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

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Chapter 5

Talking politics online: The Guardian Talkboard

5.1 Introduction

The study reported here examines the communicative practices of participants from the *Guardian* online discussion forum in light of the normative conditions of the public sphere. In this chapter, the results from that study are presented. In section 5.2, the analysis on identifying political talk is provided. In particular, the political discussions and the issues and topics of those discussions are revealed. In section 5.3, the results for each of the nine conditions of deliberation are presented. This is followed by the results on the use of expressive speech acts in section 5.4. In section 5.5, the normative analysis is presented in light of past net-based public sphere research. The analysis moves beyond a normative notion of deliberation and discusses the role and use of expressives in section 5.6. Finally, in section 5.7, the chapter ends with a summary of the findings and some concluding remarks.

5.2 Identifying political talk

In order to identify political talk, the initial sample, which represented 37 discussion threads containing 1,271 postings, was subjected to two criteria. All those threads, which contained postings where a participant (1) made a connection from an experience, interest, or topic in general to society, which (2) stimulated reflection and a response by at least one other participant were considered a political thread and advanced to stage two of the analysis.

Thirty threads containing 1,215 postings, which represented 96% of the initial sample, satisfied both criteria, indicating that Guardian participants were most of the time talking politics, which is what one would expect from a politically oriented discussion forum. Out of the seven threads that failed to advance to the second stage, three fulfilled the first criterion but failed to satisfy the second. Two of these threads contained only one posting, while the remaining thread contained only one participant. The last four threads failed to fulfill the first criterion.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Examples of Issues</th>
<th># of postings</th>
<th>% of postings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blair, Labour, &amp; party politics</td>
<td>Blair’s Cabinet, status, performance, character/personality, &amp; future; Labour Party wrangling; party politics</td>
<td>339</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Galloway’s politics</td>
<td>Galloway’s political positions; relationship with Iraq; personality, character, &amp; performance</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political corruption &amp; cover-ups</td>
<td>Political corruption; Labour cover-ups; conspiracy theories; Russian political system &amp; corruption</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration, multiculturalism, &amp; citizenship</td>
<td>Deportation of criminals; multiculturalism; British Muslims; immigration &amp; racism</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political activism &amp; protest</td>
<td>Brain Haw; the Euston Manifesto; methods of political protest</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq War &amp; foreign policy</td>
<td>Iraq War; the war in Afghanistan; the Iranian nuclear program; Iran &amp; WMD; anti-Americanism</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The mass media</td>
<td>The sensationalization of terrorism; media biases; media and trust</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health care &amp; welfare policy</td>
<td>Labour’s welfare policies; public housing; the NHS</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human rights</td>
<td>Human rights vs. social contract; the European Court of Human Rights</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Guardian Unlimited</td>
<td>Improving GUT</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Talkboard (GUT)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The economy</td>
<td>The Euro; tax reform</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euthanasia</td>
<td>Legalizing euthanasia</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Codes of conduct</td>
<td>Bullying; sexual harassment</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy policy</td>
<td>Nuclear vs. green energy; Labour’s nuclear policy</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,056</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The total percentage does not add up to 100 due to rounding.

5.2.1 Political topics discussed

What were the topics of these discussions? This question was addressed by categorizing the political lines of discussion offered by the 30 threads into broad topics based
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on the issues discussed. The top six topics accounted for the bulk of the debates with Blair, Labour, and party politics representing nearly a third of the political discussions. Out of the 14 topics, only one topic called *codes of conduct*, which represented less than one percent of the postings, can be characterized as a lifestyle political issue—characterized by emotional attachments to issues based on connections to lifestyle concerns (Bennett, 2004). Overall, the political issues discussed within the Guardian forum were conventional, institutional political topics.

5.3 The communicative practices of political talk

In this section, the results from stage two of the analysis are presented in reference to the nine conditions of deliberation. This includes the process of achieving mutual understanding (rational-critical debate, continuity, coherence, reciprocity, reflexivity, and empathy) and structural and dispositional fairness (discursive equality, discursive freedom, and sincerity).

5.3.1 Rational-critical debate

Rational-critical debate requires that the discussions in part be guided by rationality and critical reflection. Regarding rationality, arguments are preferred over assertions. As Table 5.2 shows, there were 756 total claims made by Guardian participants. Out of these claims, 84% were reasoned, which suggests that providing reasons with claims (being rational) was the norm rather than the exception. In terms of postings, nearly half of them provided arguments, whereas only 10% contained assertions. As the results suggest, the exchange of claims (arguments and assertions), which represented approximately 59% of the postings, was the guiding communicative form.

Table 5.2 also shows the level of disagreement and critical reflection. First, the level of disagreement was substantially higher than the level of agreement. Approximately 46% of the total claims represented some form of disagreement, whereas only 12% were in the form of agreement. However, disagreeing is not always accompanied by critical reflection. The level of rebuttals and refutes, on the other hand, is an indication of critical reflection. Approximately 41% of all claims, which represented 25% of the postings, were rebuttals and refutes. Moreover, a closer examination of Table 5.2 reveals that rebuttal and refutes represented nearly half of all reasoned claims. Thus, the ratio between initial/counter/affirmation arguments

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73 This is based on the analysis of coherence, which coded, organized, and categorized each thread into lines of discussion.
74 There were 159 postings, which were nonpolitical and/or incoherent. These were not included.
75 This only includes initial agreement. Agreement reached during the course of a discussion was coded as a commissive.
and rebuttal/refute arguments was nearly 1:1, suggesting a substantial level of critical reflection in comparison to new, alternative, and supporting arguments. Overall, the exchange of claims represented the guiding communicative form. Moreover, it was overwhelmingly rational and regularly critical in nature.

5.3.2 Coherence

Coherence requires that participants stick to the topic of discussion. The threads were first analyzed and then categorized into lines of discussion. The level of coherence was established by determining the number of topic changes, and more importantly, the relevance of those changes. Overall, there were 110 lines of discussion within the Guardian’s 30 political threads. Participants did not diverge at all from the topic of discussion within six of these threads. That said, within the remaining 24 threads, there were 39 lines of discussion, which consisted of only 159 postings, coded as complete divergences, as off the topic of discussion. In other words, 87% of the postings were coherent; they were related directly or indirectly to the original issue under discussion.

