Internet political discussion forums as an argumentative activity type: A pragma-dialectical analysis of online forms of strategic manoeuvring in reacting critically

Lewinski, M.

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1.1 Online discussion forums as object of research

The Internet has offered many technologies which make new forms of communication possible: from simple ubiquitous e-mail to high-definition videoconferences. One of such forms are online forums for open, text-based public discussions among Internet users. Such discussion forums have attracted much attention—both popular and scholarly—ever since a new system for computer-mediated discussion and information exchange called Usenet was launched in the United States in 1979. Originally created as a network for fast circulation of technological news among computer aficionados, Usenet outlived the specialised functions it was meant to fulfil – not unlike many other Internet-related inventions, including e-mail. New topics, including politics, were continuously added to the computer-mediated discussions taking place in the various ‘newsgroups’ formed by Usenet users. In about a decade the system grew so popular that some dared to call it ‘arguably the world’s largest conversation’ (Rheingold, 1993: 131) even before the World Wide Web system—that is, what we call the Internet nowadays—was publicly introduced in 1993.¹ After the inception of the World Wide Web many new venues for online discussions have been established in the form of Web-forums, similar to Usenet newsgroups but held on countless, easily accessible Web-pages.

The object of this study is argumentation in online political discussion forums available through the Google Groups service (http://groups.google.com/). Google Groups provide a unified Web-based design (or ‘interface’) for accessing the two afore-mentioned widely used systems for holding online discussions: the Web-forums, which are hosted on Google servers, and the independent Usenet newsgroups, to which Google provides only a

¹ Today, in the Usenet system alone, online users exchange up to 15 million messages per day. For the statistics of Usenet traffic see http://www.newsadmin.com/usenet.asp. Not all of these 15 mln messages are actual contributions to discussions – some of them contain the so called ‘binary code’ by means of which computer files are exchanged.
popular gateway.\(^2\) Therefore, Google Groups offer a good insight into the working of common online forums, even if there is a wide array of other modes of participating in Internet discussions.

Google Groups are online forums for *asynchronous* discussions in which users ‘post’ (i.e., send), read and reply to publicly available messages in a form similar to e-mail, that is, without rigorous time and space constraints. The available collection of discussion forums, as well as the pool of messages within forums, is organised along topical lines. Google forums can be dedicated to highly specialised topics of all sorts, such as computer programming, UFOs or university courses, but can also serve as venues for informal *political* argumentation over issues of common concern: elections, government policies, international relations, etc. Many popular political discussion forums accessible through Google Groups, including those studied here, are informal, grassroots, bottom-up initiatives: they are hosted and administrated by politically engaged Internet users and are in no direct way connected to any institutional decision-making processes.

In sum, this study focuses on argumentative exchanges in asynchronous, topically organised online forums in which Internet users discuss political issues by sending written, public messages.

1.2 Research problem and research questions

The rapid growth of the Usenet and other online forums for informal political discussion has been met with mixed reactions. First came the optimistic view that an anonymous, computer-mediated environment may give rise to a new, reinvigorated public sphere in which ‘occupation, education and social status […] lose significance, bringing pure exchange of arguments to the fore’ (reported in: Linaa Jensen, 2003: 351). For their advocates, Usenet disputes carried a promise of a novel type of argumentative discussion, void of many problems of the discussions we know from the pre-Internet era: restricted access to public forums, spatial and temporal constraints, impact of face-concerns and social status on advancing argumentation and voicing criticisms, inadequate accessibility of sources of information, etc.

Others, however, spoke of ‘cacophony,’ ‘chaos,’ and the ‘tumultuous nature of Usenet discussions’ which easily ‘break down into a babel of voices’ (Davis, 1999: Ch. 6).

To the critics, forums for political online discussion such as Google Groups rather than open and free were boundless and anarchic, and thus resembled ephemeral ‘shouting matches’ between antagonistic ‘opinion venturers,’\(^3\) much more than prolonged, orderly exchanges of arguments leading to some reasoned results. The overall pessimistic diagnosis was that what online political discussions actually offered in terms of argumentation were often, contrary to expectations, ‘endless fruitless dialogues’ characterised by ‘irresponsibility, hate speech and decline of debate culture’ (reported in: Linaa Jensen, 2003: 364, 358).

