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

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6.1 Introduction

The study reported here examines the communicative practices of participants from the *Big Brother Fan* online discussion forum. The discussions analyzed were based on the Celebrity Big Brother 2006 (UK) TV series, which consisted of 11 housemates initially, including: George Galloway the politician, Dennis Rodman the basketball star, Faria Alam former Football Association secretary, Jodie Marsh the glamour model, Traci Bingham the actress/model, Maggot the rapper, Michael Barrymore the comedian, Samuel Preston the ‘boys band’ singer, Rula Lenska the actress, Pete Burns the singer/songwriter, and Chantelle Houghton the non-celebrity.

In section 6.2, the analysis on identifying political talk is provided. In particular, the political discussions and the issues and topics of those discussions are identified. This is followed by an analysis of how the political emerged in those discussions. In section 6.3, the results for each of the nine conditions of deliberation are given. This is followed by the results on the use of expressive speech acts in section 6.4. In section 6.5, the normative analysis is presented in comparison to the Guardian. The analysis moves beyond the normative in section 6.6 and discusses the role and use of expressives within Big Brother and in comparison to the Guardian. Finally, in section 6.7, the chapter ends with a summary and some final remarks.

6.2 Identifying political talk

In order to identify political talk, the initial sample, which consisted of 345 threads containing 6,803 postings, was subjected to two criteria: All threads containing postings where a participant (1) makes a connection to society, which (2) stimulates reflection and a response by at least one other participant, were considered political threads and advanced to the second stage of the analysis. Political talk was no stranger to the Big Brother forum. Thirty-eight threads containing 1,479 postings, which represented 22% of the initial sample, satisfied both criteria. The results suggest that Big Brother fans were doing more than talking Big Brother. More than a fifth of the postings were engaged in or around a political discussion. Out of the 307 threads that failed to meet the criteria, five fulfilled the first criterion but failed to satisfy the second, while the remaining 302 threads failed to fulfill the first criterion. Consequently, when a connection to society was made, it usually ignited a political discussion.
6.2.1 Topics of discussion

What were the political topics of these discussions? This question was addressed by categorizing the actual political discussions, which consisted of 1,176 postings, into broad topics based on the issues discussed within the various coherent lines of discussion offered by the 38 threads.\(^9\) As Table 6.1 shows, there were 13 topics identified by the analysis. The dominant topic of discussion was George Galloway’s politics, consisting of 436 postings, which represented more than a third of the political discussions.

It seems that George Galloway’s presence in the Big Brother house caused a stir among forum participants, as Mary’s posting below reveals:

**Mary:** Thank you [Henry] - surely though, MPs don’t have to be in parliament all the time do they? I was under the impression that none of them go in all the time and that they are all busy with things other than constituency business. I am not trying to say GG is all good, obviously that isn’t true, and maybe the forum isn’t the best place to look for an education but I am trying to understand both sides of this fiery debate which is all over this forum at the moment.

In this thread, participants engaged in a heated debate on Galloway’s motives for appearing on the show and on whether a sitting MP should be allowed to participate on a reality TV series. These discussions were often lively; many participants and opinions contributed to these debates.

However, the political discussions on Galloway were not always confined to these particular issues. Occasionally, the discussions branched off into debates on MPs and parliament in general. Moreover, participants here frequently discussed Galloway’s politics, e.g. his political arguments, his relationship with Iraq and the Muslim world, and his character, behavior, and performance as an MP. In short, Galloway’s presence in the house got the participants of Big Brother Fan talking politics.

George Galloway was not the only political topic of discussion. As Table 6.1 indicates, participants often engaged in discussions on a variety of issues. Moreover, unlike in the Guardian, the topics of discussion were not always driven by conventional political issues. Approximately 42% of these discussions dealt with issues on bullying, sexuality and gender, animal rights, health and the body, and even on the role of reality television in society. In other words, Big Brother discussions frequently centered on issues that were more individualized and lifestyle oriented, more personal; when discussing these topics, participants would often bring their life experiences and choices to the debate via, for example, personal narratives.

\(^9\) The 303 postings that were nonpolitical and/or incoherent were not included.
Table 6.1

*Political Topics Discussed in Big Brother*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Examples of Issues</th>
<th># of postings</th>
<th>% of postings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>George Galloway’s politics</td>
<td>Galloway’s politics; relationship with Iraq; personality, character, &amp; performance</td>
<td>436</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying and codes of conduct</td>
<td>Bullying; moral codes of conduct</td>
<td>248</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animal rights &amp; conservation</td>
<td>Animal rights; fur trade; conservationism; endangered species act/law</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The judicial/legal system</td>
<td>Rights of the accused; innocent until proven guilty</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health &amp; the body</td>
<td>Skinny celebrities/models–bad role models; smoking; drugs and today’s youth</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender, sexuality, &amp; discrimination</td>
<td>Sexism; sexuality; sexuality and prejudices/discrimination</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration, multiculturalism &amp; racism</td>
<td>Sharia law; Muslims in the UK; immigration and racism</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The media</td>
<td>Media’s failure &amp; the Iraq war; media censorship</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parliamentary politics</td>
<td>MPs attendance/track records; democratic reform; politicians and today’s youth; characteristics of a leader</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reality TV and society</td>
<td>Big Brother’s impact on British youth; Big Brother as a political platform</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Iraq War &amp; foreign policy</td>
<td>Iraq War; Saddam’s regime; UK/US Foreign policy; terrorism</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political philosophy</td>
<td>The class system; capitalism vs. communism</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Education: the British versus the EU</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,176</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6.2.2 Triggers of political talk

How does political talk emerge in nonpolitically oriented discussion forums? In particular, what were the triggers of political talk within the Big Brother forum? In order to answer these research questions, the postings leading up to the political discussions were
examined for triggers. Additionally, as a means of providing more context to the discussions, other sources were consulted when applicable, i.e. the Celebrity Big Brother Highlight episodes and links to third-party sources.

