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**The New Media Elite:** How has Participation been Enabled and Limited in Leaders Live Online Political Debates

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# **The New Media Elite: How has Participation been Enabled and Limited in Leaders Live Online Political Debates**

**Matilde Giglio**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research deals with Leaders Live, a YouTube series of live-streamed debates between political candidates competing in the UK 2015 General Elections and young people (16-25). The distinctiveness of the event consisted in the fact that the debates entailed two different participatory levels for the audience: participation offline (in the studio) and online (through social media). While both celebratory and critical approaches have emerged regarding the democratic role of public mediated participation in audience discussion programmes and mediated participation on the web, the participatory dynamics that manifest when the two occur simultaneously have not been the subject of extensive research.

Through semi-structured in-depth interviews with the producer, and the audience in the studio and online, this research aimed to examine how people involved in the Leaders Live online political debates experienced participation in the programme. In particular, the empirical study aimed to answer the following research question: How has participation been enabled and limited at the level of representation, interrogation and mobilization in Leaders Live online political debates?

The findings suggest that Leaders Live constituted a source of social representation and that enabling young people to have a voice has also strengthened their level of political engagement. However, the findings also indicate that participation in Leaders Live has been influenced by a new form of capital deriving from 'how well one operates on the Internet' (Dahlgren, 2009: 159) and consisting of the connections made on the web. This new capital has led to an unequal distribution of power between the different groups of audience involved in the debates and has limited the participatory potential of Leaders Live.

## INTRODUCTION

We, people aged 16-24, have been ignored by our leaders for too long. Bite The Ballot's giving you the chance to change this by putting your questions to them directly: live and online.

(Bite the Ballot official page)

With these words, the UK party-neutral movement Bite the Ballot launched the project Leaders Live. The project consisted of a series of live-streamed debates to be distributed on YouTube by ITV News and YouTube channel Bite News. The debates ran for four episodes between 26 November and 16 December 2014, and hosted the main parties' leaders competing for the UK 2015 General Election: Ed Miliband, Nick Clegg, Nigel Farage and Natalie Bennett; David Cameron refused to participate. In each debate, candidates were individually facing questions from young voters in front of a studio audience composed of 15 influential 'YouTubers' chosen for their strong social media presence.

The Leaders Live project purported to be a political debate specifically aimed at young people (16-24), and as such it strived to implement the media realities in which young people feel more at ease. The online audience could participate in the discussions by sending questions either to the panel members of the studio audience through their Twitter and Facebook private profiles, or to the producers of the programme using the '#Leaders Live' 'hashtag'. As such, differently from the majority of audience discussion programmes in the mass-media context, Leaders Live combined offline and online forms of participation, offering the opportunity to participate in the debate not only to the physically present panel members, but also to the online audience.

Leaders Live is of great interest for several reasons. Firstly, Leaders Live is intriguing because of its strong focus on young people. The widespread concern about youth disengagement and low levels of involvement in institutionalised politics, combined with the fact that as extensive literature has highlighted, young people tend to be excluded from mainstream media (see, for example, Bastedo, 2015; Coleman, 2007; Couldry, 2008), make Leaders Live a perfect case to analyse the importance of media in democracies. Moreover, given the peculiar format of the debates, Leaders Live embodies the transformation that audience discussion programmes are undergoing as they move from traditional broadcasting media (e.g. radio and television), to online platforms (e.g. YouTube). Lastly, the unique participatory dynamics that characterized the debates appeared to me an extremely fertile ground to study how the tensions between top-down modes of discussion and bottom-up

forms of participation are shaping the modes of participation afforded to the public in the digital age.

By offering the opportunity for the audience to voice its opinion and question the established power, Leaders Live represented a space for public mediated participation in political debate that McNair et al. (2003) would call ‘mediated access’ in relation to radio and television programming. While there is extensive academic literature on audience discussion programmes on television (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994; Gamson, 2001; Scannell, 1996; Hamo, 2006; Carpentier, 2011; McNair et al., 2003), there is a need to analyse these new ‘mediated access’ spaces online as they are emerging and consolidating. In particular, commentators have called for investigations into the modes of participation afforded to the public by emerging deliberative platforms (Dahlgren, 2013; Livingstone, 2013).

In view of the foregoing, by reaching the producer of the programme and the audience both in the studio and online, this research purports to investigate how Leaders Live’s distinctive features have enabled and limited participation in the experience of the people involved in the debates, with particular reference to the three normative aims of ‘representation’, ‘interrogation’ and ‘mobilization’ set by McNair et al. (2003) for the ‘mediated access’ forms of programming.

## **THEORETICAL CHAPTER**

In order to assess the limitations to and potentialities of participation in the Leaders Live online political debates it is necessary to understand the notion of ‘participation’ in democratic theories and how it has evolved into mediated participation in public discussion both on television (offline) and the web (online).

### **Participation in Democratic Theories**

In western democracies, the word ‘participation’ forcibly entered ‘the popular political vocabulary’ at the end of the 1960s (Pateman, 1970: 1), giving impetus to the move towards participatory democratic models that we have witnessed in the past few decades (Pateman, 2012). In post-modern democracies the notion of ‘participation’ has become a highly fluid and contested term (Carpentier, 2007), an empty signifier (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) embodying a wide range of different situations (Pateman, 1970). Thus, although citizens’ involvement in the political sphere is central to democracy (Zolo, 1989), the notion of

participation assumes several meanings depending on which model of democracy is taken into account.

According to Held (2006), models of democracy can be classified into two categories: liberal or representative and direct or participatory. The models pertaining to the former category envisage a 'system of rule embracing elected "officers" who undertake to "represent" the interests and/or views of citizens within the framework of the "rule of law"' (Held, 2006: 4), whereas the models belonging to the latter category conceive a 'system of decision making about public affairs in which citizens are directly involved' (Held, 2006: 4).

Pre-eminently, in the first category figures the elite democratic model, theorized by Schumpeter (1943) among others. This model embraces a 'minimalist' version of citizens' involvement, in which participation remains confined to the realm of institutionalised politics (Carpentier, 2011). According to Schumpeter, since 'the electoral mass' is ill-informed about politics, and 'incapable of action other than a stampede', its political role must be reduced to the practice of voting (Schumpeter, 1942: 283). In this view, the most important function of democracy lies in the 'democratic method' (Schumpeter, 1942), that is, the periodic election and removal of the ruling elite (Scammell, 2000).

Conversely, models belonging to the second category (i.e. participatory, deliberative and radical) adopt a 'maximalist' version of citizens' participation (Carpentier, 2011). Within these models, participation plays a more 'substantial and continuous role' and is conceived as moving beyond the mere election of representatives and the single sphere of institutionalised politics (Carpentier, 2007). Citizens' involvement in every societal realm has, at least potentially, a political value because it is through the involvement in participatory activities at 'the micro-level', as opposed to the 'macro-level' of general elections (Carpentier, 2011), that citizens develop the democratic skills necessary to play an active role in society (Pateman, 1970: 42). In particular, these models assume that the established power needs to engage in some kinds of dialogue with the citizenry, thus the possibility for the public to participate in public debates where to question the political elite, and voice its opinion becomes a vital dimension of democratic participation (Dahlgren, 2013; Livingstone & Lunt, 1994).

