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

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Citation for published version (APA):

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Chapter 4

Online rules and regulation

4.1 Introduction

Online forums are guided by explicit and implicit rules and norms that are upheld and enforced by forum management and abided to by participants (whether consciously or unconsciously). They provide the boundaries within which the public debate takes place. In Chapter 2, I stated that web forums are at times considered to be the ‘genuine’ public sphere, as they allow many-to-many interactions, and there are few restrictions in accessing this space (as compared to other media constituting part of the public sphere). In television, radio, and newspapers, there are technological barriers and journalistic gatekeepers limiting public access, if not making access impossible for a large section of the public. In contrast to the general idea about web forums’ openness, however, here too access can be controlled and restricted, not only because ‘providers, internet browsers and search engines pre-structure access to information’ (Koopmans, 2004), but also because participants and discourses can be excluded.

In this chapter I will examine the organizational openness of web spaces: their norms and rules. They are examined to more fully understand the online discussion on immigration and the role that the online debate can play as part of the broader public discourse. This chapter then seeks to answer the question: *How are web forums organized and in what way does this facilitate or hinder the openness of the debate?*

4.2 Methodology

To answer this question, I examine both the explicit rules and more implicit norms of the debate as put forward by forum management, as well as the participants’ reactions to them. Three elements of online regulation are included in the analysis:

i) The rules of web forums (netiquette);
ii) Behaviour of, and decisions made by forum moderators and participants’ reactions to them;
iii) Moderators’ presence in debates, their appointment, and participants’ reactions to them.

Every web forum holds its own rules for discussion (often called netiquette), which are usually published in a specific place on the forum. When an individual first registers to become a member, she or he must, on most web forums, acknowledge agreement with a certain statement containing the rules of what is allowed on the forum and what is not. Most forums also have a thread entitled ‘about this forum’, in which further rules for the debate are laid out. The rules and norms point to what may be included in the debate, which participants can contribute, and which positions are not tolerated or included. I use the term ‘rules’ here for the rules that are explicitly laid down in the netiquette. ‘Norms’ refer to the implicit norms held by moderators and participants, guiding the moderators’ interpretation of, and action upon, breach of the netiquette and other rules.

To analyse how the netiquette affects the relative openness of forums, a discourse analysis is applied that identifies who and what is allowed or not. With these results, the following questions are addressed: What is the underlying logic of who and what is included and excluded? Are certain groups, positions or ways of debating a priori excluded by the netiquette? Subsequently, the different means of moderation are analysed. These means are identified to assess the position of power of forum moderators. In addition, I analyse the way in which forum management is made discernible from other users and how moderators are appointed. Last, I examine the views of participants about moderation, moderators, and their appointment (other user attitudes based on a survey are discussed in the next chapter): What kind of questions and concerns do web forum users have regarding the decisions, appointment, and position of moderators?

For the analysis of the three elements of online regulation, seven large Dutch web forums that discuss immigration issues—Fok, Maghrebonline, Maroc, Nieuwrechts, Politiekdebat, Terdiscussie and Weerwoord—are examined (see Table 3.2 in Chapter 3 for a description of the forums).

4.3 Rules and regulations online: Netiquette

All forums in this sample explicitly mention the forum rules. When entering a debate as reading and ‘speaking’ participant, one has to agree to these rules. Other than this explicit rules section, almost all forums have a thread explaining the rules of behaviour. This observation is noteworthy, because in offline discussions the rules of the discussion are only rarely explicated. For offline debate they are expected to be self-evident but for online debates they are spelled out and emphasized. On one forum a parallel is drawn in the netiquette between offline and online public discussion, showing that offline rules are considered ‘given’:

You should behave according to all of the rules that you take into account when you participate in a public debate. (Maroc)
It seems that both forum administrators and participants feel there is something different about online discussions that makes it necessary to clarify and uphold rules online. Only three forums, however, explicitly state why they have rules. These explanations in addition remain very general. On Fok, there are rules ‘to keep things pleasant.’ On Nieuwrechts, they similarly state: ‘Let’s make it a good discussion together; those who want to ‘shout’ should ‘do this elsewhere.’ On Maroc, ‘you have to ensure that there is a pleasant atmosphere on the forum, so flaming is prohibited.’

The rules can be divided into two themes: banning of harmful expressions and manageability of the debate. Most of the rules in the netiquette are concerned with the banning of harmful expressions.

4.3.1 Harmful expression

Many rules in the netiquette pertain to how people should interact with one another, how they should behave towards each other. First and foremost, there is a rule regarding the banning of ‘harmful expressions’, such as flaming, threats, and insults (for a summary of the different rules on what is not allowed, see Table 4.1). All of the web forums mention racism or discrimination as a harmful form of expressions. This type of expression is thus a major focus in the netiquette, not only on forums centred around the issue of immigration, but also on the general forums. With the exception of Fok they also ban hurtful expressions like insults or threats. Flaming, religious or ethnic insults, and pornography are forbidden in four out seven forums. Three also mention ‘illegal actions’ in general. Some of these rules are written using ‘legal’ terminology, as if to lend it extra authority, as, for instance, in Maghrebonline:

You hereby declare that you will not post messages that are hurtful, obscene, vulgar, hateful, discriminating, threatening, or sexually oriented. Apart from this you have to obey appropriate laws and rules.

Some of this is clearly superfluous, as expressions like discrimination are against the law to begin with, but it provides an air of authoritative legality. What the moderators perceive to be ‘vulgar’ or ‘hurtful’, however, is not made explicit. Even though these terms are far from straightforward, they are presented on this and other forums as if they were unambiguous. Equally undefined is what the ‘appropriate rules’ are, or what they refer to.

