What’s Wife Swap got to do with it? Talking politics in the net-based public sphere
Graham, T.S.
Chapter 2

The normative conditions of the public sphere

2.1 Introduction

One of the central aims of this study is to evaluate the democratic quality of online communicative practices in light of an ideal notion of the process of deliberation of the public sphere. In order to conduct such an analysis, a specification of the conditions of the process of deliberation for the evaluation of everyday political talk within the public sphere is required. Thus, the aim of this chapter is to provide clarification and delineation of those normative conditions theoretically. Before conducting such an endeavor, the basis of those conditions needs to be established. Consequently, this chapter is cumulative in the sense that it looks to provide the necessary theoretical framework for constructing and coming to a set of normative conditions of the public sphere.

In section 2.2, Jürgen Habermas’s notion of the public sphere is introduced. A brief compressed synopsis of his theory of the public sphere (1989) is provided. The aim here is to specify the various conditions of the public sphere in order to clarify the focus of this study, which rests on the process of deliberation. In section 2.3, attention is paid to the deliberative model of democracy. Deliberative democratic theory places much stock on deliberation within the public sphere. Consequently, most net-based public sphere studies have drawn heavily from this particular brand of democracy. However, given the diversity of approaches taken by deliberative democratic theorists, there has lacked a consensus among net-based public sphere researchers as to which criteria to employ. Therefore, in section 2.4 and 2.5, two crucial positions on the notion of deliberation within deliberative democratic theory are mapped out as a means of clarification. Section 2.6 begins with a discussion on Habermas’s theory of communicative action. Drawing from this theory specifically and other deliberative democratic theorists in general, this section ends with a delin-

---

7 I am aware of the wide range of criticism lodged against Habermas’s (1989) earlier version of the public sphere. For example, Fraser (1992) and Fleming (1995) both criticize the account for excluding women from public life, while Eley (1992) addresses the inadequacies of Habermas’s account of the proletarian public sphere. That said, Habermas (1992a, 1992b) himself has taken much of this criticism to heart. In his later work (see e.g. 1996), he has addressed or at least touched upon most of these criticisms. Moreover, the aim of this section is not to provide a critical overview of the public sphere, but rather to clarify the theoretical focus of this study by specifying its conditions. See Calhoun (1992) for various critical commentaries on and a comprehensive overview of this version of Habermas’s theory of the public sphere.
creation of a set of the normative conditions of the process of deliberation. Finally, in section 2.7, the chapter ends with some closing remarks.

2.2 The public sphere and its conditions

The notion of deliberative democracy in modern day discussions covers a multiplicity of theoretical approaches from Barber’s (1984) ‘strong democracy’ to Dryzek’s (1990) ‘discursive democracy’. Since democratic theory took a deliberative turn nearly two decades ago (Dryzek, 2000),8 democratic theorists have applied the deliberative model to everything from direct forms of democracy to more liberal forms of representative democracy.9 Questions over who should deliberate, where deliberation should be advanced, what can be deliberated, and what is deliberation are just a few of the areas in which deliberative democrats divide among themselves. Despite these differences, however, a core set of propositions distinguishes the deliberative model of democracy from its adversaries. “They all highlight the role of open discussion, the importance of citizen participation and the existence of a well-functioning public sphere” (Gimmler, 2001, p. 23).

The concept of the public sphere is central to the various versions of deliberative democracy, which are generally concerned with how public opinion is formed within the public sphere, and how such opinion influences the decision-making process of the political system. Habermas’s theory of the public sphere has been very influential on the work of deliberative democrats and other democratic theorists. It is fruitful because it provides, as Dahlberg argues (2004a), to date one of the most systematically developed critical theories of the public sphere. It can be broken into three phases of development. Phase one begins with the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), which provides an historical account of the rise and fall of the bourgeois public sphere from pre-modern times till present.10 Here he is mostly concerned with the rise of public opinion and the media in relation to the political system. Phase two represents his two-volume series the *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984, 1987) and his discourse ethics in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (1990). Here he contends with rationality and looks to construct a democratic discourse. He turns away from his earlier position by replacing a subjective notion with an intersubjective notion of rationality, i.e. rationality exists in human interaction as opposed to being inherent in the individual, as a product of communicative action. Habermas returns to *STPS* in phase three with *Between Facts and Norms* (1996).11 Here he attempts again to base legitimacy and the practice of democratic politics in the rational-critical discourse of the public sphere.

