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

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Chapter 7

Talking politics online: The Wife Swap Forum

7.1 Introduction

The study reported here examines the communicative practices of participants from the *Wife Swap* online discussion forum. In this chapter, the results from that study are presented. In section 7.2, the analysis on identifying political talk is provided. In particular, the political discussions, along with the issues and topics discussed, are revealed. This is followed by an analysis of how the political emerged in these discussions by identifying the triggers of political talk. In section 7.3, the results for each of the nine conditions of deliberation are given. In section 7.4, the results on the use of expressive speech acts are provided. This is followed by the normative analysis in section 7.5, which is presented in comparison to the previous two forums. In section 7.6, the discussion moves beyond the normative and focuses on the role and use of expressives, again, in comparison to the previous two forums. Finally, in section 7.7, the chapter ends with a summary of the findings and concluding remarks.

7.2 Identifying political talk

As a means of identifying political talk, the initial sample, which consisted of 79 threads containing 892 postings, was subjected to two criteria: All those threads comprised of postings where a participant (1) makes a connection to society that (2) evokes reflection and a response by at least one other participant were coded as political threads and advanced to stage two of the analysis. The results indicate that political talk represented a substantial portion of the debate within Wife Swap. In particular, nine threads containing 288 postings, which represented 32% of the initial sample, were coded as political threads. In other words, close to a third of the postings were engaged in or around a political discussion, which represents a rise of 10% from Big Brother. Out of the 70 threads that failed to advance to the second stage, two fulfilled the first criterion but failed to satisfy the second, while the remaining 68 threads failed to fulfill the first criterion. Like Big Brother, when a connection was made to society, it usually provoked a political discussion.
7.2.1 Topics of discussion

What were the political topics of discussion within these nine threads? The actual coherent political discussions, which consisted of 233 postings, were categorized into broad topics based on the issues within the various lines of discussion offered by these threads. As Table 7.1 indicates, there were four topics identified by the analysis. The dominant topic of discussion was the welfare state, which consisted of 105 posting, representing 45% of political talk. Discussions here focused mostly on whether or not there should be welfare reform in the UK and on the morality of the welfare system in general. Though the discussions here seemed to resemble conventional political issues, the discussions themselves were often driven by the life experiences of forum participants. Participants would bring their knowledge and life lessons to these debates, which dealt with, for example, losing a job, being on welfare, providing care for a loved one, and difficulties with the National Healthcare Service (NHS). In other words, these debates were often alive with personal narratives.

Table 7.1
Political Topics Discussed in Wife Swap

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Examples of Issues</th>
<th># of postings</th>
<th>% of postings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The welfare state</td>
<td>Welfare benefits and fraud; the NHS; welfare reform; the morality of the welfare system; cutting taxes</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting</td>
<td>The perfect mother; life as a single mother; good versus bad parenting; British youth lack discipline, manners, and respect; child obesity; bullying</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrant families</td>
<td>Wife Swap as an educational resource for introducing ‘the other’; immigrant families in Britain</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family values</td>
<td>What are family values; the role-model family; family planning; contraception</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>233</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The welfare state was not the only political topic of discussion. However, unlike in Big Brother and the Guardian, Wife Swap participants did not engage in debates on an array of diverse political topics. On the contrary, as Table 7.1 shows, in

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111 There were 55 postings, which were nonpolitical and/or incoherent. They were not included here.
addition to the welfare state, a majority of the issues discussed dealt with two primary topics: parenting and the family. Thus, much of political talk here, more than half of the discussions, centered on issues that were more individualized and lifestyle oriented as opposed to conventional ones.

Parenting was another popular topic of discussion within Wife Swap. The topic of parenting tended to foster discussions that were both personal and authoritative in nature. First, similar to above, political talk on parenting tended to be personal and life experience oriented as Elizabeth’s posting illustrates:

**Elizabeth:** I know that I am not a 'perfect mother' sh*t I mean both of my sons have been suspended more than once and they sometimes can be badly behaved but I do try my hardest with them. I mean I am on my own and at the end of the day they respect me and I do try to respect most of the decisions they make. Although the bad behaviour has not come from the way they were brought up its just the crowds they've made friends with. I'm proud of almost all the decisions I've made for them they are disciplined but when your 5 foot 3 and both your sons are 6 foot or just under it can be hard keeping them in the house and off girls. Kids will be Kids and different people have different ways of dealing with them.

In this thread, participants were discussing parenting and the life of ‘the single mother’ in the UK. Like Elizabeth, during the course of these political debates, participants often brought their life lessons and stories to the discussions.

Second, in addition to being more personal, the discussions here were often more authoritative as Mary’s posting below reveals:

**Mary:** The English parents gave far too much leeway to their children and were too arrogant to see that they were not perfect parents. After seeing their 13-year old last night you realise why British young people are so out of control - it all stems from their upbringing. The girl had such a foul mouth and was allowed to come and go as she wished with no guidance or barriers whatsoever, and this is the example the younger ones will copy. This is unacceptable. When they watch the program the parents will be so ashamed unless they are still in denial. Keeping some of the routine and chores introduced by the Pakistani wife will do the English children a world of good as I should know. These children were treated more like friends and equals instead of parents and children. I am telling you, if they don't take action now to reign in the 13-year old then they will have serious problems very soon.

In this thread, the participants were discussing and contrasting the parenting practices—good vs. bad parenting—of two families, an English family and a Pakistani family from an episode of Wife Swap. In these types of discussions, it seems that because participants were speaking as parents, bringing their knowledge and lessons to the debate, at times, they assumed the role of ‘an expert’, speaking with an authoritative voice when criticizing the parenting practices of others. What is interesting here is that this type of communicative practice was usually directed towards the families
appearing on the TV series. However, when forum participants shared their parenting experiences and practices, as they often did, they were rarely confronted with this type of reaction, but rather, fellow participants tended to use supportive communicative practices as opposed to authoritative ones.