Why these restrictions are part of the netiquette or how they benefit the discussion is not explained by forum administration. Even when no reference is made to the law, the rules are presented as ‘facts’ as if no arguments need to be given. Only quality of the discussion and ‘feelings of the other’ are mentioned a few times, as in the following example:

Messages that are obviously meant to malign others or their convictions will be fully removed without further notice. This has to do with the nasty discussion sphere that can arise because of a handful of diehards (Maroc).
Table 4.1: Types of harmful expressions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forum</th>
<th>Obscenity, vulgar</th>
<th>Obscenity, violent</th>
<th>Obscenity, erotic</th>
<th>Obscenity, racist and discriminatory</th>
<th>Obscenity, religious</th>
<th>Obscenity, anti-Semitic</th>
<th>Obscenity, against women</th>
<th>Obscenity, against people, groups, etc.</th>
<th>Violence, genocide and war crimes</th>
<th>Obscenity, illegal actions</th>
<th>Obscenity, other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(In)difference online</td>
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<tr>
<td>Forum</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fok</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Racism and discrimination</td>
<td>Flamewars</td>
<td>Harmful</td>
<td>Harmful</td>
<td>Harmful</td>
<td>Harmful and discrimination</td>
<td>Harmful and discrimination</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism and discrimination</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Flamewars</td>
<td></td>
<td>Harmful</td>
<td>Harmful</td>
<td>Harmful</td>
<td>Harmful and discrimination</td>
<td>Harmful and discrimination</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hurtful</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Flamewars</td>
<td></td>
<td>Harmful</td>
<td>Harmful</td>
<td>Harmful</td>
<td>Harmful and discrimination</td>
<td>Harmful and discrimination</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illegal actions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Flamewars</td>
<td></td>
<td>Harmful</td>
<td>Harmful</td>
<td>Harmful</td>
<td>Harmful and discrimination</td>
<td>Harmful and discrimination</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Flamewars</td>
<td></td>
<td>Harmful</td>
<td>Harmful</td>
<td>Harmful</td>
<td>Harmful and discrimination</td>
<td>Harmful and discrimination</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There is further tension between the openness of the forums—most forums feel strongly about ‘freedom of expression’—and the limits of striking a fair balance between openness and the quality of debate. *Terdiscussie* states that freedom of expression is ‘absolutely crucial’ for an ‘optimal discussion’, but that they ‘at the same time employ rules of conduct to sustain a high level [of debate]’. On *Nieuwrechts* the limit of what is allowed is worded in terms of assumed correctness:

As you all know Nieuwrechts is a political party that stands for freedom of expression. On the Nieuwrechts forum everything can be discussed, as long as it happens in a (reasonably) correct way. Floods of abuse, insinuations and insults are not part of what is (reasonably) correct.

For them 'being emotional' falls within the limits of correctness, 'being abusive' does not:

Threatening pm [personal messages] and postings will result in a direct IP ban. Emotions are fine, but behave within the normal etiquette. Shouting and cursing is not what we want. (*Nieuwrechts*)

The forums think of it as their task, so it seems, to navigate between on the one hand, being an open forum where much, if not all, is allowed, and on the other hand, hosting a ‘good’ discussion in which some types of behaviour or communication need to be eliminated. The following quote clearly depicts this ambivalence, and once more makes clear the ambiguity of the notion of ‘harmful expression’:

It cannot be that everyone with a handicap, a disease, or other disorder (…) is being shitted all over to one’s heart’s content. This is not what the Fok! Forum was meant for and this is not what it will be like. To tell someone the truth is welcomed. A firm discussion is also welcomed. Simply ridiculing someone who is already in a (more) difficult position is not welcomed. (…) When the above is detected, a ban of at least a week will follow in all forums from now on. (…) A bit of civilized flaming is oftentimes quite enjoyable, we all are in for that, but be fair and pick someone of your ‘own size’. (*Fok*)

Forum management¹ here seems mostly concerned with how other participants are treated. In the next example, the same boundary between what is admissible and what is not comes into view, but here the forum management is more concerned with the quality of the debate:

¹I use forum management to refer both to the administrators and the moderators. On some of the forums this distinction is made. Administrators normally have somewhat more means to govern the forum than moderators (for instance, banning participants can only be done by the administrators on some forums). As not all forums have this distinction, I also use the term moderators as the general term to refer to both, unless the distinction is meaningful.
Of course it is still possible to make a joke here and there, but please make sure that it is not offensive, and that it is on-topic, and make sure that your joke is accompanied by a serious reaction. In this way topics can become of higher quality, and people can seriously ask a question without being ridiculed. And the serious forums can remain serious. (Fok)

These examples illustrate the tensions that forum managers feel they have to deal with: ‘civilized’ as opposed to ‘uncivilized’ flaming and (reasonably) correct forums in which discussants are allowed to be ‘emotional’ but not ‘abusive’. Forum management sees as its task to guard these boundaries, while providing an open space for people to discuss, away from the ‘normal’ governing forces. So, the moderators want to provide an open space where almost everything is allowed, but see themselves bound. In this, moderation is seen as a necessary evil. Such a view also exists in the discussions between forum users, as is later demonstrated.

There are also forums that do not aim at openness to all, but rather, at providing a safe haven for a specific group of users. These forums try to protect the ‘in-group’, their targeted users, through exclusion of the ‘out-group’, those that may harm their users. Maroc, for instance, says it is ‘meant for discussions about all sorts of topics amongst ourselves’.2 If we take a closer look at this Dutch-Moroccan forum, it seems to be focused on one particular group (those of Moroccan descent living in the Netherlands) and its goal is to facilitate discussion among members of this group. Maghrebonline, likewise, mentions banning specific violations that may harm their central group of Muslim users: ‘Insulting our prophet or Allah is considered a grave violation of our forum rules’, while ‘pro-Zionists’ are prohibited from coming to this forum. The purpose of excluding certain groups from the forum is to prevent the site from becoming a platform for users who ‘help to create a negative image of Moroccans’ (Maghrebonline).

