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Scaling Up Good Listening: An Assessment Framework for AI-Powered Mass Deliberation Models

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Abstract

The challenges of scaling up deliberative processes to mass audiences have long been highlighted by deliberative theorists. Apart from the difficulty of keeping content quality at a high enough level as more and more people get involved, the technical feasibility of mass participation in a structured form of deliberation has been a serious constraint. The development of digital platforms and AI systems are now making it technically possible to extend structured participation to wider audiences. This article addresses the following question: How can we ensure that good listening is scaled up in these new contexts? Drawing on an analytical framework based on recent contributions in the areas of deliberative democracy and AI, we evaluate the ability of current models of AI-powered mass deliberation to incentivize receptive, responsive, and apophatic listening. We further develop an assessment tool, the "Listening Incentives Score," that can be used to assess whether AI-powered mass deliberation models provide participants with the adequate channels, facilitation, training, and systems of rewards and sanctions to incentivize them to engage in good listening.

Keywords

AI; apophatic listening; deliberative democracy; listening crisis; listening incentives score; mass deliberation; receptive listening; responsive listening

1. Introduction

Democracies worldwide are confronted with a crisis of listening (Macnamara, 2016, p. 3). Citizens do not feel heard by those who should represent them. They often feel that the political process is increasingly unaccountable to them and that they no longer identify with their governing institutions and the laws they

promulgate (Mansbridge, 2020). This legitimacy deficit of political leaders and their decisions further translates into alarmingly low rates of political participation and often leads to outbursts of civic anger that threaten the stability of democratic systems in many countries (Landemore & Fourniau, 2022).

Moreover, citizens seem less and less capable of truly listening to each other's political concerns. The public sphere is flooded by polarising sound bites, demagoguery, and manipulative misinformation, drawing citizens further and further away from each other and making them less and less capable of engaging in the quality political talk that democracies need in order to flourish (Lafont, 2015).

To restore faith in democratic principles, political authorities must ensure proper channels and leverages through which the citizens' input can be further integrated into the decision-making process (Landemore, 2020; Mansbridge, 2020; Velikanov & Prosser, 2017). Citizens must be given more opportunities to express their political voice, to cultivate it by engaging in deliberation with those who have different opinions on public issues, and to authentically listen and be listened to (Briggs, 2008; Fishkin et al., 2021; Huckfeldt et al., 2004; Landemore, 2020). Large-scale deliberation models have long been proposed as a solution to this crisis of listening, but their technical feasibility has always been a serious limitation. The availability of digital platforms and the possibility of incorporating AI systems into these efforts have now made it possible for such deliberative formats to be implemented in real-life settings.

In this article, we develop a framework for assessing whether these deliberative models incentivize good listening. In order to operationalize good listening in a deliberative context, we must first clarify the notion of democratic deliberation and provide a clear view of its own quality standards.

2. The Deliberative Ideal of Democracy

2.1. The Deliberative Turn in the Theory of Democracy

Dryzek (2000) theorizes the "deliberative turn" as representing a shift away from traditional forms of democracy, one that emphasizes authentic deliberation among equals as the primary source of legitimacy for policies and laws (Cohen, 1989, pp. 17–34; Dryzek, 2000, pp. 1–2). Political decisions cannot be imposed on those concerned but must be the result of a deliberative process in which they are subjected to public critique and defended by arguments and reasons that are accessible and acceptable for the wide citizenry (Bächtiger et al., 2018, p. 2; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, pp. 3–7; Habermas, 2006, pp. 21–26; Lafont, 2006, pp. 3–6).

Deliberation is defined as a type of communicative exchange that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values, and interests regarding matters of common concern, as well as assessing relevant facts from multiple points of view (Bächtiger et al., 2018, p. 2; Fishkin & Mansbridge, 2017, p. 8). Deliberation is distinct from adversarial interactions because it involves a level of reflexivity on the part of both citizens and authorities, as well as an attempt to discover solutions that make sense for all participants (Barber, 1984, p. 175; Velikanov & Prosser, 2017, p. 213). Deliberative processes are meant to help participants regain their capacity to see their own actions as part of a higher-order act that impacts their entire community (Barber, 1984, pp. 174–177, 193–197; Searle, 2010, pp. 42–61).

The deliberative model of democracy offers a more effective way of involving citizens in political decision-making than voting by empowering those who have been systematically marginalized on a political level (O'Flynn, 2006, p. 1). The inclusion of diverse voices in deliberative processes thus becomes a way to make decisions more legitimate and more epistemically robust. Since political decisions typically deal with vast areas of society where uncertainty and complexity reign (Barber, 1984, pp. 129–131), various contributions coming from sufficiently diverse individuals are needed to reach good decisions (Landemore, 2022, pp. 162–163). Deliberative exchanges make it possible for gaps in individual knowledge to be filled with the help of others who have direct experience with the subject at hand, which political leaders may lack (Landemore, 2022, pp. 150–155).