Political talk emerged 42 separate times within the 38 threads of Big Brother.\(^\text{92}\) Similar to the Guardian, there were two instances when the political emerged immediately.\(^\text{93}\) In both cases, politics itself was the trigger of the political discussions that followed. Participants here began a thread with the intent of talking politics as Guardian participants did. In particular, discussions on the Iraq War and the job performances of current British MPs emerged. Consequently, these discussions seemed to have little to do with Big Brother and more to do with talking politics for the sake of political talk.\(^\text{94}\)

In the remaining 40 instances, there were four triggers of political talk identified by the analysis. The most common trigger was *behavior*, the behavior of the Big Brother housemates. On 17 occasions, the bullying and sexual behavior of at least one of the housemates triggered a political discussion. In particular, the bullying behaviors of Burns, Barrymore, Galloway, and Rodman were the primary triggers here of political talk. The political discussions that followed dealt with issues such as the meaning of bullying, its role among and affect on British youth, and moral codes of conduct or lack thereof in British society.

The second most common trigger of political talk was *statements and discussions*. On nine occasions, a statement by or discussion between Big Brother housemates triggered a political discussion. Unlike the triggers above, where political talk initially emerged in the discussion forum itself, the political discussions that emerged here tended to be an overflow from the political statements and discussions, which took place in the Big Brother house. In other words, these political discussions were a continuation of what was already being discussed.\(^\text{95}\) The discussions that emerged dealt with issues such as animal rights, immigration, the Iraq War, Galloway’s politics, racism, and even a discussion on communism emerged.

The third most common trigger was *lifestyle, image, and identity*. On eight occasions, the lifestyle, image, and/or identity of a Big Brother housemate ignited a political debate. In terms of lifestyles, for example, a political discussion was sparked when participants discussed Marsh’s lifestyle choice of being a vegetarian. In return, a political discussion on animal rights ignited. Political discussions were also triggered by the images and identities put forth by Rodman and Burns. For example, Rodman’s ‘bad boy’ image sparked a discussion on individuality, which developed into a discussion on the qualities of a good political leader. Burns’ overt sexuality and flamboyant style, for example, ignited political discussions on sexuality and discrimi-

\(^{92}\) On several occasions the political emerged more than once in a single thread.

\(^{93}\) The trigger’s analysis focused on Big Brother and Wife Swap only. That said, in all the 30 threads of the Guardian, political talk emerged immediately. Participants came to the forum to talk politics.

\(^{94}\) Galloway’s presence may have had something to do with these discussions. However, in both cases, he was not mentioned.

\(^{95}\) On one occasion, this was a continuation of a discussion from a talk show.
nation. Finally, given the presence of three band members and two models in the house, discussions on images associated with the ‘rock-star’ (sex and drugs) and the ‘model’ (drugs and anorexia) sparked political debates on health and body, drugs and British youth, and sexism.

The final trigger was *debates in the media*, which was also a trigger of political talk in the Guardian. On six occasions, forum participants posted articles from the Guardian, the BBC, the Sun, and the Daily Mirror, which in turn ignited political debates. In particular, most of the articles were editorial commentary on issues surrounding Big Brother housemates Galloway, Barrymore, and Burns. Commentary on Galloway’s decision to and motives for appearing in the Big Brother house and past and present criminal and legal proceedings surrounding Barrymore were the primary triggers here. In return, political debates on Galloway’s politics, the rights of the accused, and even the fur trade emerged. Furthermore, as was the case with the statement/discussion trigger above, these discussions were usually a spill over from the political debates already taking place in the media.

### 6.3 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, which 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).

#### 6.3.1 Rational-critical debate

Rational-critical debate requires that political discussions be guided by rationality and critical reflection. In terms of rationality, reasoned claims are preferred over assertions. As Table 6.2 shows, there were 825 claims made by the forum participants. Out of these claims, 591 were reasoned, representing 72% of all claims. The results here suggest that providing reasons with claims was the norm rather than the exception. In terms of postings, nearly 40% provided arguments, whereas only 16% contained assertions. Together, the exchange of claims, which represented approximately 56% of the postings, was the guiding communicative form.

In terms of critical reflection, first, the level of disagreement was substantially higher than the level of agreement. Approximately 35% of all claims represented some form of disagreement, whereas only 17% were in the form of agreement.

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96 Although the trigger’s analysis did not focus on the Guardian, eight instances occurred where a participant began a thread by posting a newspaper article (from The Observer, The Guardian, BBC, The Times, and The Independent), which trigger the ensuing political discussion.

97 This is in reference to the controversy surrounding Stuart Lubbock who was found dead in Barrymore’s pool following a party.
Table 6.2

*Big Brother’s Claim Type Usage Overview*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Claim type</th>
<th>Reasoned claims</th>
<th>Non-reasoned claims</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Initial</td>
<td>Counter</td>
<td>Rebuttal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial claims</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% of claims</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postings</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% of postings</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

^n=825 claims.

^n=1479 postings.
However, disagreeing does not necessarily equate to critical reflection. Regarding critical reflection specifically, the level of rebuttal and refutes was examined. Thirty percent of all claims came in the form of rebuttals and refutes, which represented 17% of the postings. Moreover, a closer examination of Table 6.2 indicates that rebuttal and refutes represented 42% of all reasoned claims. Consequently, the level of new, alternative, and supporting arguments was slightly higher than the critiques of those arguments, suggesting a more modest presence of critical reflection.

Overall, the exchange of claims was guiding communicative form within the Big Brother discussions. Moreover, these exchanges were frequently rational while maintaining a modest level of critical reflection.

6.3.2 Coherence

Coherence requires that participants remain faithful to the topic of discussion. By determining the number of topic changes and more importantly the relevance of those changes the level of coherence was ascertained. Within the 38 discussion threads of Big Brother, there were 98 lines of discussion identified. Participants did not diverge at all from the original topic in only nine of these threads. That said, within the remaining 29 threads, there were 40 lines of discussion, which consisted of only 193 postings, coded as complete divergences. In other words, 87% of the postings were coherent. Overall, the analysis revealed that participants rarely deviated completely from topic of discussion.

