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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Citation for published version (APA):

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10.1 The main results

In this study I have set out to shed light on the conditions that the context of Internet political forum discussions creates for argumentation, and to trace the impact of these conditions on the way arguers react critically in their online argumentative exchanges. To reach this goal, I have first examined contemporary approaches to the study of argumentation in context (Chapters 2-4). Second, I have analysed online political discussions as a context for argumentation, starting from a general description of their argumentative characteristics, and moving towards investigation of specific types of critical reactions distinctive to online discourse (Chapters 5-9).

Argumentation theory has been increasingly attentive to the study of ordinary argumentation in various contextualised settings. Distinct views on how to conceptualise recognisable types of contexts have been proposed. Three such views have gained prominence in contemporary argumentation studies: Walton and Krabbe’s concept of dialogue types, Jackson, Jacobs, and Aakhus’s notion of argumentation designs, and the pragma-dialectical conception of argumentative activity types. In order to assess their comparative applicability to analysing the phenomenon of critical reactions in online discussions, in Chapter 2 I have adopted three criteria that any scientific theory should meet: (theoretical) efficacy, (empirical) well-groundedness, and (methodological) parsimony. In accordance with these criteria, firstly, an approach to studying argumentation in context that is theoretically efficacious provides a precise definition of the notion of context (whether a dialogue type, design or activity type) and clarifies its functions in the study of argumentation. Secondly, (empirical) well-groundedness means that the characteristics that are attributed to different types of contexts are based on methodical observation of argumentative reality. Thirdly, a methodologically parsimonious approach offers a coherent set of well-established methods conducive to examining peculiarities of particular contexts, such as online forum discussions.
The results of the investigations in Chapter 2 show how Walton and Krabbe’s concept of dialogue types fails to meet these three criteria. Firstly, dialogue types are conceptualised as theoretical, normative models that function as a source of varied, contextualised standards of reasonableness. At the same time, they bear resemblance to some actual contexts of discourse. This leads to confusion regarding the status of dialogue types in the analysis and evaluation of argumentation. Secondly, despite resemblance to actual contexts, the description of dialogue types is not substantiated by any sound empirical study of argumentative practice. Finally, while some methodological concepts proposed by Walton and Krabbe seem redundant (dialectical shifts, mixed dialogues), other concepts are conspicuously underdeveloped: notably, Walton and Krabbe propound no clear methods of analysis and reconstruction of contextualised discourse. In sum, despite Walton and Krabbe’s attempts at grasping argumentation as inherently contextualised activity, when it comes to detailed studies of specific phenomena of discourse in context they have little to offer.

Jackson, Jacobs, and Aakhus’s notion of argumentation designs, examined in Chapter 3, pertains to actually occurring contexts (or formats) for discussion which are amenable to theoretically motivated, practical improvements. In accordance with such a notion, Jackson, Jacobs, and Aakhus’s study of different designs focuses on easily upgradeable computer-mediated contexts of argumentation and starts from concrete empirical analyses of their argumentative characteristics. Therefore, their study provides observations regarding online argumentative practices that are useful to the investigations of this dissertation. At the same time, Jackson, Jacobs, and Aakhus offer no comprehensive theory of argumentation that clearly lays out the methodological tools that are indispensable to investigating critical reactions in online discussions.

By contrast, the pragma-dialectical conception of argumentative activity types, discussed in Chapter 4, is incorporated into a consistently developed, systematic theory of argumentation. Argumentative activity types are defined as empirical entities whose function in the theory is to give a better understanding of how argumentation is conventionally disciplined in various institutionalised contexts. Description of any activity type presupposes a detailed analysis of the conditions for argumentation prevalent in the activity type under scrutiny. To this end, pragma-dialectics offers a comprehensive set of concepts and methodological tools: both for examining the main parameters of argumentative activity types, and for reconstructing and evaluating argumentative exchanges taking place in the context of a given activity type. One of such crucial concepts
is the notion of strategic manoeuvring, which enables us to analyse actual argumentative exchanges as sequences of dialectically relevant moves made by arguers with a view of rhetorical gains.

