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The potential of Voting Advice Applications in reinforcing democracy's critical infrastructure: more than a tool

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**The potential of Voting Advice Applications in
reinforcing democracy's critical infrastructure:
more than a tool.**

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Abstract

The thesis discusses the importance of political institutions in a democratic country and the challenges of fulfilling the criteria for a sound democratic process. Focused on the notion of enlightened understanding, it emphasizes the need for democratic institutions to support the development of all democratic citizens while acknowledging intellectual differences among citizens. This thesis identifies an erosion of institutions responsible for the task of bringing about enlightened understanding. From here, this thesis delves into the recent emergence of Voting Advice Applications (VAAs) as a tool to assist voters in decision-making and discusses its potential and the potential of incorporating conversational agents within VAAs to enhance citizens' enlightened understanding. Moreover, this thesis argues for the integration of (CA)VAAs as an essential part of the institutional structure of modern democracies, given the ongoing corroding of traditional institutions. The thesis explores the concept of democracy, address potential issues, examine various institutional approaches, analyze technological advancements, and assess the implementation of (CA)VAAs.

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We are born demanding and inconsiderate, disgruntled whiners, rather than born listeners. We must learn to listen, to be free and caring through deliberation that sculpts responsible citizenship from common clay (Barber, 1992).

Introduction

A democratically organized country needs political institutions supporting it. For a country to be actually considered democratic, the democratic process has to fulfill a number of criteria through institutionalization, and it is this task that remains a difficult one. In a monumental book covering democracy, Robert Dahl (1999) identifies five criteria for a sound democratic process: effective participation, voting equality, enlightened understanding, control of the agenda and the inclusion of adults (Dahl, 1999, p. 37). Especially the notion of enlightened understanding has been a point of debate within democratic theory. For democracy to work properly, the electorate should obtain a certain level of competence. Democratic theorists from Tocqueville to Barber (1992) have argued that the health of democracy depends upon the education of its citizens. However, thinkers such as Plato maintain that certain individuals are more intelligent and educated about politics than others, and that they have a higher moral character, and that those people should rule the country (Kooleschijn, 2005). The logic of the last part of the previous remark does not hold for democracy, because I argue, in line with Dahl (1999) that it is founded upon one crucial principle: ‘that all the members are to be treated (...) as if they were equally qualified to participate in the process of making decisions about the policies the association will pursue’ (Dahl, 1999, p. 37). Still, as the Platonic remark rightly states, great intellectual differences remain between citizens. This unequal dispersion of competence under the electorate stresses the need for concrete democratic institutions supporting the development of democratic citizens.

Much civic education in both established and new democracies is provided and obligatory for underage students in formal education systems, with the goal of preparing them for their future roles as democratic citizens (Torney-Purta et al. 2001). From here, a democratic citizen should be interested in current affairs and politics; well-informed about issues, candidates, and parties; frequently engaged in deliberations on public matters with fellow citizens; an active participant in efforts to influence governmental decisions through voting, communicating views to public officials, attending political rallies, and driven in all of these activities by a desire to promote the general good (Dahl, 1992, p. 46). Still, in spite of the existing institutions in place (formal education followed by accessible information through free media and parties) to enhance civic competence, the average citizen's knowledge of

political issues and candidates is far from the ideal (Dahl, 1992; Friedman, 2007; Brennan, 2011).

However, a recent phenomenon entering the democratic, institutional infrastructure has had an impact on the enlightened understanding of the electorate (Kamoen, Krouwel, Holleman, van de Pol, & de Vreese, 2015; Schultze, 2014; Westle, Begemann, & Rütter, 2014). Voting Advice Applications (VAAs) serve as a new way of overcoming the incompetence of citizens by assisting voters in their voting decisions, by operating as an interacting tool that informs and questions at the same time. Its popularity has been overwhelming, with millions of users during elections across and beyond Europe (Marschall, 2014). Considering the popular belief that the two core institutions (political parties and free media) that made representative democracy function properly from the nineteenth century and onwards are now experiencing a crisis and negative transformation (Müller, 2021), it is important to evaluate the place of VAAs in this institutional framework. Furthermore, recently there has been an increased interest in implementing conversational agents within VAAs, which would allow users to deliberate with a VAA, ask for additional information, and thus engage in a more interactive way. These CAVAs bear the potential to enhance democratic citizens' enlightened understanding further than ever before. Until now, (CA)VAAs have been conceptualized as tools, additional and operating in the outer layers of the infrastructure supporting democracy. With the ongoing erosion of conventional institutions aimed at bringing about enlightened understanding in mind, this thesis argues for the suitability and necessity of (CA)VAAs as more than a tool: (CA)VAAs should be treated as part of the crucial infrastructure of modern-day democracies.

In the first chapter, I will discuss the conception of democracy this thesis will follow and analyze possible problems within this conception while making up for these problems. I then investigate, in the second chapter, the multiple possible institutionalizations of democracy and its theoretical and practical feasibility in regard to the democratic ideal. Then, in the third chapter, I will delve into the discussion of both negative and positive technological developments in the current institutional framework supporting democracy, while pointing at an ongoing institutional disintegration. From here, (CA)VAAs are identified as theoretically fitting and thus key for living up more closely to the democratic ideal. The actual and possible practical implementation of (CA)VAAs is further investigated and discussed in the fourth chapter.

Choosing Sides, Taking Aim

1.1 What kind of Democracy?

Every paper which investigates components of democracy has to start with a precise inquiry into what is actually meant by democracy and which interpretation it decides to follow. While democracy, both as an ideal and in actuality, has quite a history, there can be made a distinction between general definitions of democracy. The following passage will situate this paper within this discussion about how to approach democracy and follow suit.

Democracy, in its most plain and cliché version, is a form of government where the people rule. But immediately, the question arises of what it means to rule as a people. As Robert Talisse (2021) shows, popular responses to this question would immediately refer to institutions such as elections which define the democratic practice as the practice of voting. However, if we were to ask why the institution of election is needed for people to rule and ‘one responds that elections are vital because democracy is the rule of the people, we’re returned to where we started’ (Talisse, 2021, p. 23). This creates the need for an inquiry into what purpose such institutions serve and more generally what the underlying principle of rule by the people is. I argue, in line with Dahl (1999), this principle is a moral one.

In the words of Robert Dahl (1999), democracy is conceptualized as a system wherein: ‘members are to be treated (...) as if they were equally qualified to participate in the process of making decisions about the policies the association will pursue’ (Dahl, 1999, p. 37). It is this very principle of intrinsic equality that is crucial for Robert Dahl’s core notion of what democracy entails. Interesting is the ‘as if’ component of the sentence, which signals a rather radical and normative stance on intrinsic equality. Moreover, Dahl even acknowledges how fundamental this moral core of this conception is by stating that true, rational justification of this qualification is impossible. Nevertheless, there are serious reasons to adopt the principle of intrinsic equality. For example, it corresponds with many already existing ethical considerations and cornerstones of various religions, which leads automatically to the fact that radical alternatives propagating inequality are generally not considered attractive by many. Additionally, reasons for adopting the intrinsic equality principle lay in its acceptability and prudent nature, which makes sure that no one is made inferior by default (Dahl, 1999, pp. 67-69).

Dahl (1999) justifies his principle of radical intrinsic equality with rather pragmatic arguments, while this paper argues that there is a case to be made for a more practical explanation. For instance, Jacques Rancière (2004) approaches equality as something merely logical, starting from a negative deduction which argues that every justification of inequality

is illogical, because every foundation of a society is anarchic, lacking founding principles of distinction. This is especially prevalent in the fact that every act affirming a hierarchy presupposes a certain equality, because without that presupposition such an act would be unnecessary, and so ‘politics exists because there is no foundation; no social or divine order regulates human society’ (Göksel, 2021, p. 24). Equality then, for Rancière, is the moral and epistemological assumption of inequality and subjection. With this, democracy is the ‘expression of the logic of equality through its assertion by those who have been told, for one reason or another, that they have no part in the determination of their collective lives’ (May, 2007, p. 25). For Rancière (1999), expression of the logic of equality can only occur sporadically and institutionalization of democracy is therefore impossible. Rancière’s politics are not ‘(...) democratic in the sense of being committed to any particular way of institutionalizing political practice ... it is based on the universal claim to equality’ (Woodford, 2015, p. 821).

Rancière’s universal claim to equality goes beyond the pragmatic stance Dahl holds and is important to consider as part of the answer to the ‘why’ of democracy. The cliché of the favorability of democracy, coming from a serious lack of alternatives, famously coined by Winston Churchill, leaves the door open for undemocratic practices to enter our political system if proven to ‘work’ better. Pragmatically adopting democracy because of its favorable workability is tricky, with democracy being ultimately inefficient, slow, and vulnerable to populism, manipulation, and gridlock. It, therefore, needs a more robust, normative foundation. I argue that this foundation is found in Rancière’s concept of democracy and its core of intrinsic equality.

Rancière’s outlook on a democratic practice is a rather pessimistic one, deeming it to be constantly subjected to hegemonic forces trying to institutionalize the political into something Rancière calls the ‘police’, which necessarily violates the principle of intrinsic equality. While Rancière’s notion of democracy is helpful for elaborating the notion of intrinsic equality, it can therefore not do the same for an investigation of the possible institutionalization of democracy. Democracy is a process of struggle. Here, Dahl (1999) and Rancière differ immensely. While Rancière’s notion of democracy is helpful for elaborating the notion of intrinsic equality, it cannot do the same for an investigation of the possible institutionalization of democracy. This thesis follows the critique of John Dunn (2005) on this pessimistic stance taken by Rancière, who argues that the fact that democracy became a word on its own, must mean that it is something more than the struggle for the principle of intrinsic equality. That ‘more’ is the need to make compromises in regard to social realities, with these compromises

mainly consisting of the need to create institutions and consider social differentiation (Dunn, 2005, p. 130). This thesis follows Dunn's argumentation and goes no further than using Rancière's notion of intrinsic equality. From here, Dahl proves to be more fruitful in assessing the task of institutionalizing democracy as a regime.

For Dahl (1999), the realization of the principle of intrinsic equality is a requirement of democracy, and how much it satisfies this principle determines how democratic a country is. The satisfaction of the principle can be measured through certain process criteria. Dahl identifies five criteria for a democratic process, namely: effective participation, voting equality, enlightened understanding, control of the agenda and inclusion of adults. For Dahl, these criteria are needed if the members are to be considered politically equal. However, it is not only Dahl that accepts these criteria. Among others, philosopher Jürgen Habermas is also 'happy to take them directly on board' (Saward, 2001, p. 364).

