Interrupting Deliberation

Nicole Curato
Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance
University of Canberra

Abstract
‘Non-deliberative acts may have deliberative consequences’ is one of the most provocative yet undertheorized developments in the systemic turn of deliberative democracy. In this paper, I propose a way to move this scholarly conversation forward by placing power at the centre of analysis. I focus on the role of interruption in public deliberation. I argue that such non-deliberative act adds value to the deliberative system if it redistributes currencies necessary for public deliberation including (a) voice and visibility, (b) attention and (c) deliberative agency. These consequences reset the terms of public deliberation from one that condones innocent exclusions or deliberate marginalisation to one that provides meaningful space for vulnerable communities to take part in shaping the course of collective will-formation.

Introduction
Public deliberation is rarely a smooth process, and when things go smoothly, the process is suspicious. Whether in carefully designed forums or the unstructured public sphere, the practice of deliberation is far from its caricature as genteel exchange of reasons among peers. Deliberative theorists have long recognised the role of emotional testimonies, storytelling and confrontational protests as part of the repertoire of communication that allows polities to be sensitive to good reasons (Polletta and Lee, 2006; Ryfe, 2007; Black, 2008; Dryzek, 2010; Mendonça and Ercan, 2015; also see Della Porta and Rucht, 2013).

One of the key lessons from these developments is that deliberation is not just about the unhindered exchange of reasons. Sometimes, deliberation also needs interruption. To uphold inclusiveness, deliberation needs the intrusion of marginalised actors when there are overt or innocent exclusions in the public sphere. To uphold norms of reason-giving or pursue the goal of epistemic fruitfulness, deliberation needs to break path dependencies in collective will formation. Sometimes, deliberation needs to put a break to an emerging consensus when some discourses have yet to secure a fair hearing.

While deliberative theory has increasingly become hospitable to interruptive forms of politics, questions remain about the boundaries for acceptable forms of interruption in public deliberation. Non-deliberative acts may have deliberative consequences is a crucial yet under-theorised line of argument in the deliberative systems literature (Stevenson and Dryzek, 2014). While this theoretical development prompts deliberative democrats to imagine creative ways in which deliberative systems can be enhanced, the normative question about what counts as ‘enhancing’ the deliberative system needs further unpacking.

1 Stevenson and Dryzek made this claim in their book Democratizing Climate Governance: ‘non-deliberative acts or practices may have consequences that are positive for the deliberative qualities of the system as a whole.’ They use the example of ‘uncompromising partisan activism’ that forces deliberations about neglected issues on the agenda (Stevenson and Dryzek, 2014, p. 32-33).
In this article, I propose three possibilities by which consequences of interruptions can be considered to ‘enhance’ the deliberative system. I argue that interruptions to public deliberation may have positive consequences to the deliberative system if it redistributes (1) voice and visibility; (2) attention; and (3) deliberative agency. I use the term ‘redistribute’ purposively to underscore the uneven distribution of currencies that are valued in public deliberation. In cases where marginalised political communities have no assured voice, assumed audience and capacity to express their views in their own terms, interruption is justifiable for it renders differences visible and creates a space to renegotiate the terms of deliberative engagement in the public sphere. The arguments I put forward are based on grounded normative theorising, taking inspiration from empirical cases of protest movements in the Philippines and Puerto Rico in the aftermath of record-breaking hurricanes. These cases demonstrate how interruptive protests disrupt the course of public deliberation about disaster response and rehabilitation.

I present these arguments in four parts. First, I make a case for incorporating the concept of interruption in deliberative democratic theory. Second, I provide an overview of the ways in which disruption has been theorised in the deliberative systems literature. For the most part, interruption has been assessed based on the deliberative quality of its enactment (procedure), but more can be done to theorise the deliberative quality of its consequences (outcomes). In the third section, I discuss three ways in which interruption results to deliberative consequences by situating the analysis in a context where asymmetries of power are most pronounced. The concluding section reflects on the implications of these arguments to the trajectory of normative deliberative theory, and democracy studies more broadly.

