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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Chapter 5

Internet discussion forums as a technology for informal political deliberation

5.1 Characterising Internet political discussion forums

This chapter opens the analytic part of the study, in which online political discussions accessible in the system of Google Groups are analysed as a special context for argumentation. The goal of this chapter is to lay grounds for a detailed and theoretically satisfying pragma-dialectical analysis of online political discussion forums as an argumentative activity type (Chapter 6). To reach this goal, two steps are taken.

First, section 5.2 provides a non-theoretical description of the details of the technological design of online political discussions offered by Google Groups. Such a preliminary description is a precondition for a pragma-dialectical analysis of online discussions as an argumentative activity type, because the technological properties of the computer-mediated forums have a bearing on the way argumentation is regimented in this type of argumentative activity. The way Internet users can start discussions, develop the topics, (critically) react to others’ messages, and close discussions, are all conversational features that are to a large extent determined by the design of the forum used for argumentation. Therefore, a well-founded analysis of computer-mediated argumentation requires, in the first place, a thorough insight into the specifics of the format of online discussions.

Second, the ‘institutional goal’ of online discussions belonging to the domain of political argumentation is specified in section 5.3. Within the pragma-dialectical approach, a comprehensive analysis of argumentative activity types starts with a characterisation of the relevant domain of communication and the genre of communicative activity typically associated with that domain. The broadest ‘institutional point’ of deliberation—the genre of communicative activity characteristically employed in the domain of democratic politics—is to preserve a democratic culture (van Eemeren, 2010: Ch. 5). This point can be
realised by performing specific activities of deliberation aimed either at decision-making or (solely) at opinion-formation. Pinning down the ‘institutional goal’ of online discussions analysed here as ‘informal opinion-formation’ provides the appropriate institutional background for a more precise characterisation of such discussions as a type of argumentative activity.

In this way, this chapter provides the first part of the answer to the primary analytic question of the dissertation: what kind of conditions for argumentation does the context of online political discussion forums create? A detailed analysis of these conditions in terms of the restrictions and opportunities that are characteristic of this argumentative activity type follows in the next two chapters.

5.2 The design of Internet discussion forums in Google Groups

Taking the non-theoretical perspective of an ordinary Internet user, one can say that a ‘forum’ where people meet to discuss issues is a particular Web-page that the user chooses to enter. In systems such as Google Groups (http://groups.google.com/) the choice of an appropriate forum for discussion is facilitated by a net of categories of topics. A great many of the current hierarchies of topics are still based on the old Usenet system, which distinguishes between the following nine categories (the so called ‘Big Eight’ + alt) labelled with the following commonly used prefixes:

- comp – computer science
- humanities – humanities
- misc – miscellaneous
- news – news
- rec – recreational
- sci – science
- soc – sociological
- talk – controversial
- alt – alternative

It is striking that politics is not singled out as an independent category of discussion subjects. In fact, political scholars analysing Internet have observed that among the thousands of discussion groups (or ‘newsgroups’) ‘relatively few are explicitly political’, and that those that are political ‘are most often found under the designations “soc,” “talk,” “misc,” and “alt”’ (Davis, 1999: 151). Google Groups use the following topical categories (numbers of groups under each class are given in brackets): computers (96033), society (90806), schools and universities (90668), recreation (80090), arts and entertainment
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To find a particular political discussion group one can also use Google’s search engine (that is, one can ‘google’ them), for example, by typing a key-word such as ‘politics.’ However, one can also use the net of categories and sieve out the sought-for group by specifying the criteria of search. For example, if one chooses to “browse all group categories…”, and then selects the category of “News”, and further “English” as a language filtering option, the web-browser will return a list of the most popular results fulfilling these criteria (popularity is measured by the number of members subscribing to a given discussion group and the number of messages they send to a group per month). Among the most popular groups discussing news in English are: Political Forum (mind the space between ‘Political’ and ‘Forum’), ‘a comfortable place for adults to talk about issues, finish topics, and talk about the news without moderators being so strict nothing can be said.’, and PoliticalForum, ‘a non-biased, non-partisan political forum, the Group [that] treats each and every member’s position and viewpoint equally. All members are encouraged to share and discuss their viewpoints on a broad spectrum of subject matter!’

These two popular groups are not part of the Usenet, but are established in the Google Groups system. Using Google Groups’ Web-page, however, one can easily access one of the most popular Usenet group devoted to politics, that is, alt.politics. The analyses conducted in this dissertation will largely pertain to these three groups. In terms of the interface provided by Google, Usenet groups and Web-forums, such as Political Forum and PoliticalForum, do not differ. The difference lies in the origin and administration of both types of forums. Usenet groups do not ‘belong to’ any commercial organisation such as Google, but are freely distributed among many independent servers. Therefore, they have been seen as part of the grass-roots online subculture in a stronger sense than Web-forums (see Hauben & Hauben, 1997; Linaa Jensen, 2003; Rheingold, 1993; Smith, 1999).

