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

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Online discussion spaces do not necessarily produce an open exchange of views on the controversial issue of immigration, contrary to the expectations of many commentators and users who regard those spaces as fulfilling an ideal of ‘openness’. Instead, many of the earlier-analysed online discussions on immigration are not inclusive of difference and diversity; and, in some cases, participants in online discussions are even hostile to alternative voices.

The Internet is said to provide the ideal space for open and democratic discussion by many academics (see Chapter 2 for an overview of the literature) for two reasons: (i) the unbounded space for interaction and (ii) the anonymity of interaction. The Internet enables many-to-many communication while bridging time and space thus allowing thousands of people to be engaged in a single discussion. The low social and economic costs of publishing and the ease with which people can find both an audience of like-minded people as well as one with different opinions, create great optimism regarding the Internet’s potential. The Internet could facilitate not only the participation of more people, but also of a more heterogeneous group of people. Moreover, interactions can take place anonymously, allowing people to discuss with others without divulging their identity. This should create a more comfortable environment for discussion. Also, because of its anonymity, the Internet is often seen as providing the means to overcome inequality in discussions.

In this thesis I have examined these claims focusing on the debate in the Netherlands on the contested issue of immigration. This issue has been heavily debated in the last decade and it has led to a polarization of Dutch society, with little meaningful dialogue between different groups in society. Opinions diverge substantially, making open discussion all the more important. The research question examined in this thesis is: 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?

I have shown that discussions about immigration on popular Dutch web forums provide very little diversity in terms of who is represented. Moreover, even though users often perceive web forums as open, the actual discussions on them are actually not so open, according to various aspects of openness, as specified below. Furthermore, it be-
comes apparent that when different voices are represented, most of the discourse is aimed at eliminating the alternative voice rather than incorporating it into the discussion. In this final chapter, I will expand this conclusion by re-visiting the theoretical framework introduced in Chapters 1 and 2 in light of the empirical findings presented in Chapters 4–7. I will discuss the implications that the empirical results have for the role of public discussion in democracy as well as for the role of web forums in debates about contested issues.

The question of openness

The traditional account of deliberative democracy (Chapter 1, Section 1.2) concentrates on public discussion in society and views the ideal discussion as an inclusive and equal exchange of opinions and arguments. Here, people do not think in terms of their own interests, but let the better argument prevail. Deliberation in this view is needed to allow for a rational process of public opinion formation and to thereby reach consensus, the common good and legitimate decisions in society (Bohman, 1998). The space in which this deliberation takes place is the public sphere—the arena where societal problems are identified and preferences regarding solutions for these problems are developed. But though this account aims at inclusion for all, it has been criticized for not being inclusive of difference, due to its favouring of rational communication. Marginalized voices run the risk of being excluded from the public debate because this definition of deliberation requires the suppression of differences in ways of speaking and addressing public matters.

The focus in this thesis has been on the openness of public debate in a multicultural society in general, and to alternative or marginalized voices in particular. In Chapter 1, I discussed an account of the public sphere that—in reaction to the shortcomings of the traditional account of deliberation—focuses on the inclusion of these alternative voices: the theory of counter publics. A counter public recognizes exclusion and attempts to overcome it by forming an alternative public through discursive practices (Asen, 2000). Counter public theory shows how alternative public discourse is articulated in response to the exclusion of specific interests in the wider public sphere. What is important is that this articulation of alternative discourse does not aim at withdrawing completely from the wider public sphere, but rather at challenging the discourse in this sphere. I have argued that counter public theory is lacking in the sense that it fails to explain and theorize the interaction between dominant publics and counter publics. Viewing counter publics and dominant publics as parallel spheres is problematic because it leaves no space for interaction between these publics. For it to be meaningful, the most important aspect of public debate in polarized societies is that the different discourses of these publics interact. Only this interaction will allow engagement and understanding between these different publics.

Based on theories focusing on the inclusion of difference in democracy, I argued that there is one main requirement for such interaction to come about: openness of the discussion. This openness has two key elements: (i) openness in terms of the inclusion of different participants, positions, and types of communication, and (ii) openness of partic-
ipants towards these different types of participants, positions and communication. Only when these two are combined may the debate transcend the stage in which these positions, participants and discourses merely coexist. The aim of open public discussion is neither the coexistence nor the simple clash of different discourses, but rather the engagement between them, a reflection upon one's own discourse in light of the other’s discourse. Engagement between discourses must ultimately result in the discussants understanding each other’s positions.