**Conceptualising interruption**

The impression that public deliberation is about the unhindered exchange of reasons is not unfounded. After all, deliberative democracy’s account of legitimacy, at least in some of its early conceptualisations, emphasises ‘rationally-motivated consensus’ as the ideal outcome of free and reasoned argumentation among equals (Cohen, 2003, p. 347). When appreciated in this manner, deliberation does give an impression that it takes place in a ‘disinfected argumentative operating theatre where the sealed air conditioning vents stop any everyday fluff floating down infecting the sterilised truth’ (Gordon-Smith, 2019, p. 3). This leaves agonistic democrats to critique deliberation as one that fetishizes order at the expense of messy confrontation, focusing on reasonable agreement than passionate disagreement (Mouffe, 1999).

The literature, of course, has moved on from these debates. It has almost been twenty years since John Dryzek observed that ‘the ideal of consensus has long been rejected by most deliberative democrats,’ although the theory’s critics ‘have not always noticed’ (Dryzek, 2001, p. 661). The conclusion of deliberation is not the end of disagreement (or the end of the political as Chantal Mouffe [1999] puts it), for there are good outcomes of deliberation beyond consensus. Clarifying the nature of conflict, generating workable agreements or forging meta-consensus are just some examples (Manin, 1987; Dryzek, 2000; Dryzek and Niemeyer, 2006). Deliberative theory, in other words, has scope for pluralism. Public deliberation can promote continued cooperation when participants think ‘they have contributed to and influenced the outcome even when they disagree with it’ (Bohman, 2000, p. 33).

In terms of process, the notion that deliberation is only about dispassionate reason-giving has also long been addressed. Deliberative democrats recognise the value of embracing a plurality of speech styles to give voice to a range of perspectives. Maria Clara Jaramillo and Jürg Steiner’s work (2014), for example, demonstrates the importance of storytelling and humour in transforming the quality of deliberation in tense situations, as in the case of former rebels and paramilitaries deliberating as part of Colombia’s peace process. Deliberation need not be a sterile process. It can embrace different speech cultures and
epistemological positions. Today, many deliberative democrats take the view that ‘there is no Platonic ideal of good deliberation’ (Bächtiger, Dryzek, Mansbridge and Warren, 2018, p. 8). Deliberation is a dynamic enterprise. Its ideals are constantly subjected to critical scrutiny, examined for unintended implications, opened to revision, revised and subjected again to contest and further scrutiny (Bächtiger, Dryzek, Mansbridge and Warren, 2018, p. 8).

Theorising the role of interruption in public deliberation is an extension of these developments. While deliberative theory has made a normative case for incorporating creative forms of speech and pluralistic outcomes, these developments are still anchored on deliberation’s ‘coordinative function’ or its role in coordinating conflicting values, interests and common good through argumentation (Landwehr, 2010, p. 104). Even the ‘systemic turn’ in deliberative democracy, which recognises the distribution of deliberative virtues in different spaces and sequences maintains functionalist undertones that gives primacy to ‘coordinating’ different parts of the system to arrive at epistemic, ethical, and democratic outcomes (see Mansbridge et al., 2012; Goodin, 2005). In this approach, deliberative quality is judged based on the integration of different components to create a well-functioning system. One can imagine a scenario where ‘poor deliberative quality in one place (say, the legislature) may be compensated by, or even inspire, higher deliberative quality in another location (say a flourishing informal public sphere)’ (Dryzek, 2010, pp. 13-14). What matters is these different sites coordinate the flow of discourses, where one site can take up and respond to the discourses in another.

There are cases, however, when coordination of the deliberative system is undesirable. Deliberative democrats warned against ‘tight coupling’ where different sites of deliberation are too coordinated, thereby rendering the deliberative system vulnerable to co-optation and intellectual monocropping. Other cases, meanwhile, have sites of deliberation that are ‘decoupled’ where discourses simply do not intersect or ignore each other (see Mansbridge et al., 2012, p. 23; Hendriks, 2015). On the surface these deliberative systems may appear stable either because the sites are well in agreement as in the case of a tightly coupled system or just not in disagreement because discourses do not interact at all as in the case of a decoupled system. In each of these instances, interruption is valuable for public deliberation.