5.3.3 Continuity

Continuity requires that the discussions continue until understanding or some form of agreement is achieved as opposed to abandoning or withdrawing from the discussion. It was analyzed from two angles: the level of extended debate and convergence. The level of extended debate was measured via the presence of strong-strings. Ideally, extended debate should consist of counter-rebuttal-refute exchanges with rebuttals and refutes representing a substantial portion of those exchanges. There were 54 strong-strings. The average number was 13 with the largest totaling 42 claims. Moreover, 74% of all claims were involved in extended debate; this represented 44% of the postings. Furthermore, 89% of these claims were reasoned, and a majority came in the form of rebuttals and refutes, indicating the rational and critical nature of these exchanges. Overall, the results suggest that when participants did debate, a substantial portion of it came in the form of counter-rebuttal-refute exchanges, i.e. extended critical debate.

The second indicator of continuity was convergence. Convergence represents the level of agreement achieved during the course of a debate. It was examined by coding the discussions for commissive speech acts. There were 48 commissives posted within the Guardian, representing four percent of postings. There were three types of commissives used: assents, partial assents, and agree-to-disagree statements.

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76 See Appendix 3 for an overview of the types and frequencies of the claims involved in these exchanges.
Table 5.2

*The Guardian’s Claim Type Usage Overview*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Claim type</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>% of claims</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>% of postings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reasoned claims</strong></td>
<td>Initial</td>
<td>Counter</td>
<td>Rebuttal</td>
<td>Refute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claims</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postings</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Non-reasoned claims</strong></th>
<th>Initial</th>
<th>Counter</th>
<th>Rebuttal</th>
<th>Refute</th>
<th>Affirmation</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Claims</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postings</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Total</strong></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>% of claims</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>% of postings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Claims</td>
<td>756</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postings</td>
<td>719</td>
<td>59</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. A posting containing more than one of the same claim type were only counted once.*

*a_n = 756 claims.*

*b_n = 1215 postings.*
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First, the most frequent commissive was a partial assent. There were 36 partial assents, which represented three-quarters of commissives. Partial assents occurred during the course of a debate when a participant partially conceded a particular point, but still maintained his or her position overall. They usually came via statements such as “I agree to a certain extent”, “I agree with some of what you say”, and “I agree with…But”. The second most used commissive was an assent. Unlike a partial assent, an assent acknowledged complete compliance with an opposing argument. There were only 10 assents achieved. Assents tended to be short and to the point, for example, “You are right”, “I stand corrected”, and “Okay, I see your case”. Finally, agree-to-disagree statements were the least common commissive used. There were only two commissives of this type, and they were, “We differ on the likely outcome—that I acknowledge” and “Anyway we debate it”.

Convergence was assessed by comparing the number of commissives with the number of lines of discussion. Ideally, a line of discussion should end in convergence. The Guardian sample consisted of 30 threads, which contained 66 coherent lines of discussion. The average number of commissives per line of discussion was 0.73. Moreover, 29% of these lines (or 19 lines) contained at least one commissive. In short, the results here suggest that the act of convergence was infrequent, and when it did occur, it seldom came in the form of an assent. Finally, the analysis revealed that extended debate was an important ingredient in achieving convergence. In particular, 90% of commissives (43 commissives) were a product of strong-strings exchanges.

In sum, the results for continuity were mixed. While extended critical debate seemed to be the norm, acts of convergence, on the other hand, were uncommon.

5.3.4 Reciprocity

Reciprocity requires that participants read and respond to each other’s posts. In the past, this has often been assessed by determining the level of replies. However, this measurement is inadequate because it neglects the social structure of the discussions. Consequently, the level of reciprocity was assessed by determining and combining the reply percentage indicator with a degree of centralization measurement. The data from both measurements for each of the 30 threads was plotted along a double axis matrix in order to assess the forum’s level of reciprocity.77

As Figure 5.1 shows, the level of replies was high. All but five threads had a reply percentage indicator of ≥ 75%. The percentage of replies for the whole sample was at 84%. In terms of the degree of centralization, the measurement is set on a scale of zero to one with zero representing the ideal decentralized thread and one the ideal centralized thread. First, six of the discussion threads were moderately to highly centralized (threads ≥ .500). These threads resembled more a one-to-many or many-

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77 See Appendix 4 for full results.
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to-one type of discussion rather than a web of interactions. Second, slightly more than half of the threads (16 threads) were moderately decentralized (threads between .250 and .500). Though there are still several core participants in these threads, the connections are more decentralized and dispersed; there are more connections among more of the participants. Finally, slightly more than a fourth of the discussion threads (eight threads) were highly decentralized (threads ≤ .250). The connections between participants are distributed more equally within these threads than above.

![Figure 5.1](image)

Figure 5.1. The Guardian results from the web of reciprocity matrix.

As was discussed in the previous chapter, those discussion threads, which fall within the top left quadrant of Figure 5.1, the strong decentralized web quadrant, are considered to have a moderate to high level of reciprocity. Twenty-two of the 30 threads fell within this quadrant. In order to make a sharper distinction between these threads, a second set of criteria was added to Figure 5.1 (represented by the dotted lines) as a means of distinguishing between those threads possessing moderate levels with those containing high levels of reciprocity. As is shown, there were five threads, which had a strong, highly decentralized web of interactions, in other words, 78

78 Two of the threads received a centralization score of .333 and a reply percentage indicator of 75%, consequently, in the figure, this appears as one thread.

79 See Appendix 5, 6, and 7 for visual representations of these three degrees of centralization.
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an ideal level of reciprocity (threads $\geq 75\%$ and $\leq .250$). With the exception of two threads, the 15 remaining threads in this quadrant had a strong, moderately decentralized web of interactions, in other words, a moderately high level of reciprocity (threads $\geq 75\%$ and between .250 and .500).

Overall, the web of reciprocity analysis suggests that the level of interactions between participants was high, and the social structure of those interactions tended to be moderately decentralized, indicating that a web of reciprocity was the norm.

5.3.5 Reflexivity

Reflexivity requires that participants reflect another participant’s argument against their own during the course of a discussion. The first step in determining the level of reflexivity is to discover the type and level of evidence use. There were four types of evidence identified, which were examples, facts/sources, comparisons, and experiences. Examples were the most common, representing 43% of supporting evidence. Both comparisons and facts/sources accounted for 23%, while experiences were the least common at 11%.