Within 'large scale democracies' (Dahl, 2000), the possibility for the citizenry to participate in public discussion lies in the media that, by overcoming constrictions of both time and space (Chouliaraki, 2008), provide the contemporary infrastructure for 'public participation and debate' (Silverstone, 2005: 200). As such, citizen participation 'through' the media

(Carpentier, 2011) emerges as a fundamental dimension of democratic participation (Curran, 1991; Dahlgren, 2013; Livingstone & Lunt, 1994).

In the light of the foregoing, this research will adopt Jenkins's (2006: 305) definition of participation as 'social and cultural interactions that occur around media' and will build upon a growing body of literature that conceives 'the discursive' as part of democratic participation (see, for example, Curran, 1991; Dahlgren, 2013; Livingstone & Lunt, 1994), to analyse participation within Leaders Live online political debates.

### **Mediated Participation: Television**

Today, we live in an intensively mediated world (Silverstone, 2005) where the media have become the infrastructure of all spheres of social life (Livingstone, 2013), thus exercising a fundamental influence in the construction of the political sphere (Silverstone, 2005; Castells, 2009; Meyer, 2002; Altheide & Snow, 1979). Specifically, many have examined the major impact that media have on public participation (Putnam, 2001) and civic engagement (Dahlgren, 2009; Livingstone & Lunt, 1994).

In particular, the role of television has been extensively discussed. The dominant school of thought has criticised television for undermining democratic citizenship (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2011). Well-known is the 'video-malaise' theory that Robinson (1976) uses to describe the negative impact of television political coverage on government trust and authority. In an ever more competitive broadcasting environment, serious political coverage is said to have been replaced by entertainment (Corner & Pels, 2003; Postman, 2006), resulting in a deterioration of the quality of public discussion (Merritt, 1999). While distracting and entertaining the public, television has also been accused of undermining traditional forms of political participation and social capital (Putnam, 2001). These views have been reinforced by research on media effects, which have frequently portrayed audiences as passive spectators, 'moving from being participants to being viewers' of politics (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2011: 443). In all these ways, television, as one of the main disseminators of political information, has allegedly promoted public apathy and cynicism, and discouraged citizens' involvement in democratic life (McNair et al., 2003).

Meanwhile, a more optimistic view of the role of television has tended to emerge in connection with two correlated processes. Firstly, recent researchers have demonstrated that viewers' responses to television programme messages are diverse and more critical as the public has become more informed (see, for example, Liebes & Katz, 1990). Accordingly, many

scholars have argued that the audience cannot be treated as a passive and homogeneous entity, moving beyond the traditional active/passive conception (Livingstone, 2005) and employing a notion of the audience as ‘active viewer’ (Livingstone, 1990) or ‘citizen viewer’ (Corner, 1991).

Secondly, new optimistic views have arisen as broadcasters started introducing new formats, in which the audience could directly intervene in the public discussion, express their opinion, access politicians and question the established power (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994; McNair et al., 2003). These formats are known as audience discussion programmes. Although audience discussion programmes include different specific genres, they always entail a participatory component for the studio audience, which participates in the discussion of social or political issues under the supervision of the presenter (Leurdijk, 1999, cited in Carpentier, 2011).

A fundamental contribution regarding audience discussion programmes is that of McNair et al. (2003) which introduces the label of ‘mediated access’. With this term they refer to those forms of programming ‘through which citizens are enabled to be physically present in the public sphere, encouraged to state their views on political issues [...] and to question representatives of the political elite’ (McNair et al. 2003: 7).

In their empirical research, McNair et al. (2003) identify three fundamental normative aims of ‘mediated access’ programming:

- 1) ‘Representation’ of the people in the public sphere. In the process of questioning the political elite, ‘mediated access’ programmes constitute a source of social representation. As such, the composition of panel members needs to be accepted by the audience as representative of the population.
- 2) ‘Interrogation’ of the political elite. That is the possibility for the public to ask the political elite questions, and to manifest their dissatisfaction or approval.
- 3) ‘Mobilization’ of citizens’ in the political process. That is the possibility for ‘mediated access’ programmes to motivate the public to act politically and to engage in the democratic process. This can take the form of voting, taking part in single issue campaigning, or to ‘simply think in a sustained way about politics’ (McNair et al., 2003: 34).

Adopting these three aims as the yardsticks to evaluate participation, McNair et al. (2003) conclude that 'mediated access' can be regarded as a potentially valuable tool to re-engage the public in the democratic process. In fact, as shown by their empirical study, participants (intended as either those who directly intervene in the studio audience and the audience at home) generally valued the opportunity to participate in public discussion and conceive this format as a fundamental instrument to make politicians more accountable.

A similar account is offered by Gamson (2001: 58) who argues that mediated participation on television is meaningful for 'the political process, for the individual's self-development as a citizen, and for increasing the collective capacity of citizens to act on their own behalf'. Embracing the same stance but with a focus on the talk show genre, Livingstone and Lunt's (1994) empirical research highlights the democratic potential of audience discussion programmes, stating the emergence of what they have called 'talk show democracy'. By providing a space where the expression of diverse voices can emerge, these programmes 'implicitly allow public opinion to have influence' and constitute a source of social representation (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994: 33).

Other exponents, while accepting the inherent limitation of the medium, believe that mediated participation on television has expanded the public sphere, giving voice to the previously silenced (see, for example, Doyey, 2000; Gamson, 1999). As Scannell highlights (1996, cited in Dahlgren, 2009), television (at least in its national public service context) has been inclusive in incorporating audiences-as-citizens into the public sphere, contributing to the 'democratization of mass media' (Hamo, 2006: 428). Moreover, providing the daily environment where issues are raised and politics is discussed, audience discussion programmes encourage the emergence of 'civic talk', enabling new forms of public collaboration and participation to emerge (Dahlgren, 2009).

These accounts reflect a 'ritual view' of communication (see Carey, 2008), according to which the media, acting as 'midwives' of the public (Dayan, 2005, cited in Anstead & O'Loughlin), provide a framework of orientation (Silverstone, 2005), and enable citizens to represent themselves by generating a sense of belonging and togetherness (Carey, 2008).

#### *Power Dynamics in Mediated Spaces on Television*

Despite the democratic potential attributed to audience discussion programmes (McNair et al. 2003; Livingstone & Lunt, 1994; Gamson, 2001), one cannot ignore the fact that these deliberative spaces are 'managed-shows' (Lunt & Stenner, 2005) which remain subject to the institutional control of the mass media (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994). The producers of these

programmes have a variety of objectives that range from producing a quality output to attract the audience, thus making public empowerment not always their primary goal (Carpentier, 2011). As such, it should be emphasised that within these programmes participation is structurally limited and that the ‘mediated public voice is managed in countless ways’ (Coleman, 2010: 45). Here the question of *who* is allowed to speak is as important as *how* these voices are managed.

With regard to the question of *who* speaks, it has been highlighted that public access on television has traditionally been very limited, especially compared to the access given to representatives of elite groups (Scannell & Cardiff, 1991). Moreover, research has demonstrated that mediated participation is linked to the possession of ‘social capital’ and thus those who participate tend to be male, middle class, middle aged and white (Putnam, 2001). As shown by McNair et al. (2003), this has limited the audience’s possibility to feel represented by panel members of ‘mediated access’ programmes.