In this paper, I argue that the deliberation’s democratic promise is realised not only in its successful completion but also in its interruption (Pinchevsky, 2005). This is consistent with the strand of deliberative theory that incorporates creative forms of speech to the repertoire of deliberative expression. Interruption aims to break, derail, or reset on-going deliberations to renegotiate unfair or exclusionary terms of engagement. Deliberations that do not reach their conclusion—whether it is in the form of policy outcomes or meta-consensus—may not necessarily indicate democratic failures. Interruptions may expose taken-for-granted realities in deliberative systems, particularly how its component parts construct, stabilise and sustain insidious inequalities (see Mendonça and Ercan, 2015). Interruption could prompt reflexivity for the deliberative system to identify its shortcomings and reform the terms of deliberation. They can challenge emerging consensus built on exclusions and create space for new perspectives to flourish. Of course, interruptions can also result to negative consequences to the deliberative system. Interruptions can hijack deliberations in favour of partisan interests. ‘Rage-baiting’ on Twitter or physical violence in the streets may divert deliberations from an orientation towards understanding to inflaming divisions. The ambivalent character of interruption requires deliberative theory to map normative considerations for interruption to count as adding value in deliberative politics.

**Interruption in deliberative theory**

There are two ways in which deliberative theory can assess the normative qualities of interruption. The first one is in terms of procedure, the second is in terms of outcomes. The former is more developed in
deliberative theory, while the latter—which is the focus of this article—needs to be sharpened conceptually.

In terms of procedure, deliberative theory has gained inroads in characterising the deliberative quality of the act of interruption. Archon Fung’s article ‘Deliberation before the Revolution: Towards an Ethics of Deliberative Democracy in an Unjust World’ sets the groundwork for this research agenda. For Fung, widespread inequality and failures of reciprocity ‘can justify non-persuasive, even coercive, methods for the sake of deliberative goals’ (Fung, 2005, p. 399). When choosing non-persuasive forms of communication, ‘deliberative activists’ must consider four principles: fidelity, charity, exhaustion, and proportionality. Deliberative activists’ interruption of public deliberation is justified if their loyalties first lie in deliberation (fidelity) and assume that their would-be interlocutors are good faith deliberators until proven otherwise (charity). Deliberative activists must also take all reasonable efforts to persuade interlocutors to engage in deliberation and only when all these attempts fail must they engage in non-deliberative action (exhaustion). The use of non-deliberative action, however, must be commensurate to the extent of opponents’ rejection of the norms of deliberation (proportionality). ‘The greater their [would-be interlocutors’] rejection,’ Fung argues, ‘the more the deliberative activist is at liberty to conduct politics by noncommunicative means’ (Fung, 2005, p. 403). Through this theoretical development, Fung demonstrates that it is possible to practice deliberative democracy in the face of hostility without being a political fool.

William Smith argues along similar lines. Building on his work on civil disobedience, Smith introduces the concept of ‘deliberative disruption’ which refers to protest acts that are ‘conducted as reflective, respectful, and dialogic contributions to public deliberation’ (Smith, 2016, p. 165). This is contrasted to non-deliberative disruption, or protest acts that are not designed to contribute to reflective, respectful and dialogic deliberation. The difference between the two is that deliberative disruption uses deliberative norms as constraints to their conduct, while non-deliberative disruption is not subject to these constraints. To illustrate this point, Smith draws on the work of Pollyana Ruiz (2014) on the occupation of Starbucks. Activists dressed as inmates in Guantanamo, wearing orange overalls and black hoods, went in the café, knelt in silence, as activists read statements against Starbucks’ policy to sell coffee to US military stationed in Guantanamo. Disrupting the apolitical space of Starbucks provokes learning and reflection among customers. In this example, interruption of a ‘typical day’ in Starbucks jolts customers out of their habits and transforms their experience in a café as actors in a market to actors in the public sphere. Put another way, the site of consumption is disrupted to link or ‘couple’ it to the site of political contestation. Like Fung, Smith argues that normative constraints distinguish deliberative disruption from other forms of disruptive political action.2