7.2.2 Triggers of political talk

How did the political emerge in these nine threads? This question was addressed by examining the postings leading up to the political discussions for triggers of political talk. Moreover, when applicable, the Wife Swap series episodes and third party links were consulted as a means of providing context to the discussions in question.

Political discussions emerged 10 separate times within the nine threads of Wife Swap. There were three triggers of political talk identified by the analysis. The most common trigger was the parenting behavior and practices of the families appearing on the series (similar to Big Brother’s trigger behavior, which too was the most frequent trigger of political talk). On five occasions, the parenting behavior and practices of at least one of the families triggered a political discussion. The political discussions that followed dealt with issues such as good versus bad parenting; single mothers in the UK; British youth and the lack of parenting; child obesity; and even bullying.

The second most common trigger of political talk was family lifestyles and values. On three occasions, the lifestyles and values of families appearing on the series triggered a political discussion. The discussions that emerged tended to challenge traditional notions of family values and lifestyles as Maude’s posting below illustrates:

Maude: I think it’s bad that she didn’t clean etc because she worked. But not just because she is ‘a wife and a mother’. Women are allowed to have a life nowadays even if they’ve got kids and a husband. I just can’t stand people who think women should do everything for their families with then end result that they all have a life because she's taking care of it all at home - but she has no life outside of them - they are her life because she has nothing else. And then when their kids leave home what do they do? Or when their husband leaves them for someone not so good at housework but with nicer legs?

In this thread, the two wives appearing on the series caused a stir among forum participants. The apparent contrasting lifestyles and values of the two wives (the two families)—one, the ‘perfect housewife’, and the other, representing the opposite—ignited a discussion on (challenging) traditional family values. Discussions on the morality of welfare and family planning/contraception also emerged here under this trigger of political talk.

112 There were several forum participants claiming to be one of the family members, which participate on the TV series. Whether this was true could not be verified. Indeed, on several occasions the identities of these participants were actually questioned by forum participants.
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Similar to the Guardian and Big Brother, the final trigger was *debates in the media*. On two occasions, participants posted articles from the Sun and the Daily Mail, which in turn sparked political discussions. The two articles in question were editorial commentary on a former Wife Swap family, Lizzie and Mark Bardsley from series three, which was convicted of welfare benefits fraud. In return, political discussions on welfare and the NHS materialized. Moreover, unlike the two triggers discussed above, these discussions were a runoff from the political debates that were already taking place in the media.

7.3 The communicative practices of political talk

In this section, the results for the six conditions of achieving mutual understanding (rational-critical debate, coherence, continuity, reciprocity, reflexivity, empathy) and the three conditions of structural and dispositional fairness (discursive equality, discursive freedom, and sincerity) are presented.

7.3.1 Rational-critical debate

Political discussions should be guided by rationality and critical reflection. Regarding rationality, arguments are desired over non-reasoned claims. Overall, Wife Swap participants were very rational. As Table 7.2 shows, there were 218 claims made by participants. Out of these claims, 184 were reasoned, representing 84% of all claims. The results suggest that being rational was the norm. In terms of postings, nearly 60% provided arguments, while only 12% contained assertions. The exchange of claims, which represented 72% of the postings, was overwhelmingly the guiding communicative form.

Table 7.2 also indicates that the discussions in Wife Swap frequently displayed agreement in the form of supporting arguments and claims. For example, often during the course of a discussion within the Wife Swap threads you would find a string of affirmations in support of each other. Affirmation claims here represented nearly a quarter of the total claims made. That said, there still was a moderate level of disagreement present in the discussions. In particular, approximately 36% of the claims were in the form of disagreement. In terms of critical reflection, 32% of all claims were in the form of rebuttal and refute arguments, which represented nearly a quarter of the postings. Moreover, a closer examination of Table 7.2 reveals that the level of new, alternative, and supporting arguments was substantially higher (63%) than the level of challenges to those arguments (37%), indicating a more modest level of critical reflection within the Wife Swap discussions.

Overall, the exchange of claims was the dominating communicative form, accounting for nearly three-quarters of the postings. These debates were almost always rational, and they tended to be supportive and affirming while maintaining a moderate level of critical reflection.
Table 7.2

Wife Swap’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>Claims</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% of claims</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postings</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% of postings</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

*a*=218 claims.

*b*=288 postings.
7.3.2 Coherence

Coherence maintains that participants stick to the topic of discussion. It was assessed by determining the number of topic changes, in particular, the relevance of such changes. Within the nine threads of Wife Swap, 21 lines of discussion were identified. There was one thread where participants did not diverge at all from the original topic of discussion. That said, there were six lines of discussion, which contained only 16 postings, coded as complete departures. In other words, 94% of the postings were coherent. In short, the analysis revealed that participants rarely strayed off the topic of discussion.

7.3.3 Continuity

Continuity maintains that discussions continue until some form of agreement is obtained as opposed to withdrawing. It was assessed by determining the level of extended debate and convergence. In terms of extended debate, discussions threads were analyzed for strong-strings. There were 13 strong-strings. The average number of a strong-string was 11 with the largest totaling 31 claims. Approximately 63% of all claims (138 claims) were involved in strong-string exchanges; this represented nearly half the postings. Moreover, 85% of these claims were reasoned, and nearly half were rebuttals and refutes, indicating both the rational and critical nature of these exchanges. These results suggest that when participants did debate, a substantial portion of that debate occurred via strong-string exchanges, i.e. extended critical debate.

In terms convergence, the coherent political lines of discussion were analyzed for commissive speech acts, communicative acts of agreement. There were 17 commissives discovered by the analysis, representing approximately six percent of the postings. There were only two types of commissives identified: assents and partial assents; agree-to-disagree statements were not used by participants. The most frequent commissive used was a partial assent. Specifically, 15 of the 17 commissives came in this form. Thus, assents within Wife Swap were uncommon.

