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

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8.1 Introduction

Political talk online has no boundaries. From the Guardian to Big Brother to Wife Swap, political talk was a common ingredient within these online communicative spaces. It was not just in the Guardian, the ‘quality’ political discussion forum, where we saw deliberative discussions, but rather, in all three forums, the quality was often moderate to high. Indeed, it was the Wife Swap forum, a reality television forum, a place where traditionally one might expect to host ‘not so serious’ talk, where the normative conditions of deliberation were most frequently met. We also saw that expressives, i.e. humor, emotional comments, and acknowledgements, were a common feature of political talk within all three forums, which both facilitated and impeded it at times. Furthermore, it seems that the issues, behaviors, statements, discussions, lifestyles, images, and topics of reality television series like Big Brother and Wife Swap trigger political discussions among forum participants that touch upon a variety of conventional to more lifestyle-based political issues.

In this chapter, a summary of this study and conclusions drawn from these findings are presented. In section 8.2, an overview and summary of the study are provided. In sections 8.3, 8.4, and 8.5 the three underlying research questions set out in the introduction are addressed. In section 8.6, reflections on the study along with its implications and recommendations are offered. Finally, in section 8.7, the chapter ends with some final thoughts and addresses the question asked in the title of this dissertation: So, what’s Wife Swap got to do with it?

8.2 Summary of the study

Talking politics online is not exclusively reserved for political discussion forums, particularly the everyday political talk crucial to the public sphere. People talk politics just about anywhere online from reality TV forums to numerous other forum genres. Thus, the need to tap into those discussions is important if our aim is to provide a more comprehensive overview of the online communicative landscape. To date, most net-based public sphere studies have neglected these communicative spaces by solely focusing on politically oriented forums such as Usenet newsgroups, news media message boards, independent deliberative initiatives, political party/candidate forums, and governmentally sponsored forums. Consequently, in order provide a
more complete picture on whether the internet is facilitating and/or extending the public sphere, we need to widen our scope and start taking a more inclusive approach to the communicative spaces we examine because politics online is everywhere.

8.2.1 Research aim, purpose, and questions

The aim of this study then was to move beyond politically oriented forums by examining the communicative practices of participants within reality television discussion forums. The aim here was not only to move beyond politically oriented communicative spaces, but also to move beyond a conventional, institutional notion of what is political, allowing also for a more individualized, lifestyle-based approach to politics. The focus of this study was on examining how participants actually talked politics in these informal everyday communicative spaces. There were three underlying purposes of this study. The first purpose was a normative one. That is, to examine and assess the democratic value of these communicative practices in light of a set of normative conditions of the public sphere. The second purpose was a descriptive and explorative one. It was to move beyond a ‘traditional’ notion of deliberation by analyzing how participants actually talked politics in these spaces and how other communicative forms such as humor, emotional comments, and acknowledgments interact and influence the normative conditions of deliberation. The final purpose was to better understand how the political emerged in these spaces. What is it about Big Brother, for example, that triggers political talk? Thus, this study was guided by three central research questions, which were:

To what extent do the communicative practices of online political discussions satisfy the normative conditions of the process of deliberation of the public sphere?

What role, if any, do expressives (humor, emotional comments, and acknowledgements) play within online political discussions and in relation to the normative conditions of deliberation?

How does political talk emerge in nonpolitically oriented discussion forums?

8.2.2 Research design

As a means of addressing these questions, a comparative study design with normative, descriptive, and explorative characteristics was carried out. A normative analysis was conducted. Such an analysis required three steps. In Chapter 2, a set of normative conditions of the process of deliberation of the public sphere was constructed. Drawing from Habermas’ theories of communicative action and the public sphere specifically and deliberative democratic theory in general, a set of nine conditions of
deliberation were delineated.\textsuperscript{123} The conditions include the \textit{process of achieving mutual understanding}, which consists of rational-critical debate, continuity, coherence, reciprocity, reflexivity, and empathy; and \textit{structural and dispositional fairness}, which consists of discursive equality, discursive freedom, and sincerity.

The process of achieving mutual understanding focuses on providing the necessary structural and dispositional conditions for achieving understanding during the course of political talk. In particular, the six conditions place both structural and dispositional requirements on the communicative form, process, and participant. Structural and dispositional fairness focuses on providing the necessary conditions aimed at creating a discursive environment based in and on fairness. The three conditions place structural and dispositional requirements on the discussion forum’s structure and the participants of those forums. During the second step (Chapter 4), these conditions were operationalized using multiple methods and instruments into empirical indicators of deliberation. During the final step (Chapters 5, 6, and 7), the indicators were applied to political talk as a means of assessing the quality of debate.

In order to provide a more accurate picture of how the political emerges in online discussions, how people actually talk politics in those discussions, and finally, how non-traditional deliberative communicative forms such as humor, emotional comments, and acknowledgements interact and influence the more traditional elements of deliberation an interactional analysis on the pragmatic and functional components of political talk was conducted. Both the normative and interactional analyses were conducted within the framework of a comparative study design of three online discussion forums. In order to provide for a more fruitful analysis, a politically oriented forum, a nonpolitically oriented forum, and a mixed forum were selected. The political forum was represented by the Guardian Political Talkboard, which is hosted by the Guardian’s online presence. It was selected because it represented a ‘quality’ British newspaper whose discussion forums would host quality political debate. The nonpolitical forum was represented by the Wife Swap Forum, which is hosted by Channel 4’s online community site. It was selected because it is a forum dedicated to a reality TV series, a place where one might expect to find ‘not so serious’ talk. The final forum selected was the Celebrity Big Brother 2006 Forum, which is hosted by the BBFan.com, a website dedicated to and ran by fans of the reality TV series Big Brother UK. This was designated as the mixed forum because of the presence of George Galloway, a British MP, as one of the housemates in the Celebrity Big Brother 2006 series.

\textbf{8.2.3 Research methodologies}

This study moved beyond politically oriented forums by analyzing the communicative practices of participants within two reality TV forums. However, such a widen-
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ing of scope presented this study initially with a set of difficulties, namely, how do we capture and assess politically oriented discussions within the sea of threads and postings offered by such forum types? How do we sift through the variety of discussions offered without becoming overwhelmed, while at the same time without missing something? How do we identify political talk, which may be less about conventional politics and rooted more in lifestyles—personal life considerations of health, body, sexuality, work, and so forth? Finally, how do we assess such talk in light of the process of deliberation, while at the same time, taking into account its informal nature?

A methodological approach, which utilized multiple methods and instruments, aimed at tackling these questions was constructed for this study. The approach consisted of two stages. During the first stage, the aim was to identify the political discussions and the triggers that ignited those discussions. Regarding the former, the goal was to come to a set of criteria that would allow a researcher to capture both conventional and lifestyle-based notions of political talk. There were two criteria utilized which focused on identifying when a participant made a connection to society and when that connection stirred reflection and a response by another participant, igniting a political discussion. Regarding the latter, a content analysis, which utilized Mayring’s (2000) procedures for carrying out the development of inductive coding categories, was employed.

During stage two, the aim was to assess and describe the political discussions identified by stage one of the analysis in light of the public sphere while taking into account their informal nature. In order to achieve this, a content analysis with both qualitative and quantitative features was utilized as the primary method. From analyzing the level of communicative empathy to counting the number of replies, the method proved useful and effective given the diverse nature of the various variables of deliberation, which required various levels of operationalization, interpretation, and maneuvering. Moreover, in conjunction with the content analysis additional network and textual analyses were carried out as a means of creating a more comprehensive set of indicators, which actually reflected the normative conditions in question. Finally, as a means of describing political talk more precisely and exploring whether expressives tended to facilitate or impede deliberation, additional in-depth readings on the use of humor, emotional comments, and acknowledgements were conducted.