Dahl acknowledges the fact that democratic criteria are difficult to fulfill for an actual country. A democratic country needs an institutional infrastructure that entails institutions that meet the ideal criteria proposed earlier. These institutions do not come in a ready-to-go package countries can implement. On the contrary, democratic struggle has historically always been about a lack or total inexistence of one or more democratic institutions, and how these institutions are designed is a further point of discussion. Later on, we will see differences in views between which institutions are needed and which have bigger chances to actually fulfill the criteria needed for a people to be intrinsically equal. First, the criteria demand a more elaborate discussion.

1.2 Dahl's Criteria for a Democratic Process

To start with a critical discussion of the criteria for democracy proposed by Dahl (1999), it is vital to explain the criteria in more detail. First, the criterion of effective participation entails the right of the members of an association to have equal and effective opportunities for making their views about policies known to the rest of the members. Secondly, the criterion of voting equality states that 'every member must have an equal and effective opportunity to vote, and all votes must be counted as equal' (Dahl, 1999, p. 37). Third, the criterion of enlightened understanding states that every member must have equal and effective opportunities for learning and understanding relevant political topics and their consequences. Fourth, the members must have exclusive control of the agenda, by deciding how and what matters are placed on the agenda. All policies are open for change and therefore never fixed. Lastly, all *adults* should have the full rights implied by the previous four criteria.

For the realization of intrinsic equality, the first two criteria seem obvious. By providing equal opportunities for stating personal opinions and equal voting power within the political sphere, members are treated as if equally qualified to participate. However, the criterium of enlightened understanding seems to be an odd one out (Dahl, 1999, p. 39). If we are intrinsically equal in principle, why should its members still pursue the gaining of enlightened understanding? It could be argued that having a right is different from actually exercising that right and in this case, the right to participate does not mean someone is capable of exercising that right per se. Here, Dahl argues that ‘political equality *assumes* that the members are all equally well qualified to participate in decisions provided they have adequate opportunities to learn about the matters before the association by inquiry, discussion, and deliberation’ (Dahl, 1999, p. 39). To make this effective, we should therefore still pursue the gaining of enlightened understanding although we are assumed to be equally qualified a priori.

This does not change the fact that, although we morally decide that everyone should be considered equal, there is a strong possibility they are actually not. For instance, ‘some (*views*) will be more enlightened - more informed factually, based on more knowledge of others’ views, perhaps adjusted in the light of the intensity and character of others’ expressed views, and so on - than others, as a result of participation in, or attentive observation of, focused deliberations on the issue’ (Saward, 2001, p. 366). Based on this situation, serious concerns about the workings and desirability around democracy stem from the fear of the actual incompetent crowd. The following section will discuss the most prominent handlings of this problem in democratic theory.

1.3 Ignorance and its Discontent

Plato is considered one of the earliest critics of democracy but more importantly, the one critic that played into the idea of the ignorant crowd. While the other critics during Plato’s time were especially concerned with the chaotic nature of democratic policymaking, Plato took a different angle and attacked one of the core values of democracy by stating that rational decision-making in a democracy is impossible by definition (Koolschijn, 1990, p. 32). The majority of people do not overcome their childish phase, only wanting to behave as ‘beasts’ focused on the primary needs of life: drinking, eating, and fooling around. The democratic state is, famously put, a ship whose owner, the people, is rowdy, deaf, nearsighted, and ignorant of any navigation. From this analysis comes Plato’s case for guardianship wherein the equal qualification assumption ‘ought to be replaced by the opposing proposition that rulership should be entrusted to a minority of persons who are specially qualified to

govern by reason of their superior knowledge and virtue' (Dahl, 1989, p. 52). Political knowledge is a royal science for Plato and the guardians must not only be completely devoted to the search for truth and, like true philosophers, discern what is best for the community more clearly than all others, but they must also be totally dedicated to achieving that end and thus have no interests of their own that are inconsistent with the good of the polis (Dahl, 1989, p. 53). This creates the need for a class of philosopher kings, which rule the polis with an eye for the common good, which they can formulate and extract from the public with their expertise and wisdom.

From here, there has been a tradition of thinkers concerned with the incompetence and ignorance of the public and its effect on good governance (implicitly) inspired by Plato, with authors like Alexis de Tocqueville, Max Weber, Gustav LeBon, and Joseph Schumpeter as the most well-known proponents of this conservative stance in democracy (Medearis, 2001, p. 4). Although not arguing for anything other than democracy, these authors displayed a general bias toward deeming the 'masses' incapable of taking moral responsibility and forming a sound political judgement. For some this bias results in a case for guardianship, resembling the anti-democratic rhetoric of Plato. Exemplary is the work of Schumpeter, which propagates, as Medearis (2001) shows, an 'elite' theory of democracy based on a conception of human nature wherein individuals, have no more than 'wishes and daydreams and grumbles at best'—and more likely 'dark urges' and 'extra-rational or irrational prejudice and impulse' (Medearis, 2001, p. 116).

Is democratic theory, with its moral fundament of equal qualification, realistic enough for human psychology then? One might ask. Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels (2016) certainly do not think so. Voters are frequently misinformed, despite an increase in available knowledge that apparently has not been useful in enlightening these voters. Moreover, voters have few strong policy preferences. Voters are susceptible to framing effects or have no choice at all on some subjects. Finally, voters are unaware of the viewpoints of parties on a wide range of subjects, so even if they have developed preferences, they are unable to associate those choices with the appropriate party. As a result, Achen and Bartels believe that the theory of democracy which relies on the potential competence of the public is misrepresenting reality and should be abandoned as a societal goal. (Achen & Bartels, 2016, pp. 300-304). However, although Achen and Bartels provide telling evidence that the electorate might not be able to fulfill its role as a democratic citizen and be a 'well-informed, thoughtful, fair-minded people dedicated to the good of all', one should critically assess what this role is and what it means for democracy.

Where does this critique leave us? The evidence of the actual incompetence and ignorance of the general public could be considered worrisome, but only if there is a certain *necessity* of competence. As seen, among Robert Dahl's (1999) criteria of democracy is the criterium of enlightened understanding and this begs the question if and how considering the supposed low level or the total non-existence of competence, full democracy is ever possible to be realized. Although the criterium states that for members to be deemed intrinsically equal, there has to be a provision of equal and effective opportunities to gain enlightenment, there is no certainty on the actual possibility of members getting, in fact, enlightened. From here, it is interesting to look into Dahl's (1992) perception of civic competence in his previously conceptualized notion of democracy: the very notion of democracy this thesis follows.

1.4 Dahl's handling of civic competence

At the very start of Robert Dahl's (1992) article 'The Problem of Civic Competence', Dahl makes a crucial statement: 'If democracy is to work, it would seem to require a certain level of political competence on the part of its citizens' (Dahl, 1992, p. 45). This statement relates to the criteria of enlightened understanding because as already treated in the preceding part of this thesis, serious concerns are raised if one considers the data available about the actual competence of citizens to actually get enlightened from the learning opportunities provided. Here, it is vital to begin with a more accurate discussion on what kind of competence is expected from citizens in a democracy, or if there can be competence expected at all. Having in mind that democratic citizens are in fact the rulers, it seems to be obvious that citizens should be aware of what they want the government to achieve and that they will act accordingly, Dahl states. However, this poses an even more difficult problem concerning the question: 'Whose good do we expect our citizens to seek?' (Dahl, 1992, p. 46). Should it seek the general good (the broad view), or should it merely be moved by self-interest (the narrow view)? Dahl argues that the broad view is a too unobtainable ideal because it requires a sort of competence that is too demanding:

The good citizen is highly concerned about public affairs and political life; well-informed about issues, candidates, and parties; engaged often with fellow citizens in deliberations on public matters; an active participant in efforts to influence governmental decisions by voting, communicating views to public officials, attending political meetings, and the like; and motivated in all these activities by a desire to foster the general welfare (Dahl, 1992, p. 46).

From here I argue, that both the criterium of enlightened understanding and civic competence should be approached as a scale. The good citizen as conceptualized by Dahl (1992) serves as an ideal, but a too demanding one that includes features ‘that are not directly necessary for fulfilling distinctively political tasks, and thus do not fall under the scope of political competence’ (Brinkmann, 2018, p. 166). It is no shame if the actual public falls short of this ideal because of its demanding nature, but it does not mean the ideal should be abandoned. Because this ideal is as demanding as it is, I argue that there’s a certain baseline that should be strived for instead. For example, problems arise immediately around the question of what political unit the notion of ‘general welfare’ should relate to, having in mind that a standard citizen is attached to numerous collective entities, not only one. So, again it begs the question, which public’s good should be considered? This makes the case for a much narrower view of what is expected of a good democratic citizen, which evidently makes a weaker demand. Namely, it requires people to act according to their self-interest, with the public good consisting of ‘the total of all the individual interests, which must then be aggregated or integrated according to a justifiable principle like majority rule’ (Dahl, 1992, p. 46). This view is less demanding if one would assume that it is easier for citizens to understand their own interests rather than the public good. With this, the incentives to act according to self-interest are generally deemed more attractive than the incentive of striving for the general good. Lastly, if citizens are aware of their own interests, they are more likely to have a strong incentive to act accordingly. Based on these assumptions, the problem of competence becomes a problem of knowledge, Dahl argues (Dahl, 1992, p. 47). A big portion of the public simply lacks the knowledge to fulfill political tasks a good citizen is ought to fulfill (voting, persuading others to vote for a candidate, working for a political party, attending political meetings, etc.).

I argue that this narrow view of the good citizen (which I would like to frame as the good-enough citizen) can serve as a baseline that should be aimed at, while not abandoning the ideal of the true ‘good citizen’. The idea of a ‘good-enough’ citizen as a baseline can make democracy more viable as a political regime and refutes the objection of democracy being too idealistic as made by Achen and Bartels (2016). Furthermore, good citizens are not asked to become less knowledgeable for equality to come about because putting competence on a scale makes only for a minimum baseline, not for a maximum.

