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

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Chapter 3

Online deliberation and the public sphere

3.1 Introduction

Literature on deliberation has grown expeditiously over the past two decades. Today, political and communication scientists, and others, commonly use the ideas and ideals behind the deliberative model of democracy. In particular, there has been an increase in research, which focuses on testing deliberative democratic claims and/or utilizing its ideals as a means of evaluating online communicative practices. Specifically, there has been a rise in the number of internet-based researcher projects, which employ these ideals. Net-based public sphere researchers here have attempted to evaluate whether online communicative spaces and practices constitute a public sphere or enhance it.

In this chapter, some of the key observations and empirical findings within this growing body of research are examined. The aim is to see if any generalizations can be made on whether online communicative practices and spaces constitute (or extend) a public sphere. In order to carry out this analysis, a critical approach is adopted. Thus, the underlining question is, to what extent do online discussion forums and their communicative practices correspond to the normative conditions of the public sphere as laid out in the previous chapter? The aim is not only to provide a critical overview on the state of net-based public sphere research, but also to address some of the operationalization and methodological inadequacies of past studies in an attempt to move this body of research forward.

In the next two sections, the critical review of this literature as it pertains to the nine normative conditions of the process of deliberation of the public sphere is carried out. The process of achieving mutual understanding, which consists of rational-critical debate, coherence, continuity, reciprocity, reflexivity, and empathy, is addressed in section 3.2. While in section 3.3, structural and dispositional fairness, which consists of discursive equality, discursive freedom, and sincerity, is examined. In section 3.4, we move beyond the normative conditions of deliberation and discuss past empirical research on the use of expressives within online political talk. Finally, the chapter ends in section 3.5 with some final thoughts on the state of net-based public sphere research.


3.2 The process of achieving mutual understanding

Some of the earliest observers have argued that computer-mediated communication (CMC) via the internet provides an ideal medium for the type of discussion crucial to the public sphere (Katz, 1997; Kolb, 1996). Katz (1997, p. 7) maintains that the internet fosters a new rationalism, “new ways to gather and distribute facts, to make an end run around the dogma-driven discussions of conventional politics”. Kolb (1996) argues that the rhythm of CMC is ideal for Habermasian dialogue. The asynchronous nature of discussion forums (leaving aside the synchronous modes of chatting) makes it much easier to choose your own appropriate time to log on and participate. You may read another participant’s message one moment, post your own message later, and reply to reciprocating messages at another time. Such a structure allows participants the opportunity: the time to read, reflect upon, and critically assess other participant’s positions and arguments. Moreover, it provides participants the time to develop their own positions and arguments, all of which is essential to the process of deliberation of the public sphere.

3.2.1 Rational-critical debate

Rational-critical debate has been one of the most common conditions of deliberation operationalized and used among net-based public sphere researchers. Moreover, much of the empirical data suggests that within a variety of forum types and structures participants are discussing politics rationally, providing reasons and arguments with their claims (Albrecht, 2006; Coleman, 2004; Dahlberg, 2001b; Jankowski & Van Os, 2004; Jensen, 2003; Papacharissi, 2004; Tanner, 2001; Tsaliki, 2002; Wilhelm, 1999; Winkler, 2002, 2005; Wright & Street, 2007). Wilhelm’s (1999) pioneering study, for example, found that three out of four messages within Usenet and AOL forums provided reasoned claims. He concluded that participants within asynchronized forums are afforded both the time and anonymity needed to construct political messages, which reflect considered judgment. These results are supported by both Tsaliki (2002) and, more recently, Wright and Street’s (2007) research. They found relatively high levels of rational-critical debate within both news media message boards and governmentally sponsored forums.

However, there have been a couple exceptions. For example, Hagemann’s (2002) study found low levels of rational-critical debate within two Dutch political party forums. He concluded that a “fair amount of the discussion rests on opinions without argumentation” (2002, p. 73). More recently, Strandberg’s (2008) analysis of several Finnish political message boards and a Usenet newsgroup revealed very low levels of rational-critical debate. He concluded, “Finnish discussion boards revealed

22 Both Winkler (2002) and Jankowski & Van Os’s (2004) research revealed moderate levels of rational-critical debate.

23 They both adopted Wilhelm’s (1999) coding scheme.
mostly sparse signs of true deliberation” (2008, p. 84). However, these two studies are in some ways unique cases. Hagemann’s study focused on political party sites. One could argue that such forums would tend to attract those affiliated with or interested in the particular party. Consequently, we might expect lower levels of rational-critical debate among such a closed forum type. Regarding Strandberg’s study, we have to consider the Finnish political culture. As he points out, Finnish society places “a clear emphasis on quietness and solitude over conversation. […] It simply doesn’t come naturally to Finnish citizens” (2008, p. 85). Considering these contextual points, it is clear that the exchange of reasoned claims and arguments is taking place in online discussion forums indicating that the communicative form crucial to deliberation is alive and well.

However, there are a couple of methodological inadequacies here when it comes to gauging the level of rational-critical debate. First, most of the studies report their findings in terms of the percentage of total messages that provide reasoned claims and/or argumentation. However, this may be misleading or rather exaggerate the findings when we take into account messages, which consist of multiple claims. Often participants within a single post address more than one argument thereby making multiple claims. Should a message containing several non-reasoned claims and an argument be considered rational? By neglecting this, we run the risk of exaggerating our findings in favor of more rational debate. One way to avoid this would be to make the unit of analysis the individual claim thereby coding for both reasoned and non-reasoned claims. The findings could be reported in terms of the percentage of total claims rather than percentage of total messages thus providing a more accurate account.

