What's Wife Swap got to do with it? Talking politics in the net-based public sphere

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1.1 What’s Wife Swap got to do with it?

One evening before dinner, a few friends and I sat and watched television. As I flipped through the channels, one of my friends shouted out, “Leave that on. I like that show.” At the time, I had no idea what show she was referring to, and as such, I sat there patiently waiting to see what we were about to watch. As the introduction of the television series began, I thought to myself, “Please, not another one of those reality television shows”. Sure enough, it was exactly that, a series called Wife Swap. 

Wife Swap, originally broadcasted in 2003 by Channel 4 (UK), is an award winning reality television series, which focuses on the lives of families. The twist to the show is that for two weeks the mothers of two families swap places and take over the role of the other. Given the contrast in the families selected, the show presents a lively form of entertainment from the screams of anger to the laughter of joy. However, entertainment was not the only thing that Wife Swap provided that evening amongst friends. It also, and unexpectedly, provided a communicative space that fostered political discussion.

During the first commercial break, we began discussing the behaviors of the two families. By the end of the show, these particular behaviors ignited and fueled a variety of discussions on parenting practices specifically and the role and importance of parenting for society in general. In short, Wife Swap, in addition to entertaining us, provided a communicative space whereby the issues of parenting and the modern-day family within a democratic society were discussed among friends during the course of a couple hours.

Before the show began, I had a somewhat negative impression of what reality shows were, of the kind of people who watched them, and of what they offered their fans, audiences. In terms of what they offered society, these impressions were magnified further. Stealing a line from the title of the best-selling book by critic Neil Postman (1985), my thought at the time was, “Yes, we are amusing ourselves to death.” However, after watching the show and participating in the communicative space that it provoked, I began to question my initial impressions on the role of such a show specifically, and on reality television and popular forms of entertainment in general.
Shortly after, I began exploring and sampling the various online entertainment- and fan-based discussion forums, such as Wife Swap and Big Brother, in search of similar political discussions. During an initial investigation, I came across numerous discussion forums and communities tied to reality TV series. While examining these sites, I was initially overwhelmed by the sheer number of postings they offered. At the time, for example, Channel 4’s Big Brother discussion forum hosted over 9,000 messages posted during several days alone.\footnote{Available at: http://community.channel4.com/eve} Although a majority of what I read was not political by any stretch of the word, there still were a substantial number of times when the conversations turned political. For example, there were a variety of political issues dealing with everything from the role of bullying among British youth to the Iraq War,\footnote{Coleman (2007b) has made similar observations on the official Big Brother discussion forum.} indicating that political talk is not exclusively reserved for politically oriented discussion forums, but rather as Brants (2002) has argued, politics online is ‘e-verywhere’.

1.2 **Background: Net-based public sphere research**

Over the past decade, there has been much debate concerning the internet’s ability to extend the public sphere (see e.g. Bohman, 2004; Dahlberg, 2001a, 2001c; Dahlgren, 2001, 2005; Gimmler, 2001; Graham, 2002; Papacharissi, 2002; Sparks, 2001; Witschge, 2004). Much of the debate has focused on the potential of the internet in cultivating a public sphere where free, equal, and open deliberation among citizens can flourish. In particular, there has been a rise in the number of net-based public sphere research projects, which test deliberative claims and/or utilize public sphere ideals as a means of evaluating online communicative practices.\footnote{(Albrecht, 2006; Beierle, 2004; Brants, 2002; Coleman, 2004; Dahlberg, 2001a, 2001b, 2004; Graham, 2002, 2008; Graham & Witschge, 2003; Hagemann, 2002; Jankowski & Van Os, 2004; Jankowski & Van Selm, 2000; Janssen & Kies, 2005; Muhlberger, 2004; Ó Baoill, 2000; Schneider, 1997; Schultz, 2000; Stanley, Weare, & Musso, 2004; Strandberg, 2008; Stromer-Galley, 2002, 2003, 2007; Tanner, 2001; Tsaliki, 2002; Van Selm, Jankowski, & Tsaliki, 2002; Wilhelm, 1999; Winkler, 2002, 2005; Wright, 2007; Wright & Street, 2007).}

To date, net-based public sphere researchers have studied online deliberation in a variety of ways. However, most of these studies have focused solely on political discussion forums—for instance Usenet newsgroups, news media message boards, independent deliberative initiatives, political party/politician forums, and governmentally sponsored forums—and have neglected an array of other forum genres. As discussed above, one genre is the range of entertainment-/fan-based discussion forums tied to reality TV, such as Wife Swap and Big Brother. As my initial exploratory findings revealed, such forums are abundant online and host a multitude of participants and discussions. Moreover, they often host a variety of political discussions dealing with everything from health and the body to politicians and govern-
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Consequently, they offer a range of political discussions, which also contribute to the web of informal conversations that constitutes the public sphere, and as such, they should not be overlooked.

Thus far, net-based public sphere research has only provided us with a partial picture, which is problematic for two additional reasons. First, such spaces gain even more prominence if we considered the notion of a shift in politics. Today, due to complex economic, political, and social changes stirred on largely by globalization, new relationships and uncertainties between citizens and social structures have brought about a new domain of politics; what some have called life politics (Giddens, 1991), sub-politics (Beck, 1994), post-modern politics (Inglehart, 1997), or lifestyle politics (Bennett, 1998). Individuals here increasingly organize social and political meaning around their lifestyle values and the personal narratives that express them as opposed to traditional structures and institutions. Therefore, we need to start looking in different spaces and on different pages of the newspaper to find politics (Beck, 1994, p. 18). In terms of political conversations online, this means that we not only have to reconsider where to look, but we also have to reconsider what we are looking for. In this sense, a porous approach to what is political is desired, one that will allow also for a more individualized, lifestyle-based approach to politics.