8.2.4 Research results: The Guardian

From Tony Blair and the Labour Government to immigration and citizenship, the debates within the Guardian covered a multiplicity of conventional, institutional political topics. In other words, lifestyle-based political topics were rarely discussed within the Guardian. Furthermore, the debates were often deliberative. The level of rationality, critical reflection, coherence, reciprocity, reflexivity, substantial equality,
Conclusion

and discursive freedom within the Guardian were moderately high to high. However, the Guardian did not fair well on several of the conditions of the process of deliberation. First, though the level of extended debate was high, it rarely led to an act of convergence; debates would often end in stalemates and abandonment. Second, though the level of reflexivity was moderately high, participants rarely ever made the next step and empathized with others or at least never communicated emphatic considerations. Third, regarding discursive equality, the rate and distribution of postings and popularity indicated that the discussions within the Guardian were often a product of a small group of popular participants who frequently spoke to one another. Finally, even though the act of questioning another participant’s sincerity was infrequent, when it did occur, it was often personal and led to the breakdown of political talk.

Political talk within the Guardian often took the form of expressive speech acts, which appeared in more than a third of the postings. Humor was the most common expressive used. It had both favorable and unfavorable consequences for political talk. Regarding the former, it seemed to foster a friendly and playful communicative environment, and it was used relatively frequently in support of rational-critical debate. Regarding the latter, humor invited more humor. Humor fests here tended to foster incoherent political discussions. Furthermore, humor occasionally incited (or was used as a weapon of) degrading exchanges. Moving on to emotional comments, the Guardian participants were not too happy, particularly with the Labour Government. When participants expressed emotions, anger tended to be the emotion of choice. Even humor was often laced with expressions of anger and hostility. Similar to humor, anger invited more anger in the form of rant sessions. Here participants would vent their frustration, disgust, and irritation together with little to no critical reciprocal exchange. Anger also, on occasions, fostered aggressive and personal attack oriented communicative practices. In short, emotional comments added little value to the debates in way of understanding, but rather, they tended to impede political talk as opposed to enhancing it. Finally, similar to humor, acknowledgements presented political talk with a double-edged sword. On the one side, they tended to create and foster a cordial communicative environment between those on the same side of an argument. While on the other side, they tended to foster polarization between different sides of an argument. Overall, expressives seemed to hinder political talk as opposed to facilitating it.

8.2.5 Research results: Big Brother

Talking politics was not uncommon in the Big Brother discussion forum with nearly a quarter of the postings engaged in or around a political discussion. The topics discussed touched upon a variety of contemporary political issues, which dealt with everything from parliamentary politics to health and the body. The presence of the British MP George Galloway ignited numerous political discussions. That said, his
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presence was not the only catalyst of political talk. Overall, it was 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, which were the triggers of political talk. Furthermore, unlike the Guardian, the issues discussed frequently touched upon a more lifestyle-based form of politics, such as bullying, sexuality, and animal rights.

When it came to the normative conditions of deliberation, the Big Brother forum fared relatively well for a number of the conditions. The level of coherence, reciprocity, discursive freedom, substantial equality, and perceived sincerity were moderately high to high, while the level of rationality, critical reflection, and extended debate were moderate. However, Big Brother did not fare well on several of the conditions. First, the level of convergence was low. Participants rarely achieved an act of convergence during the course of political talk but rather discussions tended to end in a withdrawal by participants. Second, providing reflexive argument or communicating empathetic considerations was infrequent. It seems that achieving deeper levels of understanding on the arguments and positions of fellow participants’ was not common within the Big Brother forum. Indeed, in many of the more heated debates on George Galloway, participants tended talk at each other rather than with each other. Finally, the rate and distribution of postings and popularity indicated that the discussions tended to be a product of a small group of popular participants.

Though the Big Brother forum was not exceptionally deliberative, it did seem to foster a civil, friendly, and welcoming communicative environment. From acts of curbing to questioning another participant’s sincerity to expressions of anger, Big Brother participants were rarely personal, aggressive, and/or malicious towards each other. For example, the use of humor frequently acted as a form of social bonding. Participants would engage in lively, playful, and flirtatious forms of banter, which later would act as common memories and experiences that participants would allude to from time to time. Acknowledgements too seemed to foster a more cordial communicative environment across argumentative lines whereby complimenting a competing argument was not unheard of as was the case in the Guardian. Though the expression of anger was still the emotion of choice, it was rarely directed towards another fellow participant. However, expressives were not always beneficial to political talk. Humor regularly led discussions off the topic, while rant sessions were a relatively common feature.

8.2.6 Research results: Wife Swap

With nearly a third of the posting engaged in or around a political discussion, it seems that Wife Swap participants were doing more than talking Wife Swap. The parenting behaviors and family lifestyles and values of the Wife Swap families, which appeared on the TV series, seemed to ignite a number of political discussions. However, the diversity of topics discussed was limited; a majority of the discussions
focused on the issues of parenting and family. Thus, political talk here embodied a more lifestyle-based, personal form of politics. Discussions on the welfare state, for example, were more individualized and personal in nature with life experiences and stories representing a common contribution to those debates.

This style of political talk did nothing in way of hampering the deliberativeness of the discussions within Wife Swap. In fact, Wife Swap was a forum where the exchange of claims was frequently practiced and the quality of those exchanges was usually high overall. The level of rationality, coherence, reciprocity, the use of supporting evidence, substantial equality, discursive freedom, and perceived sincerity were all moderately high to high, while the level of critical reflection, extended debate, and reflexivity were moderate. There were three notable findings here. First, in contrast with the previous two forums, participants of Wife Swap engaged in communicative empathy. Second, unlike the previous two forums and much of the literature, the level of convergence within Wife Swap was moderately high, i.e. almost all lines of discussion ended in some form of agreement. Finally, the results indicated that unlike the previous two forums and past studies the rate and distribution of voice was egalitarian.

All told, Wife Swap represented a unique communicative environment in comparison to both the Guardian and Big Brother. The issues discussed seemed to foster more personal communicative practices. The use of personal stories and experiences were frequent contributions to the political discussions. These types of communicative practices were more emotional and when combined with arguments, they seem to provide a touch of realness and authenticity. Moreover, these types of communicative practices were often greeted with acknowledgements, affirmations, support, and even encouragement. This type of communicative environment seemed to be a trusting one, given the personal nature of the stories and experiences being shared. In short, such a communicative environment tended to foster a communicative space oriented towards understanding, a forum where empathetic considerations and acts of convergence were more readily attained.

8.3 **Assessing political talk: The normative analysis**

One of the foci of this study was to assess the democratic value of everyday political talk within the three forums of the Guardian, Big Brother, and Wife Swap. The underlying 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 assessment from that analysis is presented in Table 8.1. The table serves two functions. First, it indicates whether the forums satisfied the various conditions of deliberation. If a forum received a ‘√’ then it satisfied the (sub) condition; if it received a ‘+’ then it more than satisfied the (sub) condition (i.e. it performed exceptionally well); and if it received a ‘-’ then it did not satisfy the (sub) condition. Second, the table also provides comparative quality scores, which are
meant to determine how the forums performed in relation to one another. The numbers represent scores on the basis of the analysis. A score of zero was given for a ‘−’; a score of one was given for a ‘√’; while a score of two was given for a ‘+’. In the cases where a condition had more than one indicator, the scores for each indicator were added together and then divided by the total number of indicators for that condition. Two is the maximum score for an individual condition, while 18 represents the maximum total score when all nine conditions are treated equally.