However, one immediate response to the framing of the problem as one of knowledge can be again an argument in favor of guardianship of experts. After all, they are the ones in possession of the most knowledge and therefore most suited to govern and lead us to the

realization of the public good. Well, that is only half the case. Experts should, of course, be acknowledged for their (scientific) knowledge but as Dahl (1999) argues: ‘it is one thing for government officials to seek the aid of experts; but it is quite another for a political elite to possess the power to decide on the laws and policies you will be compelled to obey’ (Dahl, 1999, p. 71). Here, it becomes clear that the argument of guardianship is not merely a question about who the most competent is, rather it is about who possesses the power to decide: who should have political power? Jerome Frank (1947) answers this question by stating that democratic countries have ‘rejected hereditary father-rulers’ (Frank, 1947, p. 266). Although countries ruled by king-philosophers or systems of elitist democracies are well and truly capable of pursuing ‘fairly consistent and intelligent policies’, (...) the policies of mature democracy will be sounder and will have the added *moral* value that they represent shared decisions’ (Frank, 1947, p. 266). From here, this paper will not further mention guardianship as a viable option for the problem of competence.

Now, there is still the problem of the actual public not being competent or, not knowledgeable enough: ‘The available evidence seems to indicate that the average citizen falls far short of the standards of the good citizen (...)’ (Dahl, 1992, p. 47). Additionally, Achen and Bartels (2016) observe a similar conclusion made over the years by various democratic theorists. For instance, Joseph Schumpeter even claimed that ‘the typical citizen drops down to a lower level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field’ (Achen & Bartels, 2016, p. 10). Furthermore, Walter Lippmann (1992) argues that the political environment citizens have to act within is too complex; humans simply lack the mental equipment to manage and act in the overwhelming political sphere. These two and numerous others named by Achen and Bartels deem human nature to be unreconcilable with the criterion of enlightened understanding and later research put even more body to their claim, producing a rather bleak portrait of habitual, socially determined political behavior (Achen & Bartels, 2016, p. 11).

Following Achen and Bartels (2016), the criterion of enlightened understanding seems to be too utopian if we were to be realistic. Note that the second part of the sentence. I argue that democracy is never meant to be a realistic political system per se. It puts great power in the hands of people through the notion of intrinsic equality, not because people are the ones trustworthy of that power, and not because all people are more capable than a few. Rather, it is a highly idealistic form of government primarily based on a *moral* foundation. Dahl (1992) also points towards the daunting truth that the practices and institutions of modern democratic countries seem to be failing to produce even the "good-enough" citizens’ (...), let alone good

citizens (Dahl, 1992, p. 48). It is therefore vital to become realistic in our assessment of the actual state of democracy, which might not be living up to an important criterium of the ideal of democracy; be it the possibility of gaining enlightened understanding. This actuality paved the way for deliberative democrats to emerge within the field of democratic theory. The following section will briefly discuss its main focus points.

1.5 The deliberative Stance

The core value of deliberative democrats is the belief that democracy functions best when citizens engage in thoughtful, respectful, and informed discussion and debate about important issues. According to deliberative thinkers, the degree and character of the deliberation that results in collective choices determine the validity of democratic institutions. Legitimacy is fostered by the extent to which citizens talk, rather than vote. Some argue for implementing deliberation into already existing institutions (Guttman & Thompson, 1996), while others opt for the implementation of separate deliberative institutions (Fishkin & Lushkin, 2005). To compare this deliberative thinking to Robert Dahl's (1999) five baseline criteria, it is first valuable to state them again: effective participation; voting equality; enlightened understanding; control of the agenda; and inclusion of adults (Dahl, 1998, pp. 37-38).

Deliberative theorists can be counted as posing the same critique as some earlier discussed critics. For example, Fishkin (1999) suggests that there is a fundamental contradiction among Dahl's (1999) five criteria by stating that 'voting equality, inclusion of all adults, and control of the agenda seem to produce a significant cost in enlightened understanding and effective participation, at least with respect to those involved in the relevant decisions' (Fishkin, 1999, p. 699). So, there is a certain fear for the incompetent crowd, which is, as seen, not out of place or novel. For deliberative democrats, if we were to provide all adults voting equality and control of the agenda, then there should be deliberation preceding the decision-making process to provide a certain degree of enlightened understanding and effective participation (with deliberative democrats deeming participation ineffective if it is a product of ignorance or incompetence). This could potentially bridge the gap between the inequality of the public and the normative foundation of intrinsic equality. However, as I will argue later in this thesis, deliberative democrats aim for the realization of the 'good citizenry' as proposed by Dahl (1992), while I argue that the baseline of the good-enough citizen is a more realistic goal through institutional reform. Deliberative democrats argue for demanding institutions, which require time, financial funding, an equal dispersion of skilled mediators and other resources.

From here, it is crucial to look into the institutional framework supporting democracy to fulfill its criteria and begin a critical investigation in its past and present working. This thesis argues against the narrative of the incompatible nature of humankind in relation to democracy but is not blind to significant findings in the field of psychology and social science that question people's rational/political capabilities (Kahneman, 2011; Kelly, 2012). This thesis supports a more optimistic approach to human nature, primarily based on the fact that it operates from a point of view that holds that civic competence is nowhere near its potential. It is contradictory to argue that institutions facilitating competence are working optimally, considering the lack of competence among the public. If there is certainty that institutions reached their full potential, then humankind could not be the best fit for democracy, but without this certainty and even evidence of the opposite being the case, as I will show in the third chapter, the argument about the incompatibility of human nature with democracy cannot be made yet. From here, this paper will look into Dahl's proposed institutional infrastructure. We will see that the institutions conceptualized to improve the important criterium of enlightened understanding, such as 'access to alternative sources of information', do not say anything about the quality of information, the accessibility to information or about how comprehensible it is. This makes the case for a critical inquiry into what the actual state of the institutional infrastructure is at the moment and which institutions can be more effective in fulfilling the criteria of enlightened understanding. Furthermore, deliberative democrats seem to offer fruitful ideas and proposals for the ideal of intrinsic equality to become reality, although it remains a field haunted by proponents arguing it to be inefficient, time-wasting and elitist (Brennan, 2014). Additionally, the ideal citizen as conceptualized by deliberative democrats resembles Dahl's (1992) 'good citizen', which is a very demanding ideal. The good-enough citizen can serve as an ideal threshold while deliberative democracy can inspire the good-enough to be the ideal or 'good citizen'. This thesis will further investigate the deliberative approach to the problem of civic competence and its proposed institutions.

The institutional approach to the problem of civic competence

“Every single human being should be the fulfilment of a prophecy: for every human being should be the realisation of some ideal, either in the mind of God or in the mind of man.”

— *Oscar Wilde*

2.1 Realizing democracy

As seen in the previous chapter, this thesis follows a form of democracy which is among others conceptualized by Dahl (1999) and Rancière (1999). This conceptualization is rooted in the singular notion of radical intrinsic equality, which can be, according to Dahl, realized if certain criteria are fulfilled. While Rancière’s notion of democracy was helpful for elaborating the notion of intrinsic equality, it, as argued, cannot do the same for an investigation of the possible institutionalization of democracy. So, from here, this thesis focusses on Dahl’s criteria again. Among these, there is the criterium of enlightened understanding which is implicitly interlinked with the notion of civic competence. A certain level of competence is needed to have the effective opportunity to become equally enlightened in one’s understanding of politics. To accomplish this, a critical infrastructure of adequate institutions is essential for democracies. Müller (2021) poses the term ‘critical infrastructure’, which is a term this thesis will adopt when discussing the framework wherein democratic criteria are to be satisfied. Müller makes the positive claim that it is not the psychology of people that bars them from becoming ‘enlightened’, it is the infrastructure supposed to support democratic ideals. Further, Müller identifies media and parties as institutions that are intermediaries and the sole factors in the critical infrastructure. These institutions actively ‘facilitate(s) the reaching of people and being reached by them’ (Müller, 2021, p. 91). Furthermore, such institutions stage the battle of democratic politics, provide pluralism and structure political time (Müller, 2021, p. 109). This chapter first investigates Dahl’s preferred institutional infrastructure with a focus on the institutions meant to address the criterium of enlightened understanding and critically evaluate its potential and its expected operation. From here, other institutional infrastructures are evaluated both theoretically and practically, mainly focused on the already discussed deliberative institutions.

2.2 Dahl’s institutional infrastructure

Because this thesis reasons from Dahl’s (1999) and Rancière’s (1999) notion of democracy and especially which criteria need to be fulfilled for something to be considered democratic, it is interesting to first take a look at Dahl’s proposed institutional infrastructure designated to

accommodate the democratic criteria. As said, Dahl acknowledges the fact that democratic criteria are difficult to fulfill for an actual country. A democratic country needs an institutional infrastructure that entails institutions that meet the ideal criteria proposed earlier. The proposed minimal institutional requirements for a *large-scale* democratic country are as follows (Dahl, 1999, pp. 85-86):

1. Elected officials: *Control over government decisions about policy is constitutionally vested in officials elected by citizens. Thus modern, large-scale democratic governments are representative.*
2. Free, fair, and frequent elections: *Elected officials are chosen in frequent and fairly conducted elections in which coercion is comparatively uncommon.*
3. Freedom of expression: *Citizens have a right to express themselves without danger of severe punishment on political matters broadly defined, including criticism of officials, the government, the regime, the socioeconomic order, and the prevailing ideology*
4. Alternative sources of information: *Citizens have a right to seek out alternative and independent sources of information from other citizens, experts, newspapers, magazines, books, telecommunications, and the like. Moreover, alternative sources of information actually exist that are not under the control of the government or any other single political group attempting to influence public political beliefs and attitudes, and these alternative sources are effectively protected by law.*
5. Associational autonomy: *To achieve their various rights, including those required for the effective operation of democratic political institutions, citizens also have a right to form relatively independent associations or organizations, including independent political parties and interest groups.*
6. Inclusive citizenship: *No adult permanently residing in the country and subject to its laws can be denied the rights that are available to others and are necessary to the five political institutions just listed. These include the rights to vote in the election of officials in free and fair elections; to run for elective office; to free expression; to form and participate in independent political organizations; to have access to independent sources of information; and rights to other liberties and opportunities that may be necessary to the effective operation of the political institutions of large-scale democracy.*

These institutions do not come in ready-to-go package countries can implement. On the contrary, as mentioned earlier, democratic struggle has historically always been about a lack or total inexistence of one or more of these institutions. Furthermore, these institutions each correspond to the ideal criteria discussed earlier, which make these institutions somewhat ideal as well. From here, it is interesting to assess Dahl argumentation about which institutions are meant to address the criterium of enlightened understanding and which institutions make it achievable. Afterwards, I will point towards its idealistic nature and apparent shortcomings.

