ Daniella Zlotnik Raz & Shulamit Almog, "Children's Political Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child", *The International Journal of Children's Rights*, 31(2), (2023): 500–523; Nishiyama, "Deliberators, not Future Citizens", 1–24; Steiner, "The Foundations of Deliberative Democracy", 26; Zlotnik Raz & Almog, "Deliberating the Rights of the Child", 91–109.

¹⁰ Almog, "Creating Representations of Justice in the Third Millennium", 195–196; Almog, "Law and Literature in the Digital Age", 34.

to authentically represent and support the insights of those participating and provide meaning to the deliberative process.¹¹

The digital environment introduces a transformative dimension to the discourse on deliberative poetics. Harnessing the unique features of the digital environment, online deliberative processes incorporate new verbal and visual components that redefine the capacities and roles of deliberators, including child deliberators. Digital technologies can enrich these processes by enabling simultaneous production, transmission, and responses to diverse types of data and information. This technological evolution could potentially replace or, at least, enhance ‘traditional’ poetic tools, allowing for streamlined, simultaneous utilization and presentation of digital contents, such as videos, presentations, and surveys. This shift also enables the digital environment to reshape the deliberative time and space. Online deliberative processes, unlike physical deliberations, are no longer confined to specific, singular events, nor do they require the physical presence of participants. Instead, they now enable global, asynchronous, and continuous deliberative processes, with new, distinct poetic features.¹²

This shift significantly impacts the evolving role of the deliberator. In the digital environment, participants in deliberations are ‘users’ who can, potentially, better steer and influence deliberative processes. Digital technology facilitates easy finding, storing, editing, and transmitting content within deliberative processes. Its interactive environment also enables deliberators to blur, to a large extent, the existing distinctions between senders and receivers, authors and readers, and creators and audiences, thereby allowing participating individuals to simultaneously assume multiple roles, on top of that of deliberators.¹³

Exploring and understanding online deliberative poetics becomes particularly essential when considering the inclusion of children in online deliberations. The digital environment has become inseparable from children’s lives.¹⁴ Children have emerged as a primary user group of digital technologies, engaging online for various purposes including education, play, communication, socialization, commerce, health, and accessing government services—both during times of crisis and routine.¹⁵

11 See Almog, “Law and Literature in the Digital Age”, 40.

12 See Almog, “Creating Representations of Justice in the Third Millennium”, 2015-216, 220, 224–225, 230; Almog, “Law and Literature in the Digital Age”, 71.

13 Almog, “Creating Representations of Justice in the Third Millennium”, 217, 220; Almog, “Law and Literature in the Digital Age”, 62.

14 Alexander Cho, Jasmina Byrne, Zoe Pelter, “Rapid Analysis: Digital Civic Engagement by Young People” (UNICEF Office of Global Insight and Policy Publication, 2020), 6; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), “General comment No. 25 (2021) on children’s rights in relation to the digital environment [CRC/C/GC/25]” (March 2, 2021), Para. 2.

15 Sonia Livingstone & Monica Bulger, “A Global Research Agenda for Children’s Rights in the Digital Age”, *Journal of Children and Media*, 8(4), (2014): 317–335; Sonia Livingstone, John Carr, Jasmina

Children also regard digital access and engagement as a human right and recognize that the digital environment provides them with a space to express their opinions, political views and participate in decision-making. This makes digital civic engagement, including through participation in deliberative processes, especially suited for children.¹⁶

In recent years, deliberative democrats have placed particular emphasis on enhancing—albeit not flawlessly—the involvement of children, especially youth, in political and institutional decision-making. Advocates for the inclusion of children present both deliberative and child rights-based justifications. These include, among others, the potential to bolster legitimacy and acceptability of decisions concerning children's lives; the introducing fresh perspectives that can lead to better decision-making; the enhancement of civic skills and engagement among children; and the realization of their rights under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, namely their right to be heard and participate 'in all matters affecting the child'.¹⁷

In that regard, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC Committee) has provided guidance to States-Parties concerning children's online participation and deliberation. The CRC Committee extensively addressed the potential of the digital environment for children's engagement and noted its recognition of children's participatory and discursive rights in the digital environment. Furthermore, the CRC Committee called States-Parties to actively involve children and give due weight to their views when 'developing legislation, policies, programmes, services and training on children's rights in relation to the digital environment' and encouraged States-Parties to specifically employ digital platforms for consultative and participatory processes with children.¹⁸

Byrne, "One in Three: Internet Governance and Children's Rights", UNICEF Office of Research–Innocenti Discussion Paper (2016), 16–17; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, "General comment No. 25", para. 3.