One of the ideals of deliberation is to bring about an increased mutual awareness of citizens' interests and an empowerment of the citizens to act on them in a collective manner (Briggs, 2008, p. 5; Habermas, 1984, p. 286; Rojas, 2008, p. 459). In Iris Marion Young's view, confrontation with different cultural perspectives, interests, and meanings teaches participants an important lesson about the partiality of their own perspective, which further enhances their overall social cognition (Young, 2006, p. 128). This is why, in deliberative settings, differences should not be denied, minimized, or explained away but taken seriously (Eveland et al., 2023, p. 1; Scudder, 2020, p. 144). Even as collective decisions are reached, they must make room for dissenting views to be maintained and left open for further deliberation (Barber, 1984, pp. 135, 192).

2.2. The Standards of Good Deliberation

Concerning the variables that influence the quality of deliberative processes, a variety of perspectives can be found in the literature. For example, Fishkin's position (2009, pp. 33–34) is that the quality of deliberation is influenced by five conditions: information (participants should have access to accurate and relevant data on the issue that is discussed); substantive balance (interpreted as the degree to which reasons offered by one side are addressed by arguments offered by the other side); diversity (defined as the extent to which all significant public positions are represented in the deliberation); conscientiousness (the degree to which participants honestly assess the merits of arguments); and equal consideration (the degree to which reasons are considered on their merits regardless of who presents them).

According to Philip Pettit (2003), the "deliberative democratic ideal" should be understood in terms of three constraints. The "inclusive constraint" stipulates that all members should possess an equal right to vote on the resolution of pertinent collective issues. The "judgmental constraint" emphasizes the necessity for deliberation (prior to voting) based on shared concerns regarding the optimal solution. Finally, the "dialogical constraint" is understood in terms of the need for open and unforced dialogue between members of a democratic society (Pettit, 2003, pp. 139–140).

A widely accepted view is that deliberative design should aim to create the premises for the type of listening that simultaneously fulfills the epistemic function, the ethical function, and the democratic function, theorized as being essential in deliberative processes at any level (Mansbridge et al., 2012, pp. 11–12). The epistemic function is associated with ensuring that decisions are properly informed by facts and logic and are the result of substantive and meaningful consideration of relevant reasons. The ethical function of the system regards the promotion of mutual respect between citizens. The democratic function involves ensuring an inclusive political process based on the assumption that all participants have equal rights (Mansbridge et al., 2012, pp. 11–12).

Summarizing these views, the conditions for good deliberation refer to different aspects of this communicative exchange, some of which are related to the input (relevant and accurate information, diversity of perspectives), while others focus on how this input should be managed and how the participants should be treated (substantive balance, conscientiousness, equal consideration given to the various viewpoints expressed, and respect shown to their proponents). In our view, the dialogical constraint can be understood as a core premise of good deliberation, without which the inclusive and judgmental constraint cannot be fulfilled. In what follows, we focus on the conditions of receptivity that need to be met for citizens to give proper consideration to what is shared in a deliberative setting (Scudder, 2020, p. 34). We draw on three theoretical contributions concerning good political listening—listening that regards discursive exchanges on political topics (Eveland et al., 2023).

3. Good Political Listening in Democratic Deliberation

In Scudder's view, the quality of political listening depends on the uptake of citizens' inputs, defined as "the act of giving due consideration to the arguments, stories, and perspectives that particular citizens share in deliberation" (Scudder, 2020, p. 20). Therefore, the manner in which participants act in listening (the "ilauditory" act) matters. Citizens should listen seriously, attentively, and humbly, investing time and energy in hearing others express their opinions without pretending to know the outcome of the conversation. They should continue to listen with an open mind, even when they realize it is very difficult to come to an agreement (Scudder, 2020, pp. 115–116). "Uptake" is seen by Scudder as a middle ground between inclusion and actual influence on the final decisions—while it requires more than granting someone access to contribute to a deliberative group, it does not require that each person's contribution will shape the final decisions (Scudder, 2020, p. 44). Some views may be left behind even after having been given proper consideration, since differences may persist even after careful weighing of all arguments. Although decisions that are made can eventually leave out some people's views and preferences, they are only legitimate if they have explicitly addressed those people's views (Scudder, 2020, p. 147).

Susan Bickford (1996) examines the role of listening in helping participants deal with the unavoidable conflict that underlies democratic life in pluralistic societies. She argues that communication presupposes both conflict between different individuals and the possibility of discovering shared values. If we automatically agreed, we would not need to speak or listen or argue, nor would we if our differences were completely irreconcilable (Bickford, 1996, p. 4). Bickford draws on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception to conceptualize the notion of "listening" in terms of the relation between object and horizon, or figure and background. Listening means accepting that, for the moment, we—as listeners—are the background, and the speaker becomes the figure on which we concentrate our attention (Bickford, 1996, pp. 23–24). Giving attention in listening is a process by which we give meaning to what is being said and to the person saying it (Bickford, 1996, pp. 21–22). Good listening is, therefore, the process of creating a path between the experiences of the other and one's own experiences (Bickford, 1996, pp. 147–148), thus advancing toward the joint construction of an intersubjective world (Bickford, 1996, p. 173).

