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### Studying public deliberation after the systemic turn: The crucial role for interpretive research

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<b>Abstract:</b>	The recent shift towards a deliberative systems approach suggests understanding public deliberation as a communicative activity occurring in a diversity of spaces. While theoretically attractive, the deliberative systems approach raises a number of methodological questions for empirical social scientists. For example, how to identify multiple communicative sites within a deliberative system, how to study connections between different sites, and how to assess the impact of the broader context on deliberative forums and systems? Drawing on multiple case studies, this article argues that interpretive research methods are well-suited to studying the ambiguities, dynamics and politics of complex deliberative systems.	
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## Introduction

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4 Over the past 15 years, the scholarship on deliberative democracy has expanded in at least  
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6 two directions. The first expansion occurred as a result of the ‘empirical turn’ in deliberative  
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8 democracy. It has seen a growing number of empirical studies on discrete deliberative sites,  
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10 (such as citizens’ forums and legislatures), examining how deliberators behave, their  
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12 preference shifts, and the quality of their deliberations (e.g. Bächtiger and Hangartner, 2010;  
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14 Fishkin, 2009; Steenbergeren *et al.*, 2003; Warren and Pearse 2008). Such studies have  
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16 produced valuable insights into what works in deliberative sites and spurred experimentation  
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18 with new democratic tools by scholars, policy makers and politicians (e.g. Geissel and  
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20 Newtown 2012; Nabatchi *et al* 2012). Much of the empirical research in deliberative  
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22 democracy has focussed on ‘micro’ or forum-based conceptions of public deliberation, and  
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24 many studies have been situated in what Bevir and Ansari (2013) label a ‘modernist’ research  
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26 tradition. Derived from the natural sciences, a modernist approach to Political Science sets  
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28 out to make ‘value free’ observations of the social world, subject hypotheses to empirical  
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30 testing, identify causal relationships between the dependent and independent variables and,  
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32 ultimately, develop generalizable laws to explain past events, or predict future ones (for an  
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34 overview and critique, see Hawkesworth, 2006). In the context of research on deliberative  
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36 democracy, this has involved: empirically testing hypotheses derived from deliberative  
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38 democratic theory (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002; Mutz, 2008); observing and quantifying  
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40 the deliberative quality of discrete deliberative processes (Steiner *et al.*, 2004); or testing the  
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42 effect of deliberation on political preferences (Niemeyer, 2004) and group dynamics in  
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44 experimental and political settings (Sunstein, 2000).

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57 The second significant expansion in deliberative scholarship has been to look beyond discrete  
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59 forums towards a broader appreciation of the various sites, spaces and actors that contribute  
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1 to public deliberation. This is increasingly referred to as the ‘deliberative systems approach’,  
2 in which public deliberation is conceptualised as something that occurs within a broad system  
3 composed of a diversity spaces from informal ‘everyday talk’ to formal legislatures  
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5 (Mansbridge *et a* 2012). A systems approach recognises that, in contemporary polities, public  
6 deliberation occurs across multiple, differentiated, yet interconnected, venues. While debate  
7 continues as to what acts and venues make up an ideal deliberative system (Owen and Smith  
8 2015), for the purposes of this article a system of public deliberation entails a multiplicity of  
9 diverse communicative sites from highly structured forums to loose informal social  
10 gatherings and public interactions. Some of these sites are more deliberative than others,  
11 others more contestatory (Mansbridge *et al.* 2012). Some occur within the state, others  
12 outside (Ercan and Dryzek 2015). Some sites are on-going and form part of established  
13 political institutions; others are one-off innovations or public protests. What is important is  
14 that different sites serve overlapping functions, involve diverse participants and invoke  
15 different norms of engagement. Few, or perhaps none, entail all the ideal aspects of  
16 democratic deliberation in isolation, but, ideally, as a collective they foster inclusive and  
17 reflective discussion on matters of common concern (Dryzek, 2009; Mansbridge *et al.* 2012).  
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19 This expanded notion of where public deliberation takes place has necessitated a broader  
20 understanding of what constitutes deliberative communication, and what to expect from it.  
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46 For the most part, these two ‘turns’ in deliberative democracy—the empirical turn and the  
47 systemic turn—have pulled in different directions. Empirically, deliberative democrats are  
48 increasingly fascinated with the micro-dynamics of deliberative forums, while, theoretically,  
49 the push has been to expand understandings of public deliberation, beyond the forum into the  
50 public sphere. Most notably, the empirical turn has left deliberative theory open to many of  
51 the criticisms that the systemic turn has sought to address. For example, deliberative  
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1 democrats have been charged with neglecting the fact that many actors in political life are  
2 motivated more by interests than reasons (Shapiro, 1999). The field has also been criticised  
3 for focussing too heavily on micro-deliberative forums, such as citizens' juries, or even  
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democrats have been charged with neglecting the fact that many actors in political life are motivated more by interests than reasons (Shapiro, 1999). The field has also been criticised for focussing too heavily on micro-deliberative forums, such as citizens' juries, or even parliaments, at the expense of considering some of the broader challenges facing mass democracies (Chambers, 2009). Indeed there has been very limited work on developing empirical tools to explore how deliberation works at the large scale. More recently, scholars have recognised that many of the tools and techniques developed to examine deliberation in structured forums are not well-suited to understanding the complexities and dynamics of entire deliberative systems (Parkinson, 2012).