Second, it is unclear whether the above operationalization adequately captures the critical in rational-critical debate. For example, Wilhelm’s (1999, p. 168) coding category ‘validate’ captures those postings which supply reasons or arguments for the validity of their positions. However, this does not gauge for critical reflection directly. For example, a discussion thread could have a high level of ‘validate’ postings with a very low level of critical reflection. In order to address this, researchers could simply code for critical arguments directly by adding other coding categories. There have been a few studies, which have directly attempted to assess forums for critical debate (Dahlberg, 2001b; Stromer-Galley, 2003; Tanner, 2001; Winkler, 2005). Winkler’s (2005) analysis of an EU sponsored forum revealed very low levels of disagreement. Stromer-Galley’s (2003) interviews with Usenet and Yahoo forum/chat participants, on the other hand, revealed that many of them choose to frequently “engage in those conversations that involve a high level of disagreement”. However, does disagreeing on its own satisfy the criteria of critical reflection? No, it does not because disagreeing is not always accompanied by reflection, and thus, it is inadequate on its own in capturing it.

A couple studies have examined forums for critical reflection. Tanner (2001) conducted a textual analysis of a Chilean news media message board and found that 83% of the messages analyzed contain some form of criticism. This observation is in
line with Dahlberg’s (2001b) analysis of the independent deliberative initiative, Minnesota E-Democracy. His findings suggested that “substantial critical discussion” often developed. However, given the qualitative nature of these analyses, it is difficult to replicate their approach.

Though the latter two findings are encouraging, there is still a need for more research, which taps into the critical aspect of rational-critical debate. Moreover, there is a need for an indicator that is replicable and capable of capturing critical reflection. One way to address this would be to analyze the depth of the debate within each thread: the level of refutes and rebuttals. Refutes and rebuttals represent arguments directed at attacking and defending against opposing claims and arguments. Refutes and rebuttals not only include statements of disagreement, but are also directed against opposing claims and provide reasons in support of those claims, indicating to some degree critical reflection.

3.2.2 Coherence

Coherence requires that participants stick to the topic under discussion. There have been only a couple of studies, which directly examined online discussions for coherence (Jensen, 2003; Schneider, 1997). Schneider (1997, p. 75) uses what he calls a quality assessment: “Quality in the informal zone of the public sphere requires that participants stay with the topic at hand”. He operationalized coherence here “as the proportion of messages that are concerned with the issue”. His analysis of a Usenet newsgroup revealed low levels of coherence. More recently, Jensen’s findings offer more encouraging results. His examination of a Danish Usenet newsgroup and a governmentally sponsored forum found high levels of coherence—89% and 95% of the messages stuck to the topic respectively.

There have been several studies, which have indirectly gauged the level of coherence by providing observations (Dahlberg, 2001b; Stanley, Weare, & Musso, 2004; Wright & Street, 2007). Stanley, Weare, and Musso’s (2004, p. 175) observation of an American governmentally sponsored forum indicated that the “discussions for the most part remained on the topic and were constructive”. Wright and Street (2007, p. 863), who observed high levels of coherence, concluded that pre-moderation appeared to be an important ingredient in keeping messages related to the topic under discussion. Dahlberg (2001b) too points to moderation and self-moderation as key factors to maintaining an adequate level of coherence.

Though the results here for the most part are encouraging, there still is a need for more research with regard to coherence. As pointed out above, there have been only a couple studies, which have directly examined for coherence. Moreover, of the studies that do consider coherence, the focus has been mostly on governmentally sponsored forums. This type of forum tends to be strictly (or pre-) moderated, which, as Wright and Street (2007) point out, influences the level of coherence. Consequently, it is unclear how they operationalized coherence.
ly, in order to say something about coherence, we need a more comprehensive picture of the online discursive landscape. Finally, we need to be careful how we examine coherence, operationally speaking. Often discussions diverge from the original topic under debate, for example, due to points of clarification or new issues being discovered, which are relevant to the initial topic. Thus, any examination of coherence needs to be flexible, allowing for such divergences.

3.2.3 Continuity

Continuity ideally requires that a discussion continues until understanding and/or some form of agreement is achieved as opposed to abandoning or withdrawing from the discussion. Thus, continuity requires a commitment from participants, a commitment to extended debate. Based on this, we can conceptualize continuity from two perspectives: the level of extended debate and the level of understanding or agreement achieved.

Regarding the former, the results have not been encouraging. Wilhelm’s (1999, p. 174) findings suggested that sustained debate among participants on a single topic was uncommon. He states, “These virtual gathering places are home to an array of overlapping and short-lived threads”. Observations by Brants (2002), Ó Baoill (2000), and Tanner (2001) reveal similar findings. However, there has been at least one study, which sheds a more promising note. Beierle’s (2004, p. 163) survey of participants from an American governmentally sponsored forum suggests that a sense of commitment to the process of deliberation was developed. According to his survey, a sense of responsibility to actively participate was the second most frequent motivation to participate in the forum.

Taking this from the opposite direction, we can examine forums for the level of one-timers. One-timers are those participants who contribute one (or few) message(s), suggesting a lack of commitment. The one-timer effect may result from a high level of one-timers; it fosters sporadic debate and decreases the level of continuity (Graham, 2002). Similar to the level of extended debate, the findings are far from promising when it comes to the level of one-timers. Coleman (2004), Jankowski and Van Selm (2000), Rafaeli and Sudweeks (1997),25 Tanner (2001), Schneider (1997), Van Selm, Jankowski, & Tsaliki (2002), and Winkler’s (2002, 2005) findings all showed relatively high levels of one-timers. However, not all the data are so bleak. More recently, findings from Jankowski and Van Os (2004) revealed low levels of one-timers present within the Dutch governmentally sponsored forums they assessed.

Continuity can also be assessed by examining discussions for convergence. Do the discussions end in understanding or some form of agreement? Jankowski and Van Os’s (2004, p. 190) study, which assessed for indications of mutual understand-

25 This study doesn’t address or link to the notion of the public sphere or deliberative democracy, however, it is commonly referred to by net-based public sphere researchers due to its valuable contribution regarding online interactivity.
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ing, revealed low levels of convergence. As they state, “The absence of indicators of convergence of positions suggests limited effort to understand the position of the other discussants”. Strandberg (2008) similarly found that only within 20% of the discussions where disagreement existed could a mutual agreement be achieved. Adding to this, Jensen’s (2003, p. 361) study, which analyzed discussions for ‘persuasion’, found that only 10% and 9% of the postings within the two forums showed explicit signs of being persuaded by another participant’s argumentation or posting in general.