The second way in which interruption is theorised is about outcomes or consequences. Non-deliberative acts may have deliberative consequences is one of the most important yet under-theorised claims of contemporary deliberative theory (Stevenson and Dryzek, 2014). It is a controversial line because it seems like anything and everything has deliberative potential (see Goodin, 2018). Dryzek, for example, uses the case of Australian populist Pauline Hanson who in her maiden speech in the Senate declared that Australia is being ‘swamped by Asians’ and that Muslims ‘are prominent in organised crime’ (Dryzek, 2010, p. 82). Hanson’s speech does not in any way fulfil the normative criteria put forward by Fung and Smith. For Dryzek, however, we cannot right off the positive systemic effects of Hanson’s rhetoric. She

2 Ricardo Mendonça and Selen Ercan’s (2015) work on protests and deliberation speaks to these developments, although takes a different line of argument. Drawing on the case of protest movements in Brazil and Turkey, they argue that protests do have an intrinsic deliberative quality as far as the way these movements are organized (there are constant procedures for reflexivity and self-criticism) and engaged with the public (they offer reasons for their positions). To this extent, protests are well-integrated with the deliberative system, but not interruptive of it.
may have interrupted the norms of political correctness in parliamentary discourse, but she also provoked the countermobilization of multicultural discourses.

This account is surely provocative, but it prompts calls for theoretical precision. I argue that to understand the deliberative consequences of interruption, we need to ask how interruptions challenge exclusionary structures and practices that hold the deliberative system. Together, answering this question needs an explicit account of power. The difference between Starbucks protesters and the populist senator is that the former holds corporate and state power into account through public shaming, thereby altering the balance of discursive power (Fung, 2005, p. 408). It problematises the role of corporate power as well as complicity of consumers in perpetuating human rights abuses. The populist, on the other hand, may provoke a response that defends multicultural Australia, but she also reinforces the status accorded to the White Australia policy. Such non-deliberative rhetoric further entrenches the dominance of racist speech in the public sphere. Hanson’s anti-immigrant rhetoric does not destabilise but amplifies a popular discourse that shaped the course of deliberations about Australia’s immigration policy. To judge the deliberative consequences of interruption, therefore, we need to place power at the centre of analysis.

Redistribution via interruption

Placing power at the centre of analysis begins with the definition of interruption. In this paper, I define interruption as a political practice that breaks the continuity of dominant patterns of behaviour. I emphasise the term ‘dominant’ to place the normative quality of interruption in the foreground. Interruption has a critical quality for it exposes and challenges exclusionary or unfair practice. It also has a constructive quality for interruption can redistribute the currencies necessary for public deliberation. My premise is that a deliberative system underpinned by a system of power—a set of taken-for-granted assumptions that serves as baseline understanding for public deliberation to take place. A deliberative system operates within structures of power that determine who should speak and who is to be heard, the spaces where particular styles of communication are legible and the spaces where they do not make sense, what counts as relevant discourse and what is merely noise (see Curato, Hammond, and Min, 2018).

When a deliberative system overly relies on familiar or ‘sensible’ practices of argumentation, it gives the impression that politics is ‘exaggeratedly stable’ (Goodman, 2018, p. 274). Interruption is what happens when the stability of the deliberative system is challenged. It denaturalizes the order in the deliberative system problematising what holds the deliberative system together. For interruption to be deliberative in consequence, it must redistribute the currencies of deliberation that disproportionally benefits a dominant group while diminishing marginalised groups.

In the succeeding sections, I offer three standards by which interruption can deliver deliberative consequences. These standards are based on grounded normative theory, where I work inductively with observed empirical practices to theorise normative values from the perspective of those affected by outcomes of deliberation (see Ackerly and Cruz, 2011). I draw on insights from the cases of the Philippines and Puerto Rico—two countries that suffered from record-breaking hurricanes in 2013 and 2017 respectively. The Philippines demonstrates a case of a ‘tightly coupled’ deliberative system where the states, international organisations and the global public sphere have forged a ‘humanitarian consensus’ where the aftermath of the disaster is defined as a moment for global compassion. The Puerto Rican case, meanwhile, illustrates a political system ‘decoupled’ from deliberations happening in the mainland United States.