Two different types of exclusions pertaining to harmful expression can thus be identified. The first—rules aimed at establishing general openness—can be found on forums that aim to broaden the boundaries of what is permissible. The forum moderators strive to allow as much as possible, but find themselves confronted with ‘excesses’ that they have to reject. They want to be open to emotion, but not to abuse, they want to allow ‘civilized’ flaming, encourage ‘telling the truth’, but not hurting ‘weaker’ parties. Fok, for instance, falls within this category of maximum openness forums that aim to create a space where more is allowed than in other spaces of public debate. At the same time they struggle to define the rules that somehow are deemed necessary.

The second kind of exclusion—through rules for protection of a specific group—is found on forums aimed at safeguarding certain groups, and in so doing excluding other groups and specific types of expression, such as on Maghrebonline and Maroc. The latter type of sites is typical of counter publics that aim for emancipation of the ‘own’ group, as discussed in Chapter 1. Here the aim is not so much, however, to link to the general public—a second aspect of counter publics—, that is to address the out-group and get

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2The phrasing in Dutch is ‘onderlinge discussie’. Emphasis by author.
their voice represented, but rather to provide a space for the in-group to feel comfortable
to speak their minds in an environment that is protected from the outside world.

This is an analytical distinction that does not fully explain all cases, as in practice
forums can score on different aspects of these two categories. Nieuwrechts, for instance,
aims to broaden the rules of discussion, as they want to create a space for their target group
(extreme right-wingers), where this group is allowed to say more than would be possible
in general public space. As such, it is countering public discourse, not by limiting but by
opening up the rules.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Web forum</th>
<th>Rules and guidelines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weerwoord</td>
<td>- no double posting;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- no posting that contains needlessly many or large pictures;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- topics are locked when too big (over 6 pages; popular threads over 10 pages), unless one has good arguments against closing it;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- no posts without added value;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- threads that belong to a different topic are moved;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- the topic of a thread and the content need to correspond.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fok</td>
<td>- stay on topic;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- no spamming or cross posting;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- quote only relevant parts;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- always add an (appropriate) reaction;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- signature max. 4 lines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terdiscussie</td>
<td>- do not start a thread if there is already a thread on this topic;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- threads that only consist of copied texts without contribution of the poster will be closed;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- signatures cannot be too large;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- pictures or texts that are too large can be removed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maroc</td>
<td>- no one-liners directed at one person;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- stay on-topic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maghrebonline</td>
<td>- topics that belong to a different section will be moved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nieuwrechts</td>
<td>- do not add to a thread that has ‘sunk’ unless you have something to contribute.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politiekdebat</td>
<td>- check for existence of threads before opening a new one and make sure it is in the right section.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.3.2 Regulation of the form of the postings: Manageability

Most of the forum rules are concerned with the banning of harmful expression, and focus on the tone or the content of the postings. There are a few other forum rules that together can be captured under ‘manageability of debate’. These rules all seem to be concerned with the organization of the discussions and the form of the postings (see Table 4.2 for an overview of the rules regarding manageability). Where Fok was limited in its banning of harmful expressions, they formulate quite a number of management rules, but not as many as Weerwoord. Several forums have rules on how to quote (i.e., only quote relevant parts of a message) and indicate that one should always include a reaction when replying to a post (i.e., to never just provide a quote).

Forums also request that participants limit the length of their signature in order to facilitate readability. Similarly, there are rules that say one should not reintroduce topics that have been discarded due to a lack of discussion, unless one really has something new to add. Another rule, intended to keep up the manageability of the forum, is that before someone introduces a new topic, s/he must first check whether that topic already exists within the forum. Participants should also ensure that the new topic is placed in the appropriate section. If not, moderators will move the thread to a different section of the forum. Furthermore, reactions should be on-topic; they must clearly relate to the topic at hand.

All of these rules are not as forceful as those on harmful expression, but make sense in terms of trying to enhance the manageability of a forum. It is not clear, however, how these rules are operationalised. When is something off-topic? Or in the wrong section? Which comments do not add anything new? All of this influences which posts are excluded or deemed inappropriate. The rules, and more specifically the way they are interpreted, may privilege certain groups and exclude others. Thus openness of the forums depends very much on how the rules are maintained and on those enforcing them.

4.4 Moderation

When viewing the potential of web forums for open discussion, moderators hold an interesting position. They are the key to the openness of forums as they decide on inclusion/exclusion of certain types of expression and certain participants. Although it is often claimed that on the Internet anyone can say anything, previous discussion shows that online communication is clearly regulated. In this section, I discuss the means that moderators have to govern online communication. Next, I examine whether there is information (and if so what kind) on the selection of the moderators. Finally, I discuss objections and queries that participants raise on the forums regarding moderation.

4.4.1 Means of moderation

Moderators basically have five means of moderation, which can be thought of as ascending in terms of the extent to which they are impinging on participants’ action/text and their
participating in the discussion;
2. Moving texts;
3. Changing/deleting texts;
4. Issuing warnings and giving penalty points;
5. Banning a participant.

I will not discuss these means in detail, or empirically examine the frequency with which they are employed and their direct consequences. Rather, I introduce these five means of moderation in general terms. The aim is to set out the different means that moderators have to influence the debates. In this, I focus on mapping the general boundaries to the openness of discussions that moderation establishes. As such, I will also not differentiate between the forums, but briefly discuss the five means.

**Participating in discussions**

Though not stated in the official forum rules, the forum moderators participate frequently and intensively in the discussions. Many of the moderators are among the top twenty posters. In Table 4.4, the number of posts per moderator is presented, providing an indication of the presence of moderators in the discussion. Between five and ten percent of their posts are actual moderation, the other 90% show them participating in discussion by giving their personal view. However, as moderators they have quite a bit more influence than ‘regular’ participants. This type of interference in the debate can thus be seen as an indirect form of moderation, as, even though they do not regulate the debate as such, they may influence the content and direction of it. In this way it may also involve an indirect and subtle form of power to exclude participants or their contributions. By setting the tone of discussion and conveying their convictions, moderators may cause people to withdraw from discussion, or alter their contribution. After all, it concerns those in power to formally exclude participants that are sharing their beliefs and opinions.