When entering a specific discussion group available through Google Groups, whether a Usenet group or Web-forum, a user sees the following screen (figure 5.1):

1 http://groups.google.com/groups/dir (consulted 01-05-2010).
2 In the ‘Top 100 text newsgroups by postings’ alt.politics ranks 12, highest among the English political groups: http://www.newsadmin.com/top100msgs.asp (consulted 29-04-2010). Other groups labelled as explicitly political in the top 20 include it.politica (Italian, #4), pl.soc.polityka (Polish, #10), and fr.soc.politique (French, #16).
A typical Google Groups Web-page, such as the one pictured in figure 5.1, contains a very brief ‘description’ of the group (top of the page), and the navigation panel (on the right) where more information ‘about this group’ (such as statistics regarding the messages and users, the rules of the group), as well as ‘join this group’ option are available. Most important, however, is the list of currently discussed topics. Discussion topics are ordered chronologically, i.e., the topical thread to which the most recent contribution has been made is displayed at the top of the screen (see the ‘Date’ column in figure 5.1). Discussions develop under the ‘Topics.’ A user who wants to initiate a new discussion (by sending a ‘new post’) is free to formulate its topic in any way he finds interesting. Being the most important element of this part of the discussion forum, the recently proposed / discussed topics are listed in the first column. The ‘Rating’ column displays the results of a users’ assessment of the quality of discussion (1-5 scale). Such rating is optional, so many of the topics remain unrated.

The middle column—‘Messages’—shows the number of contributions to the topic. In some cases, displayed as ‘1 new of 1,’ the only message sent is the initiating post by the user who proposed to start a new discussion thread (topic). (In the list of topics in figure 5.1, topics entitled ‘Multiculturalism At It’s Finest!!!’ and ‘For PNY’ are examples of

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3 Using the optional functions ‘View;’ and ‘Sort by;’ (top left of the screen) one can choose a slightly different visual organisation of the data. These differences are, however, inconsequential as regards the description of the discussion forums in terms of argumentative activity types.
that). It means that this post has, up to now, attracted no responses whatsoever. If this remains to be the case, the topic moves lower and lower on the list, and finally disappears from the first screen (it can still, though, be accessed in the bulk of ‘older topics’ but the chances that someone will still be willing to reply to it are minimal). Conversely, whenever there is more than ‘1 new of 1’ messages, then it means that the topic proposed and the first message posted indeed initiated a discussion. (For example, in the Political Forum in figure 5.1 the discussion under the topic ‘The books Palin wanted to ban’ consists of 37 new messages out of 37 sent in total.) In sum, in every case where a new topic is proposed, the discussion is only potential, because there is no obligation to argue if no one finds the topic, content, or form of the first message (which is supposed to start a new discussion) interesting enough for sending a reply and thus beginning a discussion.

The last column to be described—‘Author’—gives the nickname of the author of the most recent contribution to the discussion, as well as the total number of authors who have already taken part in this very topical thread. The number of authors is different from the number of messages sent, whenever one author contributes more than just one message (which is usually the case).

The user of the Web-page who wants to take part in the discussion on the forum has basically two options: he can propose a new topic by using the ‘+new post’ option (top-right of the screen in figure 5.1) or he can read one of the already existing topics by clicking on it. If he chooses the latter, the following type of Web-page opens (figure 5.2):

Figure 5.2 Topical thread in a political discussion forum in Google Groups
On the left side of this page one can see the ‘discussion thread’ (also called ‘topical thread’ or ‘discussion tree’) that has developed under the given topic (the topic headlines both the page at large, and the thread). Contributions are numbered, and labelled with the name of the author and the date. After clicking on the name of the author in the topical thread on the left, the system returns in the central window the relevant message posted. (In figure 5.2 it is message, or ‘post,’ no 2 by mike532.)

Each message consists of a header (nickname, link to ‘view profile’ and ‘more options,’ date), the text of the message, the text of the message to which it is a response (save for the initiating message no 1), and the ‘Reply,’ ‘Reply to author,’ and ‘Forward’ functions. In short, in terms of technological design the posts in discussion forums are structured in a way analogous to e-mail messages. Crucial to discussion forums is the ‘Reply’ function. A discussion starts when someone replies to the initiating message (no. 1). Such an initial exchange can develop into a long, complicated discussion ‘thread,’ or ‘tree,’ which may fork-out into many simultaneously held sub-discussions.

