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

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Chapter 7

Constraints on critical reactions in Internet political discussion forums

7.1 Describing critical reactions in an ideal procedure and in actual discussions

The goal of this chapter is to find out how the constraints of the argumentative activity type of online political discussion forums may affect arguers’ strategic manoeuvring in reacting critically to their opponents’ arguments. Taking the perspective of strategic manoeuvring means that what has to be examined are, on the one hand, the reasonable dialectical goals and means of reacting critically in an ideal critical discussion and, on the other hand, the rhetorical conditions under which critical reactions are actually performed in online discussions. By analysing the dialectical and rhetorical side of critical reactions, this chapter will provide an answer to the second analytic question of the study, that is, to Question 1.1: What kind of restrictions do online political discussion forums impose on and what kind of opportunities do they create for reacting critically to argumentation?

As described in Chapter 4, attention to the critical element of argumentation is one of the key features of the pragma-dialectical theory. The ideal dialectical discussion described by pragma-dialecticians is ‘critical,’ because it provides a specification of the ideas of critical rationalism in the domain of argumentation: according to the rules of the model, the overall structure of the protagonist’s argumentation depends directly on the type and thoroughness of the antagonist’s critical reactions. Hence, in the pragma-dialectical view, a clear overview of the exact functions and ways of reacting critically in a dialectical procedure is crucial to understanding argumentation at large.

At the same time, owing to the general institutional goal of online discussions and their specific constraints, the phenomenon of critical reactions is central to this argumentative activity type. Online political discussions studied here are, first and foremost, open-ended activities; this allows for an uninhibited performance of critical reactions, in both type and number. Open-endedness is directly tied to the institutional
goal—that is: informal political opinion-formation—that underlies the design of online discussion forums. In realising this goal there is no pressing need for achieving concrete results and thus curbing the criticisms for the sake of constructive movement towards a timely decision. Instead, an ongoing, open-ended process of critical argumentative exchanges is possible (see Chapter 5).

Related to the institutional goal of the activity type of online political forum discussions are their specific features (see Chapter 6). The highly confrontational character of the initial situation (section 6.2) and the lack of need for an explicitly established outcome (section 6.5) both are crucial to affording critical forms of argumentative behaviour. Most directly affecting the performance of critical reactions are, however, the features concerning the opening and argumentation stage of the activity type of online forum discussions (sections 6.3 and 6.4). These features—such as the presence of a multiple audience, a small number of explicit material and procedural starting points, availability of the record of exchanges—can be approached as having impact on the three aspects of strategic manoeuvring distinguished in pragma-dialectics: the adaptation to the audience demand, the selection from the topical potential of argumentation, and the choice of presentational devices.

The chapter will proceed in two steps. First, the concept of critical reactions in the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation will be discussed with the help of notions such as *felicity conditions* for the speech act of argumentation and a *dialectical profile* of the argumentation stage of a critical discussion (section 7.2). In particular, basic types and dialectical functions of critical reactions in an ideal critical discussion will be examined. Second, the ways in which the constraints of online discussions may influence three aspects of the antagonist’s strategic manoeuvring in reacting critically will be analysed (section 7.3).

### 7.2 Critical reactions in the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation

Pragma-dialectics provides a clear account of the role criticisms play in argumentative discussions. As an intrinsically dialectical theory it approaches argumentation as a part of a discursive procedure—a critical discussion—consisting, most crucially, of a series of attacks by an antagonist and defences by a protagonist pertaining to a certain disputed standpoint. In each of the stages of a critical discussion the protagonist’s speech acts are met with doubts or criticisms of the antagonist (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984: 85-93;
In the first place (see section 6.2) the model stipulates that the protagonist can meaningfully argue for a certain standpoint only after the antagonist refuses to accept the standpoint in the confrontation stage, either by casting doubt on it or by advancing an opposite standpoint. Further, in the opening stage—apart from negotiating common starting points and discussion roles—the arguer that becomes the antagonist challenges the protagonist to defend his standpoint. In the argumentation stage, the antagonist may refuse to accept arguments advanced by the protagonist in support of the disputed standpoint, and request further argumentation. In the concluding stage, the antagonist can express a non-acceptance of the result of a discussion proposed by the protagonist. Moreover, in all the stages, the antagonist can request a language usage declarative such as a definition, clarification, etc.

In this chapter the analysis of the antagonist’s speech acts as critical reactions is focused on the argumentation stage because (the empirical counterpart of) this stage is crucial to voicing criticisms in actual argumentative discussions. The role of the antagonist as a ‘reasonable critic’ is to be fulfilled in the process of a critical testing of the protagonist’s argumentation supporting a disputed standpoint, and this process takes place at the argumentation stage. The confrontation and opening stage, however indispensable in the process of argumentation, are meant to provide a necessary backdrop against which the critical testing can proceed. In the concluding stage, arguers are merely expected to jointly confirm the result of critical exchanges taking place at the argumentation stage.

In order to identify the types of critical reactions the antagonist may perform at the argumentation stage of a critical discussion, one has to examine on which grounds the antagonist may refuse to accept the protagonist’s argumentation. A natural point of departure for doing this is the definition of a speech act of argumentation – the basic complex move performed by the protagonist at the argumentation stage. As discussed in Chapter 4, the pragmatic core of pragma-dialectics lies in approaching argumentation as an ‘illocutionary act complex,’ i.e., as a complex speech act with a set of unique, conventionally required ‘felicity conditions.’ According to van Eemeren and Grootendorst

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1 In a strict sense, one cannot speak about the protagonist and the antagonist in the confrontation stage of a critical discussion. Arguers take on these roles only in the opening stage, after deciding to submit the standpoint to critical testing altogether (there is no obligation to argue).

2 As well as deciding whether a reasonable argumentative discussion should, and indeed can, take place in the given circumstances.
(1982: 3-11; 1984: 42-46), the speech act of pro-argumentation can be defined in terms of felicity conditions in the following way:

1. The speaker has put forward a series of assertions $S_1, S_2, \ldots, S_n$ in which propositions are expressed. (Propositional content condition)

2. Advancing $S_1, S_2, \ldots, S_n$ counts as an attempt by the speaker to justify an expressed opinion $O$ to the listener's satisfaction, i.e., to convince the listener of the acceptability of $O$. (Essential condition)

3. The speaker believes that: (a) the listener does not (or may not) accept $O$; (b) the listener does (or will) accept $S_1, S_2, \ldots, S_n$; (c) the listener will accept $S_1, S_2, \ldots, S_n$ as justification of $O$. (Preparatory conditions)

4. The speaker believes that: (a) $O$ is acceptable; (b) $S_1, S_2, \ldots, S_n$ are acceptable; (c) $S_1, S_2, \ldots, S_n$ justify $O$. (Sincerity conditions)

For the purpose of distinguishing the basic types of critical reactions against the speech act of argumentation, the preparatory conditions (3a)-(3c) (and the mirror-view sincerity conditions (4a)-(4c)) are of special relevance. In terms of a critical discussion, the preliminary condition (3a) is established at the confrontation stage, whereas conditions (3b) and (3c) are to be tested at the argumentation stage through an exchange of arguments and criticisms (on the basis of the prior agreements made at the opening stage). The performance of the basic moves at the argumentation stage is regulated by rule 6 of the model for a critical discussion (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: 144):

**Rule 6**

a. The protagonist may always defend the standpoint that he adopts in the initial difference of opinion or in a sub-difference of opinion by performing a complex speech act of argumentation, which then counts as a provisional defense of this standpoint.

b. The antagonist may always attack a standpoint by calling into question the propositional content or the justificatory or refutatory force of the argumentation.

c. The protagonist and the antagonist may not defend or attack standpoints in any other way.