6.3.3 Continuity

Continuity requires that discussions persist until some form of agreement is achieved as opposed to abandoning the discussions. Continuity was examined by determining the level of extended debate and convergence. The level of extended debate was measured via the presence of strong-strings. There were 53 strong-strings. The average number of a strong-string was nearly nine with the largest totaling 42 claims. There were 455 claims, which represented 55% of all claims, involved in strong-string exchanges; this represented 30% of the postings. Furthermore, 88% of strong-string claims were reasoned with rebuttals and refutes representing slightly more than half, indicating the rational and critical nature of these exchanges. In short, the results suggest that when participants did engage in debate, a substantial portion of it came in the form of extended critical debate.

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98 Eleven of the 58 coherent lines (110 postings) were nonpolitical lines of discussion. However, only the political lines containing more than one posting were included in this analysis.

99 See Appendix 12 for an overview of the types and frequencies of the claims involved in these exchanges.
Chapter 6

Convergence was the second indicator of continuity, which gauged the level of agreement achieved during the course of a discussion by identifying commissive speech acts. There were 30 commissives posted within Big Brother, which represented only two percent of the postings. Again, there were three types of commissives identified: assents, partial assents, and agree-to-disagree statements. The most frequent commissive used was a partial assent. Nearly three-quarters of commissives (22 in total) came in the form of partial assents. Both assents (five) and agree-to-disagree statements (three) rarely appeared during the course of a discussion.

In order to determine the level of convergence, the number of commissives was compared with the number of lines of discussion. The Big Brother sample consisted of 38 threads, which contained 47 political coherent lines of discussion. The average number of commissives per line of discussion was 0.64. Furthermore, 29% (or 14 lines) contained at least one act of convergence. The results suggest that convergence was uncommon, and when it did occur, it rarely came in the form of an assent. However, the analysis revealed that extended debate was an important factor in obtaining convergence. Specifically, 22 of the 30 commissives were an outcome of strong-string exchanges.

Overall, the results were mixed. On the one hand, extended critical debate represented a substantial portion of the exchange of claims. While on the other, this rarely led to convergence.

6.3.4 Reciprocity

Reciprocity requires that participants read and reply to each other’s posts. It was assessed by determining and combining the level of replies with a degree of centralization measurement, i.e. the web of reciprocity matrix. First, as Figure 6.1 shows, overall, the level of replies in Big Brother was moderately high. Twelve out of the 38 threads had a reply percentage indicator of ≥ 75%. While nearly half of the threads (18 threads) contained a percentage of replies of ≥ 50% but < 75%. The percentage of replies for the whole sample was at 65%.

Second, regarding the degree of centralization, Figure 6.1 indicates that only three threads within Big Brother were moderately to highly centralized (threads ≥ .500). Again, these threads resembled more a one-to-many or many-to-one type of discussion rather than a web of interactions. Second, 17 of the 38 threads were moderately decentralized (threads between .250 and .500). In these threads, even though there were still several central participants, the connections were more decentralized and dispersed. Finally, nearly half of the threads (18 of 38 threads) were highly decentralized (threads ≤ .250). The connections here between participants were distributed more equally within these threads, representing an ideal structure of interactions.

100 Only the commissives posted within the political coherent lines of discussion were included here.

101 See Appendix 13 for full results.
Finally, concerning the combined analysis, those threads, which fell within the top left quadrant of Figure 6.1, the strong decentralized web quadrant, were considered to have a moderate to high level of reciprocity. As is shown, a majority of the threads (28 of 38 threads) fell within this quadrant. In order to make a sharper distinction between these threads, a second set of criteria was added to Figure 6.1 (represented by the dotted lines) as a way of distinguishing between those threads possessing moderate levels with those containing high levels of reciprocity. As is shown, there were four threads, which contained an ideal level of reciprocity (threads $\geq 75\%$ and $\leq .250$), while six threads maintained a strong, moderately decentralized web of interactions, in other words, a moderately high level of reciprocity (threads $\geq 75\%$ and between .250 and .500). Given the more modest level of replies, a majority of the threads within this quadrant (18 threads) fell below the dotted line with eight representing highly decentralized threads and 10 moderately decentralized threads.

![Figure 6.1. Big Brother results from the web of reciprocity matrix.](image)

Overall, these analyses suggest that the level of interaction between participants was moderately high, and the social structure of those interactions were often highly decentralized, indicating that a web of reciprocity was the norm.
6.3.5 Reflexivity

Reflexivity requires that participants during the course of a debate reflect other participants’ arguments against their own. The first step in determining the level of reflexivity is to establish the type and level of evidence use. Again, there were four types of evidence identified, which were examples, comparisons, facts/sources, and experiences. Examples were the most frequently used type, accounting for 45% of evidence use. Comparisons and fact/sources represented 23% and 24% respectively, while experiences were the least common at only 8%.

Moving on to the level of evidence use within arguments, as Table 6.3 shows, 41% of all arguments contained supporting evidence. Initial arguments and refutes contained the highest level of evidence at half, while counters contained the lowest level with slightly more than a third. In the Guardian, when participants criticized opposing claims, they used supporting evidence significantly more often than when they provided new, alternative, or supporting arguments. In Big Brother, 44% of rebuttal/refute arguments used evidence as opposed to 39% of initial/counter/affirmation arguments, revealing no significant difference between the two regarding the frequency of evidence use ($t(534)=-1.15; p=0.05$).

Table 6.3
Evidence Use in Big Brother

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evidence use</th>
<th>Reasoned claim type</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within claim type</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within claim type</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within claim type</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within claim type</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

Table 6.3 also indicates that participants rarely used multiple forms of evidence per argument. Only five percent of arguments contained more than one piece of evidence. When participants did use multiple forms in a single argument, a majority
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of it came during the use of rebuttals and refutes, which represented 61% of these arguments. In general, the results suggest that when participants did use evidence, they usually used one piece per argument, and on those rare occasions when multiple forms were used, they tended to be used when criticizing opposing claims.

The second step in ascertaining the level of reflexivity is to identify reflexive arguments. 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. When these criteria were applied to Big Brother, they identified 20 reflexive arguments, consisting of 85 messages, which represented six percent of the postings. The average number was slightly more than four messages per argument with the largest totaling 11. Moreover, 15 participants were responsible for these postings, which represented seven percent of participants. Finally, only 13% of all arguments (74 arguments) were coded as reflexive arguments.

