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Everyday Political Talk in the Internet-Based Public Sphere

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Everyday Political Talk in the Internet-Based Public Sphere

Ever since the advent of the Internet, political communication scholars have debated its potential to facilitate and support public deliberation as a means of revitalizing and extending the public sphere (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Dahlberg, 2001a; Dahlgren, 2005; Papacharissi, 2002; Sunstein, 2002). In a time of growing cynicism and disillusionment towards politics, we have seen across Western democracies erosions of trust and engagement in political and media systems (see e.g. Brants, 2012; Coleman, 2012; Coleman & Blumler, 2009). As Blumler and Coleman (2001) argue, the current political communication structures that make up the public sphere are poorly serving certain democratic values, such as “opportunities for committed advocacy, rounded dialogue, sustained deliberation, and especially the provision of incentives for citizens to learn, choose, and become involved in, rather than merely to follow and kibbitz over, the political process” (p. 8). The belief that the Internet may play a significant role in reducing some of this deliberative deficit has generated significant interest in the possible benefits and drawbacks of online communication. Much of the debate has focused on the medium’s potential in offering communicative spaces that transcend the limitations of time, space and access (and the traditional mass media) whereby open communication, deliberation and exchange of information among the public can prosper.

Following the initial enthusiasm over the possibilities of a more interactive and deliberative electorate, along with the cyber-pessimist response, a growing body of rich empirical research into online deliberation has arisen in its wake. In search of online deliberation, scholars have conducted a broad range of investigations, developing several prominent directions in the field. One popular line of research has been the study of informal political talk through the lens of public sphere ideals. Drawing from the work of Jürgen Habermas and other deliberative

democratic theorists (e.g. Barber, 1984; Bohman, 1996; Dryzek, 2000), researchers have analysed and assessed the extent to which various online forums and communicative practices approximate deliberative ideals.

Why should scholars bother studying everyday political talk online? The focus on such talk is based on the belief that at the heart of civic culture should be a talkative public and that the Internet affords citizens the communicative space necessary to rehearse and debate the pressing political and societal issues of the day. It is through ongoing participation in informal political talk whereby citizens become aware of other opinions, discover the important issues of the day, test new ideas, and develop and clarify their preferences. It is such talk, which takes place over time and across different spaces that prepare citizens, the public sphere and the political system at large for political action. Thus, understanding political talk that occurs in these spaces is necessary because of its links with the deliberative system in general and other forms of political engagement specifically.

The aim of this chapter is to detail and discuss this growing body of research and its significance. First, I begin by discussing what scholars mean by political talk and why it is thought to be essential for (a more deliberative) democracy. Following this, the major findings to date are set out focusing specifically on three of the most common features of political talk investigated by scholars in the field. I discuss scholarly disagreement and offer my thoughts and critical reflection on the topic. Finally, the chapter ends with several recommendations for future research into informal political talk in the Internet-based public sphere.

Why Everyday Political Talk Matters

One of the most common questions I am asked when explaining my research to students is: why study everyday political talk? As one of my former students reacted, “It’s just talk, right? It’s not as though it really leads to anything meaningful”. Many of us are even taught to avoid discussing politics.¹ So then, why does everyday political talk matter? In order to address this question, we first need to situate the role of political talk within the broader notion of the public sphere.

The concept of the public sphere has become synonymous with the work of Habermas, ([1962] 1989) initially developed in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. His evolving theory (1984, 1987, 1990, 1996, 2006), which is situated within the broader theory of deliberative democracy, provides, as Dahlberg argues (2004), one of the richest and most systematically developed critical theories of the public sphere. It is conceptualized as the realm of social life – separate from political and economic interests – where the exchange of information, ideas and positions on the discovery and questions of common good take place. The public sphere “springs into being” when private citizens come together freely to debate openly the political and social issues of the day. Central to the concept is the promotion and cultivation of rational-critical discourse through the active reasoning of the public. It is through the on-going development of such discourse that public opinion is formed, which in turn guides the political system.