The expanding ideas about what public deliberation entails, and where it occurs, pose new questions for empirical studies of deliberative democracy. In terms of understanding what deliberative systems entail, and how they function in real political contexts, three pertinent methodological questions stand out: i) how can we identify and portray the sites, agents and discursive elements that comprise a deliberative system, ii) how can we study connections and transmissions across different sites of a deliberative system, and iii) how can we understand the impact of the broader socio-political context on both specific deliberative sites and the entire deliberative system?

Some scholars respond to these methodological questions by applying modernist approaches to the study of particular sites within the deliberative system. Consider, for example, Searing *et al.*'s (2007) study investigating the causal relationships between public discussion and its civic and political consequences. Although Searing *et al.* have a different understanding of deliberative system than we have here, their empirical approach to the study of a deliberative system offers an illuminating example for the use of modernist approaches in the study of

1 such systems. Drawing on survey data, Searing *et al.* (2007) seek to test several hypotheses  
2 about the impact of public discussions on the functioning a deliberative system as a whole.  
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4 Similarly, Pedrini (2014) studied the differences between the deliberative capacity of online  
5 citizens' discussions and parliamentary debate. To test her hypotheses on the differences  
6 between how elites and ordinary citizens deliberate, she quantitatively analysed the content of  
7 relevant debates, and compared their discursive quality by modelling various descriptive  
8 statistics. Others, such as Karpowitz and Raphael (2014) have applied modernist approaches  
9 to measure the quality of publicity that an individual deliberative site (and their decisions)  
10 receives. Such studies might shed light on the specific quality or effects of one or even two  
11 components of a deliberative system, but they do not enable us to explore how an entire  
12 deliberative system works in practice, particularly with respect to the interdependence and  
13 interaction between different sites.  
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31 In this article, we offer an interpretive response to these relatively new empirical questions  
32 posed by the systemic turn in the deliberative democracy scholarship. As a starting point, we  
33 concur with the recent philosophical arguments of Bevir and Ansari (2012) that  
34 interpretivism is well suited to studying deliberative democracy because: it can capture the  
35 perspectives of participants in the deliberative process; and it is sensitive to the contextual  
36 and contingent nature of such processes. Yet, in contrast to Bevir and Ansari (2012), we  
37 adopt a systemic view of deliberation and, thus, identify a much broader role for interpretive  
38 methods beyond making sense of the perspectives of individuals participating in structured  
39 forums (p.19). We argue that an interpretive approach is particularly well placed to  
40 accommodate a systems perspective of public deliberation; particularly the multiplicity of  
41 actors, sites and activities, and forms and effect of communication between different sites. In  
42 essence, an interpretive orientation provides the methodological tools to capture the 'fuzzy'  
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1 concepts of the deliberative system and its various components and linkages, rendering them  
2 amenable both to empirical analysis and normative assessment. Drawing on recent empirical  
3 studies, we identify and parse out the ways in which interpretive methods can help respond to  
4 the questions posed by the systemic turn in deliberative democracy. To be clear, our intention  
5 is not to suggest that modernist approaches are unhelpful but, rather, to show how  
6 interpretive research has an essential role to play in developing our understanding of how  
7 deliberative systems function, how different sites within them are interconnected (or not),  
8 how they are experienced, and how they might be improved.  
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### 21 **Adopting an interpretive approach**

22 Interpretive research studies the social world by seeking to understand meaning underlying  
23 an intention, action, object or phenomenon. Interpretive researchers are committed to a  
24 constructivist ontology; they reject the notion that there is a reality ‘out there’ to be  
25 discovered that is objectively independent from the researcher (Yanow, 2006; Wagenaar  
26 2011). For an interpretive researcher, any understanding of social and political phenomena is  
27 shaped by the experiences and perspectives of those involved, and also those observing.  
28 Epistemologically interpretive researchers are committed to two underlying philosophical  
29 traditions: i) that there is meaning in the underlying frames and assumptions through which  
30 people live their experiences (phenomenology) and ii) that there is meaning embedded in  
31 actions, text or artefacts (hermeneutics) (Yanow, 2006; Dryzek 1982).<sup>1</sup>  
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51 Interpretive research is typically richly qualitative in nature and therefore useful for in-depth,  
52 close-up, context-specific studies that illuminate a phenomenon or experience that is ‘in the  
53 dark’. It can also assist in bringing excluded or marginalised ‘voices’ into research.  
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1 For the purposes of this article, it is useful to highlight some of the core characteristics of  
2 interpretive approaches (adapted from Yanow, 2000).<sup>2</sup> First, interpretive political research  
3 focuses on meaning, rather than measurement. It seeks to interpret perspectives, events and  
4 objects; thus, data is generated through people, experiences, actions and objects (for example,  
5 symbols, buildings, images). Scholars employing interpretive research methods such as  
6 discourse or narrative analyses seek to ‘understand human affairs’ by trying to get a grasp of  
7 ‘relevant meanings’ (Bevir and Rhodes, 2002, p.131). In the context of Political Science, this  
8 can involve exploring what policy events, actions, texts, stories and objects ‘mean’ in their  
9 human and historical context (Fischer 2003b).  
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24 Second, interpretive political research emphasises contextuality, rather than generalizability.  
25 It seeks to understand, or make sense of, a phenomenon, in its local, historical and social  
26 context. Whereas modernist approaches aim to develop predictive causal laws (on how one  
27 thing will produce another), interpretive research seeks to form ‘constitutive causality’ which  
28 involves exploring: ‘how humans conceive of their worlds, the language they use to describe  
29 them, and other elements constituting that social world, which make possible or impossible  
30 the interactions they pursue’ (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012, p.52). An interpretive  
31 researcher is not seeking to determine causality in a mechanistic sense, but, rather: ‘to explain  
32 events [or phenomena] in terms of actors’ understandings of their own contexts’ (p. 52).  
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49 Third, interpretive research is based on an abductive, rather than deductive, logic of inquiry.  
50 Its goal is not to test hypotheses drawn from theory or previous studies, but to draw on theory  
51 and experience in a way that is iterative and recursive. The research might begin with a  
52 puzzle experienced in the social or political world or noted in theoretical debates. For  
53 example, in the field of policy studies interpretive researchers seek to appreciate and improve  
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1 policy practice by studying its paradoxes and ambiguities and exploring various meanings  
2 embedded in language, action and artefacts (Stone, 2002). In general, their purpose is not to  
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5 ‘settle’ debates by conducting a value-free, objective, assessment of the policy situation, but,  
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7 rather, to ‘stimulate’ debate about the contested understandings of politics (Fischer, 2003a,  
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9 p.211).