**Moving texts**

Though not necessarily more influential than participating in the discussion, but probably more intrusive for the author whose text it concerns is the ability and power to move a particular text to a different section of the forum. The web forums all have a division of topics, where participants can start ‘threads’. If deemed inappropriate for a certain topic, the moderator can move posts and whole threads from one topic to another. This happens with regard to ‘serious’ topics as well as ‘small talk’. The above type of interference in the debate (participation in debate) more pertains to influencing the discourse in it; this and the following types of moderation concern direct regulation of and power in the debate (but these may equally lead to self-regulation of the discourse by participants).
Changing and deleting texts

An intervention that goes even further than a simple moving of a text is the changing or deletion of (parts of) texts by the moderators. In this case there is actual censorship and a direct exclusion of certain texts. This type of censorship takes place on all forums. There are different reasons behind excluding a texts, as, for instance, the inappropriateness of it. On *Fok* it says:

There is a new rule, to take effect at once, with regard to posting in serious forums (…). Off-topic, senseless, and insulting postings will simply be removed from the topics.

Another very common reason for deleting or modifying a text is its (assumed) undesirability: ‘Racist and anti-Semitic slogans or calls will be removed immediately’ (*Maroc*). These latter ‘violations’ often do not only result in a disciplinary measure with regard to the text but also with regard to the author of the text: such measures are called *warnings* (or penalty points) and *bans*.

**Warnings**

All forums, except for *Nieuwrechts*, make use of warnings. A warning is an announcement ‘by a member of the crew to a user, requesting not to repeat a certain action’ (*Fok*). On the forum *Maroc*, penalty points are given instead of warnings, though in effect that carries the same meaning. Likewise, on *Weerwoord* there is a system of yellow cards (which are ultimately succeeded by a red card). Warnings and penalty points can be followed by a ban, if the moderators deem this a necessary or appropriate reaction to a participant’s behaviour.

**Bans**

All forums have the possibility of banning participants. A ban means depriving someone of the right to post. Bans vary in degree, depending on the deemed seriousness of the violation. Usually a ban takes place after a warning has been issued, but this is not necessarily the case. The variations in the extent of the ban are:

- *In time* (from 48 hours to a permanent/indefinite ban): All of the forums have this variation in time;
- *The number of sub-forums the ban pertains to*: The ban can concern either the whole forum, or be specified in terms of sub-forums. This distinction can be found on *Fok*, where there is a strong demarcation between the different sub-forums (if someone is excluded from the politics section s/he is not necessarily excluded from the news section);
- *A nick-ban or an IP ban*: this distinction is, for instance, made on *Maroc*, where the ‘normal’ ban involves a nick ban: a ban for a specific login-account, related to a specific nickname used to register. An IP ban is even more far-reaching: In this case, the participant is not only unable to use his or her log-in account combined with a specific...
Online rules and regulation

nickname, but is also unable to create a new account or use an old account using the same IP address. At Nieuwrechts the IP ban is the only type of ban mentioned in the forum rules. The other forums do not specifically mention this IP ban, but may use it.

These types of bans are used regularly. All forums, except for Maroc and Nieuwrechts, have specific threads in which bans (and on Weerwoord also the warnings) are announced, and reasons for the bans are provided.

4.4.2 Moderation is non-negotiable

When discussing the rules, I argued that openness of the forums depends very much on how the rules are interpreted and thus on those enforcing them. Even though the Internet is often seen as a space for the free flow of information, online discussions are often controlled. Even more, forums state that users have little input in this process of moderation. On four of the forums (Fok, Maroc, Nieuwrechts, and Terdiscussie) it is explicitly stated that moderation is non-negotiable. Suggestions are usually appreciated (or so it says in the forum rules) but such cooperation is encouraged to take place through private e-mails rather than via the public discussion itself. Requesting the banning of a specific participant is not tolerated, nor is it allowed to discuss actual bans. Some examples:

Requests by users for bans of others are not welcome, and can result in a ban of the user making the request. (Alleged) violations observed by users can, of course, be reported. However, we prefer to receive those by e-mail, ICQ, MSN, or IRC. The FAs [Forum Administrators] in turn decide if and which action should be taken. (Fok)

There will be no discussion about bans and penalty points. Also we do not want people to start topics with questions about a ban or penalty points of their own or other users. If people have questions, they can send them to [webmaster]. (Maroc)

Concrete complaints can be sent to the administration; administration decides and no form of appeal is possible. (Nieuwrechts)

In the forum rules there is a particular focus on the personal responsibility of the users regarding one's own posts as well as posts of other users. Everyone has the obligation to report misuse of the forum. Users are furthermore obliged (under penalty of a ban) to ignore posts that are provocative or aggressive. Here again, they are asked to react only with a personal message to the moderators. Even though their input is valued in this case, the outcome is once again non-negotiable.

A number of the forums (Fok, Maroc and Politiekdebat) refer to the fact that rules can be applied at the moderators' discretion. Some forums (Fok and Politiekdebat) state that they can change the policy at any time and without prior notification. These specifications leave less room for the users to appeal certain decisions, and make it difficult to ensure an equal debate. Forum moderators have the right to act against the users of the sites, even when that action is not based on the policy. The sometimes (seemingly) arbitrary
moderation, or at least its lack of transparency, is exemplified by the following disclaimer to the netiquette of *Fok*:

- *Fok* reserves the right to evaluate posts and threads of its own discretion when a policy does not suffice;
- The contents of the policy can be changed, without prior notification, at all times;
- Moderators of specific forums decide for their own forum how strict it will be: what is allowed in one forum, is not necessarily allowed in another;
- One cannot derive any rights from preceding acts, decisions of moderators and rules mentioned in the policy;
- The moderators can and will diverge from common rules. Their sense of justice comes from feeling, not from predetermined rules.

