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

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Chapter 3

Argumentation designs in the account of Jackson, Jacobs and Aakhus

3.1 Design enterprise in the study of argumentation

Jackson and Jacobs (later also in collaboration with Aakhus) developed an approach to the study of argumentation which is distinctive in its focus on empirical analyses of pragmatic details of everyday argumentation, rather than on theoretical considerations aimed at constructing normative models of argumentation. Especially Jackson and Jacobs’ early study of ‘the structure of conversational argument’ (Jackson & Jacobs, 1980, 1981; Jacobs & Jackson, 1982, 1983b) is characterised by a methodical investigation of sequential patterns of ordinary discourse – an approach deeply embedded in a tradition of conversation analysis. In these studies they developed an understanding of argumentation as a ‘disagreement-relevant expansion of speech acts’ governed by some ‘general conversational principles,’ such as preference for agreement and maxims for cooperative communication distinguished by Grice (Jackson & Jacobs, 1980; Jacobs & Jackson, 1983a). As Jackson and Jacobs stress, these general principles are not universally applicable in an identical way across all discursive situations; rather, they always function ‘in a context of practical constraint and opportunity.’ Therefore, actual argumentative discourse is structured ‘according to the language activities and forms of expression in which arguments are embedded’ (Jacobs, 1989: 361).

Jackson and Jacobs’ context-sensitive approach to argumentation began with analyses of actual discourses and is thus largely based on empirical considerations. Later in their work, however, they became increasingly attentive to the normative aspect of argumentation and moved towards an approach geared to integrating the descriptive with the prescriptive which they call (after van Eemeren) ‘normative pragmatics’ (Jacobs, 1999;
‘Normative pragmatics,’ in the simplest formulation, ‘is empirical discourse analysis organized by normative theory’ (Jackson, 1998: 187). In Jackson, Jacobs, and Aakhus’s view, the most thoroughly worked out and applicable normative theory of argumentation is the model for a critical discussion, as developed by pragma-dialecticians (see below). Therefore, they propose to examine and assess peculiarities of actual contexts of argumentation against the norms of this ideal model. In doing so, they employ the concept of argumentation designs.

‘Argumentation design,’ as very broadly depicted by Jackson, is ‘any negotiated method of dispute settlement’ or ‘some sort of plan for the management of discussion’ (1998: 184, 190). De Moor and Aakhus define argumentation designs in somewhat more concrete terms as ‘the interrelated functionalities, procedures, checks and balances, and connotations that shape the practical range of argumentation behavior’ (de Moor & Aakhus, 2006: 94-95). Taking a ‘design stance’ in an analysis of contexts or formats of argumentative discussion amounts to seeing them as (deliberately or, more often than not, unreflectively and conventionally) constructed models for communication consisting of a number of features which afford or constrain certain forms of argumentative behaviour. Such ‘design features,’ i.e., functionalities built into a given design, influence ‘among other matters, the way people take turns, the identities people are willing to display, the commitments to be invoked, the direction in which speech act sequences are expanded, [and] the means to repair coherence and coordination’ (Aakhus & Jackson, 2005: 414).

Jackson, Jacobs and Aakhus propose that virtually every format for argumentative discussion can be studied as an argumentation design: third-party dispute mediation, classroom instruction, group decision-making, etc. (Aakhus, 2002a, 2003; Jackson, 2002; Jackson & Wolski, 2001; Jacobs & Aakhus, 2002a, 2002b). Analysis of such well-established discussion formats, however, is not at the core of a ‘design enterprise’: empirical study is in fact motivated by the idea of ‘seeing designs as contingent and malleable, rather than as a fixed set of constraints on practice’ (Aakhus & Jackson, 2005: 415). That is why the research interest of Jackson and Aakhus has been focused on the computer-mediated formats of argumentation made possible by new Information and Communication Technologies. These new technologies, thanks to the relative easiness of

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1 This is to say that their path to analysing actual argumentative contexts (with the view on a normative theory) is opposite to Walton and Krabbe’s, who start from a theoretical and normative stance and then seek to apply their concepts in ‘typical conversational settings.’