The basic result of a comparative review of the three approaches to studying argumentation in context is that pragma-dialectics meets the criteria set at the outset most satisfactorily. Therefore, this approach has been used as the basis for analysing contextual restrictions on, and opportunities for, reacting critically in online political forum discussions.

The analysis of the argumentative features of online political forum discussions—central to this dissertation—have been carried out in Chapters 5 to 9. In accordance with the arrangement of the research questions, the line of the analysis moves from the general to the specific. First, in Chapters 5 and 6 I have provided an answer to basic Question 1: What kind of conditions for argumentation does the context of online political discussion forums create?

In Chapter 5 I have examined two fundamental issues regarding online political forum discussions. In the first place, I have provided a pre-theoretical description of the technological design of discussions held in the system of Google Groups. Details such as the graphical interface of the discussions, their asynchronous character, organisation into topical threads, open access, pseudonymity, availability of the record of past and ongoing exchanges, and lack of moderation constitute the technological framework for online argumentation. In the second place, I have specified the institutional goal of informal online political discussions within the domain of political communication. In accordance with the pragma-dialectical account of institutional discourse, and drawing on recent developments in political theory, I have argued that online discussions belong to the genre of political deliberation, but are aimed at informal opinion-formation, rather than efficient decision-making. Moreover, it is exactly the process of advancing and criticising arguments in publicly accessible fora that leads to a formation of externalised, publicly accountable political opinions.

In order to spell out methodically the argumentative conditions under which informal online political forum discussions take place, in Chapter 6 I have provided their pragma-dialectical characterisation in terms of the four parameters of an argumentative activity type. First, due to a contentious character of online political disputes in which disagreements seem to prevail, their initial situation has been described as an expected
mixed or non-mixed disagreement regarding political opinions. Second, when it comes to *procedural and material starting points* for discussions, arguers are constrained, notably, by the special features of design of computer-mediated discourse (described in Chapter 5), as well as by the explicit regulative rules of a particular forum and implicit general netiquette; moreover, material starting points (premises) used in discussions are characterised by ideological divisions, yet, thanks to hyper-linking, are easily available online. Third, in terms of *means of argumentation and criticism*, online political discussions are an activity in which incompatible standpoints are defended in critical exchanges among many pseudonymous participants who may team up to play the role of the collective antagonist; argumentative exchanges are organised into topical threads that may fork out into simultaneously held lines of discussion developing in an argumentatively relevant way. Finally, as venues for open-ended informal exchanges of arguments and criticisms, online forums do not require any explicitly established *outcome*, even though for some members of the audience a difference of opinion may be resolved.

Based on the characterisation of online political forum discussions in terms of an argumentative activity type, it becomes clear why one of the crucial features of this activity are the fairly unconstrained opportunities for reacting critically. By their rudimentary design and loose communicative conventions, online discussions encourage open-ended and contentious exchanges stimulated by freely performed critical reactions.

In order to scrutinise the conditions for reacting critically in online discussions, in Chapter 7 I have moved to the more specific *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? Seeking an answer to this question from the perspective of integrated pragma-dialectics means that the focus of research is on the antagonist’s strategic manoeuvring in reacting critically in what can be reconstructed as the argumentation stage of a critical discussion. In order to characterise the conditions for critical reactions in the argumentative activity type of online political forum discussions in terms of restrictions on and opportunities for strategic manoeuvring, two tasks have been realised in Chapter 7.