Apart from the tree-like organisation, in which every contribution is numbered and precisely connected to the message it is a reply to, Google Groups forums do not structure disputes in any more precise manner. Features of many well-formatted communicative activity types—assignment of turns to particular discussants, types of turns they take, sequential division of discussions into stages—are not regulated by means of the technology. This is to say that online discussions develop with the use of a very minimal conversational design consisting of replies, replies to replies, etc. Notably, no tools exist in the system that allow discussants to explicitly mark their posts in terms of argumentative turn-types such as, for example, ‘argue for/agree with’ or ‘argue against/criticise’ the opinions expressed in the previous message.

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4 One may notice in figure 5.2 (top-left), that the discussion can be sorted ‘by reply’ or ‘by date.’ Only in the former case it creates a proper ‘topical thread.’ In the latter case it is simply a chronologically-ordered collection of messages.

5 ‘View profile’ contains the basic information about the author (e-mail address, personal website address, links to his/her most recent messages, and statistics of his/her contributions). ‘More options’ include ‘Report this message’ (as an abuse of rules) or ‘Find messages by the same author.’

6 The difference between ‘Reply’ and ‘Reply to author’ is that in the former case the message gets publicly posted on the forum, whereas in the latter it takes the form of a private e-mail to the author, which may develop into an e-mail discussion. It is not, then, a discussion in a public forum.

7 Technically, it is possible that someone replies to his own message. This happens, however rarely, when someone wants to immediately amend, or add a comment to, his own message just posted (or wants to complain that no one has yet responded to the message).
Over the course of discussions, some of the groups are moderated, which is clearly indicated in the description of a given group. Internet researchers distinguish between various kinds of moderation and generally stress the positive impact that moderators have on the orderliness and quality of discussions (e.g., Dutton, 1996; Edwards, 2002; Poor, 2005). Edwards, in his comprehensive approach to online moderation, differentiates between its three basic functions: strategic (‘establishing the boundaries of the discussion and embedding it in the political and organizational environment’), conditioning (‘taking care of conditions and provisions for the discussion’), and process (‘managing the discussion process as a collective, purposeful activity’) (2002: 6-7, 16). He concludes that ‘the intermediary role that is played by the moderator has the potential to enhance the quality of Internet discussions as forms of deliberative democracy’ (Edwards, 2002: 18).

Edward’s study of moderation, however, pertains to government-initiated political discussions, while this dissertation is focused on the grassroots, ‘anarchic’ discussion forums set up by the citizens themselves. In these two kinds of forums, the ‘moderation versus freedom of speech’ dilemma (Edwards, 2002: 5; see also Dutton, 1996: 277) is typically solved in two opposite ways: in favour of moderation in more institutionalised discussions and in favour of freedom of speech in informal, citizen-run forums. In any case, there is a certain trade-off involved in moderation – as Jackson remarks, human moderators ‘eliminate the problem [of the quality of discussions – ML] by eliminating openness’ (1998: 193).

Since the forums studied here belong to the grassroots activities underlain by the ideas of a free, and free-wheeling, Internet communication, they are, in principle, not moderated. Sometimes, this lack of moderation even becomes a kind of a group’s credo, as is the case with the Political Forum (‘A comfortable place for adults to talk about issues, finish topics, and talk about the news without moderators being so strict nothing can be said.’).

Finally, it is vital to note that the system described here offers no tools to explicitly ‘finish topics,’ that is, to conclude argumentative exchanges. There is no technical affordance—such as voting, relying on the moderator’s arbitration, or otherwise balancing the pros and cons of the points discussed—that would close the discussion in some limited

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8 For a comparative study of ‘government-sponsored’ and ‘anarchic’ online forums, see Linaa Jensen, 2003.
9 As mentioned in section 6.3.1, even though the forums analysed here are in principle moderation-free, their administrators may stipulate that in cases of rampant abuses of the forum’s norms the offenders ‘will be subject to moderation at the discretion of the moderators.’
time. Rather, in a fashion similar to many ordinary conversations, discussions dry out when participants lose interest in the current topic and do not produce any new replies to the dispute.

5.3 Internet political discussions as deliberative activities aimed at opinion-formation

The aim of this section is to situate the online political discussions available through Google Groups more precisely in the general domain of political discourse. To this end, the main function, or ‘institutional goal,’ of this kind of online exchanges within the political domain has to be explicitly specified. This means that having described how the technology of online discussions works in practice, I turn in this section to the question of what institutional functions the (use of) technology can fulfil. This question is central to the analysis of daily argumentative activities from the perspective of pragma-dialectics – a theory governed by the meta-theoretical principle of functionalization. According to this principle, argumentation should always be understood as a ‘purposive verbal activity,’ that is, as a form of language use instrumental in achieving the distinctive aims pursued in different contexts of social life (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984: 7-9; 1992a: 10).

