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

Lewiński, M.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Chapter 6

Internet discussion forums as an argumentative activity type

6.1 The role of argumentation in online political forum discussions

The goal of this chapter is to provide a pragma-dialectical analysis of online political forum discussions as an argumentative activity type. The results of this analysis, together with the preliminary description of online discussions provided in Chapter 5, are meant to give an answer to the basic research question of the study (Question 1): What kind of conditions for argumentation does the context of online political discussion forums create?

As discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, it is a basic assumption of pragmatic approaches to the study of argumentation that different ‘designs’ or formats for argumentative discussion are efficient in realising different (institutional) goals. In Chapter 5 I have argued that the online political discussions studied here are designed in such a way that they are conducive to realising the goal of informal opinion-formation rather than efficient decision-making. Still, next to opinion-formation in the political domain, the same design of online discussions can also support the realisation of other institutional goals, in other domains of communication. Attempts have been made to give an orderly account of the various goals that online discussions can serve. For example, Fisher, Smith and Welser (2006) proposed to divide Usenet newsgroups into four basic functional sub-types: ‘question and answer,’ ‘conversational,’ ‘social support’ and ‘flame’ newsgroups. Himelboim (2008) distinguished even more basically between ‘conversation-based groups’ and ‘information-based groups.’ According to him, the specimen of the conversation-based groups are online venues for ‘political, philosophical and ideological discussions’ in which opinions are defended and critiqued from a variety of perspectives (Himelboim, 2008: 164). Thus, such groups typically have a clear argumentative aspect.¹ By contrast, the goal

¹ Himelboim’s (2008: 164) general characterisation of the conversation-based groups, including political ones, is in line with the discussion in Chapter 5 of this study: ‘The goal of participants in conversation-based
of information-based groups is often ‘to provide participants with a set of facts regarding a topic’ (Himelboim, 2008: 165). Himelboim mentions ‘health-related groups’ as a clear example of forums for discussion in which informative questions and advice solicitations are responded to by individuals aspiring to be online experts by means of providing facts and proposing solutions (Ibidem).

The distinction between conversation- and information-based online forums is not equivalent to a distinction between argumentative and non-argumentative discussions (if only because facts too can be disputed). However, online political discussions can be expected to be more emphatically argumentative than, say, (information-based) online medical discussions, even if both these types of discussion are supported by the same technology. As argued in this study, the technology of online forums is likely to engender a more confrontational, argumentative type of discussion if used in the political domain. As a result, certain conventions and patterns of use of the technology of online discussions analysed below can be different from other, non-political uses of online discussions.²

As discussed in Chapter 4, the theoretical consistency of a pragma-dialectical analysis of argumentative activity types, such as online political forum discussions, is based on grasping their main argumentative qualities in terms of four parameters: the initial situation, starting points (rules of discussion, shared premises), means of argumentation and criticism, and the outcome (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2005). These parameters mirror the analytic division of the ideal model of a critical discussion into four stages: confrontation, opening, argumentation, and concluding.

In this chapter a general analysis is provided of how institutional constraints of online political discussion forums impose typical restrictions and create opportunities for the realisation of each of the stages/parameters of argumentative exchanges that can be reconstructed from online discussions. Accordingly, the analysis is divided into four parts, pertaining to the initial situation (6.2), starting points (6.3), means of argumentation and criticism (6.4), and the possible outcome (6.5) of the argumentative activity type of online political discussions. In each part, the analysis is based directly on an argumentative reconstruction of fragments of online discussions and indirectly on other, often

---

² Himelboim (2008: 172), for one, has demonstrated that, in comparison with the ‘information-based’ health groups, opinion-based ‘political groups showed a disproportional distribution of replies, but to a lesser extent. The opinion-based messages, where no one is expected to hold the “correct” piece of information, showed less concentration of replies around the few highly replied individuals.’
quantitative, research results which shed light on argumentatively relevant qualities of online discussions. The results of the analysis of each of the parameters of the argumentative activity type of online political discussions will be summarised at the end of the chapter in table 6.1.

6.2 The initial situation

6.2.1 Disagreement as a necessary condition for an argumentative discussion

Confrontation, in which disagreement regarding a certain standpoint is externalised in a discursive exchange or anticipated by the speaker (or writer), is fundamental to the pragma-dialectical grasp of argumentation for two basic reasons.

The first reason is pragmatic: as defined by van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1982: 8-11; 1984: 42-46) the performance of a complex speech act of argumentation is superfluous if an expressed opinion of a speaker is not confronted with a doubt or an opposite opinion by another speaker. That is because the speech act of argumentation is meaningfully performed only as an attempt to convince the listener of the acceptability of a given expressed opinion (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984: 43). If the listener already accepts the opinion, then—pragmatically speaking—the speaker is doing something that does not have to be done and therefore is completely superfluous. That is to say that from a pragmatic point of view opinions that are shared between the speaker (or writer) and his fellow discussants (or audience) can be meaningfully explained, elucidated, or perhaps preached about, but they cannot be ‘argued for’ among the members of this group of discussants.3

The second reason is dialectical: pragma-dialectics follows the crucial dialectical principle stipulating that there is no argumentation without confrontation. In dialectical models of argumentation the presence of disagreement is a necessary condition for a dialectical discussion (or game) to begin: ‘Without a real or presumed confrontation, there is no need for a critical discussion’ (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: 60; see also Barth & Krabbe, 1982; Walton, 1984; Walton & Krabbe, 1995). Therefore, an ideal argumentative discussion, such as the one proposed in the pragma-dialectical model of a critical discussion, starts with a confrontation where the form of disagreement is

---

3 Of course, if the group tries to defend their in-group opinions against criticisms of some other group, then argumentation is possible, exactly because the condition of disagreement is fulfilled.
determined. This, ideally, happens in but two simple steps: 1) the speaker advances his standpoint and 2) the listener casts doubts on, or directly attacks, the standpoint (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984: 85).

In real discussions, such basic confrontational structure (advancing standpoint followed by an expression of doubt or attack) may take many forms. As described in Chapter 4, one of the distinguishing features of different argumentative activity types is their initial situation, that is, the way in which the confrontation is shaped. Many activities, such as legal proceedings or mediation sessions, presuppose a specific form of disagreement, i.e., they define the necessary conditions (such as the object and type of dispute) under which an argumentative discussion in these institutions can start. If the conditions are not met, that is, if the initial situation does not contain a particular form of disagreement, a speech event (i.e., an individual occurrence of an activity type) cannot be commenced.

The design of online discussion forums studied here does not predefine any special kind of argumentative confrontation in the sense of conditions needed to initiate the online discussion. Moreover, the elements necessary for an argumentative discussion to begin, that is, discursive moves leading to a clear establishment of dispute, are not explicitly imposed by the system of online discussions. This is in sharp contrast to many computer-mediated designs for holding argumentative discussions (the so called groupware systems) described by Aakhus (see section 3.2). In particular, contrary to the ‘issue-networking’ systems, online forums studied here are not explicitly designed in a way that would enforce ‘optimizing disagreement through the clash of claims’ (Aakhus, 2002a: 124-125). Hence, at least theoretically, they can be carried out in an amicable, supportive atmosphere, where agreements abound and confrontations never emerge. This, however, would be a highly surprising incidence, especially when political topics are discussed.

---

4 This involves making clear the sense and force of the disputed standpoint and the type of a difference of opinion (dispute) that is at stake in respect of the standpoint. There are four basic types of disputes. In the first place, disputes can be single or multiple, depending on the number of propositions that are included in the standpoint. Moreover, every dispute is either non-mixed (when the listener only casts doubt on the standpoint of the speaker without assuming a standpoint of his own) or mixed (when the listener disagrees with the standpoint of the speaker and advances an opposite position) (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992a: 15-22).

5 In a fully externalised ideal discussion one can distinguish two more basic moves necessary to complete the confrontation stage: 3) the protagonist upholds his standpoint in face of the expressed doubts or criticisms, and 4) the antagonist upholds his doubt or criticism (or moves from criticism to doubt, or vice versa). See van Eemeren, Houtlosser & Snoeck Henkemans, 2007: 24-28.

6 This is most explicitly clear in the case of judicial trials where a judge can refuse to open proceedings on the basis of the suit brought to the court not qualifying as a legal dispute.
In fact, as the results of quantitative content analyses show, differences of opinion are externalised in online political discussions. Political scientists analysing various samples of online discussions discovered that anything from 10.6% to 76% of messages in online political discussions contain some forms of disagreement, categorised as ‘debate’ or ‘attack on poster’ (Davis, 1999: 157; Hill & Hughes, 1998: 58; Wilhelm, 1998: 327-333). Especially interesting are the meticulous analyses of Hill and Hughes (1998), who hypothesise that the Usenet political discussions will be confrontational (or ‘debate-oriented’), and define a confrontation as a situation in which ‘people with different opinions will clash in a battle of ideas’ (Hill & Hughes, 1998: 49-50). Their initial result is that merely 30% of the discussion threads are argumentative debates. However, after excluding the ‘discussion’ threads consisting of just one message (that is, those which are limited to just the initial message which never really instigated a discussion) from the mechanical quantitative coding, they discover that the proper, multi-message discussions containing argumentative confrontation cover 76% of all the messages posted to the Usenet political groups they studied (Hill & Hughes, 1998: 58).

