NEEDLES IN A HAYSTACK:

A NEW APPROACH FOR IDENTIFYING AND ASSESSING POLITICAL TALK IN NON-POLITICAL DISCUSSION FORUMS

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Abstract

Talking politics online is not exclusively reserved for politically-orientated discussion forums, particularly the everyday political talk crucial to the public sphere. People talk politics just about anywhere online from reality TV discussion forums to numerous other forum genres. Thus, the need to tap into those discussions is important if our aim is to provide a more comprehensive overview of the online discursive landscape. However, widening our scope of analysis presents us with a new set of difficulties, namely, how do we identify political talk within the vast pool of threads and postings, and how do we assess such talk in light of the public sphere, while at the same time, taking into account its informal nature. The aim of this article is to tackle these questions by presenting a methodological approach, which attempts to detect, describe, and assess political talk in non-political discussion forums.

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Introduction

Literature on deliberation has grown expeditiously over the past two decades. Today, political and communication scientists, and others commonly use the ideas and ideals behind the deliberative model of democracy. In particular, there has been an increase in research, which focuses on testing deliberative democratic claims and/or utilising its ideals as a means of evaluating real-world practices. For example, there has been a rise in the number of Internet-based researcher projects, which employ these ideals.[1] Net-public sphere researchers here have looked to question whether the Internet presents the public sphere with an opportunity for developing public spaces where free, equal, and open deliberation among citizens could flourish.

To date, net-public sphere researchers have studied online deliberation a variety of ways. However, most of these studies have focused solely on *political* discussion forums[2] for instance Usenet newsgroups, news-media message boards, and governmentally sponsored forums and have neglected an array of other forum genres. One such genre is the range of fan-based discussion forums tied to reality TV, such as Wife Swap. Such forum types are abundant online and host a multitude of participants and discussions. Moreover, they often offer a variety of political discussions dealing with everything from health and the body to politicians and government. Consequently, these spaces offer a range of political discussions, which also contribute to the web of informal conversations that constitutes the public sphere, and as such, they should not be overlooked. The aim of this article then is to address these communicative spaces by presenting a methodological approach, which attempts to detect, describe, and evaluate political talk.[3]

Thus far, net-public sphere research has only provided us with a partial picture, which is problematic for two additional reasons. First, such spaces gain even more prominence today if we considered the notion of a *shift* in politics. Today, due to complex economic, political, and social changes stirred on largely by globalisation, new relationships and uncertainties between citizens and social structures have brought about a new domain of politics; what some have called life politics (Giddens 1991), sub-politics (Beck 1994), post-modern politics (Inglehart 1997), or lifestyle politics (Bennett 1998). Individuals here increasingly organise social and political meaning around their lifestyle values and the personal narratives that express them as opposed to traditional structures and institutions. Therefore, we need to start looking in different spaces and on different pages of the newspaper to find politics (Beck 1994, 18). In terms of political conversations online, this means that we not only have to reconsider where to look, but we also have to reconsider what we are looking for. In this sense, a porous approach to what is political is desired, one that will allow for a more individualised, lifestyle-based approach to politics.

Second, by solely focusing on politically-orientated discussion forums, we run the risk of painting a distorted view. Are the participants that participate in politically-orientated discussion forums a good representation of who and how citizens discuss politics online, or do these participants resemble more the "political junkies" that Coleman (2003) describes? Thus, if we are to move "beyond the first phase" of net-public sphere research, as Dahlberg (2004) calls for, we must start widening our scope of analysis by taking a more inclusive approach to selecting the discursive spaces we examine.

However, such a widening of scope presents us with a new set of difficulties, namely, how do we capture and assess politically-orientated discussions within the sea of threads and postings offered by such forum types? How do we sift through the variety of discussions offered without becoming overwhelmed, while at the same time without missing something? How do we identify political talk, which is less about conventional politics and rooted more in lifestyles – personal life considerations of health, body, sexuality, work, and so forth? Finally, how do we assess such discussions in light of the public sphere without losing our normative footing?

In order to address these challenges, this paper offers a methodological approach to identify, describe, and assess political talk in non-political discussion forums. First, the theoretical notions of the deliberative democracy and the public sphere are discussed, focusing on the process of deliberation and the normative conditions related to this concept. These aspects are discussed at some length, as this is necessary to develop later useful indicators. The bulk of this article consists of constructing a methodological approach derived from both theory and practice. The emphasis is placed on the operationalisation of a set of public sphere criteria, in particular, the process of deliberation. Finally, examples from a Wife Swap discussion forum are presented periodically in the latter sections as a means of illustration.[4]

Deliberative Democracy: Moving Forward

The notion of deliberative democracy in contemporary discussions covers a variety of theoretical approaches from the more liberal approach of Habermas (1996) to the more critical approaches of Dryzek (2000) and Barber (1984). The latter are particularly important here because they look to contrast the deliberative model of democracy with real-life practices thereby retrieving, maintaining, and advancing the model's critical voice. They seek to (a) move deliberative democracy beyond the venues of institutional politics, (b) construct a more authentic notion of deliberation, (c) and create space for private interests in public reasoning, allowing for a more individualised and lifestyle notion of politics to emerge.

Deliberative democrats such as Barber (1984), Benhabib (1996), Dryzek (2000), and Mansbridge (1999) have attempted to refocus the deliberative model on and within the public sphere thereby placing citizens at the centre of the theory. In this sense, the public sphere, and the everyday conversations that constitute it, becomes the key venue for deliberation, a place of democratisation. It is through ongoing participation in everyday talk whereby citizens become aware and informed, sometimes try to understand others, test old and new ideas, and express, develop, and transform their preferences. All of this is essential for a healthy, effective, and active public opinion specifically and for the public sphere in general.