Table 5.3

Evidence Use in the Guardian

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evidence use</th>
<th>Reasoned claim type</th>
<th>Initial</th>
<th>Counter</th>
<th>Rebuttal</th>
<th>Refute</th>
<th>Affirmation</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within claim type</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within claim type</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within claim type</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>631</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within claim type</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The total percentages due not all add up to 100 because of rounding.

Regarding the level of evidence within arguments, Table 5.3 indicates that 43% of all reasoned claims contained supporting evidence. Rebuttals contained the highest level of evidence at half, while affirmations contained the lowest level with a third. Given that rebuttals represent a challenge to any of the four other arguments, one
would expect this type of argument to contain higher levels of supporting evidence. While a lower level of evidence use by affirmations would be expected, since these arguments act in support of another participant’s argument.

Table 5.3 also shows that when participants criticized opposing claims, they used supporting evidence more frequently than when they provided new, alternative, or supporting arguments. In particular, when initial, counter, and affirmation arguments are combined, given they support or begin a discussion or new line of argument, and rebuttals with refutes, given they represent challenges, the results indicate a significant increase of 10% in the use of evidence when participants used rebuttal/refute arguments ($t(626)=-2.48; p < 0.05$).

Finally, Table 5.3 indicates that participants rarely used multiple forms of evidence per argument. Only six percent of arguments contained multiple pieces of evidence. When participants did use multiple forms in a single argument, a majority of it came during the use of rebuttals and refutes; 56% of arguments, which used multiple pieces of evidence, were in the form of rebuttals and refutes. Consequently, when participants did use evidence to support their arguments, they stuck to using one piece per argument, and on those rare occasions when multiple forms were used, they tended to be used when challenging opposing claims.

However, determining the level of evidence use represents only the first step in ascertaining the level of reflexivity. In order to determine the level of reflexivity, arguments were subject to four criteria. When a posting or series of postings (1) provided a reasoned initial or counter claim; (2) used evidence to support that claim; (3) was responsive to challenges by providing rebuttals and refutes; (4) and provided evidence in support of that defense or challenge, they were coded as part of a reflexive argument.

There were 32 reflexive arguments consisting of 192 postings (16% of postings). Twenty-three participants were responsible for these exchanges (16% of participants). The average number of postings per reflexive argument was six. Overall, 27% of all arguments (169 arguments) were coded as reflexive. Moreover, a majority of these arguments (64%) were in the form of rebuttals and refutes, suggesting the importance of extended critical debate in the development of reflexive exchanges. In particular, 93% of reflexive arguments were part of strong-string exchanges, or 28% of strong-string claims were reflexive.

The results here also suggest a relationship between reflexive arguments and convergence. It seems that reflexivity, in addition to extended debate (under continuity above), was another important ingredient in achieving convergence. In particular, 52% of all commissives were engaged in and posted by those participants who provided reflexive arguments. The results become more revealing when all commissives, not just those posted by one of the 23 participants, are included. This reveals that 81% of all commissives occurred during a reflexive exchange. Finally, reflexive arguments tended to come from the most frequent posters. Fourteen of the 23 participants responsible for reflexive arguments were among the top 20 most frequent posters. Moreover, 56% of all postings were posted by these 23 participants.
Overall, the results suggest that a substantial portion of arguments were involved in reflexive exchanges, and though only a small group of frequent posters were responsible for most of these exchanges, when they did occur, they led to nearly all acts of convergence.

### 5.3.6 Empathy

Since deliberation is a social process, it is important that participants convey their empathetic considerations to fellow participants. Consequently, postings were examined for communicative empathy. Guardian participants rarely engaged in empathetic exchanges. In particular, there were only eight postings coded as communicative empathy. However, there was one interesting finding. All eight postings were part or product of reflexive exchanges. That said, the results still suggest that the Guardian forum was not a communicative space conducive to empathetic exchange.

### 5.3.7 Discursive equality

Discursive equality requires an equal distribution of voice and substantial equality among participants. First, the distribution of voice was determined by measuring the rate and distribution of participation and popularity. There were 140 participants responsible for the 1,215 postings within the Guardian sample. As Table 5.4 indicates, the level of one-timers was relatively high, which represented more than a third of the participants. Moreover, a majority (54%) of the participants posted two or less postings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rate of Participation and Distribution of Postings in the Guardian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Posting rate</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant frequency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postings 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 to 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 to 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 to 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In terms of the distribution of postings, 20% of the participants posted three-quarters of the contributions, which indicates a substantial inequality in the distribution of participation. However, measuring the rate and distribution of who is posting is only half of the picture. Consequently, an examination of whom these participants were talking to, the rate and distribution of messages received (popularity), was conducted. This analysis revealed similar results to the above rate and distribution of participation, indicating again a substantial inequality in the distribution of voice.\(^{80}\)

Overall, these analyses, the rate and distribution of participation and popularity, revealed that a majority of the postings were a product of a small group of popular participants who tended to talk to each other frequently.

The second element of discursive equality is substantial equality. Participants are required to respect, recognize, and treat each other as equals. One way to analyze discursive equality is to code the discussions for acts of inequality by determining the level of neglected arguments and degrading postings. Of the 254 counter/initial arguments, 27% (69 arguments) were silently neglected, which represented 11% of the total arguments.\(^{81}\) However, a closer reading of these arguments revealed that there was no particular trend to the act of neglecting. Specifically, there was no explicit issue or topic, position, type or style of argument, or participant(s) ignored. Additionally, there was no pattern to the placement of these arguments within the thread. Moreover, there was no reaction by the authors of these arguments; these participants simply moved on in the discussion most of the time or on occasions stopped posting. These results suggest that even though the level of neglected arguments was substantial, the act of neglecting appeared to be random; some postings simply went unnoticed or noticed but unreciprocated.

The number of degrading comments was low. Out of the 1,215 postings, 85 were coded as degrading. That said, there were still three noteworthy aspects to the act of degrading, which were (1) its relationship with expressives, (2) its social structure, and (3) its focus. First, as will be discussed later, both humor and emotional comments played an important role when it came to degrading. More than three-fourths of degrading exchanges used and/or were a consequence of these types of expressives. Second, degrading invited more degrading—degrading fests. Slightly more than three fourths of degrading comments were involved in degrading exchanges. There were 17 exchanges. The average number was four with the largest totaling nine postings. Finally, degrading usually came in the form of a personal attack, an ad hominem argument.\(^{82}\) In short, on those rare occasions when degrading exchanges

\(^{80}\) See Appendix 8 for the results.

