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 8

Analysis of critical reactions in Internet political discussions

8.1 Patterns of strategic manoeuvring in reacting critically

The question to be addressed in this chapter is what activity-type-specific choices arguers actually make in their critical reactions in order to win the episodes of online political forum discussions. As indicated in Chapter 1, this question can be specified with the help of two sub-questions pointing to two basic types of critical reactions in argumentative discourse: Question 1.1.1a. How do the restrictions and opportunities of online political forum discussions affect the arguers’ questioning of the acceptability of the premises used by their opponents? Question 1.1.1b. How do the restrictions and opportunities of online political forum discussions affect the arguers’ questioning of the justificatory force of their opponents’ arguments?

In order to answer these two questions, examples of episodes of online discussions from three popular political forums available through Google Groups—alt.politics, PoliticalForum, and Political Forum—are analysed (see section 5.2 for a brief description of these three discussion forums) The analysis in this chapter follows the pragma-dialectical method in which the model of a critical discussion is used as a heuristic tool instrumental in reconstructing analytically relevant argumentative moves (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson & Jacobs, 1993). With the addition of rhetorical insights, such an analysis allows for an examination of ordinary argumentation in terms of strategic manoeuvring. In line with the research questions specified above, the goal of the analyses is to identify some recurring patterns of critical reactions in online discussions and account for these patterns in terms of strategic choices of arguers affected by the restrictions and opportunities of the activity type of online political forum discussions.

As argued in section 7.3 these restrictions and opportunities influence the three aspects of strategic manoeuvring in reacting critically, notably the topical choice of the
target of criticism. Two of the features of online discussions seem to directly affect the way topical selection regarding critical reactions is made in this computer-mediated context of argumentation. The first of them is the embeddedness of online discussions in the World Wide Web constructed by the interconnection (hyper-linking) of countless Web-pages. This allows for easy corroborating, but also undermining, of the data used in argumentation by referring to online sources. The second is the general topical relevance: by their design, in which every message has its place in a topical tree stemming from the first message, and by some basic principles of online netiquette, discussions are supposed to be developing along topical threads, that is, all the responses to the opening message should be topically relevant to this message. This rule, as many other in online discussions, is quite loosely enforced (and very often violated), yet it can always be called up by a discussant who finds a certain contribution irrelevant. These two features are of particular importance since they restrict and afford two crucial ways of reacting critically in an argumentative discussion as distinguished in section 7.2.

In the following sections, some recognisable patterns of critical reactions will be analysed. The first of them concerns the acceptability of premises and is related to the constraints of online discussions affecting topical selection, in particular the possibility of linking arguments to online sources of data (section 8.2.1). In the second pattern the premises are targeted as well, but the key aspect is the collective performance of critical reactions (section 8.2.2). The third pattern amounts to a comprehensive attack on both the premises and the justificatory force of argumentation (section 8.3.1). Finally, the topical selection of critical reactions concerning the justificatory force of arguments will be analysed as affected by the requirement of topical relevance of threaded online discussions (section 8.3.2). Finally, an account of strategic manoeuvring in reacting critically in online political discussions in terms of the management of the burden of proof will be given (section 8.4).

8.2 Analysis of critical reactions concerning the acceptability of premises

8.2.1 First pattern: ‘provide quote or link’

1 Of course, topical relevance is expected to be followed in *any* discussion, including ordinary small talks; however, in online threaded discussions—which are otherwise quite loosely regulated—it stands out as a requirement that is explicitly formulated and often referred to.
Compared to such established argumentative activity types as legal trials or scientific disputes, political online forum discussions have little to offer when it comes to having recognised methods of checking the acceptability of propositions (let alone when it comes to having a pool of facts agreed upon prior to the argumentative stage of discussions; see sections 6.3 and 7.3). However, hyper-linking—a simple technological affordance that has become a vital part of online culture—can be seen as an important constraint on what kind of material starting points (premises) can be acceptably used in argumentation: premises (especially factual ones) that are not supported by links referring to some external sources of data are vulnerable to argumentative criticism regarding their acceptability.

It seems, thus, that the basic, ‘entry level’ online-specific mode of attacking the propositional content of argumentation is to request the protagonist of a standpoint to provide a link supporting his position. Such is the case in the following fragment (8.1) of an online discussion initiated by a post by *ImStillMags* in which s/he quotes and links to an Associated Press report which, briefly, claims that ‘Al-Qaida backs McCain.’ This report is further affirmed by *Fritz_da_Cat* (turn 2). However, in turn 34, *Zebnick* directly attacks this argument (LOL – ‘Laughing Out Loud’\(^2\)) and advances a counter-argument (‘Al Qeda backs one of their own, Hussein Obama’), thus instigating a qualitative multiple dispute.\(^3\) In the ensuing discussion *UnityNotExtremism* (turns 35 and 37) requests *Zebnick* to provide links supporting his arguments and, finally, considers *Zebnick’s* reluctance to provide such links as comparable to Goebbels-style propaganda.

\(^2\) ‘LOL’ is one of the abbreviations commonly used in the Internet-language (see Crystal, 2001: 85-86). Just as a regular laughter in verbal communication it can be used to express joy and amusement, and thus to convey the affirmation of others’ discourse as something witty, or to signal disbelief or even ridicule, and thus to convey the assessment of others’ discourse as something laughable. No doubt we are dealing with the latter case here.

\(^3\) In the rhetorical situation of a pre-election campaign, most of political discussions can be justifiably reconstructed as consisting of argumentation supporting one of the major standpoints at issue, that is: ‘vote for politician X’ or ‘do not vote for politician Y.’ Therefore, explicitly advanced standpoints, such as ‘Al-Qaeda backs McCain,’ are in fact sub-standpoints pertaining to one particular issue of the election campaign. On the main level, they are arguments that support the main standpoint (‘vote for’ or ‘do not vote for’ politician X or Y). For this reason, critical reactions in discussion (8.1) are analysed here as directed against the propositional content of the argument at the argumentation stage of a discussion, rather than as attacks on a standpoint at the confrontation stage. Moreover, in strongly bi-partisan American politics, the standpoint: ‘do not vote for McCain’ can be reconstructed not only as ‘mutually exclusive’ with the standpoint ‘vote for McCain,’ but also as ‘mutually implicative’ with the standpoint ‘vote for Obama.’ Therefore, *Zebnick’s* counter-argument: [do not vote for Obama], because Al-Qaeda backs Obama’, is a relevant response to the argument ‘Al-Qaida backs McCain’ and points to a complex mixed dispute of the type described by van Eemeran et al. (1993: 67-68).
(8.1) Al-Qaida backs McCain

http://groups.google.com/group/abc_politics_forum/browse_frm/thread/530778eaf3cf69ec/7c186bbd8ef0dbf7

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/ALeqM5iFK9c9KTpdbhjYyuW1lZyAuyqejgD93VA3B80

2. Fritz_da_Cat Oct 22 2008, 9:23 pm

Ofcourse Al Qaeda backs McCain. They know he'll keep our troops in Iraq and not persue them where they really are in Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

34. Zebnick Oct 23 2008, 4:48 am

LOL! Nice try jack offs. Everyone knows Al Queda backs one of their own, Hussein Obama.

35. UnityNotExtremism Oct 23 2008, 5:47 am

You gotta link that supports that general statement you claim???

Ooops, I guess not... But ImStillMags has one that says just the opposite. And there are a dozen more on all the news stations that says you're full of shit.

36. Zebnick Oct 23 2008, 5:57 am

A link? Al Queda doesn't advertise their celebrations of getting one of their own elected as President of the US on the internet

37. UnityNotExtremism Oct 23 2008, 6:46 am

Oh... So you don't have a link to support you're claim? So where's your source? ... Or did you just make it up???

It probably falls under .....

“If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it. The lie can be maintained only for such time as the State can shield the people from the political, economic and/or military consequences of the lie. It thus becomes vitally important for the State to use all of its powers to repress dissent, for the truth is the mortal enemy of the lie, and thus by extension, the truth is the greatest enemy of the State.”

Joseph Goebbels

38. Zebnick Oct 23 2008, 4:03 pm

I think its cute when posters like you quote their dad.