2 Even though they acknowledge the possibility of formulating some other ideal models of argumentation.
implementing new communicative features through programming, allow to put into practice the idea that the design enterprise ‘is a form of intervention oriented toward invention’ (Aakhus & Jackson, 2005: 418; italics original).

A consistent integration of empirical research and critical evaluation of argumentation formats followed by intervention aimed at improving practice is proposed by Jackson in the general ‘design methodology’ (1998, 2002). This methodology consists of four basic steps: 1) ‘an empirical examination of discourse practices,’ aimed at revealing some recurrent patterns of argumentative discourse by means of careful, qualitative analyses of situated practices (see: van Eemeren et al., 1993; Jackson, 1986); 2) ‘a critical analysis based on comparison of practices with an ideal model’; as already mentioned, Jackson and colleagues employ as the ideal the model for a critical discussion, in which ‘arguers engage in full, free, and impersonal exploration of potential disagreement without limitations on either total talk time or rights to speak’ and where ‘contestability of every proposition is fundamental’ (Jackson, 2002: 110); 3) ‘a specification of designable features,’ that is, the search for these sources of impediments to the realisation of the ideal that can be possibly singled out and altered in the discussion format under investigation. For example, in the protocols for teaching and learning such potentially designable impediments include ‘finite talk time, unequally distributed speaking rights, unequally distributed authority, identity-relevance of speech, and so on’ (Jackson, 2002: 110); 4) ‘a proposed redesign, and examination of the change in practice that follows from the implementation of the design’; this is the crucial act of inventing new formats for argumentation, in which the design enterprise is accomplished. Examples of newly designed improvements to traditional discourse practices include online protocols for teaching and learning devised and implemented by Jackson (2002; Jackson & Wolski, 2001) and ‘virtual dialectic’ aimed at facilitating learning from experience by students involved in workplace internships developed by Aakhus (Aakhus & Jackson, 2005).

The goal of applying such elaborate ‘design methodology’ is to narrow the gap between the ideal argumentation envisaged in the model of a critical discussion and the way argumentation is conducted in reality. In less-than-ideal conditions of ordinary discourse characterised, for instance, by ‘finite talk time, unequally distributed speaking rights’ and, very often, by the norm of ‘conflict avoidance,’ it is hardly possible to simply implement and exercise ideally critical forms of argumentation. Instead, one can ‘search for ways to eliminate, compensate for, or work around design features that promote bad practices, and to inject or emulate design features that promote good practices’ (Jackson,
2002: 110). For example, conflict avoidance can be limited if features stimulating open expression of doubt and disagreement (such as an automated antagonist in an online learning protocol) are built into the new design.

It should be clear from this description that the theoretical framework propounded by Jackson, Jacobs & Aakhus requires that a successful new design fulfills two general criteria: first, it should enhance the opportunities for critical and reasonable argumentation as pictured in the model of an ideal critical discussion; second, it should be practically applicable in that it should catch on with actual arguers who can, of course, accept or reject any new form of communication. If the whole design procedure is properly implemented, in the end, less-than-rational formats of communication are replaced by improved new designs, in which argumentation can better approach the rational ideal.

In this sense, a design enterprise combines both descriptive and normative insights in the study of different contexts for holding argumentative distinction:

Within a design enterprise, models must be both descriptive and normative, which is to say that they are accountable on the one hand to values and ideals and on the other hand to actual practices and circumstances. Though a design enterprise is distinct from descriptive and critical enterprises, it depends on the same resources as these other enterprises and is accountable to many of the same standards. Design involves interpreting and judging the communicative possibilities in any setting and inventing actions or means to bring to life forms of action latent but yet unrealized. (Aakhus & Jackson, 2005: 420)