First, freedom of expression is an institution which is aimed at enhancing the possibility of gaining enlightened understanding. Freedom of expression paves the way for the emergence of adequate opportunities to come across different opinions and more importantly, form a genuine personal opinion without external interference. It provides the chance to freely engage in ‘discussion, deliberation and question experts, political candidates, or personal judgements made by others’ (Dahl, 1999, p. 97). Secondly, alternative sources of information can also contribute to the attainment of an adequate understanding of the various political stances and views present in society, because ‘how can citizens acquire the information they need in order to understand the issues if the government controls all the important sources of information?’ (Dahl, 1999, p. 97). Third and lastly, the institution of associational autonomy grants persons the right to group and associate with one another. This in turn provides citizens with opportunities for ‘discussion, deliberation, and the acquisition of political skills’ (Dahl, 1999, p. 98). Henceforward, I will assess this proposed institutional infrastructure, first theoretically on its purposefulness and further compare it with its perceived workings.

2.3 Assessing Dahl’s democratic Proposal

To begin with a discussion of Dahl’s (1999) proposed critical infrastructure, there is one overarching argument to be made. Namely, all three institutions proposed to address the criterium of enlightened understanding are too vaguely conceptualized. From this, Dahl seems to presuppose active citizens, instead of passive citizens, who make use of their freedom and voluntarily delve into available sources of information. For example, the institution of ‘access to alternative sources of information’ leaves a lot to be desired and is the weakest conceptualized institution of the three. Citizens have a *right* to seek out alternative information and sources of alternative information should actually exist. However, the prospect of people actually seeking out alternative information depends on more than being formally able to access these alternative sources. Additionally, it does not provide any

normative quality standard for information sources to live up to. Quite unexpectedly, Dahl seemed to be aware of these problems in his 1992 article *The Problem of Civic Competence*. To follow Dahl's own argumentation, the mere availability of information is not enough because there is an increased complexity of information coming from the actual volume of information and the cognitive complexity of public issues, which matters as well. So, 'more information does not necessarily mean greater competence or heightened understanding' (Dahl, 1992, p. 51). How severe this issue is will be explained further in the next chapter. Nevertheless, it remains the most problematic conceptualized institution explicitly meant to bring about enlightened understanding.

Something similar goes for the institution of freedom of expression, which provides the chance to freely engage in discussion. However, as democracies grow bigger, 'the percentage of fellow citizens with whom one can directly engage in discussion and deliberation necessarily shrinks' (Dahl, 1992, p. 53). Furthermore, due to the increasingly complex nature of issues, expertise is needed in discussion to become fruitful and productive. Lastly, associational autonomy again does not sufficiently contribute to fulfill the criterium of enlightened understanding because it mainly depends on the existence of fora and places where one can associate with one another, and wherein discussion is a highly valued given. Again, it relates to the problem that Dahl's institutional infrastructure naively presumes that the freedom to associate necessarily produces discussion, deliberation, and the acquisition of political skills.

Dahl forgets to consider which real-life institutions follow from his ideal criteria in his main proposal of an institutional infrastructure and if they can live up to the criterium, although swiftly identifying them as political parties and the media (in line with Müller) in another article (Dahl, 1992, p. 48). Therefore, realizing the strong democratic ideals in practice becomes a hit-or-miss game, with a lot of potential democratic discontent as a result. Dahl's institutional framework seems to be intentionally silent on the real, practical completion and keeps it 'laidback', which makes it rather weak in comparison with its strong normative foundation.

Here, I argue that the democratic criteria deserve a more elaborate and robust institutional infrastructure than those proposed by Dahl. The difficulty to argue for democracy's intrinsic equality presupposition beyond morality or ethics puts the task on idealists to persuade opponents in a way that is less idealistic and not based on already present optimal conditions. As argued before, critics like Plato and Schumpeter worry about the gruesome effects a crowd can have on the prosperity and well-being of an association by

voting ignorant and as Achen & Bartels (2016) show, this it is not unjustified criticism per se. To defend democracy from critics like these, it needs more than pragmatism and morality as argued by Dahl. To hold up the ideal of democracy, I argue that its proposed institutions should be practically effective because of democracy's highly idealistic nature. Although Dahl presents his infrastructure as effective, I showed how these institutions lack the certainty of fulfilling the role they should fulfill. Furthermore, besides quantity, there is a need for a qualitative analysis of institutions conventionally supporting democracy.

While the institutions of associational autonomy and freedom of speech are vital for competence to arise as well, I argue, most importantly, that the institution of 'Alternative sources of information' as proposed by Dahl (1999) should be altered. As seen in Chapter 1, misinformation and incompetence were among the most prominent objections to democratic rule, and with the conception of the 'good-enough' citizen, this thesis has argued that the problem of competence is one of knowledge. Therefore, citizens should have an *effective* right to seek out alternative and independent sources of information. In line with Müller, I argue that alternative sources of information should not only autonomously exist but also be **accessible**, **accurate**, and **assessable** (Table 1). Accessibility can further be conceptualized as consisting of timeliness (accessible at all times when needed) while accuracy means that information is constrained by facts and thus is free from misinformation or grave distortion. Information being assessable refers to the need for information to be presented in a clear and understandable way. Although the other components of Dahl's institutional infrastructure might be lacking in their own respect, this thesis focusses on information provision the most, because it has the strongest and most explicit link to the criterium of enlightened understanding, which is the main center of attention for this thesis.

Both Dahl (1992) and Jan-Werner Müller (2021) identify media and parties as the sole, practical institutions of information provision. These institutions actively 'facilitate(s) the reaching of people and being reached by them' (Müller, 2021, p. 91). Here, it actually seems that both authors have somewhat of a resembling conception of what a critical infrastructure is made up off. However, Müller identifies a downfall of exactly these institutions. Additionally, Dahl (1992) himself argues that 'practices and institutions of modern democratic countries seem to be failing to produce even the "good-enough" citizens' (Dahl, 1992, p. 48), let alone the ideal, good citizens. I argue that this is exactly because the ideal institutional infrastructure of democracy is too thinly defined in Dahl's case, which leaves open the door open for situations wherein democratic institutions seem to be sufficiently in place to fulfill the criteria of democracy while they are not.

Additionally, I argue that adjusting the institution of ‘alternative sources of information’ by making it effective and qualitatively assessable rather than quantitatively makes for a more serious institutionalization of democracy’s heavy normative burden. Furthermore, while parties and media are conventionally seen as the sole institutions responsible to satisfy the criterium of enlightened understanding, I argue that there are serious concerns about whether these institutions can ever sufficiently fulfill that role, with private interests, misinformation, individualism, and the ever-growing complexity of public issues stripping them of firepower (Müller, 2021). Dahl seems to acknowledge this discrepancy between ideal and actuality in his 1992 article (*The Problem of Civic Competence*) by arguing for an investigation into, among others, deliberative democracy, but, as said, ignores this in his proposed institutional infrastructure (Dahl, 1999). The following section will delve into Dahl’s deliberative self-critique and looks into deliberative theorists’ proposed institutional infrastructures and other alternative proposals, with a focus on the criterium of enlightened understanding.

Table 1. Dahl’s institution of ‘Alternative sources of information in comparison with the altered one

Alternative sources of information (Dahl)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Right to seek out alternative and independent information • Alternative sources of information actually exist that are not under the control of the government or any other single political group • Alternative sources are effectively protected by law
Alternative sources of information (Altered)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Right to seek out alternative and independent information • Alternative sources of information actually exist that are not under the control of the government or any other single political group • Alternative sources are effectively protected by law • Information is accessible at all times when needed • Information is presented in a clear and understandable way • Source of information is free from grave distortion

2.4 The deliberative democratic proposal

Deliberative theorists make a vital point regarding Dahl's (and Rancière's) notion of radical democracy, which holds that the criterium of enlightened understanding is something that should be considered with more urgency, thus ascribing an ordinal scale to the institutional framework as posed by Dahl. As shown in the first chapter, James Fishkin (1999) argues that the criteria of voting equality, inclusion of adults, and control of the agenda 'seem to produce a significant cost in enlightened understanding and effective participation' (Fishkin, 1999, p. 699). Because of this, deliberative democrats like Fishkin argue that the criterium of enlightened understanding should be satisfied through deliberative practices *before* members of a democratic association can control the agenda and vote. Although not mandatory, deliberative democrats stress that formal (intrinsic) equality is a noble pursuit but 'prior debate (...) is critical to the achievement of levels of intersubjective knowledge and awareness of the interests and views of others that will underpin the reasons for defending such equal and formal validity on all fronts' (Saward, 2001, p. 368). Therefore, institutions that grant a *right* to get enlightened are not enough for deliberative democrats. Deliberation should be implemented in the democratic process, with deliberation deemed *necessary* for the criteria of enlightened understanding to be fulfilled.

Dahl (1992) seems to partly acknowledge this, by stating that the institutions in place should be supplemented with new institutions, all the while he never adopted any deliberative institution in his conceptualized infrastructure. As said, Dahl argues, resembling Müller (2021), that the conventional institutions in place are media and 'political competition among office seekers organized into political parties' (Dahl, 1992, p. 48). The possible supplementary institutions posed by Dahl are localism, citizens assemblies and the implementation of 'modern telecommunications technologies'. I argue that while deliberative practices bear the potential of producing the good-enough citizen, it aims at bringing about the good citizen. This is, I argue, because deliberation can contribute to bringing about personal preferences through dialogue (thus partly producing the good-enough citizen) and additionally seek justification for these preferences. A deliberative democratic institutional approach alters the institutional framework proposed by Dahl as well. Namely, it makes the institution of freedom of expression effective by actively initiating moments where opinions and convictions can be expressed, demanding a certain assertive stance of democratic citizens by actively involve them in deliberation, which can potentially bridge the gap between ideal and actuality by realizing a certain baseline equality of competence. While not everybody would become good citizens right away, chances are that deliberation causes a lot of citizens to

become aware of their own preferences. Additionally, to fulfill some of Dahl's criteria, it seems that a democratic system needs more deliberative institutions altogether for it to become effective. For instance, if members should be granted a direct say on policies, there should be some form of a face-to-face or virtual assembly to voice their opinion. Furthermore, if agenda setting should be in the hands of the public, they should be some kind of institution that provides citizens' formal initiative power. So, the implementation of deliberative democracy's institutions bears a real potential for satisfying the necessary criteria of democracy, with an enlightened understanding of them.