To examine whether the elements of openness can be found in public discussions in a polarized society, I analysed online debates on immigration in the Netherlands. Immigration is a contested issue in Dutch society and features differences that are perceived to be insurmountable. It becomes relevant to see to what extent openness of the debate can be found in such a context. I focused furthermore on a specific type of online communication, namely web forums. These web forums can be seen as providing a space for public discussion on political issues, enabling democratic discussion that is inclusive of difference.

In Chapter 2 (Section 2.2) I have provided an overview of claims pertaining to the Internet’s potential for democratic debate. An important point that needs to be addressed here is that the Internet does not exist, contrary to what much of this literature seems to suggest. Different technologies and different user contexts may produce different experiences of Internet communication (Thomas & Wyatt, 1999: 694). Moreover, neither the Internet in general nor the specific types of online communication, such as web forums, inherently produces one particular type of communication, whether open and democratic debate, heated, fragmented, or nonsensical debate. The different types of online communication may allow for certain types of interaction that meet the ideal of democratic debate to a greater or lesser extent, but it is the users who must employ Internet communication with that purpose and in those specific ways. So, even though online communication may have certain features that allow for a more open debate than other platforms do, the actual openness of the space depends on the way in which users of these spaces view and employ these spaces.

To examine empirically the actual openness of online debates on immigration, four sub-questions were formulated, which were each answered in a separate study reported on in Chapters 4–7:

i) How are web forums organized 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?
Online openness examined

These four sub-questions are respectively answered in Chapters 4 to 7. The first two chapters examine the possibilities and limitations of web forums to allow for an open debate. They pertain to the structural openness of web forums (how are they regulated, which concerns the first criterion of openness: Who is included and who is excluded in the debate) and the attitude and behaviour of the users (the second criterion of openness: Are the participants themselves open towards difference). The second two questions are examined through case studies, which look at the extent to which the criteria of openness are met, and whether this also results into engagement and understanding.

Structural openness

To answer the question of the structural openness of web forums, I analysed the rules and moderation, as well as users’ reactions to them, of seven popular Dutch web forums: Fok, Maghrebonline, Maroc, Nieuwrechts, Politiekdebat, Terdiscussie and Weerwoord (Chapter 4). I conducted a discourse analysis identifying themes in the rules of web forums and examined the ways these rules were upheld by moderators. Examining the netiquette of these forums, I found that, in general, web forums aim to provide an open space for discussion.

I distinguished two types of platforms that each aim at a different type of openness of the web forums: (i) general platforms aiming to provide an open space for all; and (ii) platforms that resemble counter publics, aiming to provide openness for a specific group. The moderators of both of these platforms consider themselves more open than traditional media: The first because it allows for more types of expression and different content than these media, 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 to protect members of the in-group from being harmed. They enhance openness for the in-group by excluding certain expressions of the out-group. On general platforms, rules aim to protect all its users from harm.

Thus, both types of forums have rules that exclude certain forms 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 open up the discussion (either by attracting more participants to the discussion or by making the participants better disposed towards each other). It is, for instance, difficult to envisage how flaming could help to open up the discussion. The same could be said for the rule on discrimination. 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.

Even though the netiquette is not formulated to rigidly determine how participants should behave and web forums are generally aimed at openness, the rules do determine to a large extent the boundaries of expression for discussants. In web forums, moderators uphold the rules, and thus have the power to create the boundaries of the space.
This enforcement involves different types of power: power over and in communication, which can be both direct and indirect. Moderators have power over communication in the sense that they can decide to exclude certain participants and/or texts. In addition, their role gives them power in communication, as they can influence the actual content of the debate. This influence is not only based on their capacity to exclude participants and texts (direct power) mentioned above, but also on their symbolic power in participating in the discussions (a more indirect form of power). Moderators were found to be highly active participants in the debates, and thus affected the content of debate, not only directly by their own contributions but also by influencing the writing of other participants through these contributions. These two types of power—over and in communication—may produce a third type. Moderators may induce (whether intentionally or not) the self-constraint of participants, causing them to alter or withdraw their contributions.