Such an account of models (or designs) of argumentation may resemble Walton’s idea that the concept of a dialogue type should combine some ideal of normativity with a descriptive value, so that the dialogue types are primarily prescriptive models which, at the same time, can ‘fit the typical conversational settings’ (Walton, 1998: 29). This is, however, only a seeming resemblance. In fact, Jackson, Jacobs and Aakhus are well aware of the difference between ‘exogenous dialogue ideals for judging the reasonableness of a particular move in a discussion’ and ‘artifacts people use to take communicative action and to construct communicative activities as argumentation’ (Aakhus, 2002a: 133; see also Jackson, 1989). Only having clearly distinguished these two ways of approaching argumentative models, they see a practical need of joining them in a comprehensive research project aimed at improvements of practice with a view towards a clearly specified
ideal. And this is very different from assigning, in the first place, an unclear theoretical status to models of argumentation, as Walton seems to be doing.³

3.2 Argumentation designs in computer-mediated argumentation

It has been repeatedly stressed by Jackson and Aakhus that it is the new Information and Communication Technologies that have offered ‘massively expanded opportunities for deliberate design’ and thus precipitated the ‘explosion of interest in the structure, organization, and conditioning of discourse’ (Aakhus & Jackson, 2005: 411). Among the technologies studied by them are, first of all, specialized computer-mediated formats of argumentative discussions, such as Group Decision Support Systems (Aakhus 1999, 2000, 2002a; de Moor & Aakhus, 2006), but also, importantly, casual asynchronous online discussion fora (Jackson, 1998; Aakhus, 2002b), asynchronous e-mail discussion lists (Aakhus & Rumsey, 2010), and synchronous chats (Weger & Aakhus, 2003). Therefore, their research has not only theoretical, but also empirical significance to the study of online discussion fora.

In his analyses of Group Decision Support Systems, Aakhus distinguishes between three discrete argumentation designs: ‘issue-networking,’ ‘funneling,’ and ‘reputation’ (Aakhus, 1999, 2000, 2002a; de Moor & Aakhus, 2006). These three kinds of computer-mediated procedures structure argumentation by constraining or affording specific argumentative roles, sequential rules, forms of discussion turns, and acceptable ways of concluding discussion. Such a procedural ‘orchestration’ of design is meant to facilitate the realisation of the main purpose of each of these activities thanks to a ‘systemic rationality’ that underlies each of the activities, that is, thanks to a deeper rationale that reveals a certain hypothesis of what counts as effective argumentation in this given activity.

Table 3.1 contains a brief characterisation of the three argumentation designs defined through the parameters of purpose, orchestration and systemic rationality. ‘Issue-networking,’ ‘funneling,’ and ‘reputation’ are three different ways of crafting support for a collective decision-making. Yet, they share some important features with open online forums for informal political discussion. This is especially the case with ‘issue networking.’ As Aakhus notes (see table 3.1), the purpose of this design is ‘to optimize the

³ Aakhus, describing ‘groupware’ products, that is, various types of computer software created to facilitate group decision-making, characterises the difference quite explicitly: ‘Groupware is not a dialogue game in Walton’s sense but the materials and practical theory for reconstructing the context of a dispute or decision into various forms of argumentative activity’ (1999: 2).
clash of claims so that lines of argumentation unfold to reveal areas of agreement and disagreement, unarticulated issues, and relevant relationships among issues’ (2002a: 125). To do that, arguers have at their disposal three general kinds of discussion turns: they can pose a question (‘problem,’ ‘issue’), provide answers that constitute possible solutions to resolve the problem in question (‘idea,’ ‘claim,’ ‘argument’\(^4\)), and give arguments (‘reasons’) pro and contra each of the ideas. Arguers are free to generate as many standpoints (‘ideas’) relevant to the issue as they can. Similarly, every idea can be unlimitedly argued for or against. In this way, arguers create a network of interrelated issues, standpoints and arguments. This network is organised into discussion threads tied to a given issue, and developing along the lines of arguments pro and contra proposed ideas (standpoints).