Overall, online political discussions fall well short of the ideal with regard to continuity. It seems that participants are not committed to extended debate, and achieving understanding or some form of agreement is rare in an online setting. However, should we be applying such criteria? Certainly, such criteria pertain well to e-consultations, e-juries, or any discussion forum that aims to reach a decision, i.e. influencing policy or government in general. In these situations, continuity becomes crucial to achieving the objectives of the forum. Acknowledging the sparse data available, it seems that within these forum types, commitment to extended debate is much higher than those forums that lack any clear objective (outside the objective of talk itself). That said, more research is needed to draw any conclusions.

I am not suggesting we abandon continuity altogether outside decision oriented forums. Extended debate is crucial to deliberation and should always be taken into account when the quality of debate is concerned. Nevertheless, when it comes to everyday informal discussion forums, we need to place less emphasis on convergence because convergence may not readily emerge during the lifespan of a discussion thread within these forum types. However, it might later emerge during talk elsewhere online or offline.

In order to tap into this aspect of continuity, we need to move beyond the lifespan of a discussion thread and an analysis of the text alone. Questionnaires or interviews with participants would be required. Additionally, there is a need to develop better indicators of extended debate via the actual text of the debate itself. Most of the studies above merely provide observations as opposed to an operationalization of extended debate via the messages posted. One effective way, as mentioned above, would be to examine the depth of the debate, examine the interaction between arguments. This could be achieved by determining the level of refutes and rebuttals—extended interaction between arguments—within a particular line of discussion of a thread.

3.2.4 Reciprocity

Reciprocity, similar to rational-critical debate, has been one of the most common conditions of deliberation operationalized and used among net-based public sphere researchers. Reciprocity represents the first dispositional requirement for achieving mutual understanding. Thus, it is crucial to the process of deliberation. Simply put, it
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demands that participants listen and respond to each other. Schneider (1997, p. 105) maintains, “Reciprocity is an important consideration in assessing the public sphere because it indicates the degree to which participants are actually interacting with each other, and working on identifying their own interests with those of the group, as opposed to talking past each other or engaging in simple bargaining or persuasion”.

Early commentators questioned whether CMC environments would facilitate or impede listening. Streck (1998, pp. 45-46), for example, argued, “The crucial flaw of cyberspace is that it elevates the right to speak above all others, and all but eliminates the responsibility to listen”. Along a similar line, Schultz (2000, p. 219) maintained, “A new discipline is required since the Internet involves a great temptation to publish and communicate too much, which consequently weakens the overall significance and excludes many people just because they cannot keep up and cannot get through the dense communicative jungle.” Other commentators argued that CMC environments diminish a participant’s need to respond; it weakens a sense of responsibility to others because of anonymity and the lack of social cues (Heim, 1994; Poster, 2001). Poster (2001) describes this effect as a fading away of ethics among participants. However, the empirical data to date suggest a different story.

Much of the empirical evidence indicates for a variety of forum types, structures, and contexts relatively high levels of reciprocity (Beierle, 2004; Brants, 2002; Dahlberg, 2001b; Jensen, 2003; Papacharissi, 2004; Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997; Schneider, 1997; Tsaliki, 2002; Winkler, 2002, 2005; Wright & Street, 2007). Reciprocity here was usually operationalized as the percentage of total replies. There were some mixed results. For example, Coleman’s (2004) study of two British e-consultations revealed two conflicting accounts: 82% of the messages posted were replies in one, while only 14% in the other. A few studies revealed discouraging results. Wilhelm (1999, p. 171) reported very low levels of reciprocity with less than one of five messages representing a reply. Research by Hagemann (2002), Jankowski and Van Os (2004), and Strandberg (2008) all reveal similar findings. Even with these discouraging results, the findings as a whole look promising; it seems that online discussions tend to be reciprocal, living up to, for the most part, the normative condition of reciprocity. However, there is one fundamental problem; the above operationalization of reciprocity is insufficient on its own.

Most studies have measured reciprocity by determining the percentage of postings coded as replies—reply percentage indicator. This approach focuses on measuring individual acts of reciprocity, reciprocity at a participant-to-participant level. Howev-

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26 Both Brants (2002) and Rafaeli & Sudweeks (1997) operationalized reciprocity (interactivity for the latter) at two levels: reactive and interactive postings. Both studies revealed relatively high levels of reactive postings (percentage of replies) and low levels of interactive postings (directly referring to how previous messages related to others).

27 Reciprocity for some researchers took on a broader conceptualization than is stipulated here (Hagemann, 2002; Jankowski & Van Os, 2004; Jensen, 2003; Schneider, 1997; Strandberg, 2008). Some include aspects of reflexivity and continuity in there definition and operationalization of reciprocity. That said, my understanding of reciprocity is present in some form within these accounts.
er, this approach neglects the social structure of a discussion thread; it neglects the network of messages connecting the participants. A good visual reference here is that of a web, within which all the participants are connected directly or indirectly via their postings—a web of reciprocity; the web of reciprocity represents the ideal deliberative discussion. Consequently, by only gauging the percentage of replies, we run the risk of painting a distorted view. For example, if a single posting attracted the attention of most other participants, the percentage of replies might be high; however, the network of messages would be centralized, looking more like a many-to-one discussion rather than a many-to-many discussion, a web of reciprocity. Consequently, we need to include both a reply percentage indicator measurement and a measurement of the degree of centralization in order to provide a more accurate account of the level of reciprocity.

### 3.2.5 Reflexivity

Unlike reciprocity, reflexivity has received little attention among net-based public sphere researchers. It represents the second dispositional requirement crucial to achieving mutual understanding. Put simply, it requires participants to reflect critically upon their own position in light of other positions. Given the textual focus of most studies, there is no wonder why reflexivity has been neglected. Assessing the level of reflexivity via an analysis of the text alone is difficult because it is an internal process, which takes place over time. However, as Dahlberg (2001a) argues, “Despite such difficulties, we can gain some appreciation of the level of reflexivity by looking at the structure and content of online debate”. That said, few researchers have attempted to operationalize reflexivity, and as such, results are limited. What is available, however, seems to be somewhat hopeful.