Given the extent of power, the transparency of moderators' decisions becomes very important. Transparency helps to determine whether these exclusions enable or rather foreclose engagement between different discourses. In the forums that were examined in this thesis, transparency leaves a lot to be desired: Little information is provided about who the moderators are, how they are appointed, and how they make their decisions. Furthermore, there are few possibilities for users to appeal against the appointments and decisions. Whether this necessarily influences participation in web forums is not clear, but it is apparent from users' comments that they 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 voicing their opinions than others. This might limit the possibility of different discourses interacting in a certain space (and hence the possibilities for engagement between them).

Some form of participant moderation may open up the space. Users view the forums as open spaces and more importantly as public spaces. In this they seem to differ from forum moderators. Even though the latter also consider the forum to be an open space, they at the same time consider the forum to be a private space to which users are merely granted conditional access.

Perceived openness

In Chapter 5, the question of the users' perspective on openness was examined through an online questionnaire. Respondents were recruited through web forums. They were mainly young, highly educated males who are politically active. It was established that these users view web forums as open platforms for discussion concerning the opinions expressed on the forums. They mainly wish to exchange ideas and encounter different opinions, and they attach much value to diversity of opinions. They indicate that they also find this diversity when discussing immigration online. In keeping with the expectations of a number of scholars regarding online discussion spaces (Chapter 2), the forum participants perceive the Internet to be a space where people can easily voice their opinions. They do not only consider the forum in which they discuss to be open, but in addition they regard the Internet as more open to difference than traditional media.
Since diversity is important, participants focus on the Internet’s potential to encounter difference rather than to find like-minded people and to form counter publics. This finding is contrary to what many scholars expected, who anticipated people to seek confirmation rather than challenging of their viewpoints online. But for the users examined, confrontation with other discourses is seen as more important than seeking confirmation of one’s own viewpoint. However, most of the respondents in this sample are active on web forums that do not have a specific focus, either in topic or affiliation. The majority of the visited web forums are general discussion forums with a diverse public. It could well be that the participants who appreciate finding like-minded others attend web forums with a specific focus and audience. The survey indeed showed that the participants of web forums that have a specific political affiliation, (ethnic) target group, or topic, value finding like-minded individuals more than the participants of general discussion forums. There was, however, only a slight difference. On the other hand, these participants deemed encountering a diversity of opinions just as important as did the participants on general discussion forums. Furthermore, there is no difference regarding web forum openness: Specific forums that could be regarded as counter publics were considered as open as general forums. Compared to traditional media, however, the openness of web forums was deemed slightly higher by the participants of specific forums than by those of general forums. Apparently, the participants of forums that resemble counter publics regard the online spaces as being more inclusive than the participants of general forums do. This is a difference in degree, however, not in nature.

The question that arises is whether participants are open enough towards alternative positions to engage with them rather than simply having different positions coexist with their own. It is difficult to deduce this type of information from the attitudes of the participants, but answers to one survey question suggest that this engagement does not really occur; participants only rarely change their opinion as a result of the discussion. So, the question becomes, to what extent diversity actually informs the online debate. To examine whether openness can be found on web forums and how people deal with diversity, I conducted two case studies. These case studies looked at the openness in terms of representation comparing online and offline discussions, and the inclusion of and interaction with alternative voices (the third and fourth sub-questions, respectively).

Openness and inclusion represented

Openness of a discussion ideally leads to inclusion of different types of participants and positions in a debate. If an online discussion is more open than an offline discussion, one expects to find more types of participants and positions represented on that former platform. In Chapter 6, I examined the representation of actors and positions in a public debate. The issue chosen for the first case study was that of honour killings in the Netherlands. To examine whether the online debate is open and whether this debate is more inclusive of difference than the offline debate, the representation of participants and viewpoints online were compared with those in newspapers. Aside from the dominance of the political elite in the newspaper debate, and even though there are more postings
and participants online, I found that the newspaper debate is more inclusive than the online debate. A more diverse public participates in the discussion offline: Women and immigrants are better represented. This seems to conflict with the expectations of online debates.

But to what extent does this representation influence the content of the debates? Does a greater diversity of participants mean a greater diversity of positions? This was not the case in this particular debate. Even though there is little diversity in terms of participants online, more information is provided, more positions are considered, and alternative solutions to the problem are discussed. In the newspapers, almost no positions are discussed at all, very little information is provided, and as a result, the content of the debate is meagre. More positions are represented online but less diversity is shown in participants. Does this make the online discussion less or more open than the newspaper debate?