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4 The fragments of this discussion, and the following discussions, that are most pertinent to the analysis of patterns of reacting critically are underlined. This underlining (added to the original text of discussions for the purpose of this study) should not be confused with original underlining of the links to external Web-sites.
In this example of online critical reactions regarding the propositional content of argumentation (UnityNotExtremism in turn 35 and 37), arguments which are not backed by quoted or linked material are classified as ‘made up’ and thus not worthy of serious consideration, even when a certain absurdity of the request to provide a link is pointed out by the attacked protagonist – Zebnick (in turn 36).

The argumentative rationale of requesting for links can be expounded with the help of the dialectical profile described in section 7.2 (see figure 7.1). Asking for links means, in terms of the profile, that at step (2.1) of the argumentation stage—immediately after the argumentation has been presented by the protagonist—the antagonist asks for a source of the argument in question, thus getting the protagonist into the route in which new information is to be added (steps 3.2-etc.). This obviously limits the protagonist’s choice: it is clear from the profile that it is in principle up to the protagonist to decide at step 3 how to defend his argumentation: he can choose to start the intersubjective identification procedure (3.1), add new information (3.2) or defend the argument by sub-arguments (3.3).

In discussion (8.1), it is the antagonist—UnityNotExtremism—whose question ‘where's your source?’ (turn 37) immediately points to the step (3.2) in the procedure in which arguers test the propositional content of arguments by referring to some commonly recognised method of adding new information to a discussion, such as consulting news reports. The antagonist’s strategic manoeuvre to choose this critical reaction as the first line of attack is in line with the features of the activity type of online discussions: since it is uncommon for arguers in online forums to agree explicitly on a set of common premises before arguing over an issue, a question referring to the intersubjective identification procedure (steps 3.1-etc.) is very unlikely to yield a conclusive, affirmative answer. However, it may be the case that a certain source of data is, or should be, generally acceptable to both the protagonist defending his position and the doubting antagonist. That would allow for a decisive defence or refutation of the argument used. In discussion (8.1), UnityNotExtremism refuses to accept Zebnick’s argumentation on the basis of Zebnick’s not supporting his arguments by links to reports of some respectable news agencies, such as “Associated Press.” At the same time, as UnityNotExtremism notes, ‘ImStillMags has one [link from Associated Press – ML] that says just the opposite’ to what Zebnick is claiming. Implicitly, thus, UnityNotExtremism points to a convention according to which arguments backed by links to (or quotations from) reports provided by news organisations such as AP should be acknowledged by the disputants or, at least, that they are stronger than arguments without any reference to other online sources.
Provision of links or citations backing one’s arguments seems to be a recurring, expected and sanctioned form of behaviour and hence gains the status of a convention internalised and acknowledged by Internet arguers.5 This is evident in fragments of ‘meta-discussions’ of the following type:

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

39. frankg Oct 17 2008, 9:34 pm

[...] I try to maintain an open mind, but if I have come to a conclusion
I try to support that conclusion by explaining my rational as well as
posting links to data, editorials, etc., that helped get me there.
[...] I can cite post after post from Mike where he promoted anti-McCain/
Palin/Republican bull shit, even when everyone else knew it wasn’t so.
The most recently example of this being this particular thread.
[...]

(8.3) Powell Endorses Obama
http://groups.google.com/group/misc.news.internet.discuss/browse_frm/thread/b5948e65bf1b1101#

25. Wally nft Oct 19 2008, 11:01 pm (to be removed)

I have been trying my best, but I can't find the Wiki link
so I can be as smug as you.

(8.4) Obama’s brother arrested for drug possession. Not unexpected from the brother of the man who
admits to cocaine use.
http://groups.google.com/group/alt.politics/browse_frm/thread/11be728259021c2d#

92. Tater Gumfries Feb 4 2009, 5:12 pm

On Feb 3, 5:39 pm, Kate_G <kate6...@gmail.com> wrote:
> On Feb 3, 7:10 pm, Tater Gumfries <TaterGumfr...@usa.com> wrote:
> > And yet you are unable to provide citations to back up your claim that
> > people rob and steal to buy marijuana.

> I don't need to provide cites to prove something that every sensible
> person knows.

Yes, you do because your claim that "every sensible person knows" what
you think must be true is also unsupported by any facts.

You seem to be unfamiliar with the art of argumentation. Provide a
citation or face up to the fact: you haven't proved your assertion.

Tater

5 Van Eemeren and Grootendost (1984: 58-63) distinguish three criteria for language usage conventions: (1)
‘the language of the members of the community displays a certain regularity which occurs in strictly
delineated cases’; (2) ‘the members of the community expect these regularities to occur in those cases’; and
(3) ‘the members of the community prefer the regularity to occur in those cases because it solves a problem
of communication or interaction.’
Examples of such meta-communication, both in the form of auto-comments (8.2 and 8.3) and critical reactions (8.4) point to an informal, unwritten convention according to which linking to or quoting online sources of data is an expected element of the online ‘art of argumentation.’ In pragma-dialectical terms each such convention can be seen, on the one hand, as a restriction on argumentation and, on the other, as an opportunity for argumentation. In the case of online linking, the restriction amounts to a limitation of the scope of acceptable arguments: those which can be supported by external sources have higher chances of gaining acceptance. That is why arguments that are not supported by links or quotes may become easy targets of the antagonists’ acceptability criticism. At the same time, linking gives the protagonists an opportunity to consider their arguments as supported enough to be considered acceptable. In other words, providing a link may be seen as the protagonist’s manoeuvre meant to conclusively support the propositional content of his argumentation.

The following fragment is an example of such a manoeuvre. Discussion (8.5) revolves around the problem of condoning the use of torture in important police investigations. The arguer jgg1000a’s main argument is that torture was not only inflicted on terrorist suspects in the US, but also, in at least one case, in Germany. In his reply, THE ANNOINTED ONE criticises jgg1000a’s analogy by pointing out differences between German and American law and quoting some short excerpts from the German criminal code and constitution. Further, he proposes to ‘pull the links’ if jgg1000a ‘openly apologizes,’ that is, drops his argument based on incorrect (according to THE ANNOINTED ONE) information regarding German law:

(8.5) Yes American Leftie, Europeans like and do torture too
http://groups.google.com/group/PoliticalForum/browse_frm/thread/7dc1cd77c1b7b76a?hl=en#

5. jgg1000a Dec 15 2008, 11:12 pm
You do understand that the ICC [International Criminal Court] is an EU [European Union] inspired and designed International court?? If you dig into the story sufficiently you will find that the German court effectively flipped off the ICC...

9. THE ANNOINTED ONE Dec 16 2008, 2:33 am
and you would be dead wrong.

German law clearly forbids torture, though it seems to allow for some instances in which it can be used.

The criminal code and the Constitution explicitly forbid the use of force or the threat of force against a suspect. But there is also a provision to cover what is called “a life-threatening danger,” when
the police can “overstep the legally protected interests of the person affected.”

I will pull the links if you agree to openly apologize when they are posted.

[...]

Despite such strategic attempts of protagonists, ‘pulling the links’ is not a full-proof method of gaining acceptance of the propositional content of arguments. As mentioned in section 6.3.2, providing a link does not automatically mean providing an acceptable link. Therefore, apart from the first level of criticism—that is, requesting any link whatsoever—there is a deeper level of requesting an acceptable linked source. Such is the case in the following passages:

(8.6) did McCain lie about the cross in the dirt?
http://groups.google.com/group/PoliticalForum/browse_frm/thread/b8e63c5ee272f7a0?hl=en%3Fhl

1. mike532 Aug 20 2008, 10:01 am
Is McCain Now Copying Solzhenitsyn?
Last week, a speech by Sen. John McCain had phrases that were likely lifted directly from Wikipedia.
Now it seems McCain may have lifted another story last night at megachurch pastor Rick Warren's Faith Forum. According to a very persuasive Daily Kos diary, the anecdote McCain told about a North Vietnamese prison guard making a cross in the dirt as a sign of solidarity -- or as he said, "just two Christians worshiping together" -- is very similar to a story about Alexander Solzhenitsyn and his times in the Soviet Gulags.
[...]