As a means of determining the level of convergence, the number of commissives was compared to the lines of discussion. The Wife Swap sample consisted of nine threads, which contained 10 political coherent lines of discussion. The average number of commissives per line of discussion was 1.7. Furthermore, nine of the 10 lines of discussion contained at least one act of convergence. Additionally, the analysis indicated again the importance of extended debate in achieving convergence. In particular, 15 of the 17 commissives were a product of strong-string exchanges.

\[113\] Five of the 15 coherent lines (39 postings) were nonpolitical lines of discussion.

\[114\] See Appendix 19 for an overview of the types and frequencies of the claims involved in these exchanges.
Overall, regarding continuity, extended critical debate represented a significant portion of the discussions, while almost all lines of discussion ended in at least one act of convergence, though this was rarely in the form of complete compliance.

### 7.3.4 Reciprocity

Reciprocity maintains that participants read and respond to each other’s messages. It was assessed by ascertaining and combining the percentage of replies with a degree of centralization measurement. First, as Figure 7.1 indicates, the level of replies was high. In particular, only two threads maintained a reply percentage indicator < 75%. The percentage of replies for the whole sample was at 78%.

![Figure 7.1](image)

*Figure 7.1. Wife Swap results from the web of reciprocity matrix.*

Second, concerning the degree of centralization, Figure 7.1 shows that there were no threads moderately to highly centralized. On the contrary, four of the nine threads were moderately decentralized (those between .250 and .500), while more than half of the threads were highly decentralized (those ≤ .250).

Finally, regarding the combine analysis, those threads that fell within the strong decentralized web quadrant (the top left quadrant of Figure 7.1) were considered to

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115 See Appendix 20 for detailed results.
have moderate to high levels of reciprocity. As is shown, all nine threads fall within this quadrant. So that a sharper distinction between these threads could be made, a second set of criteria was added to Figure 7.1, represented by the dotted lines, as a way of distinguishing between those threads maintaining a moderate level of reciprocity with those possessing a high level. As is shown, there were three threads that contained an ideal level of reciprocity (threads \( \geq 75\% \) and \( \leq .250 \)). With the exception of two threads, the remaining four threads fell within the top right corner of this quadrant (threads \( \geq 75\% \) and between .250 and .500), indicating a moderately high level of reciprocity.

Overall, the combined analysis indicates that not only was the percentage of replies high, the social structure of those interactions were frequently highly decentralized, indicating that a web of reciprocity was the norm.

### 7.3.5 Reflexivity

Reflexivity demands that participants in a discussion reflect other participants’ arguments against their own. Determining the level of reflexivity first requires the type and level of evidence use to be uncovered. There were four types of evidence identified, which were examples (56%), experiences (27%), facts/sources (10%), and comparisons (7%). Examples were the most frequent type, representing more than half of the evidence used by participants. Moreover, they preferred using experiences, which represented more than a quarter of supporting evidence, to fact/source and comparison types of evidence.

Not only did Wife Swap participants prefer arguments to assertions, they often provided evidence in support of those arguments. As Table 7.3 indicates, 58% of all arguments contained supporting evidence. In particular, both rebuttals and refutes contained the highest level of evidence at nearly three-quarters, while new, alternative, and supporting arguments (initial, counter, affirmation) contained the lowest levels. Moreover, when participants criticized opposing claims, they used supporting evidence more frequently than when they provided new, alternative, or supporting arguments. 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 or defenses, the results indicate a significant increase of 26% in the use of evidence when participants used rebuttal/refute arguments (t(158)=-3.68; p<0.05).

Finally, Table 7.3 shows that the use of multiple forms of evidence per argument was uncommon. Specifically, eight percent of all arguments contained more than one piece of evidence. However, when participants did use multiple forms of evidence in a single argument, nearly three-quarters of it came during the use of rebuttals and refutes. In short, the results suggest that when participants did use evidence, they stuck to using one piece, and on those occasions when multiple forms were used, they were overwhelmingly used when criticizing opposing claims.
The second step in determining the level of reflexivity is to identify reflexive arguments by employing the 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. After applying these criteria to Wife Swap, 11 reflexive arguments, consisting of 37 messages (13% of postings), were identified. The average number was slightly more than three postings per argument with the largest totaling 10. Moreover, 11 participants were responsible for these postings, which represented approximately nine percent of all participants. Finally, 20% of all arguments (37 arguments) were coded as reflexive arguments.

The results here also suggest a relationship between reflexivity and continuity. In particular, all 37 reflexive arguments were part of strong-string exchanges, suggesting again the importance of extended critical debate in fostering reflexivity. Moreover, the results also hint at a connection between convergence and reflexivity. Specifically, 14 of 17 commissives occurred during these exchanges, suggesting that reflexivity, in addition to extended debate, is an important ingredient in achieving convergence. Finally, the distribution of reflexive arguments was not as skewed towards the most active posters. Non-frequent posters were more likely to be involved in reflexive exchanges. In particular, only two of the 11 participants responsible for reflexive arguments posted more than four messages. Moreover, 19% of all messages were posted by these 11 participants.
Overall, in addition to being rational, Wife Swap participants frequently used evidence (examples and experiences) to support their claims. Moreover, the results suggest that a substantial portion of arguments were involved in reflexive exchanges, which were not dominated by the most active posters. Finally, the results again suggest a relationship between reflexivity and continuity, nearly all acts of convergence occurred in relation to reflexive exchanges.