Bickford's view is echoed by Andrew Dobson (2014), who elaborates on the notion of "good listening" (Dobson, 2014, p. 51). Dobson differentiates between three main types of listening: "compassionate," "cataphatic," and "apophatic" (the use of the terms "cataphatic" and "apophatic" being inspired by the contribution of Leonard Waks regarding listening in educational settings; cf. Waks, 2007, 2010). The "compassionate" listener gives

up one's own thoughts, judgments, or feelings in order to make room for those of the speaker. According to Dobson, this type of listening is not suitable in a political context since it undermines the conditions for genuine dialogue. Cataphatic listening occurs when listeners impose their own categories on what is being said, reorganizing the received content in their minds so as to reinforce their previously held views. This type of listening will inevitably lead to an understanding deficit. Apophatic listening requires the listener to open up authentically to the speaker, to make an effort to really hear what the speaker is saying, and to further ask the necessary questions to give meaning to the novel perspectives and categories that the speaker proposes. Thus, apophatic listening involves a temporary suspension of one's own categories, leaving room for a critical distance that makes authentic dialogue possible. In this way, apophatic listening leads to a co-creation of meaning because the listener is not only open to what the other wants to say but also to the meanings that are developed between oneself and the other (Dobson, 2014, pp. 64–69).

In Dobson's opinion, apophatic listening can have a significant effect on the refinement of the deliberative processes meant to tackle disagreements in democracy. For this to happen, it must take place in a structured dialogue between the listener and the speaker, organized so as to make listening to the other person an obligation (Dobson, 2014, p. 107). To assess the quality of listening in a democracy, one needs to focus on the set of procedures, conditions, and resources that can increase citizens's ability and willingness to engage in listening.

In the following section, we explore different paths that scholars and practitioners have proposed for structuring deliberative experiences in order to cultivate good listening.

4. Structuring Deliberation to Maximize Good Listening

The notion of "deliberative design" encompasses the set of decisions that structure the deliberative process as such: how participants are selected, how the deliberative exchange is organized, to what degree facilitation ensures an equal distribution of speaking rights, how the purpose of the event is presented to the participants, and what resources and cognitive tools are offered to participants to achieve that purpose. By employing structured deliberative processes, we can address the challenges that informal political conversation inevitably poses, such as the lack of a listening disposition that stems from fundamental differences in opinion, interests, preferences, identities, or group affiliations. Informal political conversation creates the premise for a confrontational experience in which the gains of one of the speakers are the losses of the other. Therefore, they tend to be less inclined to listen and learn from their exchange of views (Mutz, 2006). Structured forms of deliberation are meant to create a safe space for a diversity of opinions to be expressed and given due consideration.

The resources that are made available to participants can also contribute to the deliberative processes having better results. It is essential to provide participants with balanced expert information on the topic (Fishkin et al., 2021) and further expert support to revise and shape their proposals. Structuring deliberative interactions in a manner that enhances good listening also means ensuring that the group composition is sufficiently diverse (Huckfeldt et al., 2004, pp. 3–4). The most widespread approach to meeting this requirement is that of creating a mini-public, seen as a microcosm of a particular community. Citizens are recruited to be part of a mini-public by random sampling and called in for certain periods of time to deliberate on a particular issue (Fishkin & Mansbridge, 2017, p. 8).

Deliberative formats include deliberative polls, citizens' juries, consensus conferences, and citizen assemblies (Fishkin & Mansbridge, 2017, p. 8). A systematic perspective regarding the different purposes of mini-publics is provided by Fung (2003, p. 340, as cited in Rountree et al., 2022, p. 150), who distinguishes between: educative fora (developing and refining citizens' opinions on policy issues); participatory advisory panels (shaping citizen recommendations that are further sent to policymakers for consideration); mini-publics focused on participatory problem-solving collaboration (ensuring that citizens are involved in monitoring policymakers' progress on an issue and are given channels to provide feedback on their decisions); and mini-publics aimed at participatory democratic governance (entrusting them with decision-making power).

Structured forms of deliberation have a serious critique to face: The rest of the citizens will not be bound by the decisions made by mini-publics and may not accept them as democratically legitimate and representative (Lafont, 2015, p. 55; Ţuţui, 2012, pp. 74–78). In an attempt to address this limitation, several authors have suggested that digital technologies and AI systems could be used to increase citizen participation in a structured mass deliberation process (Landemore, 2024; Velikanov & Prosser, 2017). However, this increased participation poses serious risks, one of which is that it would only translate into a proliferation of inputs. In this context, we investigate the conditions under which these mass deliberation formats can also contribute to a scaling up of good listening.