In contemporary societies, however, the public sphere is highly complex and opinion formation occurs in a variety of interacting publics across a multitude of spaces at varying levels. As Habermas (1996) himself states:

It represents a highly complex network that branches out into a multitude of overlapping international, national, regional, local, and subcultural arena. Functional specifications,

thematic foci, policy fields, and so forth, provide the points of reference for a substantive differentiation of public spheres that are, however, still accessible to laypersons (for example, popular science and literary publics, religious and artistic publics, feminist and “alternative” publics, publics concerned with health-care issues, social welfare, or environmental policy). Moreover, the public sphere is differentiated into levels according to the density of communication, organizational complexity, and range – from the episodic publics found in taverns, coffee houses, or on the streets, through the occasional or ‘arranged’ publics of particular presentations and events, such as theatre performances, rock concerts, party assemblies, or church congresses; up to the abstract public sphere of isolated readers, listeners, and viewers scattered across larger geographic areas, or even around the globe, and brought together only through mass media. (pp. 373–374)

Even with such complexity, the public sphere or rather the network of public spheres can be conceptualized via four fundamental conditions.²

First, it needs active citizens who engage not only in institutional forms of political participation, such as voting, but, more importantly, in public deliberation on the relevant societal and political issues of the day. Second, it requires autonomous communicative spaces (free from both state and commercial influence) whereby citizens can engage freely and openly in public deliberation. Third, it requires the mass media. Journalism’s role is not only to fuel public debate by providing information and keeping a critical eye on government and corporate affairs, but also to encourage, facilitate and act as a platform for it. Finally, there is deliberation, the guiding communicative form of the public sphere, which stipulates the structural, procedural and dispositional requirements of the process.

Now, we should make the distinction between (formal) deliberation on one hand and everyday political talk on the other. For many scholars, deliberation is a normative concept, which is guided by the principle of rationality based on a set of norms and rules oriented towards the common good aimed at achieving a rationally motivated consensus. However, this kind of deliberation seems inappropriate for the everyday commutative spaces of the public sphere. Such spaces are not bound to any formal agendas or outcomes, and political talk that emerges in these spaces is often spontaneous and tends to lack any direct purpose outside the purpose of talk for talk's sake. Unlike deliberation within public decision-making bodies, everyday political talk is not necessarily aimed at decision-making or other forms of political action, but rather is often expressive in nature (Mansbridge, 1999, p. 212).

However, everyday political talk is not meaningless simply because it does not typically lead to immediate or direct political action. On the contrary, there is a growing body of evidence that suggests talking about politics can increase levels of political knowledge, civic engagement, exposure and tolerance to differencing perspectives, and facilitate preference change (Bennett, Flickinger, & Rhine, 2000; Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Conover, Searing, & Crewe, 2001; Eveland, 2004; Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999; McClurg, 2003; Monnoyer-Smith, 2006; Price & Cappella, 2002). It is through such talk whereby citizens achieve mutual understanding about each other and the political and societal problems (and solutions) they face. It is the web of informal political conversations conducted over time and across and between the multitude of levels and spaces, which fosters public opinion, preparing citizens and the political system at large for political action.³

Analysing and Assessing Online Political Talk

Over the past two decades, the field of online deliberation has developed into one of the central areas of interest among research on the public sphere and deliberative democracy. It now covers a variety of research agendas, which include comparisons between face-to-face and online deliberation (Wojcieszak, Baek & Delli Carpini, 2009; Baek, Wojcieszak, & Delli Carpini, 2012); the use of online consultations (Albrecht, 2006; Åström & Grönlund, 2012; Coleman, 2004; Fishkin, 2009; Karlsson, 2012; Kies, 2010; Winkler, 2005); moderation and the design of forums (Bendor, Lyons, & Robinson, 2012; Edwards, 2002; Wright, 2009; Wright & Street, 2007); the extent to which forums facilitate contact between opposing perspectives (Brundidge, 2010; Stromer-Galley, 2003; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009); and the effects of online deliberation on civic engagement (Price & Cappella, 2002). One of the most popular lines of research, however, has been the study of informal political talk through the lens of deliberative ideals.