The diversity of ‘voices’ reported by mainstream media more generally has in fact come into question. As highlighted by Couldry (2008), even if mainstream media do offer a voice, they tend to reflect a neo-liberal set of values and to exclude certain groups from the media sphere, leading to a ‘crisis of voices’ in contemporary societies. Commentators have stressed in particular how mass media tend to exclude young people (Coleman, 2010; Couldry, 2008), thus contributing to youth disengagement in the political process (Coleman, 2007; Bastedo, 2015) and young people’s feelings of being ignored by both the news media and governments (Dahlgren, 2007). For Couldry (2008), this is the ‘crisis of voices’ experienced in contemporary societies.

With regards to the question of the *how* voices are managed, commentators have critically appraised the power dynamics that influence the conditions imposed on ‘those who speak on Television’ (Bourdieu, 1998: 15). Scannell and Cardiff (1991: 2), for example, have highlighted that the studio is:

A public space in which and from which institutional authority is maintained and displayed ... it can define the terms of social interaction in its own domain by pre-allocating social roles and statuses, and by controlling the content, style and duration of its events.

It follows that these discursive arenas are always characterised by a ‘certain awkwardness caused by the fundamental asymmetry of power’ (Coleman, 2010: 71). Critical analyses have pointed precisely to the difficulty of striking a reasonable power balance between producers

and participants and how this influences the public possibility of participating in the discussion (Carpentier, 2011). It is not only that the programme is framed in conformity with the media institution it belongs to (Carpignano et al., 1993), but also that the host has a well-defined authority and plays a crucial role in managing social interactions, for example, determining turn-taking or denying access to the microphone (Higgins, 2008). However, power dynamics within these contexts are more complex than that. As Carpentier (2011) shows in his research on 'Jan Publiek', participants' opportunities to express themselves are limited by a variety of subjects, including other participants, which frequently restrict others' participatory attempts.

Combining these limits and constraints with the emancipatory potential explained in the previous paragraph, these mediated spaces can be seen as the result of the opposition between expression and control (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994), resulting in a negotiated level of public expression (Higgins, 2008) and participation (Carpentier, 2011).

In this context, the articulation of power formulated by Foucault (1978) and Giddens (1979) becomes particularly relevant in understanding the dynamics at stake in audience discussion programmes, as it considers power as simultaneously a restrictive and a generative force. As sustained by Foucault (1978), power in modern societies is diffused and multidirectional, in constant negotiation and flux. Foucault's view is enriched by Giddens' (1979) 'dialectic of control' based on the distinction between structure and agency. People (agents) operate within pre-existing structures, but retain nonetheless the ability to resist, and to transform those structures through practice (Giddens, 1979).

### **Mediated Participation: The Web**

The emergence of Web 2.0 drastically changed the discussion around participation and the media. In contrast to the limits explained in the previous paragraph, (*who* speaks and *how* voices are managed), the optimistic views on online participation emphasise how the digital environment has enhanced opportunities to participate in public discussion (the *who*), causing a shift of power to the advantage of the audience (the *how*).

With regard to the question of the '*who*', well-known scholars such as Castells (2009) have highlighted that 'mass-self communication', free of the top-down hierarchical models of organization, has increased the freedom and the autonomy of individual subjects in the communication sphere, allowing a greater diversity of voices to be heard and to be represented (Benkler, 2006). In particular, the web makes 'more information available to a

greater number of people' (Kellner, 2005: 183) and makes it possible to overcome time and space constraints, 'allowing many-to-many discussion and deliberation' (Coleman & Gotze, 2011: 17). As such, scholars have emphasised how the Internet provides new forums for participation in political discussions (Papacharissi, 2002), facilitating political debates that approximate the requirements of the public sphere (Dahlberg, 2001).

Specifically in relation to broadcasting political programmes, it has been argued that the possibility for the 'viewertariat' to comment through social media platforms while watching a programme has enhanced the opportunities to participate in the discussion, enriching processes of democratic deliberation (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2011). Following the same path, in her empirical study on the CNN-YouTube Presidential Candidate Debate, Lachrysal (2010) has shown how traditionally disengaged and unrepresented groups of society (i.e. young people) have used social media to intervene in the debate, concluding that these alternative forms of participation increase democratic engagement. In particular, many have emphasised the Internet's potential in promoting youth involvement in public discussions (Dahlgren, 2007; Coleman, 2007). As the web enables participants to feel less constrained by social pressure and sanction (Oh, 2011: 9), it can encourage young people, who often feel a lack of communicative competence for face-to-face political discussion, to participate in political debate (Dahlgren, 2009).

With regard to the question of the *'how'*, many have suggested that the revolution caused by the advent of digital technologies has resulted in audience's empowerment. Researchers have embraced the idea that we are witnessing a convergence between producers and receivers of discourses (Carpentier, 2011), and that today's audiences, consumers and producers no longer carry exclusive meaning (Brun, 2008, cited in Carpentier, 2011). As per Jenkins (2006: 243), convergence represents a shift 'toward the increased interdependence of communication systems, toward multiple ways of accessing media content, and toward ever more complex relations between top-down corporate media and bottom-up participatory culture'. In a 'hybrid environment' where forms of old and new media collide (Chadwick, 2011), the increasingly active role of the audience in mainstream output is evident. For example, in the journalistic field, terms like 'networked journalism' (Beckett, 2008) and 'citizenship journalism' (Gillmor, 2006) have emerged to describe this increasing collaborative interaction.

Nevertheless, the idea that the web can lead to individual empowerment and enable greater participation in political discussion has been challenged. As properly highlighted by Dahlgren (2013: 33) 'while the media alter the condition of political life, they do not automatically

transform power relations'. One line of critique has precisely pointed to the exclusionary character of Internet technologies, and to its tendency to reproduce elitist types of structures. Firstly, the digital divide, explained as 'physical access to the Internet and its related hardware and software' (Chadwick, 2006: 51) still deeply influences the access to these platforms (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2011). It is thus crucial to bear in mind the inequalities behind the physical access to the Internet (Warschauer, 2003: 6). Secondly, it has been highlighted that despite its potential democratic nature, the Internet tends to empower a small group of elites (Hindman, 2009), reinforcing the language of specific actors who already express their views in other forms of mediated and non-mediated participation (McNair et al., 2003: 105). As a consequence, even people who intervene in political programmes through social media are 'a vocal minority' of the entire population (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2011: 458).

Moreover, the Internet is also creating new power dynamics, which directly influence participation online. A recent account of this trend is the one presented by Dahlgren (2009), in which he highlights that social capital, intended by Putnam (2001) as individual personal networks and connections, is nowadays dependent not only on 'personal charm' but increasingly on 'how well one operates on the Internet' (Dahlgren, 2009: 159). Thus, as Dahlgren (2009) highlights, in the online environment 'the more one is personally a hub, that is well connected, the greater one's impact tends to be within the network'.

Finally, other criticisms have focused on the nature of online deliberation. As Davies (2005, cited in Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2011: 444) emphasises, Internet discussions are often dominated by the loudest and most controversial voices, and the lack of reflexivity that characterises online political debate often results in the polarization of political discussions (Sunstein, 2008; Cammaerts & Van Audenhove, 2005).

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The evolving notion of citizenry that has arisen out of the shift from elitist to participatory political arrangements, requires consideration citizens' participation 'through' the media (Carpentier, 2011) as a fundamental dimension of democratic participation (Curran, 1991; Dahlgren, 2013; Livingstone & Lunt, 1994).