While the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation does not aspire to be a theory of politics, it shares an increasingly influential view propounded most forcefully by the advocates of the concept of ‘deliberative democracy’ that politics is largely a discursive activity and thus should be treated as a ‘distinct communicative domain’ (Dryzek, 1987: 662; van Eemeren, 2002; 2010: Ch. 5). Approaching politics as such a domain requires fine-tuned tools for analysis of political communication, and argumentation in particular – after all, ‘argument always has to be central to deliberative democracy’ (Dryzek, 2000: 72). Pragma-dialectics provides such tools, grossly underdeveloped in political theory, and therefore can give a useful insight into the working of actual political discourse in various types of communicative activity, such as online political discussions. In the empirical task of analysing actual political argumentation, the relevance of the theory of deliberative democracy—largely a normative enterprise—lies in the special attention it pays to real-world ‘discursive designs’ in which political argumentation is actually practiced.

A comprehensive pragma-dialectical analysis of political argumentation starts from a general characterisation of the domain of political communication. Taking a communicative perspective means that domains are analysed from the viewpoint of broad ‘genres of communicative activity’ which are typically employed in realising the
institutional mission of the domain at large. Such genres are defined by the general function, or ‘institutional point,’ that particular types of activities belonging to the genre realise in the relevant domain. Pragma-dialectics, in agreement with the contemporary developments within political theory, identifies the primary genre of political communicative activity as ‘deliberation’ and defines its institutional point as ‘to preserve a democratic political culture by deliberation’ (van Eemeren, 2010: Ch. 5). This broadly defined point is in the practice of the ‘deliberative system’ (Mansbridge, 1999) realised through many specific activities, characterised by their more concrete ‘institutional goals’ and special institutionally based conventions. These activities are the macro-contexts in which argumentative political discussions take place. Therefore, in the following, the focus is on the goals of political argumentation in online discussions on politically relevant issues carried among the users of Google Groups.

To start with, the question of the ways in which deliberation ‘preserves a democratic political culture’ needs to be addressed. It is an established practice among political theorists to distinguish between two basic goals and, in effect, two general kinds of deliberation: decision-making and opinion-formation.10

Deliberation aimed at decision-making is embodied in the ‘institutional procedures and practices for attaining decisions on matters that would be binding on all’ (Benhabib, 1994: 34). In the normative account of Habermas and his followers, binding decisions—the primary outcomes of deliberation in various institutional bodies—are democratic and rational as long as they are taken on the basis of (in the strongest formulation) ‘complete and rational consensus’ among the deliberating parties concerning the matter discussed (Niemeyer & Dryzek, 2007: 499). Further, consensus can be ‘complete and rational’ only if it is an outcome of a critical argumentative discussion in which opinions are tested.

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10 Many theoretical concepts have been offered to render this distinction. Habermas (1996 [1992]: Ch. 7) opposes ‘will-formation,’ resulting in formally approved decisions of state institutions, to informal ‘opinion-formation’ taking place in the autonomous ‘public spheres.’ Rawls (1993: Ch. 6) talks about ‘public reason,’ best exercised in strongly institutionalised and strictly regimented legal procedures resulting in official decisions, and the ‘background culture’ of weakly institutionalised discussions among citizens who are not directly related to the state apparatus. Fraser (1990 [1992]: 75) distinguishes between ‘strong publics,’ such as parliaments, which serve ‘as a locus of public deliberation culminating in legally binding decisions’ and ‘weak publics,’ active in various nongovernmental forums for political discourse, whose deliberative practice consists exclusively in opinion-formation and does not also encompass decision-making.’ Yet others speak simply of ‘constitutional’ [high] politics and ‘ordinary’ [low] politics (see Benhabib, 1994: 47, n. 16). Taking the distinction to a meta-theoretical level, Hendriks (2006) analyses ‘micro conceptions of deliberative democracy’ which are primarily aimed at ‘providing ideal models for deliberation in public institutions’ and ‘macro conceptions of deliberative democracy’ preoccupied with ‘deliberation [that] takes place in the informal and “wild” spaces in society where communication is unconstrained and spontaneous.’
(exclusively) according to the principle of ‘the forceless force of the better argument’ (Dryzek, 2000: 70).11