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14 Fourth, interpretive research is well equipped to accommodate the multiplicity inherent in  
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16 political life; so in the context of public deliberation it can shed light on the ‘multiplicities of  
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18 interpretation across policy-relevant groups’ (Yanow 2014). Such an approach  
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20 accommodates a core feature of deliberative systems: that public deliberation involves  
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22 multiple sites, actors and activities (Mansbridge *et al.* 2012). Interpretive research is not only  
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24 well-placed to help us to better understand the multiple meanings associated with contested  
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26 policy issues, but it can also shed light on the different interpretations and experiences of  
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28 public deliberation. Indeed, understanding how multiple actors interact, network, and  
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30 transmit ideas in a deliberative system are key tasks of the interpretive analyst, and this very  
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32 process can assist in the identification of strengths and weaknesses of particular deliberative  
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34 systems—a theme we revisit in more detail later.

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43 These characteristics of interpretive research have featured in numerous empirical studies of  
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45 deliberative democracy. For example, some studies have focussed on the lived experience of  
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47 deliberators (Talpin, 2012), or on the motivations and actions of consultants running  
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49 deliberative events (Lee and Romano, 2013). Adopting interpretive approaches, other studies  
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51 have sought to understand how a particular phenomenon is enacted in context; for example,  
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53 how deliberative forums generate legitimacy (Parkinson, 2006), how interest advocacy works  
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55 alongside citizen deliberation (Hendriks, 2011) or how participants utilise discursive  
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1 resources within deliberative arenas (Mendonça, 2009). Debates in deliberative practice and  
2 theory have also been informed by empirical studies of participatory governance, many of  
3 which have interpretive characteristics (see for example, Fung and Wright, 2003).  
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7 Regardless of the particular focus of these interpretive studies, it is fair to say most have  
8 concentrated on ‘meaning making’ in, and around, micro-deliberative forums. Yet it is  
9 possible to draw out some of the interpretive insights from these studies and consider their  
10 relevance for understanding and analysing deliberation at a systems level as well.<sup>3</sup> In the  
11 following sections, we show how interpretive approaches can play a number of crucial roles  
12 in empirical studies of deliberative systems, particularly i) portraying the sites, agents and  
13 discursive elements that comprise a deliberative system, ii) understanding connections and  
14 transmissions within a deliberative system, iii) appreciating the context of deliberative  
15 forums and systems.  
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### 31 **Role 1. Portraying the sites, agents and discursive elements of a deliberative system**

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36 A central challenge for empirical studies of deliberative systems is to identify the various  
37 components of the system and its boundaries. In other words, the researcher is faced with the  
38 task of determining what is in the system, and what is not. For this task, an interpretive  
39 approach can help portray at least three key elements of any deliberative system: *sites*, *agents*  
40 and *discursive elements*.  
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51 First and foremost, an interpretive approach can help researchers to better capture the *sites* of  
52 a deliberative system—the institutional arrangements through which deliberation emerges or  
53 is funnelled. Where from a modernist perspective the diversity of interlocking sites risks  
54 being so expansive as to be infinite and not meaningfully ‘measurable’, an interpretive  
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1 analysis is interested in how these boundaries are understood by the actors engaged; it is what  
2 these embedded actors think that matters, rather than necessarily any ‘true’ extent of sites  
3 which deliberation cuts across. Emerging interpretive studies on the deliberative system are  
4 adopting this approach (see Boswell, 2015) but perhaps the clearest example through which  
5 to explore this process is Maarten Hajer’s (2005) dramaturgical analysis of the rebuilding of  
6 Ground Zero after the 9/11 attacks. Though it predates the conscious move towards  
7 deliberative systems analysis, Hajer produces an account of how the actors involved  
8 experienced and perceived the key sites (or in his terminology, ‘stages’) of public  
9 deliberation on the redevelopment of Ground Zero. His interpretive approach considered the  
10 markers, structures and patterns in the deliberations, as well as their physical and symbolic  
11 context. This combined discursive and performative analysis revealed a system of public  
12 deliberation with moving boundaries. As the planning process wore on the deliberative  
13 system shifted and shrunk; the initial, publicly-oriented sites faded away and assumed lesser  
14 importance, while sites dominated by technocrats and elites rose to prominence. Such an  
15 account reveals that there is much more to portraying a deliberative system than simply  
16 mapping formal institutions since these boundaries are the subject of public contestation and  
17 thus can shift and alter over time.