As highlighted in the theoretical chapter, nowadays citizens' mediated participation in public discussion can take both offline and online forms. The case under review, Leaders Live,

combined both of these forms. While in fact presenting the characteristics of audience discussion programmes as it entailed the participation (offline) of the physically present panel members of the studio audience, it also allowed the online audience to participate in the discussion via social media platforms (online). The debates thus displayed the dynamics pertaining to mediated participation on television (offline) and the web (online) simultaneously. Embracing Jenkins' (2006: 305) definition of participation as 'social and cultural interactions that occur around media', this research will be looking at these two different levels of participation, analysing the interplay between producer and audience, both in the studio and online.

One way to operationalize participation within audience discussion programmes is to utilise the McNair et al. (2003) categories of 'representation', 'interrogation' and 'mobilization'. These categories guided the gathering of data and served as the analytical framework for the analysis of participation in the Leaders Live debate within the scope of the present research.

The review of the literature in the two areas of mediated participation offline (audience discussion programmes) and online (the web) has attracted both optimistic and pessimistic views. With regard to the first one, some commentators have praised the democratic potential of audience discussion programmes, while others have lamented that the fundamental asymmetry of power that characterises these spaces severely restricts the degree of public participation, both at the level of *who* is allowed to speak and *how* voices are managed. Theoretical considerations regarding the role of the host (Bourdieu, 1998; Carpignano et al. 1993; Coleman, 2010; Higgins, 2008), and other participants (Carpentier, 2011) in the management of social interactions have been considered in drafting the topic guide, as well as in analysing the interview data (the transcripts).

With regard to the second one, the optimistic view of the web has emphasised how the web allows for increased participation – relevant to the level of the *who*, and empowers the audience – relevant to the level of the *how*. Conversely, pessimistic accounts have pointed to the exclusionary character of Internet technologies (Chadwick, 2006; Warschauer, 2003) emphasising how old and new forms of power influence participation in a way that tends to reproduce elitist types of structures (Hindman, 2009).

By relying on Foucault (1978) and Giddens' (1979) conceptualization of power as both a generative and restrictive force, this research will take into account the dialectic between optimistic and pessimistic views outlined above, to shed light on both the enabling and

limiting effects that media can have on public participation within the context of Leaders Live online political debates.

## **OBJECTIVE OF THE RESEARCH**

Relying on this conceptual framework, the objective of this research is to investigate how people involved in the online political debates Leaders Live experienced participation in relation to the three aims of ‘mediated access’ programming set by McNair et al. (2003): 1) ‘representation’, 2) ‘interrogation’ and 3) ‘mobilization’. Building on existing theories, this research evaluates how these three participatory dimensions have been influenced by the dynamics present in the studio, and by the various affordances created by the digital environment. A further objective of this research is to determine whether in an online mediated space, other factors not discussed in previous studies affect participation.

In order to satisfy the research’s objectives, the empirical work aims to answer the following research question:

### **How has participation been enabled and limited at the level of representation, interrogation and mobilization in the Leaders Live online political debates?**

Emerging literature suggests the need to investigate what modes of participation are afforded to the people by the emerging platforms to express deliberation (Livingstone, 2013; Carpentier, 2011; Dahlgren, 2013). However, while the theoretical chapter revealed extensive literature on audience discussion programmes within the mass-media context, rarely have empirical studies focused on the new ‘mediated access’ spaces online (McNair et al., 2003).

Hence, studying Leaders Live online political debates could help to understand the emerging dynamics at stake within online deliberative spaces, as well as how in a digital age the tension between top-down modes of discussion and bottom-up forms of participation, is shaping the modes of participation afforded to the public and the evolving nature of the audience. Moreover, while previous literature has used content analysis to analyse audience use of online publishing platforms (i.e. social media) to comment and debate while watching a broadcasting event (see for example, Anstead & O’Loughlin; Lachrystal, 2010), this research employs the interview method with the aim of providing insights into how it *feels* to participate online. Finally, given the widespread concern about youth political disengagement, the focus of this research is on young people (age group 18-25) and is

mindful of the underlying question ‘what does this tell us about the more general relation between youth, politics and the media?’

## **METHODOLOGY**

As outlined above, the objective of this research is to shed light on how different actors involved in Leaders Live experienced participation in relation to the three categories of ‘representation’, ‘interrogation’ and ‘mobilization’ set by McNair et al. (2003). In the light of this objective, interviewing was considered the most suitable methodology to gather data. The interview method has in fact the advantage of exploring in-depth opinions and thoughts (Berger, 2011); it is thus likely to be the most effective methodology to provide a deep understanding of subjective feelings and experience (Flick, 2009; Silverman. 2001).

By giving participants a ‘voice’ (Hartley, 2006; Livingstone, 2010), the use of interviews enables us to explore individuals’ different perceptions of the same phenomenon (Gaskell, 2000), and ‘gain insights into people’s behaviour’ that would otherwise be impossible to obtain using other methods (Hayes, 2000: 126). For instance, content analysis could have revealed whether the questions asked by participants and the responses given by the candidates contained specific patterns, but it would not have allowed the crux of participants’ opinions and experiences within the debate to emerge.

In this research, individual interviewing was chosen instead of focus groups for two reasons. Firstly, extended accounts (especially regarding sensitive topics such as political participation) are more likely to emerge from one-to-one interviews (Michell, 1999), due to the fact that collective interviewing can inhibit some respondents from sharing their own experience and opinion. Secondly, even if focus groups are ‘superior for the study of group norms and group understanding’ (Bloor et al. 2001: 8), in-depth interviews are more appropriate when, as in my case, there is the possibility that subjective experience and perception can differ among participants (Johnson, 2002).

Given the central interest of this research in participants’ individual experience rather than group alignments, the use of in-depth interview was considered the most effective. Surveys and short form interviews were also initially considered as a way of gaining information from a larger sample of Internet participants but ultimately discarded due to the lack of investigative depth (Boyce & Neale, 2006).

Instead of structured interviews, this research adopted semi-structured in-depth interviews. Firstly, given the innovative character of the programme, it was necessary to leave space for unexpected topics to emerge. As Esterberg (2002) highlights, while structured interviews are fixed and prescribe a rigid adherence to the interview schedule, semi-structured interviews are more flexible and enable one to solicit richer detail with follow-up questions (Gaskell, 2000). The use of follow-up questions was considered essential to probe valuable information and elicit clarification on sensitive issues emerging during the conversations thus reaching a deeper understanding of respondents' experience.

Secondly, as pointed out by Flick (2009: 150), 'interviewed subjects' viewpoints are more likely to be expressed in an openly designed interview situation than in a standardized interview', due to the fact that the former enables the interviewees to express their opinions and ideas in their own words (Esterberg, 2002; Hammersley, 2013). By allowing 'spontaneous and in-depth responses' (Baumbusch, 2010: 255), it is generally accepted that semi-structured interviews are more similar to normal conversations than structured ones (Deacon et al., 1999). Given that the majority of respondents were young people (18-25) who are generally not used to the unnatural character of the interview situation, a talk-like situation was more apt to make respondents feel at ease.

Finally, semi-structured interviews allow tailoring of the interview process to different situations and individual respondents (Berger, 2011). This proved to be particularly useful for the present study, as it purported to interview different categories of participants involved in Leaders Live (i.e. the producer, and the audience in the studio and online).

Notwithstanding these advantages, this methodology presents different disadvantages that need to be taken into account. One of the main limitations of this method lies in the small sample of respondents chosen and the absence of random sampling methods, barring the interview's results from being generalizable (Boyce & Neale, 2006). As such, the themes that arose from the interviews with Leaders Live participants can be valid just for these respondents and not for the general audience participants of the programme.