This rule—precisely, its point (b)—provides a very basic stipulation of the types of critical reactions available to the antagonist at the argumentation stage of a critical discussion. Based on the felicity conditions for the speech act of argumentation, one can distinguish

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3 Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984: 40-42) distinguish between 'recognition' (identity) and 'correctness' conditions for the performance of speech acts. According to them, propositional content and essential condition can be seen as fundamental identity conditions since the given speech act cannot be conventionally identified as the act intended by the speaker if both these conditions are not jointly fulfilled. By contrast, the fulfillment of preparatory and sincerity conditions guarantees a conventionally correct performance of a speech act. This distinction is crucial here since critical reactions (in the sense propounded here) pertain to a situation when a speech act is identified as argumentation (through its propositional content and essential condition), but not (immediately) accepted. The refusal to accept the speech act is thus based on the listener’s reservations regarding preparatory or sincerity conditions.
two basic kinds of relevant critical reactions: the attack on the propositional content and on the justificatory (or refutatory) force of argumentation. The antagonist can, thus, refuse to accept the protagonist’s standpoint: (1) on the basis of the argumentation backing the standpoint containing intersubjectively unacceptable (wrong, inaccurate, unverified, or otherwise flawed) information or value judgments; or (2) on the basis of the argumentation inadequately supporting the standpoint by a wrong application of one of the informal argument schemes or formal patterns of a logical system used in a given dispute.

Similar, but by no means identical, distinctions have been proposed by contemporary argumentation scholars from their own theoretical perspectives. None of these perspectives, however, consistently combines the pragmatic attentiveness to actual language use with the dialectical view on argumentation. At the same time, the integration of pragmatic and dialectical concerns has a distinctive advantage: it allows us to see the dynamics of critical reactions against the speech act of argumentation in a broader dialectical procedure, what provides an additional theoretical insight into a reasonable progress of criticisms. In particular, one can trace the dialectical objectives and routes that reasonable arguers can follow in their exchanges of arguments and critical reactions. This, further, makes it possible to clearly define the rhetorical counterparts of the dialectical objectives and to study the arguers’ efforts to balance these two objectives in their strategic manoeuvring in concrete types of argumentative activity, such as online discussion forums.

To start with, the dialectical goal of the argumentation stage of a critical discussion is to critically test the argumentation supporting the protagonist’s standpoint by following the intersubjective procedures stipulated for this stage in accordance with the ideal norms of critical reasonableness. This general goal is realised by achieving two sub-goals to which the two main types of critical reactions distinguished above are related. The first dialectical sub-goal is to test the acceptability (tenability) of the propositional content of argumentation, that is, to check if the propositions expressed in arguments can be

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4 To give just three different examples of conceptualising the abstract distinction between the criticisms against the content and the force of argumentation: in Toulmin’s model one may either attack ‘datum’ or ‘warrant’ supporting the ‘claim’ (Toulmin, 2003 [1958]; Ch. 3); Krabbe, after Naess, distinguishes between ‘tenability’ and ‘connection’ criticism (Krabbe, 1987, 1992). Johnson and Blair propose three basic kinds of critical reactions: those regarding acceptability, relevance, and sufficiency of arguments in respect of a given standpoint (see Blair, 2007, for an updated account, and Snoeck Henkemans, 1992, for a pragma-dialectical analysis). For the most recent theorising about the concept of argumentative objections see: Johnson, 2008; Krabbe, 2007a; van Laar, 2009; Walton, 2009. In these studies various more elaborate typologies of critical reactions in argumentative discussions are proposed. For example, Krabbe (2007a) distinguished between seven main types of critical reactions: request for clarification, pure challenge, bound challenge, exposure of flaws, rejection, charge of fallacy, personal attack.
legitimately used in the actual context of a discussion. The second dialectical sub-goal is to test the justificatory potential of the argumentation advanced in support of the standpoint, that is to examine the contextual correctness of the application of argument schemes.5

The best way to give a detailed account of how critical reactions function to realise these two sub-goals at the argumentation stage of a critical discussion, and of how they can be strategically manoeuvred with, is to consider them as particular steps in a dialectical profile. Dialectical profile, as defined by van Eemeren, Houtlosser and Snoeck Henkemans (2007: 18), is ‘a specification of the sequential pattern of the moves that the parties are allowed to make, or should make, in a particular stage or sub-stage of a critical discussion in order to realise a particular dialectical goal.’ Dialectical profiles for various (sub-)stages of a critical discussion are a useful elaboration of the general model. The model for a critical discussion does not define a reasonable dialectical procedure in an algorithmic, step-by-step manner. The rules of discussion are general: they prescribe certain reasonable dialectical moves that can (or must) be taken in the four stages and various sub-stages. These (sub-)stages comprise dialectical tasks and sub-tasks which may extend recursively and hence cannot be stipulated in a simple A-to-Z fashion.6 Moreover, some moves are optional: at many points it is up to the participants to decide which route to take. This gives arguers a chance to take these options which are strategically most beneficial to them.

The argumentation stage is particularly complex. Depending on the details of the protagonist’s argumentation and the thoroughness of the antagonist’s critical reacting, it can extend to prolonged dialectical exchanges in which various elements of the protagonist’s argumentation are tested. Therefore, the dialectical profile for the argumentation stage presented below is in fact a ‘core profile,’ that is, a profile that comprises the basic dialectically relevant moves, without specifying in all detail how the discussions can further develop (see van Eemeren, Houtlosser & Snoeck Henkemans, 2007). In figure 7.1 all the moves and procedures stipulated for the argumentation stage in the rules of the model for a critical discussion are included.7

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5 This, of course, applies only to informal argumentation which is not claimed to be formally valid in accordance with the standards stipulated in one of the logical systems. As defined by van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992a: 96), an argument scheme is ‘a more or less conventionalized way of representing the relation between what is stated in the argument and what is stated in the standpoint.’