¹⁶ Amanda Third & Lilly Moody, "Our Rights in the Digital World: A Report on the Children's Consultations to inform UNCEC General Comment 25" (5Rights Foundation & Western Sydney University, 2021), 13–16; Cho et al., "Digital Civic Engagement by Young People", 4, 7; Kate Raynes-Goldie & Luke Walker, "Our Space: Online Civic Engagement Tools for Youth", in *Civic Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth*, ed. W. Lance Bennett (MIT Press, 2008), 161; Livingstone et al., "One in Three: Internet Governance and Children's Rights", 21; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, "General comment No. 25", para. 58.

¹⁷ Bulling et al., "Deliberation Models featuring Youth Participation", 410; Steiner, "The Foundations of Deliberative Democracy", 26; United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1,577, 3, (opened for signature November 20, 1989), Article 12.; Zlotnik Raz & Almog, "Deliberating the Rights of the Child", 95–96.

¹⁸ United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, "General comment No. 25", para. 17–18, 64. On the guidance provided by the CRC Committee for States-Parties concerning children's participation and deliberation online: Daniella Zlotnik Raz & Shulamit Almog, "Online I can ask questions and contribute confidently: Children's Rights and Potential in E-Consultations" (*Forthcoming*).

Therefore, the rise of online deliberations holds particular relevance for children, who can, and should, actively participate as users, audience, and creators, thus paving the way for a child-authored deliberative poetics. However, these developments pose questions as to how poetic elements should be structured within online deliberative processes, and what adaptations are necessary for them to resonate with children.

3 The Poetics of Video-Conferencing and Their Impact on Children: Some Lessons from the COVID-19 Experience

The use of video-conferencing platforms, such as Zoom, during the COVID-19 pandemic offers valuable insights into their effect on children. Through reflection on both the technological and poetic aspects of video-conferencing, and their impact on children's engagement, some lessons can be extracted and applied in the particular context of video-conference-facilitated deliberations with children.

It is important to recognize that the use of video-conferencing in deliberative contexts differs from its use in educational settings during the pandemic. These distinctions manifest, among others, in the video-conferencing intended purposes (deliberative vs. educational) and the composition and size of the participant group (new, unfamiliar individuals and working in smaller groups in deliberations vs. the familiar class group and working in larger groups in education). Additionally, it is important to consider the change in context: online learning during COVID-19 was necessitated by broader social distancing measures. The reliance on online communications extended beyond the realm of education, affecting children's leisure, participatory activities, play, and social interactions. In contrast, contemporary online deliberative processes are a conscious methodological and practical choice, which is not dictated by emergency situations. Nevertheless, the experience of online learning during COVID-19 can offer insights into the efficacy of children's engagement with video-conferencing platforms.

The global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic prompted many countries to declare a state of emergency and implement measures to enforce social distancing and mitigate the spread of the virus. These measures and restrictions had profound implications for children, namely in the field of education.¹⁹ Globally, COVID-19

¹⁹ Laura Lundy, Bronagh Byrne, Katrina Lloyd, Michelle Templeton, Nicholas Brando, Mary-Louise Corr, Evie Heard, Lucy Holland, Mandi MacDonald, Gerry Marshall, Siobhan McAlister, Catherine McNamee, Karen Orr, Dirk Schubotz, Emilia Symington, Colm Walsh, Kristen Hope, Prathit Singh, G. Neil, Laura Wright, "Life Under Coronavirus: Children's Views on their Experiences of their Human

measures forced prolonged closure of educational settings, which necessitated an abrupt transition from face-to-face learning to emergency online learning. While online learning was not a new phenomenon, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated its implementation across schools. This gave rise to various substantial challenges, including children's lack of access to digital equipment; connectivity; the deepening of digital divides and inequalities; insufficient digital literacy; and the need for adaptation of educational content into online formats.²⁰

Notably, online learning heavily relied on video-conferencing platforms designed to emulate physical classroom study. The Zoom application, in particular, emerged as a leading digital tool for the COVID-19 period.²¹ Zoom introduced a novel educational aesthetics by incorporating technological features such as customized backgrounds, various display options of participants' cameras, and digital tools for chat, as well as sharing and presenting digital contents, like videos or presentations. However, the extensive use of Zoom, and other video-conferencing platforms, also had negative effects on children. In that regard, participatory processes conducted with children have provided valuable insights into their perspectives on the educational, social, and emotional challenges associated with online learning via video-conferencing, which included.