Moreover, the interview method presents several potential sources of bias, which were considered when conducting the analysis. The first source of bias is created by the researcher. As Berger (2011) suggests, the interviewees tend to conform to what they assume the researcher is expecting. Thus, although interviewees seemed natural and relaxed when talking to a 'peer', the fact that I am a media research student investigating their participatory experiences might have led to more critical responses towards the programme. Another

source of bias lies in the possibility of reporters' 'inaccuracy' in giving accounts of their own experiences retrospectively (Bernard, 2004). Even if in the present case the interviews were conducted in a time-frame proximate to the debate, some strategies were implemented in order to deal with this issue. The researcher tried to recreate the debate setting in respondents' minds, giving participants time to recall the experience, asking for concrete examples and submitting to the respondents' specific situational instances.

## **Sampling**

Following Gaskell (2000), the sampling of respondents aimed to collect the widest possible range of views and experiences about the programme. Given the different participants involved in Leaders Live, three categories of interviewees were established:

1. Producer
2. Studio audience
3. Online audience

The interview with the producer (and host) of the programme was considered fundamental in order to understand how participation had been structured within the programme. By contrast, interviews with the audience in the studio and online aimed to understand participants' experience within the debate, as well as to shed light on the possible differences that could emerge between the two groups.

While the producer of Leaders Live debate was contacted by email, audience participants were approached on Twitter, sending them my credentials and the main theme of the research. The 15 influential You tubers present in the studio were identified through Leader Live's YouTube channel. Out of the 15 participants contacted, two agreed to be interviewed. With regard to the online audience, given the time constraints, interviewees were recruited on the basis of a convenience sample (Saumure & Given, 2008). The researcher followed the 'hashtag' '#LeadersLive' on Twitter and identified the participants who were actively sending questions during the four episodes of Leaders Live. This choice was made not only because the most active participants were thought to be more willing to participate in the interview, but also because they could have provided for more interesting insights on their participation. Out of the 19 contacted, seven people of the online audience accepted to be interviewed.

Eventually, the audience sample resulted in the inclusion of people with different backgrounds and with a discrete gender-balance. Given that the aim of the programme was to reach young adults, and in order to narrow down the research scope, the sampling of respondents was restricted to young people (18-25). This sample had, however, its own difficulties. Firstly, it should be noted that participants of the online audience that accepted to be interviewed are potentially the most interested in or critical about the programme. Moreover, given the limited access to the influential You tubers present in the studio and the consequent difficulties faced in the recruitment process, it was not possible to achieve a proper balance between the quantity of interviews with participants online and in the studio.

### **Interview Schedule**

Seven interviews were carried out face-to-face in coffee shops next to participants' places of residence or work. The other three were conducted in telephone format. All the interviews lasted between 40 and 80 minutes. Although the use of the telephone format limited the possibility of achieving a thorough understanding of participants' experience due to the time constraints inherent of this medium and the absence of visual and nonverbal cues (Aquilino, 1994), this format helped to overcome geographical constraints and could best accommodate participants' availability. Moreover, as highlighted by Novick (2008) the use of the telephone can potentially mitigate against face-to-face situational embarrassment, thus helping respondents' disclosure of sensitive information.

As prescribed by Warren (2002: 91) all interviews started with small talk and a brief note on the main research objective, so as to provide 'a particular social-context for the interview communication'. Moreover, for ethical reasons participants were asked to sign a consent form and were informed that the interviews would be recorded and analysed at a later stage. Interviewees (excluding the producer) were also guaranteed that they would remain anonymous, and informed of the possibility of refusing to answer specific questions and of stopping the interview at any point. All interviews were transcribed with non-verbal clues (such as laughter, pauses and sighs) included.

### **Interview guide**

As mentioned above, interviews were carried out in semi-structured format and combined open-ended questions fixed in the topic guide with follow-up questions that emerged from the dialogue and from the different responses given by each interviewee. The topic guides were formulated on the basis of the literature reviewed above, the research question and

general knowledge about the field of study. The topic guide for the audience's interview was divided into two main parts. The first part included questions about respondents' background, their level of political engagement and the way they perceive and consume political news. The second and main part was instead based on participants' motivations, expectation and experience within Leaders Live debate. This part was also tailored for the two different categories of audience participants involved in the research (in the studio and online). After the pilot study conducted in April 2015, the first part of the audience topic guide was shortened, while the second, specifically related to participants' experience in the programme, was broadened.

The interview guide for the producer and host of Leaders Live included questions regarding motivations behind the implementation of the project as well as evaluations of the results obtained. The main part of the topic guide was specifically dedicated to the structure of the format (i.e. how the online and the studio audience participation was organised, the question selection process, types of information provided to panel members).

### **Coding and Thematic Analysis**

The interview transcripts were analysed manually using thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012). This method enables the identification of relevant themes and angles (Creswell, 2009) through a process of systematic observation and categorization (Mills et al., 2010). The choice of using thematic analysis was motivated by the nature of the research question and the programme under scrutiny. This type of analysis can in fact be conducted both deductively and inductively (Braun & Clarke, 2006), thus enabling the researcher to combine themes already identified in previous studies and new themes that come forth organically from the data. As such, the main themes of this research were deduced from McNair et al.'s (2003) three dimensions of participation. However, given that the research focus is on a new, online debate, it was important to leave space for unexpected topics to emerge. Thus, many sub-themes were induced from the data themselves.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

As explained in the methodology, the transcripts were analysed manually using thematic analysis. The McNair et al. (2003) categories of 'representation', 'interrogation' and 'mobilization' proved to be a useful analytical tool to analyse participation in Leaders Live online political debates. In fact, the results obtained through the interviews could be gathered

within these categories, which are thus the themes of the present research. In any event, during the coding process different sub-themes pertaining to the three main themes of ‘representation’, ‘interrogation’ and ‘mobilization’ were individuated inductively from the data.

The quotes included below have been chosen as the most representative of the themes under consideration. An effort was made to include in the discussion results from the variety of participants involved in Leaders Live (producer, audience in the studio and online) that were interviewed.

## **Representation**

As previously explained, according to McNair et al. (2003), ‘representation’ of the public is one of the three fundamental aims of ‘mediated access’ programming. In this context, representation is achieved when panel members are recognised by the audience as a representative sample of the population. According to the interview results, three sub-themes, namely ‘exclusion from mainstream media’, ‘inclusion in Leaders Live’ and the ‘new media elite’ were found under the theme ‘representation’.

### *Exclusion from Mainstream Media*

Participants’ feeling of exclusion from mainstream media echoed throughout the interviews. For instance John, who defines himself as a ‘You tuber’, asserted:

We’re talked down to quite a lot. I think most people in the media are kind of not aiming at younger people, and when they are, they misjudge where young people are.

Referring specifically to television political programmes, some of the respondents highlighted the fact that young people rarely have the opportunity to participate as members of the studio audience. One of them made an additional observation, stating that the limited access provided by mainstream media tends to be further restricted to specific socio-economic realities. Sonia stated:

Even when you have young people on TV, they’re only a certain type, like they have very posh English accents and they’re from the upper middle class.

The way in which many respondents described the limited access they have to mainstream media is reflected in the extensive academic literature affirming that mainstream media tend

to exclude young people (Coleman, 2007; Couldry, 2008), generating in them a feeling of being ignored (Dahlgren, 2007). In this regard, one of the respondents, Alex, used the word 'discounted' to convey how young people's opinion is treated by mainstream media. These findings indicate that the 'crisis of voices' described by Couldry (2010) is a condition intensively experienced among the youngest generations.

