(In)difference online: the openness of public discussion on immigration

Witschge, T.A.C.

Citation for published version (APA):

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

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

Dutch multicultural society, once seen as a textbook example of how different cultures can live together, is under pressure. Whereas tolerance has long been seen as a trademark of Dutch society, in the last decade ‘attitudes toward immigration and minority cultures appear to have become harsher’ (Entzinger quoted by: Thränhardt, 2000: 172). Almost daily, the media report on the dichotomy between native and immigrant cultures and present the two ‘groups’ as being diametrically opposed. Tensions and anxieties are increasingly coming to the fore, and have intensified after incidents such as 9/11; the shift in politics stirred up by the late Pim Fortuyn, a Dutch politician who openly showed his contempt of Islamic culture; the Madrid bombings in 2003; the murder of filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a Muslim fundamentalist in 2004; and the London bombings of 2005.

Public debate on minorities focuses ever more on issues of social cohesion and asks to what extent natives and immigrants can live together in a peaceful manner (Gijsberts & Dagevos, 2005: 66). Foreign media have also picked up on the perceived tensions. ‘Increasingly, the Netherlands wonders whether diversity is always desirable’, the Economist reported in April 2005. The public mood is described as ‘deeply fearful of religious extremism and terrorism, and [one that] feels that too much stress has been laid on accommodating different values and faiths’ (‘The new Dutch model? – Living with Islam’ 2005).

The differences between groups in society are perceived to be so substantial and fundamental that public debate seems close to reaching impasse; it is dominated by a discourse

---

1In this thesis I use the terms ‘native’ (for autochtoon) and ‘immigrant’ (allochtoon), with the latter also referring to the children of immigrants (second-generation), whether or not they were born in the Netherlands. The official term currently used for those of immigrant descent (people with at least one foreign-born parent) is ‘allochtoon’. It covers both Western and non-Western immigrants, and applies to both first- and second-generation immigrants. Commonly, that is to say ‘unofficially’, the word allochtoon is used to refer only to non-Western immigrants and their children, and even more specifically to those of ‘non-white skin colour’ (Garssen, Nicolaas, & Sprangers, 2005: 96). In January 2005, about 1.7 (of a total of 16) million people living in the Netherlands were classified as non-Western immigrants. This total exceeded the number of Western immigrants (almost 9 percent of the Dutch population, with 1.4 million) at the end of the 1990s.
of ‘us’ versus ‘them’.

This focus on differences makes it difficult to exchange ideas constructively on how to deal with the problems that face today’s society. Different groups in society do not seem to be willing to give each other room to speak of their experiences and opinions. Current public debate is (among other things) informed by the feeling that certain positions that have been suppressed for a long time, particularly against immigrants, can now be aired openly; there is finally freedom to speak one’s mind, or even the ‘truth’ and a form of ‘new realism’ has emerged (Prins, 2002).

However, with this view, public debate has hardened and society has become polarized. Also, even though some argue that freedom of expression has increased, others feel that it is losing ground in the Netherlands:

In the Netherlands people say: if you don’t like it here, you can leave. But views that are condemned by the majority should also be heard. Certain views are useful and clarifying. Nowadays, if you are anti-Muslim, you can say anything, but a view that opposes this cannot be expressed. In this fashion, it is not done to approve of the attacks on American targets in Iraq. The one camp can say anything, the other nothing. (...) It seems as though certain liberties are reserved for a large group, while the freedoms of a small minority are restricted (Böhler quoted in: Olgun, 2006).

The British Observer similarly raised questions with regard to the limits on freedom of speech in light of the situation in the Netherlands following Theo van Gogh’s murder. However, this concern pertains to the expression of anti-Muslim views, which would be repressed due to the climate in the Netherlands: ‘Now, in a deeply polarized society, can free expression triumph over fear?’ (Anthony, 2004).

In this situation where fear or disdain for the other, difference and tensions seem to dominate public debate, the question is how to deal with these differences in ways benefiting and not threatening democracy. In a democratic society, all citizens are ideally included in formal as well as informal politics, maybe not in the actual decision-making, but their voices should be heard in one way or another. Citizens should be granted equal rights and have equal positions in democratic society. These fundamental, basic rights of democracy are challenged in the Netherlands, or at least its citizens do not feel that they are always allowed to exercise these rights. The (perceived) differences between participants frustrate public debate, and seem only to be intensifying.

In a society with ever-increasing polarisation, facilitating dialogue becomes difficult. How can equality for different interests in society be ensured, when they are perceived to be diametrically opposed to each other? I will examine the way in which debate takes place when society is faced with (seemingly) insurmountable differences. How do these differences inform public debate and how do people interact with one another when confronted with these differences? I will specifically look at possible areas of in- and exclusion of voices and at the role new communication platforms play in this process.

---

2Britta Böhler was one of the lawyers of the alleged members of a terrorist cell called the Hofstadgroep on trial at the end of 2005. All Dutch quotes are translated by the author.
Introduction

To examine what role difference plays in public discussion, I will discuss theories on the public sphere, or the realm where democratic debate (deliberation) takes place and where opinions are formed (Chapter 1). I will focus on the role difference plays in these conceptions of the public sphere. I will examine, in-depth, the notion of counter publics (coexisting multiple public spheres), as this notion provides ample space for difference in a democratic society. However, the idea that different views can be discussed in different publics or multiple public spheres (thus creating exclusive spaces for difference) does not answer the question of how different voices and different views come ‘together’ in public discussion. The question is, how can different views or discourses engage with one another in a divided society (by which I do not necessarily mean in a harmonized, consensus seeking, way)?