\(^{81}\) Only counter and initial arguments were included in the analysis because the three other types of arguments represent responses to other arguments. It was possible for participants to continue posting to any of the threads in the sample after the archiving date. Consequently, some neglected arguments may have received a response, which was not included in the analysis.

\(^{82}\) Degrading here was usually located on a continuum, leaning either towards the argument or towards a personal attack.
did occur, they occurred in strings and tended to focus on another participant’s person rather than their argument.

In sum, the results for discursive equality were mixed. On the one hand, the rate and distribution of participation and popularity revealed substantial inequality in the distribution of voice. While on the other hand, the examination of participants’ communicative practices, neglecting and degrading, revealed that acts of inequality were, for the most part, infrequent.

5.3.8 Discursive freedom

Discursive freedom requires that participants are free to state their claims, arguments, and opinions in general. The analysis focused on the communicative practices of participants by coding for curbing. Overall, the level of curbing was low. There were only 30 acts of curbing detected. Moreover, this number decreases substantially when these acts are examined closely.

As discussed in the previous chapter, not all acts of curbing impede deliberation, and in some cases, curbing may enhance it. A closer reading of the 30 instances of curbing revealed that there were four types/objectives of curbing utilized by participants. First, only 10 instances of curbing were direct acts of censorship, impediments of deliberation. In these cases, a participant tried to censor a particular argument or issue from being discussed. Curbing here was frequently accompanied by a degrading comment and usually appeared when participants were discussing ‘conspiracy theories’ as the posting by Stephen below illustrates:

Stephen: For goodness sake, can you doubters please let Mr. Cook rest in peace. Doubts over the circumstances of Dr. Kelly's death are understandable, but the ones over Robin Cook are sheer lunacy. Just let it go.

Here Stephen interrupts and attempts to curb a discussion on theories surrounding the death of Robin Cook, former British Labour MP and Foreign Secretary. As is shown, not only does he try to curb the discussion, he also degrades it.

The remaining three types tended to enhance the discussions as opposed to impeding them. First, participants used curbing to keep discussions on the topic. On nine occasions when discussions drifted off the topic, participants attempted to bring them back on course by curbing. Second, participants used curbing nine times to stop or prevent personal attacks, abusive language, or inappropriate exchanges/arguments. Finally, participants used curbing twice to enforce rules of etiquette—the use of signatures and posting length.

83 Robin Cook resigned as Leader of the House of Commons and Lord President of the Council in March 2003 in protest against the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In August 2005, he suffered a heart attack and died. There were conflicting reports surrounding his death.
In sum, the level of curbing was low, and when it did occur, it tended to enhance political talk rather than impede it.

5.3.9 Sincerity

Sincerity requires that participants are truthful. It was assessed by examining the communicative practices of participants for questionable sincerity. There were only 31 postings coded as questionable sincerity. Below are two of these postings:

**John:** Actually, I don’t think you believe that at all. I think your hostility to him arises entirely out of the subject matter of his protest.

**Mary:** Is that [Henry] speculation, or is it backed up by the results of surveys?

In the first posting, John simply states that he does not believe the other participant. This type of direct statement of mistrust was relatively common, representing most of these acts. In the second example, Mary questions Henry’s claim with a hint of suspicion. Here, participants would request proof or evidence by posting questions mixed with words of skepticism. These types of indirect statements of mistrust were another way participants questioned the sincerity of another.

When the sincerity of a participant was questioned, it frequently ended in a breakdown of the discussion. In particular, a closer reading of these exchanges revealed that once it was questioned, it usually ended in a withdrawal by participants or in an exchange of accusations. What is interesting here is that on those occasions when perceived sincerity was restored and the discussion continued, the subject in question was the argument. They were questioning e.g. another participant’s claim, fact, or source as the statement by Mary illustrates. On those occasions when perceived sincerity was not restored and the discussion broke down, the subject of questioned sincerity was usually another participant’s person, like John’s statement above.

In sum, the analysis suggests that though questionable sincerity was infrequent, when it did occur, it often led to a breakdown in the discussion, particularly when the sincerity of a participant’s person was questioned.

5.4 The use of expressives

Expressives are typical ingredients of political talk. There has been a growing debate among deliberative democrats as to what role expressives should play with regard to deliberation. As discussed in Chapter 2, some deliberative democrats have argued that expressives and alternative communicative forms must have a place in the deliberative process, particularly deliberation grounded in the everyday informal

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84 As was the case for degrading, this was usually located on a continuum, leaning either towards the argument or towards a personal attack.
realm of the public sphere. However, as discussed in Chapter 3, there have been few empirical studies that have addressed expressives in everyday political talk, either off- or online. Consequently, we know little empirically about the role expressives play within (online) political talk.

In following section, the results for expressive speech acts are presented. In particular, the results on participants’ use of humor, emotional comments, and acknowledgements are provided. Moreover, particular attention is paid to the relationships between expressives and ‘traditional’ conditions of deliberation with regard to whether they facilitate or impede the process.

5.4.1 Humor

Expressive speech acts were frequently used during the debates within the Guardian, representing 34% of the postings. The most common expressive was humor. It accounted for 43% of expressives and appeared in 15% of the postings. Overall, the analysis revealed three notable aspects on the use of humor: (1) its social function, (2) its social structure, and (3) its relationship with certain variables of deliberation.

The first aspect of humor was the way in which it was used, the social function of humor.\(^{85}\) For example, humor may be used for social bonding, to express frustration and anger towards authority, criticize another, or to reinforce stereotypes (Koller, 1988; Shibles, 1997). In the case of the Guardian, participants used humor for multiple and a variety of functions.\(^{86}\) That said, the aim here was not to provide a detailed breakdown of all the different uses because that goes beyond the scope of this analysis, but rather, it was to detect any persistent patterns/general trends in the use of humor.