---

8 At the time Dryzek wrote this it was a little more than a decade ago.
9 See e.g. Saward’s (2001) mixing of the direct and deliberative models of democracy.
10 This is referred to *STPS* this point forward.
11 This is referred to *BFN* this point forward.
Ideally, Habermas envisions the public sphere as the realm of social life where the exchange of information, positions, and opinions on the discovery and questions of common concern/good take place, ultimately forming public opinion, which in turn guides the political system. The public sphere “springs into being” when private citizens come together freely to debate openly the political and social issues of the day. In *STPS*, it formed around the rational discourse of the rising bourgeois class through meetings at e.g. coffee houses and salons as well as through their use of print media (e.g. pamphlets and newspapers).

Habermas introduces this notion of the public sphere in *STPS* by describing and interpreting an historical movement that took place during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is through this historical account whereby Habermas draws a parallel between what took place then, and what he considers the ideal notion of the public sphere to be, which we might today still strive to achieve. He argues that with the development of early modern capitalism, the necessary conditions were created for the emergence of the public sphere in Western Europe. One such condition was the appearance and rise of a ‘bourgeois class’, which consisted of a growing number of well-to-do and educated citizens who found themselves on the one hand ignored by the state, while on the other hand their self-interests were becoming progressively more intertwined with the acts and decisions made by the state. Simultaneously, there was the development of new infrastructure for social communication such as the press, publishing houses, and libraries. This corresponded with the development of communicative public spaces such as coffee houses, salons, and table societies. These were the spaces where this new bourgeois class freely came together on relatively equal terms and discussed openly and rationally the social and political concerns of the day. It is important to stress that for Habermas the essential ingredient here was not the formation of the institutional communicative spaces themselves (though a necessary requirement), but rather, it was the manner of communication, which was used within the spaces, that of rational-critical debate, of rational thought. Although deprived from power directly, this new public sphere increasingly gained the capacity to criticize, create recommendations for, and influence in general the state in the name of the public (the ‘bourgeois’ public that is). Thus, normatively speaking, a sphere that acted as an intermediary between the state and the public was born, and more importantly, it was this sphere that produced, via rational-critical debate, a new legitimizing source of power.

However, according to Habermas, after the first half of the nineteenth century, the landscape changed in reference to the public sphere. This new legitimizing source of power began to disappear. He (1989, pp. 141-175, pp. 181-196) argues that a range of structural changes slowly started to take place, which led to the breakdown of the public sphere. First, it became engulfed by an expanding welfare state; the separation between the public sphere and the state became blurred. In particular, the growth of political parties, organizations, and interest groups began to take over the once free communicative forums with self-interest agendas. As Sparks (1998, pp. 110-111) explains, “The growth of large-scale firms and parties meant that debate was no
longer concerned with the issues of public concern but with the wrangling over interests of different powerful political actors”.

Second, the institutions of the public sphere, i.e. the media and the communicative spaces of for example the coffee houses and table societies, began to be taken over by the logic of commercial interests. In other words, as commercial interests became more entrenched in these spaces, the domain of rationality began to diminish as the primary form of communication. Habermas argues that the media, in particular, shifted from a guardian of the public sphere where a critical eye kept watch on the state to a profit driven, economically interested big business who’s number one concern became creating consumption, and who’s role as critical eye shifted to a role as ‘opinion manager’. As he argues (1989, p. 193), “Opinion management with its promotion and exploitation goes beyond advertising; it invades the process of public opinion by systematically creating news events or exploiting events that attract attention”. The once critical press that provided the spark for critical debate among citizens at large now became manipulators of public opinion, which helped foster passivity and conformity on the part of citizens. The coffee houses and table societies where rational-critical debate once took place became nothing but a commodity itself, as he maintains (1989, p. 160), “The public sphere in the world of letters was replaced by the pseudo-public or sham private world of cultural consumption”. Consequently, the public sphere began to deteriorate to a point whereby today the notion seems more like a distant memory rather than a plausible reality. Nevertheless, Habermas argues that modern day democracies still have the capacity and potential for the reconstruction of the public sphere, thus providing us with a normative account that we should strive towards.