Similarly, an argumentative analysis of online discourse supports the view that the freedom the design of online discussion forums offers is, notably in the political context, exercised by Internet users as an opportunity for disagreement, rather than agreement. Interestingly, even in cases where agreement seems to prevail, there is some room for dissent which, even though delayed, may still trigger an argumentative discussion:

(6.1) 8 Years of Dick
http://groups.google.com/group/abc_politics_forum/browse_frm/thread/3e367eac10ed1d02?hl=en#

1. DOC828NDF May 15 2009, 8:57 pm
We have had to put up with that Dick Cheney for 8 long and miserable years. Why doesn't the man shut up and keep his opinions to him self? And better yet, why does the media torture us with these opinions. The only thing I want to hear about him or Bush from now on is when they'll be prosecuted

7 Quite oddly, Davis (1999: 157) defines the category of ‘attack on poster’ as: ‘verbal adverse criticism of a previous poster’s ideas, affiliations, background, or personal characteristics.’ From a point of view of argumentation theory, this is truly nothing more than a rag-bag category: it includes all sorts of critical reactions, from confrontational expressions of disagreement in respect of a standpoint, to reasonable criticisms of arguments, to overtly fallacious *ad hominem* attacks.

8 All the excerpts of online discussions are presented in this study in the following order: topic of the discussion (created by the author of message no 1), Web-address, number of a message (or ‘post’) as appears on the forum, name of the author (‘poster’), date and time of a message (in the format provided by the Google Groups system), and the text of a message. Note that, due to the topical rather than purely chronological structuring of the conversations, even posts far removed in the numbered sequence can be direct responses to some previous posts. All the messages are quoted verbatim, without any editorial corrections (save for some occasional shortenings clearly indicated by squared brackets: […]).
That is the problem Doc, No one has ever seen Cheney before, its all new to the population to see the republican asshole VP.

Yeah, it's strange that we've seen more of him since he left office than we did in 8 whole years of his vice precedency.

Yeah, he is on the defense, he knows we are going to get him one way or another...this evil bastard will pay eventually.

Are you going after Obama when he does the same thing the Republicans did?

P.J. When he messes up, I will go after him, if you had read my posts, you would see there is some things I do not like about Obama, But I am going to give him a chance. I read his story in NewsWeek, and He is an impressive person, unlike the SOB's that you support.

In discussion (6.1), participants (Rebel and SgtUSMC) are up to turn 4 in full agreement with the initial standpoint advanced by DOC828NDF (in the form of a rhetorical question): ‘Dick Cheney should shut up and keep his opinions to himself.’ When it seems that reinforcement of ideas is strongly set up and explicitly indicated (‘That is the problem,’ ‘Yeah’), in turn 5 Pajasu asks a dissenting question: ‘Are you going after Obama when he does the same thing the Republicans did?’ Typically for starkly bi-polar discussions over American politics, Pajasu’s question does not directly address the issue of Cheney’s current performance, but rather turns against Obama’s performance. It is clear from Rebel’s response (turn 6) that this indeed leads to a full-fledged, qualitative multiple dispute: ‘He [Obama – ML] is an impressive person, unlike the SOB’s that you support.’

This question, if taken to be rhetorical, can be reconstructed as an accusation of inconsistency in the confrontation stage of a discussion: ‘[You are going after the Republican Cheney, but] you are not going after Obama when he does the same thing the Republicans did.’ As argued by Andone (2009) and Mohammed (2009), such an accusation amounts to an expression of doubt whether the standpoint can be upheld by the protagonist.

A qualitative multiple dispute arises when an ‘alternative standpoint’ advanced by one of the arguers ‘implies a standpoint that is opposite’ to the standpoint advanced by the other arguer (van Eemeren, Houtlosser & Snoeck Henkemans, 2007: 27).

The use of acronyms, such as SOB (son of a bitch), LOL (laughing out loud) or STFU (shut the fuck up), is characteristic of online discussions – it not only facilitates typing, but also veils some very explicit comments. See Crystal (2001: 85-86) for an extensive list of such acronyms.
In the following two sub-sections, I will argue that due to the special features of online political discussion forums there is some kind of an accountable typicality to initial disagreements occurring in this type of argumentative activity.

### 6.2.2 Conditions for expressing disagreements in Internet discussions

It is a fact well-established by discourse and conversation analysts that many of our daily interactions are permeated by the ‘preference for agreement.’ In the simplest formulation, it means that subsequently to someone else’s speech acts, such as compliments or assessments (Pomerantz, 1978, 1984), we tend to respond with agreements. The prevalence of such a preference means that there are more agreements than disagreements, that they are performed faster, and more explicitly. By contrast, disagreements are not only usually avoided or withheld but, if they occur, they are very often delayed and become subject to many strategies of implicitness (prefaces, partial or token agreements, indicated, e.g., by ‘Well…’ or ‘Yes…but…’) (Pomerantz, 1984: 64). Pomerantz, in an attempt to account for such an observable fact, suggests that ‘across a variety of situations conversants orient to their disagreeing with one another as uncomfortable, unpleasant, difficult, risking threat, insult, or offense’ (Pomerantz, 1984: 77). For similar reasons, as has been argued by political scientists, avoidance of contestation may lead to situations in which everyday political talk is limited, stifled, or even does not occur at all (Witschge, 2004: 111-113).

All the same, disagreements do occur in everyday conversations, notably in political discussions. Moreover, disagreement is often not an unusual, unexpected and thus marked form of conduct, but rather an expected, preferred and even ‘default’ behaviour. In order to account for this fact, one may start from emphasising that the idea of the ‘preference organization,’ as construed by conversation analysts, is based on the ‘institutional ranking of alternatives’ (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984: 53). Having this in

---

12 As two important exceptions to this general rule, Pomerantz mentions responses to some overt compliments directed towards the listener (1978: 98-106) and self-depreciations (1984: 77-95). In such cases, for reasons of, respectively, self-praise avoidance and supportiveness towards others, disagreements are preferred.

13 Based on such considerations, Jackson and Jacobs developed in their early work a concept of argument as a ‘repair mechanism’ used in the situation of ‘interactional trouble,’ i.e., in case of ‘the occurrence of disagreement in a rule system built to prefer agreement’ (Jackson & Jacobs, 1980: 251; see also Jacobs & Jackson, 1982).

14 These concepts are defined in the following way: ‘The term “preference” refers to a range of phenomena associated with the fact that choices among nonequivalent courses of action are routinely implemented in ways that reflect an institutional ranking of alternatives. Despite its connotations, the term is not intended to reference personal, subjective, or “psychological” desires or dispositions’ (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984: 53;
mind, it is noticeable that the types of activity that Pomerantz mentions in her analyses can be briefly characterised as ‘a context of unspecified, friendly conversation’ (Kotthoff, 1993: 195, 213). Therefore, the features that Pomerantz seems to be treating as universal, should be carefully studied in different institutionalised situations, as some variations of the preference structure may surface. Kotthoff, interested in this very problem, makes two claims on the basis of her study of preference structures in the context of a dispute or, as she calls it, ‘the activity type of argumentation’ (1993: 205).

First, whenever the *dynamics* of a conversation leads to a situation in which dissent and argumentation emerges, then ‘the disagreement activities appear less and less modulated. There is no preference for agreement any more. On the contrary, disagreement is stressed and oriented to’ (Kotthoff, 1993: 201). One of her accounts of such a ‘reverse’ preference structure is that if a disputant (in her examples – a student facing opposition from a professor) ‘wants to present herself as a rational human being who is responsible for her actions, she has to defend herself and disagree’ (1993: 199). Apparently, then, the preference for disagreement is in some cases driven by requirements of reasonableness, such as the burden of proof.

Second, in some situations certain *fixed* institutional conditions which stimulate disagreements are in place throughout the discursive activity. Evident examples of such institutional situations are legal trials as well as, in general, all activities based on argumentation: ‘the dispute’, Kotthoff claims, ‘is even typically staged by suspending the “normal consensus expectations”’ (1993: 195). Thus Kotthoff seems to suggest that there are institutional contexts in which the situation is ‘typically’ reversed and the preference for disagreement prevails.