Several trends emerged with regard to the use of humor. Participants tended to use humor to entertain; to criticize, assess, or provoke thought; and/or to express hostility, anger, or offence. The most common pattern in the use of humor was to entertain. Humor here usually came in the form of wisecracks, jokes, sarcasm, and banter. There were two focuses of humor under ‘to entertain’. First, humor here often focused on making fun of politicians and the Labour government in general.\(^{87}\) It usually was accompanied by malicious delight. Moreover, it tended to be less constructive in relation to the issue under discussion and more oriented towards ‘having a laugh’ at the expense of the subject in question. Second, a substantial portion of humor under ‘to entertain’ focused on good-natured teasing and the exchange of witty remarks between and about participants in the form of banter.

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\(^{85}\) There is no agreed upon taxonomy of humor. Moreover, one humorous comment may illustrate numerous uses and types. Thus, there is no objective scientific method when it comes to categorizing and analyzing humor.

\(^{86}\) The analysis focused solely on the content of the discussions, consequently, it has limitations. That said, the analysis was based interpretation, taking into account the context within which humor was used.

\(^{87}\) See Appendix 9 for the results on whom or what humor was directed towards, focused on.
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This sort of good-natured exchange was quite common; 65 of the 186 humorous comments were in the form of banter. Though banter tended to create an atmosphere of playfulness, it often led the discussions off the topic. Nearly 70% of these exchanges were off the topic.

The second most common pattern in the use of humor was to criticize, assess, or provoke thought. Humor has a critical function in political talk, the function of questioning, criticizing, and assessing politicians, government, or society in general. The participants of the Guardian used humor to do just this. The use of humor here usually came in the form of satire via the use of irony, sarcasm, parody, comparison, and analogy as the postings below illustrate:

**Henry:** All of you old enough to remember this classic Dire Straits 80s track will appreciate that it has lost nothing of its meaning over the two decades since its original release. Despite demotion, Prescott strangely keeps his salary and perks and his choice of parliamentary skirt.

**John:** That ain't working, that's the way you do it,
Set your own pension when you're an MP,
That ain't working, that's the way you screw it,
When you get caught with the secretary

**Henry:** Not bad, but what we need is one of those dynamic 80s power-and-might tracks with some really pithy and topical lyrics showing the lack of difference between Thatcherism and NuLabourism. <...sits scratching head....>

**John:** Look at them NuLabs, that's the way they do it,
Pretending that they're not really Tories,
Look at those Blairites, pretending it's the third way,
Privatising hospitals and tuition fees

**Richard:** Let's go further back - Genesis, Selling England by the Pound.

In this thread, participants used satire via parody to criticize and assess John Prescott, Tony Blair, and the Labour Government in general. Unlike above, this type of use of humor was usually supportive and constructive to both individual arguments and to the topic of discussion.

The final pattern in the use of humor was to express hostility, anger, or offence. This use of humor usually came in the form of wisecracks, jokes, repartee, and sarcasm. Moreover, it tended to be vulgar, offensive, and usually contributed little to the discussion constructively. Rather, humor here often led to flaming and degrading exchanges as the postings below show:

**Charles:** If Tony Blair was blown apart by a suicide bomber, I'd be over the moon and pay for drinks all around.

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88 He is a British Labour MP and former Deputy Prime Minister. He was criticized for maintaining the benefits of Deputy Prime Minister despite losing his post. There was also controversy surrounding his sexual relationships.
Elizabeth: And no doubt you claim the moral high ground in anti-war debates. Charming.
Charles: There’d be no room on that moral high ground, [Elizabeth]. Not with Blair on top and you groupies licking his shitty arse.

In this example, a debate on the Iraq War turns into an exchange of degrading remarks when Charles, in several postings, begins to use vulgar wisecracks, sarcasm, and jokes to express his anger and hostility towards the Blair Government, the British public, and finally towards his fellow participants. Eventually, Elizabeth and other participants begin to take offence to Charles comments and reply accordingly.

The second aspect of humor was its social structure. As the above example highlighted, humor invites more humor. When a participant posted a joke, for example, it usually ignited a string of humorous comments—one joke lead to two jokes and so forth (like the Prescott thread above); it was contagious. Humor here tended to stir more humor fostering lengthy exchanges or what may be called humor fests. Out of the 186 postings coded as humor, 86% or 160 postings were involved in humor fests. There were 32 fests. The average number was five with the largest totaling 16 postings.

The final aspect of humor was its relationship with certain variables of deliberation, in particular, with rational-critical debate, coherence, and discursive equality. As mentioned above, humor was used to criticize and assess politicians, government, and society in general. In particular, participants used humor deliberately as a means of expressing and supporting their arguments or what may be called rational humor as the posting by Mary below shows:

Mary: [Edward] that news about the need Lord Kinnock being drafted in to mediate between No. 10 & 11 is quite quite barmy. They are supposed to be leaders. Instead, it's like warring schoolchildren using intermediaries,
"Neil, tell Gordon I'm not talking to him."
"Neil, tell Tony he's not worth talking to, he's finished here, his name is mud."
"Neil, tell Gordon I'm not setting a date, ner ner ner ner ner ner."

In this thread, participants were discussing the turmoil within the Labour Party. In this posting, Mary uses humor to expose the childish behavior taking place between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Her humorous skit, which is used deliberately to stress and support here argument, serves as supporting evidence (a supposed example) to her claim. Rational humor here represented slightly more than a third of humorous comments (63 comments) and nearly 10% of all reasoned claims.

Humor, however, did not always contribute constructively to a discussion. First, as mentioned above, humor often led discussions off the topic. Thirty-eight percent of all humorous comments were off the topic of discussion. A participant would make fun of Tony Blair, for example, and a humor fest would ensue leading the focus of the conversation away from the topic and towards having a laugh.
these cases, humor acted more as a distraction. Second, though the number of degrading comments was low overall, when they did occur, humor played a significant role in igniting and being used as a weapon of them; nearly one third of all degrading comments were humorous or a response to humor. Humor used to express anger and hostility was the primary culprit here. As the above postings demonstrated, often this type of usage of humor led to degrading exchanges.

Overall, humor was a relatively common feature of political talk within the Guardian forum. On the one hand, it sometimes created a friendly and sociable communicative environment and was commonly used in support of rational-critical debate. While on the other hand, when humor went unimpeded, it often led to incoherent political discussions. Moreover, humor was often used to express hostility and anger. When this use of humor was directed towards fellow participants, it regularly was used to degrade another or led to degrading exchanges and ultimately to a breakdown in political talk.