Again, central to the deliberative model of democracy is the concept of a ‘well-functioning’ public sphere. From the above synopsis, 12 four crucial conditions are required in maintaining a healthy public sphere, which include active citizens, communicative spaces, the media, and the process of deliberation. It is important to note here that these conditions do not exist within a single unified public sphere. Indeed, Habermas in BFN, addressing criticisms made by e.g. Fraser (1992), abandons the perspective adopted in STPS, which viewed the bourgeois as a single public. Rather now, he views the public sphere as representing “a highly complex network that branches out into a multitude of overlapping international, national, regional, local, and subcultural arena”, which consist of not only the formal and institutional publics associated with the state, but also “for example, popular science and literary publics, religious and artistic publics, feminist and “alternative” publics, publics concerned with health-care issues, social welfare, or environmental policy (1996, pp. 373-374). That said, even with such complexity, the public sphere or rather the network of public spheres requires four basic conditions.

---

12 Also from the second and third phase, as discussed above, of the development of Habermas’s public sphere theory.
First, the public sphere requires citizens to act as active agents in the political process. This does not only include institutional political participation, such as voting, but more importantly, it requires citizens to come together to discuss the political and social issues of the day in their everyday lives (a prerequisite to voting). Moreover, it is this everyday informal political talk among the citizenry, which represents the fundamental ingredient of the public sphere.

Second, the public sphere requires autonomous (free from both state and commercial influence) communicative spaces whereby citizens can engage freely and openly in deliberation, in political talk. It is important to note that these spaces may be conceptualized from two angles. First, they can be viewed from a micro, a meso, or a macro level (Keane, 2000). For example, at the micro level, communicative spaces would include e.g. the local pub, the hairdresser, or a town hall meeting, while at the meso level they would include e.g. national media, and at the macro level, they would include e.g. international media. Second, a formal to informal distinction can be made here. For example, formal communicative spaces would include parliaments, legislators, or even e-juries, while informal spaces would include the everyday communicative spaces of the workplace cafeteria, the shopping mall, or the café.

Third, the public sphere requires mass media, ideally, free from both state and commercial influence. The media serve three functions. First, as mentioned above, they serve as a large-scale communicative space for public deliberation. Second, they serve as a transmitter of information; they provide the necessary information to inform the citizenry on the social and political issues of the day. Finally, they serve as a ‘critical eye’ on both governmental and economical affairs.

Finally, there is the process of deliberation, which is not only the guiding communicative form of the public sphere, but also represents the structural and dispositional arrangements of this communicative process. It is important to note here that in BFN, Habermas (1996, p. 360) maintains that the public sphere can not be conceptualized as an institution or space, but rather, it represents a ‘social space’ generated by a process of deliberation. It is here where the ‘heart and soul’ of the public sphere can be found and where much focus has been paid to by deliberative democratic theorist. Moreover, it is the process of deliberation set within the context of everyday informal political talk where the focus of this study rests.

2.3 Deliberative democracy: From vote-centric to talk-centric

Central to any account of deliberative democracy is the process of deliberation. Unlike earlier liberal accounts of democracy, deliberative democratic theory “begins with a turning away from liberal individualist or economic understandings of democracy and towards a view anchored in conceptions of accountability and discussion” (Chambers, 2003, p. 308). In other words, “talk-centric democratic theory replaces

Note that the process of deliberation refers to Habermas’s (1984) notion of communicative rationality.
voting-centric democratic theory” (Chambers, 2003, p. 308). Hence, the deliberative model emphasizes public deliberation rather than the role of power plays and bargaining between interests as a means of resolving public dispute and conflict; deliberation becomes the (communicative) heart and sole of democracy. Moreover, in line with critical theory, the deliberative democratic account views democratic participation as a means of transforming individuals, transforming their preferences through a process of deliberation. This is in contrast to the liberal democratic account, which views preferences as remaining stable during and after democratic participation. Consequently, deliberative democracy relies on the empirical reality of preference transformation.