In a fast-paced world, the practice of deliberative democracy to raise competence has been vulnerable to one specific objection made extensively: its time-consuming aspect. Because of this, deliberative proposals are still merely operated as experiments, with some fiercely arguing that these do not have any positive effects or results (Brennan, 2017). As Dahl (1992) rightly points out however, electronic technology has seen a trend that holds a great promise as well, which bypasses this biggest complaint towards deliberative democracy. Technological development has brought great changes to the accessibility of information and places of dialogue and made it able to make knowledge and skills of scholars and specialists readily accessible to citizens. This places a less demanding task on citizens, with it being remote and thus lowering the threshold to participate, especially in comparison with face-to-face deliberative initiatives which could take several days (Guerrero, 2014). Especially voting advice applications has been a prominently used 'tool' in satisfying the criterium of enlightened understanding by stimulating citizens to internally deliberate about their own convictions and preferences, all in one freely accessible place. By presenting users with political information, VAAs can prompt individuals to consider and deliberate upon the issues and stances that are important to them. A conventional VAA simply asks a participant to state their preference, which prompts them to actually deliberate about their preferences. More recently, conversational agents are being implemented within these applications to roll out its deliberative potential, even further increasing its capability of increasing competence and producing more 'good-enough citizens' and even something that resembles the notion of a 'good citizen'.

Concluding, I argue that a fruitful practical institutional reform can come from 'modern telecommunications technology', especially with the recent emergence of voting advice applications (from now on called VAAs). With the implementation of conversational agents, this 'tool' can become a major asset in satisfying democracy's criterium of enlightened understanding by implementing internal and interconnected deliberation into the democratic

infrastructure. In this chapter, I have critically assessed Dahl's (1999) institutional infrastructure, focusing on its ability to satisfy the criterium of enlightened understanding. After arguing that especially the institution of 'alternative sources of information' deserves alteration, I have argued that VAA's could potentially correspond to this altered institution 'alternative sources of information', while deliberative aspects can further strengthen its effectiveness. With the time-consuming aspect of deliberative democracy being its major point of criticism, technological innovations bear a great potential of overcoming this weakness. The following chapter will investigate recent technological innovation within the critical institutional infrastructure. From here, its focus will be on the concept of VAAs, their potential, and working in practice. Further, it will investigate the implementation of conversational agents within VAAs (from now on called CAVAAs) and its potential place in the critical infrastructure supporting democracy.

Democracy: ‘Making it easier TM’

“Propaganda is to a democracy what the bludgeon is to a totalitarian state.”

— *Noam Chomsky*

3.1 From modern telecommunication to the internet

The ways we see reality, interact with ourselves and others, go about our everyday lives, and, of course, behave politically are all being profoundly redefined and reinvented: The ‘virtual’ is overtaking the ‘real’ (Mills, 2002, p. 69). One crucial aspect of this process is the altered way information is managed and distributed in a democratic society. Robert Dahl (1992) was early to point out that a critical requirement is to improve access to theoretically relevant knowledge through the means of the internet (which he then called telecommunication technology). Political parties, politicians, and the media could not be relied on to make essential information freely accessible at acceptable levels of cognitive complexity. So, with the coming of new inventions such as smartphones and more accessible computer systems, Dahl’s (1999) institution of ‘alternate sources of information’ would benefit enormously from the digital revolution and indeed, nowadays citizens can have access to academics’ and specialists’ information through ‘modern telecommunications’ (Dahl, 1992, p. 56). This dream of accessibility of information seems to have become reality, with experts, politicians, and commentators constantly active on social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. While some claim that this free and renewed dispersion of information is vital for actual democracy to come about with bearing an enormous potential for the increase of civic competence in a democratic society, a lot of concern is raised about the constant bombardment and cluttering of information. This intense amount of information that is being sent into the world every minute results in a primary incentive for information providers to get only louder and ‘much of the political information, therefore, will inevitably become distorted, shrill, and simplistic’ (Noam, 2005, p. 58). The first section of this chapter will delve into this change in democratic information provision and highlights its problems. After crystalizing the problem of the dispersion of information through new media, this thesis will point towards VAAs as a potential instrument to tackle the problem of ‘information overload’ and institutional ineffectiveness in general. VAAs bear great potential to integrate a system of internal deliberation into the democratic infrastructure and could therefore raise enlightened understanding significantly among its populace. Through VAAs, the good-enough citizen become a much more realistic and obtainable ideal to pursue. The implementation of conversational agents within these applications could make them even more effective in overcoming ‘information overload’ and raising competence among the public with them being

more interactive by imitating deliberation. Consequently, deliberative VAAs bear the potential of raising the presence of ‘good citizens’ in a democracy. These attributions make the case for an investigation if and how these (now-called) tools can become more than just tools: part of the critical infrastructure facilitating democracy.

3.2 Infobesity and the distortion of the ‘truth’

There has always been a certain precarious feature to information provision in a democratic society, with ‘deception, propaganda, and indoctrination’ always having played a ‘role in the rough and tumble of actual political life’ (Pitkin, 2004, p. 341). Exemplary is the fact that Walter Lippmann argued that ‘the crisis of western democracy is a crisis of journalism’. Although sounding relevant and applicable to much democratic discontent today, this quote dates back to the 1920s, demonstrating how inseparable this issue seems to be from democracy. The institutions of political parties and media have never been able to fully resonate with the altered ‘alternative information institution’ and besides autonomously existing they leave a lot to be wished for in terms of accessibility, accuracy, and ‘assessability’. Although constantly aiming to fulfill this role, the rise of telecommunication technology altered the content of the very crisis of journalism and initiated even more crises altogether. First of all, traditional gatekeepers of information such as newspapers, radio, and political parties, which would normally shape, disperse, and shape information, have been joined by individuals and other entities which operate their own lines of information through social media platforms. This can be argued to be something positive, with more people now able to publish different types of content, to express their opinions, and to experience in practice their freedom of speech (Enjolras & Steen-Johnson, 2022, p. 113).

However, the way social media platforms work makes for a political reality wherein fewer people than ever before control what we see and what opportunities we are offered: it makes for ‘a public sphere sorted and manipulated by algorithms, fragmented by design, and hostile to dialogue’ (Pariser, 2011, p. 164). Although more information is available and being sent (thus corresponding to Dahl’s institution of alternative sources of information), chances are slim one actually encounters a diverse selection of this, with selectiveness being inevitable because of the quantity of information shared around the clock. These ‘wild cacophonies’ (Habermas & Derrida, 2003, p. 239) stand in great contrast with what public discourse, in the words of Habermas, actually needs. The public sphere should be a forum for democratic deliberation, where individuals can express their opinions, engage in critical debate, and come to a shared understanding of the issues at hand. Lacking features of *accessibility*, inclusivity,

rationality and publicity, new internet platforms take ‘on a new, disturbing dimension in our age of electronic media and satellite surveillance, of ‘hype’, ‘spin’, and the ‘infomercial’, of ‘image’, ‘credibility’, and ‘virtual reality’ (Pitkin, 2004, p. 341). As Pitkin (2004) argues, traditional information sources such as media and parties have always been prone to misinformation and bias, but none of these have had such an immense capability of depriving citizens of the chance to counter opposing opinions ‘with different information, and (...) contrasting views’ by operating through micro-targeted ‘dark posts’ (Müller, 2021, p. 126). These dark posts are specifically targeted ads or information pieces which are only visible to the people targeted, which contributes to polarization and the emergence of echo chambers.

Another detrimental development in the way in which people are able to get enlightened about relevant topics and policies is the desert of local news. Müller (2021) argues that local journalism struggles massively with adapting to the way traditional media now relies on advertising, with the disappearance of one in five local newspapers in the United States since 2004 for example, leaving open a gap for national and even international news to fill. This reinforces grave polarization on broad issues between local residents while it is exactly local news that can make neighbors ‘agree on diagnosing concrete problems and discuss practical solutions – all without getting into extended culture wars’ (Müller, 2021, p. 125). Here, a link can be made to another process which becomes apparent when one turns to Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels (2016) again via a quotation:

Human beings are busy with their lives. Most have school or a job-consuming many hours of the day. They also have meals to prepare, homes to clean, and bills to pay. They may have children to raise or elderly parents to care for. They may also be coping with unemployment, business reverses, illness, addictions, divorce, or other personal and family troubles. For most, leisure time is at a premium. Sorting out which presidential candidate has the right foreign policy toward Asia is not a high priority for them (Achen & Bartels, 2016, p. 9).

It then seems that people are simply too preoccupied with their day-to-day lives to even become slightly enlightened in their understanding, or sorting out complex issues like which presidential candidate has the right foreign policy toward Asia. So, even if people are aware of the biased nature of the information they encounter and how they actually are operating in a ‘filter bubble’, they lack the time and motivation to actively go on a search for the alternative information needed to justify their preferences. The salient detail here is that although ordinary people lack time, some do not. Considering the ongoing technological developments as stated before in mind, it does not seem that social media platforms and other

new sources of information provision will make the democratic task of getting as much as people on the baseline of competence much easier. This is for Achen and Bartels (2016) reason to ask the question: ‘Can ordinary people, busy with their lives and with no firsthand experience of policy-making or public administration, do what the (democratic) theory expects them to do?’ (Achen & Bartels, 2016, p. 299). They continue to answer this question negatively.

While this means for Achen and Bartels (2016), as already discussed in Chapter 1, that one should alter democratic theory, for this thesis this means that one should strive to alter the democratic practice and institutionalization. Technological development has so far mostly worsened the institution of ‘alternative sources of information’ in democracy by adding a disturbing dimension to the already present danger of deception and misinformation. Here, Habermas (2022) again makes a vital point by arguing that the new gatekeepers of democratic public life and information provision;

‘neither produce, nor edit nor select; but by acting in the global network as intermediaries ‘without responsibility’ (...) initiate and intensify discourses with unpredictable contents, they profoundly alter the character of public communication itself’ (Habermas, 2022, p. 159).

Dahl’s (1992) optimism about the rise of telecommunication technology is exemplary for the overall hope that the spread of the Internet would lead to great improvements as regards to civic competence, political trust, and political participation. However, the reality is quite bleak. The preceding part showed first how while the traditional institutions of political parties and media were barely capable of living up to the more elaborate institution of ‘alternative sources of information’, technological developments further worsened the actual institutional framework underlying democracy. First, new lines of information come with new gatekeepers which prove to be selective in its dispersion of information and hostile to dialogue. Secondly, the sheer amount of information makes for a cognitive overload of complex issues, which bars people from using information for which it is intended. These two observations actively conflict with the necessary democratic institutions that were conceptualized in the previous chapter: effective alternative sources of information and effective freedom of expression. As Norris (2004) shows, a lot of hope was pinned on the introduction of e-democracy for overcoming the flaws of conventional democratic institutions, which entails online voting systems lowering the bar to turn out to political moments, but it eventually failed to bring about the intended result (Fivaz & Nadig, 2010, p. 169). The other promising development concerned the ‘introduction and promotion of online

chats, blogs, discussion forums, and social media networks' (Fivaz & Nadig, 2010, p. 170). As seen, this has had a great impact on the public sphere but cannot be hailed as a positive development altogether.