6 Simple repetitions of the same speech acts are disallowed in a critical discussion (by rule 13, see van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: 153-154). Recursiveness means that, for instance at the argumentation stage, additions of new criticisms and new arguments may lead to opening new sub-discussions, sub-sub-discussions, etc.

7 The only exemption being the ‘intersubjective inference procedure’ aimed at testing the formal validity of logical patterns of reasoning (see van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: 148). One of the reasons for this
Figure 7.1 Core dialectical profile for the argumentation stage of a critical discussion

1. P: 1. ARG1 & → Stp.
2. A: 1. ARG1 (Is that so?) 2. ARG1 & → Stp. (So what?)
   IEP
   IIP
   ANI
   S-D ....
4. A: 1. CS(ARG1) 2. RS(ARG1) 3. RS(ARG1) & → ARG1 4. AS 5. OK but ARG1
5. P: ... ... ... (see 3.4) ... 1. ASₐₐₜ
   (establish content CS) (establish content RS) (establish AS – go to 3.4 or 4.5)
6. A: (see 4.4 or 4.5) 1. ASₐₐₜ 2. OK but ASₐₐₜ
7. P (etc.) ... 1. CA(ASₐₐₜ)
   (establish ASₐₐₜ – go to 3.4 or 6.2)
8. A 1. (critical questions)

P – Protagonist
A – Antagonist
ARG – argument
AS – argument scheme
ASₐₐₜ – argument scheme used in the given argumentative activity type
Stp. – Standpoint
S-Stp. – Sub-standpoint
→ – implies
? – doubt
- – opposite
/ – with regards to
CS – commitment store (so: CS(ARG1) means: ARG1 belongs to your commitment store)
RS – respectable source (so: RS(ARG1) means: ARG1 is provided by a respectable source)
CA – correctly applied (so: ?/CA(ASₐₐₜ) means: is the argument scheme correctly applied in this
argumenative activity type?)
IIP – intersubjective identification procedure
ANI – adding new information
S-D – sub-discussion
IEP – intersubjective explicitization procedure
ITP – intersubjective testing procedure

exclusion is that such procedure would in general run similarly to the intersubjective testing procedure (steps
3.4-etc. in figure 7.1), but the point of discussion would not be informal schemes but formal logical patterns.
For simplicity’s sake, all agreements (‘OK’ in the profile) are left out. That is because in each case:
If the antagonist says ‘OK’ at any point – the argument is defended in the disputed aspect; the antagonist has
to accept the standpoint (end of argumentation stage) or move to critical reactions against a different aspect.
If the protagonist says ‘OK’ at any point – the disputed argument is refuted: the protagonist has to give up the
standpoint (end of argumentation stage) or advance multiple argumentation.
Apart from that, at every point, both the protagonist and the antagonist can request or provide a language
usage declarative (definition, clarification, etc.)

Using the following example,\(^8\) the working of this profile is described below.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Stp.:} & \quad \text{All Americans should be trained and fully armed, all the time.} \\
\text{ARG1:} & \quad \text{Every Swiss has a fully automatic “assault” weapon in home.} \\
\text{(AS:)} & \quad \text{Switzerland is similar to the US.}
\end{align*}
\]

In step (1.1) (a point of departure for the argumentation stage) the protagonist puts forward
an argument (ARG1: ‘Every Swiss has a fully automatic “assault” weapon in home’) in
support of his standpoint (Stp: ‘All Americans should be trained and fully armed, all the
time’). To this, as discussed above, the antagonist can react in two basic ways: (2.1) he can
ask about the propositional content of the argument ARG1 (is that so?), or (2.2) about the
justificatory potential of the argument in relation to the standpoint (so what?). Depending
on the antagonist’s first critical reaction two main dialectical routes may develop.

The first main dialectical route starts at (2.1) and concerns the acceptability of the
propositional content of the argument (ARG1). Responding to the criticism of the
propositional content of his argument (2.1: ?/ARG1), the protagonist has three options,
leading to three separate dialectical routes:

(3.1) He can start the so called \textit{intersubjective identification procedure} by claiming that the
propositional content of the questioned argument actually belongs to the antagonist’s
commitment store (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: 145-146). The protagonist claims,
in other words, that the antagonist himself accepted the argument as a material starting
point (shared premise) earlier at the opening stage or conceded the content of the argument
at the argumentation stage. This can be questioned by the antagonist further in 4.1
(?/CS(ARG1)) – in result, a sub-discussion may develop in which the content of the
commitment store has to be established. If it is to be reasonable in actual circumstances,
this discussion requires access to the previous contributions of the arguers and a proper

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\(^8\) The argumentation and critical reactions used in the examples in this section are based on an actual
discussion held in Google Groups in November 2008 and entitled ‘Freedom to bear arms’:
http://groups.google.com/group/abc_politics_forum/browse_frm/thread/a596b5ac9e87dc84?hl=en
For the sake of clarity of illustration, some actual contributions have been simplified or adjusted.
reconstruction of them (otherwise, a stalemate stemming from futile ‘I never said that!’ – ‘yes, you did!’ exchanges is possible).

An example of this route may look like this:

A: 2.1  Is that so? Is it really the case that the Swiss are armed to the teeth?  

P: 3.1  Yes, you said it yourself!  

A: 4.1  Did I? Can you quote any of my posts on this forum in which I said something like this?

(3.2) The protagonist can add new information to a discussion by claiming that the propositional content of the argument is confirmed by a certain respectable (reliable, recognised) source (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: 146-147). A respectable source is a source agreed by the arguers upfront at the opening stage (see van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2003b: 291) or a source accepted institutionally in a given argumentative activity type (rulings of the Supreme Court in a criminal trial, a textbook in a classroom discussion, etc.).

9 To this, the antagonist can react in two ways: In the first place (4.2), he can ask if the source indeed contains the information in question (?/RS(ARG1)). In result, a sub-discussion may develop in which the content of the information included in the source has to be established. Similarly to above, for this sub-discussion to yield reasonable results in actual circumstances, access to the source and a proper reconstruction of its content are required (otherwise, it may end up in a futile dispute on the would-be pronouncements of the source). In the second place (4.3), the antagonist can contest the very acceptability of the source (which the protagonist presents as respectable) in the context of discussion (?/RS(ARG1) & → ARG1). Since this is in fact a criticism regarding the acceptability of the argument scheme from authority (a subtype of a symptomatic scheme), this question may lead to a sub-discussion which, if fully externalized, develops in general according to the route 2.2-3.4-4.4-etc. In this case, however, it is clear from the beginning that the discussion is a concrete substitution instance of the general route concerning a specific argument from authority. Therefore, for example, critical questions asked by the antagonist (8.1-etc.) will be critical questions tailored to the authority scheme (see, e.g., Walton, 1989: 60).

Using the above example, the first three steps of this route are as follows:

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9 See van Eemeren, 2010: Ch. 8 for the notion of ‘contextual commitments.’
A: 2.1 Is that so? Is it really the case that the Swiss are armed to the teeth?  