2. mark Aug 20 2008, 11:55 am
yeah there is a real credible source of information, the daily kooks.
bawahahahahahahahahahahahaha

3. mike532 Aug 20 2008, 12:08 pm
amazing not only are you a bigot you show yourself to be ignorant and short sighted . the story of the cross in the dirt came from the Alexander Solzhenitsyn book about his times in the Soviet Gulags. oh and mark McCain's guards would have been Buddhists not Christians !

Maybe the guard in North Korea read the same story and that prompted him to draw the cross.
Just a thought.
Don't let the activity in your brain confound you as you consider it.

(8.7) More bad polling news for Obama
http://groups.google.com/group/politicalforum/browse_frm/thread/d179a16cb1110d53?hl=en

1. The Weasel Aug 21 2008, 1:19 am
Just over 30 days ago, Obama held more than 125 electoral college vote lead. Today, that lead is gone.
August 20th numbers:
Real Clear Politics, with no tossups, McCain leads Obama 274, 264
Electoral Vote dot com, with one state tied, Obama 264, McCain 261, 13 tied

3. mike532  Aug 23 2008, 11:04 am
Obama 325  McCain 199  Ties 14
Senate Dem 56  GOP 44
House Dem 239  GOP 196

ROLFMOA [a misspelled acronym: Rolling on The Floor Laughing My Ass Off – ML].
What a MORON. Posting data that is month old doesn't show
that Obama is winning, it show old just proves that you are
dishonest.

Once again, you have shown that you are willing to distort the truth.

5. mike532  Aug 24 2008, 8:42 am
the information is from your web site sparky!

6. The Weasel  Aug 24 2008, 4:10 pm
Once again, the MORON loves to prove just how STUPID he really is. I
suggest that you educate yourself on how polls work. Pay close
attention to the dates.

[...] 

In these examples, the antagonists refuse to accept the data referred to by the protagonists. In discussion (8.6), mike532 quotes verbatim a message from a political blog which, in turn, is based on (and linked to) information published in ‘a very persuasive Daily Kos diary.’ Mike’s argumentation can be reconstructed as follows – (implicit main standpoint): (‘Don’t vote for McCain’), because (explicit standpoint): ‘McCain lied about the cross in the dirt,’ because (argument 1): ‘His story is copied from Solzhenitsyn’, because ‘The Daily Kos says so (http://blogs.cqpolitics.com/)’ (step 3.2 in the ideal profile). In his reaction, mark dismisses this primary online source by naming it ‘the daily kooks.’ In the next turn (3), mike532—the protagonist—repeats his argument 1, and then tries to shift his defence of this argument from the addition of new information provided by an external source to a sub-discussion in which he advances argument 1.1: ‘McCain’s guards would have been Buddhists not Christians’ (step 3.3 in the profile). One cannot judge whether this strategy is successful, because mark never responds to this post, and does not participate in the discussion anymore (yet, another user—RichardForbes—goes on with criticisms of mike532’s argumentation).  

6 In such a not uncommon situation where one of the arguers withdraws from an online discussion (without explicitly announcing it, e.g. by saying ‘it doesn’t make sense to continue discussing with a moron like you’),
In fragment (8.7) discussants argue about precise information about the most up-to-date polls regarding presidential candidates in the 2008 American elections. Mike532, in his counter-argument against The Weasel’s standpoint ‘More bad polling news for Obama,’ provides exact data, but from an old poll (18 July 2008), for what he is strongly reproached by The Weasel, who, in his first post, refers to ‘August 20th numbers.’ In this case, contrary to discussion (8.6), the source itself (http://www.electoral-vote.com/) is accepted by both arguers, but the precise use of its information is fiercely disputed (up to turn 34). The discussion reveals some other expectations regarding online sources of data: since information on the Internet is so easily and quickly available, links and quotes adduced should be precise and up-to-date. Linking is thus a constraint that functions as a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it gives protagonists an opportunity to quickly back up their points; on the other hand, (potential) antagonists have an equal opportunity to ask for exact sources and swiftly expose any imprecision. Despite such opportunities, similarly to case (8.6), no final agreement is reached in discussion (8.7).

8.2.2 Second pattern: the collective antagonist

In extreme cases, exchanges of arguments and critical reactions between online discussants become almost completely supplanted by exchanges of links. In this way, reacting critically to arguments with (the addition of) counter-arguments turns into reacting critically to links with (the addition of) counter-links, as if providing a better argument consisted in getting at the stronger online source:

(8.8) Hey There David Deilley, What Obama’s Approval Rating Now?
http://groups.google.com/group/alt.politics/browse_frm/thread/ced465b50b97f31c

1. Crap Detector Feb 4 2009, 12:59 am
Obama has been subjected to a two-week long nightmare. I am not going to take the trouble to state all the mistakes he has already made. His "stimulus" package (which is a miss-named omnibus spending bill) has only about about a 40 per cent approval rating among Americans, and that would indicate that Obama's rating would not be that much higher.
[…] 

one may assume that the convention of tacit agreement is in force: he who does not object, agrees. It is difficult to determine, however, how prevalent this convention is in online discussions. One of the complications is the collective performance of arguments and criticisms: why would I have to continue criticisms, if someone else is already doing it. In the discussion (8.5), mark ceases to react critically to mike532, but others immediately take on the role of mike’s antagonist. (See also section 6.5)
2. dangdangdoodle
Feb 4 2009, 3:48 am
Well it looks like you are the victim of the rightwing media who are about two to one in face time on US TV. The democrats are being held to a much higher standard than the corrupt Republicans were/are.

[...]

3. Starkiller©
Feb 4 2009, 4:19 am
What "rightwing" media are you referring to?

4. klunk
Feb 4 2009, 4:30 am
practically EVERY media outlet... what else would he be referring to...?...

5. fedora
Feb 4 2009, 5:48 am
Really?

** ABC News MICHAEL S. MALONE: Media's Presidential Bias and Decline **
http://abcnews.go.com/Business/Story?id=6099188&page=1

** Study: Coverage of McCain Much More Negative Than That of Obama **
http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2008/10/22/study_coverage_of_mccai...

** Study shows media treats McCain negatively, Obama and Clinton kindly **
http://hotair.com/archives/2008/05/29/study-shows-media-treats-mccain..
[...]

** Washington Post Admits An Obama Tilt in Campaign Coverage **
http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/11/07/AR200...

** Time Magazine says: 'extreme pro-Obama' press bias' **

And last, but certainly not least:
** Chris Matthews: My Job Is To Make Obama Presidency a Success **
http://newsbusters.org/blogs/mark-finkelstein/2008/11/06/odd-job-matt...
[...]

6. klunk
Feb 4 2009, 7:59 am
yes... really... for example, you cited individual biases as evidence to the contrary whereas I posted an objective tally of the amount of airtime given each idiotology by each of the major media outlets... secondly [...] 

7. fedora
Feb 4 2009, 3:42 pm
No, I posted two studies of the campaign coverage, not just "individual biases" read the post:

** Study: Coverage of McCain Much More Negative Than That of Obama **
http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2008/10/22/study_coverage_of_mccai...

** Study shows media treats McCain negatively, Obama and Clinton kindly **
http://hotair.com/archives/2008/05/29/study-shows-media-treats-mccain..
[...]