### 7.3.6 Empathy

Given that political talk is a social process, it is important that participants convey their empathetic considerations to others during the course of a debate. Thus, messages were analyzed for communicative empathy. Wife Swap participants were not shy when it came to empathetic exchanges. Statements, such as “I really understand where you’re coming from” were more common in Wife Swap. In particular, approximately 10% of the postings (or 28 postings) were coded as communicative empathy. In relation to reflexivity, 15 of the 28 postings were a part or product of reflexive exchanges, suggesting again the importance of reflexive exchanges in achieving empathetic considerations.

Finally, forum participants not only emphasized with each other, they occasionally emphasized with members of the participating families on the series. Participants on several occasions communicated their third-person empathy to the discussions, where empathizing with family members from the TV series eventually led to empathizing with forum participants.

### 7.3.7 Discursive equality

Discursive equality requires both an equal distribution of voice and substantial equality. First, the distribution of voice was ascertained by measuring the rate and distribution of participation and popularity. There were 125 participants responsible for the 288 postings within the Wife Swap sample. First, as Table 7.4 shows, the bulk of Wife Swap participants were infrequent posters. In particular, the level of one-timers was high, representing 57% of participants. Furthermore, 92% of the participants posted four or less postings. Second, the distribution of participation was more equally distributed. As Table 7.4 indicates, the most frequent posters (posting five or more messages) were responsible for less than a third of the postings. Indeed, it was the infrequent posters (posting four or less) who were responsible for most of the contributions. Finally, moving on to the rate and distribution of popularity, the results were consistent with the above findings, indicating that, the rate and distribution of messages received was more evenly balanced among Wife Swap participants.\(^{116}\)

\(^{116}\) See Appendix 21 for the results.
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Overall, though there were a substantial number of one-timers, the distribution of voice within Wife Swap was more egalitarian; the discussions were not dominated by a small group of participants with regard to the rate and distribution of participation and popularity.

The second element of discursive equality is substantial equality. It was analyzed by examining the discussions for neglected arguments and degrading comments. First, out of the 71 counter and initial arguments, 30 (42%) were silently neglected, which represented approximately 16% of all arguments. A closer reading of these arguments in context revealed that there was no pattern to the placement of these arguments within the threads, and there was no explicit issue, topic, or position ignored. However, two noticeable trends did emerge. First, all 30 neglected arguments used emotions. Second, one-time posters posted a majority of these arguments. In particular, nearly three-quarters of these arguments were posted by one-time posters. This partially explains why participants did not react to being neglected.

Table 7.4
Rate of Participation and Distribution of Postings in Wife Swap

<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>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 to 9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

In short, the level of neglected arguments was high. Moreover, patterns did emerge to the act of neglecting; emotional and one-time posters’ arguments tended to be neglected. However, as will be discussed below, emotions were commonly used in conjunction with arguments; nearly half of all arguments were emotional. Consequently, neglecting might have had more to do with the frequency of emotional arguments rather than any intent by participants to neglect. Regarding one-timer posters’ arguments, neglecting here again might have had something to do with the high level of one-timers discussed above, and less to do with any purposeful act of inequality performed by forum participants.
Second, regarding active acts of inequality, there were 28 messages coded as degrading, which represented 10% of the postings. Interesting here is that most of these comments were directed at forum participants claiming to be a Wife Swap family member from the series. Consequently, much of the degrading focused on the parenting practices and family lifestyles of the families appearing on the show, though in these cases, they were actually participating in the debates. If these exchanges were left aside, the level of degrading would decrease substantially.

The results also suggest no substantial connection between degrading and the use of humor. However, emotions were often used in conjunction with degrading. Specifically, 22 of these comments expressed some form of anger, usually in the form of disgust or irritation. Furthermore, degrading invited more degrading. Twenty-four of the 28 degrading comments were involved in degrading fests. There were seven fests. The average number was approximately three with the longest totaling five postings. Finally, a majority of degrading came in the form of a personal attack as opposed to being directed at another participant’s argument, which was mostly directed at the parenting practices and/or family values of the forum participants claiming to have appeared on the TV series.

Overall, the distribution of voice analysis indicated that the discussions within Wife Swap were not dominated by a small group of frequent posters, but rather, there was a more egalitarian distribution of participation and popularity. Regarding acts of inequality, though the level of neglected arguments was substantial and the level of degrading exchanges was higher, a closer reading suggests that intentional acts of inequality directed at ‘normal’ forum participants were infrequent.

7.3.8 Discursive freedom

Discursive freedom, simply put, maintains that participants are free to voice their arguments and opinions during the course of a discussion. It was gauged by examining for acts of curbing. Overall, the level of curbing was low. There were only six acts of curbing committed by Wife Swap participants. Moreover, a closer examination of these six messages revealed that only half were direct acts of censorship. The remaining acts of curbing enhanced the discussions as opposed to hindering them. In these cases, participants used curbing once to stop an inappropriate exchange and twice to prevent incoherent discussions. In sum, the act of curbing was rare, and when it did occur, it tended to be used to enhance political talk rather than impede it.

7.3.9 Sincerity

Sincerity was examined by identifying acts of questionable sincerity, gauging the level of perceived sincerity. The act of questioning another participant’s sincerity was low.

117 There was no way of verifying whether this was the case.
In particular, there were only four postings coded as such, which were directed at questioning the identity of several forum participants claiming to be a Wife Swap family member from the series. This low level of questionable sincerity is no surprise given the nature and atmosphere of the Wife Swap forum. As mentioned above, the discussions within Wife Swap tended to be personal and supportive, an environment where participants felt safe to share life lessons and experiences on very real and personal issues such as parenting and maintaining a family. Consequently, the level of perceived sincerity seemed to be high, participants seemed to trust one another enough to share such personal stories and information.

Overall, the act of questioning another participant’s sincerity was uncommon. Moreover, given the nature of the discussions that took place, it seems that even more so than in the other two forums, the level of perceived sincerity was high.