P: 3.2 Yes, Wikipedia says so!  

A: 4.2 Can you give me a link to / quote the relevant article in Wikipedia? or  

A: 4.3 Can Wikipedia be trusted on these matters?  

(3.3) The protagonist can open a sub-discussion by advancing a sub-argument (ARG1.1) that supports the propositional content of the main argument (ARG1). In this case, the contested propositional content of ARG1 becomes a propositional content of a sub-standpoint (S-Stp.), that has to be defended in a new critical sub-discussion. This discussion can develop recursively taking all the possible routes from the point 1.1. Continuing our example:  

A: 2.1 Is that so? Is it really the case that the Swiss are armed to the teeth?  

P: 3.3 Yes the Swiss are armed to the teeth because it is required by their laws.  

(AR1.1 & → ARG1 (S-Stp.))

In accordance with rule 7 for a critical discussion, if any of these three routes is completed in the protagonist’s favour, then ‘the protagonist has successfully defended the propositional content of a complex speech act of argumentation against an attack by the antagonist’ (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: 147). However, if a certain procedure does not lead to a successful defence of the content of argumentation, the protagonist may attempt to still defend it by means of the other two procedures. That means that even though the three procedures are in principle alternative ways of completing the same task (checking the acceptability of the propositional content of argumentation), they can be also taken in a sequence. Only after all of the procedures are finished with the antagonist’s win, is the ARG1 defeated. Using our example:  

A: 2.1 Is that so? Is it really the case that the Swiss are armed to the teeth?  

P: 3.1 Yes, you said it yourself!  

A: 4.1 Did I? Can you quote any of my posts on this forum in which I said something like this?  

10 The intersubjective identification procedure and adding new information can also be seen as sub-discussions. However, since they pertain to specific sub-tasks at the argumentation stage, they have a special status. In contrast to them, instead of relying on the antagonist’s commitments or an authoritative source, in the dialectical route starting from (3.3), the protagonist goes on with his own attempt to defend ARG1. This sub-discussion engenders a subordinative argumentation structure (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992a: 82-85; Snoeck Henkemans, 1992: Ch. 4).  

11 As van Eemeren & Grootendorst (2004: 147) stipulate: ‘This sub-discussion has to be conducted in accordance with the same premises and the same discussion rules accepted in the original discussion.’
P: 3.2 Well, I can’t access your previous posts. But that doesn’t matter: Wikipedia says so! (RS(ARG1))
A: 4.2 Can you give me a link to or quote the relevant article in Wikipedia? (?/RS(ARG1))
P: 3.3 I cannot find a Wiki link… However, just think of it – the Swiss are armed to the teeth, because it is required by their laws. Every Swiss man has to go through military training after which he keeps a fully automatic “assault” weapon and sufficient ammunition in his home. (ARG1.1 & → ARG1 (S-Stp.))

In sum, when it comes to the acceptability of the propositional content of argumentation, the antagonist can, in the first place, question the content of the argumentation in general, and then (depending on the protagonist’s response to this first question) he can react critically in a specific manner by: (a) questioning the content of the commitment store attributed to him by the protagonist, (b) questioning the content of the source of information adduced by the protagonist, (c) questioning the reliability of the source, or (d) questioning the content of sub-argumentation in a sub-discussion.

The second main dialectical route starts at point (2.2: ?/ARG1 & → Stp.), and it is taken to realise the task of testing the justificatory potential of argumentation. In a fully externalised discussion, whenever parts of the protagonist’s argumentation are unexpressed, it starts with the intersubjective explicitization procedure in which the argument scheme (AS) that connects the argument (ARG1) to the standpoint (Stp.) is made explicit (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: 148-149). After the protagonist reconstructs the (previously unexpressed) argument scheme (3.4: ARG1 & AS → Stp), the antagonist can react critically in two ways:

First, he can doubt that the reconstruction is correct (4.4: ?/AS). In this case a sub-discussion develops in which the correct reconstruction has to be jointly established by the protagonist and the antagonist. If the arguers cannot agree on a mutually acceptable reconstruction of the AS, then the ARG1 is (for the time being) irrelevant to the Stp. This has severe consequences for the protagonist, who either has to propose another reconstruction of a scheme (by coming back to (3.4)), or give up the argument altogether. If the arguers do agree on a scheme (thus completing the intersubjective explicitization

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12 Even though either the standpoint itself or the argument may also be left unexpressed, while the argument scheme is made explicit, in ordinary argumentation it is usually the argument scheme that remains implicit.
13 Blair (2007: 37), using different terminology, defines such lack of ‘probative’ relevance as a contextually determined situation in which ‘no defensible warrant [AS - ML] can be found linking the suspect premise [ARG - ML] to the conclusion [Stp – ML].’ See also Blair (1992).
procedure) they can move on to the step (4.5). An illustration of the first three steps in this route may look like this:

A: 2.2  So what? Does Swiss reality have anything to do with American policies?  

P: 3.4  Yes, it does: Switzerland is similar to the US.

A: 4.4  But doesn’t your argument imply something stronger, like ‘whatever Switzerland does is great and we Americans should follow it’?

Second, the antagonist can agree on the reconstruction but doubt whether the argument scheme is admissible in the argumentative activity type in which the discussion takes place (4.5: OK but ?/AS\textsubscript{AAT}). In this case the antagonist opens the intersubjective testing procedure (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: 149-150). After the protagonist confirms that the scheme is indeed admissible (5.1: AS\textsubscript{AAT}), the antagonist, similarly to above, can first challenge the contextual admissibility of the scheme (6.1: -/AS\textsubscript{AAT}) – and thus open a sub-discussion in which this is further established. If the scheme is deemed inadmissible in the given activity type then, again, ARG1 is irrelevant to the Stp. To keep defending the Stp., the protagonist has to move back all the way to (3.4) and propose another scheme (if this is possible regarding the ARG1 and Stp.). If the scheme is admissible, the arguers can move on to the route (6.2-etc.). Following the example:

A: 2.2  So what? Does Swiss reality have anything to do with American policies?  

P: 3.4  Yes, it does: Switzerland is similar to the US.

A: 4.5  I see what you mean, but can we rely on analogies here?  

P: 5.1  Yes we can. I haven’t heard it’s forbidden on this online forum.  

A: 6.1  Yes it is forbidden – first see the charter of the forum and then try to argue.\textsuperscript{14}

The second option for the antagonist after the protagonist’s response (5.1) is to concede the in-principle admissibility of the scheme in the activity type, and to question the correctness of its application in the given argumentative situation (6.2: OK but ?/CA(AS\textsubscript{AAT})). In this case, after the protagonist’s confirmation of the correct application in (7.1: CA(AS\textsubscript{AAT})), the antagonist can go on with his criticisms by asking critical questions relevant for the argument scheme that is applied by the protagonist.\textsuperscript{15} Depending on how the questions are

\textsuperscript{14} This example is hardly realistic – regulations of online forums do not ordinarily include any rules regarding the admissibility of argument schemes, as is the case, e.g., in legal discourse.