Based on empirical insights from each of these cases, I argue that interruption results to deliberative consequences in three ways. First, interruption adds value to the deliberative system when it redistributes voice and visibility in the public sphere. I focus on the Philippine case to flesh out this argument. Second,
it adds value when it redistributes attention. This argument is empirically grounded on the case of Puerto Rico where hurricane survivors at risk of being neglected insist on remaining on the national agenda. Finally, interruption adds value to the deliberative system when it redistributes deliberative agency. This observation is inspired by both cases. Surely, these three are not the only contributions of interruption to the deliberative system. For this paper, however, I focus on these three consequences based on empirical cases.

**Redistributes voice and visibility in the public sphere**

There are instances where deliberative inequalities mask as communicative triumphs. While media bias or underrepresentation of minorities in parliament are observable inequalities, there are inequalities that are insidious and capable of feigning an impression of a healthy deliberative system.

Take the case of the Philippines in 2013. In the aftermath of world’s strongest storm that made landfall in recent history, the global public sphere immediately responded to the suffering of distant others. The affordances of social media such as Facebook groups and Twitter hashtags coordinated disparate audiences’ discourses of shock and sadness to the plea of the Philippine government and humanitarian organisations to contribute to relief operations. The smooth conduct of global discussions paved the way for the emergence of a humanitarian consensus. Discourses of the public and decision-makers—from Pope Francis to pop star Harry Styles to UNICEF to @typicalgirl (an ‘ordinary’ citizen from Australia)—are linked by the vocabulary of care. This is evidenced by the textual analysis of online discourses I conducted in the first 100 days of the disaster where themes of unity and compassion overwhelmingly set the global agenda on post-disaster relief and rehabilitation (see Curato, 2017; also David, Ong and Legarda, 2016). Meanwhile, those who attempted to challenge the global moment of unity were silenced by stigmatising their poor behaviour. ‘We haven’t even buried the dead yet,’ was a common response to statements that called out the Philippine government’s failure to prepare for a mega-disaster. Others were disparaged for being callous, opportunistic, and tasteless for raising issues of climate justice at time for grieving.

Viewed this way, post-disaster Philippines is an example of a tightly coupled deliberative system where consensus is achieved through depoliticised discourses of compassion that coordinate collective action between the public and decision-makers. Voices that challenge the humanitarian consensus is not only undermined but delegitimised by invoking the moral obligation of care (Fassin and Pandolfi, 2010). This moral obligation may seem benign but, in this context, it was an insidious performance of discursive power by shrinking spaces for meaningful contestation. It promotes a depoliticised response to tragedy which prioritises ‘conformist action devoid of meaningful critique’ (Kapoor, 2012, p. 113).

A protest movement interrupted this tightly coupled deliberative system. One hundred days after the tropical cyclone laid waste to a cluster of islands in one of the Philippines’ poorest regions, a group of disaster survivors organised a protest march in Tacloban City which is the ground zero of the typhoon. The protesters called themselves People Surge. The name is a word play on ‘storm surge’—the twenty-one feet of water that ploughed through the city and left over 7,000 people dead.

People Surge interrupted the humanitarian consensus by redistributing voice and visibility in the public sphere. They did this in two ways. First, People Surge interrupted the dominant portrayal of disaster-affected communities in global conversations online. People Surge asserted their voice not as victims who deserve compassion but as citizens who demand justice. With over 12,000 protesters marching downtown, People Surge reclaimed their voice from celebrity humanitarians and government officials who claimed to speak for them. They expressed anger for experiencing a second order disaster brought about by the government's slow and ineffective response. They raised issues of corruption by squarely laying blame to government officials who selectively distributed aid to political allies. Through social
media, they appealed to the public to channel their donations to trustworthy organisations and not to inutile government agencies. The tonality of protests used a combination of grief and indignation, effectively challenging the moral consensus of grief first, politics later. Instead, People Surge demonstrated that sorrow and justice go together. This is reflected in their protest repertoire, as in the case of People Surge politicizing a mass grave by laying wreaths and candles wrapped around white ribbons printed with the phrase ‘Justice from government neglect.’ Such imagery interrupted the portrayal of disaster-affected communities as too traumatised and too miserable to speak. That this protest took place in a site of grief adds layer to the protest’s interruptive capacity to transform the meaning of the mass grave as a space for mourning to become a space for demand-making.