### *Inclusion in Leaders Live*

The possibility of access to a political debate that Leaders Live offered to young people was positively valued by the majority of respondents. Both the online and the studio audience respondents compared the limited access provided by mainstream media to the feeling of inclusion experienced in Leaders Live.

Kim: I just thought, you know, that was refreshing to finally see young people talking about politics.

John: For once we had the opportunity to be there, to have a little space in which we could talk about politics. I think a lot of young people thought, you know, finally we got there!

John's use of the phrase 'little space' indicates that respondents acknowledged that the public sphere online is fragmented and not unitary. The findings are nonetheless aligned with the optimistic view of the web, praising the digital environment for enabling access to broader ranges of debates (Papacharissi, 2002), thus permitting a greater diversity of voices to be heard and represented (Benkler, 2006).

Some respondents went a step further, pointing out the positive impact that Leaders Live had for the construction of young people's collective identity, by providing a mediated political arena where both the audience in the studio and online could access politicians. For instance for Kim, Leaders Live:

Gave a wide image of how young people are, how they interact with the world... [this image was given] not only to us, but also to the others.

Ben made this point even clearer, highlighting that one of the positive aspects of Leader Live was:

That it was young people's specifically, it wasn't, you know, through the whole community, we were together talking about us, about our concerns... understanding together what we

want.

For these respondents, by gathering young people together, Leaders Live granted them the possibility to identify their shared needs and fully understand the different perceptions and identities of the other members of the 'young people' community. These findings mirror the 'ritual view' of communication (Carey, 2008) regarding the media as providing a framework of orientation (Silverstone, 2005) and enabling citizens to represent themselves by generating a sense of belonging and togetherness (Carey, 2008). As previous empirical studies asserted with regard to audience discussion programmes on television (see, for example, Livingstone & Lunt, 1994; McNair et al. 2003), from these findings it emerges that Leaders Live online political debates functioned as a source of social representation for both the online and the studio audience.

*The New Media Elite: enabling and limiting representation*

As previously highlighted, the Leaders Live studio audience was composed of influential You tubers. Mike (producer/host) defined this choice as the 'Unique Selling Point' of Leaders Live. As he described it:

The USP [Unique Selling Point] was that we managed to get an audience of idols and influencers that could act as a mouthpiece for their wider online fans.

Given that the role of the studio audience was to represent their followers, attention was given to ensuring that they 'weren't too political' (Mike). As Mike explained:

We made sure that people didn't publicly voice their own political persuasions because they were a mouthpiece for the audience.

On top of gender representation, Leaders Live tried to strike a balance among panel members' interests. As Mike later clarified:

Mainly, it was to try and keep it as diverse as possible, across a platform of interests. So we would have people from YouTube that represented fashion. People from YouTube that represented music. People from YouTube that represented comedy...

Both respondents of the studio audience showed awareness of their role. As Emily explained:

We were representing our viewers basically. So they were trying to choose people who had YouTube, it was mainly YouTube but it could have been any large online following, so that we

could speak for all the people that were following us.

These dynamics are evidence of an innovative conception of representation. Instead of being representative of the general audience (see McNair et al, 2003), the panel members purported to represent their own followers exclusively. Representation thus manifested itself in a more personal dimension.

If, as highlighted in the previous paragraph, the majority of respondents of both the online and studio audience valued Leaders Live's function as a source of social representation, the composition of panel members elicited more negative than positive accounts from online participants. Only one respondent, Simon, appraised the panel members' role as representatives of their own online followers, stating that the identity of panel members gave an added value to the programme.

They said through things which people had told them, so they're almost like representing people that they'd been talking to themselves, so, in a sense they're being more representative than perhaps someone who had been picked up from the street as it were. That was a clever move.

By contrast, three respondents who participated online critically evaluated the composition of panel members, defining the recruitment process as selective and lamenting this choice for restricting the openness of the programme.

On the surface it looked balanced... there was a wide range of different classes and people from different races but they [Leaders Live producers] could have had a more open public show... to allow young people from all walks of life to come in, not just twitter celebrities.  
Matthew

Within this context, one respondent used the word 'unfair' to refer to Leaders Live's recruitment process.

David: It seemed unfair because, you know, these people got their place there just because they did some videos on YouTube. Instead all of us, people who are really interested in politics, were outside.

These findings indicate that Benkler's (2006) assertion that the digital environment is exempted from hierarchical modes of organization and allows a more equal distribution of power between participants, may have its limitation. Rather, these findings support

Hindman's (2009) empirical research showing that the Internet tends to reproduce elitist type of structures.

As underlined in the literature review, previous empirical research, including that of McNair et al. (2003), has shown that the audience's possibility to feel represented by the panel members is restricted by the fact that those who participate in 'mediated access' programmes are often middle class, middle aged and white (Putnam, 2001). In contrast, as emerged from Matthew's account, panel members in Leaders Live represented different social realities. As such, the conditions that have influenced the physical access to Leaders Live debate appear to be different from the ones that characterise offline mediated participation on television.

These findings indicate that the access to Leaders Live was dependent upon what Dahlgren (2009) has described as the new emerging factor that influences mediated participation online. As Dahlgren (2009: 159) highlighted, on the Internet 'the more one is personally a hub, that is well connected, the greater one's impact tends to be within the network'. From these findings it emerges that the dynamics described by Dahlgren (2009) have influenced the physical access to Leaders Live political debates, and indicates that a new type of elite is being created, whose capital consists in the connections made on the web. For the purpose of this study, this elite will be called 'new media elite'.

To conclude, these findings revealed that although Leaders Live functioned as a source of social representation for young people who felt excluded from mainstream media, the fact that the production team restricted the physical access to influential You tubers limited the extent to which the majority of respondents who participated online felt represented within the programme.

## **Interrogation**

According to McNair et al. (2003), 'interrogation' constitutes the second aim of 'mediated access' programming and is intended as the possibility for the audience to ask the political elite questions, and to express their dissatisfaction or approval. Within Leaders Live online political debates, this possibility was not only afforded to panel members, but also to the online audience who could send in questions via social media platforms. The theme 'interrogation' emerged as the more recurrent within the transcripts. Four sub-themes were identified which will be reviewed.

### *Enabling Voice*

Many respondents praised Leaders Live for enabling young people to question political candidates and allowing them to voice their opinions. On the one hand, some respondents highlighted that by making them feeling closer to politicians and rendering politicians more accountable, the debates had a positive impact on their idea of politics.

Alex: I think it just shows that politicians are accessible in some way and that they can be held accountable, that we can ask them questions and they can have them answered... that these politicians aren't just these things that are on the news.

On the other hand, other respondents recognised that the debates could have an impact on politicians, emphasising the enduring long-term effects of the debates on the political process:

Sonia: They [politicians] often don't hear what young people are thinking because young people engage in a lot of protest politics and they don't listen to protest politics, so stuff like this where you can directly target a politician and ask them a specific question can definitely impact on how the politician is thinking they need to connect with young people.

It emerges from these findings that respondents have perceived Leaders Live as alleviating young people's feelings of being ignored in politics, reported for instance by Dahlgren (2007). In the context of mediated participation in access programmes on television, commentators have noted that participants valued the opportunity to participate in the discussion and perceived this format as a fundamental instrument to make politicians more accountable (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994; McNair et al., 2003). From these findings it emerges that the same perception was felt in the context of Leaders Live online political debates, not only by the studio audience but also by online participants.