These types of disclaimers make it very difficult for users to be able to contest decisions, and gives forum moderators substantial means to decide upon the in/exclusion of participants and their texts. The openness of forums depends largely on the actions of the moderators.

### 4.5 Forum moderators

It seems that the interpretation of the rules of moderation is obscure, and at times quite undemocratic. It thus becomes important to know who the moderators are and how they are ‘installed’. Are they elected or appointed, and if they are appointed, by whom? And how do forum participants respond to this? When examining the moderators it becomes apparent that on many forums it is unclear who the moderators are and how they are appointed. Table 4.3 provides an overview of the information that is available about the institutional arrangement vis-à-vis moderators and administrators of various forums. On all the web forums there is one general ‘administration account’ (mostly in the form of ‘administration@webforum’). They are rarely used, however, as almost all of the moderation and administration is done through separate accounts of individual moderators and administrators.

Some of the forums clearly indicate who the moderators are, either in a specific section on the web or in the user profile. In this respect, *Fok* is the most transparent forum: It not only has a post in which the moderators and administrators introduce themselves, but they are also made visible through identifiable labels such as ‘forum moderator’ and through use of a colour label. On some forums, there is a moderator introduction (ranging from a quite extensive description—providing information on the age, gender, and profession or interest of the moderators—to a mere mentioning of the names of the persons that have moderation rights). The remaining forums reveal nothing about who moderates, unless a moderator leaves or a new one is appointed. This seems to suggest that one can only get to know such matters when spending a considerable amount of time on the forum. In any case, with the exception of *Fok*, forum management is not well introduced and made
Table 4.3: Institutionalisation of forum management

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Web forum</th>
<th>Introduction of moderator(s)?</th>
<th>Separate indication for moderator(s)?</th>
<th>Information on appointment of moderator(s)?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fok</td>
<td>Yes, introduction per sub forum.</td>
<td>Yes, with colouring and label.</td>
<td>Only by requesting users to apply to become moderators.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maghrebonline</td>
<td>Only when newly appointed; no separate place where they are introduced.</td>
<td>Yes, through label.</td>
<td>No information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maroc</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>No information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nieuwrechts</td>
<td>Only when newly appointed; no separate place where they are introduced.</td>
<td>Some moderators have labels indicating this.</td>
<td>No information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politiekdebat</td>
<td>Yes, moderators are mentioned per topic.</td>
<td>One with label 'site admin'; all others have no labels.</td>
<td>No information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terdiscussie</td>
<td>Yes, separate item in which moderation team is introduced; functions and authority indicated per moderator.</td>
<td>Yes, through label.</td>
<td>No information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weerwoord</td>
<td>Yes, in the topic ‘about this forum’ they are mentioned.</td>
<td>No separate indication.</td>
<td>No information.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

None of the forums explicate how moderators and administrators are appointed. Only Fok advertises a position for moderator for which they ask users to apply, by providing a brief CV, motivation, and interests in the forum. Even in this case, though, no insight into the actual process of appointing the moderators is provided. On all of the other forums the process through which forum management is appointed remains even more of a mystery.

Table 4.4 provides more data on the activities and background of the different moderators. Information of this kind is at times difficult to find. On Maroc, for instance, there is a separate page with information on the administration. However, two of the three administrators mentioned there have not been active on the forum in the last two years. Moreover, in the forum statistics on user groups, it says that there are 149 people in the group ‘admin/moderators’. It remains unclear, however, who they are and how they may
be recognized, and even if they indeed all have moderation rights.

As Table 4.4 shows, there are a number of active moderators in the different forums who contribute a considerable percentage of the posts. As previously argued, quite often these moderators are prominent participants of the discussions rather than moderators of the discussions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Web forum</th>
<th>Moderator (label) (label)</th>
<th># of posts</th>
<th>Year of registr.</th>
<th>% of total</th>
<th>Average per day</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fok ‡</td>
<td>Sidekick (moderator)</td>
<td>35,472</td>
<td>May 02</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sizzler (moderator)</td>
<td>13,978</td>
<td>Sept 02</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maghrebonline</td>
<td>Saidxxx</td>
<td>7,651</td>
<td>Nov 02</td>
<td>7.35</td>
<td>8.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>XOR© (super admin)</td>
<td>537</td>
<td>Nov 00</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Admin (admin)</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>AMA (moderator)∗</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>Dec 04</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maroc</td>
<td>Beheer (admin)</td>
<td>1,090</td>
<td>Jul 01</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nieuwrechts♭</td>
<td>Blokkie (no label)</td>
<td>4,525</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Michiel (admin)</td>
<td>3,295</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Onkies (admin)</td>
<td>3,267</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lothar (no label)</td>
<td>2,694</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>John Nederland (moderator)</td>
<td>2,521</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nederland (admin)</td>
<td>988</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Malord (moderator)</td>
<td>824</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Still Thinking (guest)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politiekebate*</td>
<td>Batman (no label)</td>
<td>6,883</td>
<td>Jan 04</td>
<td>17.20</td>
<td>8.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sven (no label)</td>
<td>2,246</td>
<td>Jan 05</td>
<td>5.53</td>
<td>16.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Roel (site admin)</td>
<td>1,562</td>
<td>Jun 03</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>2.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terdiscussie</td>
<td>Toad (admin)</td>
<td>6,811</td>
<td>Feb 02</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mephisto (admin)</td>
<td>5,247</td>
<td>Feb 02</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wilmer (moderator)</td>
<td>3,982</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gerbski (moderator)</td>
<td>3,004</td>
<td>May 02</td>
<td>2.01</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Democraat</td>
<td>982</td>
<td>Jun 04</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mies (admin)</td>
<td>938</td>
<td>Feb 02</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chris (admin)</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>Feb 02</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mediadesign (admin)</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>Feb 02</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tuxje (admin)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weerwoord</td>
<td>Mirjam (no label)</td>
<td>5,554</td>
<td>Mar 02</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>4.73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Continued on next page*
## Online rules and regulation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Web forum</th>
<th>Moderator (label†)</th>
<th># of posts</th>
<th>Year of registr.</th>
<th>% of total</th>
<th>Average per day</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>John Wervenbos (admin)</td>
<td>4,063</td>
<td>Feb 01</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>2.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Theo (no label)</td>
<td>3,933</td>
<td>Mar 03</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>4.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mark Paalman (no label)</td>
<td>3,132</td>
<td>Feb 02</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>2.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cliff (admin)</td>
<td>2,543</td>
<td>Nov 00</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>1.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Niels (no label)</td>
<td>1,807</td>
<td>Nov 00</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Melisz (no label)</td>
<td>1,515</td>
<td>Feb 01</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Weerwoord admin.</td>
<td>567</td>
<td>Nov 00</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