7.4 The use of expressives

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

7.4.1 Emotional comments

Expressives were a common communicative feature of political talk within the Wife Swap forum, appearing in more than half of the postings. Emotional comments were the most common expressive used, representing 62% of expressives, and appearing in 39% of the postings. The analysis revealed three aspects on the use of emotions: (1) their type; (2) their social structure; and (3) their relationship with particular variables of deliberation.

First, the most common emotion expressed was anger.\(^{118}\) In particular, 56% of emotional comments expressed anger, which usually came in the form of disgust, dislike, annoyance, or rage. That said, Wife Swap participants regularly expressed other types of emotions. Specifically, sadness and love appeared in 15% of the postings each, while fear and joy were also occasionally expressed. Overall, though negative emotions represented a bulk of the emotions expressed, positive emotions were not uncommon.

The second aspect of emotional comments was their social structure. Emotional comments tended to fuel more comments that were emotional in the form of rant sessions. Approximately 53% of emotional comments (62 postings) were engaged in a rant. There were seven rants. The average number was nearly nine with the largest totaling 15 postings. Rant sessions were usually directed at the parenting

\(^{118}\) See Appendix 22 for the results on the primary emotions expressed.
behavior that appeared on the Wife Swap series. These sessions, however, were not always about expressing anger. Rants were often sprinkled with other negative emotions, i.e. sadness and fear. They were also polarized; they ranted together not at each other. Moreover, unlike the other two forums, where rants were usually raw, vulgar, and/or often crude, in Wife Swap, they tended to be slightly more constructive. For example, they would not only express their anger, they would also provide (parenting) advice, though, as discussed above, usually in an authoritative tone. That said, during these rants, there still lacked reflexive critical exchange between forums participants.

The final aspect of emotions was their relationship with particular variables of deliberation. First, degrading exchanges were emotional. In particular, more than three-quarters of these comments expressed some form of anger towards another forum participant. Emotions in Wife Swap were also a common ingredient in the exchange of arguments. Nearly three-quarters of emotional comments were expressed via arguments, or put differently, nearly half of all arguments were emotional. However, these arguments were not commonly abrasive, vulgar, and/or crude, but rather, a substantial portion of these arguments were constructive to the political debates in question. For example, when participants provided experiences as supporting evidence, they would often lace their stories with emotions, which seemed to lend weight, for example authenticity and a sense of realness, to their claims.

Overall, emotions played an integral role in the discussions that took place within Wife Swap. Even though negative emotions were still prevalent and were often expressed via rant sessions, they tended to be more constructive in relation to political talk. In particular, emotions were used to support arguments more frequently, and more importantly, constructively. Furthermore, though degrading was often used in conjunction with emotions, most of these exchanges were directed at the alleged Wife Swap family members and not the ‘normal’ forum participants.

7.4.2 Humor

The second most common expressive was humor. It accounted for 23% of all expressives and appeared in 15% of the postings. The analysis revealed three aspects on the use of humor: (1) its social function, (2) its social structure, and (3) its relationship with certain variables of deliberation.

First, as already discussed, humor can be used socially for a variety of functions and reasons. However, Wife Swap participants used humor mostly to entertain. Humor here usually came in the form of wisecracks, caricature, and sarcasm, and it usually focused on making fun of the families appearing on the episodes. This type of humor was rarely constructive in relation to the issues under discussion, but rather, it was more oriented towards having a laugh with (or sometimes at) fellow partici-

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119 See Appendix 23 for the results on whom or what emotional comments were directed towards.
120 See Appendix 24 for the results on whom or what humor was directed towards, focused on.
pants. Moreover, participants rarely engaged in banter, which was widespread throughout the other two forums.

The second aspect of humor was its social structure. Again, humor invited more humor. A wisecrack, for example, posted by a participant, usually ignited an exchange of corresponding wisecracks, igniting a humor fest. Out of the 43 postings containing humor, 24 (56%) were involved in humor fests. There were six fests. The average number was four with the largest totaling seven postings.

The final aspect of humor was its relationship, or lack thereof, with particular variables of deliberation. First, rational humor was rarely used in Wife Swap. Specifically, only six humorous comments were coded as rational humor, which represented only three percent of the total arguments. Second, humor rarely led to a degrading exchange or was used as a weapon of it. In particular, only six humorous comments were tied to degrading in this way. Finally, humor in Wife Swap played less of a role in leading discussions off the topic. Only 10 humorous comments were coded as off the topic of discussion.

Overall, humor was less of a factor in political talk than in the other two forums. Humor was mostly used to entertain, rarely contributing constructively to the topics of discussion. For example, rational humor was unusual. Humor did invite more humor; however, it had little to do with causing incoherent discussions. Finally, there was no significant relationship between humor and degrading exchanges.

### 7.4.3 Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements were the final expressive. They accounted for 15% of expressives and appeared in nine percent of the postings. There were four types of acknowledgements identified: thanking, complimenting, apologizing, and congratulating; greetings were not used by Wife Swap participants.

Thanking and complimenting were the most commonly used acknowledgements, appearing on 12 and 10 occasions respectively. They represented more than three-fourths of acknowledgements. There was one noticeable trend here. Complimenting and thanking tended to work together as the two postings below illustrate:

**Mary:** im sure you are the best mother in the world to your children, just keep up the good work, and hang in there mr right might just be round the corner for you!

**Elizabeth:** Thanks for the support [Mary] i sure will tell you when i find that mr right!!!

As discussed above, participants often shared personal stories and difficulties with each other. When participants did compliment, it was mostly used in conjunction with these stories as a means of support as Mary’s posting illustrates, while thanking tended to be given in response to that support (or to advice given) as Elizabeth’s postings shows.
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In short, acknowledgements seemed to enhance political talk. When they were used, complimenting and thanking tended to foster a supportive and encouraging communicative environment.