5.4.2 Emotional comments

The second most frequent expressive used was emotional comments. They accounted for 29% of expressives and appeared in 11% of the postings. Overall, the analysis revealed three notable aspects on the use of emotions: (1) their type; (2) their social structure; and (3) their relationship with certain variables of deliberation. Expressing negative emotions was the norm. In particular, anger was the most frequent emotion expressed; 79% of emotional comments expressed some form of anger. Anger here was conveyed mostly through statements of disgust, irritation, rage, and exasperation.

The second aspect of emotional comments was their social structure. Similar to humor, but to a lesser degree, emotional comments fueled more comments that were emotional; emotional comments were involved in what can be called rant sessions. These were lengthy exchanges where participants vented their disgust, irritation, rage, and anger towards politicians in particular and the Labour Government in general.89 These types of exchanges were often raw and vulgar. Moreover, they tended to be polarized; they ranted together not at each other. Out of the 129 postings coded as emotional comments, 54 were involved in rant sessions. There were six sessions. The average number was nine with the largest totaling 22 postings.

The final aspect of emotional comments was their relationship with certain variables of deliberation, in particular, with rational-critical debate and discursive equality. First, when participants expressed emotions, they usually were used in conjunction with arguments. Sixty-five percent of all emotional comments were expressed via a participant’s argument, or put differently, 13% of all arguments were emotional. Though emotions were used in a variety of ways within arguments, given the intense anger expressed overall, there was a tendency for these types of argu-

89 See Appendix 11 for the results on whom or what emotional comments were directed towards.
ments to be abrasive, vulgar, and even crude at times. However, these types of arguments were not ignored. Only two were neglected by fellow participants; arguments that used emotions were reciprocated. Finally, emotional comments played an important role in relation to discursive equality. Thirty-one percent of all emotional comments were used in a degrading way or 48% of all degrading comments expressed emotions.

All in all, given the intensity, rawness, and prominence of the anger conveyed, emotional comments tended to contribute little constructively to the political discussions. Emotions used in arguments were often crude and sometimes caused offence. In particular, when directed towards fellow participants, they often ignited degrading exchanges or were used in conjunction with them. Moreover, emotional comments regularly ignited rants sessions, which contributed little to the discussions in way of understanding.

5.4.3 Acknowledgements

The final expressive was acknowledgements. They accounted for 28% of expressives and appeared in 10% of the postings. There were five types of acknowledgements identified: complimenting (54%), greeting (24%), thanking (13%), apologizing (8%), and condoling (1%). Complimenting was the most common acknowledgement used, representing 54% of acknowledgements and appearing in six percent of the postings. When participants complemented, it tended to be directed at others’ arguments or positions. Participants commonly used statements such as “nice post”, “good point”, “well said”, “good analysis”, and “good defense” to express a complement.

However, participants rarely complimented a participant on an opposing side of an argument; compliments were polarized. Most complements were given in-house, between those on the same side of an argument. When compliments were given across argumentative lines, they focused less on complementing another participant’s position and more on another participant’s humor. Participants on opposing sides of a discussion simply avoided complementing the substances of opposing claims, and when they did complement, it usually had nothing to do with an argument or position.

In sum, even though acknowledgements created a cordial and civil atmosphere, this was usually only between participants on the same side of an argument/position. Rather, the use of acknowledgements here usually fostered polarization, thus hindering political talk.

5.5 Assessing political talk: The normative analysis

One of the central research questions of this study is: To what extent do the communicative practices of online political discussions satisfy the normative conditions of the process of deliberation of the public sphere? In order to answer this question, in this section, an evaluation
for each of the nine conditions of deliberation, which includes the six conditions of the process of achieving mutual understanding (rational-critical debate, coherence, continuity, reciprocity, reflexivity, and empathy) and the three conditions of structural and dispositional fairness (discursive equality, discursive freedom, and sincerity), is conducted.

### 5.5.1 The process of achieving mutual understanding

The first condition in the process of achieving mutual understanding is that political talk must be guided by **rational-critical debate**. This requires participants to provide reasoned claims, which they critically reflect upon. Rational-critical debate has been one of the most common conditions of deliberation employed by net-based public sphere researchers. Most of these studies point to high levels of rational-critical debate within a variety of online forum types (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). The results from the Guardian are consistent with these findings. In particular, the exchange of claims was moderately high, and the rationality of those exchanges was high, living up to the normative condition.

However, one difficulty with much of the literature is that it is unclear whether the *critical* in rational-critical debate was adequately operationalized. Consequently, it reveals little about the level of critical reflection. The two studies that do assess the level of critical reflection have revealed encouraging results (Dahlberg 2001b; Tanner 2001). The results from the Guardian are in line with these findings. In particular, the level of disagreement was substantially higher than agreement and, more importantly, the level of critical reflection overall and in comparison to new, alternative, and supporting arguments was moderately high, thus satisfying the normative condition.

The second condition in the process of achieving mutual understanding is that political talk must be **coherent**; participants must stick to the topic of discussion. The literature on coherence is sparse. Indeed, there have only been several studies that have examined coherence. That said, with the exception of Schneider’s (1997) study, the more recent research on coherence suggests, directly or indirectly, relatively coherent political talk (Dahlberg, 2001b; Jensen, 2003; Stanley, Weare, & Musso, 2004; Wright & Street 2007) within online forums, particularly governmentally sponsored forums. The Guardian results are consistent with these recent findings, and more importantly, suggest that coherent discussions do not exclusively occur in governmentally sponsored, strictly (or pre-) moderated, forums. In particular, the level of coherence was high indicating that participants regularly stuck to the topic of discussion, thus satisfying the condition of coherence.

The third condition in the process of achieving mutual understanding requires that participants discuss the issue until understanding or some form of agreement is achieved as opposed to withdrawing. Unlike previous studies, in order to provide a
more comprehensive indicator of continuity, it was assessed by determining both the level of extended debate and convergence.

Brants (2002), Ó Baoill (2000), Tanner (2001), and Wilhelm’s (1999) studies all suggest that extended debate on a single topic was uncommon. However, unlike most of these studies, which relied upon observations rather than any systematical operationalization of extended debate, this study found the level of extended debate to be high. This result falls more in line with Beierle’s (2004) survey research, which suggests that participants develop a sense of responsibility to actively participate during the course of a discussion.