Dryzek (2000, p. 1) maintains, “Deliberation as a social process is distinguished from other kinds of communication in that deliberators are amenable to changing their judgments, preferences, and views during the course of their interactions, which involve persuasion rather than coercion, manipulation, or deception”. It is through deliberation whereby preference transformation becomes possible because participants are confronted with new information, opinions, and arguments, which they would have otherwise never supposed before deliberation under a voting alone account. Elster (1998) argues similarly that bargaining and voting alone tend to emphasize individual preferences and motives while open deliberation among free and equal citizens looks to transform individual preferences into a common will based on the common good. Benhabib (1996) argues along similar lines but focuses more on how preferences clarify and take shape during the process of deliberation. As she states, “The formation of coherent preferences cannot precede deliberation; it can only succeed it. Very often individuals’ wishes as well as views and opinions conflict with one another. In the course of deliberation and the exchange of views with others, individuals become more aware of such conflicts and feel compelled to undertake a coherent ordering” (1996, p. 71). What is important here is that deliberative democrats see individual preferences as transformable rather than set, which is crucial for a democratic theory based on deliberation.

2.4 What is deliberation?

Given that this study focuses on everyday political talk within the public sphere, it is important to make clear what is meant by deliberation. Though deliberative democrats agree that deliberation is the essential component of democracy, when it comes to defining deliberation, agreement is not as forthcoming. That said, the theoretical literature on deliberative democracy regarding the notion of deliberation can be deduced, for the most part, to two camps: 1) those deliberative democrats who tend to emphasize a formal, procedural, representative, impartial, and consensus oriented notion; 2) and those deliberative democrats who tend to emphasize an informal, critical, citizen-based, personal, and understanding oriented notion.

Regarding the former, deliberative democrats tend to define deliberative democracy as a collective decision making system, which should occur through
The normative conditions of the public sphere

public deliberation (Cohen, 1997a, 1997b; Elster, 1998; Fishkin, 1991; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Manin, 1987; Neblo, 2005). They tend to focus on the instrumental function of deliberation stressing procedures and institutional arrangements as a means of fostering public deliberation oriented towards the common good, which ideally should lead to legitimate outcomes in the form of a rationally motivated consensus. Cohen (1997a, p. 69) maintains, “When properly conducted, public deliberation focused on the common good, requires some form of manifest equality among citizens, and shapes the identity and interests of citizens in ways that contribute to the formation of a public conception of common good”. Public deliberation here requires that participants transcend their particular interests in the name of the public interest. Thus, only arguments that are grounded in impartiality are to be permitted in the process of deliberation, leaving little room for private interests in public reasoning.

One of the difficulties with such an account is that it tends to describe a ‘formal’ (along with an idealized) notion of deliberation. It represents a type of deliberation, which we might (or should) expect to find among politicians or representatives within formal settings (or elite public spheres). It might be the type of deliberation by which we evaluate the mass media, the mediated public sphere. Or we might want to apply such standards to structured semi-formal settings, such as citizen juries and consultations (see e.g. Fishkin, 1991). However, deliberative democracy involves public deliberation not only as a means of public reasoning oriented towards the common good and collective decision-making within formal or semi-formal settings, but also as a process of producing public reasons and achieving mutual understanding within the more informal everyday communicative spaces of the public sphere. As Habermas (2005, pp. 288-289) states, there are two types of political deliberation, deliberation as described above, and deliberation that takes place among citizens within the informal public sphere. The latter being the type of everyday political talk one might typically find within the various genres of online discussion forums.

2.5 Beyond institutional and formal notions of deliberation

There are those deliberative democratic theorists who look to contrast the deliberative model of democracy with real-life practices thereby retrieving, maintaining, and advancing the model’s critical voice (Benhabib, 1996; Bohman, 1996; Dryzek, 1990, 2000; Young, 2000). Both embracing and critically drawing upon Habermas’s theory of communicative action (which will be discussed in the following section) specifically and his notion of the public sphere in general, these democratic theorists have looked to orientate the deliberative model more towards a process of understanding between and among everyday citizens. In particular, they seek to (a) move deliberative democracy beyond the venues of institutional politics into the realm of the informal public sphere, (b) construct a more authentic notion of deliberation, (c) and
create space for private interests in public reasoning, allowing for a more individualized and lifestyle notion of politics to emerge.