The question remains what kind of actually practiced procedures of political system can best approximate this theoretical and, as many critics point out (see, e.g., Fraser, 1990 [1992]; Niemeyer & Dryzek, 2007), unattainable ideal of a purely rational discussion leading to ‘complete consensus.’ For both Habermas and Rawls, the rationality of public decision-making is most closely embodied in the argumentative practices of public courts, especially the Supreme Court (Habermas, 1996; Rawls, 1993: Ch. 6; see also Feteris, 2003). In an argumentative perspective of pragma-dialectics, however, forensic argumentation is taken to be realised in the communicative genre of legal adjudication, rather than political deliberation. In adjudication, different institutional rules and conventions are brought to bear on argumentative exchanges (van Eemeren, 2010: Ch. 5; Feteris, 1999: Ch. 11-12). Pragma-dialectical analyses of types of communicative activity which can be unquestionably classified as instances of deliberation aimed at decision-making include, most notably, various procedures within parliaments (plenary sessions, committee sessions, question time).12

Apart from these practices of political argumentation established in the institutions of the state, analysts of deliberation have pointed to a wide array of other types of argumentative activity which facilitate rational public decision-making, which they conceptualise as ‘discursive’ or ‘deliberative designs’ (Dryzek, 1987; Hendriks, 2006).13 Instantiations of such designs include international conflict resolution, mediation, regulatory negotiation, citizens’ jury and deliberative poll (Ibidem). Despite a great many differences among such ‘deliberative designs’ they all share one fundamental quality – their institutional rules and conventions are clearly specified with the aim of ‘the production of collective outcomes in problem-solving contexts’ (Dryzek, 2000: 73).14

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11 More recently, analysts of deliberation such as Dryzek and Parkinson have recognised the legitimacy of supplementing ‘purely rational argument’ with some ‘additional modes of communication’ in actual political deliberations. Rhetoric is considered to be the most important of these ‘additional modes.’ As these theorists claim, because a certain ‘tension between reason and persuasion’ may occur, thereby putting the rationality of the outcomes of actual deliberation in peril, a principle of ‘holding [the rhetorical modes of communication] to critical standards’ should be followed. See Dryzek, 2000: esp. 4-5, 69-72, and Parkinson, 2006: Ch. 6. Unfortunately, no exact criteria or guidelines on how to implement this general principle in practice are provided.

12 For pragma-dialectical studies regarding various aspects of parliamentary debates, see: van Eemeren & Garssen, 2010; Mohammed, 2009; Plug, 2010; Tonnard, 2010.

13 According to Hendriks (2006), such designs constitute a mix of formal state deliberations and activities in informal public spheres.

14 For an analysis of argumentative conditions for rational problem-solving, see van Rees, 1992.
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approach evokes the image of deliberation painted by Aristotle: the deliberative procedure starts with a certain publicly experienced exigency which calls for a political solution, regarding which there is a difference of opinion between parties; on the way to deciding on the course of action commonly accepted as the most expedient (and thus resolving the difference of opinion) disputants employ, among other types of arguments, pragmatic argumentation in which various solutions are critically assessed as to their efficiency in addressing the exigency (Aristotle, 1991; see also Nieuwenburg, 2004; Walton, 1998: Ch. 6; Yack, 2006). What is particularly important to contemporary theorists of deliberation is that the outcome of such a procedure—a collectively binding decision—should not be based on a majority voting rule in which preferences of participants are simply aggregated, but rather on a mutually agreed, reasonable resolution reached as a result of an argumentative discussion. In this way, deliberative procedures are meant to further the aim of reaching timely decisions which are both democratically legitimate and deliberatively rational (Benhabib, 1994).

Deliberation aimed at decision-making is also possible online. Political scholars distinguish a particular sub-type of online discussion named ‘e-consultation’ or ‘policy forums’ (Janssen & Kies, 2005; Wright & Street, 2007). Such forums are described as ‘the most institutionalized procedures to allow online participation of citizens in the political process’ (Janssen & Kies, 2005: 319), that is, designs for online discussions through which ‘input is made directly to the policymaking process’ (Wright & Street, 2007: 854). Policy forums have been used to involve citizens in discussing prospective bills in British Parliament and local policies of UK government (Ferguson, 2008), and various decisions to be taken at the three levels of Dutch government: national, provincial or municipal (Edwards, 2002). Such forums, in order to effectively facilitate ‘interactive decision making’ (Edwards, 2002: 12), are regulated by respective institutions. This regulation pertains to certain technological choices (for example, the preference for threaded discussions over chronologically ordered discussions; see Wright, 2006). Most of all, however, it involves a careful, multifaceted moderation of the disputes. As argued by Edwards (2002), moderators serve as ‘democratic intermediaries’ between the opinions of ordinary citizens and the institutional decision-making. In the cases he studied, moderators do not only overlook discussions to eliminate abusive or irrelevant messages, but they also set the agenda for discussion, provide discussants with relevant information, encourage

15 Apart from these similarities, there are also important differences between Aristotelian account of deliberation and contemporary theories of deliberation. See, e.g., Nieuwenburg (2004) and Yack (2006).
participation of public officials, and feed the results of disputes back to the institutional bodies which commissioned the forum.