The analysis also revealed a connection between extended critical debate (i.e. strong-string exchanges) and convergence and reflexivity. Nearly all acts of convergence and reflexivity occurred towards the middle to latter end of strong-string exchanges. In other words, when participants took the time to engage with each other in lengthy exchanges, in the form of rational-critical debate, it seems they were more likely to take up a reflexive position towards opposing positions and, in the end, more likely to reach some form of agreement and/or understanding with each other, suggesting the importance of extended rational-critical debate in political talk. In sum, the level of extended debate satisfied the requirement of continuity.

In terms of convergence, the few studies available all suggest that, directly or indirectly, online discussions rarely achieved convergence (Jankowski & Van Os, 2004; Jensen, 2003; Strandberg, 2008). The results from the Guardian are consistent with these findings. In particular, less than a third of the lines of discussion ended in some form of agreement. Consequently, Guardian participants typically withdrew from the discussions before any type of convergence was reached, falling short of the normative condition.

Overall, the results for continuity were mixed, on the one hand, the level of extended debate was high, satisfying the normative condition, while on the other hand, even though extended debate fostered nearly all commissives, lines of discussion infrequently ended in convergence, falling well short of the condition.

The fourth condition (reciprocity) in the process of achieving mutual understanding is that participants must read and reply to each other’s questions, arguments, or opinions in general. Much of the literature reveals for a variety of forum types that reciprocal online political discussions was the norm (Beierle, 2004; Brants, 2002; Dahlberg, 2001; Jensen, 2003; Papacharissi, 2004; Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997; Schneider, 1997; Tsaliki, 2002; Winkler, 2002, 2005; Wright & Street, 2007). The results from the Guardian are consistent with these findings. In particular, the percentage of replies was high.

However, such an approach neglects the social structure of the threads. Therefore, unlike previous studies, the reply percentage indicator measurement was combined with a degree of centralization measurement as a means of providing a comprehensive indicator of reciprocity. The combined analysis found that a substantial portion of the threads maintained a high level of decentralized social interaction,
indicating that a web of reciprocity was the norm, thus satisfying the condition of reciprocity.

The fifth condition (reflexivity) in the process of achieving mutual understanding is that participant’s are required to reflect upon their own position in light of others. Again, there have been few studies that analyzed reflexivity within online political discussions. That said, the few that do examine reflexivity, either directly or indirectly, all revealed substantial levels (Dahlberg, 2001b; Jensen, 2003; Stromer-Galley, 2003; Winkler, 2002, 2005). The results from the Guardian are in line with these findings. There was a moderate level of reflexive arguments, thus satisfying the normative condition. Moreover, the analysis discovered that nearly all acts of convergence took place during reflexive exchanges. In particular, when convergence did occur, it took place nearly always towards the end of a reflexive exchange, after participants had exchanged several rounds of (reasoned and critical) claims, suggesting that reflexivity, along with extended debate, may be another crucial ingredient in achieving convergence.

The final condition (empathy) in the process of achieving mutual understanding is that participants put themselves in another participant’s position, either cognitively and/or emotionally. Again, there has only been one study to my knowledge that has examined empathy (Zhang, 2005), and its findings suggest a lack of empathetic considerations. The results from the Guardian are consistent with this finding. Participants simply did not engage in communicative empathetic exchange, falling well short of the normative condition.

5.5.2 Structural and dispositional fairness

The first condition (discursive equality) of structural and dispositional fairness requires an equal distribution of voice within the discussions and substantial equality between participants. Much of the research has revealed substantial inequalities in the distribution of participation within a variety of forum types (Albrecht, 2006; Brants, 2002; Coleman, 2004; Dahlberg, 2001; Jankowski & Van Os, 2004; Jankowski & Van Selm, 2000; Jensen, 2003; Schneider, 1997; Schultz, 2000; Stanley, Weare, & Musso, 2004; Winkler, 2002, 2005). The results from the Guardian are consistent with these findings. The analyses indicated a substantially high level of inequality in both the rate and distribution of participation and popularity, falling well short of the normative condition.

In terms of substantial equality, much of the more recent research has shown that participants typically avoid aggressive and abusive communicative practices (Dahlberg, 2001; Hagemann, 2002; Jensen, 2003; Papacharissi, 2004; Stanley, Weare, & Musso, 2004; Winkler, 2005). The results from the Guardian are in line with these findings. The level of degrading postings was substantially low. Additionally, the

90 Dahlberg’s notion of ideal role taking, which is deduced from Habermas’s theory of communicative rationality, focuses on the cognitive side of empathy as opposed to the affective side.
examination also included an analysis of neglected arguments, acts of passive inequality. The findings here lend support to the above. Though the level of neglected argues was substantial, a closer reading of those arguments revealed that the act of neglecting another participant’s argument was random.

Overall, the results for discursive equality were mixed. On the one hand, the distribution of voice measurements uncovered a high level of inequality, falling well short of the normative condition. While of the other hand, the substantial equality analyses revealed low levels of inequality, living up to the normative condition.

The second condition (discursive freedom) of structural and dispositional fairness demands that participants be free to share and discuss information, opinions, and arguments. The Guardian forum was an arena where a variety of arguments and opinions interacted. The level of disagreement and critical reflection was moderate and extended critical debate on the issues was the norm. However, there tended to be one issue where participants’ opinions, for the most part, were polarized, their anger towards Blair’s Government, which represented about a third of the discussions. That said, the findings here fall more in line with Jankowski and Van Os (2004), Schneider (1997), Strandberg (2008), Stromer-Galley (2003) and Tsaliki’s (2002) research, which suggests that diversity is the norm.

As already discussed, there has lacked an operationalization of discursive freedom that focuses on the communicative practices of participants within the discussions. Consequently, the discussions were analyzed for curbing, the act of censorship by the participants themselves. The results suggested that the level of curbing was substantially low, thus satisfying the normative condition. Furthermore, when it did occur, curbing frequently enhanced the discussions rather than impede them.