Such, I would like to argue, is the case with online political forum discussions. Simply put, disagreement seems to be a preferred form of discursive behaviour in this type of argumentative activity. In this respect, online political discussion forums resemble, in general, ‘aggravated debates’ in which ‘speakers orient themselves to quick opposition’ (Kotthoff, 1993: 205). Apart from an extensive impact on reacting critically in the course

---

*italics original*. As Kotthoff remarks regarding Atkinson & Heritage’s notion of ‘institutional ranking of alternatives’: ‘They do not elaborate on that understanding, but it points to a context orientation’ (1993: 214, n. 1).

15 And, indeed, in any other type of activity that is *inherently or predominantly* argumentative (van Eemeren, 2010: Ch. 5). Van Eemeren (*Ibidem*) distinguishes between communicative activity types that are ‘inherently or “essentially” argumentative’ (e.g. parliamentary debates), ‘predominantly argumentative’ (e.g. political interviews), ‘coincidentally argumentative’ (e.g. ‘prayers in which a claim that is made is supported by arguments’), and ‘not argumentative at all’ (e.g. ‘short news bulletins broadcast on the radio’).
of argumentation (see Chapters 7, 8 and 9), such preference for disagreement means, first
of all, that confrontational moves regarding others’ standpoints can be freely performed.

Examples of research carried out in the early days of computer-mediated
communication already showed that some special qualities of such communication,
especially anonymity, make discussants more prone to an uninhibited, assertive and critical
style of conversation (Connolly, Jessup & Valacich, 1990; Kiesler, Siegel & McGuire,
1984). As the authors of these studies argue, anonymous computer-mediated environments
eliminate many social cues and status dependencies that typically prevent people from
‘speaking up,’ notably, from defying the authority. They also limit the evaluation
apprehension, one of the major sources of socially-driven inhibitions to free expression of
one’s ideas. ‘Uninhibited,’ however, may not only mean free and open—two most
important values in political argumentation—but also free of accountability and open to
abuses leading to lack of civility in discussions.\(^{16}\) An extensive use of derogatory, abusive
language in online discussions (so called \textit{flaming}) has been seen as an inhibiting factor in
itself, since many would-be arguers may be discouraged to participate in vehemently
confrontational activities (Benson, 1996; Dahlberg, 2001a; Papacharissi, 2004). Without
judging the impact of reduced inhibitions in voicing one’s opinions on the overall quality
of discussions, one can agree that, among other factors, anonymity makes ‘dissenters feel
more liberated to express their views online than offline’ (Witschge, 2004: 115).\(^{17}\)

Other factors that may facilitate occurrence of argumentative confrontations
include: a heterogeneity of often diverging views available online, which makes meeting
‘the other’—a possible antagonist—much easier than in the limited circle of our daily
encountered like-minded friends (Stromer-Galley, 2003); the spoken/written character of
online discourse which allows for actual interactions (and thus quick rejoinders) but
eliminates the elementary features of face-to-face encounters, that is, physical co-presence
and non-verbal communication cues, which often provide ‘back-channels’ for immediate
(positive or negative) feedback to one’s opinions (Baym, 1996; Collot & Belmore, 1996;
Crystal, 2001; Ferrara, Brunner & Whittemore, 1991; Herring, 1999, 2001); norms of

\(^{16}\) Papacharissi (2004) states that civility should not be confused with politeness. As she argues, online
political discussions which may be seen as rather ‘impolite’ from the perspective of certain socially preferred
conventions of a gentlemanly use of language can still remain civil in terms of ‘the democratic merit of
robust and heated discussion’ characterised by open expression of disagreements.

\(^{17}\) A distinction is sometimes made between ‘pure anonymity’ and ‘pseudonymity’ (Donath, 1999: 53-54; see
section 7.3.1). In pseudonymous contexts arguers are not fully accountable as persons with ‘real’ identities.
Yet, for the sake of building reputation around a consistently used pseudonym, they may tend to conform to
social norms, such as avoidance of contestation, in a more pronounced way than ‘purely anonymous’ arguers.
CHAPTER 6

netiquette which ‘contains a bias towards particular, agonistic forms of discourse’ (Dahlberg, 2001a: online; see also: Baym, 1996; Mandelcwajg & Marcoccia, 2007).

The last but certainly not the least factor is the very type of discussions studied here – as some claim, ‘political discussion is inherently confrontational as people discuss policies from vastly divergent points of view’ (Hill & Hughes, 1998: 22-23). This characteristic of the topic of discussions can, of course, be only put to work if a political discussion sets off at all – as mentioned above, people may have plenty of reasons not to start political discussions in the first place. As soon as they start, however, disagreements are likely to surface.

All in all, it seems quite safe to claim that—owing to the qualities of online political discussions—argumentative confrontations can be typically expected in this very type of activity.

6.2.3 Ways of expressing disagreements in Internet discussions

Knowing that disagreements are likely to occur in online political discussion forums, it is worthwhile to briefly illustrate how they actually come about.

As examined by van Eemeren, Houtlosser and Snoeck Henkemans (2007: Ch. 3), actual argumentative discourse contains many linguistic indicators of confrontation, which can be basically grouped into the indicators of standpoints and indicators of (various kinds of) disputes. However, apart from linguistic clues one can also draw on ‘clues in the context’ (Houtlosser, 2001: 43; Johnson & Blair, 1994: 13-15): in some activity types such as letters to the editor or—as I will try to show presently—online discussions, putting forward any assertive can be readily taken as expressing a standpoint. That means that proposed assertives can be quickly made disputable – as argued by Houtlosser (2001: 32), it is one of the preparatory conditions for the speech act of advancing a (positive) standpoint that the ‘speaker S believes that the listener L does not (already, at face value, completely) accept [opinion] O [in respect to which the speaker has advanced a positive standpoint and thus has assumed an obligation to defend].’

The most explicit indicators of confrontation, such as ‘I believe’ (standpoint), ‘I am not so sure about it’ (doubt leading to a non-mixed dispute), or ‘I disagree’ (criticism leading to a mixed dispute) certainly do appear in online discussions. At the same time, online discussions exhibit some special ways of starting argumentative confrontation, notably, of advancing standpoints. One of such ways is putting forward the standpoint in
INTERNET DISCUSSION FORUMS AS AN ARGUMENTATIVE ACTIVITY TYPE

the topic of the discussion thread, while the body of the message contains nothing more than a copy-paste quotation of facts from an online news report:

(6.2) ============> YET ANOTHER THING OBAMA IS DOING RIGHT...AND THAT SHOULD HAVE BEEN DONE YEARS AGO! ============>
http://groups.google.com/group/alt.politics/browse_frm/thread/24cc450e5eee39c6#

1. ChasNemo May 20 2009, 1:26 am
===========> YET ANOTHER THING OBAMA IS DOING RIGHT...AND THAT SHOULD HAVE BEEN DONE YEARS AGO! ============>

Obama drives up miles-per-gallon requirements
By James R. Healey, USA TODAY
The Obama administration announced Tuesday what amounts to a sweeping revision to auto-emission and fuel-economy standards, putting them in the same package for the first time.
The plan would require cars and trucks to average 35.5 miles per gallon by 2016, […]

2. MEG May 20 2009, 1:39 am
I hope you like riding in a beer can with wheels, that is what gets 35 mpg

Another, even more minimalistic, way of advancing standpoints is proposing only a quotation from some media reports, without any comment or, indeed, any text added by the initiator of the thread:

(6.3) McCain Was Not Tortured, POW Guard Claims
http://groups.google.com/group/PoliticalForum/browse_frm/thread/c3c3b5b8a589c9e5

1. [ the last patriotic republican ] Oct 17 2008, 11:44 am
McCain Was Not Tortured, POW Guard Claims
http://www.alternet.org/election08/103233/
An interview with the chief prison guard of the North Vietnamese jail in which McCain was held claims, “We never tortured McCain.” […]

2. mark Oct 17 2008, 11:52 am
bwahahahahahahahahahaha God murky, where do you find these comic posts of yours. what a crock of shit.

(6.4) Al-Qaida backs McCain
http://groups.google.com/group/abc_politics_forum/browse_frm/thread/530778eaf3ef69ec?hl=en

1. ImStillMags Oct 22 2008, 9:17 pm
Al-Qaida-linked Web site backs McCain as president
By PAMELA HESS – 16 hours ago
WASHINGTON (AP) — Al-Qaida supporters suggested in a Web site message this week they would welcome a pre-election terror attack on the U.S. as a way to usher in a McCain presidency.
[…]
http://ap.google.com/article/ALeqM5iFK9c9KTpdjbhYyuW1lZyAuyqeJgD93VA3B80
As examples (6.3) and (6.4) illustrate, even if the initial message of an online political discussion consists exclusively of cited content, it is taken to be containing a more or less direct expression of a certain standpoint on the issue referred to.\(^{18}\) That such messages function as expressions of a standpoint is made clear by other discussants who respond with doubt or more or less direct disagreement to all kinds of initiating messages, including those where the author’s own externalised opinions are apparently missing. If this is indeed the case, it is not necessary to indicate explicitly in some standard way that one advances a standpoint. Instead, the context of the activity type alone may suggest that ‘Anything you say can (and will) be used against you.’ Moreover, since online discussions studied here are political discussions, the type of standpoints that arguers orient to are standpoints in which political opinions are expressed. Therefore, even citing ‘objective’ news reports, especially in the first message of a thread, is responded to as advancing a standpoint with respect to a certain political opinion that is implicitly conveyed in the quoted material.