Deliberative democrats such as Barber (1984, 1998), Bohman (1996), Benhabib (1996), Dryzek (2000), Mansbridge (1999), and Young (2000) have attempted to refocus the deliberative model on and within the public sphere thereby placing citizens at the center of the theory. Unlike above, they envision a strong democracy via a public sphere of informal citizen deliberation oriented towards achieving mutual understanding, which fosters rational public opinion that critically guides the political system. In this sense, the public sphere, and the web of everyday political conversations that constitute it, becomes the key venue for deliberation, a place of democratization. It is through ongoing participation in everyday talk whereby citizens become aware and informed, try to understand others, test old and new ideas, and express, develop, and transform their preferences. All of this is essential for a healthy, effective, and active public opinion specifically and for the public sphere in general.

If our focus is on everyday political talk within the public sphere, we need to reconsider what we mean by deliberation. In other words, we need a notion of deliberation that takes into account the everyday informal nature of political talk. Privileging reason by means argumentation as the only relevant communicative form ignores the realities of everyday political talk and differences within a society. Young (1996, 2000), for example, argues for a restyling of deliberative democracy into what she has termed ‘communicative democracy’. Communicative democracy, according to Young (1996, p. 123), “attends to the social difference, to the way that power sometimes enters speech itself, recognizes the cultural specificity of deliberative practices, and proposes a more inclusive model of communication”. Thus, she looks to broaden and extend the notion of rational discourse to include communicative forms such as greeting, rhetoric, and storytelling (1996, 2000). Dryzek (2000) takes a similar position. He maintains that communicative forms such as rhetoric, humor, storytelling, and gossip all have a place in the process of deliberation (2000, p. 169). However, unlike Young, Dryzek takes a more guarded approach in that rational-critical debate is a required element of the process of deliberation while other communicative forms are welcomed but not compulsory.

Other theorists have looked to integrate and create space for emotions and expressives within the process of deliberation specifically. As Mendelberg (2002, p.

---

14 Young calls herself a communicative democrat precisely because she wants to create room in deliberation for other communicative forms.

15 The few studies that do analyze everyday political talk (non net-based studies) provide evidence to support these claims (Barnes, 2005; Barnes, Knops, Newman, & Sullivan, 2004; Bennett, Flickinger, & Rhine, 2000; Conover & Searing, 2005; Eliasoph, 1996, 2000; Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999; Wyatt, Katz, & Kim, 2000).

16 The deliberative model of democracy has been heavily criticized and influenced by feminist and difference theorists for privileging rationality via argumentation. Sanders (1997) and McGregor (2003) for example have argued for the inclusion of testimonial within the deliberative process. Warnke (1995) and Squires (1998) argue along a similar line maintaining a need for the integration of aesthetics into any conception of deliberation.
170) maintains, “Deliberative theory must make place for a more complex view of what emotions can do, not just against but for good deliberation”. O’Neill (2002, p. 267) claims that good deliberation requires emotions because they are capacities for proper judgment and concern about what matters in private and public life. Rosenberg (2004) argues that productive deliberation requires emotional connections, the formation of emotional bonds between participants. Such connections, for example, fuel a participant’s effort to understand other positions and arguments. Coming from a slightly different direction, Basu (1999) argues that humor warrants inclusion in any robust conception of deliberation. According to Basu (1999, pp. 390-394), humor benefits political talk in three ways. First, it acts as a social lubricant; it breaks the ice and fills the awkward silences. Second, it allows for criticism and frankness to be conveyed in less threatening and contentiously ways. Consequently, it creates a more civil and productive discursive environment. Finally, it can act as social glue. It fosters a good mode atmosphere between participants, which inclines them towards empathy with one another. In short, democratic theorists have begun loosening rationality and argumentation’s grip allowing emotions and alternative communicative forms a place within the deliberative process. This is particularly important when it comes to the type of deliberation crucial to the informal public sphere.