While information is more accessible than ever, misinformation is as well, and it remains the question if the unconstrained dispersion of information alone can raise competence. For now, it seems that this technological change makes a complex world even more complex. However, as Fivaz and Nadig show (2010), there is the concept of 'voting advice applications' which has been globally implemented by countries as tools to raise enlightened understanding which has not gathered as much attention from scholars as it is supposed to have, given the grave problems at hand around civic competence. It is therefore interesting to look at how they would theoretically fit into an institutional framework supporting democracy. From here, although used already as 'tools', I argue that such applications deserve a place in the critical infrastructure responsible for satisfying the principle of intrinsic equality and the criteria of democracy as a whole.

3.3 Vote wiser!

The consultation of voting advice applications (VAAs) has become a standard practice in the run-up to elections in countries across Europe from 1989 onwards, with the Netherlands being the first country to implement such an application. Here, the VAAs bear the task to help voters by enhancing the very foundation for their voting decisions. This directly aims to overcome the problem of civic competence and raise enlightened understanding in terms of the previously discussed 'good-enough' citizen. Anderson and Fossen (2014) point out that many designers of these applications explicitly say so, with the German VAA 'Wahl-O-Mat' focusing on voter 'apathy' and the Dutch VAA 'Kieskompas' claiming to strive for more the casting of more well-informed votes (Anderson & Fossen, 2014, p. 245).

Anderson and Fossen (2014) further claim that the point of VAAs is to 'address what may be called a democratic 'competence gap' between how engaged and knowledgeable voters actually are and how engaged and knowledgeable they would have to be for the democratic process to function properly' (Anderson & Fossen, 2014, p. 246). This sentence could be seen differently in the light of this thesis again referring to the normative principle of intrinsic equality as discussed in the first chapter. To refresh our memory: the principle of intrinsic equality holds that all persons are to 'be treated (...) as if they were equally qualified to participate in the process of making decisions about the policies the association will pursue' and we were able to distinguish criteria that have to be met in order to 'satisfy the

requirement of that all members are equally entitled to participate' (Dahl, 1999, p. 37). Among these criteria, the criterium of enlightened understanding, which holds that each member 'must have equal and effective opportunities for learning about the relevant policies' seems to be the hardest to fulfill. Formally, there are more opportunities than ever in terms of availability of information, but these opportunities simultaneously lack the qualities of becoming effective. Here, VAAs are different from the conventional institutions of the media and political parties. Besides being aimed at overcoming the competence gap for the sake of democracy the work 'properly', I argue VAAs to be specifically aimed at reaching a baseline of political understanding. So, I argue that VAAs are unique in their approach to bringing about enlightened understanding and thus good-enough or even good citizens, having such a singular and explicit aim in comparison with conventional institutions. The next section clarifies this contrast with the mediative institutions of the media and political parties.

First, the mediative institution of parties could be seen as a form of 'regulated rivalry and acknowledges managed conflict as an achievement', while it organizes actual government at the same time (Rosenblum 2010, p. 110). But more importantly for the criterium of enlightened understanding, political parties can provide platforms for political education, such as workshops, seminars, and training programs, which can help citizens learn about important political issues and the political process. However, the enlightened understanding parties may bring about can better be considered as positive side effects than the outcome of their main motif. Political parties can be biased in their education and can sometimes use manipulative tactics to shape citizens' political views. They are too likely to lack in terms of accuracy, with a recent report on disinformation stating that 'established political parties were (...) found to be using social media to spread disinformation, suppress political participation, and undermine oppositional parties' ("Social media manipulation", 2021, para. 7). Therefore, it is important for citizens to seek out diverse sources of information and to *engage in critical thinking* when evaluating political information. From here, I argue that political parties are, as one of the two mediative institutions, too precarious to fulfill the task of providing equal opportunities to become enlightened, although not dismissing it totally.

Secondly, news channels (both online and offline), and thus the mediative institution of media, were never invented to overcome a gap but to inform whoever was interested and create a political/public sphere. Newspapers, for instance, are argued to be designed to bring the same sense of community present in villages to the anonymous city: 'In the village, everyone knew everyone else. Everyone called everyone by his first name. The village was democratic. We are a nation of villagers. Our institutions are fundamentally village

institutions' (Park, 1923, p. 278). Furthermore, it was Thomas Jefferson who stated that complete information about current events *through newspapers* is required for the general public. However, as Müller (2021) points out, American newspapers would almost never provide accurate information, with eighty percent being specifically linked to political parties (Müller, 2021, p. 114). So, while Jefferson had good intentions to raise competence, he seemed to miss that newspapers were not designed to 'bridge a gap' or raise the average threshold, but merely to shape political life as a whole. Then, when newspapers disengaged from political parties, profit became an incentive for newspapers, with sensationalism and readers being seen as consumers rather than voters as a result. Although professionalism made its way into media, resulting in the profession of journalism, the emergence of social media and its negative effect on the number of paid subscriptions causes the 'Fourth Estate' to remain shaky fulfilling its attributed democratic function of informing the public as a whole. The very fact that it aims to inform the public as a whole, makes it difficult to see it in the light of the discussed problem of civic competence. The problem of civic competence is not that a political sphere does not exist, but the fact that a lot of people miss out on being able to operate in that very sphere. 'Paywalls' discount the accessibility of autonomous and reliable information, while tribalization of the people through filter bubbles has a profound impact on how understandable ('assessable') information is for people outside 'the loop'.

Concluding, I argue that VAAs, in contrast, are specifically designed to address the problem of civic competence as described by ancient thinkers such as Plato, Cicero, and contemporary thinkers such as Schumpeter and Brennan (2010). VAAs provide voters with information about political parties, candidates, and policy positions in order to help them make more informed, which seems to be resembling media and political parties. However, political parties are in a struggle for power and influence while simultaneously bearing the task of mediating information, they are too prone to bias and inaccuracies. In addition, the institution of the media is not aimed at producing as many good-enough citizens, let alone good citizens. It often cannot or is not directed towards reaching the people in need of accurate and reliable information, only empowering the already competent and thus widening the gap altogether. What is needed, is an institution that is directly aimed at the ones falling behind in competence and thereby raising the chance of satisfying the criterium of equal and effective opportunities to become enlightened. By presenting information about political parties and candidates in an accessible and neutral way, theoretically, VAAs can help to level the playing field and ensure that all voters have access to the same information, regardless of their socioeconomic or educational background. While Anderson and Fossen (2014) claim

that VAAs strive to make democracies work, I argue that they are more importantly theoretically best in line with the burden the founding principle puts on a democratic people: to *bring about* actual intrinsic equality while treating each other as intrinsically equal, nonetheless. While VAAs have the explicit intention of raising competence, it remains crucial to assess their actual *effect* on raising competence. The next chapter will further discuss the current and potential effect of practical VAAs in their workings and investigate the recent development of deliberative VAAs and VAAs supported by conversational agents.

Stop chasing dreams: let us avoid a nightmare

“Great is truth, but still greater, from a practical point of view, is silence about truth.”

— Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World*)

4.1 Getting all practical

Until here, this thesis provided a minimum account of what a VAA practically looks like and how it operates. This next section will therefore delve into the practical design options surrounding actual VAAs. To start, the most common way of designing a VAA is one which serves as a matchmaker between voter and party, mapping the users’ preferences, which are extracted through a questionnaire, onto parties’ positions on the issues, thereby transforming users into ‘well-informed political shoppers’ (Anderson & Fossen, 2014, p. 246). Voters are helped to vote ‘well’ or as the name of a Dutch matchmaking VAA claims: wiser. Anderson and Fossen show that this way of designing a VAA presupposes a certain conception of the problem of civic competence. Namely, voters have already formed preferences they are aware of and with the VAA as tool they can match their preferences to specific political parties themselves: ‘what voters need to know is what options are on the table, and this is the sense in which the VAA helps voters make choices that are ‘better’ (Anderson & Fossen, 2014, p. 246).

To compare this with the criterium of democracy, this thesis is most concerned with, enlightened understanding, a VAA designed in such a way does not seem to fit immediately. The standard of enlightened understanding dictates that all members of an association ‘must have equal and effective opportunities for learning about relevant alternative policies and their likely consequences’ (Dahl, 1999, p. 37). A matchmaking VAA does not provide an opportunity to learn about policies and their consequences, but merely helps those who cannot align their preferences to a party in doing so, leaving behind the ones still incapable of forming primary preferences about relevant policies and oblivious to possible consequences. In this way, it poses as an institution aimed at second-order information deficits, which aims at overcoming an incompetence of connecting prior knowledge to new knowledge. As argued before, the main problem in the quest for satisfying the principle of intrinsic equality is the fact that reality is unequal and people most significantly struggle with first order information deficits, or in the words of Achen and Bartels: Voters are frequently *misinformed*, despite an increase in available knowledge that apparently has not been useful in enlightening these voters (Achen & Bartels, 2016, p. 300). VAAs designed to match voters to parties would only affect already quite competent individuals capable of overcoming the great chances of getting

lost in information. It would correspond to Dahl's institution of 'access to alternative information' but as argued, this institutional proposal is simply not purposeful. Therefore, I argue that a matchmaking VAA would not be the sort of instrument that is capable of effectively taking on the problem of competence. Nevertheless, matchmaking VAAs should not be dismissed fully, with studies showing the use of this kind of VAAs has had a mobilizing effect in terms of electoral participation and users have stated 'that they feel stimulated in casting their vote' (Gemenis & Rosema, 2014, p. 287). Furthermore, Ilmarinen et al. (2022) showed their positive effects on citizen participation and engagement with candidates. So, although not addressing the problem as conceptualized in this thesis, one should still give credits where it is due.