8. klunk
Feb 4 2009, 10:27 pm
no... you trimmed out my response in the same tried and true manner that dishonest and disingenuous people do when they try to hide from the truth... the fact of the matter is that all you've done is provide an opinion by one of the biggest reichtoid media spin idiots on cnn who regularly spews the same tired bullshit lines for them... there's nothing in his article which
references a specific source or methodology that can be construed as even being remotely scientific.
He doesn't even bother to reference any specific study done by Project for Excellence in Journalism. He just makes vague reference to "a new study".... which is rather pathetic for someone who is supposed to represent news media...
In fact, the Project for Excellence in Journalism, although initially began its existence in the time honoured tradition of being supported by education through Columbia University... it left its honourable roots behind and is now funded by the Pew Charitable Trust which is almost entirely backed by big oil:
http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Project_for_Excellence_in...
http://www.undueinfluence.com/pew_charitable_trusts.htm
Here's some further examples of spin by Kurtz to help you understand exactly how twisted he is:
Is Howard Kurtz actually a media Critic?
http://videocafe.test.crooksandliars.com/node/17451
Calling Howard Kurtz
http://crooksandliars.com/2007/03/15/calling-howard-kurtz
Howard Kurtz: I can't believe all of Obama's positive coverage
Is Obama Black Enough? Huh?
http://crooksandliars.com/2007/02/11/is-obama-black-enough-huh/
KURTZ JUMPS INTO THE TANK:
http://dailyhowler.com/dh090808.shtml
There's MUCH more on Kurtz in this link alone:
http://crooksandliars.com/search?cx=partner-pub-2240240393572029%3Acy...
do note that although the c&l site does make a practice of documenting the antics of rightwingnuts, they do document their antics with specific examples of the egregiousness of rightwingnuts...
and all of which which is entirely different from the simple tally I provided which actually has been backed up by full documentation supporting its methodology in what is a far more realistic adherence to the scientific methodology:
http://mediamatters.org/sundayshowreport/online_version
[…]

Apart from the profuse use of links, discussion (8.8) illustrates the pattern of arguing in which collectives of arguers are involved (see section 6.4 and 7.3.1). In the passages quoted above, the conversational structure of the discussion is quite simple. There are clearly two opposing camps: an ‘anti-Obama’ camp consisting of Crap Detector, Starkiller© and fedora, and an ‘anti-rightwing’ camp consisting of dangdangdoodle and klunk. Such a clear division of roles allows for a consistent dialectical reconstruction of the entire discussion as one critical discussion between two (collective) opponents. Since the discussion is mixed, each of the camps (or ‘tag-teams’) takes on at the same time the dialectical role of the collective protagonist and the collective antagonist. The anti-Obama camp’s role as the collective antagonist is first made clear in turn 3 in Starkiller©’s critical reaction to the argumentation advanced by dangdangdoodle in turn 2. Starkiller©’s question (‘What "rightwing" media are you referring to?’) is a rather subtle case of strategic manoeuvring: it can be analysed both as a request to provide a language usage
declarative (‘Could you please specify what "rightwing" media are you referring to?’) and as a proper critical reaction regarding the propositional content of the argument (‘Are there really any "rightwing" media having the qualities you are referring to?’ or ‘What examples of the "rightwing" media you are referring to can you give?’). Klunk, who in turn 4 takes on the role of the protagonist of the anti-rightwing position, responds to both: first by specifying the scope of dangdangdoodle’s argument (‘practically EVERY media outlet’) and then by providing a link to a table which shows a huge disproportion in ‘cable news appearances by members of Congress, January 26-28, 2009’ in favour of the Republican party. This triggers a long exchange of links and counter-links. In turn 5, fedora—another discussant in the role of the protagonist of the anti-Obama and the antagonist of the anti-rightwing position—starts with a specimen of critical reactions regarding the propositional content of argumentation: ‘Really?’ (‘Is it really the case that what you are claiming is correct?’). Further, however, s/he supplements this critical reaction with numerous links which are supposed to serve as counter-examples falsifying klunk’s claims.

From this message on, discussion (8.8) revolves around the acceptability of online sources of data (along the lines of the pattern described in the previous section): the major issue is which of the links are ‘individual biases’ and which of them provide an ‘objective tally’ (klunk, turn 6). In this discussion, klunk plays the role of the antagonist by trying to undermine the credibility of the sources quoted by fedora. S/he does so in a rather unique online manner: going through links provided by fedora, klunk finds that they are largely based on opinions of one single ‘media critic’ – Howard Kurtz. In a long message (8) klunk attempts to discredit Kurtz as an acceptable authority, inter alia by linking to various entries dedicated to Kurtz on www.crooksandliars.com – a Web-site documenting ‘specific examples of the egregiousness of rightwingnuts’ (klunk, turn 8). What klunk ultimately requests in turn 8 are online sources ‘backed up by full documentation supporting its methodology.’ However, since this line of discussion ends with klunk’s post no 8, the critical reactions and the counter-links are not responded to, and the requested methodologically acceptable sources are never provided.

A similar pattern of collective critical reactions regarding the propositional content of arguments can be observed in discussion (8.9). As many other online discussions (see section 6.3.2), this discussion starts with a quote from a news report – in this case a blog

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7 That a reaction expressed in ordinary discourse as a request to provide a language usage declarative can be actually used as a cover-up for a stronger form of a critical reaction (such as the criticism of the propositional content of argumentation) has been noted, e.g., by Snoeck Henkemans (1992).
entry on the ABC News Web-site reporting about Obama’s step-brother’s being arrested in Kenya for the possession of marijuana. From turns 5 and 6 the discussion turns into a vigorous dispute over the standpoint put forward by JTEM in turn 5: ‘Obama should submit a proposal to legalize marijuana in the US.’ The most controversial argument in this dispute is Kate_G’s claim (turn 8) (which supports her standpoint: ‘Obama should not legalize marijuana’) that ‘[Marijuana] causes people to rob and steal to support their habit. Just like heroin or any other addictive drug.’ A chain of critical reactions concerning this argument follows:

(8.9) Obama’s brother arrested for drug possession. Not unexpected from the brother of the man that admits cocaine use.
http://groups.google.com/group/alt.politics/browse_frm/thread/11be728259021c2d

1. Kate_G Feb 1 2009, 11:08 pm
<lol> "I don't know why they are charging me"  George Obama

Maybe he should pull that cloud over and walk back to reality.

President Obama's Half-Brother George Arrested
January 31, 2009 3:27 PM
The White House had no comment Saturday on the arrest in Kenya of President Barack Obama's half-brother George for possession of marijuana and resisting arrest.
[...]

5. JTEM Feb 2 2009, 12:54 am
Ironically, I couldn't think of a better time for him [Obama] to submit his proposal to legalize Marijuana. He could use his brother's arrest as an example of the money & resources we could save, even as we stimulated the economy and create new tax revenue streams.

6. Kate_G Feb 2 2009, 1:44 am
[...]
That's the stupidest statement I've heard in a while. I take it you're a pathetic addict?
[...]
And lets legalize heroin and murder while we're at it.

7. Ray Fischer Feb 2 2009, 2:05 am
[...]
Marijuana isn't addictive.
[...]
Marijuana doesn't kill people.

8. Kate_G Feb 2 2009, 3:35 am
[...]
Marijuana is a psychological addiction as opposed to being a physical addiction but an addiction none the less.
[...]
It causes people to rob and steal to support their habit. Just like heroin or any other addictive drug.
28. Tater Gumfries
Feb 2 2009, 4:18 pm
I call bullshit. Citations are in order, and no, your assertion is not a citation.
Tater

31. Kate_G
Feb 2 2009, 5:16 pm
For one, take the tests.
http://www.mcmaster.ca/health/hwc/Newsletters/Nov06/marijuana_quiz.htm
Unlike other illegal drugs, marijuana isn’t addictive.
If you answered - True, you are Incorrect.
[...]
Chronic marijuana abuse, like cigarette use, can create cancer and also results in respiratory problems such as regular chest colds, persistent coughs, an increased risk of pneumonia, and chronic bronchitis. Scientific evidence indicates that long-term, chronic marijuana use can even adversely affect the immune system and reproductive systems.
The Surgeon General's Warning on Marijuana
http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00001143.htm
[...]

33. martin
Feb 2 2009, 5:32 pm
You were asked for cites regarding your statement "It causes people to rob and steal to support their habit. Just like heroin or any other addictive drug.", not a load of bullshit.
Where are they?

95. Kate_G
Feb 4 2009, 8:41 pm
[...]
Cannabis is linked to rising child crime and harder drugs
http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/crime/article648195.ece
Cannabis use among Britain's young offenders is "out of control", up by 75 per cent in some areas and fuelling a crime epidemic, with youngsters stealing to fund their addictions, according to two studies.

96. martin
Feb 4 2009, 9:27 pm
Nothing about pot users robbing for a fix.