To operationalize the concept of "scaling up" good listening, we must first make explicit the two dimensions of "scaling up" deliberation: On the one hand, it depicts the viability of deliberation as a broad and sustained logic of political and social action. Thus, "scaling up" is related to contextual incentives as well as to individual abilities for performing successfully in deliberation. On the other hand, "scaling up" refers to deliberative action that has a discernible impact on policy outcomes (Bächtiger & Wegmann, 2014, p. 118). "Scaling up" good listening would, therefore, require that mass deliberation models provide resources and contextual incentives for citizens and political decision-makers to give proper consideration to the deliberative input. The meaning we give to the notion of "good listening" is closely tied to the deliberative values that were discussed in Section 2. An adequate deliberative model would incentivize listeners to assess the informativity, accuracy, and relevance of the input, to give equal consideration and respect to all the contributions set forth by the other participants, to evaluate the merits of the arguments set forth (conscientiousness), and adequately address them (substantive balance). In the following section, we provide a framework that can be used to evaluate mass deliberation models from this perspective.

5. A Framework for Assessing Listening Quality in AI-powered Mass-Deliberation Models

5.1. A Lexical Scale of Listening Quality

In order to evaluate whether a model incentivizes good listening along these lines, we borrow from Scudder (2022, pp. 118–121) the idea of a lexical scale describing different levels of listening quality. Adapting Scudder's Listening Quality Index to our research question, we distinguish between receptive, responsive, and apophatic listening. Placing them along a lexical scale would mean that receptive listening would be needed for responsive listening, and responsive listening would, in turn, be needed for apophatic listening.

We will further analyze how the mass deliberation models can incentivize each of these listening quality levels.

A mass deliberation model incentivizes receptive listening when it creates the conditions for participants to access the content set forth by other citizens and to signal having done so. In the case of direct engagement in deliberative interactions, such signals could be a nod or other signs of paying attention. In the case of written comments, such indicators would be the number of views of a certain post, the time spent while reading it, the eye movements of the readers, or other signaling systems (such as the "seen" function in various social media apps). In AI-powered mass deliberation, various systems of monitoring whether participants have indeed accessed and understood the other contributions can be set in place.

A mass deliberation model incentivizes responsive listening when listeners are provided with the technical possibilities and adequate resources to ask questions, require details, or nuances regarding the speaker's position. Responsive listening involves participants respectfully addressing the content of the interlocutors' arguments and giving an honest assessment of their contribution in terms of informativity, relevance, and accuracy.

A mass deliberation model incentivizes apophatic listening when citizens are provided with proper conditions to engage in the construction of intersubjective meanings that can further become novel solutions to common issues. Apophatic listening entails a possible revision of one's initial ideas in the joint search for common ground. This level of listening is necessary because quality deliberation cannot be reduced to the epistemic gain of becoming aware of each other's positions. It needs to leave open the possibility for democratically valuable solutions that would belong to everyone involved.

5.2. Whose Listening is Being Assessed?

Mass deliberation formats involve distinct types of listeners. The first type of listener is the citizen who listens to other citizens (we will refer to this as interpersonal listening). In the case of ordinary citizen interactions, the facilitator is expected to take the necessary measures to ensure that participants engage in receptive, responsive, and apophatic listening. This function can be delegated to human moderators or AI agents.

As contributions to a mass deliberative process multiply, it becomes necessary to include a second type of listener. We will refer to it as the aggregative listener. Its function is that of analyzing, synthesizing, and reporting on the contributions advanced by the participants in deliberative settings in order to extract the most valuable viewpoints according to the aforementioned standards of good deliberation: relevance, accuracy, and diversity. The aggregative listener must ensure substantive balance, equal consideration of the contributions, and an honest and competent assessment of the merits of each of them. Aggregative listening functions as an iterative procedure, being performed at every transition from one stage of deliberation to the next. It is a specific function currently delegated to both human and AI agents. Receptive listening, in this case, would involve including all the contributions in an unbiased manner. Responsive listening would entail the aggregator subjecting its report to an assessment that would be open to all participants. Participants should be able to ask questions and provide suggestions on the content of the report. The aggregative listener should further provide a substantive response to these suggestions. Apophatic listening would be attained if the aggregator were open to revising the categories and the ideas initially included in its report.

To secure uptake of the deliberative output, every model needs a communication channel and a binding agreement between public officials and the participants in the mass deliberation process. Without it, the

process would defeat its purpose of improving the quality of democracy and empowering citizens to influence political life (Mansbridge, 2020, pp. 20–22). The third type of listener is, therefore, the political decision-maker who should access the aggregative listener's output containing both the recommendations and the main reasons expressed in support of them. Political actors should be incentivized to give due consideration to the aggregative listener's output without dismissing or explaining away any of its contents (which would amount to receptive listening). Such incentives may include the technical possibility for citizens to track and assess politicians' contributions in this respect. Political actors should also provide a substantive response regarding the possibilities of implementing the proposals included in the aggregative listener's output (which would count as responsive listening). Politicians' demonstrated openness to change their viewpoints and policies according to citizens' recommendations would be a sign of apophatic listening.