First, I have specified the dialectical goals and means of reacting critically in an ideal critical discussion. The goal of reacting critically at the argumentation stage is defined in pragma-dialectics as a critical testing of the protagonist’s argumentation. This general goal can be reached by the antagonist’s reacting critically in two basic ways, that is, against the propositional content and the justificatory potential of the protagonist’s
argumentation. In order to spell out the exact dialectical ways in which these two basic types of critical reactions can be performed in a reasonable discussion, I have developed a core dialectical profile for the argumentation stage. Such a core profile, based on the rules for a critical discussion stipulated by van Eemeren and Groothorst, specifies all the dialectically relevant types of critical reactions and the dialectical routes that can be taken depending on the type of critical reactions that are performed. Moreover, since every critical reaction performed in ordinary discourse can be reconstructed as a specific move in the profile, the impact of contextual conditions on the actual arguers’ strategic choice of particular types of critical reactions can be precisely grasped with the help of the profile.

Second, I have stipulated the rhetorical goal of reacting critically as increasing the protagonist’s burden of proof regarding the propositional content or the force of justification of his argumentation. In their attempts to realise this goal in a reasonable and efficient way, actual arguers coordinate three aspects of strategic manoeuvring: adaptation to audience demand, topical selection and the choice of presentational devices. I have shown how the management of these three aspects in reacting critically is affected by the features of the argumentative activity type of online forum discussions. First, online discussions impose serious restrictions on getting at the audience demand. This is largely because the very notion of the audience is vague: in pseudonymous online forums in which participation may be fluently changing and the actual readership is unknown, the audience is multilayered, and can be assumed to be divided along ideological lines, thus becoming multiple and mixed. This renders an opportune adaptation to the frame of the audience as a whole a difficult task. At the same time, online arguers have an opportunity to address different audiences: by collectively criticising someone’s standpoint or argumentation, arguers create pseudonymous virtual camps which may cement group opinions against the opinions of the opposite camps. In this way, both friends and foes are simultaneously addressed. Second, the aspect of the selection from the topical potential of critical reactions is clearly affected by the features of online discussions. Since they are informal and loosely scripted activities, online discussions do not require explicit agreements on shared premises or argument schemes. This gives any antagonist an opportunity to extensively criticise all the elements of the protagonist’s argumentation to which the antagonist is not committed himself. More in particular, in an information-saturated online environment, in which all kinds of sources of data are available through hyper-links, antagonists can easily criticise arguments which are not supported by external online references. Apart from that, arguers can question the lack of topical relevance of their opponents’ contributions. Third,
what affects a strategic choice of presentational devices in reacting critically in online discussions, is the spoken/written character of asynchronous Internet discussions: they are informal conversational exchanges which, like many written texts, are recorded and thus easily retraceable. This restricts the antagonist’s attempts at an opportune reformulation of the protagonist’s standpoints or arguments to which the antagonist reacts critically.

Once the impact of the constraints of online forum discussions on the ways critical reactions can be performed had been described in Chapter 7, I moved to analysing how critical reactions are actually performed in online discussions. Accordingly, the goal of Chapter 8 has been to answer two specific research questions: 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?, and 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 answering these questions, actual patterns of strategic manoeuvring in reacting critically that are recognisable in online discussions have been analysed and accounted for in terms of the conditions for argumentation prevalent in the argumentative activity type of online discussion forums described in Chapters 6 and 7.

In order to provide a (partial) answer to questions 1.1.1a and 1.1.1b, I have described four patterns of online strategic manoeuvring in reacting critically that can be expected under the conditions for argumentation analysed in the previous chapters. The first pattern—requests to provide quotes or links—pertains to the acceptability of premises and, dialectically speaking, amounts to requesting to back up one’s arguments by adding new information. This pattern is afforded by the key technical feature of the World Wide Web, that is, hyper-linking. As the analysis of fragments of online discussions shows, arguers who are aware of the opportunity of easy linking explore the topical potential for reacting critically by persistently asking their opponents for links or quotes supporting the opponents’ argumentation.

The second pattern—multiple criticism of the collective antagonist—can be used both in criticisms against the acceptability of the premises and against the justificatory force of argumentation. This pattern, which consists in many individual arguers joining forces and consistently playing the dialectical role of antagonist, is afforded by the polylogual character of online disputes. Through a collective performance of critical reactions, groups of arguers reinforce (critical) positions of individual arguers, thus expanding the process of critical testing beyond the limits of a single ‘critical tester.’
Rhetorically speaking, arguers involved in collective critical testing explicitly adapt to the demands of like-minded participants to online discussions.