If our focus is on everyday political talk within the public sphere, we need to reconsider what we mean by deliberation. In other words, we need a notion of deliberation that takes into account the everyday informal nature of political talk. Privileging reason by argumentation as the only relevant communicative form for deliberation ignores the realities of everyday conversation. Thus, deliberative democrats (Dryzek 2000; Mansbridge 1999; O'Neill 2002; Young 1996; 2000)[5] have begun loosening rationality's grip on deliberation allowing emotions and alternative communicative forms such as rhetoric, greetings, and testimonials a place within the deliberative process.

Finally, in addition to the communicative form of deliberation, deliberative democrats have also been questioning whether reason itself should be solely grounded in the public's interest. The aim is to create a place for private interests within the deliberative process. It has been argued that private interests may also be a legitimate source for deliberation, and as such, there needs to be a balance between private and public interests, particularly deliberation grounded in the public sphere (Dryzek 2000; Young 1997, 2000).

The Normative Conditions of Deliberation

Evaluating the democratic value of online communicative practices requires normative criteria of the public sphere, in particular, of the process of deliberation. Thus far, there has been a lack of consistency among net-public sphere researchers as to what criteria should be included.[6] From Schneider's (1997) criteria of equality, diversity, reciprocity, and quality to, more recently, Jensen's (2003) criteria of form, dialogue, openness, tone, and argumentation, it is clear that the theoretical footing among researchers varies considerably. As Dahlberg (2004) points out, the main reason for such diversity is that net-public sphere researchers have drawn from a variety of democratic theories. That being said, most of these studies have constructed and operationalised formal criteria of deliberation. As discussed above, such an approach is problematic because, to some extent, it ignores the realities of everyday political talk. I am not suggesting here that we abandon formal criteria. Criteria such as equality, freedom, reciprocity, and sincerity pertain well to everyday political conversations. However, focusing exclusively on rationality and ignoring private interests neglects the reality of communicative practices and politics today.

Thus, drawing from the above deliberative democrats and Habermas's earlier work (1984; 1987; 1990), the following six normative conditions of the process of deliberation are distinguished: the process of achieving understanding (rational-critical discussion, reciprocity, reflexivity, and empathy); structural equality; discursive equality; structural autonomy; discursive freedom; and sincerity.[7] All six conditions provide both structural requirements of the process and dispositional requires of the participants. Although all six conditions are crucial to the process of deliberation, this article only deals with the process of achieving understanding, discursive equality, discursive freedom, and sincerity. Nevertheless, short normative descriptions of structural autonomy and equality are provided below.

The process of achieving understanding is comprised of four crucial components: rational-critical discussion, reciprocity, reflexivity, and empathy. Political talk must *in part* take the form of rational-critical discussion.[8] It requires that participants provide reasoned claims, which are critically reflected upon, and that an adequate level of coherence and continuity is maintained. Such a process requires three dispositional requirements. Reciprocity represents the first of these; put simply, it is listening and responding to another's question, argument, or opinion in general. However, reciprocity on its own does not satisfy the process. Reflexivity is required. Reflexivity is the internal process of reflecting another's argument or position against one's own. Again, the process does not stop here, empathy may be required, a process of putting yourself in another's position. It is here at empathy where the potential for achieving mutual understanding is highest.

Equality is conceptualised at two levels: structural equality and discursive equality. Structural equality refers to the notion of access. It requires that everyone affected by the claims under discussion have equal access to the deliberative process. However, access here is more than just allowing people in; it also includes equal access to the necessary skills needed for engaging in such a process, for example, the skills to communicate effectively.

Once citizens have access to the discursive space and the necessary skills, equality from within the process of deliberation must be upheld – discursive equality. It requires that all participants within the process of deliberation be considered equal members. First, the rules and guidelines that coordinate and maintain the process of deliberation cannot privilege one individual or group of individuals over another. Second, it requires that participants respect and recognise each other as having equal standing. Finally, discursive equality requires an equal distribution of voice. In the deliberative process, one individual or group of individuals should not dominate the conversation at the sake of others trying to be heard.

The normative condition of freedom is also conceptualised at two levels: structural autonomy and discursive freedom. The deliberative process requires autonomous discursive spaces whereby citizens can discuss freely and openly. Ideally, these spaces should be free from all outside forms of force and influence, free from both state and commercial control.

Within these discursive spaces, discursive freedom must be assured. The process of deliberation requires that participants are able to share freely information, opinions, and arguments, with only one force permitted, the force of a better argument. In particular, every participant within the process of deliberation has the right to express an opinion or criticise another; to raise issues of common concern or challenge the appropriateness of issues under discussion; and to challenge the rules and guidelines that govern the process. Finally, the process must maintain an adequate level of respect and manners thereby prohibiting abusive and aggressive language.

Finally, sincerity as a normative condition of the public sphere implies that all strive to make all information, relevant to the discussion, known to other participants, which includes their intentions, motives, desires, needs, and interests.

Identifying and Assessing Political Talk Online

When it comes to everyday political talk, the Internet presents a unique situation. On the one hand, it hosts the city centres, shopping malls, cafes, and of course, the reality television programs, such as Wife Swap – the likely discursive spaces of life politics. On the other hand, as Slevin (2002, 53-54) states, "Internet use is refashioning community, organisations, and self-identity, and in so doing it is also challenging traditional concepts of democracy, public life and our involvement in them". In other words, the Internet itself is a locus for new politics and not just an extension of offline spaces. Furthermore, the Internet makes everyday political talk visible. Seas of informal political conversations, which researchers in the past have had difficulties gaining access to, are now readily available online due to the archiving wonders of the Internet. Moreover, the Internet makes political talk visible not just for researchers, but also for people and participants.

This article taps into that visibility by developing a methodological approach for

identifying, describing, and assessing political conversations. In order to achieve this, a content analysis was adopted as the primary method (Mayring 2000). The focus was placed on the participants' comments, as they are externalised in or can be externalised from the postings and not on the participant themselves. As Wilhelm (1999, 163) argues, "It is not necessary to know who the participants are, from what walk of life they come from or with what political parties they are affiliated, to paint a compelling portrait of the deliberativeness of these discussions."