5.3. Introducing the Listening Incentives Score

We have developed an assessment tool, called the "Listening Incentives Score" (LIS), which focuses on the listening incentives included in the design of mass deliberation: a channel that allows listeners to access each other's contribution; a facilitator that organizes the communicative exchange so as to maximize the chances for good listening to be performed; a form of training that would increase participants' awareness of good listening and their capacity to perform it; an extrinsic motivation system (based on rewards, sanctions) for stimulating participants to pay increased attention to how they act in listening.

5.3.1. The Need for a Channel

Concerning receptive listening, the possibility for citizens to access each other's contributions depends on whether the deliberative model includes a channel for this purpose. This would mean the technical possibility to hear or read the original viewpoints that were expressed by citizens. This may include a translating function for cases where participants have different cultural or linguistic backgrounds. A channel for responsive listening would provide the technical possibility to ask questions, comment, and engage in an exchange of reasons. In a face-to-face setting, participants would benefit from adequate resources to react to each other's interventions. In a digital setting, an explicit function for participant commentaries and reactions should be included in the deliberative platform. Providing a channel for apophatic listening would involve creating the technical possibility for participants to engage in in-depth deliberation, seeking common ground, and further exploring innovative perspectives that transcend their initial positions.

5.3.2. The Need for Facilitation

An essential condition would be to employ specialized facilitation for all types of listeners. Without it, participants' quality of listening will depend solely on individual dispositions. A listening-focused facilitator should not only ensure an atmosphere of equality and political correctness but should create the conditions for participants to be willing and capable of engaging in a substantive exchange of reasons.

To encourage receptive listening, facilitators should ensure that no participant silences the others or engages in other activities that make them lose their focus on the ongoing deliberation. Facilitators could remind participants to access the content that was previously posted or expressed by other participants. They could further support participants in using the translating functions or the additional informative resources made

available by the organizers of the deliberation. To encourage responsive listening, facilitators should invite participants to express their position regarding the arguments that were set forth and organize the exchange of reasons between participants in a manner that increases the informativity, relevance, diversity, equal consideration, respect, substantive balance, and conscientiousness of the deliberative exchange. Facilitators should use the deliberative phase dedicated to apophatic listening to challenge contributors to think beyond their initial categories and positions, negotiate new meanings that may lead them to a shared viewpoint, and cultivate their democratic capacities.

5.3.3. The Need for Training

Another key requirement is for participants to be trained in good listening (Brownell, 2024, pp. 5–7). The training program could be used at the beginning of the mass deliberation process to explain the distinct objectives of receptive, responsive, and apophatic listening, and to offer practical advice on how to perform each of them. It could further involve training sessions organized at key points in the mass deliberation to correct the mistakes that may have appeared in the deliberative exchanges before they become entrenched modes of relating to each other.

A receptive listening training would be focused on instilling a polite and respectful attitude in the participants and on increasing their ability to follow the logical sequences in the interlocutors' arguments. A responsive listening training would increase participants' capacity to further clarify the relationship between their own position and their interlocutors' by asking pertinent questions and by expressing their assessment of these contributions in terms of informativity, relevance, and accuracy. An apophatic listening training would aim at developing participants' ability to transcend their usual categories and their willingness to engage in a process of searching for a common solution.

5.3.4. The Need for a Rewards and Sanctions System

In addition, listening experts should accompany the deliberative groups and provide feedback on the listening performance of each participant. This feedback should be further related to a system of extrinsic motivation (rewards and sanctions that may be symbolic or material) in order to increase their attention to how they act when they listen (Scudder, 2020, p. 88).

In the case of receptive listening, sanctions should be given for inappropriate behaviors such as interrupting, silencing, or not listening to the speaker. Rewards should be given for correctly answering random questions that test whether the listener has paid attention. Sanctions for failing to engage in responsive listening should be given for a significant number of irrelevant questions or for the attempt to downplay or distort the viewpoints expressed during the debate. Rewards should be given for adequately addressing the argumentative content set forth by the other participants. Regarding apophatic listening, sanctions should be given to the participants who refuse to take part in the in-depth phase of the deliberation process. Rewards should be given for valuable contributions along the lines of identifying common ground and novel solutions.

5.4. The scope of LIS

These resources and conditions are needed for all types of listeners. Therefore, we include the need for a channel, facilitation, training, and a rewards and sanctions system for the aggregative listeners as well, whether they are human or AI. They are needed because the aggregative listener's epistemic competence and fairness heavily influence the quality of the output that is transmitted further. Human experts should be in charge of training, facilitation, and the supervision of the rewards and sanctions system to prevent the aggregators' reports from being flooded by irrelevant, incorrect, or outright dangerous content. In the absence of these resources and conditions, the aggregative listeners may impose their own criteria and categories, making their output less capable of accurately reflecting the essential components of the argumentative exchange.

Moreover, proper channels, facilitation, training sessions, and an extrinsic motivation system should also be in place for political actors' involvement. In this manner, we would ensure that they are treated as equal participants in the deliberative process. In addition, this would increase their awareness of the responsibility they have towards the citizens in a deliberative democratic setting. They would thus be required to get effectively involved in the deliberation and give an account of their positions during the process.