> Cannabis use among Britain’s young offenders is "out of control", up by 75 per cent in some areas and fuelling a crime epidemic, with youngsters stealing to fund their addictions, according to two studies.
> http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/reclassification-of-cannab...
which says no suck thing. Indeed, in the executive summary we find (ASB is anti-social behavior)
"In conclusion
Based on the various samples interviewed for this study, evidence for a link between young people’s cannabis use and ASB is slim. For the majority of these respondents, cannabis use by young people does not constitute or cause ASB. Rather, behaviour that is regarded as ASB is engaged in by many young people, a proportion of whom, in turn, smoke cannabis in public places – and drink alcohol. On the whole, respondents’ comments suggest that cannabis use does not lead to ASB (or indeed to criminal behaviour), and that police resources would be better focused elsewhere."

So you believe a newspaper report taking a university paper out of context when the paper says quite the opposite thing reported by the press. Indeed, further on in the paper it states that alcohol consumption is the area that would be better targeted to reduce ASB and criminal activities.

> http://article.wn.com/view/2008/11/29/Armed_Robbers_Open_Fire_at_Medi...
Nothing to do with looking for a pot fix

Nothing to do with looking for a pot fix - did you actually read it?
Lying fuckwit, these were dealers. How many pot users have 300kg of the stuff? How many tobacco addicts keep 300kg of the stuff. Grow up and stop lying.

Did you read it? How many pot users are growing 3000 plats 10’ high in their greenhouses? Again you're lying, not pot users looking for a fix.

These passages are another example of how various online discussants join in with their criticisms to form a collective antagonist. Ray Fischer, Tater Gumfries, and martin react critically viribus unitis against Kate_G’s arguments. Even though all three of them are also protagonists of their own standpoint (initially advanced in turn 5 by JTEM), and hence have a positive burden of proof to discharge, they manoeuvre to play persistent antagonists by launching repeated attacks on the propositional content of Kate_G’s argumentation, rather than arguing for their own standpoint. Moreover, these attacks are not counterarguments, but almost exclusively questions and requests which add to Kate’s burden of proof without incurring any burden on the side of the questioners.

Furthermore, in the sequence of the collective antagonist’s criticisms a certain order can be observed and clearly described with the help of the dialectical profile. First, any ‘citation’ that would support Kate_G’s argument—‘Marijuana causes people to rob and steal to support their habit’—is requested (by Tater Gumfries in turn 28) (see step 2.1 in

8 That is, the arguers making up the collective antagonist in this case manoeuvre to keep the discussion consistently non-mixed (simple) (see van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984: 87-89).
figure 7.1). Then, after Kate_G (turn 31) provides a number of sources which report marijuana’s addictiveness (step 3.2), cites that would serve as evidence for the causal relationship between marijuana use and criminality, rather than just addictiveness, are asked for (by martin in turn 33) (see steps 4.2-etc.). Following Kate_G’s provision of a number of such links (turn 95), all but one of them are dismissed by martin as irrelevant (repeatedly in turn 96: ‘Nothing about pot users robbing for a fix’). That means that sources referred to by Kate do not actually contain information about the causal relation between marijuana and criminality, but rather some other claims such as ‘marijuana is not good for your health’ or ‘criminal gangs are involved in marijuana trade,’ which means that Kate_G actually argues for a different standpoint. 9 Finally, the only link considered relevant (turn 96: ‘You found one report that apparently shows a connection between cannabis and criminal behavior’) is criticised as unacceptable, because the source referred to by Kate_G provides unreliable information in this instance (see 4.3-etc.). Martin, in his role of antagonist, checks the link provided by Kate_G (www.independent.co.uk) to find out that the primary source of the data used by the British newspaper was a report on Anti Social Behaviour prepared by King’s College London. He ‘digs up’ the original report on the College’s Web-site, provides a link to a full text of the report, and quotes one of its concluding paragraphs, which states that ‘evidence for a link between young people’s cannabis use and ASB is slim.’ Similarly to the examples analysed above, this line of discussion is discontinued after martin’s message, which means that Kate_G never directly responds to his criticisms.

Discussion (8.9) illustrates how different arguers in their role of collective antagonist explore many possible dialectical routes in a consistent fashion by advancing more and more thorough and specific critical reactions. Since each critical reaction targets a different aspect of Kate_G’s argumentation, it can be seen as a reasonable follow up to a previous critical reaction. Such a pattern of successive criticism is largely afforded by the features of online discussion: notably, everyone can join in and add to the pool of criticisms, as there are no clear regulations regarding turn-taking.

After the analysis of the fragments of online discussions, one can provide (at least partial) answer to research Question 1.1.1a: How do the restrictions and opportunities of online

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9 A basic pragma-dialectical understanding of irrelevance is that of a violation of rule 4 for a critical discussion, which corresponds to the classical fallacy of *ignoratio elenchi* (literally: ‘ignorance of refutation’ which amounts to ignoring the standpoint one was supposed to argue for). See van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992a: 133 and Hamblin, 1970: 31-32.
political forum discussions affect the arguers’ questioning of the acceptability of the premises used by their opponents? At least two ways in which conditions of the activity type of online political forum discussions affect arguers’ strategic manoeuvring in reacting critically against the propositional content of their opponents’ argumentation can be distinguished: the requests to provide quotes or links and the multiple criticism of the collective antagonist. As is evident in the examples analysed, these two patterns of critical reactions are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, they are employed together in many discussions adduced above. Yet, they are analytically independent: on the one hand, various criticisms regarding sources of data may be advanced by one and the same arguer and, on the other hand, groups of arguers may team up to criticise protagonists in ways other than by persistently asking for links. In fact, the collective antagonist may also react critically against the justificatory potential of argumentation advanced by an online arguer. Moreover, these two patterns are (primarily) related to two different aspects of strategic manoeuvring distinguished in pragma-dialectics.

The aspect of manoeuvring that is vital to the ‘provide quote or link’ pattern is the choice from topical potential (see section 7.3.2). Since parties to online political discussions characteristically do not draw lists of commonly acceptable starting points prior to discussions, a straightforward intersubjective identification procedure stipulated in the model of a critical discussion is hardly possible. Therefore, one cannot typically expect critical reactions such as ‘Did we agree on this before?’ Similarly, there are usually no firm agreements on specific sources of data in informal political discussions. Still, there seems to be a strong general convention requiring backing up one’s claims by at least some data available online. Hence, critical reactions in which requests to provide ‘quotes or links’ are expressed are to be expected. Different levels of specificity of such requests can be discerned: from general requests to provide any source whatsoever, to qualified calls for a respectable source, to strict demands for ‘full documentation supporting its methodology’ (see post no 8 in discussion 8.8). Such critical reactions referring to specific sources are unusual, and even out of point, in ordinary (that is, offline) informal (political) discussions but they do make sense on the Internet, where all kinds of data, including scientific articles, are available at a click of a mouse (and a bit of ‘googling’).

Moreover, in the situation where plenty of ready-made arguments for and against almost every issue are constantly circulating around the Internet, arguers, just as in the cases analysed above, tend to ‘outsource’ the defence of arguments (especially those based on factual data) to certain purportedly authoritative online resources. Because of that, the
critique of individual, original arguments may easily turn into the critique of online sources employed by one’s opponents. From an argumentative point of view, this shifts the problem of the acceptability of premises used by online arguers to the problem of acceptable authorities in public discourse (Jackson, 2008; Lewiński, 2008; Walton, 1989; Willard, 1990).10

In the pattern of the collective antagonist it is the aspect of the opportune audience frame that plays a key role (see section 7.3.1). In online polylogues groups of arguers may forge strategic, even if ephemeral, alliances, in which they join forces to argue for or criticise a given standpoint. Such alliances probably come into being along the lines of simple ideological divisions (such as anti- and pro-Obama), with members of each confronting group trying to satisfy and reinforce the beliefs of their own group. Yet, from the perspective of a critical discussion, exchanges between collectives of arguers may allow for a more thorough critical testing of standpoints and arguments: when the inventiveness of a single person is (temporarily) limited, others may (spontaneously) step in and lend support to a given position, notably the position of the antagonist. From the rhetorical perspective, the pattern of collective argumentation may engender the sense of ‘communion’ among the members of one collective – a crucial element in the adaptation to audience demand (see van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 1999: 485).