As Table 8.1 shows, all three forums faired relatively well when it came to the nine conditions of deliberation with Wife Swap representing the strongest forum by satisfying all the conditions (scoring 14.4) and Big Brother representing the weakest forum by not satisfying four of the (sub) conditions (scoring 10.5). As a means of providing a more detailed answer to this question, I will now address each of the conditions separately by comparing the performance of the three forums for each condition while at the same time reflecting back on the literature when applicable.

### 8.3.1 The process of achieving mutual understanding

The first condition of the process of achieving mutual understanding is rational-critical debate. It has been one of the most common conditions used among net-based public sphere researchers. Much of the research suggests that within a variety of political forum types, structures, and contexts participants are talking politics rationally (Albrecht, 2006; Coleman, 2004; Dahlberg, 2001b; Jankowski & Van Os, 2004; Jensen, 2003; Papacharissi, 2004; Tanner, 2001; Tsaliki, 2002; Wilhelm, 1999; Winkler, 2002, 2005; Wright & Street, 2007). The findings from all three forums are consistent with these findings.

As the scores from Table 8.1 indicate, both Wife Swap and the Guardian did better than Big Brother. Simply put, the Big Brother participants were slightly less rational and critical within their debates. The main distinction between Wife Swap and the Guardian was the level of critical reflection. In Wife Swap, the exchange of claims represented nearly three-quarters of the postings, which was significantly higher than both Big Brother and the Guardian. However, unlike the Guardian, a substantial portion of those claims came in the form of affirmations (or non-reasoned affirmations) while in the Guardian they came in the form of rebuttals and refutes, i.e. critical reflection. Such a distinction here seems to make sense given the nature of the Wife Swap forum. In Wife Swap, the results from various indicators suggested a more personal, supporting, and encouraging communicative space than in the Guardian forum. It seems reasonable to expect, under these conditions, a higher level of affirmations. That said, all three forums satisfied the condition of critical reflection.

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124 The criteria for determining whether a forum satisfied a condition is discussed in Chapter 4; see section 4.4.3 and page 48 in particular for details.

125 Note here that all t-test scores are located in the appropriate results chapters.
## Conclusion

Table 8.1  
**Comparative Overview from the Normative Analysis of the Nine Conditions of Deliberation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conditions</th>
<th>The Guardian</th>
<th>The Forums</th>
<th>Wife Swap</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quality score</td>
<td>Fulfillment</td>
<td>Quality score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rational-critical debate</strong></td>
<td>1.7*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exchange of claims</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationality of claims</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical reflection</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coherence</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coherent discussions</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Continuity</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended debate</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convergence</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reciprocity</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web of reciprocity</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reflexivity</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflexive arguments</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Empathy</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicative empathy</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discursive equality</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distribution of voice</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neglected arguments</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acts of degrading</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discursive freedom</strong></td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity of opinions</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&amp; topics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acts of curbing</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sincerity</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionable sincerity</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quality score total</strong></td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. A ‘-’ indicates that the forum in question did not satisfy the condition, a ‘√’ means that it did, while a ‘+’ indicates that it more than satisfied it.*  
* The numbers represent scores on the basis of my analysis. A score of zero was given for a ‘-’; a score of one was given for a ‘√’; while a score of two was given for a ‘+’. In the cases where a condition had more than one indicator, the scores for each indicator were added together and then divided by the total number of indicators for that condition. Two is the maximum score for an individual condition, while 18 represents the maximum total score when all nine conditions are treated equally.*
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As discussed in Chapter 3, one of the problems with past net-based public sphere research is that it is unclear whether the critical in rational-critical debate was properly operationalized. Moreover, there were only a couple studies that assessed for critical reflection directly (Dahlberg, 2001b; Tanner, 2001). The results from both these studies revealed substantial levels of critical reflection. Consequently, the results from this study are consistent with these findings, and more importantly, add much needed empirical data to our understanding of the online discursive landscape.

The second condition of the process of achieving mutual understanding is coherence. It requires that participants stick to the topic of discussion. As reflected in Table 8.1, all three forums performed well and satisfied the normative condition of coherence. Indeed, participants within these forums regularly stuck to the topics of discussion. Moreover, these findings are consistent with past studies (Dahlberg, 2001b; Jensen, 2003; Stanley, Weare, & Musso, 2004; Wright & Street 2007). Additionally, they suggest that coherent discussions are not exclusively reserved for governmentally sponsored professionally moderated forums.

As discussed in Chapter 3, some net-based public sphere researchers have argued that strict (pre-) moderation is an important ingredient in maintaining coherent discussions (see e.g. Dahlberg, 2001b; Wright & Street, 2007). After reviewing the results from this study, I question whether that is the case. Though the three forums in this study employed some level of (loose) moderation, in all the threads analyzed, only on one occasion did a moderator (visibly) step in to bring a discussion back on course. Indeed, it was self-moderation, through acts of curbing, by participants themselves that seemed to keep discussions in check. I am not suggesting moderation is not needed at all, there certainly will be occasions when a moderator needs to step in and e.g. remove a post, but rather strict or pre- moderation might not be as important in informal communicative spaces with regard to maintaining coherence. The results from all three forums here suggest that self-moderation is an effective means of maintaining coherence.

The third condition of the process of achieving mutual understanding is continuity. It requires that political talk continues until understanding or some form of agreement is achieved as opposed to abandonment. There were two indicators of continuity, which were extended debate and convergence. As reflected in Table 8.1, regarding the latter, all three forums maintained an adequate level of extended critical debate with the Guardian maintaining the highest level. These findings are not consistent with past studies (Brants, 2002; Ó Baoíll, 2000; Tanner, 2001; Wilhelm, 1999), which suggest that extended debate on a single issue was uncommon. One

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126 Strict moderation is when forums employ extensive rules and guidelines on what is considered acceptable to post. Some forums check messages before they are posted, as in pre-moderated posts. This type of moderation is different from those forums that rely mostly on self-moderation. Dahlberg (2001b) here also talks about self-moderation.

127 As noted in Chapter 4, there were instances uncovered where postings were removed or modified by forum moderators. However, in these cases, it was a question of removing abusive language. That said, it is unclear how often this occurred and in which capacity.
possible reason for this discrepancy is that these studies have relied mostly on
observations as opposed to any systematic operationalization of extended debate as
the one carried out here. There does, however, seem to be a link with Beierle’s (2004)
survey research. Though his study focused on the participants from a governmentally
sponsored forum, his findings did suggest that during the course of online debate
participants develop a sense of commitment to that debate. It seems that, to a certain
extent, for at least some of the participants, this was the case in the Guardian, Big
Brother, and Wife Swap.

The second indicator of continuity was convergence, which gauged the level of
agreement achieved during the course of a discussion by identifying commissive
speech acts. As Table 8.1 shows, both the Guardian and Big Brother did not satisfy
this condition. Indeed, an act of convergence within these forums was rare. These
findings are consistent with past studies (Jankowski & Van Os, 2004; Jensen, 2003;
Strandberg, 2008). In Wife Swap, however, this was not the case. Almost all lines of
discussion ended in some form of convergence. One explanation for this may have
something to do with the nature of the Wife Swap forum. As discussed above and
throughout Chapter 7, 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 conver-
gen easier to obtain than in the other two forums.

Overall, though the Guardian maintained a substantially higher level of ex-
tended debate than the other two forums, Wife Swap performed better given the
level of convergence achieved. Though Big Brother maintained an adequate level of
extended debate, when combined with the level of convergence, it did not meet the
condition of continuity.