† ‘No label’ does not mean that there is no label at all (usually labels are assigned to user groups), but that there is no specific label indicating that this moderator belongs to forum management.

‡ As Fok makes a clear distinction between the sub forums and its moderators, I only include here the moderators of the sub forum ‘Politics’.

∗ It seems this moderator has a separate account as a user, which is used more frequently (also for moderation).

◊ This forum has had to restructure recently and some people lost their status; the statistics may thus be tainted.

⋆ At Politiekdebat, there are moderators assigned to specific topics. ‘Roel’ is the overall administrator (he has access to all discussions), and the other two are the specific moderators for the topic ‘ethnic minority policy and integration’.

### 4.6 Users’ perspectives of moderation

Even though moderation is non-negotiable there are numerous instances where people do react to the forum rules, the way in which they are upheld and by whom. Here, I will discuss some of these reactions, and the debates they result in. The discussion of these debates is not aimed at presenting all (or a representative sample) of the concerns of users. It does aim to show the way in which the lack of transparency presented above can lead to questions and unease for the forum participants.

With regard to the rules, there are not many objections made on the forums. Only a few web forum participants feel that moderation should not exist at all; most of the participants feel moderation is necessary and unavoidable. This, for instance, becomes clear in the discussion initiated by the forum administrators of Terdiscussie. They ask whether moderation should be stricter, by removing all off-topic messages, in order to increase the quality of the discussions. One of the participants draws a parallel with offline discussions to explain why s/he is against this:

> If you have a discussion with people, in real life, and someone makes a futile, or ‘off-topic’ remark (spots a beautiful woman, for instance), then you won’t shout ‘shut up!’, now will you? (…) Internet is pre-eminently a space to freely give your opinion, unhindered by your personal contacts that you do have in daily life. ([Torero, Terdiscussie, discussion: act stricter, 12 Feb 2004, 10:53](#))

Both advocates and opponents of strict(er) moderation use this comparison to offline in-
teractions. Indeed, there are many references to the (alleged) openness of the Internet in comparison to other discussion platforms. Many see this transparency as its main value, and feel that online communication should be moderated as little as possible. Online communication is, after all, *online*; the rules that may apply offline should therefore not necessarily be followed online. Advocates of more moderation likewise draw the comparison to offline interaction:

We are on a discussion forum, so argumentation has to be at the basis of every post. (…) Even on the Internet one has to obey rules. (INDO4LIFE, *Terdiscussie*, discussion: act stricter, 12 Feb 2004, 17:29)

In general, the objections made on the web forums are thus not as much about the rules, but rather concern the way in which moderators interpret and uphold the rules. A main question raised by participants is to what extent moderators should use their power to interfere in discussions. In choosing to close off certain threads, for instance, they decide what is included and what is not. A number of *Terdiscussie* participants are not happy with the closing of a number of threads on Islam:

You (the moderator) are here for the users, if you keep up this attitude you will chase people away from the forum; you don’t have to decide what the users find interesting, they know this well enough themselves. (Armand, *Terdiscussie*, Censorship on this forum again?, 21 Nov 2004, 12:37)

It is the users who decide what is said, not the moderators, right? (Jeroen, *Terdiscussie*, Censorship on this forum again?, 21 Nov 2004, 17:56)

Moderators do not feel accountable to the users of the forums, and hold the key to whom and what is included and excluded. A last example of a discussion clearly illustrates the unease with the power and the predispositions of moderators:

After hanging around on maroc.nl for three years, I was forced to leave. Mainly because I have been chased away by the moderators with their stupid penalty point system. So now I’m looking for a new place to go. But before I put my energy in my writing, I would like to know how strict the moderators are here. Is there room for critical, sharp, and sometimes fierce but fair opinions from autochthonous side? (Seif, *Maghrebonline*, How are the moderators here, 12 Jan 2005, 13:10)

They don’t have penalty points here, and there is no telling how the moderators will decide upon something. (Jena, *Maghrebonline*, How are the moderators here, 12 Jan 2005, 19:21)

Moderators don’t do much except to follow our Farid’s [the top-poster in this forum, with 13% of the posts] lead in banning Jewish and (according to him) Zionistic sympathies without any warning or dialogue. (allemaal, *Maghrebonline*, How are the moderators here, 13 Jan 2005, 01:32)
After this post, Seif; the initiator of the discussion replied with: ‘Apparently there is not much difference with Maroc.nl. Ah well, why would there be: Moroccans are Moroccans’. Because of this comment, Seif was banned on the 14th of January 2005. The ban is titled: ‘Bye Bye Seif’, and only contains a quote of the last sentence: ‘Ah well, why would there be: Moroccans are Moroccans’. There is no further explanation. The ‘super administrator XOR©’ who banned Seif uses a remarkable image of the role of a forum administrator in his profile. There are two persons depicted through emoticons: an administrator and a user of the forum. The user states ‘BLABLA*SPAM*BLABLA BLA*FLAME*BLA,’ at which the administrator proclaims: ‘cut it out!!’ The user in turn says ‘No!’ and the administrator shoots the user in the cheek. The user begs for mercy. The reply is a shot between the eyes (with a laughing administrator). The ‘lesson’ shown at the end is: NEVER F*CK WITH AN ADMIN.