Table 1 illustrates the manner in which LIS can be used to assess the presence of receptive, responsive, and apophatic listening incentives in a mass deliberation model. We opt for a dichotomous approach to assessing the deliberative models from the perspective of the listening quality they incentivize: The presence of an element will bring one point in the final score we assign to each of the models we assess, while the absence of an element will bring zero points in the final score (see Tables 1 and 2). What we evaluate is whether the models include—by design—the resources, procedures, and conditions that would be needed for good listening to be incentivized. This conceptual tool also allows for a comparative assessment of mass deliberative models (as illustrated in Table 2). A higher score would indicate the superiority of a model regarding its capacity to incentivize good listening.

Table 1. LIS.

Type of listener	Resources	Receptive listening	Responsive listening	Apophatic listening	LIS
Interpersonal listener	Channel				
	Facilitation				
	Training				
	Rewards/Sanctions				
Aggregative listener	Channel				
	Facilitation				
	Training				
	Rewards/Sanctions				
Political decision-making listener	Channel				
	Facilitation				
	Training				
	Rewards/Sanctions				
Total score:					

This analytical framework can be used to assess the listening incentive system of a variety of mass deliberative formats—online or offline, synchronous or asynchronous, AI-mediated or not. In the following section, we illustrate its use by applying it to the AI-powered deliberation models proposed by Velikanov and Prosser (2017) and Hélène Landemore (2024). As we shall see, their views differ regarding the functions they entrust AI with. We focus on the communicative channels, affordances, and incentive systems they incorporate in order to create the premises for good deliberation.

6. Applying the Analytical Framework

We now proceed to a description followed by a comparative assessment of the design of two AI-powered mass deliberation models to identify the extent to which they incentivize good listening.

6.1. AI-Powered Mass Deliberation Models

The first model we analyze is that of Velikanov and Prosser (2017), called "mass online deliberation" (MOD), in which all citizens are brought together in a virtual room to engage in an extensive deliberation around a specific issue. They address the inclusion problem by imposing the condition that the deliberative event ("Deliberandum") be intensely promoted so that all citizens who may be interested in the issue would be adequately informed about its purpose. In order to avoid duplicate, fake, and unauthorized contributions, enrolled citizens may be required to upload identity data so that they can be compared with the appropriate national registry or subjected to other forms of controlled registration (Velikanov & Prosser, 2017, p. 237).

There are three main steps in the mass online deliberation envisaged by Velikanov and Prosser. The first is called "ideation" and involves citizens uploading written proposals, while a clustering algorithm operates in the background and organizes these proposals. During this phase, citizens receive the expert information that is relevant to the topic, in an accessible format. Each proposal is sent by an AI system to randomly selected citizens who are invited to rate its clarity, the extent to which they agree with the proposal, and whether they would recommend that other citizens take it into consideration (Velikanov & Prosser, 2017, p. 246). The AI system offers a bird's eye view of the topics discussed up to a certain point to ensure that people coming in at different stages can find out what has been discussed prior to their entering the platform. Citizens can access these AI-generated visual representations of the topics discussed each time they enter the platform. The second phase is called "consolidation" and involves the AI systems associating each cluster with one summarizing sentence. Citizens can rephrase these proposals and write suggestions for cluster mergers on the platform. The third phase, called "reconciliation," invites citizens to write suggestions seeking common ground between the remaining proposals, i.e., the ones that have not been included in the consolidation phase (Velikanov & Prosser, 2017, pp. 253–256). It is worth noting that the interactions between participants are limited to written exchanges of comments.

The other AI-powered mass-deliberation model, "multiple rotating mini-publics" (MRM) has been proposed by Hélène Landemore (2024, pp. 39–68). In this scenario, a significant number of citizens (ideally, the whole population that is concerned by an issue) would be enrolled on a secure digital platform (to prevent bots and other nefarious actors from gaming the system). Participants would be randomly distributed in separate groups and would further engage in direct deliberation with one another. The following steps would involve an iterative procedure of rotating participants among groups until everyone has had the chance to hear most

of the arguments advanced by each side. AI systems would be used to distribute citizens into deliberative subgroups, allocate speaking rights within each group, summarize the output of each group, flag problematic contributions, and visualize and cluster arguments (Landemore, 2024, pp. 60–65). AI would also assess the quality of the deliberative process with established tools such as the Discourse Quality Index, and—in the case of a low score—automatically require human intervention on the part of the organizers (Landemore, 2024, p. 65). AI systems would also be involved in translation, fact-checking, and seeding of ideas that would help consensus emerge (Landemore, 2024, p. 66).

In what follows, we apply our analytical framework to these mass deliberation models.

6.2. A Comparative Assessment of MOD and MRM

6.2.1. Interpersonal Listeners

Regarding interpersonal listening, the MOD setting allows participants' access only to ideas and not their authors (content is anonymized before being sent to the evaluators). The assessment that each participant can formulate on another's contribution does not include a deliberative step in which they can ask questions and build on each other's ideas. The evaluators are thus incentivized to judge each contribution on predetermined personal categories. Therefore, there are no resources and no incentives for apophatic listening. Since its deliberative design ensures only a communication channel that allows participants to read each other's contributions and write comments on them, making only receptive and responsive listening possible, MOD receives a LIS of two points (as illustrated in Table 2).