7.5 Assessing political talk: The normative analysis

In this section, the normative analysis is present. The central research question being addressed here 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? The analysis is presented in comparison to both Big Brother and the Guardian. Again, the assessment 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).

7.5.1 The process of achieving mutual understanding

The process of achieving mutual understanding first requires that political talk be guided by rational-critical debate. First, the exchange of claims within Wife Swap was significantly higher than in both the Guardian (t(431)=3.85; p<0.05) and Big Brother (t(402)=5.75; p<0.05). Nearly three-quarters of the postings provided claims. Moreover, during the exchange of these claims, being rational was the norm, which is consistent with both Big Brother and the Guardian.

In terms of critical reflection, Wife Swap’s results were more consistent with Big Brother than with the Guardian. The level of critical reflection within Wife Swap was significantly lower than in the Guardian (t(308)=-2.90; p<0.05), with no significant difference between Wife Swap and Big Brother (t(313)=-1.26; p<0.05). That said, nearly a third of all claims (reasoned and non-reasoned) came in the form of rebuttal and refutes, which still represents a moderate level of critical reflection.

Overall, as was the case with both Big Brother and the Guardian, the results suggest that the Wife Swap forum was a communicative space where rational-critical debate was common practice, thus satisfying the normative condition.

Coherence represents the second condition of the process of achieving mutual understanding. It requires simply that participants stick to the topic of discussion. The results revealed that Wife Swap participants rarely diverged from the topic of discussion. The level of coherence was substantially high; 94% of the discussions were coherent, thus satisfying the condition of coherence. This result is consistent with both Big Brother and the Guardian, and it indicates again that coherent political talk is not unique to strictly (or pre-) moderated forums.

Continuity represents the third condition of the process of achieving mutual understanding. It requires that political talk continue until understanding or some
form of agreement is achieved as opposed to deserting the debate. It was gauged by measuring the level of extended debate and convergence.

First, when participants from Wife Swap debated, a substantial portion of that debate occurred via extended critical debate. Specifically, the level was moderately high, thus living up to the normative condition. Moreover, the results here are consistent with both Big Brother and the Guardian. However, these findings are not consistent with past net-based public sphere studies (Brants, 2002; Ó Baoill, 2000; Tanner, 2001; Wilhelm, 1999), which suggested that extended debate was uncommon. One explanation for this discrepancy might have something to do with the operationalization of continuity in these studies. As discussed earlier, most of these studies relied on observations as opposed to any comprehensive systematic operationalization of continuity like the one employed here.

The results here again suggest a connection between extended critical debate (strong-string exchanges) and convergence and reflexivity. In particular, in all three forums, strong-string exchanges hosted nearly all reflexive arguments and most acts of convergence, suggesting the importance of extended critical debate in political talk.

Second, with regard to convergence, the results from Wife Swap were not consistent with Big Brother, the Guardian, and past research findings (Jankowski & Van Os, 2004; Jensen, 2003; Strandberg, 2008). In particular, unlike Big Brother and the Guardian, most of the discussions in Wife Swap ended in at least some form of convergence as opposed to abandonment. Thus, the level of convergence was reasonable, satisfying the normative condition. One explanation for this inconsistency might have something to do with the nature of the Wife Swap forum. As discussed throughout this chapter, when it came to debate, Wife Swap tended to display more affirming, supportive, empathetic, and personal communicative practices. Such a discursive environment seemed to have placed more emphasis on understanding, making acts of convergence easier to obtain than in the previous two forums.

Overall, the results from Wife Swap were more encouraging than the other two forums. Similar to Big Brother and the Guardian, the level of extended critical debate was substantial. However, unlike those forums, lines of discussion within Wife Swap frequently ended in at least some form of convergence.

Reciprocity represents the fourth condition of the process of achieving mutual understanding. Simply put, it requires that participants read and reply to each other’s arguments, questions, and opinions during the course of a discussion. First, the level of replies within the Wife Swap forum was high. This was consistent with both Big Brother and the Guardian.

As was the case in both Big Brother and the Guardian, a web of reciprocity was the norm throughout the Wife Swap discussion threads. Specifically, the web of reciprocity matrix revealed that, even more than in the previous two forums, the discussions maintained a high level of decentralized social interactions, thus satisfying the normative condition of reciprocity.

Reflexivity represents the fifth condition of the process of achieving mutual understanding. It requires that participants reflect upon their own arguments and
positions in light of others. First, the level of evidence use within Wife Swap was significantly higher than both Big Brother \((t(774)=4.04; \, p<0.05)\) and the Guardian \((t(814)=3.22; \, p<0.05)\). Approximately 58% of arguments used supporting evidence as opposed to 43% in the Guardian and 41% in Big Brother.

In terms of reflexive arguments, the results from Wife Swap are more consistent with the Guardian. The level of reflexive arguments was significantly higher in Wife Swap than in Big Brother \((t(343)=3.44; \, p<0.05)\), with a fifth of the arguments being reflexive in the former and only 13% in the latter; there was no significant difference between Wife Swap and the Guardian \((t(462)=-1.32; \, p<0.05)\). Additionally, the results again suggest a connection between reflexivity and empathy. In all three forums, a majority of (100% in the Guardian, 59% in Big Brother, and 53% in Wife Swap) the acts were a part or product of reflexive exchanges.

In short, the level of evidence use was high, and more importantly, the level of reflexive arguments was moderate, thus reasonably satisfying the normative condition of reflexivity.