Table 3.1 Three different computer-mediated argumentation designs (de Moor & Aakhus, 2006: 97)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Argumentation Design</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Orchestration</th>
<th>Systemic Rationality</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Issue networking</td>
<td>A clash of claims where the interaction is organised into a web of issues with relevant positions and reasons developed for each issue.</td>
<td>Enables a full exploration of the agreements, disagreements, and rationalisation for position but typically provides no functionalities for settling differences.</td>
<td>A situation calls for participants to share, explore, and learn about each others’ positions and reasons where these will be held accountable to the doubts of others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Examples: - Hypernews - QuestMap - Compendium</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Funneling</td>
<td>Treat argumentation as active consensus formation where interaction is organized into a flow from broad differences toward an acceptable conclusion.</td>
<td>Sequences interaction into a series of activities that successively narrow a dispute or decision toward the most acceptable conclusion. The functionalities such as brainstorming, categorizing and voting provide means to remove resistance to collective action.</td>
<td>A situation calls for a commitment by all participants to a particular course of action. This stands in contrast to issue-networking, which aims primarily at self-correction, not at consensus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Examples: - GroupSystems - SAMM - Other GCSS - Voting tools</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Reputation</td>
<td>Create a knowledge base for action by pooling and refining the expertise among a community of participants.</td>
<td>Provides means like ratings for individual participants to compete with each other over who provides the best answers to the questions the community most wants answered. The orchestration produces experts and a repository of answers.</td>
<td>A situation calls for discovering and cultivating trustworthy experts. It stands in contrast to both funneling because it does not aim at consensus, and issue-networking because people are not separated from their standpoints.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Examples: - Experts-Exchange - Stackoverflow - Weblogs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The openness in advancing any standpoints relevant to the issue in question and in expanding discussion on these standpoints in a clash of arguments, has lead Aakhus to consider issue networking as a procedure embodying some of the ideals of a critical discussion, namely those related to the uninhibited critical testing of opinions:

\(^4\) Which, in pragma-dialectical theory, can be taken as a standpoint.
The tools emphasize opening up lines of argumentation as opposed to closing or limiting lines of argumentation. The tools maximize opportunities for participants to develop issues and scrutinize the claims of others. Exploration of the disagreement space is not limited since all claims can be challenged, the clash of claims is open to the scrutiny of the participants, and any participant can contribute to the development of a line of argument. (Aakhus, 2002a: 126)

Aakhus argues, however, that unrestricted freedom in developing lines of argument—indeed crucial to a critical resolution of a difference of opinion—if not properly regulated, may lead to serious problems with relevance of the unfolding argumentation: ‘issue-networking tools provide categories and procedures for treating discussion as a clash of claims but no categories and procedures to draw participant attention to sources of micro-level digression and macro-level drift in the development of the issue network’ (Aakhus, 2002a: 127). In other words, instead of facilitating a creation of a network of ‘exhausting lines of argument around the issue’ (Aakhus, 2002a: 126) the tools of issue-networking may lead to a development of a chaotic web of irrelevant lines of digressive argumentation. Of course, active interventions of discussion moderators can be of help in this respect, but, firstly, in each case this is just an ad hoc, rather than systematic, solution to a problem of irrelevance and, secondly, human moderators—as observed by Jackson (1998: 193)—‘eliminate the problem [of the quality of arguments] by eliminating openness.’ Such obvious trade-offs make it very difficult for actual argumentation procedures within the ‘issue-networking’ designs to match the ideal procedural criteria of reasonableness embodied in the model for a critical discussion.