It is clear that access to online discussions, though dependent on Internet availability, is easier than access to the newspaper debate. Accordingly, more citizens are represented online. For those who do not have contacts at newspapers, of course, it is difficult to access this platform. However, even though online access may be easier and more diverse positions may be addressed in the discussion, no real alternative position is expressed: There is no support for honour killings, and even more ‘nuanced’ positions could not be found in the debates. In this case neither engagement nor understanding can be established for the ‘other’. His/her position is not voiced (even though speculated upon by those present in the debate). In this way fear, frustrations, and prejudices about the other remain unresolved and unchallenged.

We need to think about whether there would have been space for an alternative discourse to enter the debate. Even though formally the alternative voice may have had access, the dominant discourse may have created such an environment that alternative discourses were not presented or maybe even not envisaged; people self-censored. Thus, there may not have been external exclusion of participants (power over communication: no participants that we know of have been formally excluded from the online debate), but the discourse may have (intentionally or unintentionally) prevented the ‘other’ from entering the debate with an alternative position.

Furthermore, the discursive exclusions show how the ‘other’ is not considered to be a Dutch citizen with the power to determine what is and what is not Dutch. This denial of citizenship not only pertains to actual perpetrators of honour killings but also seems to include immigrants and Muslims in general. This denial of a basic right of citizenship seems to foreclose any engagement from occurring, but it remains uncertain how the debate would have transpired had such alternative voices been present.

Openness to counter discourse

The second case study examined what happens when an alternative voice does enter the main public discourse (Chapter 7). Ertan.nl, a web logger, has actively sought to present an alternative view on immigration and integration. He not only seeks to address possible members or supporters of his ‘counter public’ but also tries to represent his ideas in other
spaces and address the dominant public, the out-group. As such—aiming to provide an alternative position, while at the same time aiming to address the dominant public—Ertan can be considered a good example of a (member of a) counter public. I examined the openness towards him and the possibility for engagement between him and the members of the dominant public by looking at three discussions, which were initiated by a proclamation of support by Ertan for a youngster of Turkish descent who shot and killed his teacher at a secondary school.

This proclamation of support led to strong reactions in the online discussions. The participants of the discussions in which this proclamation was published all sought to counter Ertan. They do so not by addressing the content of the message but rather by trying, in one way or another, to eliminate his voice, and in some cases advocating even his physical elimination or removal from Dutch society. Neither Ertan as a participant nor the content of his post is acknowledged by the other participants, and in two cases the discussions were closed (one within the hour, the other after 26 hours). Even though the discussion platform allows for inclusion of Ertan’s voice, the participants are not open to his view. Thus, whilst the technology may allow for Ertan to have a voice in the public domain, what happens with this voice depends on the other ‘inhabitants’ of the space. The question is if Ertan’s emotional appeal is perhaps bound to attract strong reactions, or whether the discussants did not try hard enough to be open to it. Most likely both of these features contribute to the countering of Ertan. If one wants to listen to an alternative voice, there was enough substance in Ertan’s message to deal with it in a serious manner. But if participants prefer to cut themselves off from the other, there was also enough material in the post to foreclose any serious discussion.

But what happens when people are open towards each other and seek to bridge existing or perceived differences? To address this question, I analysed a discussion that also began with a proclamation of support for the boy who shot his teacher. In this discussion, alternative positions and extreme contributions were also present, but a few participants were open to ‘connect’ to the other and tried to understand his/her position. They attempted to establish this understanding in different ways. These discussants determined the tone of the debate (and softened it) by acknowledging the presence of the other discussants, particularly those with whom they disagreed.

This case exemplifies the role that style plays in debates on contested issues. Particularly in an environment where participants cannot physically see one another, greetings have an important function for openness. This may help to establish a feeling for the discussion and they can provide some sort of continuity in a space where this may otherwise feel unnatural. When someone acknowledges the other and considers his/her post, this also conveys that s/he is willing to discuss it. Greetings thus grant a voice. In the examined debate, apologizing for disagreeing with the other also brought this about. This shows at least willingness to agree, and thus that the specific discussant is not unwilling to relate to the other’s perspective.

Next to greeting and apologizing, the sharing of personal experiences and references to one’s everyday life were also very important in connecting with the other. These testimonials and narratives allow for understanding between different perspectives. In the case
study, it became clear how these function in the discussion of an emotional and contested issue. It allowed for a connection between different discourses to be established, and thus for the possibility of engagement. However, this case also showed that openness in the debate is very fragile. The greetings created an open atmosphere between people in which participants felt free to share personal stories. But it was short lived, as even though participants can work hard to create this comfortable atmosphere, others can always ‘crash the party’.