Quite apart from that, every message containing a standpoint may in fact prompt many expressions of disagreement. In this way, the whole discussion is liable to forking out into many simultaneously held sub-disputes (provided that the expression of disagreement is followed by an exchange of arguments and criticisms). Such an opportunity for multiple confrontation may be a serious impediment to the process of decision-making, but is conducive to a thorough testing of expressed opinion from as many angles as possible.

To summarise – unlike legal trials or negotiations, online discussion forums contain argumentative confrontation not as a precondition of their very performance, but as an expected or even favoured situation: those who decide to participate should know that they will be taken as advancing a standpoint regarding a political opinion under the conditions

---

\(^{18}\) The astonishing brevity in externalising opinions in the initiating (or ‘root’) messages has been noted in the extensive content analysis of 20 political Usenet newsgroups carried out by Himelboim, Gleave and Smith (2009). In a randomly selected sample of 325 ‘root messages’ posted by ‘discussion catalysts’ (that is, online discussants who received a disproportionally high number of replies), only 4.6% of messages were original contributions of the posters without any quoted content, while 95.4% included some imported content. Of the latter messages, 65% ‘contained a brief comment (up to two sentences) by the author, such as “[t]he guy’s definitely gettin’ to be very unpopular” and “stupid”,’ mere 7% ‘included both imported content and substantial contribution (more than two sentences) by authors, while the rest [28\%-ML] had no personal comments’ (Himelboim, Gleave & Smith, 2009: 783-784). Shortly: ‘Of all analyzed root messages, only 12 percent included a substantial contribution by the authors that was apparently original content’ (Ibidem).
of open and expected criticism. This criticism may lead to both non-mixed and mixed differences of opinion. For all these reasons, one can formulate the initial situation of the argumentative activity type of online political discussion forums as an expected non-mixed or mixed difference of opinion regarding issues of politics (see table 6.1).

6.3 Starting points

In real-life argumentation the opening stage is seldom explicitly and fully performed – the negotiation of common starting points (whether procedural or material) is usually largely implicit and often spread over the whole speech event. The concept of argumentative activity types brings more clarity as to the position and status of the opening stage in actual argumentation: the guiding principle is that participants in a given argumentative activity type may be taken to be explicitly agreeing on the special rules of this activity by virtue of entering the activity. In other words, they are expected to follow the rules which they are supposed to become familiar with before entering the activity. In many institutionalised activity types, upon starting the activity discussants have to certify they are aware of the ‘rules and conditions’ of this given activity.

6.3.1 Procedural starting points

All users of the ‘Google Groups’ service, just like many other public systems for online discussion, before posting any message have to confirm they have read and understood the current ‘Terms of Service.’19 ‘Terms of Service’ are primarily a legal act, which stipulates obligations and rights of the ‘Google Groups’ owners and users. It specifies many legal aspects of use of discussion groups which are not directly relevant to argumentation, such as copyrights or privacy policy. Some of its rules are, however, argumentatively relevant. This applies to the following three rules (included in point 6 of ‘Terms of Service’: ‘Appropriate Conduct’) which are supposed to guarantee an uninhibited freedom of expression, and thus may be seen as real-life specifications of the pragma-dialectical ‘freedom rule’ of the model of critical discussion:

By way of example, and not as a limitation, you agree that when using the Service, you will not:
- defame, abuse, harass, stalk, threaten or otherwise violate the legal rights (such as rights of privacy and publicity) of others;
- post any inappropriate, defamatory, infringing, obscene, or unlawful Content;
- restrict or inhibit any other user from using and enjoying the Service;

The fact that general legal rules of ‘Terms of Service’ do not cover much of communicative behaviour of online discussants is counterbalanced by the stipulation of more specific rules in particular forums. Such a forum-specific formulation of rules is at the discretion of those who are in charge of establishing and running a given forum (group owners, administrators, moderators).

One of the discussion forums under study—PoliticalForum—welcomes users with the following information: ‘In addition to Google TOS [Terms Of Service], please read our forum rules: http://tinyurl.com/3ytd72.’ Under the link, one can find the following list:

POLITICALFORUM RULES
1) Members must be at least 18 years of Age.
2) No spam, ads, solicitations, pornography or posts in any language other than English will be permitted.
3) Posts that are made only to insult, defame, attack or threaten another member of the forum will not be tolerated and may be removed.
4) Posts that contain personal/private information about another poster, who wishes to remain anonymous, will be removed and may lead to other moderation up to and including banning from the forum.
5) Behavior that is disruptive to the forum, including but not limited to changing thread titles and the like, will not be tolerated. The only exception to thread title changes is that the originator of the thread may change the title at their discretion.
6) Any member breaking any of these rules will be subject to moderation at the discretion of the moderators. A member who is placed on moderation will remain on moderation for at least 48 Hours. Any attempts to continue to break the rules while on moderation will result in a longer period of moderation.
7) Repeated violations of the above rules may result in removal from the forum at the discretion of the moderators.

Banning slanderous or defamatory attacks, as well as threats, infringements of anonymity, and any other ‘behavior that is disruptive to the forum’ is a means to securing the smooth running of the forum. Sanctions such as temporary moderation or permanent banning of a violent user are put in place.
It is not difficult to see how these rules correspond to argumentative norms, even if this correspondence is purely coincidental (after all, the authors of the rules may be motivated by concerns different than argumentative reasonableness). According to the rules of the PoliticalForum, ad hominem and ad baculum attacks are forbidden (point 3). Strict anonymity can be seen as a condition facilitating resolving disputes on the merits, rather than on the basis of someone’s actual social role or position (point 4). Some general topical relevance is also required – changing the topic of a thread is seen as a serious infraction (point 5).

Apart from the explicitly stated general ‘Terms of Service’ and rules of particular forums, users are expected to (1) follow some basic rules of netiquette, and (2) master the details of technological design of the forums: sloppy, inexperienced newcomers making basic mistakes (such as posting personal replies using the general ‘Reply,’ rather than ‘Reply to author’ functions) are swiftly reproached (Smith, McLaughlin & Osborne, 1998).

Since the details of the technological set-up of online discussions have already been discussed in section 5.2, a short description of the netiquette will suffice. The norms of a general net etiquette are the norms of a proper online behaviour set in the early days of ‘the virtual community.’ Even though the often repeated argument holds that the rules of netiquette are notoriously breached, they remain a point of reference for both administrators of different forums, who often rely on them in stipulating the rules of the forums they are in charge of, and ordinary users alike. The relevance of the rules of netiquette transpires in arguers’ ‘meta-communication,’ i.e., their discussions regarding breaches of the norms of online communication. Such discussions are usually composed, on the one side (the offended), of reproaches, accusations, and other forms of criticism, and, on the other side (the offender), of excuses, justifications, apologies, concessions or denials (Doury, 2005; Korenman & Wyatt, 1996; Smith, McLaughlin & Osborne, 1998). Such ‘meta-communication’ provides an extra insight into the conventional conditions in which political online discussions take place. Davis, for example, notices that the requirement that the arguments given be supported by some external sources of data is rarely met in the discussions he studied. Still, the norm, even if not universally observed, seems to hold, as it is often referred to by the arguers: ‘this lack of supporting evidence became a frequent source of criticism of other posters’ (Davis, 1999: 161).

---

20 See Mandelcwajg and Marcoccia (2007) for a broader discussion on the rules of the netiquette from the perspective of argumentation theory.
To mention just a few such norms of netiquette formulated in *Netiquette guidelines* ([http://www.dtec.edu/cs/rfc1855.html](http://www.dtec.edu/cs/rfc1855.html)), pertinent to the argumentative issues discussed in this dissertation:

> Take care in what you write. Messages and articles should be brief and to the point. Don't wander off-topic, don't ramble… […] If you are sending a reply to a message or a posting be sure you summarize the original at the top of the message, or include just enough text of the original to give a context. This will make sure readers understand, when they start to read your response. […] Read all of a discussion in progress (we call this a thread) before posting replies. […] Avoid posting "Me Too" messages, where content is limited to agreement with previous posts […].