8.3 Analysis of critical reactions concerning the justificatory potential of argumentation

8.3.1 Third pattern: criticise as much as possible

Persistent criticisms regarding the acceptability of (the sources of) the protagonists’ propositions may, similarly to the discussions analysed above, lead to prolonged and seemingly futile exchanges which never bring about mutual agreement on the premises used in argumentation. Nevertheless, in some cases online arguers do agree on the content of propositions. Still, it does not mean that they cease their criticism – it may just as well

10 Dahlberg (2001: online) explains common requests for links in an online culture of argument in terms of a sceptical need to verify information provided by anonymous disputants: ‘Aware of the possibilities of fraud, participants often challenge any claims and supporting information that are not convincingly substantiated. Although it is sometimes a difficult task, claimants are expected to provide convincing support (from either offline or online sources) for their assertions before their positions become accepted by other participants.’ See also Donath (1999: 30).
mean that they move to another kind of criticism, i.e., to the criticism of the justificatory potential. An example of this is discussion (8.10). This discussion starts with a news report from www.boston.com in which a Democratic Congressman, Barney Frank, is quoted as accusing the Republican presidential candidate, John McCain, of an inconsistency: On the one hand, McCain is warning against voting for Obama in the upcoming elections, since Obama’s win may give Democrats a ‘unified control of government,’ i.e., the presidency and majority in both houses of Congress. On the other hand, he ‘didn’t seem to mind’ such a situation when the Republicans—McCain himself (Senator), Phil Gramm (another prominent Senator), Tom DeLay (Majority Leader of the United States House of Representatives, 2003-2005), and George Bush (President)—were in power:11

(8.10) "McCain didn't seem to mind unified control of government when it was him, Phil Gramm, Tom DeLay, and George Bush." 
http://groups.google.com/group/PoliticalForum/browse_frm/thread/9408f40eb41850a3?hl=en# 

"McCain didn't seem to mind unified control of government when it was him, Phil Gramm, Tom DeLay, and George Bush."
[...]
[...]

2. Gaar Oct 29 2008, 11:15 am
They didn't have a Filibuster proof Senate at any time during their tenure...

really please post the numbers of each party in the senate during that time.

The best they did was 55 Seats...
http://uspolitics.about.com/od/usgovernment/l/bl_party_division_2.htm

interesting but it doesn't address the issue of "McCain didn't mind unified control of government when it was him, Phil Gramm, Tom DeLay, and George Bush."

Not if you don't understand what a Filibuster is...
So I guess you can remain ignorant.

In this fragment of an online discussion, in turn 3 mike[move on]532, similarly to the antagonists quoted above, casts doubt on the acceptability of certain information provided

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11 The Republicans held a majority in the Senate between 2003 and 2007, but the name of the majority leader—Bill Frist—is not mentioned in the report.
by Gaar (‘really?’), and immediately requests further data substantiating Gaar’s claim (‘please post the numbers’). Gaar, in turn 4, fulfils the request and posts a link to a page which indeed in a nice table presents the numbers of the Democratic and the Republican share in both houses of the United States Congress from 1945 up till 2007. *mike*[move on]532 is compelled to accept (‘interesting but’) the rather unshakeable statistics confirming Gaar’s claim but immediately moves on to questioning the relevance of Gaar’s argument: ‘it doesn't address the issue of’ McCain’s alleged inconsistency (the topic of the discussion initiated by *mike*).

Such a dynamic progress of critical reactions exhibits the ‘first acceptability, then justification’ way of critical questioning, which can be reconstructed as following two main dialectical routes distinguished in the profile (see step 2.1-etc. and 2.2-etc. in figure 7.1). Interestingly, critical reactions can also go in the reverse order, that is in the ‘first justification, then acceptability’ route. An example of this can be found in discussion (8.11):

(8.11) *Is Obama's candidacy constitutional?*

http://groups.google.com/group/politicalforum/browse_frm/thread/1eccdf1cfd416a11/5aedb1815674abde?tv=1#5aedb1815674abde

Bloggers are raising questions about Illinois Sen. Barack Obama's qualifications to be U.S. president, because of the secrecy over his birth certificate and the requirement presidents be "natural-born" U.S. citizens.
[...]
http://worldnetdaily.com/index.php?fa=PAGE.view&pagId=66787

2. mike532 Jun 11 2008, 11:48 am
we do know McCain was born outside the united states !

You are correct about McCain. He was born in Panama to a military father and a US citizen mother. That means he is a US citizen. If you cannot stay on topic - start a new thread - as you like to say!

4. mike532 Jun 11 2008, 12:01 pm
and obama was born in the united states to an American citizen !

5. RichardForbes Jun 11 2008, 12:07 pm
You, of course have the evidence for that statement - right?

6. mike532 Jun 11 2008, 12:17 pm
[ The reports released to date show Obama was born in Honolulu to Barack Hussein Obama Sr., of Nyangoma-Kogelo, Kenya, and Ann Dunham, of Wichita, Kan. ]

next time little dick read the article in question !
Read it Mike. Maybe you would like to provide a link to the documents you cite as support. Where did they come from? Are they certified? Do they validate he was born in the US? Simple questions with seemingly simple answers you did not provide.

8. mike532  Jun 11 2008, 1:10 pm
http://worldnetdaily.com/index.php?fa=PAGE.view&pageId=66787
here is the link you asked for little dick and once again try reading the article! it would help you to keep from making a fool of yourself in the future

The initiating message of discussion (8.11) raises some doubts concerning Obama’s status as a ‘natural-born U.S. citizen,’ a condition sine qua non for becoming president of the USA. In the broad context of the bi-polar American political system, and in the specific context of this stage of a presidential race (where both McCain and Obama were sure of becoming official nominees of their parties), raising doubts about Obama can be read as giving arguments for McCain. This interpretation is further strengthened by the fact that the part of the online article quoted in the first post by mark contains only information on Obama’s problems, and not on McCain’s, which are mentioned in the original article accessible through the link provided (http://worldnetdaily.com). Therefore, mike532’s response in turn 2 can be seen as a kind of implicit tu quoque attack: (You too are having problems with your candidate’s legitimacy), because ‘we do know McCain was born outside the united states’!

RichardForbes’ reaction in turn 3 combines the acknowledgement of the propositional content of mike532’s argument (‘You are correct about McCain. He was born in Panama to a military father and a US citizen mother’) with a criticism of topical relevance (‘That means he is a US citizen. If you cannot sty on topic - start a new thread - as you like to say!’). Mike532, in turn 4, puts forward a counterargument meant to underscore the strength of Obama’s legitimacy as a presidential candidate when compared with McCain: ‘and obama was born in the united states to an American citizen!’ In advancing this argument mike532 is not only supporting his implicit standpoint (‘Obama’s candidacy is constitutional’) but also trying to make the relevance of his previous argument (turn 2) obvious to RichardForbes. It seems that mike532’s strategy of restoring relevance is successful, for Richard abandons the relevance criticism and, instead, by explicitly asking (in a tag construction) about the sources of mike’s claims, turns to doubting the acceptability of mike’s counterargument put forward in turn 4. The ensuing discussion follows the ‘provide link or quote’ pattern of an in-depth source criticism described above.
From the pragma-dialectical point of view, critical reactions in (8.10) and (8.11) can be quite straightforwardly reconstructed as contributions to an ordered critical testing of the protagonist’s position at the argumentation stage of a critical discussion. Still, of course, online debaters are probably hardly aware that they take a particular dialectical route. Rather, they make use of some resources of online forums. In general, the openness and open-endedness of discussions allow arguers to criticise as many elements of the protagonist’s argumentation as possible: since there are no limits on the number and length of messages sent, critical exchanges can be quite thorough and extensive. Moreover, in reacting critically, online antagonists have the opportunity to base their successive criticisms on distinct conventions of online forums (see section 7.3.2). In discussion (8.10), after some requested, and rather incontestable, online data are presented to the questioning antagonist, s/he pursues critical questioning by bringing up another convention of online discussion, namely, topical relevance. In discussion (8.11) topical relevance is, reversely, the first line of attack followed by a scrutiny of the online data adduced.