The approach consisted of two stages of analysis. During the first stage, discussion threads were analysed for the presence of political talk. Those threads, which contained a political discussion, were advanced to the second stage. During stage two, the discussion threads were analysed and assessed in light of the normative conditions of the process of deliberation. It is important to note that during this stage all the postings within the threads were included in the analysis, not just the political exchanges.

In the remainder of this section, the two-staged approach will be laid out in detail. First, a set of criteria for identifying a political discussion within a text is presented. Second, the coding scheme for describing and assessing political talk is specified, and the coding categories are defined. In the final section, the coding scheme in relation to the normative conditions under examination – how the coding categories form indicators – is discussed, and some examples are provided.

Stage One

As discussed above, there is a need for a porous approach to what is political, an approach that allows for a politics of sexuality, of childcare, and so forth. Politics today has become more pervasive, and as such, any concept of what is political must be capable of capturing an increasing number of issues and concerns. So then, what is political? More specifically, how do we identify within a text a political discussion?

Mansbridge's (1999, 214) definition of political is a solid starting point here. For her, a political discussion emerges when a participant draws attention to something that he or she thinks the public should discuss collectively. Under this account, seemly private issues can emerge as political so long as there are reasons given as to why this should be a collective concern; naturally, these issues can be contested by others. Moreover, such issues do not have to be connected to institutional politics, nor do they require a response from the state. Additionally, action, which has been commonly tied to the notion of political, need not be the result of talk outside the action of talk itself.

Based on this understanding, two criteria for identifying when a discussion turns political within a text were composed. During the first stage of analysis, all the discussion threads were subjected to these criteria. All those threads, which contained a posting where a (a) participant makes a connection from a particular experience, interest, issue, or topic in general to society, which (b) stimulates reflection and a response by at least one other participant, were advanced to stage two of the analysis. It should be stressed here that the aim of the criteria as a whole was to identify a political *discussion*.[9]

The criteria will now be applied to a discussion thread from a Wife Swap forum as a means of demonstrating them in-use:[10]

Elizabeth: "I think Wife Swap is a good show to educate Jo Public. It shows different families and different ways of parenting. We learn."

John: "Educate the public in what exactly? Do we need educating on how other families live? We all have friends'n'family members that live completely different to us... we KNOW everyone's different. Sorry... but… educating Wife Swap aint."

Mary: "I think many people do, yes. If people were more educated about other cultures/sub cultures then maybe there would be a little less prejudice and blind hatred in this world."

First, when individual experiences, issues, or topics in general are discussed, there needs to be a connection made from that instance to society. The word connection here implies that the experience, issue, or topic under discussion should be considered as a collective concern and as such discussed collectively. In this example, participants are discussing whether or not Wife Swap is a good educational tool for society. Elizabeth's first statement represents the connection from an experience to society, and her second statement qualifies why. Her posting implies that Wife Swap is a good TV series for the public because people learn about different families and different ways of parenting.

The second criterion operationalises the social aspect of political talk. The process of deliberation is a social process. It requires reciprocity and reflection; participants must listen, reflect, and respond to each other. Thus, once the connection is made, it must stimulate reflection among and a response by other participants. The response should question, contest, affirm, or elaborate on the connection. Both John and Mary's statement fulfil the second criteria, though, in different directions. John contests Elizabeth's positions by arguing that the public needs no education and Wife Swap is not the place. Mary, on the other hand, not only states an affirmation but also takes a step further by suggesting that if people were educated about different cultures, they would be less likely to be prejudice.

Stage Two

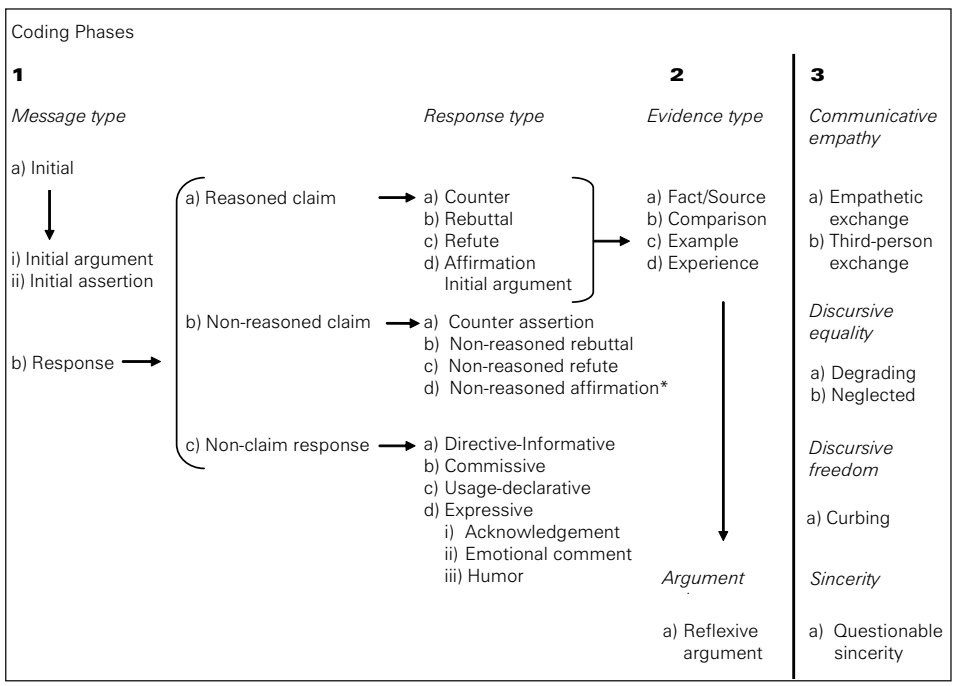
The coding scheme presented below was developed as a means of (a) analytically describing and (b) normatively assessing how participants talk politics.[11] It moved beyond a formal notion of deliberation and allowed for a more comprehensive description of political talk, allowing emotions and other communicative forms a place in the analysis. Normatively, it provided the tools for a more thorough evaluation and examination of the quality of debate. It consisted of three phases of analysis. During the first phase, the coding categories were divided into two groups, all of which aimed at identifying the message type. The two group headings were *initial* and *response*. The unit of analysis, during this phase, was the individual message.[12] Once all messages were coded, phase two of the scheme began; messages that provided reasoned claims were advanced.