However, the results did suggest a relationship between reflexivity and continuity. All 74 reflexive arguments were part of strong-string exchanges, suggesting again the importance of extended debate in fostering reflexivity. Furthermore, the results suggested that reflexivity might be an important factor in obtaining convergence. Close to half of all commissives were achieved during reflexive exchanges.

Finally, though the percentage of total participants responsible for reflexive arguments was small, the distribution of those arguments was not skewed towards the most active posters. In other words, non-frequent posters were just as likely to be involved in a reflexive exchange. Specifically, only six of the 15 participants responsible for reflexive arguments were among the top 20 most frequent posters. Moreover, 30% of all messages were posted by these 15 participants.

Overall, the level of evidence use was substantial with more than a third of all arguments providing evidence in support of their claims. However, participants infrequently engaged in reflexive exchanges.

6.3.6 Empathy

Empathy was gauged by assessing the level of communicative empathy. It requires that participants convey their empathetic considerations to others. There was one noticeable trend here, which was the communication of third-person empathy. On occasions, when participants were discussing the behavior and statements by Big Brother housemates, they would empathize with them and communicate this to fellow forum participants as Matilda’s posting below illustrates:

Matilda: That was really uncomfortable viewing. I actually feel like crying myself I'm amazed how how well Traci coped so well with the way she was being treated. WHY did no one step in?? ok so shes a bit all American cheerleady type but there was abso-
In this thread, participants were discussing the bullying behavior of one of the housemates. Matilda empathizes with Traci Bingham who was being bullied by Pete Burns; she brings her third-person empathy to the discussion to share with other forum participants. Matilda’s posting here reveals her bullied youth, which eventually ignited a political discussion on bullying and British youth. Moreover, during this discussion, it sparked internal empathetic exchange between forum participants on their bullied experiences.

Overall, such exchanges were infrequent in comparison to the total number of postings. In particular, there were 22 messages coded as communicative empathy, which represented less than two percent of the postings. However, the analysis did reveal that a majority of these postings (13 postings) were a part or product of reflexive arguments, suggesting again the importance of reflexive exchanges in achieving empathetic considerations. That said, participants still infrequently engaged in communicative empathy.

### 6.3.7 Discursive equality

Discursive equality requires both an equal distribution of voice and substantial equality amongst participants. First, the distribution of voice was determined by measuring the rate and distribution of participation and popularity. There were 201 participants responsible for the 1,479 postings within the Big Brother sample. As Table 6.4 shows, the level of one-timers was relatively high, which represented 36% of participants. Moreover, a majority of participants (54%) posted two or less messages. In terms of distribution of participation, less than a quarter of the participants were responsible for more than three-quarters of the contributions, which indicates substantial inequality in the distribution of participation. Finally, moving on to the rate and distribution of postings received (popularity), there was a substantial inequality in both the rate and distribution of messages received, which again is consistent with the above findings. Overall, these analyses reveal that a majority of the postings, which constituted the Big Brother sample, were a product of a small group of popular participants who tended to frequently talk to one another.

The second component of discursive equality is substantial equality. It was addressed by examining the discussions for neglected arguments and degrading comments. First, out of the 251 counter and initial arguments, 61 arguments (24%) were silently neglected, which represented roughly 10% of all arguments. Even though this was a substantial portion, a closer reading of these arguments in context revealed that again there was no noticeable trend to the neglecting of arguments. In particular, there was no pattern to the placement of arguments within the threads.

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102 See Appendix 14 for the results.
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There was no explicit issue or topic, position, type or style of argument, or participant ignored. Finally, there was only one instance when a participant reacted to being neglected by re-posting his argument; participants simply moved on in the discussion with little to no explicit reaction to being neglected. The 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 unreciprocated.

Table 6.4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Posting rate</th>
<th>Posting distribution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant frequency</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postings 1</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 to 7</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 to 12</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 to 25</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥26</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In terms of active acts of inequality, the level of degrading comments was low. There were 60 messages coded as degrading, which represented only four percent of the postings. That said, there were still three notable aspects to degrading. First, there was no substantial connection between degrading and the use of humor and emotional comments as was the case in the Guardian. Humor, for example, was rarely used as a weapon of degrading or was rarely a cause of it. Second, degrading invited more degrading. Thirty-four of the 60 degrading comments were involved in degrading fests. There were seven fests. The average number was five with the longest totaling 10 postings. Finally, a majority of degrading focused on another participant’s person, a personal attack, as opposed to the argument/position.

The results for discursive equality varied. On the one hand, the distribution of voice analyses revealed substantial inequalities in the rate and distribution of participation and popularity. While on the other, communicative acts of inequality were uncommon.

6.3.8 Discursive freedom

Discursive freedom requires that participants are free to voice their arguments and opinions in general during the course of a discussion. It was gauged by analyzing the
communicative practices of participants for curbing. Overall, the level of curbing was low. There were only 18 acts of curbing committed by participants. A closer examination of these 18 postings reveals that only eight were direct acts of censorship, impediments to deliberation. In these cases, participants attempted to censor or curb the discussion. However, curbing here was friendlier; it was not used in conjunction with degrading. Finally, the remaining acts of curbing enhanced the discussions as opposed to impeding them. In all 10 postings, participants used curbing to stop or prevent personal attacks or inappropriate exchanges/arguments. In sum, the level of curbing was low. Moreover, the act of curbing tended to be used more often to enhance political talk rather than impede it.

6.3.9 Sincerity

Sincerity was addressed by examining the discussions for questionable sincerity. The act of questioning another participant’s sincerity was low. There were only 19 postings coded as such. However, unlike in the Guardian where much of the focus was on questioning another participant’s person, in Big Brother, the focus was mostly on another participant’s argument. When another participant’s argument was questioned, sincerity was usually restored, while questioning another participant’s person usually led to a breakdown in the discussion or a string of accusations. Since most of these postings focused on another participant’s argument, the act of questioning sincerity usually resulted in the former rather than the latter. In sum, the results suggest that the act of questioning another participant’s sincerity was infrequent, and when it did occur, it usually focused on another participant’s argument, and it was often restored as opposed to causing a breakdown in the discussion.

6.4 The use of expressives

In this section, the results from the examination on the use of expressive speech acts are presented. In particular, the results on the use of humor, emotional comments, and acknowledgements are provided.