\textsuperscript{15} According to van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992a: 98): ‘In relying on a certain argumentation scheme, the arguer invokes a particular testing method in a dialectical procedure, in which certain critical reactions are relevant. Each argumentation scheme calls, as it were, for its own set of critical reactions. In conjunction with each other, these reactions constitute a well-rounded test for checking the soundness of an argumentation of the type concerned.’
dealt with, the AS is tested: 1) as having enough justificatory potential (the protagonist defends the standpoint, provided that the propositional content of the ARG1 was defended too);\textsuperscript{16} 2) as having insufficient justificatory potential (the protagonist has to retract the standpoint or put forward more arguments that would jointly support the standpoint in a coordinative argumentation structure)\textsuperscript{17}; 3) as being incorrectly applied, and thus having no justificatory potential at all, which renders ARG1 irrelevant to the standpoint (the protagonist has to retract his standpoint, or put forward multiple arguments that would independently from ARG1 support the Stp.).\textsuperscript{18}

\textbf{A: 2.2} So what? Does Swiss reality have anything to do with American policies? (\textsuperscript{?}/ARG1 \& \textsuperscript{\textrightarrow} Stp.)

\textbf{P: 3.4} Yes, it does: Switzerland is similar to the US. (ARG1 \& AS \textsuperscript{\textrightarrow} Stp.)

\textbf{A: 4.5} I see what you mean, but can we rely on analogies here? (OK but ?/AS_{AAT})

\textbf{P: 5.1} Yes we can. I haven’t heard it’s forbidden on this online forum. (AS_{AAT})

\textbf{A: 6.2} OK, but is it really a correct analogy? (OK but ?/CA(AS_{AAT}))

\textbf{P: 7.1} Yes, it is! (CA(AS_{AAT}))

\textbf{A: 8.1} Isn’t American society more diverse than Swiss? (a critical reaction regarding analogy)

In sum, in testing the justificatory potential of argumentation based on informal argument schemes, the antagonist can react critically by generally questioning the connection of the argument to the standpoint and, further, by: (a) doubting the correctness of the reconstruction of the argument scheme, (b) questioning the admissibility of the scheme in the given activity type, and (c) questioning the correctness of the application of the scheme in the given activity type by means of asking concrete critical questions relevant to the scheme used.

In this way, all the ‘core’ dialectical routes of the argumentation stage, and thus all major types of dialectically relevant critical reactions are briefly described. Needless to say, this description pertains to a fully externalised and reasonable critical discussion. In actual argumentative discussions held in various activity types, arguers will manoeuvre

\textsuperscript{16} This is regulated by rules 8(a) and 9(a) of a critical discussion (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: 150-151).

\textsuperscript{17} See van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992a: 76-82) and Snoeck Henkemans (1992: Ch. 4).

\textsuperscript{18} I exclude the possibility of supporting the argument scheme by further sub-arguments in a subordinative structure as a way of dealing with the relevance criticisms at this step of the procedure (see van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992a: 85-89 and Snoeck Henkemans, 1992: 90-91), since I assume that the chances of supporting the scheme are already exhausted by the protagonist in his answering the critical questions.
strategically with critical reactions and thus take critical routes that are at variance with these spelled out above. This does not imply, however, that actual arguers characteristically sidestep or neglect a reasonable progress of criticisms. Rather, they may skip certain steps depending on the particulars of the rhetorical situation and, notably, on the constraints of a given argumentative activity type. For example, in situations where the reconstruction of an argument scheme is uncontroversial, and no special conditions apply regarding the use of the argument scheme in the activity type, the antagonist can start reacting critically by immediately asking critical questions relevant to the argument scheme (implicitly) employed by the protagonist.  

The important methodological point advocated here is that it is exactly thanks to a clearly laid out dialectical profile that actual critical reactions can be precisely analysed (and subsequently evaluated) in terms of the rhetorically motivated strategic choices arguers make in ordinary contexts of discourse.

7.3 Three aspects of reacting critically in Internet discussion forums

It is a basic recognition of extended pragma-dialectics that the dialectical goals are in actual discussions overlaid with rhetorically motivated objectives. In general, the rhetorical goal of the antagonist’s reacting critically to the protagonist’s argumentation may be formulated as: increasing the protagonist’s burden of proof regarding propositional content or the force of justification of arguments. Every critical attack—both rhetorically and dialectically speaking—requires some kind of defensive response. Hence, the more critical reactions are directed at the protagonist’s argumentation, the more ‘fixing jobs’ he is required to do, which, of course, increases his burden of proof, in terms of a procedural, probative obligation (van Eemeren, 2010: Ch. 8; van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2002b, 2003a; Tseronis, 2009). Eventually, the unremitting criticism may lead to a situation in which the protagonist is unable to discharge his multiplied burden of proof, that is, to conclude all the intersubjective procedures of the argumentation stage in his favour and

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19 The following example of argumentation may be illustrative: ‘Switzerland is a safe country because the Swiss are armed to the teeth.’ The unexpressed argument scheme used in this case is obviously causal, and can be easily reconstructed along the lines: ‘arms in the hands of civilians bring about safety.’ Assuming that no special restrictions regarding causal arguments are in force in the context of discussion, the antagonist can immediately respond with a critical question, e.g., ‘aren’t there other, more important reasons for Switzerland’s safety, such as the long-standing tradition of neutrality or the overall prosperity of population?’

20 Note that this analysis pertains to non-mixed discussions in which only the protagonist has a positive (or negative) burden of proof regarding an expressed opinion.
thus successfully support the standpoint by employing shared premises and acceptable argument schemes, in which case he loses the discussion. And this is exactly the result the antagonist is after.

In order to manage the realisation of rhetorical and dialectical goals of argumentation, actual arguers coordinate in every move of their real-life discussions three analytically distinguishable aspects of strategic manoeuvring: adaptation to audience demand, selection from the topical potential of argumentation, and choice of presentational devices (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 1999: 484-486, van Eemeren, 2010: Ch. 4; see section 4.3 above). Each of these aspects is dealt with differently depending on: the results that the arguer aims to achieve by performing a given move, the routes that can be taken in order to achieve the results (specified in a dialectical profile), the constraints of a given argumentative activity type, and the ‘argumentative situation’ in which the protagonist and the antagonist are manoeuvring (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2009). What is of interest here from the dialectical perspective, are the moves that can be reconstructed as the antagonist’s critical reactions at the argumentation stage of a critical discussion (whose dialectical results and routes are described above). The question to be addressed in the following three sections is how the constraints of the argumentative activity type of online political discussions are brought to bear on the management of the three aspects of strategic manoeuvring in reacting critically to the protagonist’s argumentation.