Finally, deliberative democrats have been questioning whether reason itself should be solely grounded in the public’s interest.17 Dryzek (2000, p. 169) calls for what he has labeled an “acceptable balance […] between private and public interests”. He argues that private interests can also be legitimate sources for deliberation, therefore, “purging partial interests should not be at issue”. Young (1997) argues that a common good embedded in equality, as Cohen above supports, tends to exclude certain groups from the deliberative process. She maintains that within pluralistic societies, where the distribution of economic and cultural wealth is unequal, social norms that appear impartial often tend to be biased. As she (1997, p. 399) explains:

“Under circumstances of social and economic inequality among groups, the definition of the common good often devalues or excludes some of the legitimate frameworks of thinking, interests, and priorities in the polity. A common consequence of social privilege is the ability of a group to convert its perspectives on some issues into authoritative knowledge without being challenged by those who have reason to see things differently”.

Consequently, under this account, private interests need to be addressed during deliberation as a means of creating public discussion and decision-making, which includes all social groups’ perspectives and experiences. “Political actors should

---

17 Again, the criticisms made by feminist and difference theorists against deliberative democracy have been influential here on deliberative democrats. Sanders (1997), for example, criticized earlier versions of deliberative democracy for discrediting partial interests for the sake of privileging communal orientation within deliberation because it runs the risk of fostering the denial of the perspective of minorities.
promote their own interests in such a process, but must also be answerable to others to justify their proposals. This means that actors must be prepared to take the interests of others into account” (Young, 1997, p. 400). In short, the aim is to create a place for private interests within the deliberative process. This is important because it is through the clash of individual interests via deliberation whereby questions of what is good for society as a whole, and not just the majority, are raised and addressed.

2.6 The normative conditions of the process of deliberation

The above conception of a public sphere of informal citizen deliberation as the essence of democracy has been increasingly employed by empirical studies. As stated in the introduction, there has been an increase in the number of net-based public sphere research projects aimed at assessing the democratic quality of everyday communicative practices. These studies, along with this one, focus on the actual process of deliberation, which lies at the center of the public sphere. It is through discourse (deliberation) that the public sphere is constituted (Habermas, 1996, p. 360).

Evaluating the democratic value of online communicative practices requires normative criteria of the process of deliberation of the public sphere. To date, there has lacked consistency among net-based public sphere researchers as to what criteria should be included. From Wilhelm’s (1999) criteria of exchange of opinions, rationality, opinion homogeneity, and degree of listening, to more recently, Jensen’s (2003) criteria of form, dialogue, openness, tone, and argumentation, it is clear that the theoretical footing among researchers varies considerably. That said, net-based public sphere researchers have been heavily influenced by the work of Habermas—his theory of communicative rationality specifically and his notion of the public sphere in general.

Habermas’s work has been both influential and valuable here because, as stated above, it provides the most developed critical theory of the public sphere available (Dahlberg, 2004a). Though some net-based public sphere researchers have constructed different aspects of Habermas’s theory of communicative rationality, a thorough specification of the conditions of the process of deliberation is still required. Consequently, later in this section, I offer a comprehensive set of public sphere criteria—the normative conditions of the process of deliberation. First, however, I will turn my attention to Habermas’s theory of communicative action. It is this theory, which represents the basis for my normative conditions.

In order to acquire more footing for his normative notion of the public sphere, Habermas moves away from his earlier account of an individualistic rationality by

---

18 See Janssen and Kies (2005) and Dahlberg (2004b) for overviews.
19 See Dahlberg (2004a) for another comprehensive specification of the public sphere criteria.
20 See Graham (2002) for a more detailed account of these conditions.
replacing it with a notion of communicative action; rationality becomes a collective construct produced by social interaction. He achieves this by turning to formal pragmatics, which according to Habermas (1984) reveals that all communication contains a mode of (communicative) action that is oriented towards understanding and agreement. He defines communicative action as occurring “whenever the actions of the agents involved are coordinated not through egocentric calculations of success [instrumental or strategic action] but through acts of reaching understanding” (1984, pp. 285-286). Communication oriented towards understanding refers to the “harmonization [of] plans of action on the basis of common situation definitions” (1984, p. 286). It involves the intersubjective redemption of validity claims. That is, when two or more people talk about an issue and try to come to a shared understanding or to an agreement, they make three different claims to validity in their speech acts: they make claims to truth of propositions, claims to rightness of norms, and claims to truthfulness of expressions. Indeed, Habermas maintains, “Every speech act involves the raising of criticizable validity claims aimed at intersubjective recognition” (1996, p. 18). Thus, these claims are always, either implicitly or explicitly, raised in human conversation and represent the basic conditions people strive to meet when communicating with each other. It is this communicative practice oriented towards achieving mutual understanding which is inherent and lies at the heart of human speech.