6.4.1 Humor

Expressives were a common ingredient of political talk within Big Brother, representing 41% of the postings. The most common expressive was humor. It accounted for 45% of expressives, and it appeared in 20% of the postings. Overall, the analysis revealed three aspects on humor: (1) its social function, (2) its social structure, and (3) its relationship with certain variables of deliberation.

The first aspect of humor was its function—the social function of humor. As already discussed, humor can be used for a variety of reasons. Big Brother participants did just this; they used humor for multiple and a variety of functions, stretching from
expressing hostility and anger to reinforcing stereotypes. Three general trends emerged with regard to the use of humor here. Participants tended to use humor (1) to entertain; (2) as a form of social bonding; and/or (3) to criticize, assess, or provoke thought.

The most common use of humor was to entertain. Humor here usually came in the form of wisecracks, caricature, sarcasm, anecdotes, jokes, blunder, and banter. There were two focuses of humor under ‘to entertain’. First, humor often focused on making fun of the Big Brother housemates. Such humor was often accompanied by malicious delight. Humor here tended to be less constructive in relation to the issue under discussion and oriented more towards ‘having a laugh’. Moreover, often participants created and posted pictures here to tell jokes or to present caricature, suggesting a culture and commitment to entertaining fellow participants.

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. Banter was the most frequent type of humor used. Banter appeared to serve two functions. In addition to entertaining participants, banter acted as social glue; it functioned as a means of social bonding as the postings below illustrate:

**George:** It looked like bullying to me, and Jodie looked frightened and intimidated. I remember the incident well, but it's only my interpretation. But if anybody disagrees with me, I'll be seeing them around the back of the forums to administer a neck hold and knuckle-head rub!! Grrrr!! 😈😂

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*a:* *Disagrees with [George]*. *Quite likes the sound of the consequences!!*.

**:Diana:** *also disagrees* PILE ON!!!!

**George:** This outrageous BBFans bullying must CEASE!! 😈 Why is it every time I come on here my stuffing ends up all over the place!? 😝 I'm getting it from all angles! 😈

**Jane:** 😖 Stop fighting this instant, or I will call a teacher.

**George:** With all the violence, you'd better make it Mr Miyagi. Daniel-san, teacher say: "Wipe my ass now!"

**John:** 😈 You should be so lucky 😄 Retires to Kitchen 😄

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103 See Appendix 15 for the results on whom or what humor was directed towards, focused on.

104 See Appendix 16 for an example.

105 George’s forum identity is a stuffed animal–pink and white striped cat.
Mary: anymore from you [George] and you WILL be getting it from all angles.
*farts and walks away looking innocent*

John: So it was YOU in the lift today 😈

George: Notice she didn't deny it! Is no public place safe from Miss Bottom Blaster!? 😝

Victoria: "Hold on a cotton pickin minute..." /scratches chin... Removes pink and white fluffy striped head from apprehended cloth cat... "It's NOT [George] at all! Its the fairground owner JODIE MARSH!!!" "And I would have got away with it if it wasn't for you pesky kids... oh, and that cowbag Jordan¹⁰⁶" [George] shakes fist frustratedly before being led away by surly looking police officers in gorilla coats.

George: Yeah, and I'll be back to get you all! The gaylord van driver, the Brie housewife, the speccy lesbian, the pothead and the talking dog! If you lot are the young generation, God help us if there's a War! Illegal or not!

In this thread, a political discussion on bullying shortly turns into a chain of banter with George’s first posting above. The playful and flirtatious nature of this discussion seemed to unite forum participants creating a sense of shared experiences (participants would refer to these types of exchanges even days after they occurred) and fostering a friendly and sociable atmosphere. This sort of good-natured banter was common; 147 of 289 humorous comments (51%) were involved in this type of exchange. However, banter tended to lead discussions off the topic, in particular, 72% of these exchanges were off the topic of discussion.

The final pattern in the use of humor was to criticize, assess, or provoke thought. Again, humor has a critical function in political talk e.g. questioning, criticizing, and assessing politicians, government, or society in general. Humor here usually came in the form of satire via sarcasm, exaggeration, comparison, and anecdotes. Again, unlike above, this type of use of humor was supportive and constructive to the political issues under discussion.

The second aspect of humor was its social structure. Humor invited more humor. When a participant posted a wisecrack for example, it often ignited an exchange of corresponding humorous comments, as the example above demonstrates. Again, humor here often led to humor fests. Out of the 289 postings containing humor, 56% were involved in humor fests. There were 29 fests. The average number was roughly six with the largest totaling 36 postings.

The final aspect of humor was its relationship, or lack thereof, with various variables of deliberation. First, rational humor was infrequent. In particular, only eight percent of humorous comments were coded as rational humor, which

¹⁰⁶ Jodie Marsh is known for her heated feuds with glamour model Jordan.
represented only four percent of the total arguments. Second, humor was rarely used as a weapon of degrading or resulted in it. Only 17% of degrading exchanges were tied to humor in this way. Finally, humor frequently acted as a distraction to political talk as the above example on banter illustrated. Approximately, 41% of all humorous comments were off the topic of discussion.

Overall, humor seemed to foster a friendly communicative environment within Big Brother. In particular, the use of banter seemed to foster social bonds—common memories and experiences—between participants. Moreover, humor was rarely used to express hostility/anger or ignite a degrading exchange; its relationship with degrading was limited. However, the use of rational humor was infrequent, and humor often led to incoherent political discussions.

6.4.2 Emotional comments

The second most common expressive was emotional comments. They accounted for 31% of all expressives and appeared in 14% of the postings. Overall, the analysis revealed three aspects on the use of emotions: (1) their type; (2) their social structure; and (3) their relationship with certain variables of deliberation. First, when participants expressed emotions, they commonly expressed negative emotions. Anger was the most frequent emotion expressed. Approximately 66% of emotional comments expressed some form of anger, which was usually directed towards the Celebrity Big Brother housemates. Anger here was expressed mostly through statements of dislike, disgust, and annoyance. Though the level of negative emotions was high, there was a substantial increase in positive emotions in Big Brother. Participants posted expressions of appreciation, admiration, approval, and longing more frequently than Guardian participants did.