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43 The process of portraying deliberative systems also involves identifying important  
44 deliberative *agents*, and understanding their experiences, beliefs and practices. Consider, for  
45 example, the role played by social movements and activists within the broader deliberative  
46 system (Mendonça and Ercan, 2015; Ercan, 2014). It is interpretive scholars who are best-  
47 placed to access and examine the practices of these groups and their interplay with formal  
48 decision-making circles. Although not framed in deliberative system terms, Polletta’s (2002)  
49 study of social movements shows how interpretive research can help not only convey the  
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1 alternative sites of deliberation, but also understand the internal dynamics within these sites,  
2 and their implications for deliberation at a system level. Polletta (2002) inductively explores  
3 deliberative practices among several diverse social movements in the United States and  
4 identifies key cultural norms and practices that have been typical of these movements—  
5 especially friendship, tutelage and religious fellowship—and develops a nuanced account of  
6 how these characteristics work both to enable democratic capacity and also to constrain it.  
7 Similarly, Della Porta (2005) uses interpretive research methods in her study of social  
8 movements. She uses data from interviews, focus groups, documents and participant  
9 observation to examine the deliberative democratic qualities of the contemporary global  
10 justice movement. She provides a complex portrait of the internal dynamics of this movement,  
11 illustrating how concepts such as inclusion and consensus have been adopted to suit the  
12 traditions and structures of the organisations involved. Insights into such context-specific  
13 meanings help researchers identify the cast of relevant agents in deliberative systems, and  
14 their role in generating, influencing or undermining public deliberation.  
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36 Finally, the task of portraying deliberative systems also involves developing an  
37 understanding of the *discursive elements*—the arguments, ideas, claims and justifications—  
38 that prevail within a deliberative system. Though modernist approaches may be applied to  
39 aspects of this task, interpretive studies help to shed important light on what modes or forms  
40 of discourse are deemed valuable constituents of the deliberative system (and what forms are  
41 not). A good example is Boswell’s (2014) account of deliberation on obesity in Australia and  
42 the UK. Drawing on a richly detailed textual analysis and interview material with reflective  
43 participants across this deliberative system, he highlights the valorization of scientific  
44 evidence above all other forms of discourse. He shows how the intersubjective emphasis on  
45 this form of discourse, though positive in some respects, also served to marginalise lay  
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1 knowledge and emotional or personal expressions of experience. In the process it excluded  
2 important voices from the system—chief among them obese individuals themselves. As such,  
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4 this analysis provides useful insights into how exclusionary discursive elements can become  
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6 enabled and embedded in deliberative practice.  
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11 As these examples all illustrate, the key value of the interpretive orientation is not just in  
12 making sense of ‘the deliberative system’ and what it is intersubjectively thought to contain,  
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14 but also to highlight disjunctures and contestations across the subjective beliefs of actors.  
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16 These speak to key normative concerns of deliberative democrats around power asymmetries,  
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18 antagonisms, and exclusions. Indeed, although these scholars do not always explicitly refer to  
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20 interpretive methods or use the deliberative system terminology when analysing the nature  
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22 and dynamics of deliberation, their analysis, and the interpretive methods they use, provide  
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24 important insights for scholars of deliberative democracy, particularly those taking a systems  
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26 approach to deliberation. Future research can build on these foundations to make better sense  
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28 of how various sites, actors and forms of discourse constitute deliberative systems in context.  
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## 39 **Role 2. Understanding connections and transmissions within a deliberative system**

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43 An analysis of any deliberative system entails more than simply understanding the sites,  
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45 actors and elements of communicative activity. Attention must also be given to the way  
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47 these sites, agents and activities relate together, or not. Indeed, a diverse multiplicity of  
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49 deliberative sites can only be described as a system insofar as its constituent parts are  
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51 interconnected (Hendriks, 2006). Moreover, it is the extent and character of these connections,  
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53 as much as the characteristics of the individual sites in isolation, that determine the  
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55 deliberative and democratic credentials of the system in question (Dryzek, 2009). For  
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example, a collection of highly deliberative yet disconnected enclaves of policy discussion might be questioned on democratic grounds if ideas generated in public spaces fail to make their way into debates in empowered (decision-making) sites.

Interpretive approaches can help us understand the way different sites with a deliberative system interconnect (or not), and the nature of transmissions and blockages. There are, of course, modernist approaches that are used to chart and measure connections between different sites, and thereby provide insights for the theory and practice of deliberative democracy (e.g. Karpowitz and Raphael 2014). However, we contend that interpretive techniques are more attentive to the substance of these connections and the context in which they occur. Interpretive research can go beyond an analysis of the presence, apparent strength or relative frequency of connections and offer a deeper understanding of nature of these connections, and the democratic consequences of these.