Next to this theoretical review of the role of difference, I will seek to answer the empirical question of how difference in public debate is dealt with in a divided society. Very little empirical research has been conducted to evaluate different solutions that normative theory provides for dealing with difference in the public sphere. Accordingly, I will aim to provide insight into the actual processes of public discussion in a divided or plural society. Can different discourses engage with each other, and if so how? I will examine how people discuss contested issues, and how difference is dealt with in this respect. Also, I will theorise the role of difference in public discussion, and will consider the strategies in dealing with these differences in a democratic way. I will examine these empirical questions by analyzing the public discussion on the contested issue of immigration, currently a fiercely debated topic in the Netherlands and a prevailing issue where difference is very prominent.

To examine the question of difference in public discussion, I not only concentrate on the discussion on a specific issue, but I will also focus on the public discussion in a very specific space, or platform, namely the Internet. I do this for two reasons. First, the nature of the Internet is such that it can (but not necessarily does) bring together different people, viewpoints, positions and arguments. I expand on this point in Chapter 2, but will raise a few issues here. In the first place, the ease with which people online can find others who are different from them is undeniable; human nature operates in such a way that one meets like-minded people in one’s own (offline) environment more easily than people from a different background (whether in terms of ethnic, geographical, class, educational background or other aspects of one’s background) or with different viewpoints. The Internet provides an opportunity to bring different voices together that otherwise would not come together. In the second place, it is often argued that people would let this difference come to the fore more easily online than offline. The Internet thus seems to allow for a more in-depth study of how differences in public debate play out. In the third place, the Internet facilitates a speaker’s role for anyone who desires to have one. Online debates are expected to be more inclusive of difference than offline debates, as different voices (in theory) have access to the same platforms.

This leads to the second reason for examining public debate online. Compared to traditional media, the Internet is said to be more inclusive of difference, and to be particularly suited for marginalized groups to voice their viewpoints in public debate. To exemplify this point, let me quote part of an online discussion from one of the web forums examined
in this thesis. Participants on this forum address the added value for minority voices to speak up on the Internet. A participant of the web forum Maghrebonline asks: ‘Why do only ex-Muslims, or people that come from a Muslim country, and blacken and attack Islam get access to Dutch media?’ Ilyas replies: ‘I know a lot of people who send columns to well-known newspapers, but, unfortunately, these pieces do not get published, because they try to tell a different story’. And he adds, ‘The age of newspapers is almost over; people now have the possibility to voice their opinion through the Internet.’ Both of these claims—that mainstream media offer a limited or distorted picture of Muslims and Islam, and that the Internet might hold a solution to this setting—are found increasingly on different Dutch web forums and websites dealing with issues of immigration and integration.

Whether these online opportunities also lead to a more nuanced picture of Muslims and Islam among members of the Dutch public remains to be seen. Many a commentator and Internet user view the medium as a polarizing force precisely because everyone can express him/herself freely; supposedly, ‘anything goes’ on the Internet. Furthermore, statements from the Internet are reported in mainstream media, to show how an ethnic civil war is imminent, and to show how dangerous the ‘other’ is. These discussions about the benefits and pitfalls of the Internet link up with discussions that have been taking place, and still take place, in academic writings on the potential of the Internet for democracy. In this thesis, I will examine these matters empirically.

Research question and design

In trying to understand dialogue on a contested topic such as immigration, and to make sense of how people online can voice, come to terms with, or overcome difference, I present the following research question:

To what extent is the public debate on Dutch web forums on the issue of immigration open to different voices and how do these different voices interact in this online debate?

The notion of voices refers both to the actors who express themselves and to the viewpoints that are expressed in online discussion. In this thesis, I look both at representation and inclusion in terms of who is speaking and what is said as well as at wilful exclusion from the

---


4 Maghrebonline is a very popular website that was started in 2000 by a group of students who wanted to address the negative media coverage of Moroccans in Holland. It now functions as a meeting place for different Dutch-speaking people, of various descents, but mostly young Moroccans. In Chapter 3, more information on the forum is provided.


debate. The issue of ‘openness’ of debate comes back in all empirical chapters (Chapters 4-7). To examine the role of difference, I analyse public debates on immigration and integration that take place on popular Dutch web forums. The forums examined (Fok, Maghrebonline, Maroc, Nieuwrechts, Politiekdebat, Terdiscussie and Weerwoord) are popular in terms of the number of participants, discussions, and posts. The selection is made up of different types of forums: specifically political web forums (both more right-wing and left-wing), immigrant web forums and general web forums. Moreover, these forums produce a large amount of discussion on immigration and integration.

Openness of online discussions and the role of difference is analysed by examining the following four sub-questions:

i) How are web forums organised and in what way does this facilitate or hinder the openness of the debate?

ii) To what extent do participants of online discussions view and use web forums as an open and inclusive platform specifically with regard to the discussion of immigration and integration?

iii) To what extent are different actors and viewpoints included in online discussions on immigration and integration and how does this compare to the representation in newspapers?

iv) How do different voices interact online when alternative voices are present(ed) in the debate and to what extent is this interaction open and inclusive?

I examine these questions by looking at different aspects of the online debate on immigration and integration. In examining question (i), I analyse the norms for debate as specified and upheld by the forum management (Chapter 4). Question (ii) involves the evaluation of and attitudes towards web forum discussions by the participants. This is examined through an online questionnaire posted on different web forums (Chapter 5). Together, these first two questions form the basis for the analysis of specific cases of discussion, examined in light of questions (iii) and (iv). Questions (iii) and (iv) involve two cases of discussion, namely the debate on the issue of honour killings (which took place in the beginning of 2005) and the discussion surrounding the shooting of a head teacher by a boy of Turkish descent (which took place in the beginning of 2004), respectively (Chapter 6 and 7).