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 in the form of rant sessions. These were lengthy exchanges where participants vented their disappointment, disgust, annoyance, and dislike towards the Big Brother housemates as the below postings illustrate:

Victoria: I don't think I have ever seen anyone so self absorbed, disgusting, vile self opinionated, and every horrible word under the sun in my life. What a revolting man.

Mary: I don't think I can express how disgusting I think this man is?!
It really worries me that he is in a position of power in this country. Well, hopefully

107 Though one of the general trends in the use of humor was to criticize, assess, or provoke thought, this does not necessarily translate into rational humor. Rational humor is specifically reserved for those humorous comments, which are politically oriented and specifically used to support arguments (or as arguments).
108 See Appendix 17 for the results on the primary emotions expressed.
109 See Appendix 18 for the results on whom or what emotional comments were directed towards.
was. Surely there is no way he can continue to represent anyone in this country from now? If I lived in Bethnal Green or Bow, I would move. ASAP.

**Elizabeth:** I just want to wipe that smug smile off his face. 😈

**Mary:** How can anyone who he is supposed to represent can ever believe a word that comes out of his mouth now I don't know. He should be kicked out of the show and kicked out of parliament. How can anyone want that vile, nasty, sneaky man as their MP I don't know. He is a bully, a snake, a smug b****d and he makes my blood boil!! 😈

**Charles:** he was a total D*CK on last night's show.

In this thread, a discussion on Galloway’s attempts to discuss politics within the Big Brother house turns into a rant session on Galloway’s behavior in the house. Participants were more interested in expressing their anger and disgust for Galloway than talking about whether politics and reality TV mix. These types of exchanges were often raw and vulgar. Moreover, they tended to be polarized; they ranted together under a common feeling and not at each other. Out of the 204 postings coded as emotional comments, 43% were involved in rant sessions. There were nine sessions. The average number was nine with the largest totaling 19 postings.

The final aspect of emotional comments was their relationship with certain variables of deliberation. First, emotional comments were not often used in conjunction with degrading. Only 15% of degrading comments were a reaction to or used emotional comments. Moreover, anger was rarely directed towards fellow participants in general. Finally, emotional comments were again a regular ingredient in the exchange of claims. In particular, 42% of emotional comments were expressed via arguments, or put differently, 14% of all arguments were emotional. Given the level of intense anger expressed, there was a tendency for these types of arguments to be abrasive, vulgar, and crude, as some of the above postings demonstrate. However, these types of arguments were reciprocated. Only six arguments here were neglected.

In sum, anger was the dominate emotion expressed. It tended to come in strings via rant sessions. Moreover, arguments that expressed it were often abrasive and crude, which contributed little constructively to the political debates. That said, emotional comments were rarely used in conjunction with degrading; participants were seldom angry at each other.

### 6.4.3 Acknowledgements

The final expressive was acknowledgements. They accounted for 25% of expressives and appeared in 11% of the postings. There were five types of acknowledgements identified: complimenting (60%), apologizing (20%), greeting (11%), thanking (8%), and congratulating (1%). Complimenting was the most common acknowledgement used, representing 60% of acknowledgements and appearing in seven percent of the postings. Complimenting tended to be directed at humor more often than arguments.
In particular, 54% of compliments were directed at another participant’s humor. When participants did compliment another participant's argument, they often complimented across argumentative lines; nearly half of the remaining compliments were directed at an opposing argument (or position in general).

Apologizing was the second most common acknowledgement, representing a fifth of acknowledgements. Big Brother participants, when apologizing, had a tendency to apologize in advance for posting an opposing argument, or when they posted a statement or humorous comment, which might seem offensive; preemptive apologies were the norm.

Overall, acknowledgements, particularly compliments and apologies, within Big Brother, seemed to foster a friendly and more welcoming communicative atmosphere for debate, particularly across argumentative lines.

6.5 Assessing political talk: The normative analysis

To what extent do the communicative practices of online political discussions satisfy the normative conditions of the process of deliberation of the public sphere? To answer this research question, in this section, the normative analysis is presented. Given the comparative nature of this study, the analysis is presented in contrast with the Guardian. The evaluation is based on the six conditions of the process of achieving mutual understanding (rational-critical discussion, coherence, continuity, reciprocity, reflexivity, and empathy) and the three conditions of structural and dispositional fairness (discursive equality, discursive freedom, and sincerity).

6.5.1 The process of achieving mutual understanding

The first requirement of the process of achieving mutual understanding is that political discussions must be guided by rational-critical debate. The results from both the Guardian and Big Brother revealed that being rational was the norm. In particular, within Big Brother, the exchange of claims was moderate, and the rationality of those claims was moderately high, living up to the normative condition.

However, there was a difference between the two cases when it came to the level of critical reflection. The results from the Guardian revealed moderately high levels of critical reflection. In Big Brother, the level of critical reflection was significantly lower ($t(1216)=2.34$; $p<0.05$). That said, the level was still moderate, more than a third of reasoned claims were critical arguments. In other words, a reasonable level of critical reflection, in light of the normative condition, was maintained.

The second condition of the process of achieving mutual understanding requires that participants stick to the topic of discussion. The level of coherence within the Big Brother was high; 87% of the postings were coherent. In comparison to the Guardian, this result was the same. Consequently, the results indicate once again that...
coherence is not exclusively reserved for strictly (or pre-) moderated forums. Overall, in Big Brother, the level of coherence satisfied the normative condition.

The third condition in the process of achieving mutual understanding requires that the discussions continue until understanding or some form of agreement is achieved as opposed to deserting the discussion. Again, the level of continuity was examined from two angles: By assessing the discussions for both the level of extended debate and convergence.

In the Guardian, the level of strong-strings was high. However, the results from Big Brother indicated a more modest level. That said, in both forums, strong-string exchanges were frequently rational and critical in nature. Thus, the Big Brother results still suggest that when participants did engage in debate, an adequate portion of it, in light of the normative condition, occurred via extended critical debate. In terms of convergence, the results from Big Brother are consistent with the Guardian. The level of commissives was low. Abandoning a discussion before convergence could be achieved was the norm rather than the exception. However, both cases did suggest that extended critical debate might play an important role in achieving convergence; 90% (the Guardian) and 73% (Big Brother) of commissives were a product of strong-strings exchanges.