### *The Web: enabling and limiting interrogation*

The idea that by overcoming spatio-temporal constriction, the web enabled more people to question political candidates in the Leaders Live online political debates emerged as a recurrent theme during the interviews. One of the respondents who participated online, further highlighted that sending questions via social media platforms not only facilitated his inclusion in the debate, also made him feel 'important'.

For Simon:

Using all of these different techniques [social media] there are more roles to play... you could be a member of the audience, or you could just send questions, but anyway you are important... you get noticed.

These findings reflect on Anstead & O'Loughlin's (2011) and Lachrystal's (2010) empirical studies indicating that the use of social media platforms has created new opportunities to participate in political discussions. Beyond this point, Simon's account also indicates that these alternative forms of participation can even result in a feeling of individual empowerment.

With regard to the enabling effects of the web, two respondents also affirmed that the possibility of using social media made them feel more comfortable about participating in the debate, thus underlining the difference between online and offline forms of political participation. For instance, for Matthew, the fact that the debate was online:

Made it a lot stronger than the normal political stuff that tends to be a lot more drawn out and actually more complex... normally you need kind of know everything, and that's very difficult. With Twitter you can kind of just say or just ask one thing about something.

These findings indicate that, as conceived by Oh (2011), the web can restrict the anxieties inherent in face-to-face situations, and thus encourage people to participate in political discussions. Matthew's use of the word 'complex' in relation to the offline political realm echoes Dahlgren's (2009) account considering that young people, who often feel a lack of communicative competence, can find in the web a more encouraging environment to participate in political debates.

On the other hand, some respondents noted that the freedom provided by the web restricted their possibility to question political leaders and be heard in the debate. In particular, during the interviews, four respondents pointed to the fact that a group of online participants, mainly UKIP supporters, were dominating the discussion.

Emily: For some reason the vast amount of questions, even though UKIP is not the biggest party in the UK, were from UKIP supporters... there seemed to be this constant bias throughout every single one of UKIP supporter going 'What about immigration?' 'What about immigration?' 'Why aren't they talking about immigration?'

Sonia: They [UKIP supporters] were sending two millions questions to everyone... So you know that there is power in numbers, probably my question wasn't even seen because of that. That's the thing with the Internet, you can get aggressive groups take over the conversation.

According to these respondents, the fact that the most controversial and loudest voices can influence political discussions on the web (Davies, 2005) limited their possibility to interrogate political candidates. These findings indicate that, as opposed to mediated participation in audience discussion programmes on television, where the host (Coleman & Ross, 2010; Higgins, 2008; Livingstone and Lunt, 1994) or other participants in the studio (Carpentier, 2011) are normally depicted as those who restrict individual participation, in online political debates, a wider variety of subjects can limit others' participatory attempts, including people who intervene in the discussion using social media platforms.

*The New Media Elite: connectors and gatekeepers*

The studio audience played a crucial role in the process of questioning political candidates acting as a bridge between their online followers and the political leaders. As emerged during the interview with Mike (host/producer):

They knew what we expected, they knew their role, and they knew the role of the social media and how they were a key instigator of drawing questions from the audience. We had social briefs for these people, when you come, you tweet your network... so the individual idol or celebrity sitting in the audience would tweet their friends saying - right, I'm about to ask Ed Miliband about education. What questions do you want me to ask? So the comments flooded in, and then they were able to say - Well, I've got William, and he says... dadada.

Studio audience respondents demonstrated that they were aware of their role within the programme stating that they were questioning politicians on behalf of their followers. For instance, Emily said:

I was able to kind of reach out to all my viewers and say if you have a question let me know and I'll ask them to these big important people... It just meant that the programme with us could reach more people and more people could reach us as well, and could question the leaders through us.

The role played by the studio audience in Leaders Live as the main connectors between the online audience and the programme, point towards the fact that in an age of media convergence (Jenkins, 2006) the conception of the audience as a passive receiver of political

discourses is no longer viable. These findings indicate that in a digital environment, audiences and producers no longer carry exclusive meaning (Brun, 2008), and that the relationship between the two is becoming ever more intertwined (Jenkins, 2006). Within Leaders Live debates, the relationship between the producers and the audience in the studio took a collaborative form. These findings in fact indicate that the studio audience played an active role in reaching the online audience as well as acting as a bridge between political candidates and their own online followers.

For example, when asked about the positive aspects of Leaders Live, one respondent pointed to the function of the studio audience in connecting participants within the Leaders Live debate. According to Simon:

They gave a kind of connection that would not exist otherwise, I mean if it was just a normal show with normal people there.

As a matter of fact, many of the online audience respondents interviewed in this research said that they heard about the debate because they were following one of the panel members and that they were sending questions not only through ‘#Leaders Live’ ‘hashtag’, but also to the private Twitter account of panel members, proving that the panel members had an enabling role in the process of interrogation.

However, three respondents who participated online identified the studio audience as gatekeepers of their questions, pointing out that the selection process made by the studio audience limited the participants’ possibility to intervene in the discussion. For example, according to David:

There were very important questions that should have been answered, but none of them were brought up. They [Leaders Live producers] should have allowed people to submit questions directly on screen rather than through these people [studio audience]. To make it more like an actual town hall meeting, than what they had which was a sanitised version of that.

Practices of resistance to the power exercised by the studio audience in the question selection process emerged during the interviews, proving the validity of Giddens’ (1979) thesis that ‘structures’ exist, but people always retain the possibility to resist. One respondent of the online audience, Alex, mentioned that after his question was not picked up, he started to send questions to more than one panel member. It seems that this strategy had been adopted by more than one online participant. As highlighted by Emily, one of the member of the studio audience:

Many people cottoned on the fact that they could send questions to multiple people within the studio audience so the really savvy people who were kind of following Leaders Live were sending questions to about three or four people in the hope that at least one of them would ask the question.

While previous research on audience discussion programmes on television has frequently highlighted the crucial role played by the host in the question selection process and the consequent power imbalance between producers and participants (Carpignano et al. 1993; Coleman & Ross, 2010; Higgins, 2008), these findings indicate that in Leaders Live the possibilities for the online audience to interrogate political leaders were also influenced by the new media elite present in the studio. On the one hand, these findings indicate that reaching their network and acting as a bridge between their followers and political candidates, panel members enabled the process of interrogation. On the other hand, because of their role as gatekeeper of the questions sent by the online audience, they also limited the possibility of the online audience to intervene in the debate.

#### *The Moderating Role of the Host*

Although Leaders Live also allowed the audience to send questions to the political candidates using the general 'hashtag' '#Leaders Live', the majority of respondents who intervened online perceived the studio audience as limiting their possibility to interrogate political candidates. By contrast, the two respondents of the studio audience highlighted how the host limited their participation in the debate. John described how the process functioned:

We had a system where you kind of hold up a card if you had a question you wanted to ask, and it was kind of, if the person hosting could see you, got to you in time. That was when you got to ask a question, so a couple of times I was sat on the end... so he [the host] couldn't see me, or he didn't want to, and I kind of got pissed off.

Emily, the second of the audience studio respondents went further, highlighting how the participatory restriction imposed by the host not only limited her ability to ask questions during the debate, but also compromised her 'position' in front of her followers.