3.1 Digital Divides

"I am not sure how much of a decent education I will get from Zoom"
(Child Participant).²²

Children observed that the shift to online learning exacerbated existing digital divides, impacting their right to quality and equitable education. While some children

Rights", *The International Journal of Children's Rights*, 29, (2021): 261–285, 262, 269; Tamar Morag, Yael Sabag, Daniella Zlotnik Raz, Tal Arazi, "Ensuring the rights of children and youth during the COVID-19 Crisis: Looking through the perspective of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child", *Refua VeMishpat*, 53, (2021): 17–48 [Hebrew].

²⁰ Aretha M. Maposa & Vongai Blessing Chakanyuka, "Managing Change from Face-to-Face to Online Teaching and Learning in Higher Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Implications for Equity and Epistemic Justice", in *Online Teaching and Learning in the COVID-19 Era: Perspectives on Equity and Epistemic Justice*, ed. Felix Maringe & Otilia Chiramba (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 158–159; Tamar Morag et al., "Ensuring the rights of children and youth during the COVID-19 Crisis", 47–48; UNESCO, "UNESCO COVID-19 Education Response", Issue Note 2.1 (2020), 2–3.

²¹ Shulamit Almog & Gal Amir, "A Brief History of Zoom", *Alechsion* (June 29, 2020) [Hebrew] <https://alaxon.co.il/thought/%D7%A7%D7%99%D7%A6%D7%95%D7%A8-%D7%AA%D7%95%D7%9C%D7%93%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%94%D7%96%D7%95%D7%9D/>.

²² #COVID Under 19, "Children's Rights during Coronavirus: Children's Views and Experiences" (2020), 33.

recognized the potential of the digital environment to enhance education, for example through utilizing digital aids or accessing diverse online sources, they emphasized the need for effective adaptations to ensure equal access for all students.²³

3.2 Emotional and Mental Health Impacts of Online Learning

*“in online classes we do not have much freedom to talk and we do not see each other.”
(Child Participant).²⁴*

Children noted that online learning caused emotional difficulties, often referred to as the ‘gloom of zoom’.²⁵ The absence of physical contact, personal communication, and feedback negatively impacted their relationships with both peers and teachers. Social interactions are key components in learning and are more difficult to achieve and maintain in digital environments.²⁶ Therefore, it is not surprising that children linked between the emotional and social consequences of online learning to their educational achievements and interest. Moreover, children linked the new skills required for online learning, and the demands of online education, to feelings of increased anxiety, disengagement, and reduced motivation to study.²⁷

²³ Adi Naamat & Daniella Zlotnik Raz, “Youth parliament: Including children and youth in policy-making - Project Report” (Israel National Council for the Child Publication, 2021), 22–25 [Hebrew]; Lundy et al. “Life Under Coronavirus”, 269, 275; Reuben Dlamini & Siyabonga Mhlongo, “Digital Education Ecosystem to Achieve Instructional Equity and Cognitive Justice” in *Online Teaching and Learning in the COVID-19 Era: Perspectives on Equity and Epistemic Justice*, ed. Felix Maringe & Otilia Chiramba (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 26.

²⁴ Ahmed Ali Alhazmi, “The Pandemic of Distance Learning: How Arab High School Students see Online-Learning during COVID-19”, *Psychology in the Schools*, 60(11), (2022): 4,394–4,403, 4,398.

²⁵ Angela Y. Lee, Gloria Moskowitz-Sweet, Erica Pelavin, Omar Rivera, Jeffrey T. Hancock, “Bringing you into the Zoom: The Power of Authentic Engagement in a Time of Crisis in the U.S.”, *Journal of Children and Media*, 15(1), (2020): 91–95, 91.

²⁶ Dlamini & Mhlongo, “Digital Education Ecosystem to Achieve Instructional Equity and Cognitive Justice”, 26; Hadar Neshet Shoshan & Wilken Wehrt, “Understanding “Zoom Fatigue”: A Mixed-Method Approach”, *Applied Psychology*, 71(3), (2021): 827–852, 840–841.