More recently, still others objected to such one-sided assessments, and pointed instead to the impact the specificities of the design of particular online forums may have on the shape and quality of deliberation (in which argumentation plays a vital role):

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\text{[…] both sides in this debate are creating a false dichotomy. It is no more plausible to conclude that online discussion forums destroy deliberation than it is to suggest that they make it possible. Neither is a matter of principle or of fact; rather, […] it is largely a matter of design […] how discussion is organized within the medium of communication helps to determine whether or not the result will be deliberation or cacophony. (Wright & Street, 2007: 850)}
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Such calls for a detailed investigation of the relation between the organisation of online discussions and the ways argumentation is actually performed point to a new area of study. So far, however, the calls have not been followed by a methodical research of the conditions that online discussions create for argumentative exchanges. A gap has thus emerged between the projected objectives of the study of online argumentation, and the actual research practice.

This dissertation endeavours to contribute to filling the gap between the theory and the practice of online research. The goal of the dissertation is to trace the impact of the conditions of the context of Internet political discussion forums on the way specific argumentative moves can be performed and are performed in online exchanges. In order to realise this goal, a series of research questions is addressed. The questions are organised hierarchically in such manner that an answer to the first, most general question, allows for investigating the subsequent question, and so on:

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Q1. \text{What kind of conditions for argumentation does the context of online political discussion forums create?}
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\(^3\) I owe this expression to Peter Houtlosser.
Q1.1. What kind of restrictions do online political discussion forums impose on and what kind of opportunities do they create for reacting critically to argumentation?

Q1.1.1a. How do the restrictions and opportunities of online political discussion forums affect the arguers’ questioning of the acceptability of the premises used by their opponents?

Q1.1.1b. How do the restrictions and opportunities of online political forum discussions affect the arguers’ questioning of the justificatory force of their opponents’ arguments?

Q1.1.2a. How do the restrictions and opportunities of online political forum discussions affect the arguers’ attempts at reformulating their opponents’ arguments and standpoints?

Q1.1.2b. What kind of criteria for identifying straw man attacks should argumentation analysts apply in their evaluation of critical reactions in online political forum discussions?

Question 1 addresses the general issue of conditions for argumentation prevalent in online political discussion forums accessible through Google Groups. Since argumentation is a multi-faceted and complex activity of language, Question 1 can be specified in many ways and subdivided into precise sub-questions. Assuming that argumentation is essentially a dialogic activity, one possible line of division, selected for this study, is to take into scrutiny either the part of advancing argumentation (for or against a given standpoint) or the part of criticising argumentation. In this dissertation, it is reacting critically that is closely analysed.

The study of the critical part of argumentation has been chosen since, as it seems, it is exactly in the possibilities for criticisms where the crucial issue concerning online political discussions of the type analysed in this study lies. These discussions’ defining qualities—lack of censorship, or even moderation, lack of time and space limits, freedom of access, open-endedness, anonymity—often denounced as obstacles to orderly, civil and responsible argumentation, can also be perceived as catalysts of uninhibited critical testing of standpoints and arguments advanced in the course of debates:

A large part of the success of Usenet is due to the fact that its admins. [administrators – ML] do *not* generally quash argument and unpopular opinion. This made it a crucible for testing ideas and opinions in one of the closest approaches to the ‘marketplace of ideas’ that has been seen in history. (Woodbury, 1998)
Therefore, one may ask: what exactly are the special possibilities ‘for testing ideas and opinions’ that make online discussions unique among other contexts for argumentative discussions? Or, more precisely, what kind of restrictions do online political discussion forums impose and what kind of opportunities do they create for reacting critically to others’ argumentation? (Question 1.1)

Furthermore, a distinction has to be made between two basic types of argumentative criticism: arguers can react critically because they claim there is something wrong with the information or value judgments used by their opponents (i.e., with the premises of argumentation) or with the connection of the premises to the opinions advanced (i.e., with the justificatory force of argumentation). Therefore, two sub-questions (1.1.1a and 1.1.1b) are formulated as specifications of Question 1.1.

Finally, the questions of analysis of critical reactions in online political forum discussions can be complemented by questions of evaluation of critical reactions. Many things can go wrong with reacting critically, from furious ad hominem attacks to irrelevant objections. One element common to all critical reactions is that they relate to a standpoint or arguments originally put forward by the opponent. Therefore, the original, criticised position may always be at risk of being distorted, whether deliberately or inadvertently, by the party who reacts critically. Such a distortion is commonly referred to as ‘the straw man fallacy.’