Dahlberg’s (2001b) analysis revealed signs of reflexivity. Thirty-three percent of the survey respondents indicated that the discussions they engaged in effected their thinking in some way, which included changing the way they voted. He concluded, “Many participants come into discussions already with a reflexive attitude, but often it is the online deliberations, and especially the meeting of difference […] that stimulates a reflexive mindset”. Similarly, Stromer-Galley’s (2003) interviews revealed that participants not only learned about others, but they also were forced to re-analyze their own positions as one of her interviewees expressed, “It stimulates thought. The ideas of others which are contrary to my own ideas prompt a clarification of my own ideas”. Like coherence, Dahlberg (2001b) contributed reflexivity to the expectations set by the participants and management. These expectations were enhanced by the rules and guidelines of the forum.

There have been several studies, which do not mention reflexivity directly, but via other indicators of deliberation, we can extrapolate signs of it. Jensen’s (2003) study assessed online discussions for what he called reciprocity. However, Jensen’s definition of reciprocity provides a more encompassing account to understanding
than the definition provided above. He coded the discussions for what he termed *progress*: “A poster reflects on another posting and answers the poster with new arguments or new information or tries to create a synthesis of other arguments” (2003, p. 361). Though this definition is not a complete match, at the very least, it points to potentially reflexive arguments. His study revealed very high levels of progress messages within the two forums analyzed (75% and 86%).

Similar to Jensen, Winkler’s (2002, 2005) coding scheme does not examine reflexivity directly; however, his coding category *balanced argument* provides insight into the level of reflexivity within a discussion. According to Winkler (2005, p. 48), messages coded as balanced argument exhibit a participants willingness to reflect on the views of others. His (2002) findings from an analysis of the Guardian forum revealed a moderate level of balanced arguments—nearly half of the postings were coded as balanced arguments. More promising is the results from his analysis of an EU sponsored forum (2005); the findings indicated that more than two-thirds of the postings were balanced messages.

Though these findings are encouraging, there is little we can say about reflexivity and online discussion forums given the lack of research to date. In addition to more research, there is a need for an operationalization of reflexivity that overcomes the difficulties stated above. We should not ignore reflexivity, as Dahlberg (2004b) argues, simply because it is elusive. Reflexivity is a crucial ingredient to achieving mutual understanding, and consequently, it should not be overlooked. One comprehensive way of approaching reflexivity would be to utilize a multiple methods approach, combing an analysis of the text via a content or discourse analysis with self-reporting via surveys, interviews, or focus groups. Such an approach would provide us with a more comprehensive account of reflexivity.

3.2.6 Empathy

The final dispositional requirement to achieving mutual understanding is empathy. Empathy is an internal process whereby participants put themselves in another participant’s shoes either cognitively (mental perspective taking) and/or emotionally (vicariously sharing emotions). Like reflexivity, empathy has been one of the least common conditions of deliberation operationalized and used among net-based public sphere researchers.

Muhlberger (2007) examined data from a one-day deliberation experiment involving online and offline deliberation among a sample of Pittsburg residents. Though the results did not reflect the level of empathy within the online setting, the data from the surveys did reveal that empathy had a powerful effect on reducing the odds of a participant to manipulate. Although Muhlberger creates a valuable tool for gauging the level of empathy via self-reporting, it provides little insight into the current state of the online discursive landscape with regard to empathy. Thus far,

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28 See Muhlberger (2000) for an example of a survey dealing with reflexivity.
unfortunately, there has been only one study, which I am aware of, that examined the level of empathy within an online discussion forum directly. Zhang’s (2005) study, which utilized Dahlberg’s (2004a) condition of ideal role-taking, analyzed a Chinese commercial discussion forum. His analysis of the text revealed that although there were frequent signs of perspective taking, most of them were pseudo forms. As he (2005, p. 129) states, “Participants took others’ positions for granted and conjectured their reactions, which fell short of full understanding”.

Overall, there is little to be said about empathy and online political discussion forums due to the lack of empirical research. Net-based public sphere researchers have ignored, for the most part, this variable of deliberation. There has, however, been a substantial amount of work on empathy within other online communicative genres such as self-help forums and online communities (see e.g. Preece, 1999, 2000). Consequently, there is a need for more research, and more importantly, a need for an operationalization of empathy that provides insight into both functions of empathy: the cognitive and the affective function.

One way to approach empathy, operationally speaking, would be to examine postings for communicative empathy. Since deliberation is a social process, conveying empathic considerations to another participant is a critical element. When participants do not convey their empathic thoughts and/or feelings, empathic relationships cannot emerge, thus empathy has little bearing on the social process. Therefore, analyzing the level of communicative empathy is crucial to determining the level of empathy within online forums. Moreover, an analysis of the text, in this case, would be the most appropriate method, for example, via a content or discourse analysis.

### 3.3 Structural and dispositional fairness

Structural and dispositional fairness consists of three conditions: discursive equality, discursive freedom, and sincerity. Two characteristics of the online environment that gained much attention among early commentators and researchers are the internet’s ability to provide anonymity, and its (supposed) ability to break down social cues. Both characteristics were seen by some as liberating, allowing citizens to come online and discuss issues openly, freely, and equally. As Agre (2002, p. 314), for example, explains, “Conventional markers of social difference (gender, ethnicity, age, rank) are likewise held to be invisible, and consequently it is contended that the ideas in an online message are evaluated without the prejudices that afflict face-to-face interaction”. Moreover, there is this romanticized view that in cyberspace, people have the capacity to take on new and multiple virtual personae—a cyber spatial blurring of bonds between self-creation and external- and self-deception. The argument here is

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29 Dahlberg’s (2004a) notion of ideal role taking, based on Habermas’ notion of communicative rationality, represents the cognitive function of empathy, as defined above.

30 See Witschge (2004) for an overview.
that this represents the liberating force of the internet; we can be who ever we want to be when ever we want.