The openness of online debate on contested issues

Let me return to the central question: To what extent is 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? I found that even though both the users and the moderators of web forums claim that the forums are open, there is little diversity of voices to be found. Moreover, when this diversity is present, the discourse in the discussion seems to focus on eliminating it. The research also suggests an important role for alternative styles of communication to the rational detached mode of communication. Does this conclusion pertain to online debate in general, or does this finding relate directly to the ‘contestedness’ of the topic of immigration?

The research shows that alternative voices are excluded in several ways, some more overtly than others. A very explicit use of power to exclude the alternative voice is to seek its elimination from the debate or even from society. Participants may ask for violence against an alternative voice, for the actor’s imprisonment, or ‘deportation’. The latter involves an even more invasive way of using power to exclude people: the denying of (elements of) citizenship and thus of rights such as participation in debate, on the basis of descent. A major part of the discussion on immigration deals with ‘Dutchness’: Who is viewed as a Dutch citizen? This very much determines who is allowed access to public debate and who is given a stake in the discourse on immigration and integration.

There appears to be a strong definition of what is Dutch when determining which issues are ‘Dutch’ and should thus determine public discourse (and follow or precede on the political and media agenda). The honour killing case and the Ertan case show that what is ‘foreign’ to ‘the Dutch’ is not supposed to be on the public or political agenda; the Dutch do not have to deal with it. Moreover, as in the public discourse, when the ‘other’ (in this case immigrants and Muslims) is not viewed as Dutch, s/he has a difficult time trying to enter and being heard in the debate, let alone influencing it. The debate is about the other but not with him/her. In the debate on honour killings, I came to the conclusion that there are no real alternative positions, and that there actually is no space for what some consider as an extreme voice. The discourse was so homogenous in terms of banning honour killings that people may have refrained from entering the debate in the first place. The debate was also so concentrated on the non-Dutchness of the act of honour killings, that some people were excluded from it a priori.

We see that openness to difference is limited in online debates and that voices are
excluded from entering the dominant discourse in several ways. The question remains whether this type of exclusion depends on the issue at stake. After all, many of the exclusions are centred or based on questions of social and national identity. Would we find such exclusions on less contested issues?

The research cannot give an answer to this, but I would argue that we could expect more exclusion in the debate on contested issues than in those on non- (or less) contested issues. Precisely the fact that an issue is deemed contested points at the (perceived) differences between positions and the emotions involved in the issue. This emotional status and distance between participants will make it difficult for people to engage and relate to one another. It will make people more prone to clash and deny each other certain rights, such as equal standing in the debate. In addition, the need for alternative styles of expression that I have identified applies more to such cases than to less contested issues.

The conclusions regarding the process of the debate, the exclusions and possible solutions may thus not be readily translated to non-contested issues. But can they be translated to contested issues other than those connected to immigration? I expect them to do so, at least to a certain extent. The nature of contested issues, with high stakes and social distance, would induce a certain amount of exclusion. In other cases, this exclusion may involve the construction of a different ‘other’ who is denied a stake in the debate. That is generally dependent on the social, political and general cultural context. This study took place during a socially and politically ‘turbulent’ time in the Netherlands, with polarization and a harsh tone dominating the debate, especially related to immigration.\(^1\) The need for alternative types of communication, such as greetings, testimonials and narratives may have been crucial in this case. However, I believe that generally speaking, when strong emotions and stark differences are present, these alternative types of expression are necessary to soften the tone, and make people more prone to open up and listen. It is this pivotal quality of participants in debates—the ability to listen—that is lacking in both practice of and in the theory on public debate (Bickford, 1996). Further research should give us insight into these and related matters, not only regarding other contested issues, but also with regard to the specific issue of immigration in other national contexts.

Criteria for public discussion

The traditional account of deliberative democracy (referring to an open and equal exchange of opinions and rational arguments leading to consensus) has been criticized, and in my discussion of it, I have focused on the criticism pertaining to difference. In particular, the following five elements were addressed: inclusion, rationality, impartiality, intersubjectivity, and consensus. The discussion of these elements, and the critique on them—the ways in which they impede full inclusion of difference and disagreement in plural societies, rather than fostering it—was mainly theoretical: how they may \textit{a priori} exclude alternative ways of expression and alternative voices. The research that was con-

\(^1\)Note that many issues were framed as immigration issues, like the honour killings and the murder of the teacher, even though they do not necessarily have to be framed in such terms.
ducted in this thesis allows for the empirical establishment of how these elements foreclose difference in public debate on a contested issue in a plural society.