Next to discussing the rules and the way these rules are upheld on forums, the participants also discuss those that uphold them: the moderators. On many forums, the lack of institutional clarity regarding the appointment of moderators results in questions from the users. After the appointment of a number of extra moderators on Nieuwrechts, one of the participants asks about the process of selection:

How come there are so many new moderators on this forum? And what is the difference between administrator and moderator? I see that a number of people who arrived at the forum later than I became moderator or administrator. Yet, I have never seen a call ‘We need moderators or administrators, anybody?’ Is the moderation position a special favour to friends of Michiel [Michiel Smit, the front man of Nieuwrechts]? Or is it offered to people in a PM [Personal Message], because they are active in the movement? (Tinus, Nieuwrechts, Moderators and administrators, 14 May, 17:44)

At this, Michiel himself replies:

It is not a matter of favouritism. There are a number of people who offered themselves in reaction to a few vague people who have been coming here the last weeks. It concerns people who are very active on the forum and who were involved with other plans. In turn we spoke about how we can keep the discussion civil. People can always sign up, and then we’ll see how to take it from there. (Michiel, Nieuwrechts, Moderators and administrators, 14 May, 17:52)

The lack of transparency leads many users to speculate about the role of favouritism or nepotism in the process. One of the participants of Terdiscussie, Jakhals, asks if it would be possible for her/him to get a job at the forum. One of the administrators answers:

Maybe your posts have to be of the same high level as mine are ©. Every now and then a position opens up and then you have to apply . . . . There is no such position at the moment. (Mephisto, Terdiscussie, Who owns Terdiscussie?, 19 Sep 2004, 17:14).
At this *Jakhals* continues to ask:

How many posts are required? Do you have to become a meeter [a certain group of users of the forum] to be eligible? Do you have to be a left-winger? (De *Jakhals*, *Terdiscussie*: Who owns *Terdiscussie*? 19 Sep 2004, 17:22)

According to an ex-moderator, *Reason*, this is not the case: ‘Political ideas are not considered; as long as people are not extremists, political preference is not important’. ‘Everyone who is reliable’, *Reason* continues, ‘and is good at discussing and shows this frequently, has a chance of becoming a moderator.’

The discussion continues with this line of questioning; *niccion* does not really feel ‘that things are being done that objectively’. S/he furthermore asks whether there are rightwing administrators on the forum at all.6

The lack of transparency further leads to frustration among the users as it is not entirely clear when moderators moderate, and when they ‘just’ participate in the debate. Since moderators are participants of the forum as well, they will never be able to be objective or impartial in their maintenance of the discussion:

A moderator should never BOTH participate AND be a moderator at a forum. Conflicts of interest have to be prevented at all times, quite simply because it stirs up a whole lot of discussion. After all, moderators are also only human, and therefore they make mistakes. (Edu, *Terdiscussie*: Act stricter, 24 Feb 2004, 11:42)

On *Weerwoord* a complaint was made by one of the forum participants at the *Meldpunt Discriminatie Internet*.7 In the discussion following this complaint the lack of transparency is discussed once more:

Rules—as far as they are unambiguous—are nowhere to be found on this forum and if they (summarily) are specified at all, they are violated (…). So there is only one rule and that is the—completely non-transparent—unwritten rule that some *Weerwoord* participants have more rights than others. (koekoeksjong, *Weerwoord*, FAQ about the precious topics from the by-you-much-hated Islam, 5 June, 20:31)

Users often question the process of appointment of moderators. In particular, some feel discriminated against, as the decisions made by the forum management are often to their disadvantage. They see no possibility to become moderators themselves or for other people like them to hold such a position. By examining people’s reactions to the forum moderation, it becomes clear that participants do not always feel they are treated justly and equally.

These quoted debates on web forums are only a few examples of the way in which users assess and understand moderation on particular web forums. The way in which moderators act and govern online communication is very important for users, and it is

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6*niccion*, *Terdiscussie*: Who owns *Terdiscussie*? 23 Sep 2004, 14:07
7*MDI*, a governmental organization that handles reports of discrimination on the Internet.
clear that users are at times struggling to understand what is and what is not allowed on forums. Participants try to identify the boundaries of the space and some have a difficult time positioning the moderators and themselves in this space. What can be observed is an established interaction between the users and the moderators, which to a large extent determines how the discussion evolves. It also determines what is allowed and what is not allowed. Particularly for new users, it is sometimes difficult to enter this space with all its existing rules and the implicit norms that may surface and that are difficult to determine the exact nature and impact.

How this influences the openness of the debate cannot be determined in general terms. Whether the debates are positively or negatively affected depends on the discussion. In some discussions exclusion of certain types of expressions and participants may foster openness, whereas in others it may foreclose it. However, what we do see is that the moderators exert power on different levels. First, they have the direct power to exclude participants and their contributions to the text. Second, they also have power by influencing participants to self-monitor their contributions, or even to fully withdraw from debates. We have seen that participants try to establish the boundaries between what they are allowed to move, which is then incorporated into their behaviour. As such, the moderators have a more indirect but significant form of power over the communication of the participants. Third, the fact that moderators participate heavily in the discussions themselves may increase their influence in this respect, whether they do so consciously or not. We see that it is difficult for forum participants to challenge this power of moderators.