**8.3.2 Fourth pattern: topical irrelevance as weak justification**

As discussed in sections 6.3.2 and 7.3.2, in contrast to many institutionalised argumentative activity types, the conventions of online political discussion forums do not specify the admissibility and use of particular argument schemes. However, when it comes to procedural requirements, a general topical relevance is expected from the discussants.¹² Both general rules of online netiquette and specific regulations of many of the discussion groups explicitly require that arguments be relevant in the emerging structure of the thread. Those who do not fulfil this requirement can be reproached for making a wrong type of a move – instead of a relevant, fitting response to the previous argumentation, they seem to be starting a new topical thread. (This is exactly what RichardForbes is accusing mike532 of doing in turn 3 of discussion (8.11).)

*Topical* relevance, a quality of discourse studied in descriptive approaches to communication, is by no means equivalent to the notion or *argumentative* relevance. In particular, topical relevance belongs to the realm of interpretative relevance, rather than to the analytic or evaluative approaches to relevance used in argumentation theory (see van

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¹² As has been observed, ‘violations of sequential coherence,’ which encompasses topical relevance, ‘are the rule rather than the exception in CMC [Computer-Mediated Communication]’ (Herring, 1999: online). However, even if indeed often not observed, netiquette guidelines to ‘be brief and to the point’ and ‘don't wander off-topic,’ can always serve as a basis for criticising others’ argumentation.
Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992b). One implication of this is that ordinary arguers’
interpretative judgments of relevance may significantly depart from an argumentation
analyst’s theoretically grounded evaluation:

[...] certain relevant connections can escape their attention, and they may dismiss as irrelevant
certain elements in the discourse which are of crucial importance to achieving a certain goal, notably
that of resolving the difference of opinion. (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992b: 144)

Simply said, ordinary arguers may criticise as irrelevant elements of discourse which are
relevant from an argumentative point of view. For instance, in discussion (8.10), one can
quite easily reconstruct the argumentative relevance of Gaar’s argument (‘They didn’t
have a Fillibuster proof Senate at any time during their tenure’) by seeing it as an element
of a complex (coordinative and subordinative) argumentation structure of the like: ‘One
should vote for McCain, because he is right in warning against the Democrats having a
unified control over government and there is nothing wrong in him not minding the unified
control by the Republicans in the past, because they “didn’t have a Fillibuster proof
Senate...”’ Yet, mike[move on]532 decides to accuse Gaar of irrelevance, especially that it
is mike who originated this discussion thread and thus in accordance with online
conventions has a privileged position as, say, a guardian of topical relevance.

Ordinary arguers, in their interpretative judgments of relevance, may resort to
different types of relevance—topical, conversational, premissary, global, local—that are
clearly distinguishable analytically, but in real-life discourse often blend together (Krabbe,
1992). Therefore, the naïve application of the notion of relevance may be confusingly
vague, and accusations of irrelevance can be used rather indistinctively. For an
argumentation analyst studying critical reactions in online forum discussions, however,
rather than confusing, it may be illuminating to see how accusations of topical relevance
can be employed by online arguers in a strategic function of criticising argumentative
relevance.

An example of this is the following fragment of online discussion (8.12) initiated
by Euwe, who chooses to put forward his standpoint (‘Republicans like Georgian
democracy better than Palestinian democracy’) in the very title of the thread and,
subsequently, supports it by an argument in the form of a rhetorical question (turn 2). In
response to that, Kamakazee quotes a report from www.foxnews.com entitled ‘U.S.
Refuses Israel Weapons to Attack Iran’ which, among other things, quotes Israel’s defence
minister as saying that the United States ‘does not see an action against Iran as the right
thing to do at the moment.’ This counter-argument is vigorously criticised as irrelevant by *Euwe* (turn 6):

(8.12) **Republicans like Georgian democracy better than Palestinian democracy**
http://groups.google.com/group/abc_politics_forum/browse_frm/thread/5ba9041db07e9966?hl=en

1. **Euwe**
   Aug 13 2008, 8:35 am
   ...I wonder what's up with that?

2. **Euwe**
   Aug 13 2008, 9:29 am
   Maybe shelling villages is ok as long as you're not Muslim?

3. **Kamakazee**
   Aug 13 2008, 1:23 pm
   Sure. Brilliant, again.
   Report: U.S. Refuses Israel Weapons to Attack Iran
   […]
   The United States "does not see an action against Iran as the right thing to do at the moment," the defense minister said, but shared Israel's view that "no option should be removed from the table".
   http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,402708,00.html
   I think you're jumping ahead of yourself. I think you meant the Obamas.

6. **Euwe**
   Aug 13 2008, 8:40 pm
   […]
   My post was about the Georgians shelling Tskhinvali being judged not terrorism because they're not Muslim - how in the fuck do you get to your reply about Israel attacking Iran from Palestinian democracy?
   You're moving from irrelevant to irrational.

7. **Kamakazee**
   Aug 13 2008, 8:45 pm
   Because your lunk-headed logic assumes that we have a problem with the Georgian conflict because they are non-muslims, whereas we have no problem "preventing" (or whatever the hell you might want to call it) a Palestinian "democracy" because of our relationship with Israel. My post debunks that generally; we disagree with Israel where appropriate, even when it appears their goals might be our goals (attacking Iran, in your book anyway).
   You're moving from lazy and bloated to tepid and infected.

Euwe’s accusation of irrelevance directed against Kamakazee’s counterargument is, on most obvious interpretation, based on topical grounds. Still, similarly to cases (8.10) and (8.11) above, ‘how […] do you get to your reply about Israel attacking Iran from Palestinian democracy?’ can be seen both as an accusation of lack of topical relevance and lack of an argumentative link between the Kamakazee’s counterargument and Euwe’s original standpoint. Indeed, the way Kamakazee attempts to defend the relevance of his point (turn 7)—for example by mentioning Euwe’s ‘lunk-headed logic’—clearly refers to an argumentative, rather than a purely topical, relation between both discussants’ messages.
Cases like (8.12) seem to confirm the point that ordinary users’ relevance criticisms may be ‘not very well-behaved’ in view of the precise theoretical distinctions of argumentation theory (Krabbe, 1992: 280). Interesting, in this respect, is discussion (8.13) in which Liberal mike 532 uses the accusation of topical irrelevance to attack an argument from analogy:

(8.13) Zoo pulls Creation Museum promotion
http://groups.google.com/group/PoliticalForum/browse_frm/thread/bd175b3d0189d728?hl=en#

1. Liberal mike 532 Dec 8 2008, 12:29 pm
Zoo pulls Creation Museum promotion
The Cincinnati Zoo and the Creation Museum launched a joint promotional deal last week to draw attention to their holiday attractions,
http://www.courier-journal.com/article/20081201/NEWS01/81201045
It worked, but not the way zoo and museum officials had hoped.

The zoo pulled out of the deal Monday after receiving dozens of angry calls and e-mails about the partnership, which offered reduced prices to anyone who bought tickets to the zoo’s Festival of Lights and the museum’s Christmas celebration, Bethlehem’s Blessing.
Most of the protests echoed the same theme: the Creation Museum promotes a religious point of view that conflicts with the zoo’s scientific mission.
[...]

34. Kamakaze Dec 8 2008, 2:56 pm
Too bad they didn't set up an abortion booth, I'm sure you would have been overjoyed.

35. Liberal mike 532 Dec 8 2008, 3:05 pm
a booth to supply free condoms and other forms of birth control would be a great idea!

36. Kamakaze Dec 8 2008, 6:45 pm
One and the same; soem people use abortion for birth control.

37. mike 532 Dec 8 2008, 9:50 pm
so what?

38. Kamakaze Dec 8 2008, 10:10 pm
from a libbie perspective, not much....

39. mike 532 Dec 8 2008, 10:21 pm
neither the article or this thread is about abortion you chose to try and make that the issue ! why?