During the second phase, the coding categories were divided into two groups: *evidence type* and *argument style.* Messages were first coded for the type of evidence used, after which, selected messages were coded again for argument style. The unit of analysis during this phase was the argument.

During the final phase of analysis, the coding categories were divided into four

groups: *communicative empathy, discursive equality, discursive freedom,* and *sincerity*. During this phase, all messages were coded for various variables of deliberation. The unit of analysis here was the individual message.[13] For all three phases, the context unit of analysis was the discussion thread; the relationships between the messages within a single thread were analysed. The coding scheme phases are summarised in Figure 1, and the coding categories are discussed in detail below.

Figure 1: Coding Scheme Overview



The Coding Categories. The goal of the first phase of analysis was to identify the message type. Here, messages were coded as one or more of two possibilities: initial or response. It is important to note that these groups are not mutually exclusive, and as such, a single message may be coded multiple times under one or both.

The first group was developed to identify messages for the presence of an initial claim – a seed, which began the initial line of discussion. It consisted of two coding categories: *initial argument* and *initial assertion*. The distinction between the two was based on whether the claim was accompanied by reasoning. Messages, which provided reasoned or non-reasoned claims, that began an initial line of discussion and were not a response to another message's claim or argument, were coded as initial argument or initial assertion accordingly. It should be noted that this group was reserved solely for the first seed within a thread. Any additional seeds in the thread, which began a new line of discussion, were coded as one of the two counter categories discussed below.

The second group was developed as a means of identifying the different types of reasoned, non-reasoned, and non-claim replies. A message was regarded as a response if it directly or indirectly referred to another message.[14] The group was

divided into three sets of categories. The first set denoted those messages, which provided reasoned claims: *counter, rebuttal, refute,* and *affirmation*. First, a message that provided a reasoned claim in which an alternative claim was proposed that did not directly contradict or challenge a competing claim or argument was coded as a counter. Second, a message that provided a reasoned claim, which directly contradicted or challenged a competing claim or argument,[15] was coded as a rebuttal. Unlike a counter, a rebuttal directly contradicts or challenges an oppositional claim or argument. Third, a message that provided a reasoned claim, which directly defended an initial argument, initial assertion, counter, counter assertion, or affirmation against a corresponding rebuttal or non-reasoned rebuttal was coded as a refute. A refute is a defensive response to a rebuttal. Messages that provided direct or indirect reasoned support in favour of another's claim were coded as affirmations. Finally, when it comes to the second set of responses (non-reasoned claims); it was divided into similar categories (counter assertions, non-reasoned rebuttals, non-reasoned refutes, non-reasoned affirmations[16]) as reasoned responses.

The final set of responses identified non-claim replies. It consisted of four coding categories: *directive-informative*, *commissive*, *usage-declarative*, and *expressive*. First, messages that solicited or provided information were coded as a directive-informative. Second, messages that affirmed, assented, or conceded (partial assent) to another's claim or argument were coded as a commissive. Third, messages, which attempted to rectify a misunderstanding, were coded as a usage-declarative. Finally, messages were coded as an expressive response if they conveyed a participant's feeling or attitude towards him-/herself, another, or some state of affairs. Expressive responses were divided into three groups: acknowledgements, emotional comments, and humor.[17]

During the second phase, messages containing reasoned claims were coded in two steps. The first step, evidence type, consisted of four coding categories: *fact/source*, *comparison*, *experience,* and *example.* First, fact/source identified arguments, which supported their claims by providing a fact or source as evidence. Second, an argument that supported its claim by using an analogy or a comparison in general was coded as a comparison. Third, the category example identified an argument, which supported its claim by providing an anecdotal example (real-life, fictional, or hypothetical). Finally, an argument where a personal experience was used to support its claim was coded as an experience. It is important to note that these categories are not mutually exclusive. The second step, argument style, consisted of the coding category *reflexive argument*. During this step, a message or series of messages by an individual were coded as reflexive argument if they provided: (a) a reasoned claim in the form of an initial or counter argument; (b) evidence to support that argument; (c) reasoned responsiveness to challenges by providing rebuttals and refutes; (d) and evidence in support of a challenge or defence against one.

During the final phase, messages were coded again for communicative empathy, discursive equality, discursive freedom, and sincerity. First, communicative empathy consisted of two categories: messages suggesting that the author had imagined his- or herself in another or third-person's position were coded as an *empathetic exchange* or *third-person exchange* accordingly. Third-person here refers to an individual or group of individuals who were not participants of the discussion. Second, discursive equality contained the categories of *degrading* and *neglect*.

A message that degraded – to lower in character, quality, esteem, or rank – another participant and/or participant's argument or opinion was coded as degrading. A message coded as an initial argument or counter, which was silently neglected by the other participants within a thread – lacked a reciprocal exchange – was coded as neglect.[18] Third, discursive freedom consisted of *curbing:* messages that attempted to suppress, restrict, or prevent another participant's argument or opinion. Finally, messages that questioned the sincerity or truthfulness of another participant or participant's argument or opinion were coded as *questionable sincerity*.