7.3.1 Adaptation to audience demand

According to van Eemeren (2010: Ch. 4), two issues are by definition crucial in adapting to audience demand: the identification of the audience and the identification of its demands. I start from the latter issue here, since it requires a short theoretical clarification.

Critical reactions are a peculiar type of argumentative move when it comes to identifying and satisfying the audience demand, especially when we consider that it is a dialectical opponent—the protagonist—who is the direct addressee of critical reactions. Exactly because reactions of the antagonist are critical, their performance makes it explicit that the

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21 The argumentative situation consists of the ‘dialectical situation’ defined by arguers’ commitments at a particular move in a particular stage of a discussion, and the ‘rhetorical situation,’ i.e., a context of discussion delineated by the unique circumstances surrounding a given discussion (van Eemeren, 2010: Ch. 6). See Bitzer (1968), Vatz (1973), and Jacobs (2002) for a discussion of the concept of the ‘rhetorical situation.’
demand of the protagonist to accept his argumentation is not met, because certain conditions necessary to accept argumentation have not been fulfilled to the antagonist’s satisfaction. This function of critical reactions can be grasped in pragmatic terms: as described above, critical reactions are basically directed against two preparatory conditions of the complex speech act of argumentation, i.e., those concerning the propositional content and the justificatory force of the propositions expressed in argumentation. Therefore, critical reactions can be reconstructed as ‘negative commissives’: the antagonist refuses to accept the protagonist’s argumentation by signalling that he (the antagonist) cannot (immediately) adapt to the preparatory conditions of the protagonist’s speech act of argumentation. (This may be followed by an elicitation of more arguments that can fulfil the conditions in line with the antagonist’s critical reaction.)

Considering this, the antagonist’s strategic manoeuvring in reacting critically can be seen as the converse of the protagonist’s beneficial adaptation to audience demand in advancing argumentation. The goal of the protagonist is to create a common ground between him and the audience that is as broad as possible, so that he can successfully build his argumentation from the concessions of the audience. To the contrary, the goal of the antagonist is to limit the common ground for discussion as far as possible, since this gives him more opportunities to refuse accepting the protagonist’s arguments and thus to continue his critical reactions. Of course, a reasonable argumentative discussion is impossible with an antagonist who does not commit himself to any material and procedural starting points – the protagonist would simply have nothing to base his argumentation on, which may result in a non-resolvable ‘deep disagreement,’ if other impediments to a reasonable discussion exist (Fogelin, 1985). Yet, within the bounds of reasonableness, the antagonist can still manoeuvre to avoid making too many concessions regarding both premises and argument schemes. For example, he may choose not to accept a certain

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22 See van Eemeren (2010: Ch. 4): ‘In examining audience adaptation in the various discussion stages systematically, the best policy is to start from the preparatory conditions for performing the types of speech acts by which the various argumentative moves are made that play a constructive part in resolving a difference of opinion on the merits. These conditions indicate, among other things, which requirements regarding the addressee must be satisfied for a correct performance of these speech acts, so that audience adaptation can be realized by ensuring and emphasizing their fulfilment.’

23 This analysis of the goal of the antagonist in non-mixed disputes applies equally well to mixed disputes: any arguer in his role of the protagonist will try to build up broad common ground that is conducive to making his case, and any arguer in his role of the antagonist will attempt to limit the scope of his concessions that may be beneficial to the opponent’s position. In short, every arguer can be expected to manoeuvre towards such a management of the common ground in which his premises and argument schemes are shared between him and the audience, while the opponent’s are not.
authority presented by the protagonist as respectable in the first instance, and instead attempt to critically test the reliability of the authority (see figure 7.1, steps 3.2-4.3-etc).

At the same time, to say that in his critical reactions the antagonist refuses to satisfy, rather than seeks to satisfy, the protagonist’s demands (to accept the speech act of argumentation and all its felicity conditions), is not to say that the antagonist cannot manoeuvre to adapt to the protagonist’s frame. In general, in realising his objective of launching the most successful attack, the antagonist can raise these objections that the protagonist may be most able, willing, or obliged to accept. This may happen, for example, by actively showing that the protagonist cannot believe the argument himself, because he already expressed commitment to a contradictory argument. In doing so, the antagonist resorts to an expedient selection of topics of attack and choice of presentational devices.

Notwithstanding these theoretical nuances regarding adaptation to the audience demand in reacting critically, two characteristics of online discussion forums mentioned in Chapter 6 have their bearing on the identification of the audience demand.

First, discussions studied here are anonymous (or rather ‘pseudonymous’), which gives arguers less resources than in ordinary discourse to get at the commitments of the audience. ‘The real,’ socially embedded members of audience with their life histories and publicly recognisable preferences are largely unknown. Moreover, written computer-mediated discussions create a ‘lean’ context for communication, in which many non-verbal contextual cues (gesture, mimics) are not available to disputants (Crystal, 2001: 36-41; Herring, 1999: online). Nevertheless, as soon as online discussants start to use their pseudonyms (‘nicks’) consistently, they create recognisable online identities which, in the long run, may lead to the emergence of rich ‘virtual communities’ (Rheingold, 1993; Smith & Kollock, 1999).24 This is especially the case with the most active participants, i.e., those who contribute to the discussions most frequently.25 What is at stake for such participants is their online reputation built through a long record of reliable postings characterised,

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24 As argued by Donath (1999: 53): ‘It is useful to distinguish between pseudonymity and pure anonymity. In the virtual world, many degrees of identification are possible. Full anonymity is one extreme of continuum that runs from the totally anonymous to the thoroughly named. A pseudonym, though it may be untraceable to a real-world person, may have a well-established reputation in the virtual domain; a pseudonymous message may thus come with a wealth of contextual information about the sender. A purely anonymous message, on the other hand, stands alone.’ According to Donath (Ibidem), this difference is crucial, since much of the discussion of the merits and demerits of online communication is ‘contingent on the distinction between anonymity and pseudonymy.’

25 In Marcoccia’s terminology such arguers are called ‘hosts’ (see 2004: 131-132). Himelboim, Gleave and Smith (2009) use the term ‘discussion catalysts’ to designate active online discussants successful in receiving ‘a disproportionate number of replies’ (compared to other arguers).
among other things, by consistency and a successful discharge of the burden of proof (Aakhus, 2002a; Anthony, Smith & Williamson, 2009; Donath, 1999; Poor, 2005). Therefore, some well-known online discussants, even if hidden behind ‘nicks,’ have recognisable and easily accessible (discussions are archived by the system) sets of commitments. As a result, on the one hand, they cannot simply criticise everything and play pure sceptics regarding any position, since that would tarnish their record; on the other hand, their opponents can make use of well-known arguers’ online commitments, both in criticising them (pointing out inconsistencies, etc.) and in advancing their own argumentation.