In this previous critical assessment of matchmaking VAAs, this thesis does not stand alone. Anderson and Fossen (2014) point toward the same critique, which falls in line with the normative foundations of deliberative democracy. As seen in chapter 1, deliberative democrats are concerned that the electorate is unaware of its own preferences and propagate for deliberation in various forms to support citizens with forming an opinion about relevant topics and policies: 'The point is for citizens to reflect critically and deliberate on the question of how best to respond to various conflicts, issues of principle, collective action problems, and so forth' (Anderson & Fossen, 2014, p. 247). Deliberative democrats put emphasis on the informed vote, with voting on factual errors being seen as something which undermines effective participation. Further, Anderson and Fossen argue, proponents of deliberative democracy believe in the normativity of revision and expect citizens to revise their opinions if presented with better, sounder argumentation or undermining proof. Lastly, deliberative democrats put great value in *public* deliberation among citizens about relevant policy options and contesting arguments.

If we were to compare this again to the standard this thesis is concerned with, this normative stance is better suited and more effective in bringing about enlightened understanding, while concrete institutionalization of these deliberative principles remains difficult. So, it is important to stress that this thesis does strongly believe in the desirability of deliberative instruments as options, while deliberative democrats might dismiss any proposals that are not built upon deliberative principles. Additionally, I argue that emphasis on the *publicness* of deliberation is something this thesis will try to steer away from because it poses the biggest obstacle to institutionalization. Nevertheless, VAAs build on deliberative principles bear the potential to provide equal and effective opportunities for becoming more

enlightened and bridging the competence gap. The next part of this chapter will investigate its practical feasibility and possibility.

4.2 Side-by-side with technology

For a practice to actually be considered deliberative, it should fulfill certain qualifications and following deliberative democrat Joshua Cohen (1997), there are four to be distinguished.

First, deliberation should be free on two accounts with participants only bound to the result of deliberation on the one hand and on the other that ‘the participants suppose that they can act from the results’ (Cohen, 1997, p. 347). Second, deliberation is reasoned in the sense that participants are expected to explain why they are pushing ideas, supporting them, or condemning them. Third, ‘in ideal deliberation parties are both formally and substantively equal’ (Cohen, 1997, p. 347). Finally, ideal deliberation seeks a logically justified consensus. How this relates to VAAs is cleverly investigated by Ten Hoor (2013) in his bachelor thesis. If we consider the first qualification of Cohen, a deliberative VAA must motivate the user to rationalize his or her standpoints, and framing effects and ‘top-of-the-head reactions’ must be kept to a bare minimum. Further, for the second qualification about the need of explanation, VAAs should provide ‘naked’ arguments to choose from instead of a plain thesis, which would incite more elaborate *internal* deliberation. Following is the qualification of formal and substantive equality. Here, a deliberative VAA should provide sufficient information and background details to inspire the formation of an informed preference while using the application. Lastly, the ideal component of consensus as argued by Cohen is replaced by ten Hoor for Habermas’ goal which aims at rational opinion formation, which indeed better fits with a deliberative VAA (ten Hoor, 2013, pp. 6-7).

As already pointed out in the discussion of VAAs, there is a major deviation from the deliberative democratic ideal: its solitaire nature. Deliberative democrats would be quick to argue that internal deliberation is ‘deliberation of a sort, but only in terms of the weighing of arguments in the mind, not testing them in real political interaction (...) [It] downplays the social or interactive aspect of deliberation’ (Dryzek, 2000, p. 15). As Goodin and Niemeyer (2003) argue, while actual discourse is vital for deliberative democrats, one should not discredit internal deliberation all too quickly. The importance of the type of conversation that occurs secretly in people's heads and among citizens informally, long before formal public deliberations begin, is not something that should be overlooked. People have these kinds of private and informal discussions all the time, and they are critical to the operation of politics (Goodin & Niemeyer, 2003, p. 644).

Here, we stumble upon a reoccurring theme within the institutionalization of deliberative democracy: the ideal is sometimes too demanding of reality to be feasible. Nevertheless, while designing a VAA to satisfy the criterium of enlightened understanding, one can take valuable lessons and opt for the incorporation of features and functionalities that promote deliberation, dialogue, and informed decision-making among users. It is difficult to design a pure deliberative VAA but based on deliberative principles, VAAs should provide access to assessable, accurate, unbiased, and comprehensive information. Further, the questions should encourage users to reflect on their own political values, beliefs, and priorities, thus inspiring internal deliberation. It is the actual public, ‘deliberative’ component of the deliberative theory that is the most difficult to actually implement in a VAA. While one solution may lie in a design that redirects users of a VAA to an online forum or discussion board, I argue that the implementation of conversational agents bears the potential to include key elements of deliberative democrats while also corresponding to the qualifications of what a democratic institution, according to this thesis, needs to be besides independent and available: accessible, accurate, and assessable. Whether deliberation with a chatbot counts sufficiently as meaningful is a question that should be taken in consideration.

4.3 Big Brother is helping you

Conversational agent voting advice applications (CAVAAs) are a relatively new design for VAAs that is meant to address the gravest problems that have been identified within the operation of conventional VAAs. By implementing a conversational agent within a VAA, users can ask additional questions and it creates a feeling of having a conversation with a real entity. This is interesting in light of the current malfunctioning of conventional VAAs. Kamoen and Holleman (2017) for example, show how one in every five statements in conventional matchmaking VAAs cause comprehension difficulties, all because users lack sufficient knowledge about both the semantic part of the question as well as the background information needed to make an assessment. Note how this observation correlates to Robert Dahl’s (1992) reading of the ‘competence problem’, which holds that what bars citizens to become ‘good enough’ is simply a case of knowledge.

Kamoen and Liebrecht (2022) argue that matchmaking VAAs do not necessarily contain mechanisms that tackle this problem by providing enough additional information. While Achen and Bartels (2016) would point out the fact that there is an abundance of information just one click away from VAAs users falling into a deadlock, which can easily help to overcome their information shortage, Kamoen and Holleman (2017) show that most

users will not take this route. Rather, ‘they make only a very minimal effort to provide an answer that is more or less suitable’ (Kamoen & Liebrecht, 2022, p. 2). From here, theorists have argued for the implementation of synchronous communication channels and a certain interactive component overall (Terán & Drobnyak, 2013, p. 84). With this in mind, Kamoen and Liebrecht argue that integrating a chatbot into the VAA is a promising way to overcome these comprehension issues without having to make use of a search engine. A chatbot of this type can be questioned about terminology, the present circumstances in relation to the question of theses at hand, and the arguments in play. Although tested on a small scale, it has been shown that the use of such a designed VAA led to more factual and perceived knowledge, and users of CAVAAAs had more positive experiences with the tool than VAA users (Verschuren, 2022, p. 11).

Verschuren (2022), in his master thesis, further investigated the possibility of CAVAAAs not only having a positive influence on political knowledge but also on political interest and voter turnout. This research showed that usage of both a VAAs and a CAVAA has benefits on perceived and factual knowledge over not using a tool at all, with the (CA)VAA-users having more perceived knowledge and a higher voting intention than those who did not use a tool. Users of a CAVAA especially obtained more factual knowledge compared to people that did not use a tool. Most interesting here is the difference that Verschuren found between users of VAAs and CAVAAAs. The increased level of perceived knowledge was only stable over time for users of CAVAAAs, while conventional VAA users ‘experienced a decrease in perceived knowledge in the two weeks after usage’ (Verschuren, 2022, p. 39). Concluding, Verschuren showed that it can be argued that people using either a VAA or a CAVAA displayed greater perceived political knowledge than those who did not use a tool, but the effects for CAVAA users are more stable throughout time than for VAA users (Verschuren, 2022, pp. 39-40).

4.4 Going forward

While it seems that (CA)VAAs bear great potential of satisfying the criterium of enlightened understanding, it is interesting to investigate how it corresponds with the altered institution of ‘alternative sources of information’. Besides having the right to seek out independent mediative institutions which spread alternative information, protected by law, this thesis argues that these institutions should be accessible, accurate and ‘assessable’.

First, (CA)VAAs are actually meant to make relevant information accessible, and many people seem to find their way into using them. For example, ‘during the 2021 Dutch national elections (...) the two most popular VAAs in the Netherlands were consulted more than 10

million times' (Kamoen & Liebrecht, 2022, p. 2). Furthermore, Garzia and Marschall (2012; 2014) show how the usage of VAAs is on the rise in general. Besides this anecdotal evidence, the fact that they are *meant to be* as accessible as possible makes them better suited to pose as an institution aimed at bringing about enlightened understanding. Crucially, this thesis does opt for a year-round approach, while normally VAAs are only made available in the run-up to elections. By operating them permanently, there can emerge a democratic institution that serves as a safe haven from the constant bombardment of information, where democratic citizens can go to make up their minds, whether in preparation for a fierce debate among friends or an actual election.

Secondly, (CA)VAAs can provide more accurate information, by actively aiming to be free from bias, prejudice, or distortion, in comparison with the traditional mediative institutions of media and political parties. Here I argue that especially the implementation of conversational agents can help provide a more neutral space, away from the 'filter bubble', with their ability to create various types of content, such as articles, social media posts, and marketing materials, being widely recognized (Ferrara, 2023, p. 2). Nevertheless, these conversational agents themselves are biased as well. There are concerns raised about the bias about 'what information is relevant and what arguments are cogent' (Fossen & Anderson, 2014, p. 248). Because conversational agents conventionally take their information from the internet as a whole, there is a need for 'identifying and mitigating bias in AI models, (...) including regular audits, retraining with curated data, applying fairness metrics, and incorporating human experts in AI system development, monitoring, and decision-making' (Ferrara, 2023, p. 16). I argue this to be fruitful because most of these chat agents are being fully developed as we speak. So, I do not argue for a *restructuring*, but a certain structure altogether. Even to the possible delight of deliberative democrats, chat agents are designed to mimic discussion about highly controversial topics. The concept of 'Biased bots' has been presented as follows:

For each issue, we create two bots to reside on both extreme ends of a controversial issue: pro and con. A conversation starts out by inviting users to express their proclivity to agree or disagree with a controversial statement (...). Based on the user's response, the bot picks the side opposing the user's view and subsequently presents arguments for discussion. The resulting Controversial Bot's purpose is to invite users to consider the opposing perspective and to challenge the bot's arguments (Dingler, Choudhury & Kostakos, 2018, p. 1666).

How to practically implement this within a VAA is beyond the purpose of this thesis, but it can be argued that even such a bot in itself could be seen as a VAA. This all serves to show how much potential technological development regarding chat-agents has for the practice of democracy to become more accurate, and thus less prone to bias, prejudice, and distortion.