Fallacious critical reactions in which the straw man fallacy is committed are a particularly interesting object of research in the context of online forum discussions. That is because online discussions are written recorded interactions in which arguers may swiftly respond to each other and correct an attempted misrepresentation of the original position on the basis of a readily available, verbatim record of what was previously written. Despite the possibility to correct the abuse, straw man attacks evidently do occur in Internet discussions. In order to address the problem of how this is possible, two interrelated questions have to be answered. The first of them (Question 1.1.2a) pertains to the relation of the conditions of the context of online discussions to the possibilities of reformulating arguments and standpoints of opponents. The second question (1.1.2b) is a question of argumentation analysis and evaluation. It addresses the problem of how the particulars of a given context of argumentation, in this case online political discussions, enter into an adequate identification of straw man attacks. These two questions are clearly interrelated, because the specific contextual conditions of online discussions are both a background against which arguers attempt to launch fallacious straw man attacks subtle
enough to pass unnoticed, as well as a necessary point of reference for an analyst in his task of accurately evaluating alleged straw men as reasonable or fallacious.

1.3 Method and organisation of the study

In this study I will employ the methods of qualitative argumentation analysis. Such a decision is motivated by the assumption that the problems of argumentation in online political discussions can be best analysed with the concepts and methods developed in argumentation theory. More in particular, in line with the research questions formulated above, the goals of the study can be reached by establishing a methodical, accountable connection between the conditions of online political forum discussions and specific patterns of argumentation characteristic of this context. The task of a researcher in doing so is to give a well-justified account of how contextual conditions for argumentation can affect the patterns of a specific argumentative move (such as the patterns of reacting critically in online discussions) (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson & Jacobs, 1993; Jackson, 1986; Jacobs, 1986), rather than to provide a broad, quantitative overview of certain frequencies of behaviour. What is needed for this task are analytic tools sensitive enough to grasp the specificities of contextualised argumentation, that is, tools that are instrumental in spelling out the argumentative qualities of the context in question, in specifying the functions a given move plays in argumentative discussion, in reconstructing the implicit and indirect parts of argumentation and, eventually, in evaluating the move’s reasonableness. It is contemporary theory of argumentation that provides such tools. Therefore, in general, qualitative methods of argumentation theory are more adequate to studying phenomena of online argumentative discourse than quantitative content analysis routinely employed by political theorists, communication scholars and sociologists interested in online argumentation.4

Yet, within argumentation theory itself, there are a number of different approaches to analysis and evaluation of actual argumentation occurring in various types of ordinary contexts for discussion. Therefore, before moving to analysing the conditions for

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4 The use of strictly quantitative social-scientific methodologies in justifying wide-ranging, often evaluative, claims concerning online argumentation has been increasingly criticised, even from within disciplines of social sciences, as inadequate or, at least, insufficient. As a solution some improvements have been proposed to the methods of content analysis of online disputes (see, e.g., Graham & Witschge, 2003; Janssen & Kies, 2005). These proposals call for a broader use of qualitative methodologies in the study of online discourse; still, they do not embrace the methods developed within argumentation theory.
argumentation in online discussions, a preliminary theoretical and methodological problem has to be addressed: which approach to studying argumentation in context can best serve as the framework for analysis and evaluation of everyday argumentation taking place in the context of online political forum discussions?

This dissertation is divided into two parts: one dealing with the theory and methodology of studying argumentation in context and one dealing with the analysis of the conditions and patterns of argumentation in Internet political forum discussions. The theoretical part of the study comprises Chapters 2, 3 and 4. The goal of the theoretical investigation is to appraise the most prominent contemporary approaches to the study of argumentation in context in terms of their functionality in a research focused on the details of argumentation in online political discussion forums.

Chapter 2 begins with a general introduction to the topic of the contextuality of argumentation. In this introduction, I will set the criteria for assessing the approaches reviewed in this dissertation. The approach to the study of context best fit for serving as the framework for analysis and evaluation of online discussions should optimally fulfil these criteria. Further, I will critically review Walton and Krabbe’s approach, which centres on the concept of dialogue types (Chapter 2). Because Walton is an exceptionally prolific author, he is often the first point of reference in dealing with problems of argumentation. This applies in particular to the analysis of various contexts for argumentation – Walton’s broad-ranging study carried under the heading of ‘new dialectic’ is primarily focused on examining ‘conversational contexts of argument,’ which he, in collaboration with Krabbe, approaches as normative types of dialogue.

In Chapter 3, I will discuss Jackson, Jacobs and Aakhus’s approach to studying contexts for argumentation. These researchers have developed the concept of argumentation designs which applies to any regulated format for carrying out argumentative discussions. Jackson, Jacobs and Aakhus’s analyses focus in particular on various contexts for computer-mediated discussions, including online discussion forums. Therefore, their study of argumentation designs is directly relevant to the research of this dissertation.

Pragma-dialectics, a theory of argumentation that I will examine in Chapter 4, brings together the conceptual, normative framework of dialectics and descriptive insights from the pragmatic study of everyday language (further enhanced by the inclusion of elements of rhetorical analysis). In the pragma-dialectical theory, contexts for
argumentation are conceptualised as *argumentative activity types*, i.e., regularly practiced, more or less fixed, institutionalised types of communicative activity which have a vital argumentative aspect.