²⁷ Adi Naamat & Daniella Zlotnik Raz, “Youth parliament: Including children and youth in policy-making - Project Report” (Israel National Council for the Child Publication, 2022), 17–18 [Hebrew]; Alhazmi, “The Pandemic of Distance Learning”, 4,396–4,400; #COVID Under 19, “Children’s Rights during Coronavirus”, 25; Evrim Şenkal, Özlem Murzoglu Kurt, Siddika Songül Yalçın, Donna Koller, Perran Boran, “Seeing the Pandemic through Children’s Eyes: Exploring Turkish Children’s Views on COVID-19 Pandemic by Focus-Group Discussions”, *Child Care Health and Development*, 49(1), (2023): 816–824, 821; Naamat & Zlotnik Raz, “Youth parliament–Project Report 2021”, 23.

3.3 The Difficulties of the Online Learning Environment

When asked how they would feel to have one more zoom sessions, some child participants answered that they would ‘drop out’, ‘cry’, ‘break the computer’, and ‘give up’.
(Child Participants).²⁸

Children observed that online learning video-conferencing platforms, such as Zoom, do not have a structure that aligns with educational content and purposes. They described difficulties concentrating, managing their time, and experiencing feelings of boredom and distraction.²⁹ Indeed, some children acknowledged the advantages of online learning, such as comfort, convenience, and flexibility. They even expressed that the ability to turn off the microphones or cameras during classes made them feel safe, less anxious, and encouraged their participation. Additionally, some children noted that the digital learning environment provided them with new tools and skills that fostered a sense of responsibility and competence.³⁰ Still, children overall found that the structure of online learning platforms made it difficult for them to stay engaged remotely and form meaningful connections. They particularly highlighted the challenge of learning in a technological environment characterized by individual black screens and muted audio and emphasized the need for educators to develop new strategies for engaging them and maintaining their interest.³¹

3.4 Lack of Participation in Decision-Making

“Talk to us, we are here, we want to have an impact”
(Child Participant).³²

Children articulated that they felt that they were not being heard by governments in COVID-related decision-making. They expressed their desire to be heard and consulted, especially in those decisions relating to their lives, such as school closure and

²⁸ Naamat & Zlotnik Raz, “Youth parliament: Project Report 2022, 22.

²⁹ Alhazmi, “The Pandemic of Distance Learning”, 4,399; Evrim Şenkal et al., “Seeing the Pandemic through Children’s Eyes”, 821; Naamat & Zlotnik Raz, “Youth parliament: Project Report 2021”, 24.

³⁰ #COVID Under 19, “Children’s Rights during Coronavirus”, 2; Evrim Şenkal et al., “Seeing the Pandemic through Children’s Eyes”, 821; Naamat & Zlotnik Raz, “Youth parliament: Project Report 2022”, 17.

³¹ Dlamini & Mhlongo, “Digital Education Ecosystem to Achieve Instructional Equity and Cognitive Justice”, 38–40; Lee et al., “Bringing you into the Zoom”, 91.

³² Inter-sectoral Roundtable on Children and Youth at Risk during COVID-19, Deliberative Meeting with Child-Participants [Video] (2021). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DrRGJlHyfHw>.

online education.³³ The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic saw the suspension of participatory processes, or their abrupt shift to the digital environment, thereby negatively impacting the existing physical mechanisms for children's participation and deliberation. In the following months after the outbreak of the virus, efforts to realize children's right to be heard were strengthened, including through information dissemination, and conducting surveys and consultations to gauge children's needs and views. While some successes were achieved, the actual impact of children on decision-making remained mainly declarative.³⁴ In a participatory process conducted in Israel on the topic of youth participation in policy-making, child participants noted that participation is essential for youth, especially during times of crisis and emergency, and that it should be facilitated also through online processes.³⁵

4 Designing Online Deliberative Processes for Children

4.1 Effectively utilizing Video-Conferencing for Children's Deliberations

Online deliberative processes should be designed with the intention of actively engaging child participants, while also reflecting their interests, passions, and distinct ways of digital engagement.³⁶ Insights gained from children's experiences with video-conferencing during the COVID-19 pandemic offer some practical lessons pertaining to the technological and poetic aspects of designing child-centric video-conference-facilitated deliberative processes.