Second, by solely focusing on politically oriented discussion forums, we run the risk of painting a distorted view. Are the participants that participate in politically oriented discussion forums a good representation of who and how citizens discuss politics online, or do these participants resemble more the “political junkies” that Coleman (2003) describes? Thus, if we are to move “beyond the first phase” of net-based public sphere research, as Dahlberg (2004b) calls for, we must start widening our scope of analysis by taking a more inclusive approach to selecting the discursive spaces we examine because, as Coleman (2007a, p. 372) has argued, “[I]t seems likely that many of the best examples of online democratic communication are not to be found within the dedicated political spaces of the Internet, but in discrete, peripheral, and ostensibly non-political online spaces”.

1.3 Research aims, questions, and relevance

The aim of this study then is to move beyond politically oriented discussion forums by also examining the communicative practices of participants within fan-based forums. The focus is on how participants talk politics in online informal discussion forums. By informal discussion forums, I am referring to those forums that are not bound to any formal predetermined agendas such as e-consultations or e-juries, but
rather to forums who’s primary purpose is to simply provide a communicative space for talk, e.g. fan-based discussion forums, news media message boards, and Usenet newsgroups. By political talk, I am referring to everyday, informal, political conversation carried out freely between participants in these online spaces, which is often spontaneous and lacks any purpose outside the purpose of talk for talk sake, representing the practical communicative form of what Habermas (1984, p. 327) calls communicative action. It is through this type of everyday political talk whereby citizens achieve mutual understanding about the self and each other, and it represents the fundamental ingredient of the public sphere.

The purpose of this study first is a normative one; it is to examine the democratic quality of this fundamental ingredient, of the communicative practices of participants within online discussions forums in light of a set of normative conditions of the public sphere. It is also to move beyond a formal notion of deliberation (beyond rationality via argumentation) by providing a more accurate account of how the political emerges in online discussions (particularly within nonpolitically oriented forums), how people actually talk politics in those discussions, and finally, how alternative communicative forms such as humor, emotional comments, and acknowledgements interact and influence the more ‘traditional’ elements of deliberation (e.g. rational-critical debate and reciprocity). Consequently, I present the following three research questions, which are central to this study:

To what extent do the communicative practices of online political discussions satisfy the normative conditions of the process of deliberation of the public sphere?

What role, if any, do expressives (humor, emotional comments, and acknowledgements) play within online political discussions and in relation to the normative conditions of deliberation?

How does political talk emerge in nonpolitically oriented discussion forums?

Together, the answers to these questions present a more comprehensive account of online political talk. They seek not only to offer insight into the quality of such talk, but also to provide a better understanding of its expressive and affective nature. Moreover, they seek to improve our understanding of how political talk occurs outside the realm of politically oriented discussion forums, and how it emerges in such communicative spaces. Therefore, in order to answer these questions and provide this insight, I examine and compare political talk within three online discussion forums of the Guardian, Big Brother, and Wife Swap. A comparative study design with normative, descriptive, and explorative characteristics was utilized. A content analysis with both qualitative and quantitative features was employed as the primary instrument for examination. Additional textual and network analyses were carried out to provide more depth to the investigation.
This study contributes to the growing body of net-based public sphere research in several ways. Theoretically, it constructs and specifies a comprehensive set of idealized conditions for democratic communication in the public sphere, thus providing a complete set of normative criteria for future research. Methodologically, it operationalizes these conditions using multiple methods as a means of providing a more comprehensive set of empirical indicators of deliberation, which can be used both by practitioners and researchers in future deliberative initiatives and empirical investigations online. Furthermore, the study moves beyond political forums to include fan-/entertainment-based discussion forums by utilizing a comparative study design, thus adding to our understanding of the online communicative landscape. It not only moves beyond politically oriented forums, but also beyond a ‘formal’ notion of deliberation by analyzing the everyday ingredients (humor, emotions, and acknowledgements) of political talk, which not only provides a more authentic account of how people actually talk politics, but it also provides insight empirically into how such communicative practices enhance and/or impede ‘traditional’ conditions of deliberation thereby improving our understanding of political talk theoretically. Finally, this study moves beyond a conventional, institutional notion of politics, allowing for a more individualized, personal, and lifestyle-based form of politics to be investigated.

1.4 Organization of the study

The remainder of this study is organized into seven chapters, a bibliography, and appendixes in the following manner. In Chapter 2, the normative framework of this study is assembled. Specifically, a set of normative conditions of the public sphere, which are later operationalized into empirical indicators, are specified from Habermas’s theory of communicative action and other democratic theorists. Utilizing this normative construct as a lens for analysis, in Chapter 3, a literature review of past net-based public sphere research is presented. This chapter not only addresses critically the empirical findings, but it also addresses some key methodological inadequacies of past studies. Chapter 4 delineates the research design and methodology of this study. The instruments for gathering the data, the procedures followed, and the criteria for selecting the sample of this study are laid out. An analysis of the data and a discussion of the findings are presented in Chapter 5 (for the Guardian), Chapter 6 (for Big Brother), and Chapter 7 (for Wife Swap). Chapter 8 contains the summary, conclusions, and recommendations of the study. The study concludes with a bibliography and appendixes.