It is clear from this excerpt that netiquette guidelines embody some well-known maxims of cooperative communication, such as those formulated by Grice (1975): brevity, clarity and relevance (which correspond to Grice’s quantity, manner and relevance maxims) are explicitly advised. Moreover, demonstrable familiarity with the whole text of unfolding discussion is recommended. At the same time, by discouraging “Me Too” messages,’ the guidelines promote a rather contentious style of conversation. Therefore, as already mentioned, it had been claimed that—despite cooperative elements—in general the rules of netiquette exhibit a certain ‘bias towards particular, agonistic forms of discourse’ (Dahlberg, 2001a: online; see also: Baym, 1996; Mandelcwajg & Marcoccia, 2007).

To sum up, the procedural starting points of online discussion forums are a combination of explicit constitutive rules of technology, explicit regulative rules of ‘Terms of Service’ and rules of particular forums, and the implicit regulative rules of general *netiquette* (see table 6.1).

### 6.3.2 Material starting points

Similarly to other informal contexts of communication, online political discussions studied here are characterised by lack of institutionally established material starting points for argumentative discussion. This is to say that arguers cannot employ as unshakeable shared premises propositions found in, for instance, law books (as is the case in judicial disputes) or textbooks (as is the case in classroom discussions). Naturally, certain ordinary requirements of common knowledge of the world are in place, hence many facts and value judgments cannot but be accepted as premises in online discussions. Still, arguers are by no means officially obligated to treat certain arguments as incontestable starting points on
which a strong case can be built. Other conditions of online discussions may however affect the way shared premises are negotiated in this activity type.

The most important of the conditions of online discussions regarding the material starting points is such forums’ being a part of the World Wide Web, in which every text may become a ‘hypertext,’ i.e., a text which contains cross-references (or ‘hyperlinks’) to other texts published on the Web. Online discussion forums as interactive discussions, which are still asynchronous and written, resemble in this respect many other types of online texts. Hyperlinks provide not only for intra-forum structuring and coherence (every message posted can be separately linked to), but also for extra-forum backing of data adduced. This means that arguers can easily prop up their argumentative statements by any online sources of data they find suitable: usually by posting a link (that is, a URL address) to a specific Web-page, or by copy-pasting some texts, or by doing both at the same time. In the case of general political discussions, often focused on current news events, the sources of data are usually news reports from numerous online newspapers (or any other media outlets accessible online). However, official documents, scientific articles, or indeed any other means of corroborating one’s own words can be linked to, if only available online.

The possibility of linking one’s argumentation to some online evidence may have a strong bearing on the shape of argumentative exchanges. It seems that thanks to its prevalence, linking has permeated online culture – information which is not substantiated by some links may be considered as somewhat defective and can certainly become a target of tenability criticism (that is, criticism regarding the acceptability of the propositional content of the premises used). As content analysis of Hill and Hughes (1998: 57) shows, 63.4% of all the discussion threads they studied provide (reference to) ‘sourced information,’ such as press releases of the White House. Hill and Hughes note, however, that ‘the number of informational threads drops to 53% for multi-message threads.’ Yet, as they claim, ‘[i]nformation is lower but still remains the norm or majority of all threads’ (Hill & Hughes, 1998: 58).

Even more striking are numbers given by Himelboim, Gleave and Smith (2009). As mentioned above (section 6.2.3), these researchers analysed the content of 325 initial (‘root’) messages posted to 20 political newsgroups on the Usenet (accessed through Google Groups) by the posters most frequently replied to, who are thus the most successful posters (the so-called ‘discussion catalysts’). The results are as follows:
Of these root messages, 95.4 per cent (310 messages) included imported content from sources on the WorldWideWeb as pasted raw articles or URLs and 4.6 per cent (15 messages) included only original content. Of all 325 root messages, 60 percent included linked to or pasted content from traditional media websites. The leading news organizations were Associated Press (24 times), the Washington Post (23), and the New York Times (11). Other major sources were online-only news sites, such as Salon.com (15 percent), blogs and personal websites, such as Capitol Hill Blue (8 percent), and government, such as the White House, and nonprofit organizations, such as Citizens for Legitimate Government (six percent). (Himelboim, Gleave & Smith, 2009: 783)

In short, the potential to copy-paste from and link to online sources of data is abundantly made use of by online discusssants. When it comes to argumentation, this means that online discusssants make attempts to ground their opinions in premises provided by some external sources, rather than exclusively in arguments created by themselves.

Of course, ‘including imported content’ by providing a link to a ‘sourced information’ is quite different from including acceptable content. The search for common ground among online arguers may be actually more difficult than in many other contexts: on the Internet, right-wingers will always have their own news reports, opinion pages, blogs, and even opinion polls to support certain viewpoints. And leftists will have their own sources too (see: Davis, 1999; Hill & Hughes, 1998). Linking, thus, is by no means a remedy that always solves epistemological problems of disputants. That is not to say, however, that online discussions are doomed to be permeated by ‘deep disagreements’ which can only engender argumentative discussions that are necessarily futile because agreements on some common starting points can never be reached (Fogelin, 1985). Indeed, ideological divisions and hence the contestation of premises for argumentation may be quite persistent, yet some sources of data due to their status in the online community such as the ‘free’ online encyclopaedia—Wikipedia—may be considered a reliable reference and thus serve as a repository of acceptable material starting points (see, e.g., Anthony, Smith & Williamson, 2009; Goodwin, 2009).21

In short, even if the possibility to link one’s arguments to external sources of data is not a means of securing the resolution of disputes by the arguers’ arriving at an agreement (based on mutually acceptable starting points), at least it may increase the quality of disagreements. In the situation of deep ideological divisions often permeating online political discussions, the online availability of material starting points gives an opportunity

---

INTERNET DISCUSSION FORUMS AS AN ARGUMENTATIVE ACTIVITY TYPE

to raise the level of disputes to a discussion on the accuracy or reliability of facts, rather
than on the availability of fact altogether.

To conclude – in terms of conditions for negotiating material starting points (shared
premises), online political discussions offer possibilities to draw premises from the open
resources of the World Wide Web. At the same time, however, political discussions are
characterised by marked ideological divisions which drastically limit the scope of common
ground on which mutually acceptable argumentation can be built (see table 6.1).

6.4 Means of argumentation and criticism

Compared to many institutionalised activity types online discussion forums contain hardly
any explicit regulations regarding the procedure for the exchange of arguments and
criticisms in what can be reconstructed as the argumentation stage of a critical discussion.
No clear ‘rules of order’—known in many highly formalised institutions, such as
parliaments—which would clearly specify the sequential organisation of the argumentative
discussion are stated for online political discussions. Therefore, elements such as the order
of speakers, the length and the shape of their contributions (type of allowed, or even
required, arguments and criticisms), the possibilities to address criticisms and develop
arguments, the overall length of discussion, etc., are not prescribed, but rather are left to be
decided by the discussants themselves. Online discussions are thus not carefully regulated,
highly institutionalised activities with a fixed format manifestly and methodically
regimenting the argumentation stage of a discussion. Instead, they are open, emergent
activities in which exchanges of arguments and critical reactions develop freely in
accordance with the direction a discussion takes depending on the online arguers’ ongoing
participation (or lack thereof). Assessed from the perspective of an ideal critical discussion
this may be disadvantageous, for discussions may degenerate into chaos, but also
advantageous, for the lines of criticisms and defences may develop in an uninhibited way.

This dual impact of the lack of regulation of online forums on the progress of
argumentative exchanges is further reinforced by the fact that discussions analysed here are
open for almost anybody to participate. They are thus not only open-ended in terms of lack
of limits on a timely decision to be taken, but also open in terms of active participation
(and not only passive participation, that is, freedom to stand by and listen). For this reason
online discussions have been analysed as ‘on-line polylogues’ with a ‘fuzzy participation
framework’ (Marcoccia, 2004) which are difficult to grasp in the regular framework for
analysing (argumentative) conversations, especially when compared to tightly regulated one-to-one dialogic exchanges. Discourse analysts studying conversational dynamics of computer-mediated discussions observed general problems with their interactional coherence, stemming largely from difficulties in maintaining global topical relevance and local turn-to-turn adjacency (Herring, 1999). Notably, the patterns of responding in multi-party asynchronous online discussions are quite peculiar:

…there is not a one-to-one correspondence between an initiation and its response. Multiple responses are often directed at a single initiating message, and single messages may respond to more than one initiating message, especially in asynchronous CMC [Computer-Mediated Communication – ML], where longer messages tend to contain multiple conversational moves (…). Moreover, many initiations receive no response. (Herring, 1999: online)

Lack of clear regulation of conversational, and—in particular—argumentative, procedures for online discussions may in fact lead to quite convoluted conversation structures. This is further magnified by the fluidity of participation:

Finally, the conversation structure and the participation framework of an on-line polylogue appear so fuzzy and complex that the schematic organization provided by the computer system cannot completely accommodate them. In fact, it is indubitable that polylogal conversations in general can neither be suitably schematized nor totally serve as a basis for a general model. Perhaps a methodological lesson can be drawn from the analysis of newsgroups: the dynamics of any conversation are a challenge to all methods of formal analysis. (Marcoccia, 2004: 144)

In contrast, Herring, in her more balanced assessment of online discussions, notices that their conversational problems, at least from the users’ perspective, are counterbalanced by other possibilities inherent in the special design of such discussions:

Users are able to participate in simultaneous multiple interactions without getting hopelessly lost or confused, because there is a typed record to which they can refer to keep track of what is going on. (Herring, 1999: online)

The organisation of argumentative discussion in online discussion forums is thus problematic on two distinct levels. First, arguers themselves have to find their way to orderly interact in the ‘fuzzy and complex’ online discussions, which can be a very difficult task taking into account the convolutions of many discussions. However, what may help online discussants in their handling of ‘simultaneous multiple interactions,’ as Herring claims, is the record of the entire discussion. Moreover, as Marcoccia suggests, discussants can focus on specific parts of interaction, for example by participating
INTERNET DISCUSSION FORUMS AS AN ARGUMENTATIVE ACTIVITY TYPE

exclusively in selected sub-discussions. As a result, online polylogues are, on the one hand, characterised by ‘lack of collective focusing’ and, on the other, by ‘the existence of varied focuses’ (Marcoccia, 2004: 118).