Researchers have investigated informal political talk in a variety of online forums, which include (Usenet) newsgroups (Davis, 2005; Hill & Hughes, 1998; Papacharissi, 2004; Schneider, 1997; Wilhelm, 1999; Zhang, Cao, & Tran, 2013); news media sponsored forums – newspapers (Graham, 2010b; Schutz, 2000; Strandberg, 2008; Tanner, 2001; Tsaliki, 2002); forums hosted by political parties and governments – excluding e-consultations (Dunne, 2009; Graham & Witschge, 2003; Hagemann, 2002; Jankowski & Van Os, 2004; Winkler, 2005); online deliberative initiatives (Dahlberg, 2001b); comparisons between different types (Brants, 2002; Graham, 2011; Jensen, 2003); third spaces – non-political forums (Graham, 2008, 2010a, 2012a); other platforms such as chat (Stromer-Galley & Martinson, 2009), blogs (Koop & Jansen, 2009) and readers' comments (Graham, 2012b; Ruiz, Domingo, Micó, & Díaz-Noci, 2011); and social media network sites such as Facebook and YouTube (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Robertson, Vatrappu, & Medina, 2010).⁴ Studies here focus on measuring the deliberativeness of

political talk as a means of determining the extent to which the Internet is conducive to (particular) conditions of deliberation. Namely, researchers construct a set of criteria that embody the ideal of deliberation, which are then operationalized into measurable concepts and employed in an empirical analysis. Habermas's work – especially his theory of communicative rationality and discourse ethics – has been highly influential in this process. However, there has been a lack of consistency among researchers regarding the conditions used for evaluation, which is partly due to different interpretations of Habermas's work.⁵ This has made making comparisons between findings difficult, along with the different contexts and types of forums analysed. Despite this, we can categorize the criteria used into four elements of deliberation: the communicative form, dispositional requirements, norms (e.g. of equality and diversity) and outcomes.⁶

First, scholars have been consumed by measuring the quality of rational-critical debate (see e.g. Graham, 2008; Graham & Witschge, 2003; Jensen, 2003; Kies, 2010; Stromer-Galley, 2007; Wilhelm, 1999). Researchers have focused on various elements such as gauging the level and quality of rationality, critical reflection, types of argumentation and the use of supporting evidence. There has also been a focus on coherence (thematic consistency) of online debates and the extent to which arguments are grounded in the common good as opposed to particular interests. Second, researchers have investigated the dispositional requirements of listening and understanding. As Barber (1984) maintains, deliberation requires “listening as well as speaking, feeling as well as thinking and acting as well as reflecting” (p. 178). Studies have analysed the level of reciprocity: the extent to which participants read and reply to each other's posts. Some have investigated deeper levels of understanding such reflexivity and empathy. Third, another popular element has been the (social) norms of deliberation. Online debates have been assessed

for discursive equality (e.g. distribution of participation, acts of inequality and mutual respect), diversity of opinions and the level of sincerity. Finally, scholars have attempted to analyse the outcomes of online debates by measuring the level of continuity (extended debate), commissive speech acts (acknowledging the better argument) and convergence of opinions. We will now take a closer look at three of the most commonly used conditions, which are reciprocity, discursive equality and diversity of opinions.

Reciprocity

Reciprocity has been one of the most common conditions operationalized by scholars. Although there are some variations in its conceptualization (as discussed below), simply put, it requires participants to listen and respond to each other. As Schneider (1997) states, “Reciprocity is an important consideration in assessing the public sphere because it indicates the degree to which participants are actually interacting with each other, and working on identifying their own interests with those of the group, as opposed to talking past each other or engaging in simple bargaining or persuasion” (p. 105).