However, these same liberating characteristic of the internet were viewed by others in a not so promising light. For example, Barber (1998, p. 269) asked the question of whether deliberation within the public sphere could be “rekindled on the net, where identities can be concealed and where flaming and other forms of incivility are regularly practiced”. Issues concerning deception and flaming gained much attention. Moreover, early observations of online communicative practices were not encouraging (Barber, 1998; Davis, 1999; Hill & Hughes, 1998; Schultz, 2000). As Barber (1998, p. 263) observed, “The Internet promised new forms of civic discourse, but political chat room banter on the Internet today is as polarized and rude as anything you can hear on talk radio”. That said, more recent findings have suggested a less gloomy picture.

3.3.1 Discursive equality

In the past, discursive equality has been examined from two angles: distribution of voice and equal standing (substantial equality). The most common measurement of discursive equality has been the equal distribution of voice indicator. Schneider (1997, p. 73) maintains, “Equality in the idealized state would suggest that all participants ought to contribute equally that is, each author ought to contribute an equal number of messages”. The goal here is to measure the number of participants along with their share of the postings thereby determining the concentration of participation. Schneider’s findings revealed that only five percent of the participants accounted for 80% of the messages indicating substantial inequalities in the rate and distribution of participation. This finding is backed by numerous studies on a variety of forums (Albrecht, 2006; Brants, 2002; Coleman, 2004; Dahlberg, 2001b; Jankowski & Van Os, 2004; Jankowski & Van Selm, 2000; Jensen, 2003; Schultz, 2000; Stanley, Weare, & Musso, 2004; Winkler, 2002, 2005).

There have been, however, more promising results. Recently, Strandberg’s (2008, p. 82) study revealed that the forums he analyzed were not dominated by a few participants. He concluded, “Viewed in light of deliberative norms, the equality of discussants appears to be quite good”. Hagemann (2002, p. 70) similarly found that the discussions he analyzed were not “monopolized in an extreme way”. Taking a slightly different approach, Beierle’s (2004) survey revealed that 48% of the participants within the governmentally sponsored forum he analyzed felt that the discussions were not dominated by a few, while only 19% felt otherwise. Finally, Albrecht’s (2006, p. 72) analysis of a German governmentally sponsored forum revealed a noteworthy finding. Though the discussions he analyzed were dominated by a few participants in terms of distribution of messages, a further qualitative analysis re-

31 The structure and design of the forum (rules and guidelines, moderation, etc.) also play an important role when it comes to discursive equality (see Wright, 2006; Wright & Street, 2007).
revealed, “The most active users did not overrule the debate with their personal views, nor did they propagate the interests of other participants. Instead, these users behaved as ‘old hands’, giving advice and providing other participants with an overview of the debate”. This finding is an important one because it questions whether the distribution of voice indicator on its own is an adequate operationalization of discursive equality.

The distribution of voice tells us little about the level of substantial equality within a discussion forum. Do participants respect and recognize each other as having an equal voice? One of the most common ways of operationalizing substantial equality has been to identify instances of abusive, aggressive, and/or degrading postings, acts of inequality. The idea here is that such communicative practices create an atmosphere of inequality thus jeopardizing deliberation. Though some of the earlier observations and empirical findings revealed a somewhat gloomy account (Barber, 1998; Hill & Hughes, 1998; Streck, 1998), recent results suggest a more positive reading with regard to this type of communicative practice (Albrecht, 2006; Hagemann, 2002; Jensen, 2003; Papacharissi, 2004; Stanley, Weare, & Musso, 2004; Winkler, 2005). For example, Papacharissi’s analysis of Usenet newsgroups, which tend to be loosely structured, revealed low levels of what she termed impoliteness. She (2004, pp. 276-277) points out, “Most Usenet discussants managed to express their political viewpoints in a civil and polite manner in the discussion groups studied”. Moreover, when impoliteness did occur, it was usually “spontaneous, unintentional, and frequently regretted”.

However, there have been a few studies that revealed less than promising results (Jankowski & Van Os, 2004; Strandberg, 2008; Tsaliki, 2002). For example, Jankowski and Van Os’s (2004, pp. 188 & 186) study found that within the governmental sponsored message board they analyzed about half of the discussions contained “verbal attacks and denigrating comments”. Moreover, their interviews suggested that this type of communicative practice along with participants who alluded to their status turned people away from the debate, negatively affecting access to the discussion.

Another issue regarding substantial equality is gender. It is often claimed that women are not only underrepresented, but they also contribute substantially shorter postings, receive less responses, and tend not to control the topics and terms of discussion (Albrecht, 2006; Dahlberg, 2001b; Herring, 1996, 2003; Jensen, 2003; Papacharissi, 2004; Tanner, 2001). Herring’s (1996, 2003) research suggests that asynchronized message boards are likely to disfavor women. Her findings show that women post fewer messages and are less likely to continue posting when they do not receive a response. Furthermore, she observed that males tended to respond to males, while females similarly tended to respond to males thus creating an atmosphere of inequality. Additionally, she found that the different manner in which male and females participants communicate was noticeable. As she explains, “The contentiousness of male messages tends to discourage women from participating, while women’s concerns with politeness tends to be perceived as a waste of bandwidth by
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men” (2003, p. 209). Similarly, Dahlberg’s (2001b) findings indicate that women, at times, felt intimidated. As he describes, “Some women fail to post, or do not post often, or change their style of postings, or attempt to join a women-only group, or leave the list altogether because they feel dominated, coerced, or intimidated”.

Overall, the results for discursive equality seem to be mixed. On one hand, the distribution of voice indicator reveals that discussions online tend to be dominated by a few participants. While on the other hand, abusive and aggressive communicative practices tend not to be the norm. However, there are operational and methodological issues that need to be addressed. The distribution of voice indicator used by most net-based public sphere researchers is inadequate. Albrecht’s (2006) findings illustrate this. Moreover, as Dahlberg (2004b, p. 35) has pointed out, the most active posters do not necessarily command the most attention. Consequently, there is a need to supplement the distribution of voice indicator because on its own it very well might be misleading.