Important to this study is also how Aakhus conceptualizes the difference between issue-networking and reputation model (1999, 2002a). According to him, every design contains some kind of a deeper hypothesis of how argumentation works and ought to work. In the case of issue-networking, the technical decision to separate arguments for and against solutions to given problems from their authors (by allowing them to be fully anonymous) presupposes that these problems should be resolved solely on the merits of the proposals (as perceived by the majority of discussants), rather than on the basis of personal skills or interests of concrete arguers. This is in sharp contrast to the reputation model (see table 3.1) in which every author is identifiably committed to his proposals and arguments, and thus has a personal stake in the outcome of the entire process of argumentation, a stake which is publicly accountable. In the long run, such argumentative practice leads to reputation-building (provided that the outcomes of advocated decisions live up to their promise). This design presupposes that individual expertise and explicit advocacy may be
more efficient in solving problems than a choice from an impersonal pool of proposals based on a majority-rule voting.

‘Issue-networking’ and ‘reputation’ are two distinct types of computer-mediated discussions designed for the purpose of facilitating group decision-making. In this basic sense they differ considerably from the informal political online discussions which, in the first place, are not tools for decision-making (in any direct and explicit sense) and, consequently, do not have many of the precise design features of ‘issue-networking,’ ‘reputation,’ or ‘funelling,’ such as labelling of the messages into various categories. Nevertheless, there are also some noteworthy similarities: the extensive openness of ‘issue-networking’ discussions which allows to ‘optimize the clash of claims’ but also leads to certain problems of orderliness of disputes, as well as some aspects of ‘reputation’ dialogues are all features also characteristic of the casual online discussions studied in this dissertation.

3.3 Informal Internet discussions as argumentation designs

Apart from the general theoretical reflection on the issue of argumentation design, and the practical task of methodically examining and developing some specialised designs for argumentation, Jackson and Aakhus also analysed some of the commonly used computer-mediated discussion formats. These analyses are more directly pertinent to the empirical investigations of this study, as they point to some important argumentative qualities of casual online discussions.

Unfortunately, the most detailed study of such discussions takes into scrutiny a format different than online forums, namely, synchronous chat rooms, where online users exchange short messages in real-time. Weger and Aakhus (2003) set out to critically analyse the recurrent argumentative patterns exhibited in actual discussions on public issues in relation to the technological features of the design of chat rooms offered by America Online. In agreement with the general method depicted above, they see the troublesome patterns of argumentation as fundamentally influenced by the critical deficiencies of the technical affordances of Internet chat rooms:

New media become accessible to argumentation criticism in the way the design of these affordances facilitate or inhibit ideal forms of argumentation. For example, in the present study we see how the design of the chat room contributes to the apparently incoherent and ad hominem quality of the argumentation. The quality of the argumentation in Internet chat is due in part to continuous
scrolling transcripts, contribution limits, and unidentified participants. Regardless of participants’ innate abilities or initial motivations for participating in chat room discussions, the affordances of the medium influence participants’ capacity to realize critical discussion in their deliberations. (Weger & Aakhus, 2003: 34; italics original)

Even though Weger and Aakhus do not conceive of the influence of technology on argumentative practice as a simple one-way determination, but rather as a ‘reflexive relationship’ (2003: 24), they still conclude that argument practices in computer-mediated environments can be best seen as ‘adaptations to the technological setting that result from participants making do with the resources available to them for deliberating at a distance’ (2003: 34). Importantly, in chat rooms participants may be inclined to engage in a form of dialogue which is decidedly argumentative, yet does not revolve around the search for solutions to disagreements, but rather around ‘being provocative and engaging’ (Weger & Aakhus, 2003: 35). Weger and Aakhus call this dialogue ‘wit-testing’ and take it to be characterised by ‘hit and run strategies of argumentation,’ which may be interpreted as strategies of severe criticism of other opinions (‘hit’) coupled with evasion of burden of proof regarding one’s own opinions (‘run’).