The fourth condition of the process of achieving mutual understanding is reci-
procity. It requires that participants read and reply to each other’s questions, argu-
ments, or opinions in general. Similar to rational-critical debate, it has been one of
the most common conditions used by past net-based public sphere studies. Much of
the literature suggests that within a variety of political forum types, structures, and
contexts a substantial level of reciprocity (Beierle, 2004; Brants, 2002; Dahlberg, 2001;
Jensen, 2003; Papacharissi, 2004; Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997; Schneider, 1997; Tsaliki,
2002; Winkler, 2002, 2005; Wright & Street, 2007). As Table 8.1 shows, the results
from all three forums are consistent with these findings. As argued in Chapters 3 and
4, the percentage of replies indicator on its own is inadequate because it neglects the
social structure of the thread, of the discussions. Consequently, a degree of centrali-
ization measurement was combined with the reply percentage indicator—the web of
reciprocity matrix. The combined analysis found that for all three forums a web of
reciprocity was the norm, thus satisfying the condition.

The fifth condition of the process of achieving mutual understanding is reflex-
IVITY. It requires that participant’s reflect upon their own position in light of others.
One of the first indicators of reflexivity is the level of evidence use. All three forums
maintained a substantial level of supporting evidence. That said, there were some
distinctions between the forums. First, the level of evidence use within Wife Swap was significantly higher than in both Big Brother and the Guardian, which maintained a similar level. Second, the composition of the evidence used also varied. Whereas in both Big Brother and the Guardian experiences were the least common type of evidence used, in Wife Swap, they accounted for more than a quarter of supporting evidence. One possible explanation for this distinction is the type of topics being discussed. In Wife Swap, a majority of the issues dealt with parenting and family, many of the participants spoke from a position of authority, as a parent themselves, offering their life experiences and stories as testimony in support of their arguments. Moreover, when they were not offering their own experiences, they frequently offered third-person stories as examples to support their claims (examples and experiences accounted for more than three-quarters of supporting evidence). This could also explain why the level of evidence use was significantly higher in Wife Swap because experiences and examples on the issues were more readily available to these participants, given their first hand knowledge as parents. In contrast, the issues discussed in the Guardian and to a lesser degree in Big Brother, were not as personal, and were more oriented around conventional, institutional political issues.

In terms of reflexive arguments, there is little empirical data available. The few studies that do examine reflexivity, either directly or indirectly, all revealed substantial levels (Dahlberg, 2001b; Jensen, 2003; Stromer-Galley, 2003; Winkler, 2002, 2005). As Table 8.1 shows, the findings from both Wife Swap and the Guardian are consistent with this. However, the level of reflexivity within Big Brother was low, falling short of the normative condition. One possible explanation for this difference might have something to do with the level of extended debate. As revealed in Chapters 5 through 7, nearly all reflexive exchanges occurred during the course of strong-string exchanges, suggesting the importance of such exchanges in fostering reflexivity. It seems that the longer participants engaged in extended critical debate the more likely they were to take up a reflexive mindset. Though the level of extended debate within Big Brother was adequate as discussed above, with slightly more than half of the claims involved in strong-string exchanges, it was lower than both Wife Swap and the Guardian. This difference in the level of extended debate, combined with a lower level of evidence use, might have something to do with Big Brother’s level of reflexivity.

Overall, all three forums maintain a substantial level of evidence use with Wife Swap maintaining the highest level by favoring example and experience types over fact/source and comparison types of evidence. Regarding reflexivity, both the Guardian and Wife Swap performed better than Big Brother. Big Brother participants simply infrequently engaged in reflexive exchanges.

The final condition of the process of achieving mutual understanding is empathy. It requires that participants put themselves in another participant’s position, either cognitively and/or emotionally. It was assessed by determining the level of communicative empathy. As Table 8.1 shows, the findings from both the Guardian and Big Brother fall well short of the normative condition. Indeed, acts of commu-
Conclusion

Communicative empathy were rare, particularly within the Guardian where it occurred only eight times. These findings are consistent with Zhang's (2005) research. However, unlike these findings, within Wife Swap, acts of communicative empathy were more common, satisfying the condition of empathy. As discussed above, this seems to have something to do with the nature of the Wife Swap forum along with the issues discussed in that forum. The issues dealt mostly with parenting and family, touching upon a personal and lifestyle oriented form of politics. Moreover, the communicative practices tended to be supportive, affirming, personal, and encouraging. As was the case for convergence, it seems likely that this type of communicative atmosphere was more conducive to achieving deeper levels of both agreement and understanding.

8.3.2 Structural and dispositional fairness

The first condition of structural and dispositional fairness is discursive equality. It requires an equal distribution of voice within the discussions and substantial equality between participants. One of the most common indicators used by net-based public sphere studies has been the equal distribution of voice measurement. Much of this research has revealed substantial inequalities in the distribution of participation within a variety of forum types, structures, and contexts (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). As Table 8.1 suggests, the findings from both Big Brother and the Guardian are consistent with these studies, falling well short of the normative condition. However, unlike these findings, the distribution of voice and popularity within the Wife Swap forum was egalitarian, more evenly distributed, thus satisfying the normative condition. One possible explanation could be again the issues discussed. It seems that most participants spoke from the point of view as experts; having a family and being parents themselves might have created a communicative space where participants were on a more equal footing, that is, they all had something to contribute. This combined with the supportive, affirming, and encouraging nature of the forum, might have persuaded them to voice that something.

The second indicator of discursive equality is substantial equality. It was gauged by determining the level of passive and active acts of inequality. First, with regard to passive acts of inequality, the level of neglected arguments was examined. In all three forums, though the level of neglected arguments was substantial, the act of neglecting seemed to be random; some arguments simply went unnoticed or noticed but unreciprocated wordlessly. Regarding active acts of inequality, as Table 8.1 shows, all three forums satisfied the condition; acts of degrading were infrequent, which is consistent with past studies (Dahlberg, 2001; Hagemann, 2002; Jensen, 2003; Papacharissi, 2004; Stanley, Weare, & Musso, 2004; Winkler, 2005).

Overall, under discursive equality, the real difference between the three forums was the distribution of voice measurements. Unlike Big Brother and the Guardian
(and past studies), Wife Swap satisfied this condition, thus performing better under discursive equality.

The second condition of structural and dispositional fairness is discursive freedom. It requires that during the course of a discussion participants are free to express their opinions, arguments, and positions. All three forums represented arenas where a variety of arguments and opinions interacted. The level of disagreement and critical reflection was moderate to moderately high and extended critical debate on the issues tended to be the norm (though Big Brother to a lesser degree). However, in the Guardian forum, about a third of the discussions were polarized; almost all participants here expressed anger at the Blair Government with little reciprocal-critical exchange. While in the Wife Swap forum, much of the debate centered on a few political topics. Moreover, the level of agreement and affirmations was significantly higher here than in the other two forums. Consequently, Big Brother hosted the most diversity, not only in opinions, but also in the topics of discussion, which stretched from very institutional, conventional topics to very personal lifestyle-based topics. However, overall, all three forums maintained an adequate level of diversity, which is consistent with Jankowski and Van Os (2004), Schneider (1997), Strandberg (2008), Stromer-Galley (2003) and Tsaliki’s (2002) research, which suggests that diversity is the norm.

Regarding the second component of discursive freedom, active acts of censorship, the analyses for all three forums revealed substantially low levels of curbing. Indeed, curbing tended to be used to enhance political talk rather than impeding it. Thus, all three forums satisfied the condition. Overall, though all three forums satisfied the condition of discursive freedom, it was Big Brother that scored higher. Big Brother was a forum where acts of curbing were rare and where a diverse set of opinions and topics was the norm.