Second, analysts of online discussions may find their methods of analysis inadequate to the task of orderly rendering the fuzzy nebulae of simultaneously held, fragmented conversations. However, when it comes to the argumentation structure of online discussions, the conclusion that ‘the dynamics of any conversation are a challenge to all methods of formal analysis’ (Marcoccia, 2004: 144) may be too pessimistic. Indeed, ‘the dynamics of conversation,’ ordinarily built of chains of adjacency pairs such as question-answer or critical reaction-argument may be seriously disrupted in computer-mediated discussions (Herring, 1999: online). Yet, conversationally messy discussions may still be characterised by a more or less neat, and easily reconstructible, overall argumentation structure.

This is especially evident when users themselves clearly orient to the argumentative dimension of discourse. Such argumentative orientation is particularly easy in asynchronous and threaded discussions, where the pressure of turn-by-turn conversational dynamics is the weakest and the constantly available record of a developing discussion gives a clear overview of the relevant points. This kind of discussions, even if vulnerable to deviations from a neat conversation structure consisting of one-to-one adjacency, may be orderly expanding along argumentative lines. Therefore, a certain pattern can be distinguished with the application of the tools of argumentation theory, such as the pragma-dialectical analytic overview.

The following discussion (6.5) is a clear illustration of how arguments and criticisms can develop quite orderly in an otherwise convoluted polylogue. Discussion (6.5) took place in the last weeks of the 2008 presidential campaign in the United States. It was sparked by a campaign event in which Barack Obama during a meeting with residents of a neighbourhood in Ohio on 12 October 2008 (only three days before the final presidential debate) was asked by ‘Joe the Plumber’ about his tax plans as a future president. The ‘plumber’ suggested that the new tax proposals would negatively affect his plans to expand the small plumbing business he was working in. In response, among other things, Obama explained that tax will only be levied on businesses bringing more than $250,000 a year in revenue and added: ‘I think when you spread the wealth around, it’s
good for everybody.’22 The event quickly became a hotly debated campaign topic, and was mentioned a number of times during the last presidential debate by Obama’s Republican opponent John McCain.

(6.5) nobama thinks he is robin hood

http://groups.google.com/group/PoliticalForum/browse_frm/thread/e33251a56f53930f/d7781d4f78961e69?ve=1#d7781d4f78961e69

nobama thinks he is robin hood

1 mark Oct 15 2008
2 Travis Oct 15 2008
3 jenius Oct 15 2008
4 Lone Wolf Oct 15 2008
5 mark Oct 16 2008
6 Gaar Oct 16 2008 [direct response to 5 mark – ML]
7 mark Oct 16 2008
8 Gaar Oct 16 2008
9 Hollywood Oct 16 2008
10 rigsy03 Oct 16 2008
11 jenius Oct 16 2008 [direct response to 5 mark – ML]
12 mark Oct 16 2008
13 Hollywood Oct 16 2008
14 mark Oct 17 2008
15 Hollywood Oct 17 2008
16 rigsy03 Oct 17 2008
17 Kamakazee Oct 17 2008
18 Hollywood Oct 17 2008
19 Kamakazee Oct 17 2008
20 Hollywood Oct 17 2008
21 Lone Wolf Oct 21 2008
22 Lone Wolf Oct 21 2008
23 Cold Water Oct 16 2008
24 Hollywood Oct 16 2008 [direct response to 5 mark – ML]
25 rigsy03 Oct 17 2008
26 Hollywood Oct 17 2008
27 rigsy03 Oct 18 2008
29 Lone Wolf Oct 17 2008 [direct response to 5 mark – ML]
30 rigsy03 Oct 17 2008
31 rigsy03 Oct 17 2008
32 Zebnick Oct 17 2008
33 MANOJ Oct 21 2008
34 Lone Wolf Oct 21 2008
35 MANOJ Oct 21 2008
36 Lone Wolf Oct 21 2008
37 gerard.flmnr@googlemail.com Oct 21 2008
38 rigsy03 Oct 21 2008
39 Maax Well Oct 21 2008
40 Lone Wolf Oct 22 2008
41 Lone Wolf Oct 22 2008
42 Maax Well Oct 22 2008
43 Lone Wolf Oct 22 2008
44 Lone Wolf Oct 22 2008
45 Maax Well Oct 22 2008
46 rigsy03 Oct 18 2008

Discussion (6.5) is initiated by mark’s comment regarding Obama’s meeting with ‘Joe the Plumber.’ In this very context (the last days of the election campaign), a statement that
‘barry [Barack Obama – ML] is a socialist’ or, more precisely, that Obama endorses a ‘socialistic’ tax plan to ‘spread the wealth,’ can be directly reconstructed as an argument for a standpoint ‘One should not vote for Obama.’ After Travis’ affirmative remark in turn 2, the main difference of opinion in this discussion is made explicit in Jenius’ message no 3. Jenius advances a standpoint opposite to mark’s: one should ‘vote for Obama,’ because his policies promote ‘justice and equality for the poor and the middle class’ and, in particular, his tax proposal is ‘a good plan.’ Following Lone Wolf’s short and outspoken call for a third way in American politics (one should vote for neither Obama nor McCain, because ‘the Dems and the GOP are two sides of the same coin’) in turn 4, mark responds to Jenius’ challenge in message 5 by advancing arguments, thus opening the argumentation stage of the discussion (see figure 6.1).

Figure 6.1 Argumentation structure of mark’s argumentation in turn 5 (what is above the line is the main standpoint and the main argument reconstructed from his initiating message in turn 1)

(One should not vote for Obama) (~3. Jenius)

(Obama endorses bad ‘socialistic’ economic policies) (~3. Jenius)

1 Obama tax plan is not a good thing (~3. Jenius)

(1.1 It will destroy the backbone of our economy) 1.2 He is raising everyone’s taxes

(1.1.1 It will destroy small business) 1.1.1’ Small business is the backbone of our economy (~29. Lone Wolf)

1.1.1.1 Small businesses will either be forced to reduce staff, or close their doors

1.1.1.1.1 2/3 of those being taxed by barry are small businesses (~11. Jenius) 1.1.1.1.1’ If you tax businesses too much then they will be forced to reduce staff, or close their doors) (~11. Jenius)

1.1.1.1.1 Obama is going to raise taxes on those who make more than $250,000 a year & 1.1.1.1.1’ 2/3 of those earning more than $250,000 a year are small businesses (~24. Hollywood)
As an analytic overview of mark’s arguments in figure 6.1 shows, his short message contains a rather complex argumentation structure. The bone of contention here is the sub-standpoint (1) that Obama’s tax plan is not good, expressed by means of a rhetorical question of a sort (‘please tell me how this is a good thing’). This sub-standpoint is supported by a multiple structure consisting of two independent arguments: (1.1) Obama’s plan will lead to a collapse of the American economy and, apart from that, (1.2) it leads to a universal tax rise (an unexpressed premise for both of these arguments is that none of these is a good thing). The former argument is further supported by a long subordinative structure, in which many premises are left unexpressed (but are justifiably reconstructible on the basis of the entire discussion or general background knowledge). The latter argument is supported by a fairly simple coordinative structure: Obama is planning to raise taxes for small businesses (1.2.1a) and rich people (1.2.1b), so ‘he is raising everyones taxes’ (1.2).

As is clear from the discussion tree (p. 102), mark’s argumentation in post 5 is the focal point of the entire discussion. Mark’s post receives four direct responses: by Gaar (6), Jenius (11), Hollywood (24), and Lone Wolf (29). Each of these reactions opens a new sub-discussion: this is how discussion (6.5) splits into four simultaneously held sub-disputes regarding four different elements of mark’s argumentation put forward in turn no 5. Two of these sub-discussions (those triggered by Gaar and Jenius) include mark himself and other arguers. Two remaining ones are rather truncated dialogues with one single arguer (rigsy03).