40. Kamakaze Dec 8 2008, 11:08 pm
kind of a compare/contrast thing. get it?

41. mike 532 Dec 9 2008, 9:26 am
try to stick with the topic of the thread.
The discussion episode most relevant to the analysis of (8.13) starts at turn 36 when Kamakaze advances an argument from analogy: using condoms and abortion is ‘one and the same.’ Mike 532’s initial reaction—‘So what?’—is a specimen of a broad-type relevance criticism (in the sense of a connection criticism to the effect: ‘what is the bearing of your arguments on your standpoint?’) (Krabbe, 1992: 274-275). Further, in turns 39 and 41, rather than trying to ask obvious critical questions regarding the application of the argument scheme from analogy (such as ‘Are they really “one and the same”?’ or ‘Aren’t there any significant differences between using condoms and abortion?’), Mike 532 chooses to ground his criticism in the requirement of topical relevance. Especially the directive ‘try to stick with the topic of the thread’ is a straightforward, even if far from reflexive, reference to the topical restrictions of threaded online discussion. In this case, again, making use of some basic conventions of online discussions intermingles with argumentatively pertinent problems.

These analyses shed some light on the way in which the research question 1.1.1b, How do the restrictions and opportunities of online political forum discussions affect arguers’ questioning of the justificatory force of their opponents’ arguments?, can be answered. First, informal online political discussions allow arguers to criticise their opponent’s position in as many ways as possible. This means, basically, that the criticisms of the acceptability of the premises used by the protagonist can be freely followed by the criticisms of the justificatory force of argumentation (or the other way round). Therefore, the third pattern analysed here—criticise as much as possible—pertains by definition to both main types of critical reactions distinguished in argumentation theory. Moreover, similarly to the collective antagonist, this is not a pattern of critical reactions truly unique to online discussions, as it may possibly be employed in other types of argumentative activity. What is special to online discussions is that, contrary to many other activity types, chances to thoroughly and persistently react critically by targeting various distinct elements of the opponent’s argumentation are not limited in any direct way. Online antagonists can simply make the most of the opportunities to uninhibitedly criticise the opinions they find weakly justified, thus fully exploring the topical potential for reacting critically.

Second, in reacting critically against the justificatory force of their opponents’ argumentation, online arguers draw on one of the explicitly recognised conventions of discussion forums, that is, on the requirement of topical relevance. In online argumentative
discussions, which should by definition develop along topical lines, an accusation of a
topical irrelevance is not only a clear reproach but also a strong strategic manoeuvre.
Criticisms of topical relevance can be analysed as manoeuvres meant to gain rhetorical
advantages by limiting the topical scope of the discussion (or de-contextualising it). That is
to say that critical reactions in which the protagonist is asked to strictly ‘stick to the topic’
are, from an argumentative point of view, a ‘catch-all’ category: an analyst can reconstruct
from them criticisms of argument schemes based on analogy (see discussion 8.13),
criticisms of complex, subordinative argumentation structures (8.10), as well as criticisms
of counterarguments used by the opponent (8.11 and 8.12).

The functioning of such ‘all-in-one’ criticisms of topical relevance can be
expounded through the distinctions regarding various types of relevance developed in
pragma-dialectics (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992b; 2004: Ch. 4). In accusing
someone of irrelevance, online arguers draw on a particular, naïve notion of ‘interpretative
relevance’ – messages that are perceived as not fulfilling the simple requirement of
‘sticking to the topic’ are criticised as infractions of the basic convention of relevance in
the activity type. Such naïve or interpretative criticisms, however, can be reconstructed
from the perspective of argumentation theory as targeting the relevance of the protagonist’s
argumentation in an ‘analytic’ sense – after all, as analysed above, criticisms of topical
relevance involve criticisms of the justificatory force of argumentation. All the same, this
does not imply that online arguers employ in their criticisms the concept of relevance in a
theoretically ‘normative’ sense. Criticising the opponent for being (topically) irrelevant
does not always amount to pointing out a specific fallacy of relevance. Rather, it means
that there is ‘something wrong’ with the justification of the opponent’s standpoint: it is a
task of argumentation analysts to reconstruct a given critical reaction as pertaining to the
protagonist’s use of an inadmissible argument scheme, a wrong application of an argument
scheme, arguing for a different standpoint altogether, or some other flaw in justifying a
standpoint.

8.4 The management of the burden of proof in critical reactions on the Internet

In order to provide additional insight into the strategic function of the patterns of reacting
critically in online political forum discussions disclosed above, in this concluding section I
will analyse the patterns in terms of strategic management of the burden of proof.
The rhetorical goal of reacting critically in argumentative discourse has been specified above (section 7.3) as increasing the protagonist’s burden of proof regarding the propositional content or the force of justification of argumentation. The realisation of this goal can coincide with the antagonist’s strategic attempts to decrease his own burden of proof. As a result, a balance (or rather imbalance) in the commitments of the arguers that is opportune to the antagonist can be reached: an arguer in the role of the protagonist has a heavy positive burden of proof to discharge, while an arguer in the role of the antagonist has few commitments to defend. Various strategic manoeuvres that can be employed by the antagonists are aimed, more or less directly, at achieving this rhetorical goal.

One of the antagonist’s basic strategies is to opportunely minimise the common ground for having argumentative discussion. This strategy is most evident in manoeuvring in the third pattern described above (‘criticise as much as possible’), but it applies in fact to all of the patterns. By reacting critically to different elements of the protagonist’s argumentation, the antagonist refuses to accept certain elements on which the protagonist attempted to build his argumentation. In accordance with the dialectical rules, every statement which does not explicitly belong to the set of commonly accepted starting points requires further justification through an intersubjective identification procedure, a proper application of an agreed method of adding new information, a sub-discussion, or an intersubjective testing procedure. It is an obligation of the protagonist to provide such a satisfactory justification. As long as the protagonist is ready to advance further arguments, but has not done so yet, in accordance with critical principles, the antagonist can claim nothing more than a provisional victory, that is, can uphold his doubts in the ongoing discussion pending the protagonist’s response. Unfortunately, the dialectical difference between argumentative procedures being successfully concluded in the antagonist’s favour (the protagonist has to abandon his standpoint as untenable) and not being concluded at all (the protagonist still has ways to back up his standpoint) may be very easily glossed over in actual circumstances – in both cases the ordinary critic may claim to get in the last word. In such an account, the patterns of persistently requesting links and criticising the relevance of the opponents’ argumentation can be seen as strategic attempts of the antagonists to keep the intersubjective procedures at the argumentation stage of a critical discussion constantly open and, in consequence, to claim victory in online discussion.

Online political forum discussions lend themselves well to strategic attempts by the antagonists aimed at exploiting the imbalance in the burden of proof between them and the protagonists. The opportunity to play a systematic doubter in online political discussions is
directly related to the institutional goal of these discussions: they do not have to lead to any specific outcome formulated in terms of a clear result to be reached within certain constraints of time. That is why pure critical doubting (i.e., taking on the role of the antagonist in a consistently non-mixed dispute) does not impede by any means a reasonable progress of online discussion. Moreover, even in mixed disputes, arguers manoeuvre strategically to continuously express critical reactions against their opponents’ argumentation, rather than defend their own position. This is especially evident is discussions (8.9) in which many discussants play together the role of a collective antagonist against the argumentation of a single protagonist.

All in all, reacting critically in online political forums comes cheap, as it were, since there is no positive burden of proof tied to being critical. An unequivocal assessment of the opportunities to be critical cannot easily be given. On the one hand, persistent criticisms are not futile: even if they do not lead to finding acceptable material and procedural starting points for a resolution of a difference of opinion between participants, they at least provide materials for consideration (by both participants and third parties). And that should be conducive to better critical opinion-formation. On the other hand, open-ended, collective, and pseudonymous argumentation creates the problem of distributed, or even diluted, responsibility: since everyone can leave the discussion at any time, no single person can be seen as an agent who would be willing and able to carry the burden of proof successfully from the confrontation and opening to the point of coming to a reasonable conclusion, and thus to the point at which a difference of opinion is resolved.