Regarding inclusion, I have argued that the strict requirements for communication as set by traditional deliberative democracy theorists, limit public discussion and possibly exclude certain voices as well as suppress difference. With Asen (1999) I argued that this exclusion can come about in three ways: through styles, topics and by forums. In the thesis I have shown that, by favouring some types of communication over others (as the traditional account does) certain voices are excluded from debate. We see that some powerful actors in the online debate to a large extent determine what is accepted in this space. First of all, the forums themselves controlled (whether directly or indirectly) the styles and topics of communication. The netiquette and decisions of moderators to ban participants or delete certain posts limits the range of topics addressed and the ways in which people communicate. In the case of Ertan, we saw that one forum banned Ertan, thus suppressing this alternative voice, and two forums closed the discussion after a short while, thereby closing off the possibility of discussing this particular topic. In addition to forum management there was a second force determining the tone and content of discussion: the dominant discourse. The dominant discourse can influence the participants to withdraw or comply, influence moderators to take action, and/or ignore the alternative voice in such a way that s/he has no influence in the debate, even though s/he has access to it.

This also shows where the danger lies in preferring rationality and one type of communication in the public sphere. Rationality refers to the requirement for citizens to be open to counterarguments and to provide reasons for their opinions and convictions; information and dialogue have to be processed rationally. The cases analysed here showed clearly how certain types of expression and opinions were not tolerated in the public debate. In this way, the dominant public limits the range of expressions accepted in the online public sphere, even though in the survey the participants of online discussions maintained they are seeking difference online. The voice expressing an alternative position is considered ‘irrational’ and is thus not taken seriously or ignored altogether in the public debate. What is more, at times means are sought to eliminate it.

The cases examined here further demonstrate the difficulty with impartiality and intersubjectivity when people are divided over an issue. In the traditional account, deliberation asks its citizens to transcend their private interests and viewpoints for the sake of the common good. First, we see that the needs and desires of participants are very much entwined with political positions and that these need to be attended to first in order to make a meaningful contribution. Specifically when coming from a subordinated position, these needs and desires need to be addressed from a subjective standing. This will also help to create understanding, as I will argue below. The difference that exists between the dominant and the alternative public further makes intersubjectivity—coming to shared ways of thinking about social problems—very difficult, as the cognitive and moral frameworks are not sufficiently similar on the issues examined in this thesis. The cases show that ways of speaking and understanding differ and that intersubjectivity was difficult, if not impossible, to reach.

This brings us to the final point of concern with traditional deliberative democracy
theory as addressed in Chapter 1: the aim of consensus, or one shared idea of the best outcome. The idea of consensus presumes that through deliberation, participants come to one position that is preferred over others by letting the better argument prevail. If the aim of the discussions examined here were consensus, then in both the honour killing debate and in the Ertan case the consensus would be one in which the alternative discourse is not incorporated. In the case of the honour killing debate, it is not incorporated because it is not expressed at all, and in the Ertan case it is not incorporated because it is considered irrational and ignored as a genuine position.

In Chapter 1, I argued that a model of public sphere and public discussion needed to be developed that values difference instead of suppressing it. However, as Asen (1999) states, in such an account the public discussion still needs to be held within a framework that is shared enough so that questions of fairness and justice may be addressed by participants themselves. In divided societies it is exactly this framework that may be lacking. Alternative types of expression to the rational discourse may help to create such a framework. An alternative account of deliberative democracy was developed in this thesis, in which discussion is viewed as the method to democratically deal with differences between discourses. Deliberation involves a discussion that: (i) is equally open to all participants and viewpoints; (ii) in which participants are open towards each other’s positions, involving recognition and consideration of these; and that results in (iii) engagement between different discourses; (iv) and in understanding for the other and his/her position.