The final condition of structural and dispositional fairness is sincerity. It requires that all claims, arguments, and information in general provided during a discussion be sincere and truthful. The level of actual sincerity was not determined here, but rather, the level of perceived sincerity was assessed by coding for questionable sincerity. As Table 8.1 illustrates, all three forums satisfied the condition, and these findings are consistent with past studies (Dahlberg, 2001b; Zhang, 2005). However, the Guardian’s performance differed here. Unlike the other two forums, when Guardian participants questioned another participant’s sincerity, it usually was directed at their person as opposed to their argument and almost always led to a breakdown in the discussion between those involved, thus impeding political talk.

### 8.3.3 Overview

As reflected in Table 8.1, all three forums scored reasonably well in light of the nine conditions of deliberation. The Guardian forum did exceptionally well under critical reflection, extended debate, and reflexivity. The forum here seemed to foster a
competitive communicative environment, which revolved around providing the best arguments and finding flaws in competing ones. Though the levels were low overall, when Guardian participants did degrade, curb, and/or questioned another particip-

tant’s sincerity, they tended to be personal, aggressive, and even malicious adding to the competitive communicative atmosphere. On the basis of these findings, the Guardian forum seemed to represent a communicative environment centered on winning.

Wife Swap on the other hand, scored the highest with regard to the nine condi-
tions. Unlike both Big Brother and the Guardian, Wife Swap satisfied all the condi-
tions. It performed especially well in relation to convergence, distribution of voice, and to a lesser degree communicative empathy. The personal nature of the topics discussed alongside supportive, affirming, and encouraging communicative practices, which these topics seemed to have instilled, tended to foster discussions oriented towards achieving understanding and agreement.

Finally, on the basis of the above find ings, Big Brother tended to resemble more the Guardian than Wife Swap, though scoring lower for most of the conditions. Unlike the Guardian, it did not fair well regarding reflexivity, however it did score higher than the other two forums regarding discursive freedom; it hosted the most diverse discussions regarding both the opinions and topics discussed. Moreover, unlike the Guardian, Big Brother participants rarely engaged in aggressive and personal attack oriented communicative practices.

8.4 Beyond the normative conditions of deliberation

One of the foci of this study was to move beyond the normative conditions of deliberation by examining the use of expressive speech acts. Note that empathy was included as part of the normative conditions. As discussed in Chapter 2, most deliberative democrats focus solely on the cognitive function of empathy, conse-

quently ignoring its affective function. The aim in this study, normatively speaking, has been to embrace this function of empathy by including it in the normative construct. Furthermore, empathy in some ways acts as a bridge between the norma-
tive conditions presented above and the expressives, which will be discussed hereaf-

ter. Empathy is not an emotion itself per se, but rather, it represents a process whereby participants share emotions, feelings, and attitudes.

As discussed in Chapter 2, there have been some deliberative democrats (and other theorists) who have argued that alternative communicative forms such as expressives should have a place within the deliberative process. However, there have been few studies thus far that analyze expressives within the context of political talk, either off- or especially online. Thus, one of the aims of this study was to provide empirical insight into the role of expressives within the context of online political talk. The underlying research question being addressed here is: What role, if any, do expres-
sives (humor, emotional comments, and acknowledgements) play within online political discussions and in relation to the normative conditions of deliberation?

In all three forums, expressives were a common ingredient of political talk, representing more than a third of the postings in both the Guardian and Big Brother, and in Wife Swap, this was significantly higher with more than half of the postings containing expressives. As Table 8.2 suggests, expressives played a mixed role in relation to political talk. In particular, within the Guardian, the political discussion forum, expressives tended to impede political talk; in Big Brother, the mixed discussion forum, they played an assorted role; while in Wife Swap, the nonpolitical forum, they tended to facilitate political talk. I will now discuss each of the three expressives individually across the three forums and in relation to past literature when applicable. Moreover, I will provide, when relevant, possible explanations as to why these differences between forums have occurred.

With the exception of Wife Swap, humor was the most common expressive used. Unlike in Wife Swap, in the Guardian and even more so in Big Brother, humor overall tended to foster a friendly and sociable communicative atmosphere. That said, the findings revealed that humor played a mixed role when it came to facilitating and/or impeding political talk. In the Guardian, humor, on the one hand, acted as a social lubricant, creating a friendly and playful atmosphere, and was used to enhance and support rational-critical debate. However, on the other hand, humor tended to invite more humor, igniting humor fests, which tended to lead discussions off the topic, and on occasions, when humor was used to express hostility, anger, or offence, it ignited degrading exchanges.

The findings suggest that humor was friendlier within Big Brother than in the Guardian. In particular, humor was infrequently used to express hostility, anger, or offence towards another participant, thus it rarely led to degrading or was used in a degrading way. Instead, humor, which often took the form of banter, acted more as a form of social bonding. Such playful and flirtatious exchanges seemed to unite forum participants creating a sense of shared experiences, which participants would occasionally allude back to during the course of a discussion or later in another thread.

Table 8.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expressives</th>
<th>The Guardian</th>
<th>Big Brother</th>
<th>Wife Swap</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humor</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Neither*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional comments</td>
<td>Impeded</td>
<td>Impeded</td>
<td>Facilitated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>Impeded</td>
<td>Facilitated</td>
<td>Facilitated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>Impeded</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Facilitated</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Humor did little to impede or facilitate political talk here.

The findings suggest that humor was friendlier within Big Brother than in the Guardian. In particular, humor was infrequently used to express hostility, anger, or offence towards another participant, thus it rarely led to degrading or was used in a degrading way. Instead, humor, which often took the form of banter, acted more as a form of social bonding. Such playful and flirtatious exchanges seemed to unite forum participants creating a sense of shared experiences, which participants would occasionally allude back to during the course of a discussion or later in another thread.

See Appendix 25 for a comparative overview of the expressives used.
Conclusion

Unlike the Guardian, humor was sporadically used to support rational-critical debate. Moreover, humor also impeded political talk. Even more so than in the Guardian, humor, and humor fests especially, regularly brought about incoherent political discussions.

Emotional comments were the second most common expressive used within both Big Brother and the Guardian, while in Wife Swap, they were the most frequent expressive, appearing in more than a third of the postings. As Table 8.2 suggests, overall, emotional comments tended to impede political talk rather than enhance it. The main distinction existed between both the Guardian and Big Brother on the one side, with Wife Swap on the other.

In the Guardian, the emotion of choice was overwhelmingly anger. It accounted for more than three-fourths of the emotions expressed. Moreover, anger here was usually raw and intense. Though anger was often expressed via rational-critical debate, given its rawness and intensity, these types of arguments tended to be abrasive, vulgar, and crude. As a result, they often contributed little constructively to the discussions in question. Moreover, anger tended to invite more anger in the form of rant sessions. Here participants engaged less in reciprocal-critical exchange and more in relieving their anger by joining in on a rant with fellow participants. Finally, anger acted as a vehicle of discursive inequality; it was used in a degrading way.