Indicators of Deliberation

As we have seen, the process of deliberation consists of a variety of components. How do we examine and assess whether a discussion forum meets the requirements of deliberation. In the paragraphs that follow, an operationalisation of the normative conditions is discussed and examples from the Wife Swap forum are presented when needed. It should be noted that not all the coding categories will appear here, only those, which served to assess the quality of debate will be discussed.

Rational-Critical Discussion. The process of understanding is comprised of four components: rational-critical discussion, and three dispositional requirements – reciprocity, reflexivity, and empathy. The first component (rationality) was assessed by calculating the number of messages coded as reasoned claims. By determining the number of messages coded as such, and comparing it to both the number of claim responses and messages posted, an assessment was achieved.

The second component (critical reflection) was assessed by first determining the level of disagreement; the number of messages coded as rebuttals, non-reasoned rebuttals, refutes, and non-reasoned refutes. However, disagreeing is not always accompanied by reflection. The level of rebuttals and refutes, on the other hand, does suggest its presence because they, not only include statements of disagreement, but also provide reasons in support of those statements, indicating critical reflection. Thus, by calculating the number of messages coded as rebuttal and refute, the level of critical reflection was assessed.

The third component (coherence) was assessed by determining the consistency of the messages within each thread. Ideally, participants should stick to the topic at hand until mutual understanding and some form of agreement is achieved. Thus, the messages were first analysed and then categorised into lines of discussion based on the topics discussed. The level of coherence was determined by assessing the number of topic changes and the relevance of such changes. The latter point is particularly important here. Often discussions diverge from the original issue, for example, due to points of clarification or new issues being discovered, which are relevant to the discussion. These sorts of divergences were consider to be indirectly related to the original issue and not considered as disturbances.

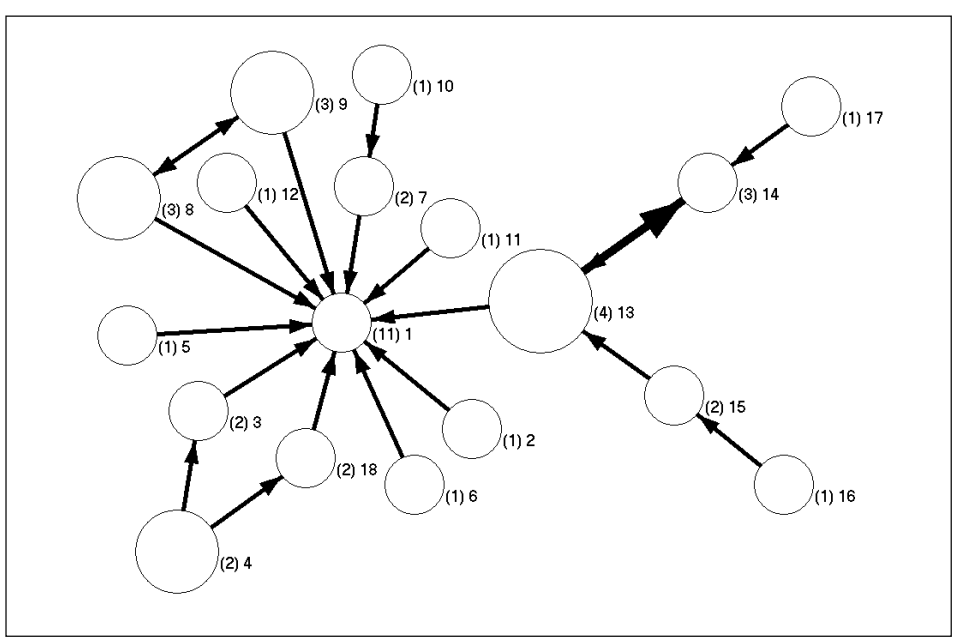
The final component (continuity) was first assessed by determining the level of extended debate within each thread. The level of extended debate refers to the frequency of continued interaction between participants via counters, rebuttals, and refutes. If there are extended interactions between participants in the form of rational-critical discussion, then the opportunity to reach a deeper level of understanding is increased. Lines of discussion within each thread, which were not off the topic, were coded for extended interaction via the presence of a least one *strong*

string. A strong string refers to a three-argument interaction, ideally in the form of a counter-rebuttal-refute exchange.[19] Here, an initial or counter claim is provided, which is challenged by a corresponding rebuttal, followed by a defence of that claim via a refute. If a line of discussion contained at least one strong string, then those messages and any additional messages, which contained a claimed response (both reasoned and non-reasoned) involved in the exchange, were coded as extended debate. By calculating the number messages and claimed responses coded under extended debate, the level of continuity was assessed.

Second, continuity was assessed by determining the level of commissives. Ideally, continuity requires that a discussion continue until understanding and some form of agreement is achieved as opposed to abandoning or withdrawing from the discussion. Thus, continuity was assessed by coding a thread (line of discussion) for a closing exchange: assent, partial assent, or agree-to-disagree agreement. Continuity here was assessed by determining the level of commissives or lack of commissives in relationship to the lines of discussion and opposing positions within a thread.

Reciprocity. In the past, net-public sphere researchers have often measured reciprocity by determining the percentage of postings coded as replies – reply percentage indicator.[20] The percentage of messages coded as a reply within a forum or sample of threads is calculated and used to determine the level of reciprocity. This approach focuses on measuring individual acts of reciprocity, reciprocity at a participant-to-participant level. Such an approach, however, neglects the social structure of a discussion thread; it neglects the network of messages, which connects the participants. Let us now look at a thread from the Wife Swap forum as a means of illustrating this point.

Figure 2: Web of Reciprocity – Example



In Figure 2, the replies between participants, within a discussion thread consisting of 18 participants with 23 postings, were plotted.[21] Each node (1-18) represented a participant. The size of the nodes signified the number of messages posted by each participant. The lines and arrows between nodes represented the replies and the direction from which they came. The darker the arrow, the higher the traffic was in that direction. Finally, the numbers in parentheses represented the total number of replies received and sent for each participant.