Second, the audience of many online discussions is both ‘multiple’ (i.e., the members of the audience have different positions regarding the issue under discussion) and ‘mixed’ (they have different starting points) (see van Eemeren, 2010: Ch. 4). As argued by analysts of online deliberation, differences (including deep-seated ideological divisions) abound in many online fora, especially in those where political issues are debated (see Davies & Gangadharan, 2009). Such differences make the identification of audience demands a formidable task in most of the discussions.

Online fora present a similar difficulty when it comes to the identification of the audience itself, that is, to recognising who is actually addressed in the exchanges of arguments and critical reactions. Because the fora studied here are open for anyone to join in and leave discussions at any point, ‘it is impossible to know who belongs to the conversational group at any moment. In fact, the discussion group is continuously under construction’ (Marcoccia, 2004: 140). Still, in spite of such a fluid participation framework, there are some identifiable levels of participation that correspond to different kinds of audience. Extending Marcoccia’s classification of three types of recipients of online messages,26 one can identify four kinds of audience in the online discussions analysed here:

1. The person to whom a message (whether critical or affirmative) is directly addressed. In the case of responses reconstructible as critical reactions in episodes of argumentative exchanges, that would be the protagonist. Hence, the beneficial adaptation to audience frame would generally work in the way depicted above.

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26 Marcoccia (2004: 131-143), following Goffman, distinguishes between ‘hosts,’ ‘casual senders,’ and ‘simple readers’ (eavesdroppers or ‘lurkers’).
(2) All the participants active in a given (polylogual) discussion thread. As described in section 6.4, strategic alliances of arguers acting in unison may emerge in online discussions, thus creating the ‘collective antagonist’ (and, possibly, the ‘collective protagonist’). In such a case, strategic manoeuvring in reacting critically amounts, on the one hand, to collectively refusing to fulfil the demands of the (collective) protagonist (acting against the other group) and, on the other hand, to satisfying the lack of satisfaction of the arguers making up the collective antagonist (acting with our group). Rhetorically speaking, it may be difficult to judge which of the audiences (out-group or in-group) is the primary and which the secondary audience.27

(3) All the participants usually contributing to discussions on a given forum (newsgroup). In continuously existing forums, regular posters come to recognise one another, what often gives rise to an establishment of a ‘virtual community’ tied to a given forum. Such communities are the locus of the norms of interaction expected to be followed by all contributors (Aakhus & Rumsey, 2010; Smith & Kollock, 1999). In this case, satisfying the demand of audience would amount to abiding by the rules of the forum – avoiding abusive *ad hominem* attacks in critical reactions, not disturbing discussions by completely irrelevant reactions (so called ‘trolling’), etc.

(4) All the potential readers of the open forum, that is, anyone world-wide with access to the Internet. In Internet vernacular online eavesdroppers who read discussions without contributing to them are termed ‘lurkers.’ Because lurkers by definition do not feed back to online discussions, there is no direct way to judge what the demands of this, possibly multiple and mixed, audience are. Yet, the sole fact that discussions may be read by a large audience adds to them the quality of a public debate, where general rhetorical prowess, e.g. quick wits (see Weger & Aakhus, 2003), is important.

A thorough examination of the ways in which arguers, the antagonists in particular, adapt in their argumentative discourse to the demand of such multilayered, fluid, multiple, mixed

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27 Van Eemeren (2010: Ch. 4) distinguishes between the primary and the secondary audience in the following way: ‘In cases where it is clear which audience the arguer considers the more important to reach, we call these people the *primary* audience and the person or persons instrumental in reaching them the *secondary* audience.’
and largely unknown online audience requires a separate study. However, while the question of how the adaptation to audience demand is exactly managed is indeed a difficult one, the answer to the question of if such adaptation is an important factor in online discussions seems more straightforward: taking into account the perspective of the audience (or audiences) seems crucial to online arguers who not only speak publicly, but also may be promptly challenged publicly. Therefore, even if not always explicit in actual discourse, the aspect of audience frame in strategic manoeuvring is a key factor underlying online exchanges analysed here.

7.3.2 Selection from the topical potential

Topical selection, in general, is rhetorically vital to both parties to an argumentative discussion: just as the protagonist can choose to construct his argumentation from the premises and argument schemes he finds strongest, the antagonist can target his critical reactions at the protagonist’s premises and argument schemes he finds weakest. In this way, the antagonist can realise his goal of ‘launching the most effective attack,’ that is, of putting the heaviest possible burden of proof on the protagonist (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2002a: 139; 2002b: 24). What the weakest premises and argument schemes are is largely contingent on a particular dialectical and rhetorical situation. However, conventional restrictions and opportunities of a given activity type can lead arguers towards certain recurring decisions regarding opportune topical selection in reacting critically. In getting at such activity-type-specific patterns of critical reactions, the dialectical profile presented in figure 7.1 can serve as a revealing heuristics. What can be gained by referring to the profile is a clear overview of the ways strategic manoeuvring can take place: by providing a sequential specification of all the reasonable ways of reacting critically the profile functions as a template against which the impact of the constraints of a given activity type on concrete dialectically relevant moves of the antagonist can be precisely distinguished. Notably, thanks to the profile it can be clearly seen how the parameters of the opening stage of online forum discussions (described in section 6.3) affect critical reactions in the empirical counterpart of the argumentation stage in online

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28 Crystal (2001: 18) explains the significance of audience in online discussions in the following way: ‘[…] as the Internet is a medium almost entirely dependent on reactions to written messages, awareness of audience must hold a primary place in any discussion. The core feature of the Internet is its real or potential interactivity.’
discussions. Three characteristics of online discussions regarding common (material and procedural) starting points are particularly relevant here.

First, apart from generally acceptable facts and values, online discussions impose few, or none at all, contextual commitments in terms of fixed premises (either factual or normative) that ought to be accepted by arguers as material starting points for their discussions. Therefore, the intersubjective identification procedure (step 3.1-etc.) can hardly yield a conclusive result based on contextual commitments. Rather, it is the commitments incurred by arguers themselves during online discussions that count. A critical reaction of the sort: ‘Did I really agree on that before we started discussing?’ would thus be quite surprising in online discussions. Much more ‘natural’ in online discussions would be a question inquiring about the source of argument (‘how do you know?’) – which is related to the next point:

Second, contrary to many academic, legal or religious disputes, in online political discussions there are no explicitly established respectable sources of knowledge, such as Fundamentals of Argumentation Theory, rulings of the Supreme Court, or Koran. Because of that, the protagonist may find it difficult to fully successfully (i.e. conclusively) respond to doubts and attacks regarding the propositional content of the premises by saying ‘it’s there, Chapter 9, p. 251’ (see step 3.2-etc.): even if this indeed is the case, the antagonist can continue his criticisms by questioning the reliability of the source itself (step 4.3-etc.). However, thanks to the enormous online resources accessible through hyperlinks an exchange of critical reactions and arguments may focus on the antagonist’s asking the protagonist to prove that the information given is accurate (correctly selected and quoted) (see 4.2-etc.).