Thirdly, VAAs (and especially CAVAAAs) can, above all, make information more ‘assessable’. As Anderson and Fossen (2014) argue, ‘traditional efforts to increase voter competence by providing them with more information may even exacerbate the problem by generating further cognitive overload’ (Anderson & Fossen, 2014, p. 245). VAAs do not provide more information but filter the most important information and key elements to make it assessable. However, people nevertheless struggle with conventional VAAs due to incompetence or the absence of both semantic or factual knowledge, Kamoen and Liebrecht (2022) argue. Conversational agents can provide additional information and thus satisfy the requirement of information needing to be assessable. Furthermore, the ‘chatting’ component of CAVAAAs can go beyond the mere provision of additional information and entice actual internal deliberation.

Finally, there is an additional claim to be made for CAVAAAs, which brings this thesis back to the theory of Jacques Rancière. As argued before, democracy is based on a universal claim to equality. However, institutions that try to bring about a certain equal enlightened understanding often start from an assumption of inequality, in which those who do not yet know are taught by those who do: ‘Education so conceived is grounded in a fundamental inequality between the one who educates and the one who receives — and needs — education’ (Biesta, 2010, p. 53). Rancière argues, that this inequality should be avoided by avoiding ‘explanation’ (wherein one’s intelligence is subordinated to another). Rather, an intelligence obeys only itself even while the will obeys another will (Biesta, 2010, p. 54). An educational institution should reveal one’s intelligence to itself, which requires attention rather than explication, with Rancière propagating education to consist of questions: ‘What do you see? What do you think about it? what do you make of it? And so on, to infinity’ (Rancière, 1991, p. 23).

4.5 Guiding the way

Based on this idea of the logic of equality, which corresponds with my discussion of Rancière at the beginning of Chapter 1, I argue CAVAAAs to be crucial and I will suggest features for its future design. Rancière has always been skeptical about the use of education to bring about equality, based on the idea that the educator will always be ahead of the educated. In the

design of CAVAA specifically, designers should program a conversational agent to ask exactly those questions previously quoted, targeted around political issues relevant for members of the polity. For example, while a VAA would ask one's opinion on the statement 'Should your country adopt more refugees?' in terms of agreeing or disagreeing, a CAVAA can sketch out the current situation and ask: 'What do you see? What do you think about it? What do you make of it?'. It should avoid repeating these specific questions but mimic the nature and aim of these questions in following ones. As argued already, the sketching of a situation is prone to bias, but as institutions such as Wikipedia show, encyclopedic and somewhat value-free situation sketches are possible (Greenstein & Zhu, 2012). I argue that CAVAA should use open-source internet encyclopedias such as Wikipedia to portray issues, exactly because of their openness to change and democratic core. The previously discussed 'biased bots' can further increase its neutrality if they are deployed tactically and interfere if certain conversational agents are considered too one-sided. A user of such a CAVAA can, for example, ask for further information or a different interpretation of the situation, which would trigger a biased bot. This brings CAVAA closer to democracy's ideal of intrinsic equality, where intelligence is not subordinated to other superior intelligences, but people can autonomously form preferences based on interaction and deliberation. While conventional VAAs provide a concrete voting advice, CAVAA can affirm and connect expressed opinions with parties and people during the 'conversation', which can be an infinite one. During conversations, a CAVAA should notify the user that her rhetoric or expressions resembles certain policy preferences of a political party or movement. From here, users can end a conversation themselves, ideally when they have gained (a feeling of) enlightened understanding.

Concluding, the most serious concerns are raised about the designers themselves and their potential bias. Fossen and Van der Brink (2015) argue VAAs are generally considered tools that improve the user's voting competency by combining their subjective choices with objective knowledge about what is at stake in the election. This is misleading to say the least, with designers constantly making subjective choices about which policy issues will be discussed. This leads Fossen and Van der Brink to conclude that there is a slim chance that VAAs can ever be neutral and scientifically objective (Fossen & Van der Brink, 2016, p. 2). I argue that CAVAA can bypass this objection. By taking in mind Rancière's vital remarks on education, CAVAA should and can take on the role of attentive mediator, rather than explicative schoolmaster. Designers their bias is rendered harmless by giving AI the lead. By simply sketching as neutral as possible political situations, with the chance to ask for more

information, and asking one's elaborate view on these (rather than asking if one would agree or not), CAVAAAs can potentially escape the policy selection bias as warned for by Fossen and Van der Brink.

While the development of telecommunication technology surely changed a lot, it has had most notably a profound effect on that very critical infrastructure supporting democracy. The mediative institution of media has not changed for the better and I have argued that it became less capable of satisfying the criterium of enlightened understanding. Its counterpart, political parties, cannot fill the gap that is been left by the chanced trustfulness of media and is prone to causing the same by its competitive nature. From here, I have argued that, because enlightened understanding is vital for democracy to come about and work properly at the same time, different institutions should be taken in consideration. Theoretically, VAAs are suitable for being part of the critical infrastructure, but still lack some needed qualities for institutions that were conceptualized in this thesis. Here, the implementation of conversational agents within VAAs can compensate for its shortcomings, with them corresponding more fully with the norms institutions regarding enlightened understanding should live up to. Although not much empirical investigation conducted on the workings of (CA)VAAs, the few studies that have been conducted showed positive effects in terms of enlightened understanding after the use of VAAs and, more crucially, even better results when CAVAAAs were used. This empirical optimism coupled with the unique fittingness of CAVAAAs to the theoretical qualifications this thesis has posed as needed for democratic institutions makes that CAVAAAs are to be considered more than a tool. Moreover, this thesis argues that because of institutional erosion, it is imperative for democracy that both VAAs and CAVAAAs are taken seriously in the critical infrastructure supporting democracy and included within this infrastructure.

Conclusion

By going back to a core conception of democracy, this thesis has reminded recalled what a democratic process needs in terms of criteria to be considered democratic. As seen with discussing Robert Dahl (1999), democracy is a highly normative form of government, that is almost as idealistic as it can get, and often deliberately blind to grave, existing inequalities among the public it administers. This is because it is rooted in the founding principle of treating every member of a democratic association ‘as if’ equal, with the ‘as if’ component as a clear denotation of its moral basis. While Dahl adopts this notion of intrinsic equality from a pragmatic stance, Jacques Rancière’s notion of intrinsic equality makes it morally more robust, while simultaneously altering the main motivation for aiming to achieve real democracy. Rancière’s universal claim to equality makes undemocratic forces (hierarchy forming practices most importantly) within democracy more visible and urges us to continue the democratic project, even when it might ‘work’ adequately. Consequently, such a regime needs more than moral content. *Actual* intrinsic equality is something to be strived for in a democracy for it to work. This thesis argued that while some criteria of democracy can be satisfied, some need reinterpretation as to what counts as being satisfied. For instance, the criterium of equal voting can be satisfied quite straightforwardly, but what it means to satisfy the criterium of equal ‘enlightened understanding’ is less simple to grasp. This thesis opted for a target baseline of the good-enough citizen, which holds that not all citizens will be highly engaged in politics, but that a basic level of political knowledge and engagement is necessary for democracy to function effectively.

To actualize this baseline of enlightened understanding, institutionalization is needed. While discussing the institutional infrastructure proposals as posed by Dahl (1999) and deliberative democrats, I have argued that Dahl’s institutional proposal lacks certain effectiveness and thus is not able to produce the ‘good-enough citizen’. Additionally, I have argued that Dahl’s institutional proposal aimed at realizing the criterium of enlightened understanding, and providing alternative sources of information, should be enhanced with the addition of three new qualifications: accessibility, accuracy and assessability of information. Furthermore, I have discussed the deliberative institutional proposal, which aimed for the realization of ‘good’ citizens. Good citizens are those who actively participate in the political process and contribute to the functioning of a democratic society, by being informed, engaged, critical, tolerant, and committed to the general good. With this being a too-demanding baseline, it can still be acknowledged as a welcome goal, although not a *necessary* and realistic ideal of democracy.

Hereafter, I have discussed the actual institutional infrastructure supporting modern democracies, which rely on two institutions: media and parties. The various conventional media platforms have fallen victim to serious decay caused by both technological developments and globalization, which now makes them unable to live up to the standards set by the altered concept of the institution of ‘alternative sources of information’ and thus ineffective in bringing about enlightened understanding. Additionally, due to their explicit bias, political parties can share distorted information that does not raise enlightened understanding but rather misinforms or manipulates. Due to this, partisanship makes political parties too unreliable to provide alternative sources of information that live up to the standards this thesis has argued for.

This decrease of effectiveness of the mediative institutions of political parties and the media has not remained unnoticed. Political scientists have been active in the creation of a new institutions, and voting advice applications, which are primarily aimed at bringing about enlightened understanding. I have argued that a specific kind of VAAs should be taken more seriously: CAVAAAs. While I argue that conventional matchmaking VAAs are not sufficient, they can still play a valuable role in the critical infrastructure supporting democracy. However, conversational agent voting advice applications are the instruments capable of bringing about effective opportunities for every democratic member and this thesis showed how CAVAA theoretically can satisfy all the qualifications such institutions should poses: accessibility, accuracy and assesability. Furthermore, based on Rancière’s concept of democracy, CAVAAAs bear the potential to avoid being ‘explanation’ instruments and rather perform as attentive institutions by activating the intelligence of those that are unequal in their understanding. Not much empirical research is done yet, but the few studies that exist prove its potential. This empirical optimism coupled with its theoretical suitability makes the case for the adaptation of (CA)VAAs into the critical infrastructure supporting democracy.

This thesis is nevertheless limited by the few empirical studies that exist around CAVAAAs. Further research should aim at designing an actual CAVAA which corresponds with the criteria more explicitly. Artificial intelligence has become one of the most interesting and hectic branches of research, with constant breakthroughs and dogma-breaking events occurring around the clock. Within this field are big opportunities for democracy, but great dangers as well. Further research should therefore be conducted on both the effects of harm and the benefit of chat agents on the democratic process. Additionally, more empirical research can sketch a more accurate picture of its potential effects. The phenomenon of

CAVAAs is quite new and its true potential will reveal itself when tested more and more elaborate.

This thesis tried to refrain from becoming activist, which proved to be difficult when discussing democracy. It is a regime based on a normative ideal that presupposes certain possible qualities and attributes to all of humanity and the demanding task of bringing a kind of genuine equality about it poses itself. This strong normative substance is one like no other regime has, and its morality, prudence, and acceptability bring us back to a modern cliché, which holds that there seems to be no viable alternative. If that is really the case, it does not mean we should just let democracy be. On the contrary, democracy is a constant struggle for bringing about actual intrinsic equality and effective self-rule, which needs experimentation and new institutions in line with democratic principles. I argue (CA)VAAs to be just that.

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