The poetic architecture of deliberative spaces, whether physical or online, should strive to fulfill the fundamental purposes of deliberations, encompassing inclusion, voice, discourse, learning, and participation in decision-making.³⁷ However, children encountered significant challenges with video-conferencing

33 Lundy et al., "Life Under Coronavirus", 277–278; Morag et al., "Ensuring the rights of children and youth during the COVID-19 Crisis", 66.

34 David Leal García, Alberto Fernandez, Laura Giesen, Maddalena Landi, Daniel Mackisack, Marilyn Neven, Therese Pearce-Laanela, Roman Snehotta, Laura Thomas, Rodney Schwartz, Edward Strasser, Nicolas Stühlinger, Sam Van der Staak, Graham Wetherall-Grujic, Peter Wolf, "Democracy Technologies in Europe: Online Participation, Deliberation and Voting" (The Innovation in Politics Institute & International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), 2023), 11; Morag et al., "Ensuring the rights of children and youth during the COVID-19 Crisis", 63–68.

35 Naamat & Zlotnik Raz, "Youth parliament: Project Report 2022", 17–18.

36 Zlotnik Raz & Almog, "Children's Rights and Potential in E-Consultations" (*Forthcoming*).

37 Almog, "Creating Representations of Justice in the Third Millennium", 203–204.

platforms, impacting their well-being and learning. Moreover, the abrupt transition to video-conferencing during the pandemic was meant to sustain a semblance of ‘normalcy’ by replicating the physical environments that were inoperable due to social distancing regulations. Yet, in this emergency situation, the shift occurred without allowing sufficient time for digitally-minded adaptation. The replication, then, failed to consider, and leverage, the distinct characteristics of the digital environment or how children engage with it. Consequently, important social features and personal interactions are absent, increasing the risk of children’s ‘deliberative’ zoom fatigue and diminishing interest.³⁸

Effectively harnessing video-conferencing platforms for children’s deliberations requires, then, adaptations that capitalize on the inherent advantages of the digital environment, namely connectivity, communication, and sharing.³⁹ Simultaneously, video-conference-facilitated deliberative processes should also ensure that their online deliberative spaces remain ‘humanized’, and that they supports social and personal interactions among the child participants in a manner that enhances the deliberative process.

Therefore, the technological and poetic design of video-conferencing platforms should encompass *features that facilitate both group and individual engagement*. This entails, among other measures, the design and incorporation of innovative camera options that supports group visibility, discourse, and real-time decision-making, as well as the development of digital tools to facilitate collective forming and presentation of group views and outputs. Enhancing group engagement can also involve the implementation of gaming elements and creative discussion methods as integral parts of the deliberative process. Additionally, written and voice chat functions should be available, along with the option to use personal avatars. These features can provide children with creative opportunities to interact, express themselves, and connect with others in deliberative settings.⁴⁰

The incorporation of rich visual elements related to the deliberative theme is also essential in the design of video-conference-facilitated deliberative processes. It is vital to enable and empower children to express themselves through imagery and styles that resonate with them and reflect their emerging deliberative poetic. This entails developing video-conference-facilitated deliberative processes that support children’s

38 Dlamini & Mhlongo, “Digital Education Ecosystem to Achieve Instructional Equity and Cognitive Justice”, 27; Neshor Shoshan & Wehrt, “Understanding “Zoom Fatigue”: A Mixed-Method Approach”, 828–830, 840–843; Zlotnik Raz & Almog, “Children’s Rights and Potential in E-Consultations” (*Forthcoming*).

39 Amanda Third, Delphine Bellerose, Juliano Diniz De Oliveira, Girish Lala, Georgina Theakstone, “Young and Online: Children’s Perspectives on Life in the Digital Age”, (Western Sydney University, UNICEF, ReRights, 2017), 16.

40 See Lee et al., “Bringing you into the Zoom”, 92–94.

use of wide-range formal and informal contents, including self-created materials, such as emojis, pictograms, memes, flags, and more. These rich visuals add depth and authenticity to online deliberations and align with the growing recognition within deliberative democracy concerning the validity of diverse stylistic expressions.