First, following Albrecht’s (2006) lead, a more qualitative reading of the most active participants’ postings would improve our understanding. It would allow a researcher to determine whether these postings are actually creating an atmosphere of inequality. Second, just because participants are speaking, it does not mean anyone is listening. The question then becomes who are they listening to—the popularity of the participants. Ideally, everyone should be equally popular; no one participant or group of participants should monopolize the receiving of messages. Therefore, a measurement of the concentration of popularity should be conducted and assessed. By determining both the concentration of participation and popularity, alongside a more qualitative reading, a clearer picture of the distribution of voice would be achieved.

With regard to substantial equality, the tendency by net-based public sphere researchers has been to examine the texts for instances of abusive, aggressive, and degrading postings. We can consider these as active communicative practices, which create an atmosphere of inequality. However, there are times in a discussion when arguments, opinions, and postings go ignored or unnoticed wordlessly. Thus, we need to examine forums for passive neglect as well as abusive, aggressive, and degrading postings. Finally, more research similar to Jankowski and Van Os’s (2004) operationalization of equality, which utilizes a mixed methods approach, is needed. Talking to participants about their experiences within the forum with regard to substantial equality would shed more light on the level of discursive equality. An analysis of the text, as described above, held alongside interviews or surveys with the participants would be the most effective way to gauging the level of substantial equality.

3.3.2 Discursive freedom

Discursive freedom stipulates that participants are able to share freely with each other their arguments, opinions, and information in general. In the past, net-based public
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sphere researchers have focused on two aspects of online discussions: the structure and design of the forum and the diversity of opinions. The management of the forum or lack thereof can influence participants’ discursive freedom. In particular, the rules and guidelines, the role of moderators, and the management of the forum in general may impede or enhance discursive freedom. However, most of the focus has been placed on the diversity of opinions within online discussion forums.

Schneider (1997, pp. 73-74) analyzed diversity as a means of assessing discursive freedom. According to Schneider, “Diversity in the informal zone of the public sphere is focused on the presence of a range of conversational patterns by the participants. A set of highly diverse patterns of conversation would suggest a freedom of the participants to shape their own conversational patterns, free from the constraints imposed by others”. He measured both the diversity of conversational patterns and diversity of participants. His analysis revealed high degrees of diversity at both levels. Jankowski and Van Os’s (2004) study, which utilized Schneider’s measurement of diversity, found a moderate degree of diversity. In line with this finding, Strandberg’s (2008, pp. 82-83) study revealed that “the discussions, to a certain extent, meet the deliberative ideal of diversity of discussion topics”.

There have been some researchers and commentators who have claimed that diversity usually occurs between forums rather than within forums (Hill & Hughes, 1998; Sunstein, 2002; Wilhelm, 1999). Their argument is that the internet encourages fragmentation and polarization of positions in society. For example, Wilhelm’s (1999, p. 171) study, which assessed for the level of group homogeneity, found the forums he analyzed to be “communities of interest, virtual gathering places in which those people who share a common interest can discuss issues without substantial transaction or logistical costs”. Contrary to this finding, Tsaliki’s (2002) comparative analysis, which utilized Wilhelm’s coding scheme, revealed a diverse set of opinions and viewpoints within British, Dutch, and Greek political discussion forums. Finally, Stromer-Galley’s (2003) study challenges the fragmentation and polarization position. Her interviews revealed that people are not only meeting and engaging with different points of view online, but they are also actively seeking out opposing positions.

Given the lack of empirical data, it is difficult to draw any conclusions with regard to discursive freedom. Though, I would argue, given the data available, the signs are more promising than discouraging. However, does the diversity and fragmentation debate comprehensively address discursive freedom? What is lacking here is an operationalization of discursive freedom that taps into the communicative practices and behaviors of participants. Are participants censoring or discouraging others from posting? What type of behavior is taking place online in this respect? We need to identify and describe those instances of censorship (if any) by the partici-

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32 See Jensen (2003), Wright (2006), and Wright and Street (2007) for an analysis and discussion on structure and design. Dahlberg (2001b) and Albrecht’s (2006) work touch upon structure and design as well.

33 See Dahlberg (2007) for a critical perspective on this debate.
pants themselves, those instances when a participant was prevented from speaking his/her opinion by another. This may be a direct act of censorship or a subtle hint of discouragement. Such an analysis would require an examination of the text by means of a content or discourse analysis. Another way of approaching this would be to ask participants directly using surveys or interviews. Do they feel free to express themselves or have they experienced acts of curbing or censorship.

### 3.3.3 Sincerity

During the process of deliberation, participants are expected to represent themselves and their opinions and interests truthfully. Moreover, participants should be sincere about the information they use to support their arguments. Early commentators have debated whether the anonymous nature and the lack of social cues of CMC reduces the sincerity of participants. Are participants within online discussion forums being sincere? Like reflexivity and empathy, sincerity has gained little attention among net-based public sphere researchers, and as such, there is little to be said empirically. Dahlberg’s (2001b) analysis revealed, “Overall, the level of deception of identity, interests, and information […] was minimal”. Zhang’s (2005) study found that participants were sincere. His survey measured the sincerity of participants’ goals, information, and opinions. He concluded that the discussions he analyzed satisfied the condition of sincerity. These results seem promising. Moreover, the above operationalization provides insight into developing a more thorough indicator.

That said, sincerity is still a difficult condition to operationalize. Even with an analysis of the text and/or self-reporting, gauging whether participants are being sincere will always be difficult given the anonymous nature of online forums. However, do we need to assess discussion forums for actual levels of sincerity? Another way to approach sincerity is to gauge the level of perceived sincerity. Even if levels of actual sincerity were high, if participants do not perceive those levels as such, then the process of deliberation is placed in jeopardy. Consequently, we should be measuring online discussions for perceived sincerity. One way to achieve this would be to capture those instances of questionable sincerity; identifying those instances when a participant questions or challenges another’s truthfulness. Similarly, we could ask participants whether they perceived the discussions as being sincere via questionnaires or interviews. Ideally, a combination of both methods would be the most effective way of assessing (perceived) sincerity.