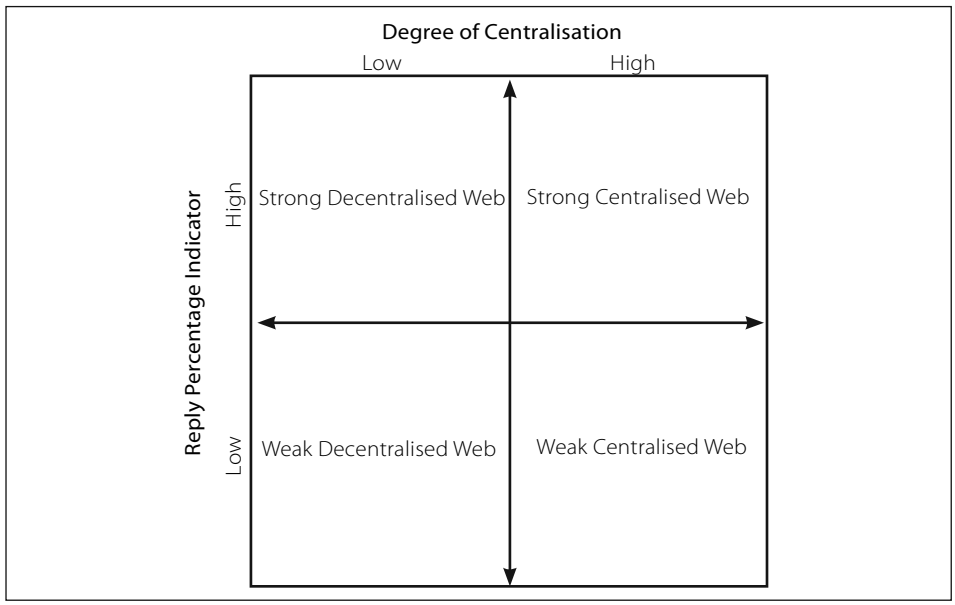
If we use the reply percentage indicator on this thread, we would find that roughly 96 percent of the messages posted were replies. Under this account, we might conclude that this thread had a high level of reciprocity thus satisfied the normative requirement. However, this would be misleading, particularly if we are interested in the type of reciprocity crucial to achieving understanding. Ideally, reciprocity here could be visualised as a web within which all the participants are connected via their postings. In this example, however, we have a centralised discussion. The initial message posted by participant one consumed the attention of most other participants thereby creating a social structure that looked more like a many-to-one reciprocal exchange rather than many-to-many web of reciprocity. Consequently, even though this discussion forum contained a high level of replies, it still had a moderately low level of reciprocity because the social structure of those replies was centralised; participants were not listening and replying to each other but rather at one other.

Knowing the percentage of replies is of course an important factor when determining the level of reciprocity, but it is insufficient on its own, as this example has demonstrated. Therefore, the level of reciprocity was assessed by combining the reply percentage measurement with a degree of centralisation measurement (De Nooy, Mrvar and Batagelj 2005). The latter measurement was employed to investigate more precise the social structure of the discussion threads. The concept of centrality here refers to the prominence of a particular participant. The degree of centrality indicates the number of links connecting participants to a focal participant, while the centralisation of a thread refers to the degree to which centrality is monopolised by any one participant(s) in the thread. The degree of centralisation for each thread was measured using Pajek, a network analysis software program. The degree of centralisation was calculated by dividing the variation in degree of vertices (participants) by the maximum degree variation which is possible in a network (thread) of the same size (De Nooy, Mrvar and Batagelj 2005, 126). Each thread yielded a score on a scale of one to zero, with the former representing the optimum centralised thread and the latter the optimum decentralised thread.

In order to assess the forum as a whole, the dual results for each thread were plotted along a double axis matrix (see Figure 3). It acted as a tool for interpreting the forum's level of reciprocity. It was broken into four quadrants labelled: strong decentralised web, strong centralised web, weak decentralised web, and weak centralised web. Those threads, which fell within the strong decentralised web quadrant, were considered to satisfy the normative requirement of reciprocity because they embodied both a high percentage of replies and a low level of centralisation. Those threads, which fell within the strong centralised web or weak decentralised web quadrants, were considered to have a moderate level of reciprocity. Finally, those threads, which fell within the weak centralised web quadrant, were conside-

red to have the lowest level of reciprocity. These threads had a low level of replies, and when participants did reply, it was highly centralised.

Figure 3: Web of Reciprocity Matrix



Reflexivity. The level of reflexivity was assessed at two progressive stages of coding. The first stage examined the messages for their use of evidence and set the boundaries for stage two, which identified messages for the presence of reflexive arguments. During the first stage, arguments were coded for evidence use. In everyday political talk, people reason socially on a variety issues. When they support their reasoning or challenge others, they make use of evidence, drawing on everything from personal life experiences and observations to statistical data and media reports. Using evidence to support an argument or challenge an opposing argument indicates that a participant has taken the time to reflect the opposing position against his/her own because, in order to relate evidence to one's own argument or an opposing argument, a participant must know and, to some extent, understand the opposing position (Kuhn 1991). Moreover, supporting an argument using a fact/source, comparison, experience, or example as oppose to using no evidence, suggests that a participant has reflected upon the opposing position because such evidence requires a participant to contend with questions such as where to use the evidence and what relationship exists between the evidence and the claim it supports or challenges, which requires reflexivity.

During the second stage, messages were assessed for argument style, reflexive argument. It is important to understand that reflexive arguments are usually dependent upon the exchange of numerous arguments between participants in a discussion. As such, they usually occur over a series of messages via a chain of arguments by a particular participant. However, occasionally a single message may be assessed as providing a reflexive argument in its own right, for example, when

a participant considers and addresses possible challenges or contradictions to his or her claim. When a participant posted a message or series of messages, which (a) provided a reasoned initial or counter claim; (b) used evidence to support that claim; (c) was responsive to challenges by providing rebuttals and refutes; (d) and provided evidence in support of that defence or challenge, they were assessed as satisfying the normative component of reflexivity. By determining the total number of reflexive postings, the level of reflexivity within the sample was determined and assessed.