The final condition (sincerity) of structural and dispositional fairness requires that all claims, arguments, and information provided during a discussion be sincere and truthful. The level of actual sincerity was not address by the above analysis, but rather, the level of perceived sincerity was assessed by coding for questionable sincerity. The results revealed that questioning another participant’s sincerity was infrequent. However, when questionable sincerity did occur, it was usually personal (directed towards one’s person as opposed to one’s argument) and led to a breakdown in the discussion between those involved, thus blocking political talk. That said, the fact that Guardian participants rarely questioned another participant’s sincerity suggests that participants perceived the forum as being a sincere communicative environment. Though the operationalization of sincerity here differed from both Dahlberg (2001) and Zhang’s (2005) research, the Guardian results suggest a similar conclusion: it satisfied the condition.

5.6 Beyond the normative conditions of deliberation

If our focus is on everyday political talk within the public sphere, we need to take a more encompassing approach when conceptualizing deliberation. In particular, we
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need a notion of deliberation that takes into account the everyday informal nature of political talk. The analysis presented above takes a step in this direction by analyzing Guardian participants’ use of humor, emotional comments, and acknowledgements. The aim was not only to describe systematically and more precisely how they actually talked politics, but also, and more importantly, to see whether expressives had any bearing on the traditional variables of deliberation. Consequently, the research question being addressed in this section is: What role, if any, do expressives (humor, emotional comments, and acknowledgements) play within online political discussions and in relation to the normative conditions of deliberation?

In the Guardian, humor was the most common expressive used, and it appeared in 15% of the postings. This finding is consistent with past net-based public sphere research (Winkler 2002, 2005). Humor was frequently used to entertain. Though humor here, for the most part, created a friendly and playful atmosphere among participants, particularly across argumentative lines, it often contributed little to the political discussions. In particular, humor usually invited more humor, igniting humor fests. These fests often took control of the discussion at the expense of the political topic. In other words, humor here acted more as a distraction, an impediment to coherence, than a benefit to political talk.

The second most common pattern in the use of humor was to criticize, assess, or provoke thought. Humor here was mostly constructive to the political discussions in question. In particular, rational humor was often used to criticize and assess politicians, government, and society in general. In other words, it was a fairly common ingredient, which was used to enhance and support rational-critical debate. Consequently, humor here tended to benefit political talk.

The final pattern in the use of humor was to express hostility, anger, or offence. The use of humor here was often vulgar, crude, and often offensive and usually contributed little to the discussion constructively, but rather, it often acted as a vehicle of discursive inequality. When degrading did occur, humor played a significant role in igniting it or acting as a weapon of it. Consequently, humor here functioned more as an obstacle to political talk. Though most of the studies (discussed in Chapter 3) that have investigated online political humor did not focused on it within the context of political talk, there is still one commonality that binds them all: no matter if its via presenting political humor on a website or during the course of political talk, political humor tends usually to be negative in nature.

Emotional comments were another ingredient of political talk. Moreover, the findings (the level of emotions expressed) are in line with past net-based public sphere research (Winkler, 2002, 2005). Unlike humor, emotional comments contributed little constructively to political talk in the Guardian. The primary reason for this was due to the type and intensity of the emotions expressed. Nearly 80% of emotional comments expressed some form of anger. Moreover, anger here was usually raw and intense.

First, though emotional comments were often expressed via rational-critical debate, given the intense anger that was prevalent, these types of arguments tended
to be abrasive, vulgar, and crude. As a result, they often contributed little beneficially to the discussions in question. Second, often these types of arguments ignited rant sessions. Here participants engaged less in reciprocal-critical exchange and more in relieving their anger by joining in on a rant with fellow participants. Though these types of rants may have provided some form of therapeutic relief, they usually added little value, in way of understanding, to the topic under discussion. Finally, as was the case with humor, emotional comments were a vehicle of discursive inequality. Nearly a third of emotional comments were used in a degrading way. This finding falls more in line with Conover and Searing (2005) analysis of everyday political talk via ‘letters to the editor’ from newspapers, which revealed that emotions such as disgust and contempt led to disrespectful talk and incivility among participants. On the whole, emotional comments did more to impede deliberation than advance it.

The final expressive was acknowledgements. The most common acknowledgement was compliments. Overall, acknowledgements tended to foster a friendly communicative atmosphere. In particular, participants regularly complimented and praised each other’s arguments and positions in general. However, there was one catch to complimenting. Participants on different sides of argumentative lines simply did not compliment one another. Complimenting was polarized; complimenting was done in-house, among those on the same side of a position. Consequently, complimenting presented political talk with a paradox. On the one hand, they fostered a friendly and civil atmosphere between those on the same side of a position. While on the other hand, they seemed to have encouraged polarization between those on competing sides of an argument. In short, unlike Barnes (2005) and Barnes, Knops, Newman, and Sullivan’s (2004) research on political talk via offline settings, which found that the use of greeting fostered a communicative space that enabled participants to express disagreement more productively, acknowledgements here, compliments in particular, tended to create an atmosphere that was more counterproductive to deliberation.

5.7 Conclusion

It seems that the Guardian forum attracted participants who wanted to debate conventional, institutional political topics. The discussions and communicative practices of participants were quite deliberative. The level of rationality, critical reflection, coherence, reciprocity, reflexivity, substantial equality, discursive freedom, and perceived sincerity within the Guardian fared well in relation to the normative conditions. However, there were some variables of deliberation where this was not the case. The rate and distribution of postings indicated that the discussions within the Guardian tended to be a product of a small group of popular participants. Moreover, in terms of convergence and empathetic exchange, Guardian participants rarely achieved understanding or agreement during the course of a debate, and expressing empathetic considerations was scarcely present in those debates.
Expressive speech acts were a common feature of political talk within the Guardian. Humor was the most frequently used expressive. It presented the Guardian with a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it acted as a social lubricant, creating a friendly and playful atmosphere, and was used to enhance and support rational-critical debate; while on the other, when it went unchecked, it often brought about incoherence, and on occasions, degrading within the discussions. In terms of emotions, the Guardian hosted at times a relatively angry communicative environment. When participants expressed emotions, they overwhelmingly were in the form of anger. Even humor was often used to express anger and hostility. This anger tended to lead to rant sessions and on occasions fostered more aggressive, malicious, and even personal attack oriented communicative practices. Consequently, emotional comments added little value to the debates in way of understanding particularly and quality of debate in general. Finally, though acknowledgements created a cordial and friendly environment, they were counterproductive; they tended to support and foster polarization between the different positions among participants. In short, expressives did more to hinder deliberation than enhance it.