Overall, as in the Guardian, the results were mixed when it came to continuity. On the one hand, the level of extended critical debate, though more modest than in the Guardian, was adequate. While on the other hand, extended critical debate rarely led to convergence, falling short of the normative condition.

The fourth condition in the process of achieving mutual understanding requires that participants read and reply to each other’s questions, arguments, or opinions in general. Even though the reply percentage indicator revealed a lower level of reciprocity for Big Brother than was in the Guardian, the level of replies was still moderately high in the former, indicating again that online discussions tend to be reciprocal (regarding the reply percentage indicator).

Similar to the Guardian, the web of reciprocity matrix revealed that Big Brother discussions maintained a high level of decentralized social interaction. However, there was one minor distinction between the two cases. Whereas the Guardian maintained a higher level of replies, Big Brother discussions tended to be more decentralized. In sum, a web of reciprocity was the norm for Big Brother, thus satisfying the normative condition.

The fifth condition in the process of achieving mutual understanding requires that participants reflect upon their own position in light of others. The results from Big Brother are not consistent with the Guardian.\(^{110}\) Even though the level of evidence use was similar between the two, the level of reflexivity was significantly lower than in the Guardian \((t(1980)=8.32; \ p<0.05)\). Only 13% of arguments were reflexive, while in the Guardian this more than doubled with 27% of arguments

\(^{110}\) Nor is it consistent with past studies (Dahlberg 2001b; Jensen 2003; Stromer-Galley 2003; Winkler 2002, 2005).
being reflexive. In sum, the level of reflexivity within Big Brother fell short of the normative condition.

One possible explanation for this discrepancy between the two forums may have something to do with the level of continuity. In both the Guardian and Big Brother (and in Wife Swap), reflexive arguments overwhelmingly occurred during the course of strong-string exchanges, suggesting the importance of extended debate in fostering reflexivity. Given that the level of extended debate within Big Brother was more modest than in the Guardian (and in Wife Swap), this might explain the lower level of reflexivity. In other words, reflexive arguments had less opportunity to develop.

The sixth condition in the process of achieving mutual understanding requires that participants put themselves in other participants’ position, either cognitively and/or emotively. The level of communicative empathy was significantly higher than in the Guardian (t(2590)=-2.12; p<0.05). Though there was a difference between the two forums, since the level of communicative empathy in both cases was at the lower end of the spectrum, that is, communicative empathy appeared in < 10% of the postings for both cases, normatively speaking, the level for both forums is still low, falling short of the normative condition. Thus, the results are consistent with one another. However, one notable finding did emerge within Big Brother. Unlike in the Guardian, participants on occasion engaged in third-person empathetic exchanges. It seems the participants emphasized with the Big Brother housemates, which stirred internal empathetic exchange between forum participants.

### 6.5.2 Structural and dispositional fairness

The first condition of structural and dispositional fairness requires an equal distribution of voice and substantial equality between participants. In terms of equal distribution of voice, the results from Big Brother are consistent with the Guardian findings. They revealed again a substantially high level of inequality in both the rate and distribution of participation and popularity, falling well short of the condition.

Regarding substantial equality, the discussions were analyzed for both degrading statements and neglected arguments. First, participants from Big Brother tended to avoid aggressive and abusive communicative practices. The level of degrading was significantly lower than in the Guardian (t(2253)=3.29; p<0.05). However, normatively speaking, this difference appears at the lower end of the spectrum; degrading appears in < 10% of the postings in both cases (the Guardian at seven percent and Big Brother at four percent). Consequently, the level of degrading in both forums was low, thus satisfying the condition of substantial equality.

Second, in terms of neglected arguments, the results were consistent between the two forums. Moreover, although the level of neglected arguments was again substantial, a closer reading of those arguments revealed that the act of neglecting another participant’s argument was random, which is similar to the Guardian findings.
In sum, as was the case in the Guardian, the level of substantial inequality was low, thus satisfying the normative condition.

Overall, like in Guardian, the results for discursive equality were mixed. On the one hand, the distribution of voice measurements uncovered a substantially high level of inequality, while of the other hand, the analysis on participants’ communicative practices revealed low levels of substantial inequality.

The second condition of structural and dispositional fairness demands that participants be free to share and discuss information, opinions, and arguments. Though the level of disagreement, critical reflection, and extended critical debate was moderate, the issues, topics, positions, and arguments discussed were still diverse. Moreover, unlike in the Guardian, there seemed to lack any real polarization on any particular issue. In short, the findings here suggest that Big Brother represented a communicative space conducive to diversity.

Regarding the communicative practices of participants, the level of curbing was low overall within Big Brother. Though there was a significant difference between the forums ($t(2121)=2.37; p<0.05$), in both cases the level of curbing postings was less than three percent (Big Brother at one percent, the Guardian at two percent). Moreover, when curbing did occur, it usually enhanced deliberation as opposed to impeding it. Overall, the findings revealed that the communicative practices of Big Brother participants satisfied the normative requirement of discursive freedom.

The final condition of deliberation requires that all claims, arguments, and information in general provided during the discussion be sincere and truthful. Though the level of actual sincerity was not addressed by the above analysis, the level of perceived sincerity was. The level of questionable sincerity was significantly lower in Big Brother than in the Guardian ($t(2136)=2.35; p<0.05$). However, the level of questionable sincerity in both forums was substantially low (one percent for Big Brother and three percent for the Guardian). Thus, the Big Brother results were consistent, normatively speaking, with the Guardian findings, acts of questioning another participant’s sincerity were infrequent.

However, there was a difference between the two forums. Participants within the Guardian tended to question another participant’s person, an ad hominem attack, which often led to a breakdown in the discussion. While Big Brother participants, on the other hand, rarely questioned another participant’s person, but rather, when sincerity was questioned, it usually was directed towards another participant’s argument, rarely leading to a breakdown in discussion. Although both cases satisfied the normative condition, the Big Brother findings revealed a more friendly and civil environment when it came to questioning sincerity.