In that regard, deliberative democrats increasingly acknowledge that not all arguments in deliberations must be rational and elaborative to be considered suitable and persuasive. Rather, participants in deliberative settings should ideally be receptive to various types of compelling arguments, which may encompass narratives, testimonials, images, and personal life stories and experiences.⁴¹ This inclusive approach allows participants, especially children, to express themselves more freely and informally, utilizing their own linguistic and poetic styles, as well as their preferred digitally-generated content. Such contributions can also ‘humanize’ video-conference-facilitated deliberative processes by conveying emotion, humor, passion, and by fostering empathy among the participants.⁴²

Moreover, *the design of video-conference-facilitated deliberative processes should prioritize active and equitable engagement of child participants*. Unlike video-conferencing platforms in education that often give teachers significant control over the classroom, including the ability to mute participants and control content presentation as ‘hosts’, video-conference-facilitated deliberative processes should be designed in a manner that affords child participants the ability to claim roles such as presenters or discussion-leaders, as well as active listeners, and impact the deliberation’s direction. This shifts towards greater empowerment for child participants fosters a more democratic and inclusive environment, thereby enhancing the overall quality of online deliberations.⁴³

Furthermore, this approach *enhances shareability of content within video-conference-facilitated deliberative processes*. While ensuring respect for data protection and privacy concerns, video-conference-facilitated deliberative processes should incorporate poetic and digital tools that facilitate the sharing and publication of contents developed by the child-participants during the process, recognizing them as owners of their own contributions. This can be achieved through implementing easy-to-use technological options for sharing contents on social media or other online platforms, thereby encouraging further child-led discussion, input, and advocacy on the deliberative theme. However, to accommodate children who prefer to participate anonymously, online deliberative processes should offer anonymous and asynchronous engagement options that also safeguard against the possibility of other

41 Steiner, “The Foundations of Deliberative Democracy”, 4.

42 Steiner, “The Foundations of Deliberative Democracy”, 60–61.

43 See Almog, “Creating Representations of Justice in the Third Millennium”, 2015-216, 220; Lee et al., “Bringing you into the Zoom”, 92–94.

users publishing the views and contributions of those who choose to engage anonymously.

4.2 Creating a Digital Hub for Child Participation in Online Deliberations

In addition to advocating for integrating technological and poetic measures into the design of video-conference-facilitated deliberative processes tailored for children, the establishment of a designated digital hub for child deliberation online is also required. The recent advancements in deliberative democracy have sparked the creation of various platforms and tools aimed at facilitating online engagement and deliberation.⁴⁴ This proliferation underscores the inherent plurality in the institutional design of deliberative processes, with the understanding that there is no ‘one-size-fit-all design’ and that each process carries its own potential and challenges.⁴⁵

Thus, it is vital to tailor mechanisms to specific political, social, and cultural contexts, the type of decisions being sought, and the characteristics of the participant group involved, such as children.⁴⁶ This recognition has led to a surge in the ‘democracy technologies’ market, with several platforms and tools specifically developed for children’s online deliberation.⁴⁷ In this context, the establishment of a digital hub for children’s deliberation online—within which video-conference-facilitated deliberative processes are integrated—stands as an essential element for realizing the potential of children as active, impactful deliberators in the digital environment. The digital hub should function as a comprehensive ‘one-stop-shop’ where children can access and meaningfully participate in deliberative processes relating to their lives, as well as gain relevant knowledge and deliberative skills.

To achieve this end, the digital hub should address several key aspects. First, it should serve as *a source of information and knowledge for child participants regarding their opportunities for engagement in deliberative decision-making*, whether offline or online. Among other measures, this entails providing access to relevant, child-friendly resources and tools for both individual participants, and

44 Bohman, “The Coming of Age of Deliberative Democracy”, 400; Elstub & McLaverty, “Issues and Cases in Deliberative Democracy”, 5–7; García et al., “Democracy Technologies in Europe”, 13; Steiner, “The Foundations of Deliberative Democracy”, 26, 32–33.

45 Bulling et al., “Deliberation Models featuring Youth Participation”, 413; Elstub & McLaverty, “Issues and Cases in Deliberative Democracy”, 7.

46 Elstub & McLaverty, “Issues and Cases in Deliberative Democracy”, 1–2; Steiner, “The Foundations of Deliberative Democracy”, 8–9.