Such a conversational situation may seem quite chaotic – it truly is a specimen of a polylogue characterised by fragmentation, and the resulting ‘lack of collective focusing and the existence of varied focuses’ (Marcoccia, 2004: 118). Yet, once reconstructed according to the pragma-dialectical method, the dispute can become more ordered than it superficially seems to be. Notably, all reactions to mark’s message are relevant argumentative criticisms.

Of special importance here are the opportunities that online discussions create for the antagonists who want to react critically to such a short, yet quite complex, piece of argumentation as in mark’s post 5. Indeed, thanks to its polylogual character, the discussion gives a chance to an unlimited number of users to cast their doubt, or straightforwardly attack, different aspects of argumentation without being limited by the temporal conversational dynamics of ordinary discussions. This means that antagonists do not have to fight for taking the floor over, nor are they limited in what they are willing to
criticise, and how they can do it (for example, in terms of time/space constraints, types of criticisms, stylistic presentation of criticisms). If Internet users actually exercise their right to participate and react critically, as is the case in discussion (6.5), then the protagonist, in this case mark, finds himself confronted with a multiplied, quadrupled in this case, antagonist. And by extension this also multiplies the protagonist’s conditional burden of proof – each relevant criticism triggers an obligation for the protagonist to respond.

The case of multiplied criticism seems to reveal an interesting characteristic of argumentative exchanges in polylogual online discussions. In online polylogues a collection of individual arguers can criticise distinct parts of complex argumentation advanced by another arguer, thereby forming what can be called ‘the collective antagonist.’ Individual arguers’ joining forces leading to a collective construction of argumentation is a well-known phenomenon in group discussion usually studied under the label of ‘tag-team argument’ (see Brashers & Meyers, 1989; Canary, Brossmann & Seibold, 1987). However, whereas the previous studies were focused on a joint production of complex argumentation structures in the context of group decision-making, what is evident in case (6.5) is a joint criticism of an argumentation structure in the context where decisions are not made. Moreover, while ‘tag-teams’ are analysed as neatly delineated groups with consistent, opposing standpoints to defend, ‘the collective antagonist’ here is collective only in the sense of the object of criticism. Gaar (turn 6), Jenius (turn 11), Hollywood (turn 24), and Lone Wolf (turn 29) team up to criticise mark’s argument advanced in turn 5, but otherwise they do not seem to be jointly defending any one consistent position. Gaar, in fact, similarly to Travis (turn 2) seems to be sympathetic with mark’s anti-Obama opinions; his criticism against the content of facts adduced by mark is thus more of a correction of the position he otherwise agrees with. By contrast, both Jenius and Hollywood are attacking mark from a pro-Obama point of view; in this sense, they create a regular ‘tag-team,’ which jointly produces complex argumentation (next to the complex criticism). Yet differently, Lone Wolf (as his online nickname suggests) argues both against pro- and anti-Obama position (‘the Dems and the GOP are two sides of the same coin’), 23 and thus stands alone, aligning with one of the main positions in the discussions only when criticisms are to be voiced. Despite such difficulties, there is some kind of regularity in the criticisms. What brings order to this rather complicated web of critical reactions is their target: the various elements of the same piece of complex argumentation.

23 ‘GOP’ stands for ‘Grand Old Party’ – a term commonly used to designate the Republican party.
‘The collective antagonist’ is thus not necessarily a ‘tag-team’ acting consistently towards one common purpose, but rather a certain strategic alliance that comes into being in a particular dialectical situation. However, even if this alliance is purely opportunistic and temporary (or even not strategic at all, but rather coincidental – the antagonists may be writing and publishing their varied criticisms online at the same time), it plays an important dialectical role. From the perspective of a critical discussion, such joint production of criticisms allows for the collectively ‘optimal use of the right to attack’ (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: 151-152). That means that there are abundant opportunities to react critically to one’s argumentation in as many ways as possible by as many people as possible: factors such as lack of individual ingenuity in launching a comprehensive criticism are of lesser importance in such cases.

Quite apart from the possibilities for collective criticism, in the course of online discussions it is quite easy for any (individual) antagonist to trace the whole discussion back and call into question any of the pieces of argumentation that might otherwise be accepted. Arguers can navigate through the discussion tree to see how exchanges of arguments and criticisms develop. Discussion trees (or threads), such as the one in discussion (6.5) (p. 102), are by no means equivalent to organised sequences of dialectical moves, that is, dialectical profiles (van Eemeren, Houtlosser & Snoeck Henkemans, 2007, 2008). Yet, they anchor the discussion in a traceable structure.

In short, in terms of means of argumentation and criticism, online discussions develop in critical exchanges among many pseudonymous participants who may team up into collectives of arguers; argumentative exchanges are organised into topical threads that may fork out into simultaneous lines of discussion developing in an argumentatively relevant way (see table 6.1).

### 6.5 Possible outcome

The pragma-dialectical theory discusses two general types of concluding argumentative disputes: resolution and settlement. Resolution comes about when arguers follow the rules of a critical discussion in the course of their argumentative exchange and, after (all) relevant arguments and critical reactions on the matter have been advanced in the argumentation stage of a discussion, they reach a reasonable agreement on whether it is the protagonist’s standpoint or the antagonist’s doubt that should hold. Resolution is thus not
only a normatively privileged manner of concluding disputes but, indeed, an ideal manner: it requires that the rules for a critical discussion are observed and that the higher-order conditions for holding reasonable discussions are in place. Therefore, critical resolution is not always reached in ordinary circumstances.

However, even if arguers fail in their attempts to critically resolve the difference of opinion between them on the merits, they may still conclude an argumentative discussion by means of settlement. Many social institutions have developed more or less sophisticated forms of bringing argumentation to an end, which stretch on a continuum from an angry frown of the Supreme Leader, to a majority vote after a debate between advocates in a public assembly, to an informed decision of an independent judge, after a diligent and studious examination of pros and cons of the case. Any of such manners of terminating a dispute is seen by the pragma-dialectical theory as settlement, because a dispute is then not necessarily resolved by means of a reasonable, critical discussion, but settled by some external force which can be only partly influenced by the power of arguments (that is to say that in favourable circumstances a settlement may coincide with a critical resolution).

As described in Chapter 4, different ways of settling disputes come into the description of argumentative activity types as the outcome parameter. This parameter may be very precisely defined and explicitly established (as in a legal trial) or defined somewhat loosely and established only implicitly (as in a presidential debate where opinion polls are used to gauge who is the winner of a debate). In any case the outcome of a discussion should be conducive to realising the institutional goal of a given type of activity and, at a more general level, to realising the institutional point of the genre of communicative activity at large.

The rules of the online discussion fora do not support, let alone guarantee, any kind of a conclusion of discussions. This means that there is no institutionally prescribed way of settling disputes in this very type of argumentative activity. Rather, discussions simply fade away without any explicit conclusive results, as soon as users lose their interest in them – the principle of novelty is very important on the Internet. Moreover, since online discussions are open-ended, participants to these discussions are by no means obliged, or even expected, to come to any sort of explicitly pronounced decision or agreement on the matters discussed. Again, this is in sharp contrast to the computer-mediated Group Decision Support Systems analysed by Aakhus (1999, 2002a): the goal of one type of design of such systems is to ‘funnel’ the multi-party argumentative discussion ‘into a flow from broad differences toward an acceptable conclusion.’ Special functionalities—such as
evaluating arguments by voting—are available to users of GDSSs in order to facilitate an efficient, time-constrained collective decision-making.

Neither such functionalities, nor even time constraints, are programmed into the online discussions analysed here. In result, there is always room for a new argument or a new critical reaction to an argument, and any form of coming to a final conclusion may be infinitely postponed. Of course, discussants may at a certain point explicitly terminate their line of argumentation one way or another, but this would be an empirical incidence rather than an institutional requirement. Moreover, some actually occurring ways of terminating (online) discussions, such as a unilateral withdrawal from conversation (which may be in certain cases understood as a tacit agreement), cannot be seen as an outcome in terms of a pragma-dialectical parameter of an argumentative activity type. An ‘outcome’ pertains to a conventionally expected (or even institutionally prescribed) and jointly reached, externalised (or at least externalisable) result of the main argumentative discussion in the entire activity (rather than a result of a sub-discussion affecting a part of an activity).