The third pattern—criticise as much as possible—amounts to a comprehensive criticism in which the acceptability of the premises is questioned in a sequence together with the justificatory force of the opponent’s argumentation. In dialectical terms, by following this pattern online arguers attempt to take as many of the critical routes described in the dialectical profile for the argumentation stage as possible. In rhetorical terms, arguers attempt to minimise the common ground for discussion, thereby diminishing the protagonist’s chances for defending his standpoint successfully. Such extensive criticism is possible because of the open-ended and informal character of online political discussions studied here: arguers can freely take as many critical turns as they want and thus continuously expand their critical reacting.

In the fourth pattern—topical irrelevance as weak justification—arguers take advantage of one of the most explicitly stated constraints of online threaded discussions, namely, topical organisation of exchanges. I have argued that accusations of topical irrelevance may involve various types of dialectically relevant criticisms of the justificatory potential of the protagonist’s argumentation: from doubts about a correct application of argument schemes, to doubts regarding the relevance of sub-arguments to the main standpoint, to criticisms of counterarguments.

In view of the rhetorical goal of reacting critically stipulated in this study, I have considered the strategic management of the burden of proof as the main factor underlying the four patterns of critical reactions distinguished in Chapter 8. In order to achieve an advantageous distribution of the burden of proof, online arguers, in the first place, attempt to consistently take the role of antagonists (whether individually or collectively). Further, by making an opportune use of the conventional online requirements to provide links and be topically relevant, antagonists try to criticise as many elements of the protagonist’s argumentation as possible. All such manoeuvres can be understood as aimed at increasing the opponents’ burden of proof and minimising their chances to conclude the discussion in their favour. The ultimate goal of strategic manoeuvring in reacting critically in online disputes is, just as in other types of argumentative activity, to win the discussion.

In the final analytic chapter of the dissertation, Chapter 9, I have set out to address two research questions. The first of them, question 1.1.2a, is analytic: How do the restrictions and opportunities of online political forum discussions affect the arguers’ attempts at reformulating their opponents’ arguments and standpoints? I have shown that
online discussions allow for a quick and precise comparison of the antagonists’ critical reactions with the protagonist’s original position. Because of that, the antagonists’ implausible reformulations of what the protagonist actually argued for—traditionally analysed under the heading of the straw man fallacy—can be easily spotted and sanctioned. Still, online antagonists may opportunely present their opponents’ standpoints and arguments by exploring the aspect of pragmatic interpretation of language-in-use. This is to say that critical reactions in online discussions may involve subtle shifts of meaning which are difficult to detect and evaluate.

In order to cope with the difficulties encountered in the evaluation of antagonists’ reformulations in online discussions, research question 1.1.2b has been addressed: What kind of criteria for identifying straw man attacks should argumentation analysts apply in their evaluation of critical reactions in online political forum discussions? I have proposed that the main criterion for assessing the soundness of the antagonist’s reformulations of the standpoint and arguments advanced by the protagonist is the pragmatic plausibility of the reformulation. Moreover, since in some activity types the antagonists are allowed to react critically to the weakest plausible interpretation of the protagonist’s position, additional criteria for identifying straw man attacks, such as the principle of charity, should not apply universally but rather contextually. In particular, I have argued that online political discussion forums are an activity type in which critical reactions which are contextually plausible but uncharitable should not be evaluated by an argumentation analyst as instances of the straw man fallacy.

10.2 Implications of the results and directions for future research

A question still to be addressed after the main results of the study have been presented is how these results contribute to the study of argumentation in online political discussion forums. In what follows I will discuss some theoretical as well as some practical implications of the results, sketching some directions for future research in the process.