47 Bulling et al., “Deliberation Models featuring Youth Participation”, 410; García et al., “Democracy Technologies in Europe”, 13, 31.

youth-led organizations. Additionally, the hub should maintain an archive of participatory processes conducted with children, detailing their methodologies, outputs, and impact, as well as include a list of current and upcoming deliberative events for interested child participants, noting their characteristics, scope, and registration options.⁴⁸

Second, the hub should *provide children with opportunities to develop their deliberative skills and literacy*. This entails providing child-friendly training and resources on digital deliberative engagement skills (e.g., civic engagement, video-production, self-expression, narrative and story-telling techniques, strategic messaging). Such skills and knowledge can help sustain the interest of child participants, enhance their participation, and benefit them throughout the deliberative experience. Importantly, developing these skills not only contributes to the poetic framing of deliberative processes or to policy-making aspects, but also influences the personal development of the child-participants themselves.⁴⁹

Third, the hub should *include technological features designed to support children's deliberative poetics and ensure their free expression and meaningful engagement*. This can entail incorporating user and organizational profiles on the hub, as well as public discussion boards, art galleries featuring children's self-generated content, and instant messaging options. Additionally, the hub should ensure accessibility to all children by implementing technological solutions such as translation options and adapted and accessible services and tools. Such measure can foster self-expression and facilitate connections and discourse. The maintenance of the hub should also constantly evolve, in response to new technological advancements, such as AI, and user feedback.⁵⁰

Fourth, the hub should reflect a *child-friendly design that is easy-to-use, interactive, and aligns with children's linguistic and technological engagement styles*. Establishing this deliberative poetics entails incorporating imagery or texts that reflect children's capacity, and right, to participate and impact matters relating to their lives. Child-participants should be actively encouraged, through the hub, to contribute to these messages using a variety of contents, including self-created content, such as emojis, pictograms, memes, flags, and more,⁵¹ thereby contributing to the creativity, authenticity and poetic richness of the deliberative experience.

48 Bulling et al., "Deliberation Models featuring Youth Participation", 413; Raynes-Goldie & Walker, "Our Space: Online Civic Engagement Tools for Youth", 162–164.

49 See Zlotnik Raz & Almog, "Children's Rights and Potential in E-Consultations" (*Forthcoming*).

50 See García et al., "Democracy Technologies in Europe", 32; Lee et al., "Bringing you into the Zoom", 92–94.

51 See Cho et al., "Digital Civic Engagement by Young People", 4; Giesen, "From Consumer to Creator: Experiencing Digital Democracy in Schools"; Raynes-Goldie & Walker, "Our Space: Online Civic Engagement Tools for Youth", 176–177.

Moreover, the design should be child-sensitive and prioritize protection and privacy concerns to ensure a safe space for democratic discourse. Among other measures, this requires incorporating reporting mechanisms for harmful or violent content, preventing child-targeted advertisement or marketing, and implementing measures to restrict data collection.⁵²

Fifth, *the operation and design of the hub should be with a focus on achieving impact on policy and decision-making*. To achieve this goal, it is crucial to ensure that the voices of child participants, along with their deliberative outcomes, reach the appropriate audience. Similar to adult deliberators, children are concerned not only with the scale of their outreach, but also with its quality. Specifically, connecting with an interested, responsive, and politically relevant audience that is directly involved in the particular decision-making process.⁵³ This requires constructing the hub in a manner that is policy and impact oriented. This includes, among other measures, ensuring adequate resources and fostering multi-sectoral collaboration with government, civil society, and business and tech developers in the hub, in order to drive meaningful, long-term changes in democratic decision-making processes.⁵⁴

Finally, the sixth aspect involves *implementing evaluation and monitoring tools to assess the effectiveness of the hub*. Currently, there is a lack of frameworks and standardized metrics to assess deliberative platforms and tools. Therefore, it is necessary to develop quantitative and qualitative metrics to assist in defining and measuring deliberative ‘success’ in both the short and long-term. These metrics should address various factors, including the outcomes and impact of online deliberative processes, the perceptions of both child participants and adult stakeholders involved, and the influence on children’s civic engagement, both online and offline.⁵⁵

52 Bulling et al., “Deliberation Models featuring Youth Participation”, 413; Giesen, “From Consumer to Creator: Experiencing Digital Democracy in Schools”; Kathryn C. Montgomery, “Youth and Digital Democracy: Intersections of Practice, Policy, and the Marketplace”, in *Civic Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth*, ed. W. Lance Bennett (MIT Press, 2008), 33–34.