These findings, for the most part, are not consistent with the use of emotions reported in Winkler's study (2005) of an EU sponsored forum. Though the level of emotions expressed was similar between both studies, his analysis suggests that expressions of anger were infrequent, and when they did occur, they were rarely directed towards another forum participant. One possible explanation is that in the Winkler study, he examined a forum which was strictly (pre-) moderated. Thus, participants might have been more inclined to avoid such communicative practices. Another possible explanation might have something to do with the political climate within the UK. The postings examined for this study come from a period where public support for the Blair/Labour government was waning. Indeed, more than a third of emotional comments, which were in the form of anger, were directed towards Tony Blair, Labour MPs, and/or the Labour Government in general. Such a climate may explain why anger was readily available within the Guardian forum. The findings here thus fall more in line with the Conover and Searing (2005) study of everyday political talk via ‘letters to the editor’. They found that discussions on controversial issues often displayed expressions of anger, which frequently led to disrespectful talk and incivility among participants.

Big Brother fared similar when it came to the use of emotional comments with two distinctions. Though anger still represented the emotion of choice, it was substantially lower within Big Brother. Furthermore, anger within Big Brother was rarely directed towards a fellow participant, which was not the case in the Guardian. Consequently, anger was rarely used as a vehicle of discursive inequality. Overall,

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129 See Appendix 26 for a comparative overview of the different types of emotions used.
however, in both cases emotional comments did more to impede political talk as opposed to enhancing it.

In Wife Swap, anger, though still the dominating emotion, was expressed substantially less often than in the other two forums. Moreover, a more diverse set of emotions were expressed by Wife Swap participants, which included an increase in positive emotions. Even more than in the other two forums, emotions tended to invite more emotions in the form of rant sessions. However, they were not always as intense and raw as was the case in the other forums. Indeed, rant sessions, on occasions, were even constructive in relation to the political topics in question. However, these types of sessions offered little in way of critical reciprocal exchange. Anger too was rarely directed towards another forum participant.¹³⁰ Finally, emotions were frequently used in conjunction with arguments. The findings suggest that emotions tended to enhance political talk by providing a sense of genuineness and realness to these arguments.

One possible explanation here for the different role that emotions played between the two sides may have something to do with the topics discussed and the context within which they are set. In the Guardian, nearly half of the political topics discussed dealt with the Labour Government and George Galloway’s politics. Moreover, approximately half of all anger was directed towards either of them. These two factors combined with the political climate at the time in the UK, which saw a growing dissatisfaction by the public with Tony Blair and the Labour Government in general, offer one explanation as to why anger within the Guardian forum was so prevalent and intense. These factors combined with the above findings, which suggest that the Guardian was a competitive communicative space centered on winning, may explain why anger was directed towards fellow participants more often in a more aggressive and malicious way than in the other two forums. In Wife Swap, on the other hand, the topics discussed were more personal. This finding is consistent with findings from research on similar entertainment/fan-based forums (e.g. Van Zoonen, 2005, 2007; Van Zoonen et al., 2007). Participants were speaking about e.g. parenting as a parent while frequently providing life experiences and stories, which were typically laced with emotions in a constructive way. Empathy too was a common feature here whereby participants shared these emotions and feelings. This combined with the above findings, which suggest that these sorts of topics foster a more supporting, affirming, and encouraging communicative environment, offer another explanation as to why emotional comments tended to facilitate political talk within the Wife Swap forum rather than impede it as was the case in the Guardian and Big Brother.

Acknowledgements were the final expressive. Complementing was the most frequently used acknowledgement overall (in Wife Swap thanking was also common).¹³¹ As Table 8.2 suggests, acknowledgements in general usually facilitated

¹³⁰ This does not include the alleged Wife Swap series family members participating in the forum.
¹³¹ See Appendix 27 for a comparative overview of the type of acknowledgements used.
political talk as opposed to impeding it. Whereas in the Guardian, acknowledgements tended to foster polarization between different sides of an argument, in both Big Brother and Wife Swap, acknowledgements tended to foster a more civil, cordial, and encouraging communicative atmosphere, which is similar to the findings found by Barnes (2005) and Barnes, Knops, Newman, and Sullivan (2004). One possible explanation for the difference between forums may have something to do with the findings discussed above. Again, the findings suggest that the Guardian was a forum centered on winning. This competitive nature may explain why participants avoided complimenting across argumentative lines. While in Big Brother and Wife Swap, this seemed to be less of an issue.

Overall, the findings on the role of expressives in political talk were mixed. However, on the basis of these findings, it appears that forums where the topics of discussion are represented by more conventional ‘hot’ issues, which are grounded in a competitive communicative environment, may tend to foster the use of expressives in a more impeding fashion than those forums where the topics of discussion are more personal, which tend to foster a more supportive, affirming, and encouraging communicative space. The latter forum seems to foster the use of expressives in a more facilitating manner with regard to political talk.

8.5 The topic and triggers of political talk

Another focus of this study was to come to an understanding on how the political emerged in the nonpolitically oriented forums of reality television like Big Brother and Wife Swap, and what kind of topics are discussed in these forum types. What is it about Wife Swap that ignites a political discussion? Put differently, what are the triggers (and topics) of political talk within these forums? The underlying research question being addressed here is: How does political talk emerge in nonpolitically oriented discussion forums?

8.5.1 From conventional to lifestyle-based political topics

Political talk was no stranger to both the Big Brother and Wife Swap forums. The topics discussed touched upon a variety of issues dealing with everything from more conventional to more lifestyle-based political topics. When comparing all three forums, a distinct pattern emerges. In the Guardian, almost all the discussions were on conventional, institutional political topics from the Labour Government to George Galloway to immigration and citizenship. When moving to the mixed forum, there is a shift in what is political. More than a third of the topics now touched upon a more lifestyle oriented form of politics, which dealt with issues concerning bullying and codes of conduct, animal rights and conservationism, health and the body, and gender and sexuality. These topics tended to be more individualized and personal. One noticeable trend here was the emergence of personal narratives, though they on
occasions appeared in the Guardian, it was in Big Brother where they became more prominent. It seems that when discussing these topics, participants would bring their life experiences and choices to the debate.

Finally, when moving to the nonpolitically oriented forum of Wife Swap, a shift towards the other direction became clearer. Now a majority of the topics discussed were lifestyle-based political issues. Even when more conventional topics were discussed, like healthcare reform, the discussions themselves were often driven by the life experiences of forum participants, which is consistent with Van Zoonen (2005, 2007) and Van Zoonen's et al. (2007) research and also with Barnes (2005) and Barnes, Knops, Newman, and Sullivan’s (2004) findings from their analyses of offline consultations with women and older people’s groups. The use of life experiences and stories (along with third-person accounts) became common place as these topics touched upon a more personal side of the participants. Given this personal nature, participants began to speak as experts. Topics on parenting and family allowed a parent to utilize his or her experiences from a position of authority, given that they indeed were experts on parenting. In some ways these topics tended to empower some of the participants, providing them an authoritative voice in these debates.

8.5.2 The triggers of political talk

What were the triggers of political talk within these forums? The triggers of political talk were similar between both Big Brother and Wife Swap. Given the size of the Wife Swap sample and the specific focus of the series (on parenting and family) this finding was somewhat surprising. That said, it seems to indicate that triggers of political talk might not vary greatly across the diverse range of reality TV fan forums.

The analyses revealed five triggers for Big Brother and three for Wife Swap. The most common trigger for both forums was behaviors. In Big Brother and Wife Swap, this represented the behaviors of the Big Brother housemates and the behaviors of the participating families respectively. Here the behaviors triggered discussions that centered on morality in the descriptive sense, i.e. on codes of conduct. Forum participants held authoritative positions on what was right and wrong, and when Big Brother housemates or Wife Swap family members broke these codes of conduct, e.g. by bullying, by displaying promiscuous sexual behavior, or by displaying (bad) parenting practices, they questioned, challenged, and debated these behaviors from these positions.