Particularly useful in this regard are the subset of interpretive methods associated with discourse analysis, including narrative or frame analysis. Though the authors who employ these techniques typically have slightly different conceptions and purposes in mind<sup>4</sup>, what unites these approaches is an overarching focus on ‘the perspectives, constituted through shared language, that reflect and order actors’ understandings of political phenomena’ (for an overview, see Hajer and Laws, 2006). The value of adopting one among this family of approaches is that it enables the analyst to track sense-making across deliberative systems and thus to identify, contextualise and normatively assess the patterns in how ideas, claims and symbols shift across different sites of deliberation (Boswell, 2013).

1 A good example of the value that discursive analysis can produce is Stevenson and Dryzek's  
2 (2012) recent analysis of deliberation on global climate governance. They develop a rich  
3 discourse analysis across four non-state transnational fora held in the lead-up to the 2009  
4 Copenhagen Climate Summit. By seeking to understand, and not just map or quantify, the  
5 deliberation within these fora, they provide vivid insights into the interaction among the  
6 agents involved, and the manner in which these interactions encounter and reproduce  
7 particular interpretations. From this analysis, they find that these sites provided only limited  
8 opportunity for engagement among proponents of competing discourses, resulting in  
9 'enclaves' dominated by a single discourse. They conclude that this particular deliberative  
10 system displayed limited interconnectivity, and this resulted in group polarisation and further  
11 intractability.  
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29 Similarly, in her comparative study of 'honour killing' debates in Britain and Germany,  
30 Ercan (2014) conducts a frame analysis to map the existing frames (problem definitions) of  
31 these murders within formal-decision making circles (such as parliamentary debates) and the  
32 broader public sphere (e.g. media, civil society, women's movements). She then explores  
33 whether these two sites of deliberation (formal and informal) are connected with each other  
34 and whether their connection enables the transmission of the frames that were employed by  
35 the women's movement actors located in the civil society to the formal decision-making  
36 cycles. In this context, frame analysis offers a particularly useful interpretive tool to identify  
37 and track the flow of discourses from one site to another. It requires paying particular  
38 attention to the way policy problems are defined by policy relevant actors; it involves  
39 portraying the dominant and alternative ways of understanding the issue at stake in different  
40 sites, and by different types of actors (Ercan 2015).  
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1 Interpretive approaches also provide insights into the workings of transmission processes  
2 between different sites and actions. To date transmission processes within deliberative  
3 scholarship have largely been conceptualized via institutions (e.g. parliaments and media  
4 connecting the public sphere with decision makers) or actors (e.g. activists, social movements  
5 promoting discourses into the public sphere). Interpretive research can draw our attention to  
6 the subtle processes of interpretation in facilitating (and inhibiting) transmission between  
7 different sites within a deliberative system. They enable us to understand the role of language,  
8 meanings, metaphor, narrative and symbols in connecting (or disaggregating) different sites.  
9 We draw out these dynamics in much greater detail elsewhere (see Boswell *et al.* 2015;  
10 Hendriks, forthcoming), but a useful example for illustrative purposes is Dodge's (2014)  
11 comparative case work on environmental justice in New Mexico and coalbed methane  
12 development in Wyoming. Dodge shows how the storylines told by civil society  
13 organisations in both cases have successfully enabled coupling or alignment of sites in these  
14 deliberative systems. She suggests that this institutional coupling has strengthened the  
15 prospects of transmission from informal sites of claim-making to formal sites of decision-  
16 making, albeit that it remains vulnerable to contestation in the rival storylines told by other  
17 policy actors.

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43 Interpretive research in this vein can shed light on how actors and objects generate meanings  
44 in a given political debate, and whether these interpretations facilitate commonalities or  
45 disconnects between different deliberative sites. Similarly, the recent interpretive study of  
46 Lawrence and Bates (2014) on the deliberations of an online 'mommy group', the Salem  
47 Kids Group, reveals how certain metaphors used in the online discussions (metaphors of  
48 competition, cooperation and connection) led to face-to-face group meetings over the state of  
49 a local elementary school, and thus enabled the connection and transmission of ideas from  
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one site to another. In addition to offering a way of specific way to study transmissions, this sort of research also helps to reveal the persistent but obscured sources of distortion and exclusion in public deliberation—precisely the sorts of problems that a shift to a systems perspective should draw our attention to.

### **Role 3. Appreciating the context of deliberative forums and systems**

Interpretive research methods help researchers appreciate the way public deliberation of all varieties can be shaped and influenced by its context. Here we draw attention to the rich insights that interpretive research has brought to our understanding of the broader context of both small-scale deliberative forums and entire deliberative systems.

While a deliberative systems approach adopts a more expansive view of where deliberation takes place, it does not dismiss the potential role of innovative small-scale citizens' forums, or mini-publics, such as citizens' juries and deliberative polls (Mansbridge *et al.* 2012). From a systems perspective, what becomes particularly important is how well such forums are embedded within a deliberative system (Ercan and Hendriks, 2013). In other words, a deliberative systems approach requires examining how, and to what extent, discrete deliberative forums connect with other sites of the system, particularly conventional decision-making sites (Hendriks, forthcoming).