This lack of a conventionally established outcome has been viewed as an unwelcome characteristic of online discussions. Critics have pointed out that political discussions which are not explicitly concluded, such as online discussions studied here, do not bring about any concrete institutional results and are thus futile and pointless. Analysts such as Davis (1999) and Wilhelm (1998, 2000) bemoaned online discussions’ incapacity to secure ‘intersubjective agreement’ leading to ‘collective action’ (Wilhelm, 1998: 316). However, these critics apply a decision-making paradigm or, as they call it, a ‘problem-solving understanding of conversation […] geared towards articulation of common ends’ (Wilhelm, 1998: 329), as a model for evaluation. As the discussion in Chapter 5 shows, this model should not be applied to informal political online discussions, since they are not expected to facilitate decision-making but informal opinion-formation. In other words, many political scientists criticise this type of discussions for what they are not meant to be.

From the perspective of the model for a critical discussion one may ask, however, if paradoxically the lack of external pressure on having the discussion ended in a prescribed way and limited time may enable a settlement that would be based mainly, or even solely, on argumentative considerations and thus approximate an ideal resolution.

In order to answer the question regarding the outcome of online discussions, one may draw on empirical analyses of the ‘sequential organization of verbal conflict closings’ in other ordinary contexts of argumentation, which similarly leave it to participants to decide how to end an exchange of arguments. Vuchinich (1990), for example, studied an
activity type of a family dinner. His results are striking – 66% of the disputes over family dinner table ended in a stand-off, while only 9% are concluded with a compromise (Vuchinich, 1990: 135). To account for such a result, Vuchinich approaches verbal conflicts as activities consisting of two ‘layers of meaning’ – one of them being ‘the management of consensus,’ that is, the mutual attempts to bring the arguers into a state of ‘agreement on matters of fact, judgement, obligation, rights, attitude, feeling and so on,’ and the other one being ‘the logic of winning and losing’ (Vuchinich, 1990: 119). The interplay between the two makes conflict-resolution a rather complicated affair:

While the management of consensus is central to the organization of conflict terminations, such conflicts carry another layer of meaning which is equally important. That is the logic of winning and losing.[…]

Once a conflict is under way, the participants know that winners and losers may be established. In fact, participants usually strive to win conflicts and avoid losing them. Social standing as well as self esteem are at stake in verbal conflicts so there is much to be gained by winning. […] While the establishment of winners and losers is a possible ending for conflict it is by no means inevitable. Conflicts can end in a stand-off in which the conflict dissipates. (Vuchinich, 1990: 119-120)

In an informal context of a family dinner discussion Vuchinich distinguishes five kinds of ‘termination formats’: submission to opponent, dominant third-party intervention, compromise, stand-off, and withdrawal. Of these, compromise and submission are the ones most studied. Still, compromise is often difficult as it requires a careful balancing of concessions by both parties, whereas submission is socially uneasy as it may have serious negative consequences for the face of the submitting party (the loser of an argument). Therefore, in the situation where a third-party adjudicator is not present, the ‘easiest’ way of terminating argumentation in informal contexts is a stand-off (Vuchinich, 1990: 134-135). A stand-off does not require the sophistication of reaching a compromise and, above all, it prevents one of the arguers from ‘submissively’ agreeing with the standpoint of the other, that is, from losing the argumentative exchange. Stand-offs arise when arguers, in

24 Vuchinich (1990: 130) defines a stand-off in the following way: ‘When a conflict terminates with participants continuing to maintain opposing positions, with neither submitting, we call it a stand-off.’

25 It is revealing to notice the analogy between these forms of informal conflict termination described by Vuchinich, and the basic types of settlement in various genres of communicative activity types: ‘dominant third-party intervention’ is constitutive of all the forms of adjudication as well as, in a quite different sense, in deliberation, where it is the vote of the third-party audience that ultimately decides on the winner of the dispute. ‘Compromise’ is of course a preferred outcome of ‘negotiation’, but also of various forms of ‘facilitation’, which additionally requires the presence of the third party. ‘Submission to opponent’ may be a quite common means of settling disputes in argumentative activity types characterized by strong disparities in knowledge or social status, such as doctor-patient consultation.
order to avoid loss, persistently maintain their positions by constantly trying to get in the ‘last word.’ Such a position of being the last to have something to tell ‘does not win a conflict but it does show that you haven’t given in or submitted’ (Vuchinich, 1990: 133). An undesirable consequence of aiming at such a possible strategic gain is that ‘stand-offs could continue indefinitely with opponents trying to get in the last word’ (Vuchinich, 1990: 135). In normal circumstances, however, this cannot really happen because the parties to a dispute have to go on with their daily activities – hence they may simply terminate the (unresolved) dispute by changing the topic or moving to another activity, such as doing the dishes in the case of the activity type of a family dinner.

‘The logic of winning and losing,’ so described in terms of conversational analysis, seems to apply to the contexts of online discussions. Some reservations are, however, in place. One of them is that face concerns and other predicaments of socially embedded arguers are to a large extent annulled in the anonymous context of online disputes: a win should thus be of lesser social magnitude, while a loss should not be so devastating. Yet, with online reputation being an important factor in many online discussion groups (Anthony, Smith & Williamson, 2009; Donath, 1999; Poor, 2005), pseudonymous arguers may still be unwilling to voluntarily admit their defeat. In this case, however, contrary to everyday offline discussions, ‘stand-offs could continue indefinitely with opponents trying to get in the last word,’ because time-constraints do not apply to online discussions – they may last for days or even weeks, as long as there is somebody who wants to ‘get in the last word.’ Moreover, discussants have nowhere else to go – it is the talking that constitutes the online group, so turning to some other activity in order to simply terminate a difficult dispute is no option. Even the strategy of changing the topic of a dispute, and thus abandoning the intractable discussion by shifting to a more comfortable one, may be unattainable – it is in the end one of the principles of online discussions that they develop in topical threads, and topical relevance seems to be one of the few seriously taken rules of the netiquette. At the same time, even if online arguers are willing to admit that arguments of the opposing party are overwhelming and that their position is untenable, they may be unable to conclude the discussion anyway. There are at least two reasons for that.

The first reason is that online discussions often constitute complex polylogues, in which multiple arguers team up to take opposing sides or individually start new confrontations and thus open new lines of argument, etc. Establishing the result of such a polylogue may be a very difficult undertaking, especially when compared to a neat dialectical game between two clearly delineated parties. Yet, many types or activity,
especially those in a democratic political system, are in fact such polylogues—a parliamentary debate is a most obvious example—and participants to such activities do reach a stage at which outcomes are determined, usually by majority voting.

The second reason is the lack of temporal linearity—another important feature of online polylogues. In the system of threaded asynchronous discussions no one can say for sure where the centre of a given discussion is at the moment. Since sub-threads may develop simultaneously, it may be the case that while some group of arguers is closing discussion on a given sub-standpoint, some other group is anywhere but close to a conclusion. This may happen especially when different sub-standpoints are discussed and different arguments and critical reactions are advanced. The lack of any moderator who links all developing sub-threads back to the main standpoint discussed makes it virtually impossible to have the entire discussion settled.

To summarise—online discussions are activities with no institutionally prescribed concluding procedures. Therefore, no outcome of discussions has to be explicitly established. Moreover, an outcome may be difficult to establish, firstly, because of general problems in acknowledging an argumentative defeat and, secondly, because of special problems of the design of online discussions, related primarily to their in-principle open-endedness, but also polylogicity, lack of temporal linearity and proper moderation. Still, as explained in Chapter 5, it may be assumed that active participants as well as—to a lesser degree—readers of such discussions confronted with a critically tested position may become more informed and critical on matters of public concern. Hence, the institutional goal of online political discussions is realised when the outcome amounts to tacit (privately held) resolution of a difference of opinion, as long as this outcome is further submitted to critical testing (see table 6.1).
Table 6.1 Characterisation of Internet political discussion forums as an argumentative activity type  
(see van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2005: 79; van Eemeren, 2010: Ch. 5)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>confrontation stage</th>
<th>opening stage</th>
<th>argumentation stage</th>
<th>concluding stage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>genre of communicative activity types</strong></td>
<td><strong>initial situation</strong></td>
<td><strong>procedural and material starting points</strong></td>
<td><strong>means of argumentation and criticism</strong></td>
<td><strong>possible outcome</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deliberation</td>
<td>mixed disagreement; decision up to a non-interactive 3rd party audience</td>
<td>largely implicit intersubjective rules; explicit and implicit concessions on both sides</td>
<td>argumentation defending incompatible standpoints in critical exchanges</td>
<td>resolution difference of opinion for (part of) 3rd party audience (or confirmed return to initial situation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online political forum discussions</td>
<td>expected mixed or non-mixed disagreement with respect to political opinions; no decision to be taken (open-ended);</td>
<td>special design of computer-mediated discourse; explicit regulative rules of a particular forum and implicit general netiquette; material starting points available online, characterised by ideological divisions</td>
<td>argumentation defending incompatible standpoints in highly critical exchanges, among many pseudonymous participants, who may team up into collectives of arguers; organised into topical threads</td>
<td>no outcome explicitly or necessarily established; tacit resolution of difference of opinion possible for (part of) 3rd party audience (or return to initial situation)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>