It seems that reality television, its format in particular, is conducive to this type of trigger. From Big Brother to Temptation Island to the Golden Cage, reality television centers on, in some ways, the breaking of, or rather the challenging of, codes of conduct. Is this not one of the attractive qualities of the series? The anger

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132 Both Temptation Island (originally broadcasted in the USA) and the Golden Cage (a Dutch series) are reality TV series. Their controversial formats are known for challenging moral codes of conduct.
that stirred up among forum participants (and audiences in general) when Pete Burns bullied Chantelle, or the disgust and contempt that forum participants expressed after watching Jodie Marsh flaunt her body, or maybe it was the ‘cringe’ forum participants felt after watching George Galloway pretend to be a cat drinking milk and later wearing a leotard. Indeed, it seems that reality television forums are the place to look, if one is looking for a debate on codes of conduct, on morality.

The second common trigger between the forums was lifestyles. In Wife Swap, this was the family lifestyles and values of the participating families from the series, while in Big Brother, this was the lifestyles, images, and identities of the Big Brother housemates. Jodie Marsh’s lifestyle choice of being a vegetarian, for example, triggered discussions on animal rights and the fur trade. However, the lifestyles trigger here was more than particular lifestyle choices of consumption, entertainment, and/or dress. The individual attitudes, values, or worldviews of Big Brother housemates ignited various political discussions as well. For example, Dennis Rodman’s ‘bad boy’ attitude led to a discussion on individuality, which eventually ignited a political discussion on the qualities of a good leader. Finally, the lifestyles trigger here was not always about a particular image put across by one of the housemates or participating family members voluntarily. In some cases, the images and lifestyles associated with a particular profession held by one of the housemates or family members ignited a political discussion. For example, in Big Brother, given the presence of two models in the house, discussions on images associated with the ‘model’ (drugs and anorexia) sparked political debates on health and body, drugs and British youth, and sexism. Again, reality television formats seem to be conducive to these types of political discussions because producers tend to select diverse e.g. housemates and families, which tend to hold diverging lifestyles as a means of producing a ‘lively’ series. It is the contestation of these conflicting lifestyle choices, which take place between housemates in the series, between housemates and forum participants, and between forums participants themselves, which triggers political talk.

The final common trigger between the two forums was debates in the media. Fans of reality TV seem to want to know what is going on with their series in general and the particular housemates involved in those series. In both forums, there was the practice of posting articles, mostly from British newspapers, which usually touched upon a certain aspect of one of the housemate’s lives outside the realm of the particular series. In all cases here, the articles in question reflected political debate that was already taking place within the media, which now ignited a political discussion within the forums. Thus, unlike the above two triggers where, for the most part, the political discussions emerged in the forums themselves, in these cases, the political debate represents an overflow from political talk already taking place in the media.

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133 It was the second and third most common in Wife Swap and Big Brother respectively.

134 It was the third and fourth most common in Wife Swap and Big Brother respectively.
Chapter 8

The second most common trigger within Big Brother (minus Wife Swap) was the statements and discussions taking place within the Big Brother house. This trigger might have been aided by the presence of George Galloway, British MP. That said, the discussions between other housemates (Galloway free) ignited political debates within the forums on e.g. animal rights, immigration, and racism. In other words, political discussions fairly often take root between housemates within the Big Brother series that touch upon a variety of political issues. But is this really a surprise, given the behaviors and diverse lifestyles of the housemates; if this ignited debates among forum participants then why not Big Brother housemates.

Finally, there was one last trigger of political talk in Big Brother (again minus Wife Swap). There were two instances when the political emerged immediately. Here, politics itself was the trigger of the political talk that followed. Participants here began a thread with the intent of discussing politics, as Guardian participants did.

Overall, it seems that the reality television format of Celebrity Big Brother and Wife Swap, and possibly in general, are conducive in igniting and fostering a range of political debates that touch upon both conventional and lifestyle-base political issues. In particular, if we are looking for debates that touch upon morality code of conduct or lifestyles choices, these types of forums might be a fruitful place to look.

8.6 Reflection, implications, and recommendations

In the Guardian forum, it was about politics. Nearly all the topics of discussion were political, while in both Big Brother and Wife Swap this was often not the case. However, when participants from these two nonpolitically oriented (or mixed) forums did engage in political talk, they too, particularly Wife Swap, performed well in relation to many of the conditions of deliberation. Overall, the results from above are somewhat of a surprise in comparison to my initial assumptions at the beginning of this study. The performance of Wife Swap in particular with regard to both the normative conditions and expressives was indeed unexpected, specifically regarding the former. Consequently, some critical reflection on the normative conditions specifically and on the analyses in general is warranted.

One might argue that a possible explanation for Wife Swap’s performance is a result of the normative framework, e.g. the choice of conditions. There may be those deliberative scholars who take a more traditional approach to deliberation that might dismiss this finding by pointing to certain conditions as inappropriate. For example, one of the areas where Wife Swap performed best was under the condition of empathy. As discussed in Chapter 2, most deliberative democrats and net-based public sphere researchers have neglected empathy altogether, and those who have considered it focus mostly on its cognitive rather than its affective function. Given the nature of the Wife Swap forum, it was certainly the affective side of empathy, which participants communicated. If this condition was dismissed, then the difference between Wife Swap and the Guardian’s performance would not be as great.
Conclusion

However, I believe that empathy is a crucial component within the process of achieving understanding, both its cognitive and affective functions. This is particularly true when discussions touch upon a more lifestyle-based form of politics. These topics often blend notions of the private and public, which call for more than just a reflexive mindset. As the Wife Swap forum has demonstrated, these types of discussions touch upon a more personal side of politics where participants often bring life stories, experiences, and lessons to the debate. It seems that communicative empathy within such a context adds to the building of trust and solidarity among participants, which leads to a more productive communicative environment, a more deliberative one. Such communicative spaces demand a deeper level of understanding—that of empathetic considerations. This is not to say that the Guardian and similar forums do not require deeper levels of understanding, they do. However, it seems that the ‘political’ topics discussed foster a more competitive communicative environment and disposition among participants, making deeper levels of understanding more difficult to achieve (and/or to communicate this as such). Indeed, discussion forums similar to Wife Swap might offer researchers and practitioners insight into developing future online deliberative initiatives oriented towards deeper levels of understanding.

This distinction begs the question of whether or not we as researchers should treat these conditions as equal. Should empathy be as important in politically oriented discussion forums like the Guardian, or should this condition be reserved for the genre of forums similar to Wife Swap? As discussed in the conclusion of Chapter 3, there are a variety of forum forms, types, genres, and contexts available online. Given this diversity, I do not want to pretend to have the answer to this question. However, these three cases (the Guardian, Big Brother, and Wife Swap) do offer insight. The genre and context of the forum does matter. Though more research is still needed, politically oriented forums like the Guardian, where the issues of political talk tend to touch upon conventional, institutional political topics, seem to foster a competitive communicative atmosphere, which seems to make achieving agreement and deeper levels of understanding more difficult. Moreover, such forums have no prescribed formal agendas or formal commitment to achieving such agreement (or understanding), unlike e-juries or e-consultations; consequently, it might not be readily available under such conditions. I caution researchers’ expectations, rather than having them dismiss the conditions outright, on how they go about assessing these conditions in these particular spaces. For example, we might want to lower our expectations on the level of convergence, normatively speaking, within everyday informal discussion forums similar to the Guardian. Moreover, as indicated above, more research, particularly research into other forum genres such as Wife Swap, may provide practitioners additional insight into fostering a communicative environment more conducive to achieving agreement and understanding.