Interpretive research can help to identify how context affects the way small-scale forums can contribute to the overall health of a deliberative system. Unlike their modernist counterparts, interpretive studies of small-scale forums explore the rich policy and political context within which public deliberation is situated. In doing so, they reveal both the opportunities, but also



1 the challenges, of contemporary deliberative practices, particularly the fact that innovative  
2 institutional designs tend to be poorly integrated into the existing democratic practices and  
3 institutions.  
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9 Consider, for example, Hendriks' (2011) interpretive study of how advocacy groups and  
10 policy elites make sense of mini-publics, based on an analysis of cases from Germany and  
11 Australia. Through a combination of interpretive methods including interviews and  
12 documentary analysis (of media articles, public and parliamentary debates) this comparative  
13 study found that the discursive context of a mini-public greatly affects the attention it  
14 receives from interest advocates and elites. The interpretive insights gained by talking  
15 directly to policy elites and studying their reports and debates suggested that citizens' forums  
16 are most likely to influence policy elites when there is enough discursive activity to attract  
17 public and political interest, but not so much that the citizens' forum loses its capacity to be  
18 heard. In studying the dynamics of small-scale deliberation in context, interpretive studies  
19 have demonstrated that a healthy deliberative system requires more than designing innovative  
20 institutions and empowering citizens; it also matters how public input interfaces with, and  
21 impacts on, conventional policy actors and existing political institutions (Hendriks 2011).  
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44 Indeed one of the central challenges for future research on deliberative democracy is to  
45 consider how its ideals might extend into the broader political system, particularly in  
46 unfavourable settings (Thompson 2008; Pateman, 2012). Here, interpretive research is  
47 providing important inroads into understanding the possibilities and limitations of making  
48 existing political institutions and actors more deliberative. For example, there is a growing  
49 body of interpretive work examining the views of different policy elites towards deliberative  
50 norms and procedures, for example: public managers (Parkinson, 2004); interest groups  
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1 (Hendriks, 2011); activists (Levine and Nierras, 2007); elected officials (Nabatchi and Farrar,  
2 2011); and experts (Baber and Bartlett, 2007). The general picture painted by these studies is  
3 that, in the abstract, policy elites celebrate deliberative norms, but, in practice, they tend to  
4 resist inclusive and deliberative forms of governing, unless it offers strategic benefits such as  
5 publicity, information, prestige or desired policy outcomes (Hendriks, 2011). The  
6 relationship between elected representatives and public deliberation appears to be more  
7 complex; emerging interpretive research suggests that many elected officials welcome the  
8 idea of increased public input, but that the institutions within which they operate can hinder  
9 greater public deliberation (Hendriks, 2013). These studies provide important insights into  
10 what deliberative systems look like from the ‘inside’ and can help to inform ideas about how  
11 interactions and interconnections between components of the system can be steered, in order  
12 to achieve more inclusive and reflective deliberation at the larger scale.  
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31 Interpretive research can also aid our understanding of the broader institutional context of an  
32 entire deliberative system. Much of the empirical research on the institutional backdrop of  
33 public deliberation to date has focused on the structure of different political systems (for  
34 example, adversarial versus corporatist systems), or the prevailing decision making  
35 mechanisms (for example, majoritarian versus consensual). This research tends to posit an  
36 elective affinity between the aspirations of deliberative democracy and corporatism, or  
37 between a deliberative and consensual decision-making processes (Mansbridge, 1992; Steiner  
38 *et al.*, 2004). In contrast, adversarial democracies are usually characterised with no, or  
39 relatively few, attempts to regulate conflicts through cooperation and negotiation.  
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56 The problem with this kind of generalisation, which an interpretive empirical approach helps  
57 to overcome, is that it considers the deliberative quality of certain political systems as  
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1 independent of the actors or issues that trigger deliberation in the first place. The underlying  
2 assumption here is that the presence of certain institutional settings alone would ensure high  
3 quality deliberation. Studies relying on such assumptions emphasize, as Bevir and Ansari  
4 (2012, p.10) argue: ‘the explanatory power of the structure of rules and norms that constrain  
5 individual agency’. In contrast, interpretive studies, and particularly those that focus on the  
6 treatment of the same issue in different countries, reveal that the relationship between  
7 institutional design and deliberative quality is more complex than is usually assumed (Ercan,  
8 2014). Interpretive approaches shed light on these complexities and develop a more nuanced  
9 understanding about the interplay between a particular political system and the prospects for  
10 public deliberation.  
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28 Ercan’s (2012) comparative study of ‘honour killing’ debates in Britain and Germany, for  
29 example suggests that corporatist regimes, which were considered by some (see for example,  
30 Mansbridge 1992) as the most suitable institutional context for realising the aspirations of  
31 deliberative democracy, have important shortcomings when it comes to the deliberative  
32 treatment of culturally contested issues. An interpretive analysis of the way gendered cultural  
33 practices such as ‘honour killing’ have been framed and dealt with in the context of one  
34 recent corporatist political arrangement, the Islam Conference in Germany, shows that such  
35 arrangements may reinforce an essentialist notion of culture or religion by insisting on the  
36 principle of substantial representation. They require the presence of ‘authentic’ group  
37 representatives of ‘a’ culture speaking in one voice (Phillips, 2008, p.557). More importantly,  
38 states in corporatist regimes usually have to seek out and even ‘create’ such representatives to  
39 start negotiations with cultural minorities. This usually requires disregarding the intra-cultural  
40 diversity that exists within each culture and with this the multiplicity of voices on the issue at  
41 stake. An analysis of corporatist political arrangements, such as the German Islam  
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1 Conference, from an interpretivist lens reveals precisely this point. It puts the presumed  
2 deliberative capacity of corporatist regimes in question, and invites us to pay closer attention  
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4 to the issue at stake as well as the various publics and discourses that emerge around certain  
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6 issues (Ercan 2014; 2015).  
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## 10 11 12 13 **Conclusion** 14