### 3.4 Expressives

There are three expressives identified in this study, which include emotional comments, humor, and acknowledgements. To date, there is virtually no research on the role expressives play within online political talk. Indeed, only one net-based public sphere researcher from above has analyzed the use of expressives. Winkler’s research,
which examined political talk from the Guardian (2002) and an EU sponsored forum
(2005), revealed relatively low levels of postings containing an emotional or ironic
tone. He concluded that the political discussions were mostly unemotional and rarely
ironic. Moreover, when emotions were expressed, they were rarely expressions of
anger directed towards other participants (2005, p. 50).

There have been several studies that examined online political humor outside
the context of political talk (Baumgartner, 2007; Darr & Barko, 2004; Foot &
Schneider, 2002; Shifman, Coleman, & Ward, 2007). Much of this research has
focused on the content and form of humor via (political) websites during campaign
elections. For example, Foot and Schneider’s (2002) examination of online political
humor during the 2000 American election campaign suggested that such humor
created new avenues of political engagement for those who would otherwise have
been disengaged. As they state:

“The variety of carnival actions observed online signify a releasing of both more crea-
tive energies and a broader range of dissident voices than usually expressed through
traditional media and in the mainstream press. Multimedia carnival humor on the Web
may appeal to potential voters who would otherwise be disengaged in the electoral
process, and just as print-based political cartoons can be sources of serious political
commentary, carnival action on the Web may shape political opinion” (p. 239).

However, more recent research has not been as hopeful. Shifman, Coleman,
and Ward’s (2007) analysis of political websites along with interviews with website
moderators/producers and campaign officials during the 2005 UK general election
revealed that while attempts were often made to use online humor to encourage
political participation among viewers, it conveyed politics as a “cynical game and
nothing more”. Moreover, they found that online humor rarely dealt with the key
political issues, but rather, it focused on “horse race attributes of the campaign”.
They concluded that “online election humor served to soften people up for ‘politics
as usual’” (p. 483). Baumgartner (2007) study of the effects of online humor on US
college students also revealed discouraging results. Her survey research and experi-
ment found that viewers of online humor showed decreased levels of trust in
political institutions than non-viewers. Although these studies do not deal with
humor in the context of political talk, they all do point to a growing use of the
internet as a platform for political humor. Moreover, these studies also reveal that
political humor online tends to be negative, e.g. oriented around anger, violence,
and/or sex.

There have been several studies that examine the use of expressives within
political talk via offline, face-to-face communicative spaces (Barnes, 2005; Barnes,
Knops, Newman, & Sullivan, 2004; Conover & Searing, 2005; Hibbing & Theiss-

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34 As will become clear below, Baumgartner’s (2007) research is the exception.
35 The notion of the carnival denotes “online action that transgresses and/or inverts established social
and political mores, norms, and hierarchies” (p. 323).
Morse, 2002). For example, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002), on the basis of their focus groups and analysis of other discussion type settings, maintained that the expression of emotions in real-life deliberation tend to lead to unproductive debate. In particular, they argue that emotions “can exacerbate rather than diminish power differentials among those deliberating, can make people feel frustrated with the system that made them deliberate […] and can lead to worse decisions than would have occurred if no deliberation had taken place” (2002, p. 191). Along a similar line, though not in the context of a face-to-face setting, Conover and Searing (2005) content analysis of everyday political talk via ‘letters to the editor’ from newspapers revealed that discussions on controversial issues often displayed disgust and contempt, leading to fundamentally disrespectful talk and exacerbating the incivility of many of the letter-writers (pp. 276-277).

However, not all the research paints a gloomy picture. Barnes’s (2005) case study research, which utilized both observation and interview techniques, of older people’s participation during consultation initiatives in the UK, revealed that storytelling had a significant impact on political talk. In particular, storytelling represented a process through which people made sense of the events that had happened to them (p. 252). Her findings also revealed that humor acted as a facilitator of political talk; it enabled disagreement to be accommodated among older people. These findings are consistent with research by Barnes, Knops, Newman, and Sullivan (2004). Their observations and interviews with participants from three consultation initiatives in the UK (a women’s group, older people’s group, and a youth group) found that both storytelling and greeting played a significant role in facilitating political talk. Regarding storytelling, they found that the use of personal experiences affirmed membership in the group and connected individuals to each other. Moreover, storytelling and the revealing of personal experiences, particularly in the women’s group, seemed to foster “connections across lines of difference among women” and their interviews “suggested that this had a transformative impact—not simply on women’s opinions, but a deeper transformation of their sense of self” (p. 97). In terms of greeting, their interviews with participants from the older people’s group suggested that greeting fostered a communicative environment, which “enabled quite strong views to be expressed and agreement to be negotiated without falling out” (p. 100).

Though these latter findings seem to indicate the importance of expressives within political talk, given the lack of research, there is little that can be said empirically. Moreover, these findings might not tell us very much about online political talk. As discussed above, some of the unique characteristics that an online environment offers, e.g. anonymity, a (supposed) lack of social cues, and the time it affords participants to develop and post their messages, may make comparing offline to online findings difficult to say the least.
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3.5 Conclusion

Over the past decade, there has been a steady increase in net-based public sphere research. The aim of this chapter was to explore and critically reflect upon this growing body of evidence. The guiding question was, to what extent do online discussion forums and their communicative practices correspond to the normative conditions of the public sphere?

Thus, the analysis was carried out by comparing the existing findings of net-based public sphere studies with a model of the public sphere as laid out in the previous chapter.

It seems that within a variety of forum types the communicative form crucial to the public sphere is alive and well online. Most of the empirical data point to discussions where rational-critical debate is the norm, living up to the normative condition. Moreover, online discussions tend to be reciprocal (at least in terms of replies); it seems participants are responding to each other as oppose to talking past one another. Though more research is needed, the findings with regard to coherence, reflexivity, substantial equality, and diversity all reveal encouraging results.

However, the picture is not all promising. Online discussions tend to be short lived, lacking in extended debate, and usually end in withdrawal or at a standoff. Achieving mutual understanding or some form of agreement is infrequent, falling well short of the normative condition. Moreover, the discussions tend to be male oriented and dominated by a few individuals with regard to the distribution of messages posted. Finally, there are several conditions, which lack results all together. Reflexivity, empathy, sincerity, and discursive freedom (behavior of participants) are four conditions of deliberation that have been neglected, for the most part, by net-based public sphere researchers.