The discussion of the three distinct approaches in argumentation theory (Chapters 2-4) establishes what is needed from a theory aiming to investigate peculiarities of various contexts of argumentation. Crucial to this task is a well-developed and applicable methodology for analysing contextualised discourse. Contemporary approaches to studying argumentation in context, notably pragma-dialectics, offer precise methods for qualitative analysis of discursive phenomena of ordinary argumentation. In particular, concepts such
as strategic manoeuvring and argumentative activity types are meant to bring the study of argumentation closer to argumentative reality and provide a fuller and more comprehensive picture of the qualities of ordinary argumentation in the various domains of communication.

When it comes to studying argumentation in the political domain, argumentation theory can provide solutions to problems of analysis and evaluation of political discourse, which cannot be achieved with the help of the methodologies of textual analysis that are traditionally used in political sciences, mainly content analysis. This applies especially to one of the branches of political theory – the theory of deliberative democracy. This theory stresses the role of reasonable argumentation in ordinary political discussions, in particular discussions held in online forums. All the same, theorists of deliberative democracy have never developed any suitable tools for analysing actual political discourse and evaluating it as reasonable or less-than-reasonable. One can say that political theorists stop their analysis of political discourse at the point where argumentation analysts start. By examining the conditions for argumentation in various contexts and by closely analysing particular phenomena of (online) political discourse—such as critical reactions—argumentation analysts can be of help in providing a more nuanced account of actual political argumentation.

At the same time, the analysis of the activity type of online political forum discussions, conducted in Chapters 5-8, points to certain difficulties in reconstructing online argumentation that the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation will have to overcome. Online discussions are predominantly polylogues which include standpoints, arguments and criticisms of many parties. By contrast, ideal argumentation is modelled in pragma-dialectics as a critical discussion between but two parties: the protagonist and the antagonist. From the perspective of a critical discussion an analyst can reconstruct one online polylogue (that is, one thread of a discussion consisting of contributions of many individual arguers) in two basic ways: either as a complex of many critical discussions over various standpoints taking place simultaneously, or as one critical discussion in which two clearly distinguishable camps (i.e., the collective protagonist and the collective antagonist of the main standpoint) dominate the dispute. This study has mostly resorted to the latter solution. However, it is not always possible to reconstruct an online discussion in terms of two opposing camps. Yet, adopting the former solution has its own complications, because online discussions often create a complex net of overlapping exchanges, mutually affecting one another. Their reduction in the process of reconstruction to separate critical
discussions does not do justice to the complexity of multi-party exchanges. In future studies of multi-party deliberation a consistent method of reconstructing complex exchanges should be developed.

The analysis of the straw man fallacy conducted in Chapter 9 is directly related to the issue of reconstruction of actual argumentative discourse. This analysis brings into light the general question of the contextuality of fallacy judgments. As I argued in Chapter 9, the study of various argumentative activity types does not only help in a more true-to-life reconstruction of contextualised discourse, but can also result in a stipulation of activity-type-specific soundness criteria for the application of the general rules for a critical discussion. Therefore, further systematic analyses of various activity types are needed, since they are instrumental in developing a comprehensive approach to fallacies in argumentative discourse (see van Eemeren, Houtlosser, Ihnen & Lewiński, forthcoming).

In the study of online political forum discussions as an argumentative activity type carried out in this dissertation I have largely focused on the analysis of the conditions for critical reactions. However, the most general Question 1, What kind of conditions for argumentation does the context of online political discussion forums create?, is very broad and can be answered in more detail than in Chapters 5 and 6.

A consequence of focussing exclusively on the critical side of online argumentation is that the results of the study do not give a complete account of the shape and quality of argumentation in online discussions. On the basis of the analysis in Chapters 5-9, online discussions may resemble an ideal context for argumentation, because they give ample opportunity for reacting critically and thus for thoroughly testing the opinions expressed on the Internet. As pointed out in the Introduction to this study, the issue of the general quality of online political discussions has been hotly debated, with two opposing camps claiming that online discussions are either altogether greatly conducive or obstructive to reasonable argumentation. It was not a goal of this study to pass a general judgment regarding the reasonableness of online exchanges. Yet, on the basis of the analysis of the key characteristics of online discussions, a balanced evaluation of online discussions at large can be offered. New fora for online deliberation illustrate a certain tension inherent in ideal models of argumentation, such as a critical discussion: on the one hand, arguers should be free to test the opinions of their opponents by reacting critically in as many ways as possible (rule 1 of a critical discussion); on the other hand, they should responsibly acquire and discharge the burden of proof (rule 2) in a way that eventually leads to a resolution of the dispute on the merits. It seems that online discussions studied here approximate the
CONCLUSION