### 6.6 Beyond the normative conditions of deliberation

The analysis presented above moved beyond the normative framework, taking into account the informal nature of political talk. In particular, expressive speech acts
were analyzed. The aim was not only to describe systematically and more precisely how participants actually discussed politics, but also, and more importantly, to see whether expressives had any influence on the variables of deliberation. Again, the research question being addressed in this section is: *What role, if any, do expressives play within online political discussions and in relation to the normative conditions of deliberation?*

More than in the Guardian, expressives were a frequent ingredient of political talk, appearing in 41% of the postings. The level of expressives was significantly higher in Big Brother ($t(2656)=-3.83; p<0.05$). Again, the most common expressive was humor. Although humor was used for multiple and a variety of functions, three distinct patterns emerged in the use of humor, differing somewhat from the Guardian, which were to entertain; to socially bond; and/or to criticize, assess, or provoke thought. Similar to the Guardian, the most common use of humor was to entertain. Although humor here, for the most part, created a friendly and playful atmosphere among participants, it again often contributed little to the topic of discussion.

Banter was the most common type of humor used within Big Brother. In addition to entertaining, banter also served as a means of social bonding. This function of humor tended to be playful, flirtatious, and friendly, and it seemed to unite participants, creating a sense of shared experiences and a friendly environment. However, like the Guardian, banter tended to invite more humor, igniting humor fests. Humor fests usually led to incoherent discussions. Consequently, humor again acted more as a distraction, an impediment to coherence, than a benefit to the political discussions in question.

The final pattern in the use of humor that emerged was to criticize, assess, or provoke thought. Again, humor here was, for the most part, supportive and constructive to both the individual arguments and the political discussions in general. However, Big Brother participants used rational humor considerably less often than Guardian participants did. That said, when it was used, it usually benefited the political discussions in question.

Overall, humor was much friendlier within Big Brother than in the Guardian. In particular, humor was rarely used to express hostility, anger, or offence. Moreover, humor rarely led to degrading or was used as a weapon of it. Instead, humor acted more as a social lubricate, a form of social bonding whereby participants created and shared experiences and memories thus fostering a friendly and playful environment, while occasionally enhancing and supporting rational-critical debate. However, humor did not always contribute constructively to the political discussions. On contrary, even more so than in the Guardian, humor regularly acted as a distraction, an impediment to deliberation; banter usually brought about incoherence within the political discussions.

The second most common expressive was emotional comments. Similar to the Guardian, emotional comments contributed little to political talk. The primary reason for this was due to the type and intensity of the emotions being expressed. Approximately 67% of emotional comments expressed anger. Like the Guardian, the expression of anger was often raw and intense.
Emotions were a common ingredient in the exchange of claims and arguments. However, given the intense anger that was dominant, these types of claims and arguments tended to be abrasive, vulgar, and crude. As such, they often contributed little constructively to the political discussions in question. Moreover, similar to the Guardian, these types of claims and arguments tended to ignite rant sessions, though to a lesser extent. Here participants engaged less in reciprocal-critical exchange and more in relieving their frustrations and anger in general by joining in on a rant with fellow participants. Again, these types of rants usually added little, in terms of understanding, to the political discussions.

There was one major difference between the two cases regarding emotional comments. A substantial portion of the anger expressed in the Guardian was directed towards fellow forum participants, which was not the case for Big Brother. Consequently, in the Guardian, emotional comments acted as a vehicle of inequality, while in Big Brother, they were rarely used in combination with degrading exchanges. Although this does not represent a benefit to deliberation, it does not represent a drawback either. Moreover, it highlights the distinction made under humor, which was that Big Brother tended to be a friendlier discursive environment. Additionally, it indicates that emotional comments need not be tied to degrading, as was the case in the Guardian. Overall, however, emotional comments impeded political talk more than advance it, though to a lesser extent than in the Guardian.

The final expressive was acknowledgements. The most common acknowledgement was compliments. Unlike the Guardian, participants within Big Brother tended to direct their compliments at another participant’s humor as opposed to their argument. However, when participants did compliment another participant’s argument, they tended to compliment across argumentative lines. In other words, complimenting was not polarized as it was in the Guardian. Consequently, complimenting tended to encourage a civil and friendlier atmosphere between participants on opposing sides of a position. In sum, unlike in the Guardian, acknowledgements, complimenting and apologizing in particular, tended to create an atmosphere conducive to deliberation.

6.7 Conclusion

Participants were doing more than discussing reality TV in the Big Brother forum. Throughout the forum, political discussions dealing with a variety of contemporary issues emerged. In particular, the presence of George Galloway caused a stir among forum participants, igniting an array of political discussions. However, Galloway’s presence was not the only vehicle of political talk. In general, the Big Brother housemates; their behavior and statements inside the house; the lifestyles, images, and identities they brought to the house; and the media coverage surrounding their lives outside the house, were the primary triggers of political talk within the forum. Moreover, the political discussions within Big Brother often touched upon a more
lifestyle, personal form of politics. For example, discussions on bullying, sexuality, and health and the body were regularly discussed.

Big Brother faired well when it came to satisfying the normative conditions of deliberation. In particular, the level of rationality, coherence, reciprocity, substantial equality, discursive freedom, and perceived sincerity satisfied the normative conditions. Moreover, the discussions maintain a reasonable level of critical reflection and extended debate. However, there were areas where the discussions did not fare so well. The rate and distribution of postings fell well short of the normative condition, indicating that the discussions tended to be a product of a small group of popular participants who talk to each other frequently. Regarding convergence, reflexivity, and empathetic exchange, participants rarely achieved understanding or agreement during the course of a debate, and reflexive and empathetic exchanges were infrequent in those debates.

Overall, the Big Brother forum seemed to foster a civil, friendly, and welcoming communicative environment. From curbing to questioning another participant’s sincerity, Big Brother participants were rarely personal, aggressive, and malicious towards one another. The use of humor, for example, often acted as a form of social bonding, while acknowledgements seemed to help facilitate a more cordial environment between argumentative lines. Even the expression of anger was rarely used as a weapon of degrading or a cause of it either. That said, expressives were not always beneficial to political talk. Humor, for example, regularly led to incoherent discussions while anger still dominated the forum, frequently leading to rant sessions, which contributed little in way of understanding to the debates.