Overall, the empirical evidence is far from robust, and therefore, at this point, drawing any generalizations on whether online communicative spaces constitute or extend the public sphere is difficult. Quite simply, there is a need for more empirical evidence to support most of these findings. Moreover, the lack of data becomes even more apparent when we consider the variety of forum structures, types, contexts, and genres. When considering this, we can begin to see that there are many holes to fill.

The structure of the forum may have a significant effect on the quality of debate. There are three features of online forums, which are commonly referred to with regard to forum structure. First, there is the rhythm of the forum; is it synchronized or asynchronized? Net-based public sphere researchers have focused much of their attention on the latter leaving us with only sparse findings on the former. The need for more research on synchronized forums is clear. Moreover, there is a need for more comparative research between the two structure types as to provide more insight into the online discursive landscape. Second, there is the feature of moderation. Governmentally sponsored forums, for example, tend to be strictly (or pre-) moderated while Usenet news groups are loosely moderated or self-moderated. Albrecht (2006), Dahlberg (2001b), Wright (2006), and Wright and Street’s (2007)
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research all suggest that moderation has a substantial impact on the quality of debate. Consequently, more comparative research between loosely and strictly moderated forums is needed in order to shed more light. Finally, like moderation, the rules, guidelines, and expectations of the forum are said to influence the quality of debate and as such should not be overlooked.

Another important factor is the forum type. The five most common types evaluated by net-based public sphere researchers have been Usenet newsgroups, news media message boards, political party/politician forums, governmentally sponsored forums, and independent deliberative initiatives. Different types have different purposes. On one side, the latter tend to be, but not always, connected to the political process, e.g. e-consultations. Their purpose is to, in some form, influence public policy, or government in general. On the other side, the former (e.g. Usenet newsgroups and news media message boards) tend not to have a defined or set purpose outside of providing a space for talk for talk’s sake. The forum type and its purpose might have a significant impact on the quality of debate, particularly e.g. with regard to continuity. Consequently, more (comparative) research is needed.

We need to say something about the context of the forums. The studies presented above are set in a variety of contexts. Some are situated nationally while others are regionally or locally situated. Some studies analyze supranational forums, i.e. those sponsored by the EU, while others focus on internationally oriented forums. Furthermore, they encompass a variety of political cultures from the United States to Finland to Greece. The point here is not to create a list of all the different contexts in which these forums are situated, but rather, to caution researchers to keep in mind that those different contexts might have a significant affect on the quality of debate.

There are numerous forum genres available online. To date, most net-based public sphere studies have focused on political discussion forums and have neglected an array of other forum genres. One such genre is the range of fan- and entertainment-based discussion forums. Research from outside net-based public sphere framework has revealed that these online spaces provoke and offer political talk (Van Zoonen, 2005, 2007; Van Zoonen et al., 2007). For example, Van Zoonen’s et al. study of online discussions from the Dr. Phil forum revealed that participants engaged in political talk that was at times both deliberative (oriented towards mutual respect and understanding) and not so deliberative (oriented towards confrontation and closure). Moreover, they found the use of expressives, the use of personal experiences, to be a common feature of political discussions within this communicative space, representing a personalized form of political talk (see also Van Zoonen 2005, 2007). These studies stress the need to move beyond political forums, particularly if we are interested in everyday political talk, because as these studies have shown such talk is not exclusively reserved for political forums. Moreover, these spaces may offer new insight into how people talk politics online, which might very well differ from the sort of political talk that occurs in politically oriented forums.

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36 Dr. Phil is a popular US talk show television series.
In addition to the lack of data, there is still a need for a comprehensive set of deliberative indicators, a set that truly reflects the normative conditions under question. Current indicators of deliberation, such as the reply percentage indicator and equal distribution of messages posted, are inadequate on their own. Moreover, net-based public sphere researchers will have to move beyond an analysis of the text. Normative conditions such as, reflexivity, substantial equality, discursive freedom, and sincerity require more than just an analysis of the text. Ideally, they require a mixed methods approach, an approach that captures both what is being said and the perceptions and experiences of the participants.

Furthermore, net-based public sphere researchers have tended to operationalized formal criteria of deliberation. Given that much of the research presented above focuses on everyday political talk, we need to reconsider what we mean by deliberation. In other words, we need a notion of deliberation that takes into account the informal nature of political talk. I am not suggesting we abandon criteria such as sincerity, reciprocity, and equality. They pertain well to everyday talk. However, privileging argumentation over other communicative forms such as expressive speech acts or neglecting them altogether ignores the reality of everyday political conversation. Some net-based public sphere researchers have begun to include other communicative forms in their analysis, e.g. acknowledgements, humor, and emotions (Graham, 2008; Winkler, 2002, 2005). Though this is a start, these attempts do little more than describe political talk. The next step should be an exploratory one, to see whether expressive have any bearing on the type and quality of political discussions that take place online. Beierle’s (2004) study revealed that 70% of participants surveyed strongly agreed that they learned a great deal about other participants’ views during an introduction phase prior to the debate. Such greeting sessions might foster sincerity and trust thereby enhancing the quality of online debate.

Finally, another issue to contend with is the interpretation, the evaluation of future findings. In the past, most net-based public sphere researchers have treated the various indicators of deliberation as equal. However, are they equal? Should we be applying continuity to a Usenet newsgroup? Should we be stressing rationality in an analysis of an e-consultation for abused women? Certain criteria pertain well to certain forum types, while other criteria might not be as important. For example, applying the criteria of convergence to a Usenet newsgroup might not be as important as applying rational-critical debate or reciprocity given the purpose of such forum types. If we do apply such criteria, we might want to reconsider our expectations. For example, Strandberg’s (2008, p. 84) findings reveal that less than 20% of the conflicts ended in any form of mutual agreement. He paints this result in a negative light, indicating that the deliberative ideals were hardly met. However, I would argue that this finding was rather high given the type of forums he analyzed. The point here is that we not only have to consider what conditions are appropriate, but which kinds of results are adequate given the diversity of forum structures, types, contexts, and genres.