Empathy. Empathy is often conceptualised cognitively (mental perspective taking) and emotionally (vicariously sharing emotions). Putting yourself in another position and trying to understand matters from that person's perspective cognitively and/or emotionally is important to deliberation. However, since deliberation is a social process, conveying empathic considerations to another participant is a critical component. When participants do not convey their empathic thoughts and/or feelings, empathic relationships cannot emerge, thus empathy has little bearing on the social process. As such, the analysis focused on capturing those instances of communicative empathy within the messages by coding for *empathetic exchange* and *third person exchange*.

Empathetic exchanges usually came in the form of statements of understanding. For example, in the Wife Swap forum, participants used a variety of statements in conveying an empathetic thought or feeling such as "I really understand where you're coming from," "I see your point," "That must have been difficult," "I know what you mean," and "I have been there before." However, communicative empathy was not always rooted in another participant's shoes. For example, when participants were discussing how a mother was treated on an episode of Wife Swap, participants conveyed their empathetic considerations for that mother to other forum members; they were bringing third-person empathy to the discussion and sharing it with others. During the process, this type of empathetic exchange often stirred internal communicated empathy between the forum members; consequently, they put themselves in another *participant*'s shoes. By determining the total number of messages code as such, the level of empathy was determined and assessed.

Discursive Equality. Discursive equality was examined first by assessing the rules and guidelines, behaviour of the moderator, and management of the forum in general. The guiding question during the analysis here was whether these factors privileged any one individual, group, or topic of discussion.

Second, discursive equality was analysed by assessing the distribution of voice within the forum. As Schneider (1997, 73) states, "Equality in the idealised state would suggest that all participants ought to contribute equally – that is, each author ought to contribute an equal number of messages". The goal here was to measure the number of participants along with their share of the postings thereby determining the concentration of participation. Schneider's equal distribution of voice approach was utilised;[22] the concentration of participation within each thread and the entire sample was calculated and assessed.

However, such an analysis on its own is insufficient; just because participants are speaking, it does not mean anyone is listening. The question then becomes who are they listening to – the popularity of the participants. Ideally, everyone should be

equally popular; no one participant or group of participants should monopolise the receiving of messages. Therefore, in conjunction with Schneider's approach, each thread and the entire sample as a whole was measured and assessed by calculating the distribution of popularity (concentration of popularity). By determining both the concentration of participation and popularity, a clearer picture of the distribution of voice was achieved.

The distribution of voice tells us little about the level of *substantial* equality within a discussion forum. Do participants respect and recognise each other as having an equal voice? This question was addressed by coding and assessing the forum for the level of substantial equality. The analysis consisted of two coding categories: degrading and neglect. The code degrading identified those instances when participants actively degraded each other. When a participant degrades another participant's character or argument, it not only indicates a lack of respect but also creates an atmosphere of inequality. The category neglect too identified those instances of inequality. However, it focused on those instances of passive neglect, when arguments went ignored or unnoticed wordlessly.

Discursive Freedom. The management of the forum or lack of management can influence participants' discursive freedom. In particular, the rules and guidelines, the role of moderators, and the management of the forum in general (or lack of) may impede or enhance discursive freedom. As such, these factors along with the structure of the forum were examined in light of discursive freedom. First, the rules and guidelines were evaluated. Do they, for example, forbid topics from the discussion, aggressive, and abusive language? Second, the participation of the moderators were observed and assessed. Often in discussion forums, moderators post messages, for example, warning participants of their behaviour; these postings and postings by moderators in general were examined. Finally, messages where coded for statements of censorship or banishment, for example, when participants complain about their messages being edited or removed completely.

Once the forum structure and management was examined, the focus was next placed on the interaction between participants. The aim here was to capture and describe those instances of censorship by the participants themselves, those instances when a participant was prevented from speaking his/her opinion by another; thus, all messages were coded for curbing. Curbing can come in a variety of forms from the use of abusive and aggressive language to direct statements of censorship. However, it should be pointed out that not all acts of curbing impede deliberation, and in some cases, curbing may be seen as enhancing it. Consequently, all acts of curbing were initially coded and then later assessed.

Sincerity. It is difficult to judge whether a participant is being honest. Moreover, such a judgment would require more than analysis of the texts. The focus here then was not on whether every participant was telling the truth, but rather, it was placed on the social act of questioning another's sincerity; identifying those instances when a participant questioned or challenged another's sincerity. Consequently, the analysis concentrated on gauging the level of *perceived* sincerity, whether participants perceived others as being sincere. Let us now look at an example from Wife Swap:

> Anne: "Hmm, 2 posts, one minute after each other, both new members with one post each, both happened to do it at the same time? What a coincidence ey?"

In this thread, we had one participant accusing another of taking on multiple identities (call signs) as a means of promoting their argument. The doubt cast on this participant's sincerity spread throughout the thread, and the accused, who repeatedly denied the accusations, was never really able to escape it. The result that followed was a collapse in discussion. As we can see from this example, perceived sincerity is a crucial component to deliberation. Even if levels of actual sincerity were high, if participants do not perceive this as such, then deliberation is placed in jeopardy. Therefore, sincerity was assessed by identifying those exchanges between participants where sincerity was questioned, like above, via the coding category questionable sincerity.

Conclusion

Talking politics online is not exclusively reserved for politically-orientated discussion forums, particularly the everyday political talk crucial to the public sphere. People talk politics just about anywhere online from reality TV discussion forums to numerous other forum genres. Thus, the need to tap into those discussions is important if our aim is to provide a more comprehensive overview of the online discursive landscape. However, widening our scope of analysis presents us with a new set of difficulties, namely, how do we identify political talk within the vast pool of threads and postings, and how do we assess such talk in light of the process of deliberation, while at the same time, taking into account its informal nature.