In the MRM version, mass deliberation includes separate and facilitated deliberative groups that encourage a meaningful exchange of ideas, and therefore, responsive and apophatic listening are incentivized. The responsibilities of the facilitator include the distribution of speaking rights (for the citizens and the experts' interventions) and stimulating participants to respect ethical rules that were settled for the deliberative event. Therefore, the listening incentive score for the interpersonal listener in the MRM setting will amount to six points—since its deliberative design ensures channels and facilitation that can incentivize receptive, responsive, and apophatic listening (as illustrated in Table 2).

6.2.2. Aggregative Listeners

In Velikanov and Prosser's model (2017), mass deliberation proceeds by a sequence of steps taken automatically with the help of AI that are then enriched by human feedback. If the AI aggregative listener tracks all exchanges, the clustering procedure may indeed offer a high level of transparency that would encourage receptive listening. Participants have the opportunity to write comments on the clusters they contributed to. The AI aggregator automatically sends these comments to three different reviewers. If these comments are approved by the reviewers as being justified, the AI aggregator will modify the cluster content or the cluster name accordingly. This reaction is equivalent to a form of responsive listening. Taking all these aspects into account, the aggregative listener in MOD receives two points (as illustrated in Table 2).

In the MRM model, AI systems are even more heavily used in the role of aggregative listeners (Landemore, 2024, pp. 50–53). Tracking all exchanges is equivalent to receptive listening on the part of the aggregative

listener. Since it only provides a channel for receptive listening, the incentive score for aggregative listening is one point in the case of MRM (as illustrated in Table 2).

6.2.3. Political Decision-Making Listeners

Although Velikanov and Prosser mention among the preconditions of their model that public officials should make a clear commitment to take into consideration the output of the deliberative process (Velikanov & Prosser, 2017), their virtual room does not include any function for incentivizing political decision-makers to participate in the deliberative exchange.

In a similar vein, although Landemore has long supported the idea of giving mini-publics increased powers in relation to the political authorities' decisions, including legislating ones (Landemore, 2020), MRM faces the same limit we mentioned in the case of Velikanov and Prosser's model: There is no explicit mention of a distinct function for incentivizing political decision-makers to directly engage citizens' contributions. Therefore both models receive zero points on the political listening level (see Table 2).

Table 2. LIS in MOD and MRM.

Type of listener	Resources	Receptive listening		Responsive listening		Apophatic listening		LIS
		MOD	MRM	MOD	MRM	MOD	MRM	
Interpersonal listener	Channel	1	1	1	1	0	1	
	Facilitation	0	1	0	1	0	1	
	Training	0	0	0	0	0	0	
	Rewards/sanctions	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Aggregative listener	Channel	1	1	1	0	0	0	
	Facilitation	0	0	0	0	0	0	
	Training	0	0	0	0	0	0	
	Rewards/Sanctions	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Political decision-making listener	Channel	0	0	0	0	0	0	
	Facilitation	0	0	0	0	0	0	
	Training	0	0	0	0	0	0	
	Rewards/Sanctions	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Total Score MOD:		2	–	2	–	0	–	4
Total Score MRM:		–	3	–	2	–	2	7

6.3. Recommendations

After applying our framework to these two mass deliberation models, we can notice that they received a relatively low LIS. What should deliberative designers take into account in order to obtain a higher LIS score?

Our first recommendation is for proper weight to be given to the structuring and the facilitation of the interpersonal exchange of reasons. This is why the solution of placing all participants in one virtual room for a potential all-to-all deliberation is prone to undermining the values of good deliberation. Quality listening,

based on substantive balance and equal consideration, does not happen spontaneously in an uncontrolled environment. In addition, listening quality could be further enhanced by training and by an explicit form of expert monitoring, based on which participants can receive rewards and sanctions.

A distinct recommendation we would make is for aggregative listeners to be human, and not AI, as often as possible. If the sequences of aggregation involved more people, the deliberative gains would be significant not only from an output-related perspective, but also from a process-related one. Regarding the output, the clustering process performed by AI risks erroneously merging apparently similar ideas and proposals, resulting in what might be called "phantom similarities." Such clustering errors might result in the system overlooking significant in-group differences, on the one hand, or substantial differences between apparently similar positions of different groups, on the other. From a process-related perspective, the interaction between human minds that is valued in a deliberative exchange is more than just a special case of computation (Scudder, 2020, p. 41; Ţuţui, 2024, pp. 253–262). If more and more people were to fulfill the role of aggregative listeners, they would have the chance to develop their deliberative skills and their ability to substantially contribute to the open and rich dialogue that is needed in a democratic society (Pettit, 2003, pp. 139–140). Even if there were inevitable losses from an efficiency point of view, we believe that such losses are compatible with the central values of scaling up good listening, which essentially rest on purposeful inefficiency.