first requirement – which is good, for opinions can indeed be thoroughly tested; but it is also dangerous, as openness, lack of moderation, diminished accountability, etc., may lead to primitive ‘dump-and-run’ patterns of argumentation, spiraling into never-ending repetitive exchanges, in which the burden of proof can be easily evaded.

To obtain a fuller picture of argumentation in online discussions, the analyses of this dissertation aimed to answer Question 1.1, What kind of restrictions do online political discussion forums impose and what kind of opportunities do they create for reacting critically to argumentation?, should be complemented by a study that takes into scrutiny a possible Question 1.2: What kind of restrictions do online political discussion forums impose and what kind of opportunities do they create for advancing and defending argumentation? The problem of the conditions for justifying one’s opinions by advancing argumentation in online fora has not been directly addressed in this dissertation. However, the description of the key characteristics of online discussions in terms of the four parameters constitutive of an argumentative activity type may serve as a framework for studying the patterns of strategic manoeuvring in advancing argumentation in online political discussions. Such study may reveal, in particular, if the patterns of reacting critically described here are mirrored by some patterns of arguing. For example, is the pattern of the collective protagonist clearly recognisable among online arguers? If so, how exactly does it function? Is it similar to the pattern of ‘tag-team argument’ described in activity types aimed at decision-making?

Moreover, the analysis of critical reactions in online discussions can be extended in a few distinct ways. That is because the results of the analysis of the patterns of strategic manoeuvring in reacting critically carried out in this dissertation are by no means exhaustive. Therefore, first, other patterns of reacting critically against the premises or the justificatory potential of argumentation may be discovered. On the basis of such research, the answer to questions 1.1.1a and 1.1.1b may become more comprehensive. Second, other research may take into scrutiny fallacious ways of reacting critically in online forums other than straw man attacks (that is, possible research questions 1.1.3, 1.1.4, etc., may be investigated). The most obvious candidate for such research are the ad hominem attacks. ‘Flaming,’ i.e., the use of derogatory language in online exchanges, has attracted considerable scholarly attention (see e.g. Kayany, 1998), but few studies give an account of this phenomenon from an argumentative perspective (Weger and Aakhus (2003) studied flaming in terms of ad hominem attacks, but in the activity type of synchronous chat room discussions). Third, still further research can attempt to establish whether the patterns of
reacting critically described in this study (or some variations of these patterns) are unique to Internet discussions or, to the contrary, are recurring in other types of activity involving multi-party deliberation.

Finally, it is noteworthy that this dissertation has primarily taken into scrutiny the conditions for argumentation, rather than the argumentation itself. Therefore, many of the results are expressed in terms of a context-specific potential for reacting critically. This potential may be squandered in the actual practice of online argumentation. In order to show that the conditions under study are not mere potentials, but consistently affect the actual patterns of strategic manoeuvring in reacting critically in online discourse, I have attempted to substantiate the claims of the study by qualitative analyses of fragments of online discussions. Still, more empirical investigations, possibly combining qualitative reconstruction of online discourse with quantitative study of frequencies of selected modes of online strategic manoeuvring, are needed. Such empirical analyses of online forms of strategic manoeuvring can be carried out in correspondence with the pragma-dialectical study of patterns of strategic manoeuvring in different argumentative activity types, in particular, in various types of political deliberation, such as parliamentary debates and political interviews. Thanks to such a comparative study a fuller understanding of argumentation in the political domain can be achieved.