When consensus is broken and contestation of validity arises, redemption of the problematic validity claims is required. According to Habermas, this is best done through communicative rationality. It involves the public use of reason via a process of argumentation where validity claims are criticized as being untrue, immoral, or insincere. Habermas (1984, pp. 168-185) argues that it is through communicative rationality whereby we come to find new shared meanings and understandings about the world and about the action we need to take in order to live together fruitfully. Such communication may be used within different contexts; however, it is the use of communicative rationality within everyday informal conversation, which constitutes the public sphere. This type of everyday talk within the public sphere serves no specific purpose or plan of action, but rather “to make communication possible and stabilize it” (1984, p. 327). Talk becomes an end in itself. It is through everyday informal political talk whereby people achieve mutual understanding and interpretative communities are founded and maintained, the basis for rationality.

Through this pragmatic analysis of everyday conversation, Habermas argues that when participants take up communicative rationality they must refer to several idealizing presuppositions. Drawing from these idealizing presuppositions (1984, 1987, 1990, 1996, 2001) and the work of some of the above deliberative democrats (Barber, 1984; Benhabib, 1996; Cohen, 1997a; Dryzek, 2000; Young, 1996, 1997, 2000), 11 normative conditions of the process of deliberation are distinguished, which fall into two normatively structured categories: the process of achieving mutual understanding, which focuses on providing the necessary conditions for achieving understanding during the course of political talk by placing both structural and dispositional requirements on the communicative form, process, and participant; and
structural and dispositional fairness, which focuses on providing the necessary conditions aimed at creating a communicative environment based in and on fairness by placing structural and dispositional requirements on the discussion forum’s structure and the participants.

2.6.1 The process of achieving mutual understanding

The process of achieving mutual understanding consists of six conditions: rational-critical debate, coherence, continuity, reciprocity, reflexivity, and empathy. The process of achieving mutual understanding in part must take the form of rational-critical debate. It requires that participants provide reasoned claims, which are critically reflected upon. Such an exchange of claims requires an adequate level of coherence and continuity; participants should stick to the topic of discussion until understanding or some form of agreement is achieved as opposed to abandoning or withdrawing.

Such a process demands three dispositional requirements, three levels of achieving mutual understanding. Reciprocity represents the first of these requirements. Simply put, it requires listening and responding to another’s question, argument, or opinion in general. However, reciprocity on its own does not satisfy the process; reflexivity is required. Reflexivity is the internal process of reflecting another’s position against one’s own. When challenged with critical arguments, participants must contemplate what impact this has on their own argument or position; they need to be reflexive.

With reflexivity, one reflects another participant’s perspective upon one’s own, but with empathy, one takes a step further and tries to put oneself in the other’s position; it represents the final level of understanding. The process of deliberation called for within the public sphere requires an empathic perspective taking in which we not only seek to intellectually understand the position of the other, but we also seek to empathically conceptualize, both cognitively and affectively, how other participants would be affected by the norms under discussion.

Habermas and those deliberative democrats (e.g. Bohman, 1996; Dryzek, 1990; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996) that address empathy tend to focus much of their attention on the former, the cognitive process of what Habermas calls ‘ideal role taking’ (1990, p. 182; 1996, pp. 228-230), while paying little attention to the affective side of empathy.21 For Habermas, empathy represents an ability or disposition that can be used to aid participants in their cognitive task of ideal role taking. However, privileging the cognitive side over the affective side is no longer suitable, particularly when referring to everyday political talk.