4.7 Conclusion

In light of the question on the structural openness of web forums, I analysed the rules and moderation of seven popular Dutch web forums: Fok, Maghrebonline, Maroc, Nieuwrechts, Politiekdebat, Terdiscussie and Weerwoord. Examining the netiquette of these forums, I found that the web forums are in general aimed at openness. The netiquette is not intended to rigidly determine how participants should behave, and the emphasis is on creating a comfortable environment for different types of users by urging participants not to express harmful language such as flaming, threats, and insults.

The netiquette focuses on what is not allowed, and how participants should not behave. There are only very few guidelines on how one should behave online, and if there are, they are framed in terms of enhancing the manageability of the web forum. As such, we can observe an administrative logic behind the forum rules, as they focus on the manageability of the forum, and motivate their rules with this criterion. This can be seen as a disclaimer: We do not want to have rules, but some rules are necessary. Most of the web forums actively position themselves as open spaces (most often in comparison to other spaces for discussion). No matter how open they consider themselves to be, however, they feel they have to set norms for debate. More specifically, they feel the need to set these guidelines and exclude certain types of behaviour exactly because they want to create open spaces. It is with this in mind that forum management presents the norms as a necessary
(In)difference online

evil, a paradoxical means to a larger end. On the forums there is an ongoing struggle between ensuring the quality of debate by upholding rules, and providing a space in which freedom of expression reigns, therefore generating an open platform.

The web forums focus on different types of openness, and accordingly exclude different forms of communication. In this we can distinguish two types of platforms relating to a different kind of openness of the web forums: (i) forums focusing on a broad inclusion and extensive freedom of expression, forming general platforms aimed at providing an open space for all; and (ii) forums focusing on protection of a specific group of users, forming platforms that resemble counter publics in that they aim to provide openness for a specific group. Both of these platforms consider themselves as more open than traditional media: The first platform sees itself this way because it allows more types of expression and broader content than these media, and the second because it focuses on providing a space for groups that are denied access to traditional media. Moreover, the rules of the counter public forums aim at protecting members of the in-group from harm. They enhance openness for the in-group by excluding certain expressions from the out-groups. Maroc and Maghrebonline are examples of this second type of platform. They aim to provide an open space for Dutch Moroccans, where they can feel comfortable and free to discuss. To ensure openness for the group of Dutch Moroccans, the forum management excludes communications that might inhibit this openness and as such tries to protect them from harm. But also on general platforms, such as Fok, forum rules are aimed at protecting users from harm, in this case, however, it pertains to all users, not just a specific group of users.

Consequently, both types of forums have rules that exclude certain types of communication. The question is whether such exclusions open up or rather close off the discussion. For some types of prohibited communication, such as flaming and discrimination, these exclusions close off discussion because more extreme contributions are excluded, while at the same time the discussion is opened by attracting more participants to the discussion or by making the participants more well-disposed towards each other. It is difficult to envisage how flaming in the form of personal attacks could help to open a discussion. The same could be said for the rule about discrimination. In such cases, it can be argued that the right to equal treatment should prevail over freedom of expression and over inclusion of all types of positions and communications.

In the web forums, moderators decide on these matters. Whether or not their specific decisions foster or inhibit openness is difficult to ascertain; the outcome differs per decision. What is important is the transparency of these decisions. This will help to determine whether these exclusions enable or foreclose engagement between different discourses. Forum administrators and moderators have extensive discretionary power with regard to which participants, positions, and discourses get access to the online debate. Questions regarding who has the authority to determine this access, how they have received this authority, and how they are using it, are therefore of great importance.

In the forums examined in this thesis, the transparency on these matters leaves a lot to be desired. The rules are often poorly defined if defined at all, and the way the moderators act upon them is unclear. The web forums are also lacking in information pertaining to
the appointment and presentation of moderators. On almost all forums, it is unclear who
the moderators are or at least how they are appointed. Only if one is completely immersed
in a particular forum will it become clear how moderation takes place and by whom. This
lack of transparency limits the democratic nature of the forum.

Furthermore, there are few possibilities for users to appeal these matters. Whether this
necessarily influences the possibility for engagement is not clear, but it is apparent that
users at times feel they are treated unfairly and are (unjustly) excluded from the debate.
The actions of the moderators may thus create a type of atmosphere in which some people
feel more comfortable to voice their opinions than others. Through this, the possibility of
different discourses interacting (and hence the possibilities for engagement between them)
in a certain space may be limited.

The users that discuss moderation on the forum seem to view the web forum as a
public space that belongs to the users. They consider forum management in a number of
instances to be too strict, undemocratic and too arbitrary. They seem to hold the view
that they should be the judges of what goes on at the forum and not necessarily the forum
administrators. The latter do not share this view as they conversely feel that web forums are
not public spaces (even though they maintain they should be open spaces). The moderators
hold the implicit view that the web forums are much more a private space, where they are
the ‘host’ and the participants are their ‘guests’. This logic helps the moderators to arrive
at the aims set for the forum. This may explain their autocratic governance of the forum
and also the lack of explanations and motivations for the forum rules and the way they are
upheld.

Going back to the main question of this chapter—how web forums are organized
and in what way this facilitates or hinders the openness of the debate—we can conclude
that the organization of web forums, if viewed as platforms of public sphere, lacks in
democratic nature and transparency, both in terms of the forum rules and in the way
these are upheld. This is a first impingement on the openness of debate, as the decisions
made by forum moderators are excluding texts and/or its authors. Also, the moderators
hold different forms of power operating in the web forums. Next to the direct power
to alter or reject contributions and exclude participants, the moderators hold power over
communication as they determine to a large extent the boundaries of the forums, and
thus who feels free or welcome to participate in them, and in what way they feel they can
participate. The latter determines the way in which people speak as well as what they say,
thereby affecting the openness of discussion. As such, the organization of web forums,
establishes (and limits) to a large extent the openness of debates. It then becomes the
question how the users of the space further fill this in.