Second, People Surge interrupted the tightly coupled deliberative system by problematising relationships of power. They enquired into who is responsible for people’s suffering and set the agenda for deliberation between the public and decision-makers. Aside from disrupting spaces of grief, they also disrupted spaces of power. They protested in the gates of Malacañang (the Presidential Palace) in Manila, the Headquarters of the Department of Social Welfare and Development, even the President’s family home. Asserting presence in the capital allowed protesters to secure a seat in television talk shows and academic forums, and even get an audience in church activities—an influential discursive space in Roman Catholic Philippines.

Today, more than five years after the disaster, the narratives of the typhoon in mainstream media as well as government’s directives reflect the discourses of People Surge. While none of the officials they blamed for their misery were officially held accountable, they nevertheless reshaped how the typhoon is portrayed as a tragedy due to government mismanagement and not because of misfortune.

Redistributes attention

There is an uneven distribution of attention in both the public sphere and sites of decision-making. There are no guarantees that political claims, no matter how compelling, will secure a fair hearing. Organised denial and institutional deafness are barriers for a plurality of discourses to be seriously considered in the deliberative system (see Bickford, 1996; Bassel, 2017). These deficits are more in pronounced today’s multimedia saturated societies, where power lies not in who has the loudest voice or the best reasons, but who gets to attract and hold audiences’ fleeting attention spans.

Interruption is one way to redistribute attention in ‘the age of communicative abundance’ (Keane, 2013). In the first instance, interruption can bait attention through creative and sometimes sublime forms of speech. If successful, interruption can transform ‘baited’ attention to sustained and consequential deliberation where marginal claims can take part.

Puerto Rico’s case demonstrates this point. In September 20, 2017, Hurricane Maria hit the Caribbean island wiping out 80% of the territory’s agriculture and reached over $8 billion worth of damage based on the governor’s estimate. The US government pegged the death count to sixty-four people. As the waters receded, Puerto Ricans continued to die, and many blamed the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s (FEMA) poor disaster response. Public health experts from Harvard University estimated the death toll to reach as high as 4,600 people because of delayed medical care (Kishore, Marqués, Mahmud et al, 2018). A month after the hurricane, eighty percent of the population did not have electricity, making Puerto Rico the case of the longest blackout in US history.

Puerto Rico, I argue, is an example of a deliberative system ‘decoupled’ from the rest of country. As a US territory, its status is ‘a colony in all but name’ (Wolffé, 2018). It has no representation in US Congress, no vote in Federal elections, and therefore have no formal mechanisms to influence deliberations in sites of decision-making. While the more than 3,000 deaths in 9/11 attacks triggered a series of congressional hearings and investigations, a similar number of deaths in Puerto Rico only resulted to two hearings with
FEMA. Investigative journalists found that President Trump ‘reacted far more aggressively to Hurricane Harvey than to Maria.’ While Trump visited Houston twice within the first eight days of the disaster which killed over a hundred people, he waited for thirteen days before making an appearance in Puerto Rico (Vinik, 2018). Others lament the treatment of Puerto Ricans as second-class citizens. A poll found that only fifty four percent of Americans know that Puerto Ricans are US citizens. Those that did not know they are citizens are less likely to support government aid to Puerto Rico (Morning Consult National Tracking Poll, 2017).

Aside from issues of poor delivery of aid, Puerto Ricans observed that the media quickly lost interest in covering the disaster. After broadcasting footage of flooded streets and collapsed power lines, journalists from mainstream media parachuted out of the disaster zone to cover the next mass shooting and sex abuse scandals. Activists worried that as attention moves away from the disaster zone, it is convenient for mainland United States to ignore suffering in the island. Indeed, despite the negative coverage of President Trump’s handling of the disaster, this did not make a dent on his approval rating, unlike the case of President George W. Bush after Hurricane Katrina.