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18 This article demonstrates the significant potential that interpretive approaches offer in  
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20 studying the multiplicities, complexities and dynamics of contemporary deliberative systems.  
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22 By drawing on existing and emerging studies we have shown how interpretive research (and  
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24 its underlying philosophical presuppositions) can help to identify and portray deliberative  
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26 sites, agents and elements, study connections and transmissions, and understand the broader  
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28 political context of both small-scale deliberative forums, and entire deliberative systems. We  
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30 acknowledge that this list of roles that interpretive research can play in the study of  
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32 deliberative systems is not definitive; however it represents some of the most significant  
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34 contributions that interpretive methods can make to empirical studies of deliberative systems.  
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43 The application of interpretive methods can generate important theoretical insights for  
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45 deliberative democracy, and in doing so reframe scholarly debates. Consider for example,  
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47 Parkinson's (2006) interpretive study of the way legitimacy was enacted in the context of a  
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49 deliberative system in the UK. This study sharpened theoretical thinking on what democratic  
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51 legitimacy implies in the messy world of public deliberation. Similarly, Hendriks' (2006)  
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53 initial empirical studies of deliberative forums inspired a theoretical critique on how  
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55 deliberative theory conceptualises different kinds of actors in civil society. Hajer's  
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60 dramaturgical analysis of public debates in contexts of trauma, including the aforementioned  
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1 account of the rebuilding of Ground Zero in New York (Hajer, 2005) and the response to the  
2 assassination of Dutch artist Theo van Gogh, provided theoretical insights how deliberation is  
3 performed on multiple stages (Hajer and Uitermark, 2008).  
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9 Of course, we recognise that interpretive approaches may not always offer the most suitable  
10 or appropriate means to study deliberative systems. They require resource intensive methods  
11 that can be costly and time-consuming and may demand data that is difficult or unethical to  
12 access. Moreover, interpretive research can place demands and expectations on scholars, such  
13 as being reflexive, adaptable and flexible, that may not align well with available research  
14 skills or institutional expectations (Hendriks, 2007). Interpretive research approaches are also  
15 unlikely to work in contexts where the research might be perceived as untrustworthy, for  
16 example when the researcher inappropriately influences the conduct of the project, or  
17 misinterprets the findings (Dryzek, 2005). Researchers can enhance the trustworthiness of  
18 their interpretive research by being reflexive and transparent about their research approach,  
19 by drawing on multiple sources and by considering contradictory interpretations of the same  
20 phenomenon (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012).  
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41 Interpretive approaches may also be inappropriate for particular kinds of research goals. Take,  
42 for example, a desire to draw extensive comparative insights. Due to their in-depth nature,  
43 interpretive studies are typically limited to discrete or small-n case studies. While this can  
44 provide richer insights into particular contexts, they risk being dismissed as idiosyncratic. As  
45 noted before, one of the goals of interpretive research is contextuality, rather than  
46 generalizability, yet, in order for specific studies to speak to, and draw lessons for,  
47 deliberative democracy, one-off interpretive studies need to connect their particular findings  
48 to broader empirical or theoretical concerns. One strategy is to consider comparative themes  
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1 through multiple case studies (Goodin and Dryzek, 2006; Ryan and Smith, 2012). Designing  
2 a comparative dimension into any interpretive study must proceed with caution, and ideally  
3 not affect the inductive nature of the study, particularly the capacity of the researcher to  
4 remain open to emergent ‘non-comparative’ research themes (Hendriks, 2007). In the case of  
5 interpretive research comparison must work ‘from the [researcher’s] ability to make sense of  
6 the singularities of each system, rather than from the capacity either to slot them into pre-  
7 determined boxes or to place them on a continuum’ (Chabal and Daloz 2006, p. 63).  
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19 This article has contributed to what we hope is an ongoing conversation about the role of  
20 interpretive methods in studying public deliberation. Much more discussion is required; and  
21 two questions, we believe, deserve particular attention. The first concerns the relationship  
22 between normative theory and empirical social research: *how should empirical researchers*  
23 *navigate the normative agenda of deliberative democracy?* In the modernist tradition the  
24 tendency has been to use normative theory to ask: ‘Does deliberative democracy work?’ (see,  
25 for example, Conover *et al.*, 2002; Button and Ryfe, 2005) or even ‘Is deliberative  
26 democracy a falsifiable theory?’ (Mutz, 2008). While such questions are interesting, it is  
27 important to keep in mind that when proceeding from a normative theory, questions of  
28 ‘feasibility’ or of ‘fittingness’ can easily result in an ‘empirically informed pessimism’ and  
29 work to reaffirm the status-quo (Stears 2005, p.326). More fundamentally, deliberative  
30 democracy is not an additional theoretical model of democracy that can be verified or  
31 falsified based on an empirical inquiry (Dryzek, 2007). Rather, it offers a set of normative  
32 criteria upon which the actually existing democracies can be analysed, criticized and  
33 improved. The task then of normatively informed empirical research should be to: ‘help in  
34 the refinement of deliberative democratic theory, making it more sensitive to real-world  
35 constraints and opportunities’ (Dryzek, 2007, p.240). For interpretive researchers, this  
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1 involves capturing the lived experiences, voices and complexities of public deliberation, and  
2 reflecting on their theoretical implications for normative theory (Hendriks, 2007). In this  
3 context, the role of interpretive research is obviously not to test practice against democratic  
4 norms (in the modernist tradition), but rather to help us understand how deliberation takes  
5 place in practice, and then feed this pragmatic perspective back to theoretical debates. How  
6 interpretive researchers can best engage, question and update normative theory with their  
7 findings, and the challenges of doing so, is a topic that deserves much more consideration. In  
8 taking up this conversation, deliberative democrats could do well to consider fostering the  
9 kind of dialogical approach between empirical inquiry and normative theory that has been  
10 forged in other fields; for example, participatory research (Font *et al.*, 2012), and feminist  
11 theory (Martineau and Squires, 2012).