Early commentators questioned whether the Internet would facilitate or impede reciprocal exchange. Kolb (1996), for example, argued that the rhythm of the Internet is ideal for Habermasian dialogue. The asynchronous nature of forums affords participants the time needed to read and react to arguments of other participants. Other scholars were less than optimistic. Streck (1998), for example, argued that the Internet “elevates the right to speak above all others, and all but eliminates the responsibility to listen” (pp. 45–46). Similarly, Schultz (2000) maintained, “A new discipline is required since the Internet involves a great temptation to publish and communicate too much, which consequently weakens the overall significance and

excludes many people just because they cannot keep up and cannot get through the dense communicative jungle” (p. 219).

Early empirical research into the level of reciprocal exchange indicated that online discussion forums tended foster shouting matches. With less than one of five messages representing a reply, Wilhelm (1999) concluded that rather than listening participants of Usenet newsgroups used the forums to amplify their own views. Davis (2005) similarly concluded that “people often talk past one another when they are not verbally attacking each other” (p. 67). Research by Hagemann (2002), Jankowski and Van Os (2004) and Strandberg (2008) all revealed similar findings. Most of the empirical evidence, however, suggests a different story; political talk online tends to be reciprocal (Brants, 2002; Dahlberg, 2001b; Jensen, 2003; Papacharissi, 2004; Schneider, 1997; Tsaliki, 2002; Winkler, 2005). My own research, which has covered a variety of forum types from news media message boards to political talk in third spaces, has revealed that participants tend to engage with each other rather than talk past one another (Graham, 2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2012a; Graham & Witschge, 2003; Graham & Wright, 2013). For example, my analysis of over 3000 posts from the reader comment sections of the Guardian found that more than half of the posts were engaged in reciprocal exchange, which was typically rational and critical in nature (Graham, 2012b).

The conflicting findings can partly be explained by differing conceptualizations of reciprocity. For some scholars, it took on a broader meaning and included the dispositional require of reflexivity. These studies reported a lower level of reciprocity, which is no surprise given the (more demanding) requirements (e.g. Hagemann, 2002; Jankowski & Van Os, 2004). In other cases, the concept was attached to the communicative form (rational-critical debate) and was too narrow in focus. For example, Strandberg (2008) assessed reciprocity by measuring the

level of messages coded as questions thereby excluding other types of responses. Moreover, many of the studies counted messages as replies based solely on the structural markers of the forum (e.g. posts embedded in other posts) without reading the content of the posts.

Consequently, it is unclear whether participants were actually listening. Furthermore, most studies do not take the context of the thread into account, coding simply at the level of the post. This is problematic because, for example, all messages in a thread could be replies, but replies to the seed post, falling well short of the deliberative ideal (see Graham, 2008).

Discursive equality

Discursive equality, not to be mistaken for inclusion (i.e. access to the debate), refers to the normative claim that all participants are equal. It requires: the rules and guidelines that coordinate and maintain the process of deliberation to not privilege one individual or group of individuals over another; participants to have an equal opportunity to express their views and question the position of others; and participants to respect and recognize each other as having an equal voice and standing within this process. Past studies have typically focused on two aspects: analysing the formal and informal rules and management of those rules for acts of exclusion and inequality; and identifying communicative exclusions and inequalities that occur in communicative practices. The former being applied in many e-consultation studies (and those that focus on design). The latter being the primary focus for analysing informal political talk.

For some early commentators, the Internet's ability to allow for anonymity and the break down social cues was seen as liberating. As Agre (2002) explains, "Conventional markers of social difference (gender, ethnicity, age, rank) are likewise held to be invisible, and consequently it is contended that the ideas in an online message are evaluated without the prejudices that afflict face-to-face interaction" (p. 314). However, these same liberating characteristics were

viewed by others in a less promising light. For example, Barber (1998) questioned whether deliberation within the public sphere could be “rekindled on the net, where identities can be concealed and where flaming and other forms of incivility are regularly practiced” (p. 269). Issues concerning deception and flaming gained much attention.