This alternative conception of the role of public discussion as suggested in Chapter 1 is much more modest in its aims, though at the same time, more demanding for its participants. The aim of public discussion is to come to an understanding for the other through engagement between different discourses, rather than consensus. The cases analysed show that for this to come about, a certain level of openness is needed towards the positions and ways of communication of the other. And, as the Maghrebonline case shows (Chapter 7), participants have to breach the traditional public sphere rule of rationality and dispassionate expression, as other types of expression are needed to be able to reach some level of understanding in light of the vast difference between participants and their discourse. Leaving behind the detached mode of communication may thus actually be necessary to foster understanding, or at least make differences seem less insurmountable. Greetings and other public acknowledgements as well as rhetoric and the sharing of personal experiences through narratives are helpful, and may even be necessary to soften the tone of the debate and to create an atmosphere in which people are more inclined to open up towards the other and their beliefs, opinions and arguments, even though they are different from their own.

Internet and public debate

The last question I want to address here is that of the implications of the findings for the Internet’s potential for public debate. What kind of contribution can online discussions make to the larger public sphere, specifically in light of the aim of inclusion of marginal
groups or alternative voices? Of course, we need to keep in mind that the main focus of study in this thesis was web forums, and not other types of Internet spaces. Whether or not there are differences between web forums and other types of online discussions regarding their openness to difference remains a topic for investigation. Also, I have concentrated on seven popular Dutch web forums that, though the sample includes both general as well as specialised forums, may be different in its potential for openness than smaller forums. Having said this, I still want to make some general comments on the Internet's potential for open public debate.

The finding that some actors seek to exclude alternative voices from the general discussion forums seems to suggest that the Internet's main potential lies in the possibility it offers in the formation of so-called counter publics. In such online counter publics, groups could focus on discussions among themselves, and be protected from the out-group, or the wider public sphere. As I introduced in Chapter 2, several theorists consider this possibility to be the main contribution of the Internet. There are two problems with this argument. One, can the Internet offer such spaces when the ‘dominant’ discourse does not want them to exist? In this thesis I have shown that—though in theory, everyone is free to contribute to the online discourse—not only does it remain difficult for alternative voices to enter the dominant discourse online, but even the mere existence of alternative voices is threatened online. Even though there are oceans of space online for alternative voices, the tolerance for these voices does not necessarily equal this space. The case of Ertan is exemplary of the difficulty that alternative voices face; he exists as a mere insular space separate from the dominant discourse, as his web presence is constantly being threatened. Even though the Internet may offer virtually unlimited space, admission to enter that space is limited.

We have furthermore seen that it may prove difficult to create a genuine ‘insular’ space resembling a counter public. Online, it is very difficult to ‘keep out’ members of the out-group. *Maghrebonline*, for instance, is to an increasing extent populated by ‘native’ Dutch rather than first and second-generation immigrants of Moroccan descent (the main target group). Though several rules are formulated to protect the in-group, it resembles less and less a counter public in the sense of a homogenous emancipatory public. I mention this example to show that the Internet's potential to form counter publics should not be taken for granted. However, this is not necessarily negative, since interaction between discourses should be the point of departure.

This brings us to the second problem with viewing the Internet's potential mainly in terms of forming these separate spaces. Next to the practical limitations, it leaves us with the problem of interaction between discourses on a theoretical level. Engagement can only come about when people encounter each other. Focusing on the technological potential to form insular publics does not bring about such encounters. So, do web forum discussions allow for meaningful interaction? And does encountering them also result in engagement?

In this thesis I have argued that whether or not different voices come together online depends on the openness of the discussants to each other. Whether or not engagement comes about when different discourses are present in the online discussion is determined by the participants. The Internet does provide for both the space and infrastructure to let different discourses engage. Moreover, if people do want to encounter difference, and are
open to it, the Internet holds many possibilities. Offline it may be difficult for people to find others with a different background and with different perspectives. Online, difference is not so difficult to find. In this respect it is promising that the general discussion forums, rather than the specific forums, seem to be the most popular, that ‘natives’ go to Moroccan websites, and that people like Ertan seek to voice their opinion on general forums. The focus of users on diversity of web forums also bodes well in this respect.

One should keep in mind, though, that encountering the other is not sufficient; not only openness to difference is needed, but the discussion also needs openness of the participants towards each other. This is not inherent to the technology of the Internet. The transformation has to be made by people themselves. Particularly on contested topics like immigration in polarized societies, such transformations are difficult. To this end, I have addressed the role of alternative styles of communication, such as greetings, narratives, and testimonials. When these are included in the debate they soften the tone of the discussion, and as such make differences seem less insurmountable. These types of expression rather than rational communication may be able to establish the necessary bridge between different discourses in society, though it remains up to the people to cross it. If people are indifferent or even hostile towards difference, full inclusion and understanding will not come about.