12 The second methodological question that deserves greater consideration is: *what are the*  
13 *possibilities and limitations of linking different kinds of approaches to studying deliberative*  
14 *democracy?* There has been a call for empirical studies of deliberative democracy to embrace  
15 mixed methods, because both interpretive and modernist approaches have strengths and  
16 weaknesses (Dryzek, 2005; Neblo, 2005). Yet, how these two approaches to studying the  
17 social world ought to combine, and their compatibility when doing so, is a subject that  
18 deliberative democrats need to consider more deeply. Simply pairing different research  
19 approaches together with the goal of methodological pluralism does not necessarily mean a  
20 happy marriage (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012). Indeed, there can be considerable  
21 challenges when different research approaches – each with their different ontological and  
22 epistemological commitments – are combined under a single research question. The  
23 possibility for mixing research approaches appears to be more promising when different  
24 methodologies (each with their assumptions about what we can know about the social world

1 and how) are applied sequentially in the one project to separate research questions (Schwartz-  
2 Shea and Yanow, 2012). The most appropriate combination of methods for studying complex  
3 deliberative systems will depend on the research questions under investigation. For example,  
4 one ongoing research project we are engaged in is exploring how policy discourses move (if  
5 at all) between online and face-to-face sites of public deliberation in the age of  
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7 communicative plenty (Ercan *et al.* 2015). For this task, we are employing a combination of  
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9 interpretive and quantitative methods; we will analyse interpretive data from interviews,  
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11 parliamentary debate and policy documents together with ‘big data’ trawled from online  
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13 spaces, such as Twitter and Facebook. Lessons from current and future projects such as these  
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15 will provide valuable insights into how to best combine different methods for studying  
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17 complex deliberative systems.  
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29 In this article, we have intentionally explored the possibilities for using interpretive  
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31 approaches in future deliberative research, rather than detailing how to use particular methods  
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33 for particular purposes. Indeed, one of the strengths of interpretive research is that it is  
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35 iterative, flexible and guided by practice, and, as such, it is likely to provide insights in  
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37 unforeseen ways into unforeseen problems and opportunities for deliberative systems. It  
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39 therefore represents a vital part of the empirical armoury in the broader goal of understanding,  
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41 assessing and improving deliberative democracy at the large scale.  
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1 <sup>1</sup> While some qualitative researchers share these underlying presuppositions, many do not. Today, the  
2  
3 expression ‘qualitative research’ refers to a range of methods that are not necessarily meaning or experience  
4  
5 focused, such as focus groups and surveys (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000, 2). In other words, the label  
6  
7 ‘qualitative’ is not a proxy for interpretive (see also Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2006).  
8

9 <sup>2</sup> We acknowledge that these characteristics are of course not exclusive to interpretive research alone. Indeed  
10  
11 the simplistic dichotomy between modernist and interpretive research can be break down in practice; some  
12  
13 research methodologies, such as Q-methodology, combine elements that share characteristics of both modernist  
14  
15 and interpretive approaches  
16

17 <sup>3</sup> It is important to note that many studies of deliberation that may be identified—either by the authors  
18  
19 themselves or by others—as ‘interpretive’ do not conform with the definition and explanation we offer in this  
20  
21 article. Most notably, studies using the Discourse Quality Index (DQI) have an interpretive element in their  
22  
23 content analyses and studies adopting Q-methodology are aimed at uncovering subjectivity; both approaches  
24  
25 have played an important role in recent empirical work on deliberative democracy (see Steenbergen *et al.*, 2003;  
26  
27 Niemeyer, 2004) Yet, these studies are primarily interested in measuring deliberation and its outcomes, not in  
28  
29 understanding its meaning, and, more importantly, similar to other studies we discussed above, their application  
30  
31 has generally been limited to micro forums.  
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34 <sup>4</sup> See Boswell (2013) for an overview of the overlaps and discrepancies among discourse, frame, and narrative  
35  
36 analyses, especially as manifested in their application in studies of public deliberation. The broader point we  
37  
38 want to stress here is that the shared emphasis within this ‘family of approaches’—especially those conducted  
39  
40 with a richly-detailed and context-specific focus—can reveal important insights about how actors make sense of  
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42 and argue about complex and contested issues right across deliberative systems.  
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