Apart from a distinctive approach to the contexts of argumentation, two elements of pragma-dialectical theory are of special significance to analysing patterns of critical reactions in online political discussion forums. First, the dialectical perspective provides the basis for understanding argumentation as part of a critical, regulated exchange of arguments and criticisms between (at least) two parties. In the pragma-dialectical view, such exchange ideally takes place by means of a *critical discussion* – a rule-governed dialectical procedure aimed at resolving disputes on the merits by testing the protagonist’s standpoint against the critical reactions of the antagonist. The protagonist’s argumentation—in the narrow traditional sense of justifying the standpoint (conclusion) by arguments (premises)—is thus functionally linked to, and indeed dependent on, the quality and quantity of the antagonist’s *critical reactions*:

> Argumentation arises in response to or in anticipation of disagreement, and particular lines of justification are fitted to meet the nature of that disagreement. The structure of argumentation, the requirements of justification, and the need for argumentation itself are all adapted to the context in which opposition, objections, doubts, and counterclaims arise. (van Eemeren, 2002: 79)

The question of critical reactions, thus, lies at the very centre of the pragma-dialectical approach to argumentation.

Second, the applicability of the pragma-dialectical model to the study of ordinary argumentation is enhanced by the introduction of the concept of *strategic manoeuvring*. Van Eemeren and Houtlosser (1999, 2002a, 2002b) claim that actual everyday argumentation can be grasped more faithfully if seen as permeated by the arguers’ strategic attempts to diminish the tension between the requirement to be reasonable and the desire to win. In such a conception, argumentation is analysed as an agonistic practice situated in numerous argumentative activity types that are characterised by peculiar restrictions and opportunities that affect strategic manoeuvring in performing various argumentative moves, such as reacting critically to argumentation of the opponent.

The analytic part of the study starts in Chapter 5, in which I will in two respects lay the basic groundwork for the analysis of critical reactions in political online forum discussions. First, I will offer a detailed, pre-theoretical description of the technology (design) of the discussion forums available through Google Groups. Second, I will provide an analysis of
the institutional goal of political discussions in such forums. To this end, I will argue that online discussions studied here belong to the domain of political communication and are deliberative activities aimed at informal opinion-formation.

After the preliminary characterisation of online political discussions, their detailed argumentative analysis will follow in Chapters 6-9. The goal of these chapters is to answer, one by one, the research questions specified above.

In Chapter 6 I will provide an answer to Question 1 by characterising online political forum discussions as an argumentative activity type. I will analyse four parameters of argumentative exchanges in online discussions: their initial situation, procedural and material starting points, means of argumentation and criticism, and the possible outcome. This analysis will reveal the key argumentative features of online discussions, which impose certain fixed constraints on the way particular argumentative moves—such as critical reactions—can be strategically manoeuvred with.

In Chapter 7 I will focus on the conditions for strategic manoeuvring in reacting critically in online discussions. Since strategic manoeuvring consists in balancing dialectical and rhetorical goals of argumentation, I will first describe the dialectical goals and means of reacting critically in the argumentation stage of an ideal critical discussion. Second, I will analyse the restrictions that online political discussions impose on, and the opportunities they create for, various ways of reacting critically in terms of the three aspects of strategic manoeuvring: adaptation to audience demand, topical selection and the choice of presentational devices. In this way, an answer to Question 1.1 will be provided.

The goal of Chapter 8 is to answer research questions 1.1.1a and 1.1.1b, which address the issue of actual patterns of reacting critically in online political discussions. In carrying out this task, I will analyse fragments of argumentative exchanges in online discussions. These analyses reveal recognisable patterns of critical reactions that target either the acceptability of the premises or the justificatory force of argumentation, or both at the same time. I will discuss how these patterns are affected by the features of online discussions and what the rhetorical rationale behind them is.

Finally, the problem of critical reactions which involve fallacious representations of the attacked position will be dealt with in Chapter 9. In this chapter, I will first present two examples of alleged straw man attacks in online discussions. Then, I will describe the pragma-dialectical approach to analysing the straw man fallacy. On the basis of this approach, I will examine the restrictions and opportunities for reformulating arguments and standpoints advanced by the opponent in online discussions. In this way, Question 1.1.2a
will be addressed. In the remainder of the chapter, I will discuss contextual criteria for reconstructing and, finally, evaluating various forms of reformulations in reacting critically. Based on this discussion, I will formulate specific criteria for identifying straw man attacks in online political forum discussions, thus providing an answer to the final research question of the dissertation (*Question 1.1.2b*).