Two months after the hurricane, a ‘Unity March for Puerto Rico’ brought thousands of protesters to march throughout Washington DC. Organisers demanded the cancellation of Puerto Rico’s $70 billion debt, the permanent repeal of the Jones Act which delayed aid efforts, and the creation of a council that will serve as liaison between Puerto Rico and the Trump administration. The protest, I argue, interrupted the ‘decoupled’ deliberations between Puerto Rico and mainland United States. Unlike the Philippine case where protests interrupted the overwhelming and unified discourse of compassion, protests in the United States addressed the disconnection and the lack of attention paid to the suffering in Puerto Rico by linking the struggles in the territory to the struggles of the rest of the country.

Protesters worked to redistribute attention through their message and strategy. In terms of message, the protest appealed to unity, ‘to stand in solidarity’ with ‘one voice’ against injustices. Organisers were clear to state that the march is not about the future status of Puerto Rico to placate suspicion that the protest is a prelude to calls for independence. Other organisations that joined the protest like Collective Action for Puerto Rico took a non-confrontational approach, saying that they are present ‘to uplift voices’ of Puerto Ricans and tell stories about people who died in the storm and its aftermath. These messages invite a particular kind of attention, one that responds to calls for ‘fellow Americans’ to show solidarity. They disrupt the portrayal of Puerto Rico as America’s colonial other by being present in the Capital, just like those who participated in the Women’s March earlier in the year.

The protesters’ strategies use a similar logic. Like People Surge in the Philippines, they expressed political claims by combing grief and indignation. Back in San Juan, disaster survivors lined up over 400 pairs of shoes in the plaza to create a makeshift memorial to honour those who died in the disaster. It was a visually striking memorial. Trainers, high heels and infant boots were arranged to face the capitol building, symbolising demands for accountability with the government’s bungled disaster response. In Washington DC, placards that say, ‘If you’re not angry, you’re not paying attention’ were visible, alongside signs that say, ‘Puerto Rican lives matter.’ Appropriating Black Lives Matter’s slogan was particularly timely. Instead of competing for attention with the NFL protests against police brutality—one that has caught the attention of the President on Twitter, and therefore in mainstream media—the unity march latched on the struggle for racial justice. The presence of Hispanic celebrities in the march reinforced this, with Lin-Manuel Miranda and celebrity chef José Andrés leading the march from the Capitol Building to Lincoln Memorial. Unlike People Surge that created a distinct register of voice to set them apart from celebrity

3 Statement from Evelyn Mejil, the National Chair for the Unity March for Puerto Rico.
humanitarians, the Unity March cashed in on the power of celebrity presence to establish a cultural bridge across different yet connected issues.

That the protest generated thousands of people in the streets was not an easy feat. There was little to no news coverage about the forthcoming march, unlike other major protests in Washington DC. It is precisely this limited attention granted to Puerto Rico’s suffering that the protest interrupted. Disruptive protests in sites of power forged intersectional solidarities that insist on Puerto Rico’s recovery to be taken up in federal and congressional deliberations. Less than two years after this march, Puerto Ricans were back again on the streets, this time to demand the resignation of Governor Ricardo Rosselló after the leak of group chat messages that made disparaging jokes about the disaster-related deaths. These interruptions, among others, ensured that Puerto Rico remains on the national agenda, though the level to which attention can be sustained remains to be seen.

**Redistributes deliberative agency**

There are two ways in which deliberative agency has been conceptualised in the literature: as a capacity and as practice. As a capacity, deliberative agency refers to the potential to articulate, defend, and revise people’s views using their own voice (Curato and Ong, 2015). As practice, deliberative agency refers to the use of these capacities to engage in public deliberation ‘with the aim of influencing the exercise of political power in accordance with their conception of common good’ (Ebeling and Wolkenstein, 2018, p. 636).