In this article, a methodological approach aimed at tackling these questions was presented. During stage one of the analysis, the aim was to identify a political *discussion*. The goal was to come to a set of criteria that would allow a researcher to capture both conventional and lifestyle-based notions of political talk. The two criteria focused on identifying when a participant made a connection to society and when that connection stirred reflection and a response by another, igniting a political discussion. When it was applied to the Wife Swap threads, for example, discussions ranging from child obesity and parenting to taxation and the role of the welfare state were identified.

During stage two, the aim was to assess political talk in light of the public sphere while taking into account its informal nature. In order to achieve this, a content analysis was utilised as the primary method. From analysing the level of communicative empathy to counting the number of replies, the method proved useful and effective given the diverse nature of the various variables of deliberation, which required various levels of operationalisation, interpretation, and manoeuvring. Due to this diversity, the coding scheme was multifaceted and extensive at times. That being said, owing to the diversity of variables, a thorough and comprehensive operationalisation of the normative conditions was required; one that would allow the creation of indicators, which actually reflected the normative conditions in question.

However, since the approach focused on participants' comments, there are limitations to what can be detected concerning variables like reflexivity. Reflexivity is largely an internal process of understanding – reflecting another's claim against

ones own. Consequently, by limiting the analysis to what was being posted, the actual processes that take place within the minds of participants were neglected. Although, as was demonstrated above, reflexivity to a certain extent can be deduced from the arguments provided by participants, ideally such an approach would be complemented by interviews as a means of providing a more comprehensive indicator.

Deliberative democrats have claimed that deliberation leads to a variety of outcomes, for example, increased knowledge and awareness; mutual understanding; strong citizenship; and informed, stable, and legitimate decisions. Outcomes need to be considered in reference to the communicative space under analysis. For example, in formal discursive settings, such as parliament debates, we probably would look for informed and legitimate decisions and possibly less in the way of citizenship building. While in informal spaces, we might look for awareness and mutual understanding. There are a variety of possibilities and the coding scheme presented above has its limitations given its textual focus. That being said, in Wife Swap, for example, given the lifestyle-based topics discussed, it seems that the outcomes of political talk were less about loses and victories and more about empathic exchange and understanding.

As mentioned above, deliberative democrats have looked to create a more authentic notion of deliberation by allowing emotions and alternative communicative forms a place within the deliberative process. The coding scheme described in this article takes a step in that direction, for example, by coding messages for their use of expressive speech acts, ingredients of everyday political talk. The aim here was more descriptive and exploratory than normative; to describe how participants actually talked politics and to see whether expressives, for example, had any bearing on the type and quality of political discussions that took place.

Even though the methodological approach presented here seeks to identify, describe, and assess political discussions in non-political spaces, it can easily be applied to most informal (political or not) discursive setting, places where everyday political talk emerges. In addition to being applicable, it was a useful tool for providing a more precious and detailed picture of political talk – of what participants were talking about and how they were talking about it. Ultimately, if net-public sphere research is to "move beyond the first phase," it will have to start adopting, not only a more porous methodological approach as the one presented here, but also a more inclusive approach to the discursive spaces it examines.

Notes:

1. See e.g. Coleman 2004; Dahlberg 2001a, 2001b; Hagemann 2002; Jankowski and Van Os 2004; Jensen 2003; Schneider 1997; Stromer-Galley 2002, 2003; Tsaliki 2002; Wilhelm 1999; Winkler 2005.

2. The distinction between political and non-political is based on whether a forum identifies itself as political.

3. Talk, conversation, and discussion are used interchangeably.

4. The Wife Swap forum was hosted by Channel 4 in the UK. The postings and threads used in this article came from a sample, which consisted of all threads that began between January 2005 and January 2006 – archived January 2006. Available at: http://community.channel4.com/eve/forums.

5. Young calls herself a communicative democrat precisely because she wants to create room in deliberation for other communicative forms.

6. See Dahlberg (2004) and Janssen and Kies (2005) for an overview.

7. Based on Graham (2002).

8. I follow Dryzek's (2000) line of argument here. Emotions and other communicative forms may play an important role in deliberation, however, rational-critical discussion is a requirement, while other communicative forms are welcomed but not compulsory.

9. A posting can be identified as political if it meets the first criterion, but if it fails to meet the second criterion, it is not part of a political discussion. It would be interesting to examine and compare those instance when a topic has been successfully politicised by fulfilling both criteria with those instance when a topic has failed, achieving only the first.

10. The call signs of the participants have been changed.

11. It builds on Graham and Witschge (2003).

12. Message and posting are used interchangeably.

13. Note, the unit of analysis for the category *neglect* was the argument.

14. When the content of a message matches the content of another, it is a response.

15. This includes an initial argument, initial assertion, counter, counter assertion, refute, non-reasoned refute, or affirmation.

16. Non-reasoned affirmations were coded under the category commissive.

17. Acknowledgments are speech acts that acknowledge the presence, departure, or conversational actions of another participant, such as greeting, thanking, apologising, congratulating, complementing, and complaining. Emotional comments are speech acts that express an emotion or attitude, for example, when a participant states, "I hate taxes." Humour represents complex emotional speech acts, which excite and amusement, for instance, the use of jokes and sarcasm.

18. Counters off the topic of discussion were not coded.

19. This may also include any three-combination exchange involving an initial argument, affirmation, counter, rebuttal, and refute, which represents a continuation.

20. See e.g. Wilhelm (1999).

21. Pajek was used: http://vlado.fmf.uni-lj.si/pub/networks/pajek.

22. He uses a standard statistical analysis here called entropy coefficient (Schneider 1997, 83).

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