Third, open online political discussions impose no special contextual limitations on the application of particular argument schemes. Since these discussions are informal, arguers may be simply expected to meet some general soundness conditions for arguing from analogies, causal relationships, and symptoms. That is to say that in the intersubjective testing procedure (see steps 4.5-5.1-etc.) no activity-type-specific

29 By contrast, such reaction would be completely natural in, say, an activity type of peace negotiations where often long lists of preconditions that all the parties to negotiations have to agree upon in advance are made.

30 As with any other type of criticism this possibility is limited by certain requirements of reasonableness. The antagonist cannot question the source he himself agreed to respect (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2003b). Moreover, it is the antagonist who acquires the burden of proof by attacking some presumptively reliable sources (see van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2003a). Therefore, he has to successfully justify his critical reaction, before the protagonist is obliged to respond to such criticism (see Krabbe, 2007a).
soundness conditions regarding the use of argument schemes apply, and thus no activity-type-specific sets of critical questions regarding specific schemes can be formulated. What is characteristic of Internet discussions, though, is the use of arguments from authority in establishing respectable sources of data: the non-hierarchical and open structure of the Internet defies the existence of ultimate authorities, yet some sources of data are preferable over others. For example, Web-sites created in line with the grassroots, open spirit of the Internet—Wikipedia, Slashdot.org, etc.—may be more readily acceptable than traditional media outlets. Moreover, the rapidity of the Internet means that sources which are newer may be perceived as more reliable. All such implicit conventions, on the one hand, may become a ground on which the antagonist’s critical questions regarding the application of argument schemes are based; on the other hand, such conventions are not decisive: the protagonist is not obliged to use the preferred sources in order to have his arguments accepted (as the case may be, for instance, in an academic paper). Quite apart from that, online discussions require general topical relevance. As argued below in Chapter 8, even though topical relevance is not directly related to the relevance of argument schemes, criticisms of topical relevance may be used in argumentative functions.

Because of the general lack of fixed starting points regarding premises and argument schemes, the antagonist in online discussions may extensively exploit the topical potential by coming up with as many critical reactions as possible. In terms of the profile that means that the antagonist manoeuvres to thoroughly test the protagonist’s argumentation by exhaustively following all the potential dialectical routes distinguished. According to the rules of reasonable argumentation, even if one of the dialectical routes is completed to the protagonist’s satisfaction, the antagonist does not have to accept the standpoint (which would end the argumentation stage to his disadvantage) – he can also move to critical reactions regarding a different element of the argument. That is, he can try a different procedure. For example, after agreeing on the propositional content of the protagonist’s argumentation, the antagonist can get involved in a thorough critical testing of the justificatory potential, without giving his assent to the standpoint.

7.3.3 Choice of presentational devices

A novel variety of language developed in online communication—labelled ‘interactive written discourse’ (Ferrara, Brunner & Whittemore, 1991), ‘electronic language’ (Collot & Bellmore, 1996), ‘computer-mediated discourse’ (Herring, 1999, 2001) or ‘Netspeak’
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(Crystal, 2001)—has attracted much scholarly attention for its specific qualities, clearly distinguishable from the more traditional varieties of language. Online discourse’s unique combination of the characteristics of written and spoken discourse, ‘first draft quality’ of many online messages, idiosyncratic spelling, ubiquitous use of abbreviations, ‘emoticons’ (so called ‘smileys’) have all been extensively analysed by linguists as new phenomena of language use, interesting in themselves (see esp. Crystal, 2001). Considering the focus of this dissertation, what is relevant here is the Internet-specific use of presentational devices in strategic manoeuvring, notably, in the antagonist’s critical reacting.

Every critical reaction is by definition directed against some previous argumentation; therefore, an opportune presentation of what the attacked argument or standpoint actually is is the most obvious and crucial way of the antagonist’s strategic manoeuvring with presentational devices. Apart from the simplest cases, in which a reaction is limited to an elementary question (‘Is that so?’ ‘So what?’), the antagonist usually incorporates parts of the protagonist’s argumentation in his critical reaction (‘Is it really the case that…?’ ‘Are you sure that we can compare…?’). In doing this, the antagonist can rephrase the original argumentation using expressions that suit his goal of launching the strongest possible attack. Such rephrasing is common in ordinary discourse and is normally acceptable and completely legitimate, but it may also seriously distort the protagonist’s original argumentation. In the latter case the antagonist commits the fallacy of the straw man.

From the perspective of manoeuvring with reformulations, the asynchronous online discussions studied here are unique as a context in which informal argumentative exchanges are recorded and are thus easily retraceable. That means that the original arguments are always available for comparison, so that the antagonists’ fallacious reformulations can be swiftly detected and objected to by other discussants. Nevertheless, as many examples show, online antagonists still attempt to subtly manoeuvre with the presentation of the protagonists’ arguments and standpoints. Criteria for a precise identification and evaluation of such manoeuvrings are discussed in Chapter 9.

In this chapter I have set out to seek an answer to Question 1.1: What kind of restrictions do online political discussion forums impose on and what kind of opportunities do they create for reacting critically to argumentation? In order to answer this question, I have first provided a detailed description of the dialectically relevant types of critical reactions and
their progress in reasonable argumentative exchanges. I have shown the varied dialectical routes that the two basic types of critical reactions—questioning the acceptability of the premises and questioning the justificatory force of argumentation—may lead to. In a critical discussion, the antagonists are in principle free to choose the critical reactions they find most advantageous (depending on the dialectical situation). In actual Internet discussions, the choice of the most opportune strategy of criticism is influenced by the constraints of the activity type. Therefore, second, I have analysed how the constraints of online discussions may affect the three aspects of strategic manoeuvring in reacting critically. In terms of the adaptation to audience demand, online antagonists have the opportunity to address multiple audiences and to act collectively. At the same time, they are restricted in their knowledge of what the demands of the audience they face actually are. When it comes to the selection from topical potential, informal online discussions impose virtually no restrictions regarding the elements of the protagonist’s argumentation that the antagonists can criticise. Moreover, because of a conventional expectation that the protagonists use premises that are available online and are topically relevant, the antagonist has an opportunity to ground his criticisms in this expectation. Finally, since online discussants use Internet language in quickly accessible written exchanges, the antagonists are restricted in their expedient choice of the presentation of the attacked standpoints and arguments.

Such an examination of both dialectical means and rhetorical conditions of reacting critically in online discussions, provides an answer to *Question 1.1* and paves the way for analyses of actual critical reactions in terms of patterns of strategic manoeuvring (Chapter 8) and their subsequent evaluation (Chapter 9).