Empathy represents the final condition of the process of achieving mutual understanding. It requires that participants put themselves in other participant’s position, either cognitively and/or emotively, and more importantly, that they communicate this to fellow participants. In both Big Brother and the Guardian, communicative empathy was rare. However, the level of communicative empathy within Wife Swap was significantly higher than in Big Brother \((t(306)=4.63; \, p<0.05)\) and the Guardian \((t(297)=5.14; \, p<0.05)\). In Wife Swap, participants engaged in empathetic exchanges more often. Moreover, the level of communicative empathy was moderate in comparison to the number of postings (10%), thus satisfying the normative condition.\(^{121}\)

One explanation for this discrepancy between forums might be the nature and topics of the discussions within Wife Swap. Specifically, communicative empathy in Wife Swap seemed to go hand-in-hand with participants’ willingness to share life experiences and lessons with each other, either as personal narratives or as supporting evidence in their arguments. In particular, most of these exchanges focused on parenting experiences, lessons, and difficulties. Given that most of the participants spoke as parents, it seems that they could relate more to each other’s stories, and more importantly, they were willing to communicate this to one another.

7.5.2 Structural and dispositional fairness

Discursive equality represents the first condition of structural and dispositional fairness, which requires an equal distribution of voice and substantial equality among participants during the course of political talk. Regarding the equal distribution of

\(^{121}\) Ten percent might not seem high; however, it is reasonable to expect a substantial amount of interaction between participants in the form of arguments, questions, etc. (getting to know the other position) before empathetic considerations could take root, particularly during political talk.
voice, the results from Wife Swap were surprisingly inconsistent with Big Brother, the Guardian, and past studies. The distribution of participation and popularity was more evenly distributed among forum participants. In other words, the debates were not dominated by a small group of popular participants, but rather the discussions were more egalitarian, thus satisfying the normative condition.

In terms of substantial equality, the results were consistent with both Big Brother and the Guardian. First, regarding active acts of inequality, the level of degrading within Wife Swap was significantly higher than in Big Brother (t(338)=3.10; p<0.05); there was no significant difference between Wife Swap and the Guardian (t(394)=1.44; p<0.05). That said, given that in all three forums the level of degrading was at the lower end of the spectrum (Big Brother 4%; the Guardian 7%; and Wife Swap 10%), the differences between them have little bearing normatively speaking. Thus, similar to the previous two forums, the level of degrading was low, satisfying the normative condition. Second, the level of neglected arguments again was substantial; however, a closer examination revealed that even though two patterns emerged on the act of neglecting, these trends seemed to have little to do with any purposeful acts of inequality performed by participants. Altogether, regarding commutative acts of inequality, Wife Swap reasonably satisfied the normative condition of substantial equality.

Overall, unlike Big Brother and the Guardian, both findings for discursive equality were positive. The distribution of voice was more evenly distributed throughout the forum. Furthermore, similar to both Big Brother and the Guardian, the analyses revealed low levels of substantial inequality in the communicative practices of participants.

Discursive freedom represents the second condition of structural and dispositional fairness, which requires that during the course of a discussion participant are free to express their opinions, arguments, and positions. Unlike the previous two forums, much of the debate within Wife Swap was centered on a few political topics. Moreover, the level of agreement and affirmations was significantly higher than in both Big Brother (t(268)=2.66; p<0.05) and the Guardian (t(242)=4.04; p<0.05); participants were more supportive and affirming. That said, the Wife Swap forum did not represent a polarization of opinions, positions, or arguments. Participants engaged often in critical debate through a variety of competing opinions. In other words, the supportive and affirming nature of Wife Swap did not take away from the diversity of opinions, but rather, it seemed enhanced participants understanding of this diversity.

Regarding the communicative practices of participants, the results are consistent with the previous two forums. There was no significant difference between Wife Swap and both Big Brother (t(356)=0.97; p<0.05) and the Guardian (t(1501)-0.39; 122 (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).
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p<0.05. In all three cases, the level of curbing was substantially low with only two percent of the postings containing acts of curbing in both the Guardian and Wife Swap and one percent in Big Brother. Moreover, when curbing did occur within Wife Swap, it usually enhanced political talk as opposed to impeding it, as was the case in the other two forums. In short, the communicative practices of Wife Swap participants satisfied the condition of discursive freedom.

Overall, in all three forums, participants engaged in the exchange of a diverse set of opinions and arguments, while discursive acts of inequality were infrequent.

Sincerity represents the final condition of deliberation, which requires simply that participants are sincere and truthful with fellow participants. Again, the level of actual sincerity was not addressed by the above analysis, but rather the level of perceived sincerity was by coding the communicative practices of participants for questionable sincerity. The results from Wife Swap were consistent with the previous two forums; there was no significant difference between Wife Swap and both Big Brother (t(1765)=0.14; p<0.05) and the Guardian (t(562)=-1.41; p<0.05). In all three forums, the level of questionable sincerity was substantially low with only three percent of the postings containing acts of questionable sincerity in the Guardian and one percent in both Big Brother and Wife Swap. However, there was one distinction here. In Wife Swap, the discussions frequently were personal in nature, i.e. participants often shared life experiences, lessons, and stories. Consequently, by sharing this type of information, it seems that the Wife Swap forum, even more than in the other two forums, was perceived as a safe and trusted communicative environment.

7.6 Beyond the normative conditions of deliberation

The study here moves beyond the normative framework of deliberation by examining political talk for the use of expressive speech acts. The aim was to describe systematically and more precisely how participants actually discussed politics, and more importantly, to see whether expressives had any bearing on the conditions of deliberation. Thus, 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 both Big Brother and the Guardian, expressive speech acts were a common ingredient of political talk in the Wife Swap forum. The level of expressives was significantly higher in Wife Swap than in both Big Brother (t(373)=5.04; p<0.05) and the Guardian (t(376)=6.95; p<0.05). Moreover, unlike the other two forums, emotional comments represented the bulk of the expressives used. Overall, whereas emotional comments added little constructively to political talk within both Big Brother and the Guardian, emotions in Wife Swap were more beneficial.