A good illustration of such an online procedure which involves citizens in the decision-making is a discussion of spatial policy in the Dutch province of North-Brabant, held in November 1996 (Edwards, 2002: 12-13). The discussion procedure, as briefly described by Edwards, is clearly geared towards reaching tangible results, which later ‘would be used in the long term spatial policy making’:

The interactional goal of the province was to get new ideas out of the discussion. The discussion was structured in three phases. The first phase was meant to discuss the problem. The central question of this phase was: “Is the province running short of space?” In the second phase, possible solutions were to be discussed. In the third phase, the discussion was to be concluded by an opinion poll. In practice, the discussions about problem and solutions ran parallel. (Edwards, 2002: 12)

Decision-making is, however, just part of the story of ‘preserving a democratic political culture by deliberation.’ The other part lies in deliberation aimed (solely) at opinion-formation, that is, in political ‘discourse [that] does not eventuate in binding, sovereign decisions authorizing the use of state power; [but] on the contrary, […] eventuates in “public opinion,” critical commentary on authorized decision-making that transpires elsewhere’ (Fraser, 1990 [1992]: 74-75). As argued in the following, it is this kind of deliberation that the online discussions studied here belong to.

Political theorists, inspired by the works of such advocates of the concept of ‘deliberative democracy’ as Habermas (1989 [1962]; 1996 [1992]) and Dryzek (2000), have been growing in their recognition of the importance of informal communication among ordinary citizens to the functioning of a democratic political system. For Habermas, the existence of informal, ‘widely expanded and differentiated public spheres,’ where unregulated and unrestricted daily communication among citizens takes place, is not only as important to rational democratic politics as ‘legally institutionalized procedures of democratic deliberation and decision-making’ but also, in a sense, fundamental to democracy as a source of ‘informal public opinion-formation’ (Habermas, 1994: 8; 1996 [1992]: 307-308). The venue for such deliberation is commonly termed the ‘public sphere’ (or ‘public spheres’): the area of politically pertinent communication located between the discourse of private individuals and the institutions of the state (Habermas, 1989 [1962]). Examples of actually existing political activities aimed (chiefly or solely) at ‘informal public opinion-formation’ adduced by political scholars stretch from disputes in various
grassroots associations, such as feminist, environmental or civil rights groups (Fraser, 1990 [1992]) and ‘letters to the editor’ (Conover & Searing, 2005), to the most informal political talks in coffeehouses and over family dinner tables (Habermas, 1989 [1962]; Mansbridge, 1999).

The traditional newspaper genre of letters to the editor has often been used to understand the novel qualities of Internet forums (see, e.g., Linaa Jensen, 2003) – after all, both these activity types offer possibilities for public, written, mediated and to a certain extent interactive everyday argumentative exchanges on political issues. However, it is the unique possibilities of online technologies that are often taken to herald a new transformation of the public sphere in which everyday political discourse can be significantly reinvigorated. This pertains especially to a great variety of Usenet groups – forums for discussion hosted and managed by ‘ordinary’ citizens without any clear institutional affiliation and thus, apparently, without a clearly specified institutional goal.16

In contrast to various forms of decision-making procedures, deliberative forums for opinion-formation (both off- and on-line) may be seen as lacking clear and tangible institutional goals. Consequently, a precise analysis of the constraints that explicitly operate on argumentative discourse in such forums may be impossible.17 Froomkin, for example, characterises Slashdot.org—a Web-site usually praised for its overall quality of discussion, and in particular its sophisticated system of moderation, but otherwise similar to open, grassroots Usenet newsgroups—in the following way:

While Slashdot is a very useful tool for enabling an interesting and useful community discussion, there are important ways in which it is not, and standing alone cannot be, the sort of best practical discourse that produces decisions entitled to our respect. Slashdot is not really a decision-making tool at all; it is a discussion tool. (Froomkin, 2004: 14)

The task relevant to this study is to grasp the ostensibly autotelic character of the most open online discussions in the pragma-dialectical terms as goal of a conventionalised, weakly institutionalised argumentative activity.

16 Studies of various aspects of online political discussions taking place in Usenet, or similar open forums, include: Benson, 1996; Chapat & Campos, 2007; Dahlberg, 2001a, 2001b; Davis, 1999; Gurak, 1999; Hill & Hughes, 1997; Janssen & Kies, 2005; Linaa Jensen, 2003; Papacharissi, 2004; Robinson, 2005; Tanner, 2001; Wilhelm, 1998, 2000; Witschge, 2007. For a discussion on the democratising potential of Usenet, see Hauben & Hauben, 1997 and Rheingold, 1993.