In the past, discursive equality has been examined from two angles: distribution of voice and substantial equality. First, the most common measurement has been the equal distribution of voice indicator. Researchers measure the number of participants along with their share of the postings thereby determining the concentration of participation. Forums that maintain a distribution of voice skewed towards a small group of frequent posters are considered discursively unequal because they threaten the participatory opportunities of other participants. One of the most common findings is that online forums typically feature highly active minorities of content creators (Brants, 2002; Dahlberg, 2001b; Dunn, 2009, Graham, 2010a, 2010b; Jankowski & Van Os, 2004; Jensen, 2003; Koop & Jansen, 2009; Robertson et al., 2010; Schultz, 2000; Winkler, 2005). For example, Schneider’s (1997) analysis of newsgroups found that only 5% of participants accounted for 80% of the messages, indicating substantial inequalities in the rate and distribution of participation.

The problem with many of these studies, as Scott Wright and I have argued elsewhere (2013), is that they tend to make assumptions about the behaviour of active minorities (super participants): they dictate the agenda and style of debate. However, most studies do not examine in any great detail (if at all) their communicative practices (outside the frequency of participation). On those rare occasions when researchers have analysed the communicative practices of active minorities, they have found their impact to be largely positive (Albrecht, 2006; Kies, 2010). For example, our research found that contrary to conceived wisdom, most did

not attempt to stop other users from posting or attack them, but rather they performed a range of positive roles including helping other users; summarizing longer threads; being empathetic towards others' problems; and engaging in (largely) rational-critical debate (Graham & Wright, 2013).

Second, substantial equality requires that participants respect and recognize each other as having an equal voice and standing in the deliberative process. One common approach has been to analyse forums for acts of exclusion and inequality through identifying instances of aggressive and abusive posting behaviour. Hill and Hughes (1998), for example, examined newsgroups for flaming: "personal, ad hominem attacks that focus on the individual poster not the ideas of the message" (p. 52). They found that more than a third of all threads ended in "flame-fests". Studies conducted by Davis (2005), Jankowski and Van Os (2004), Wilhelm (1999) and Zhang et al. (2013) all report similar findings, pointing to anonymity, and the lack of norms and moderation as the contributing factors to such behaviour (see also Strandberg, 2008).

However, we need to be careful when using these findings as an indicator of the state of informal political talk online. First, these studies focus almost exclusively on newsgroups (and very partisan ones at that), which have a reputation of being attack orientated (Wright, 2012a). Many of these studies too were conducted during the late 90s. A time when net-etiquette and communicative norms were just developing (and the number of Internet users was significantly lower). Moreover, once we move away from partisan-based newsgroups, a somewhat different picture emerges. For example, my own research of reader comment sections and reality TV, news media and government sponsored forums found that in all cases degrading exchanges – to lower in character, quality, esteem or rank another participant and/or participant's position – represented less than 15% of posts (Graham, 2010a, 2010b, 2012a, 2012b; Graham & Witschge,

2003; Graham & Wright, 2013). These findings are supported by other studies of various forum types (Hagemann, 2002; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Jensen, 2003; Papacharissi, 2004; Ruiz et al., 2011; Winkler, 2005).

Diversity of opinion

One common concern since the arrival of the Internet has been the fragmentation of the public sphere. The most prominent advocate of this position is Cass Sunstein (2002). He claims that because the Internet eliminates geographical boundaries and makes it easier for individuals with similar views to find one another that this will lead to echo chambers of like-minded individuals, thus fostering the polarization of opinions and widening the gap between extreme positions. Do Internet forums foster homogeneity or diversity of opinions?

As we might expect, the findings reveal a somewhat mixed account. Wilhelm's (1999) study, for example, concluded that newsgroups represented "communities of interest, virtual gathering places in which those people who share a common interest can discuss issues without substantial transaction or logistical costs" (p. 171). Similar findings were reported by Davis (2005) and Hill and Hughes (1998). Conversely, several other studies of newsgroups and/or news media message boards found that such spaces hosted a diversity of opinions (Graham, 2011; Schneider, 1997; Strandberg, 2008; Tsaliki, 2002). For example, Stromer-Galley's (2003) interviews with participants revealed that people not only meet and engage with different points of view online, but also actively seek it out.