Whether in terms of capacity or practice, deliberative agency is unevenly distributed in the deliberative system. In both the Philippines and Puerto Rico, disaster-affected communities had fewer opportunities to shape the course of public deliberation compared to humanitarian organisations, experts, state actors, and, in the case of the Philippines, global audiences witnessing the suffering of others from a distance. There are many constraints to exercising the deliberative agency of disaster-affected communities. Limitations in material resources, poor access to digital communication, experiences of grief and humiliation, as well as psychological trauma are some examples. Tightly coupled and decoupled deliberative systems also leave little room not only for vulnerable communities to put forward contesting discourses but also to articulate these discourses on their own terms, using their own voice.

Interruption has the power to redistribute deliberative agency. It can empower vulnerable communities to persuade, influence and shape shared perspectives in the public sphere. The strategy involved in interrupting a tightly coupled or decoupled deliberative system entails ‘active, civic-minded, and rational agents’ who relate their individual circumstances to broader political issues and abstract ideas (Curato and Ong, 2015, p. 582). People Surge provided the opportunity for disaster-affected communities to transform their personal experiences of suffering to public demands for justice, while Puerto Rico’s march for unity linked disaster survivors’ public demands to intersectional struggles.

Crucial to the deliberative consequences of interruption is the way shared perspectives are generated. Martin Ebeling and Fabio Wolkenstein are correct to argue that one blind spot of the deliberative systems approach is its tendency to lose sight of ‘the connection between deliberative agency and personal autonomy’ such that ‘deliberative engagement of citizens is no longer a central concern’ (Ebeling and Wolkenstein, 2018, p. 636). Using a systemic approach, one could argue that it is good enough for the deliberative system that disaster-affecte communities have discursive representatives who could give voice to their grievances in the public sphere and connect these grievances to sites of decision-making. After all, mobilising in the aftermath of a tragedy is an extremely taxing undertaking and so one could argue that this is a pertinent time for representation.

The empirical cases presented above demonstrate the dangers of being comfortable with this approach. It is in the autonomous act of interruption—of disaster-affected communities being present, reclaiming the
public sphere, and resetting the terms of deliberation—where dominant assumptions that hold the deliberative system together are challenged. People Surge demonstrated this as far as mobilising their personal experiences of suffering to challenge the depoliticized discourse of compassion. March for Unity interrupted the impression that Puerto Rico is a distant territory which deserves little attention in national deliberations. Through performances of grief and indignation, disaster-affected communities communicated their demands and forge solidarities using their own voice, on their own terms, which are essential achievements in reclaiming esteem and dignity in the aftermath of a tragedy (see Curato, 2019).

Aside from breaking dominant assumptions in the public sphere, interruption also redistributes deliberative agency as far as presenting a vision for the future is concerned. Protests in Puerto Rico resulted to the emergence of organisations that ask critical questions about how their society can be transformed. JunteGente is an example of a coalition that hosted meetings across the archipelago to coordinate outcomes of small group deliberations to generate a coherent platform for the island. In the book *The Battle for Paradise*, Naomi Klein describes this as the ‘battle of utopias’ (Klein, 2018, p. 78) where local communities challenged the ‘invasion’ of crypto-currency investors claiming to help revive the island by taking advantage of its tax structures. There is a battle of utopias not because disaster-affected communities left the deliberations about their future to representatives who embody politics as usual but because their response to the disaster was to build a counter-public that can interrupt the entry of dominant economic models in Puerto Rico.

**Conclusion**

There is a ‘necessary place within settled institutions for unsettling and uncanny speech’ (Goodman, 2018, p. 268). Interruptions may have non-deliberative qualities, but they may result to deliberative consequences if they destabilise deliberative systems built on uneven structures or practices of power. Among the consequences I introduced were based on the empirical lessons offered by the interruptive protests in post-disaster Philippines and Puerto Rico. As deliberative democracy continues to evolve as a normative theory and a political project, this paper makes a case for placing power at the centre of analysis. The concepts of dominance and exclusions have always been part of the vocabulary of deliberative democrats. Proposing the value of interruption is firmly anchored on this tradition. It seeks to be a reminder of deliberation’s vulnerabilities and how its redemption can be sometimes be found interruptive rather than coordinative forms of action.

**References**


Morning Consult (2017) National Tracking Poll #170916 22-24 September,  