First, as discussed earlier, politics has become more personal and lifestyle oriented. Political issues of this nature may be more in tune with the affective function of empathy rather than its cognitive function. Second, as argued earlier,
there is a need for a more authentic notion of deliberation; deliberation that takes into account the informal everyday nature of political talk. Consequently, more affective communicative forms such as narratives, emotional comments, and humor have a place in the process of deliberation and more importantly, regarding empathy, they may be more capable or oriented towards eliciting and facilitating its affective function. For example, political discussions where participants frequently bring life experiences to the debate via narratives to support their arguments may be more apt at appealing to the affective side of empathy.

2.6.2 Structural and dispositional fairness

Structural and dispositional fairness is comprised of five conditions: structural equality, discursive equality, structural autonomy, discursive freedom, and sincerity. Equality is conceptualized at two levels: structural equality and discursive equality. Structural equality refers to the notion of access—access to discursive spaces. It requires that everyone affected by the claims under discussion have equal access to the deliberative process. However, access here is more than just allowing people in; it also includes equal access to the necessary skills needed for engaging in such a process, for example, the skills to communicate effectively.

Once citizens have access to the discursive space and the necessary skills, equality from within the process of deliberation must be maintained—discursive equality. It demands that all participants within the process of deliberation be considered equal members. Such a prescription requires a set of procedures aimed at ensuring such a standard. First, the rules and guidelines that coordinate and maintain the process of deliberation cannot privilege one individual or group of individuals over another. Second, it requires that participants respect and recognize each other as having equal standing. Third, it requires an equal distribution of voice. In the deliberative process, one individual or group of individuals should not dominate the conversation at the sake of others trying to be heard. Finally, the process must maintain an adequate level of respect and manners thereby prohibiting abusive and aggressive language.

The normative condition of freedom is also conceptualized at two levels: structural autonomy and discursive freedom. Structural autonomy maintains that the deliberative process requires autonomous discursive spaces whereby citizens can discuss freely and openly. Ideally, these spaces should be free from all outside forms of force and influence, free from both state and commercial control. Within these discursive spaces, discursive freedom must be assured. The process of deliberation demands that participants are able to share freely information, opinions, and arguments with only one force permitted, the force of a better argument. Every participant within the process of deliberation has the right to express an opinion or criticize another; to raise issues of common concern or challenge the appropriateness of issues under discussion; and to challenge the rules and guidelines that govern the process.
Chapter 2

Finally, *sincerity* as a normative condition of the public sphere implies that all strive to make all information relevant to the discussion known to other participants, which includes their intentions, motives, desires, needs, and interests. Moreover, it requires that all information provided in support of claims during the process be sincere and truthful.

2.7 Conclusion

Deliberative democrats place much faith in public deliberation as a means of cultivating a strong democracy. As discussed above, there are those deliberative democrats who tend to emphasize a formal, procedural, and consensus driven notion of deliberation, while there are those theorists who look to embrace everyday political talk oriented towards understanding within the informal public sphere. The underlying position and argument of this study falls more in line with those of the second camp. As has been argued above and in the introduction, we need to not only begin looking beyond politically oriented discussion forums, but also, we need to move beyond a formal notion of deliberation because to some extent it ignores the realities of everyday political talk. I am not suggesting here that we abandon formal criteria. Criteria such as equality, freedom, reciprocity, and sincerity pertain well to everyday political conversations. Indeed, the 11 normative conditions presented above reflect this, though they begin to contend with the affective side of communication as well (i.e. empathy). However, focusing exclusively on rationality and ignoring private interests neglects the reality of communicative practices and politics today. Consequently, as is made clear in Chapter 4, this study attempts to avoid such exclusivity by taking a more inclusive approach to deliberation, to political talk.

Finally, a note needs to be made regarding the normative condition identified and discussed above. There were 11 conditions delineated. However, both structural equality and structural autonomy will no longer be addressed from this point forward. Both of these conditions represent requirements *prior* to political talk, e.g. access to the internet, access to the necessary education for talking effectively, and control and ownership of communicative spaces, and require more than an analysis of a discussion forum’s content. As discussed in the introduction, the focus of this study is on the communicative practices of participants *during* political talk by examining the content of discussion threads. Thus, structural equality and structural autonomy have been eliminated because they fall outside the scope of this study. I leave these conditions to other net-based public sphere researchers to contend with.