53 Giesen, “From Consumer to Creator: Experiencing Digital Democracy in Schools”; Laura Lundy, “Voice’ Is Not Enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child”, *British Educational Research Journal* 33(6) (2007): 927–942; Peter Levine, “A Public Voice for Youth: The Audience Problem in Digital Media and Civic Education”, in *Civic Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth*, ed. W. Lance Bennett (MIT Press, 2008), 129; Steiner, “The Foundations of Deliberative Democracy”, 171–174.

54 Bulling et al., “Deliberation Models featuring Youth Participation”, 413.

55 See Bulling et al., “Deliberation Models featuring Youth Participation”, 413; Raynes-Goldie & Walker, “Our Space: Online Civic Engagement Tools for Youth”, 176–177.

5 Conclusions

This article delved into the interplay between poetics and deliberation. Specifically, it recognizes the transformative impact of the digital environment on democratic deliberations, and places particular focus on the child (online) deliberator. It advocates for the re-imagining of online deliberative processes and platforms, in ways that align with the deliberative poetics, the unique engagement styles of children, and new digital technologies. Drawing lessons from the COVID-19 period, the article offers recommendations for designing effective and child-centered video-conference-facilitated deliberations and proposes the establishment of a designated digital hub for children's participation. These ideas serve as a starting point for enhancing children's engagement in online democratic deliberations, aiming to maximize their potential in terms of poetic, technological, and policy outcomes.

In conclusion, this article wishes to highlight several critical issues that merit the attention and concerted action of policy-makers, scholars, practitioners, and technological innovators navigating the frontiers of poetics, children's rights, the digital environment, and the design of democratic deliberative processes.

The topic of deliberative poetics demands a more comprehensive examination and study, encompassing both academic research and practical application. This becomes especially important in the context of online deliberative processes. As described, the digital frontier holds unique relevance for children, who engage online for diverse purposes, including for participation in public and policy-related decision-making. This article provides an initial exploration into deliberative poetics, emphasizing children's perspectives and the adaptations required for designing online deliberative processes tailored to them. Yet, further development is necessary, addressing policy, procedural, educational and practical aspects, and keeping pace with emerging developments in digital technologies, democratic innovation, and children's rights and participation. These ongoing efforts are essential to ensure the continuous relevance, fit and effectiveness of online deliberative processes for children.

Additionally, while the article has a focus on video-conference-facilitated deliberative processes, it recognizes that poetics encompasses not only the visual but also textual and linguistic tools. The distinctive vocabulary, linguistic preferences, and stylistic expressions of children in deliberations warrant special attention. This involves exploring the use of pictograms, emojis, gifs, memes, and other metadata like hashtags. It also requires delving into the unique linguistic expressions employed by children in their discourse. Understanding if and how these elements are received, interpreted, and effectively 'translated' by adult policy-makers - who often operate within the predominantly formal-oriented language and jargon of

policy-making - is crucial for ensuring that the original messages of children are conveyed accurately and wholly, while avoiding potential poetic failures.

Furthermore, developing a designated digital hub for children's participation and deliberation is especially important due to the inadequacy of current online platforms popular with children for democratic deliberation. Particularly, social media platforms, like Instagram, TikTok and YouTube are ill-suited for meaningful online deliberations as they are primarily geared towards visual entertainment and lack essential technological and poetic features for collective dialogue, deliberation, and decision-making. While social media platforms have the potential to encourage children's expression and participation on political and social issues, they also present distinct challenges for their democratic engagement. These challenges include targeted advertisement and marketing, data collection, and exposure to violent or deceptive content. Moreover, social media content may be manipulated and sensationalized to boost its outreach and engagement, thereby leading to polarization, and undermining democratic discourse and values.⁵⁶ Therefore, establishing a dedicated hub, that can provide similar tools and features of social media but in the context of deliberation, is particularly timely and necessary.⁵⁷

Addressing these issues can better support the foundations, aims, and rights-based perspective of democratic deliberation, particularly online deliberative processes involving children.

Bionote

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⁵⁶ See Joelle Jordan, "Dangerous by Design: How Social Media Companies are Hurting our Kids, National Security, and Democracy—and What We Can Do About It" (Issue One, 2023). 20–29, 36–37, 54–67.

⁵⁷ See Raynes-Goldie & Walker, "Our Space: Online Civic Engagement Tools for Youth", 163–164.