First, anger, though still the dominating emotion, was expressed substantially less within Wife Swap than in the other two forums. Moreover, Wife Swap participants tended to express more frequently a more diverse set of emotions, which
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included an increase in positive emotions. That said, Wife Swap discussions were not immune to rants, which were a common social feature of emotional comments within the previous two forums. On the contrary, when emotions were expressed, they were expressed via rant sessions more frequently within Wife Swap. However, rant sessions were not always as intense and raw as was the case in the other two forums. Indeed, rant sessions, on occasions, were even constructive in relation to the political topics in question; participants would give unsolicited advice. However, these types of sessions offered little in way of critical reflexive exchange between participants.

Second, similar to the Guardian, emotions were a common ingredient in degrading exchanges. Anger was the primary culprit. That said, this was a unique case. Much of degrading here was directed at participants claiming to be Wife Swap family members from the series. Given that much of the anger expressed in Wife Swap was directed at the participating families in the series, this is no surprise; they now had an opportunity to express that anger directly to those family members. When these exchanges are omitted, the level of degrading decreases substantially. Similar to Big Brother, ‘normal’ forum participants were rarely angry at each other and rarely degraded each other.

Finally, more than in the other two forums, emotions were commonly used in conjunction with rational-critical debate, with arguments. However, unlike the previous two forums, where these types of arguments were often abrasive, vulgar, and/or crude, in Wife Swap, emotions seemed to enhance arguments, enhance political talk. First, as discussed above, anger played less of a role within Wife Swap, and this holds true for the exchange of claims. These types of arguments were often less about expressing raw and intense feelings of anger at something or someone, but rather, they were used often in relation to portraying life experiences and stories. Second, emotions seemed to lend weight to these arguments. For example, when participants provided evidence via experiences in support of their arguments, emotions tended to provide a sense of genuineness and realness to these arguments.

In sum, emotional comments tended to enhance political talk rather than impede or distract it, which was not the case in both Big Brother and the Guardian.

The second most common expressive was humor. Overall, humor played less of a role in Wife Swap. Humor was used mostly to have a laugh, to entertain, which again did little constructively in way of enhancing the debates. The main distinction between the forums was that unlike both Big Brother and the Guardian, banter was uncommon in Wife Swap. Consequently, humor did little in way of creating a friendly and sociable discursive environment, which was the case in Big Brother particularly and in the Guardian to a lesser degree.

Humor again did invite more humor. More than half of humor was expressed via humor fests. However, unlike the previous two forums, humor fests did not often lead to incoherent discussions. In particular, less than a quarter of humorous comments were off the topic of discussion. Moreover, humor was rarely used in conjunction with arguments. In both Big Brother and the Guardian, humor was used to
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criticize, assess, or provoke thought, while in Wife Swap this was simply not the case. Indeed, rational humor in particular was scarce throughout the forum. Finally, similar to Big Brother and unlike the Guardian, humor was rarely responsible for igniting degrading exchanges or used as a weapon of them.

Overall, humor seemed to be less of a factor in Wife Swap. It did not seem to foster a friendly and social environment as was especially the case in Big Brother. Nor did it enhance rational-critical debate as it so often did in the Guardian. Instead, humor seemed to be used as a means of making fun of Wife Swap families, simply to have a laugh. Though humor was contagious, it had less bearing on coherence. Moreover, humor was rarely directed at fellow participants; it lacked a substantial relationship with degrading. In short, humor, unlike the previous two forums, neither enhanced nor impeded political talk.

Acknowledgements were the final expressive. Both complimenting and thanking were the most frequent types of acknowledgements used within Wife Swap. Unlike in the previous two forums, complimenting was not directed towards another participant's argument or humor. Moreover, it seemed to do little in terms of polarizing or bridging argumentative lines. Rather, complementing and thanking in Wife Swap worked together and were tied mostly to participants' use of personal narratives; for example, stories of personal hardships were met with compliments meant to support and encourage. Overall, acknowledgements seem to create a communicative atmosphere conducive to understanding, thus enhancing political talk.

7.7 Conclusion

Political talk was no stranger to the Wife Swap discussion forum. Participants frequently engaged in political debates. It seems that the parenting behaviors and family lifestyles and values of the participating Wife Swap families ignited numerous political discussions. However, the variety of political topics discussed was limited, that is, much of the debate focused on parenting and the family. Consequently, political talk in Wife Swap represented a more lifestyle oriented, personal form of politics. Even more conventional political topics, i.e. the welfare state, were discussed in a more individualized and personal manner.

However, these topics and types of discussions did not take anything away from the deliberativeness of political talk within Wife Swap. On the contrary, Wife Swap was a forum where the exchange of claims was common practice and the quality of debate was high overall. In particular, the level of rationality, reciprocity, critical reflection, extended debate, coherence, reciprocity, reflexivity, substantial equality, discursive freedom, and perceived sincerity satisfied the normative conditions. Additionally, the results revealed that unlike most previous studies (and the previous two forums) the level of convergence and the rate and distribution of voice reasonably satisfied the normative conditions. Finally, Wife Swap participants fairly
often expressed empathetic considerations, which was rare within both Big Brother and the Guardian.

Overall, Wife Swap was a unique discursive environment. The topics of discussion seemed to foster more personal communicative practices. The use of personal narrative and experiences were a common feature of political talk. They were often emotional and when combined with arguments, they seem to have added a sense of realness and authenticity to the debates. The reaction to these types of arguments and narratives, e.g. the use of acknowledgements and affirmations, tended to be affirming, supportive, and even encouraging. Moreover, the communicative environment seemed to be a trusting one, given the personal nature of the stories and experiences being shared. Altogether, the Wife Swap forum seemed to foster a more understanding oriented environment, a discursive arena where empathetic considerations and convergence were more commonly achieved.