Weger and Aakhus’ empirical observations reveal the important link between the features of actual argumentation and the technological conditions of chat rooms. Yet, these researchers do not stop at that and engage in a theoretical speculation over ‘whether these forms of argumentative activity are grounded in variations on critical discussion or whether such forms of argumentative activity orient toward different models of argumentation altogether’ (2003: 35). These ‘different models of argumentation’ are considered in Walton’s terms—in particular, ‘wit-testing’ is regarded as a benign form of a quarrel (or eristic dialogue)—hence all the caveats against Walton’s approach can by extension be applied here. Even if Weger and Aakhus correctly suggest that studying conditions of design from the perspective of the ideal model of a critical discussion is different from studying actual patterns of argumentation performed under these conditions, the addition of the third category of ‘argumentation models,’ such as wit-testing, lying somewhere between actual technical designs (Internet chat room discussion) and ideal models (critical discussion), seems to be redundant for an argumentation analyst – including an analyst applying the general ‘design methodology.’ Why simply not take the activity of chat rooms as an empirical ‘model’ and describe the model in terms of technologically conditioned

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5 A distinction hardly possible in Walton’s framework where analysis of types of dialogue and actual discourse is merged together.
and culturally developed practices of argumentation, which exhibit certain regular patterns? Further, if one is aiming at argumentation critique, these patterns can be critically evaluated from the perspective of an ideal model for testing standpoints and arguments, rather than testing wits. Interestingly, this is exactly what Jackson and Aakhus do when they study asynchronous online discussion forums. Their analyses, however, are less precise than Weger and Aakhus’ and focus only on a few selected features of the forum designs illustrated by two short exhibits of Usenet discussions over UFO sightings (Jackson) and an episode of an online discussion on a forum set up by a TV station and regarding a news story presenting dangers of mobile telephony (Aakhus).

Jackson (1998) starts from the assumption that despite their simple structure, not nearly as sophisticated as some of the discussion-facilitating tools described by Aakhus (see above), and enormous popularity, which may make them seem ‘natural’ rather than conceived (designed), online discussion forums should be considered as designs which condition argumentation in some peculiar ways. As she contends, ‘an online discussion is not just an electronic conversation but a form of discourse with its own distinctive design features and its own distinctive interactional difficulties’ (Jackson, 1998: 192). In her attempt to demonstrate the influence of the design features of online discussions on the quality of argumentation, Jackson briefly examines three such ‘interactional difficulties’: (1) the lack of clear argumentative structure developing in the course of discussion; (2) ‘the receptivity to abusive content’; and (3) ‘the lack of differentiation between important and inconsequential objections’ (Jackson, 1998: 192).

In line with the basic principles of the ‘design stance’ in the study of argumentation, Jackson uses the analysis of such difficulties as a basis for proposing to introduce to the format of the discussions some innovations which have the potential of improving the quality of argumentation. To this end, she diagnoses as the source of the first difficulty ‘the imposition of a simple sequential ordering on an asynchronously produced text’ (1998: 192). A remedy to this problem that she proposes is a replacement of the system of a chronological organisation of discussions by a hierarchical structure in which developing arguments would have their exact place depending on their pertinence to the central standpoint at issue. As she argues:

[…] if the purpose of the discussion is either to come to a resolution of disagreement or to refine participants’ thinking through critical engagement, it does not matter who said what but only how each proposition figures in an overall case for or against some proposition. (Jackson, 1998: 192)
Designing a system in which arguers would have to precisely place their arguments and criticisms in the structure of a developing case, rather than time-wise, seems like a simple technical solution to difficulty (1). Jackson admits, though, that difficulties (2) and (3) are much less easy to cope with. This is because they can be seen as symptoms of a general trade-off between openness and quality in real-life argumentation. Jackson argues that this possible trade-off may lead to a tension whenever actual arguers want to implement the norms for an ideal critical discussion under less than ideal conditions: on the one hand, as the ideal model stipulates, ‘every participant in a discussion must have full and free opportunity to raise objections’ but, on the other hand, ‘every participant must stand ready to defend any statement in his or her commitment set’ (1998: 189). The conditions under which argumentation takes place in online public discussions may, according to Jackson, exacerbate this tension:

The unrestricted openness of public discussion on the web presents a challenge to argumentation theory, to find a balance between a commitment to ‘first-order conditions’ for critical discussion such as the unrestricted right to raise questions and make claims, and a basic practical recognition that the exercise of this right by very many people produces discourse that is essentially unexamined and unproductive. Letting everyone ‘have their say’ means accepting and archiving false assertions, irrelevant objections, repetitions, blatant abuses such as argument ad hominem, and other argumentative missteps. (Jackson, 1998: 190)

Following Jackson’s reasoning, one may argue that, characteristically, participants to anonymous, open, and open-ended online discussions may find it much easier to exercise the right to criticise opinions of others than to follow the obligation to the defend one’s own position. In short, it is easy to raise objections, but it is also easy to evade commitments. Moreover, because their performance is not clearly regulated, both objections and arguments are prone to various forms of fallacies, notably the fallacy of irrelevance. To solve this unwelcome situation, Jackson proposes an introduction of an ‘automated interlocutor’ which would ask discussants basic questions about the relevance of their arguments before they get published online (Jackson, 1998: 193).

Regardless of the practical applicability of Jackson’s solutions to the problems of online argumentation, the very recognition of the problems reveals some important argumentative qualities of online discussion forums. Most importantly, they may be

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6 Jacobs (2003) analyzes the tension that may arise in argumentative discussions between ‘freedom of participation’ (that is, access to forums of public argumentation) and ‘freedom of inquiry’ (that is, opportunity to involve in argumentation of high epistemic value).
plagued by ‘inconsequential objections’ – argumentative moves which bear only a seeming semblance to valuable critical reactions aimed at testing opinions.

A similar normative stance is taken by Aakhus, who, as noted above, sees online discussions (both synchronous and asynchronous) are permeated by arguer’s ‘dumping’ opinions and objections and ‘running’ away from defending their position to proposing another (unrelated) opinion or objection (Aakhus, 2002b: 148). His general assessment of online discussions relative to the ideal standard is thus very critical:

If a technological intervention were designed to promote a critical discussion then the procedures available to participants to construct a dialogue would help participants determine the points at issue, recognize the positions that parties adopt, identify explicit/implicit arguments, analyze the argumentative structure, solicit evidence, reasoning, and counterarguments in the ongoing discourse.

These pragma-dialectical qualities are not evident in this case. (Aakhus, 2002b: 148)

A different, decidedly descriptive approach to getting at design features is taken in a recent study of conflict in online support group for cancer victims. Aakhus and Rumsey (2010) move from analysing mainly, or even exclusively, technological determinations of online discourse towards a more comprehensive view in which the focus of attention shifts to ‘interactional norms’ that develop in online communities. In other words, they move from approaching designs as sets of fixed conditions surrounding interactions and provided by the designers of technology, to analysing them as dynamic, emergent entities created by the discussants themselves through interaction:

Communication design happens as participants jointly coordinate their interaction in making contributions and, intentionally or not, craft a particular kind of communication (and avoid other kinds) with each other […] (Aakhus & Rumsey, 2010: 68)

What is important in Aakhus and Rumsey’s study—otherwise dealing with a different technology (e-mailing list) in a different domain (medical communication) from those examined in this dissertation—is an analysis of how implicit norms of interaction are made objects of discussion through argumentative meta-communication. Since interactional norms can be understood ‘both in the sense of patterns of communication and normative preferences for interaction’ (Aakhus & Rumsey, 2010: 80), they make up another source of constraints on how arguments and criticisms can be performed in online discussion groups. Therefore, their analysis allows for a more comprehensive appreciation of the contextual conditions of online discussions.
In conclusion, when assessed against the three criteria set in section 2.1, Jackson, Jacobs and Aakhus’ approach to the study of contexts of argumentation fares better than Walton’s theoretically and methodologically unclear as well as empirically deficient position. Nevertheless, with some reservations, their approach fulfils only two out of the three criteria proposed above. Therefore, it is still not the theory that is needed for a thorough and systematic examination of the actual conditions of online political discussion forums.