17 Hendriks (2006), seems to be of the opinion that deliberative forums are either precisely regulated procedures for decision-making or unconstrained and ‘wild’ venues for informal opinion-formation. There is a tinge of a false dilemma in such an account: forums for opinion-formation, even though allowing for open and spontaneous argumentative exchanges, can be carefully designed to achieve just that.
Political theorists interested in the functions of the most informal ‘everyday political talk,’ such as Mansbridge, admit that in contradistinction to institutionalised discussions in decision-making assemblies ‘everyday talk is not necessarily aimed at any action other than talk itself.’ Yet, they also argue that, in fact, ‘often everyday talk produces collective results the way a market produces collective results, through the combined and interactive effects of relatively isolated individual actions’ (Mansbridge, 1999: 212). In such a perspective, the primary role of informal deliberation lies in its impact on the functioning of a democratic political system, mostly through the channel of elections. Unfortunately, such an account shifts the problem of the aims of informal deliberations to the sphere of political institutions, without addressing the argumentative import of these deliberations. The difficult problem of how deliberation oriented to opinion-formation exactly co-functions with the more institutionalised decision-making in the democratic polity is best left to political theorists. The question to be addressed here is how the opinion-formation is reached by argumentative means and how it can contribute to ‘preserving a democratic culture by deliberation.’  

As described in Chapter 4, the aim of the ideal argumentative procedure—critical discussion—is stipulated as the resolution of an initial difference of opinion on the merits (by critical testing of the standpoints advanced). A purely rational resolution of disputes on the merits, a resolution explicitly agreed by both parties to a dispute, is hardly attainable in real-life. This is partly because argumentative exchanges function as parts of larger activities, such as informal deliberation, and thus are oriented to reaching goals which are different than a reasonable resolution. However, participants in an informal deliberation (or even passive observers) can, at a certain point, perceive the difference of opinion as resolved. (An actual outcome of informal deliberations does not have to be, and usually will not be, explicitly established, simply because no binding decisions which would

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18 Mansbridge, on charitable interpretation, means that everyday talk does not necessarily lead to any direct, political action. This does not mean, however, that it amounts to a mere, functionless talking for the sake of talking. In contemporary linguistics, influenced by the works of Karl Bühler and Roman Jakobson, communication is seen as always involving a realisation of many social and communicative functions (referential, emotive, conative, phatic, etc.), some of them simultaneously.

19 The simplest description of the working of such a mechanism of ‘informal opinion-formation’ (in ideal conditions) is provided by Habermas (1994: 8): ‘Informal public opinion-formation generates “influence”; influence is transformed into “communicative power” through the channels of political elections; and communicative power is again transformed into “administrative power” through legislation.’

20 See Habermas (1996 [1992]: Ch. 7) and Hendriks (2006) for a discussion of this issue.

21 In the contexts of online discussions, those who only read but do not contribute to the argumentative exchanges are called ‘lurkers.’
conclude them are made.) Such a perceived resolution can lead to a reinforcement, adjustment, or a significant change of the beliefs previously held by a deliberator. In any case, opinions are formed. And thus the institutional aim of the deliberation is reached.

Even if such an account is correct, however, in terms of the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation opinion-formation should not be understood as just a change in privately held beliefs. Pragma-dialectics is guided by the meta-theoretical principles of externalisation and socialisation and approaches beliefs as ‘expressed opinions’ for which a discussant can be held publicly accountable (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984: Ch. 1). This public accountability means that once a standpoint advanced in respect of an expressed opinion is challenged, its proponent has the burden of proof and is obliged to defend the standpoint by means of argumentation. In such a perspective, a change of opinion amounts to a change in publicly accountable commitments attached to one’s position. This pertains to both standpoints and arguments: pragmatically speaking, advancing a standpoint or an argument implies that a discussant believes in the opinion expressed in the standpoint or argument; conversely, a discussant cannot reasonably believe in a standpoint that has been successfully defeated or in arguments that have been refuted. Simply put, for a pragma-dialectical study of argumentative discourse commitments incurred in the process of public argumentation are more important than impenetrable, ‘real’ beliefs.