There are a cluster of conditions, based on the findings from this study, that are crucial to deliberation within any type, genre, or context, which include rational-critical debate, extended debate, coherence, reciprocity, and reflexivity. First, rational-
critical debate is a central condition of political talk within the public sphere. It is through the exchange of claims within everyday life whereby citizens learn, discover, challenge, question, and try to understand different positions and arguments on how they as a society should move forward. However, it would be a mistake to think that the exchange of claims can be identified by a particular communicative form, i.e. rationality via argumentation. Political talk is not only about argumentation but it is also about everyday citizens talking to each other in ways that make sense to them, which might require other communicative forms. As political talk from Wife Swap has demonstrated, storytelling may be as effective way to talk politics as the use of ‘proper’ argumentation. The exchange of claims therefore should not be bound exclusively to this ‘proper’ communicative form.

Second, extended debate is another important condition to political talk. Extended debate also requires and implies coherence, i.e. extended debate only occurs when participants stick to the topic of discussion. Both conditions are crucial here. The findings from all three forums indicated the importance of extended debate (and consequently coherence) in relation to achieving convergence and fostering a reflexive mindset. It seems that debates need time to progress via the exchange of critical claims before agreement or deeper levels of understanding may be achieved. Thus, researchers should not neglect these conditions, and practitioners should aim at finding ways to facilitate them.

Third, reciprocity is another key ingredient to political talk. Quite simply, political talk is a social process. It requires that participants listen and respond to one another. If this does not occur, it is not political talk. Finally, reflexivity is another key condition of deliberation. The findings from this study suggest the importance of reflexivity in relation to convergence and empathetic exchanges. It seems reflexivity may, at times, act as a prerequisite to empathetic considerations during the course of political talk. However, more research is needed here to test these findings before any conclusions can be drawn. Regardless, net-based public sphere researchers should not neglect reflexivity, which has been the case, for the most part, in the past.

This question on whether the conditions are equal leads us to the more specific question of how to assess such conditions normatively speaking. In particular, when does a discussion forum satisfy the normative condition of rationality? What are the cut-off points? Does a forum where 50% of the claims are reasoned satisfy the condition of rationality? Or does it require 60% or maybe 75%? As discussed in Chapter 4, there have been no real attempts among either theorists and/or empirically-based researchers here, yet some speak of this forum maintaining high levels and that forum being deliberative. This study has attempted to provide an initial step. First, for reciprocity (reflexivity and convergence to a lesser degree), I have provided specific criteria for assessment, i.e. specific cut-offs. Second, though cut-offs are not provided for all conditions, I do provide the criteria for establishing such decisions. Third, the comparative nature of this study provides additional insight for future research in developing such cut-offs. Finally, I do make normative judgments by indicating which forum satisfied the conditions. Though explicit cut-offs were not
Conclusion

specified, it does provide a basis whereby future research may build upon, and some indication as to where one might specify such assessment points. One of the difficulties with coming up with such an explicit account is due to the arbitrariness of such cut-offs. That said, as more empirical data become available and as more researchers operationalize and contend with such conditions, our ability to make more informed cut-offs specifically and assessments in general will be greatly enhanced.

In addition to normative implications, there are several empirical, theoretical, and methodological implications of this study worth discussing here. First, the results from both Big Brother and Wife Swap indicate, along with research by Van Zoonen (2005, 2007) and Van Zoonen et al. (2007), that political talk is not exclusively reserved for politically oriented discussion forums. These two forums hosted a variety of political discussions, which also contributed, like the Guardian, to the web of informal conversations that constitutes the public sphere. Consequently, those net-based public sphere researchers who are interested in examining and investigating everyday political talk need to take a more inclusive approach to the forums they select by stop privileging politically oriented forums. Such privileging not only provides us with an incomplete picture, but also a distorted one, as the Wife Swap forum and the Big Brother forum to a lesser degree have shown, both the political topics and the way those topics are discuss seem to vary between forum genres.

Second, the findings from this study not only suggest that we need to be more inclusive when it comes to the forums we select, we also need to be more encompassing about what constitutes the ‘political’ in political talk. As both the Big Brother and Wife Swap forums have shown, political talk is not always grounded in an institutional and conventional notion of politics. Politics within the everyday communicative spaces of the public sphere may be personal, and more importantly, it is through such talk that citizens can bridge their personal experiences with society at large. As Van Zoonen et al. (2007, p. 336) have argued, “[S]ince the everyday reality of making sense of politics is usually rooted in people’s subjective experiences, political theory and research must come to terms with those subjectivities”. Moreover, the public sphere is the place where new issues and concerns about society emerge (and should be allowed to emerge), an arena where the ‘political’ in political talk is constantly changing, though usually not very quickly. A restrictive definition of political talk in essence goes against the ideals and the purpose of the public sphere in the first place. Moreover, as discussed in the introduction of this dissertation, given the increasing inabilities of traditional institutions and structures in coping with new uncertainties brought on by e.g. globalization, such flexibility seems to be imperative to any notion of the political today within the public sphere. In short, by not taking these points into account, we run the risk of missing what politics is really about today for everyday citizens in contemporary societies.

Third, the findings from this study regarding expressives have theoretical implications on the notion of deliberation specifically. In all three forums, expressives were a common ingredient of everyday political talk. Neglecting these communicative forms is not an option if our aim is to provide a better understanding of how
people talk politics or if it is to assess the democratic value of such talk online. In all three forums, expressives both impeded and facilitated political discussions. Though it is difficult to prescribe what role expressives should play within political talk at large (more research is needed), it seems that when the topics of discussion touch upon a more lifestyle-based form of politics, expressives play a more prominent role, enhancing political talk rather than impeding it. This finding suggests that we as researchers should not be dismissing such communicative forms as irrational. In fact, based on the Wife Swap case, one could make a strong argument that emotional expressions and other communicative forms such as storytelling and acknowledgments play a crucial role in facilitating political talk and thus should be included in any normative account. The Wife Swap forum illustrates that emotions can make a distinct contribution to the use of reasoning within everyday political talk.

Finally, given the textual focus of this study, there are limitations as to what can be said about certain conditions of deliberation and even on the role of expressives. As argued throughout Chapter 3, certain conditions of deliberation require more than an analysis of the text. Though the indicators created and utilized in this study for reflexivity, discursive equality, discursive freedom, and perceived sincerity proved useful and effective, ideally such conditions require a mixed method approach. They require a combination of an analysis of the text alongside methods that gauge participants’ experiences, perceptions, and feelings such as interviews or questionnaires. It is this mixed approach that represents the way forward for creating more comprehensive indicators of deliberation for the future.

8.7 What’s Wife Swap got to do with it?

If one is interested in investigating the everyday informal political talk crucial to the public sphere, then Wife Swap has everything to do with it. Wife Swap was a communicative space where participants not only engaged in political talk, they also engaged in *deliberative* political talk. It was a space where the use of expressives played a key role in enhancing and facilitating such talk. It was a space where the mixing of the private and public was the norm, a space where participants took personal experiences and life lessons and bridged them to society at large, fostering a more personal and lifestyle-based form of politics. All of this seemed to foster a communicative environment that was about learning rather than winning or convincing. It was an environment that seemed to promote solidarity rather than polarization among participants. All in all, it seems that Eliasoph (2000, pp. 82-83) was right when she suggested that communicative spaces organized around family and parenting may be fruitful spaces for “cultivating deep citizenship”. As she states, “If political conversation is happening anywhere, these are likely places to look […] for cultivation of that personal, deep citizenship that theorists describe”. We can no longer afford to neglect such communicative spaces offline or online because if we do we will end up knowing very little about what is taking place in the public sphere.