Firstly, their general ‘design methodology’ clearly distinguishes between the normative and the descriptive models of argumentative discussion, therefore both the ‘critical’ and the ‘descriptive’ element in the design enterprise seem theoretically well-justified and consistent. At the same time, in some of their studies Jacobs and Aakhus speak of argumentation designs not as being descriptive models analysed from a normative perspective but rather as ‘something in between,’ that is, a new category of models which are amenable to ‘neither naïve nor critical reconstruction’ (Aakhus, 2003; Jacobs & Aakhus, 2002a, 2002b). In this sense, as mentioned above, these models, such as ‘witting-testing,’ ‘bargaining’ or ‘therapeutic discussion’ approximate Walton’s dialogue types, and thus considerably obscure the theoretical picture.³

Secondly—in contrast to Walton—Jackson, Jacobs and Aakhus start from a decidedly empirical perspective. Because of that their approach is well-grounded in the study of actual situated discourse. Their method of analysis, however, is deeply embedded in the tradition of speech act theory and conversation analysis and thus does not fully cover everything what an all-out argumentative method of analysing discourse would include: the tools to grasp the global structure of argumentation, to reconstruct detailed argument schemes and, most importantly, to distinguish between and closely analyse various kinds of critical reactions actually performed seem to missing.

Thirdly, the weightiest caveat from the perspective of the goals of this study is that Jackson, Jacobs and Aakhus’s conception is primarily geared toward practical intervention. Their interest in online discussions is premised on the assumption that ‘new communication contexts often present dilemmas for which theoretically informed solutions are needed’ (Jackson, 1998: 192). Such an intervention-based approach, fruitful in revealing some vital features of online argumentation from the perspective of their designability, is not, however, fully parsimonious in the task of a detailed analysis of the

³ Jacobs and Aakhus (2002b), distinguish ‘three models of rationality’ that can be realised within the institutional practice of third-party mediation: critical discussion, bargaining, and therapeutic discussion. This approach closely resembles Walton’s concept of dialogue types, even if it is clear in Jacobs and Aakhus’ case that the models are described as certain empirically grounded entities (including critical discussion!).
argumentative qualities of online discussion formats ‘as they are.’ This is, in the first place, because the assumption of the malleability of argumentation designs, especially those existing in computer-mediated environment, is not completely justified. Some contexts of online argumentation, such as Usenet or Web-forum discussions, have gained enormous popularity the way they are designed, and thus have become well established in the present communicative milieu. Proposals to (sometimes radically) re-design them seem thus as sheer speculations, rather than genuine attempts to effectively introduce changes. Moreover, the drive to come up with innovations may blind analysts to certain important characteristics of online context. Take, for instance, Jackson’s idea that simple turn-based organisation of discussions in the Usenet should be abandoned in place of a case-based structure, which would have the capacity of rendering the development of pro and contra argumentation in a more transparent and relevant way. This innovation is based on the presumption that in a critical argumentative discussion ‘it does not matter who said what’ (Jackson, 1998: 193). Such an idea, apart from being theoretically contestable, misses an important point of online discussions: their popularity seems to be strongly motivated by a contentious dynamics in which (pseudonymous) identities do play role. An attempt to forsake this quality for some putative critical gains seems rather suspicious.

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8 Online identity and reputation are certainly an important motivation behind some of the discussions, especially in established groups where participants get to know each other well (see, e.g., Smith & Kollock (Eds.), 1999). (Interestingly, the case adduced by Jackson herself contains a peculiar argument from authority in which expertise of ‘a frequent poster’ is brought to bear). Yet, revealing of one’s identity is often just an option, but not a requirement, as it can be avoided by remaining purely anonymous (some discussion forums allow to log in and contribute as an ‘anonymous’ or a ‘guest’). In this sense, online discussion forums may combine some of the features of the ‘issue-networking’ and ‘reputation’ models discussed above.