In the pragma-dialectical account, thus, the process of informal deliberation can be seen as a process of externalising political opinions and submitting them to argumentative discussions. In the course of this process, opinions are formed exactly because standpoints and arguments are formed, that is, advanced, challenged, defended and criticised. Such an understanding of informal opinion-formation, deeply rooted in the pragmatic philosophy of language, is in line with results of recent empirical research on the impact of argumentative (that is, characterised by disagreement) political discussion on the quality of ‘deliberative opinion.’ According to a study by Price et al. based on an open-ended survey measuring ‘argument repertoire’ of American public during the US elections of 2000:

[…] encountering disagreement in political conversation contributes to more deliberative opinion. By deliberative opinion, we mean the ability to ground one’s viewpoints, not only in supportive

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22 How exactly this happens is, of course, an object of psychological, rather than argumentative, research.
23 Since ‘our word is our bond,’ as Austin famously argued, ‘we cannot say “the cat is on the mat but I do not believe it is”’ (Austin, 1975 [1962]: 10, 48-49).
arguments but also in an understanding of the kinds of arguments that others might make in taking an opposite stand. (Price, Capella & Nir, 2002: 107)

In a follow-up to this general study, the same authors provide a more detailed account of the process of opinion-formation in online informal deliberation. In a study based not only on opinion-surveys but also on a content analysis of contributions to online political discussions held among ordinary citizens during the same 2000 elections, they conclude the following:

[...] the argumentative “climate” of group opinion affected postdiscussion opinion change indirectly, by shaping the character of individual participants’ own expressed opinions and arguments during the online deliberations. There appears to be a process of collective elicitation of arguments and mere opinion statements (perhaps a form of group “contagion”), in which individuals’ behaviors mimic the general tenor of the group. Such behaviors—particularly the arguments each individual made—then contributed to individual shifts of opinion. (Price, Nir & Capella, 2006: 62; italics original)

Based on both pragma-dialectic theorising and empirical analyses, the role of argumentation in forming political opinions, and thus in achieving the institutional goal of informal (online) deliberation, can be clearly grasped: it is the process of argumentation that sustains, so to speak, the constant formation of public opinions. In other words, it is ‘a process of collective elicitation of arguments and mere opinion statements’ that contributes to ‘to individual shifts of opinion.’ That means that the product of informal deliberation is realised in the very process of deliberation, since as long as a deliberative exchange continues opinions are being publicly formed, that is, made an object of an argumentative discussion in which they are critically tested.24

In this way, contrary to critics, two important characteristics of informal online forums for political argumentation can be seen as conducive, rather than obstructive, to reaching their institutional goal. The first of them is the autotelic quality of online discussions, which are seen by some as futile discussions for the sake of discussing. From the pragma-dialectical perspective, the very process of argumentation, even if it does not lead to any concrete outcomes in the sense of an explicitly reached resolution or a settlement of a dispute, is still a valuable exercise of critical reasonableness. That is because as long as standpoints and arguments are advanced and tested in a reasonable way, highly valued critical exchanges that may more or less directly increase the quality of

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24 For a discussion of the so called ‘process-product ambiguity’ in the study of argumentation, see van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984: 7-9.
‘deliberative opinion’ are under way. Related to this is a second quality, that is, the open-endedness of informal deliberations. For critics, open-endedness means that discussions may be endless and, as a result, fruitless (see, e.g., Linaa Jensen, 2003: 364). This quality, however, may also be of critical value: since online discussions are open to a continuous process of submitting opinions to critical testing without the limitations of a time-constrained decision-making procedure, they allow for opinion-formation that is independent from institutional exigencies and hence possibly more critical and thorough than in the case of carefully regimented institutional discourse.25

In conclusion: in this chapter I have provided a preliminary answer to the first research question of the dissertation: what kind of conditions for argumentation does the context of online political discussion forums create? I have done so by analysing the technological basics and the institutional goal of informal political online discussion fora. Such fora are grassroots, bottom-up venues for public discourse initiated by Internet users who want to discuss political topics. Because of the way they are established and administrated and, notably, because of the way they are designed, online fora function as vehicles for informal political discussion that can (exclusively) realise the goal of critical opinion-formation. In this sense, online discussion fora can be understood as examples of everyday political deliberation taking place in the virtual ‘public sphere.’ The type of deliberation that informal online political discussions support is not, however, identical with deliberation in the strict sense of the word, that is, with institutionalised deliberation consisting of well-regimented procedures for effective decision-making. In particular, online discussants are not Aristotelian deliberators who decide on the most expedient course of action in an official public assembly. Rather, the institutional goal of informal online political discussion can be formulated as formation of political opinions expressed publicly on the Internet. The results of such process of opinion-formation may later serve in the ‘deliberative system’ as materials for deliberation in the sense of institutionalised decision-making. What is crucial from an argumentative perspective, however, is that the process of opinion-formation is based on public argumentative exchanges, in which opinions are expressed, criticised and defended. Specific conditions that such fora create for the process of critical testing of expressed political opinions are scrutinised in the next chapter.

25 In both cases, a trade-off between openness and quality may come into play. See Jackson (1998: 190), and above, section 3.3.