Our third recommendation is for mass deliberation models to envisage the inclusion of political leaders. This would address the crisis of listening by incentivizing political leaders to answer citizen concerns explicitly. In addition, it may increase the efficacy of the deliberative process by creating richer opportunities for citizen contributions to be taken into consideration in actual policy-making. Both citizens and political leaders might benefit from this interaction. Citizens would have the chance to be provided with details about the functioning of the policy-making process, its leverages, and its limitations, thus gaining insight into these topics that usually generate distrust. As for politicians, their involvement in actual deliberation with the citizens may partially address the "incentive problem" documented by Bächtiger and Wegmann (2014, p. 120). Following Pincione and Tesón (2006), Bächtiger and Wegmann (2014, p. 120) argue that the absence of deliberation in the political sphere is not due to a lack of deliberative abilities on the part of politicians, but is a consequence of the lack of incentives for rational discussion: simplification, polarisation, conflict orientation, negativism, and the personalization of politics tend to be more appealing to uninformed citizens than nuanced, complex, and moderate deliberative approaches to public issues.

7. Limitations and Future Directions

Our contribution is limited to assessing the mass deliberation models in terms of what levels of listening they incentivize by design. LIS is an instrument for assessing whether quality listening is made possible in a deliberative setting (by providing the proper channels, facilitation, training, and an extrinsic motivation system). Since it is based on observing whether these elements are present or not, our framework is especially useful for professional deliberative designers in an initial phase of planning and structuring deliberative interactions at a larger scale. Once mass deliberation models are implemented in real-life settings, it will be possible to perform a more in-depth evaluation of the quality of listening that is actually being scaled up.

Another limitation is related to the partiality of the approach we take. The implementation of mass deliberation models cannot fully solve the crisis of listening in a democratic society. As Bächtiger and Wegmann (2014, p. 121) point out, an institutional order, consisting of both formal and informal rules, must be in place at a national or international level for deliberation to become fully effective. However, if mass deliberation settings are designed and implemented in a manner that succeeds in scaling up good listening, they can have a significant impact on restoring citizens' faith in democratic principles.

An opportunity for future research would be to investigate other roles that AI systems may be performing in interpersonal listening in a deliberative setting. One recent example is the AI system called the "Habermas Machine," designed to formulate group statements that can help participants reach consensus faster (Tessler et al., 2024, p. 1). The "Habermas Machine" engages in individual exchanges with deliberators, asking for their personal opinions on social and political issues, and uses this input to formulate a proposal designed to be collectively acceptable (Tessler et al., 2024, p. 17). In such cases, AI is explicitly used as a listener, replacing humans in interpersonal listening. However, future research in this area should address documented AI vulnerabilities related to introducing or reproducing biases because their pre-programmed parameters might prioritize the interests of certain social groups over others (Coeckelbergh, 2022, p. 81; Simons, 2023, pp. 28–29). This can further create a variety of challenges for the deliberative procedure and the listening it relies on. Moreover, if listeners' interest is redirected to the AI output, there will be no path-building between participants (Bickford, 1996). On a relational level, people's sense of agency, people feeling seen and valued, would be lost.

8. Conclusions

In this article, we looked at citizen participation in structured mass deliberation formats as a possible solution to the listening crisis that is affecting contemporary democracies. People often feel powerless in relation to political decision-makers and perceive that the political process is irremediably closed to them. If the outcomes of the deliberative groups were seriously taken into consideration by political leaders, citizens would regain their confidence in their ability to act as co-designers of political realities, having their voices heard by those who legislate.

Mass deliberation formats have long been proposed as a solution to enlarge citizen participation in political decision-making, but they have only recently become technically feasible, leveraging the power of digital platforms and AI systems. Our main research question was whether the quality of listening can be preserved once AI systems are deployed to scale up these deliberative processes. We proposed an analytical framework that accounts for the conditions, resources, and incentives needed to facilitate receptive, responsive, and apophatic listening. Based on this framework, we developed an assessment tool—the LIS—to measure the capacity of mass deliberation models to incentivize good listening by providing a set of conditions and resources: channels, facilitation, training, and an extrinsic motivation system. We further used our analytical framework to evaluate two AI-powered mass-deliberation models that have been recently proposed and formulated a set of recommendations for improving the ability of mass deliberation to encourage good listening and thus preserve the democratic value of deliberation.

As the development of AI systems is moving the design of deliberative experiences towards a new frontier, the pressures towards efficiency may bring about a serious risk: focusing only on mass participation, while

losing the focus on the values that made deliberation worthwhile in the first place. Deliberation has initially been promoted as an alternative to aggregative procedures precisely because it favored a particular kind of encounter between different minds, different communities, different approaches to public-interest issues, and provided a procedure based on authentic listening that was expected to lead to more legitimate, better informed, and more representative policy decisions. Therefore, our contribution is part of a much-needed research direction, one that should provide tools for assessing whether a deliberative design preserves the core values of good deliberation, among which good listening should always occupy a prominent place.

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Conflict of Interests

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