Cos like, usually I am not in that kind of weak position... was kind of OK, but then I would be asking, hey guys, 'Send me more questions!' and people go 'Why bother?' because he never bothers to ask you and I was like 'Come on guys! It's OK, we can do this!' And that was something I bought up with the Bite the Ballot guys. I said I asked for questions and the most asked question was 'is he [the host] going to let you ask a question?'

These findings indicate that the participatory dynamics inside Leaders Live studio were comparable to the ones that normally characterised mediated participation in access programmes on television. In fact, from these findings it emerges that the host played a crucial role in managing the process of interrogation, in particular in determining turn-taking, making the conditions imposed on panel members really similar to the ones that are normally imposed 'on those who speak on television' (Bourdieu, 1998: 15).

To conclude, these findings indicate that interrogation in Leaders Live has enabled young people's voice to emerge producing the dual effect of bringing politicians closer to young people and vice versa. The freedom provided by the web has also had a dual role; if on one side it has enabled more people to intervene, it has, nonetheless, created new limits by allowing the discussion to polarize around the social network's loudest voices (Davies, 2005). Finally, the new media elite has enabled interrogation by functioning as connectors and limited it by acting as gatekeepers of the online audience's questions.

## **Mobilization**

As highlighted in the literature review, for McNair et al. (2003) one of the normative aims of 'mediated access' programming is to mobilize the audience, intended as motivating the public to participate in institutionalised politics (e.g. voting), or simply enhancing the public's feeling of democratic engagement. According to the interview results, two sub-themes emerged regarding 'mobilization'. They will be reviewed.

### *Mobilization of the Disengaged*

The interview with Mike (producer/host) revealed that the aim of the Leaders Live and Bite the Ballot campaign more generally, was precisely to mobilize young people in the political process. In Mike's words the objective of the campaign is to 'create a movement for change, to inspire young voters to participate in politics' and even though the programme and the campaign are developed for 'online engagement', they 'call for both online and offline political action'. Following this objective, Leaders Live aimed to be 'a show that's inclusive to people that would tell you [that] politics [...] doesn't affect them, but by the end of the show quickly realise that politics does'.

The debate purported to tackle the lack of political knowledge and to bridge the distance felt by young people about the political world, through the use of social media platforms. As Mike explained:

You would often hear people say... I don't know who to vote for, I can't tell the difference between them, no-one speaks to me. So we said - OK, we need to bring politics to this community, to these young people. Leaders Live was a pilot I guess, to see if we could bring politics to Generation Y... using the mediums that they most use, so YouTube, Twitter, Facebook.

It is worth noting that the totality of respondents who were interviewed thought of themselves as 'interested' in politics and were all active voters. This supports the thesis that those who participate in mediated political debate tend to be already interested and engaged in the political process, a 'vocal minority' of the entire population (Anstead and O'Loughlin, 2011: 458).

As a matter of fact, three respondents have pointed to the limited reach of the programme to that part of the young population who was not previously engaged or interested in politics as one of the negative aspect of Leaders Live:

Kim: The fact was that the programme wasn't advertised to all young people, so the only way that you could view the dialogue between the leaders and the young people, was if you already took an interest in it, and were actively searching for programmes such as that.

Sonia: I think it has definitely helped start the conversation, but I think that there are improvements that could be made to engage more young people, to make sure that all young people of different backgrounds, classes, races, educations etc. are involved... I feel it was only apparent to those who were looking for political guidance.

From these findings it emerges that Leaders Live did not reach politically disengaged young people. As such, from these findings mobilization of the disengaged was unsuccessful.

#### *Mobilization of the Engaged*

Even though the findings revealed that mobilization of disengaged young citizens was unsuccessful, some of the respondents highlighted that Leaders Live strengthened their level of political engagement. Two respondents said that after having participated in Leaders Live they felt more encouraged to take part in the political process, because they realised that they can 'change' things. As Simon stated:

I was going to vote anyway but what it did do is made me feel a bit more inspired and a bit more feeling like I've got a voice and I've got a say, that I've got an opinion, and it's a good

one to have. So, I think it [Leaders Live] just made us realize that we can do something about the issues that we really care about.

Whereas one respondent reported that the programme enhanced his enthusiasm for engaging others in the political process.

John: I think with Leaders Live what it's actually done is it encouraged me to tell other people to vote a bit more, because I've never wanted to be like 'You should vote' but now I'm like 'No no', I should actually like try ... and seriously, it matters, it really matters.

From these findings it can be inferred that the Leaders Live debate did not succeed in reaching out to the politically disengaged. However, the debate strengthened participants' political interest and engagement. To this extent, Mike's aim of 'inspiring' young voters was achieved.

## **CONCLUSION**

Leaders Live is an important case to analyse the crucial role of the media in current democracies, and how they constitute a fundamental asset in promoting a dialogue between citizens and politicians.

Given the increasing relevance of spaces for mediated participation within modern democracies, it is crucial to understand how, within them, citizens' participation takes shape, is enabled and limited. Applying McNair's three aims of 'mediated access' programming originally developed in a mass-media context, this research sought to shed light on how young citizens' participation occurred within the context of the Leaders Live online political debates.

It emerged that Leaders Live functioned as a source of social representation for young people, who felt excluded from mainstream media. Participation in Leaders Live created a sense of belonging between participants that enabled the rise of a young people's collective identity to emerge. Moreover, giving young people a voice through the process of interrogation, Leaders Live had the additional value of reconnecting them to politicians, creating a sense of accountability that had been missing. This has also resulted in a feeling of empowerment and inspiration that strengthened the participants' level of political engagement.

However, even if Leaders Live demonstrated the potential of the web to increase the opportunities for a wider range of voices to be heard and represented (Benkler, 2006), it also shows that it is not exempt from closure. The limited reach of the programme, for example, has resulted in the exclusion of the disengaged section of the young population from the debates, thus limiting the level of mobilization created by the programme. Moreover, even if the web has the potential to enable ‘many-to-many discussion and deliberation’ (Coleman & Gotze, 2011: 17), the study of Leaders Live illustrates that, when applied in a specific format, mediated participation always entails some constrictions and rules which are necessary in order to organise such discussions.

In Leaders Live the need to increase the reach of the programme created an unequal distribution of power between the different categories of audiences involved in the debates, impacting on the two participatory dimensions of ‘representation’ and ‘interrogation’. With regards to the former dimension, the fact that the physical access to the programme was restricted to the new media elite results in a sense of exclusion that limited representation of the online audience. With regards to the latter, even though the new media elite enabled the process of questioning by functioning as a bridge between their own online audience and the political candidates, they also limited ‘interrogation’ by acting as gatekeepers of the online audience’s questions.

In other words, within the context of mediated participation the focal point remains *who* speaks and *how* voices are managed.

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**APPENDIX 1. LIST OF INTERVIEWEES**

<b>NAME</b>	<b>ROLE</b>	<b>AGE</b>	
EMILY	STUDIO AUDIENCE	22	STUDENT
JOHN	STUDIO AUDIENCE	19	STUDENT
SONIA	ONLINE AUDIENCE	23	STUDENT
BEN	ONLINE AUDIENCE	25	PROFESSIONAL
DAVID	ONLINE AUDIENCE	22	UNEMPLOYED
MATTHEW	ONLINE AUDIENCE	22	PROFESSIONAL
KIM	ONLINE AUDIENCE	18	STUDENT
SIMON	ONLINE AUDIENCE	23	UNEMPLOYED
ALEX	ONLINE AUDIENCE	21	PROFESSIONAL
MIKE	PRODUCER		

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