One of the problems with the debate surrounding the diversity of opinion (and the empirical evidence) is that almost all the commentary and studies focus on political communicative spaces. However, informal political talk is not bound to these spaces. For example, my analysis of the Big Brother and Wife Swap forums found that such spaces not only

hosted political talk (accounting for 22% and 32% of the postings respectively), but also a diversity of opinions (Graham, 2010a, 2012a; see also Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). Participants of third spaces are not there to talk politics. Therefore, when it does emerge, the chances are for greater diversity of opinions (Graham & Harju, 2011). Thus, the fragmentation theory makes little sense once we move beyond the political communicative landscape. It is beyond such spaces where political discussion grounded in diversity is more likely to be found.

Another problem with this debate is that it puts too much emphasis on the exchange of dissimilar perspectives when analysing individual cases thereby neglecting the deliberative system; i.e. there is room for online spaces that foster both diversity and uniformity of opinions. Contact with opposing perspectives is certainly necessary, but it does not always need to happen at the level of the forum. It can also occur between various discourses that develop online in the so-called enclaves of like-minded individuals. Moreover, these spaces allow minority discourses to develop. For example, some theorists have argued that political talk in such spaces allows for the development of in-group strategies and narratives, thus increasing the chance that some discourses are expressed publicly (see e.g. Barber, 1984; Fraser, 1990; Mansbridge, 1999).

Conclusion

A decade ago, Lincoln Dahlberg (2004) reflected critically on the state of online deliberation research, calling for a new agenda that would move “beyond the first phase” of empirical analysis. Since then we have not only seen an increase in the number of studies, but also the development of new and the fine tuning of past approaches. As a result, the field has blossomed, expanding our knowledge of the phenomena and developing into one of the main areas of interest among research on the public sphere and deliberative democracy.

However, with the rise of social media and the participatory culture that has followed in its wake, the need to develop innovative ways of studying everyday political talk is apparent. Although the field has grown, much of the research still, for example, focuses on case studies of discussion forums; research which explores political talk on new social media networks, and more importantly, across networks is scant. Regarding the latter, we need to start investigating the flow and clash of discourses that take place online (and offline, and between the two), examining the connections and relationships between different discursive spaces.⁷ This type of research is already on its way, though usually not grounded in deliberative ideals. For example, there has been innovative work on the flow of discourse between the Twittersphere and mainstream news media (see e.g. Broersma & Graham, 2012). One possible way forward is to analyse how a particular issue develops and flows across several networks, tracking and examining the overflow and clash of discourses between them. This type of research would provide us much needed insight into the (online) deliberative system.

Another priority should be to explore the extent to which online political talk contributes to meaningful political action. As Coleman and Moss (2012) have argued, “for most online deliberation researchers it seems as if the political process ends when civic talk stops” (p. 11). Does engaging in political talk within such spaces support a movement towards participation in the formal political process? What we need to take online deliberation research forward is longitudinal and ethnographic studies, which focus on how political talk (both in political and non-political spaces) transfers into participation in the political process and/or collective action in the public sphere.

As discussed above, there also is a clear need to investigate and explore online political talk in third spaces (see also Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Wright, 2012a, 2012b). As Kees Brants

(2002) already argued over a decade ago, “politics online is e-verywhere”, and this certainly includes everyday political talk. By focusing exclusively on political discussion forums, we are left with an incomplete picture, or worse, a distorted one. Moreover, these spaces are meaningful because they open up windows for researchers to explore and begin to understand the ways citizenry is intertwined with aspects and practices of everyday life.

In addition to better understanding the frequency and quality of political talk that emerges in third spaces, researchers should investigate what triggers such talk in everyday conversation and to what extent such spaces foster political action.⁸ Regarding the former, how do people in the course of everyday conversation make connections to formal politics? Regarding the latter, are the political discussions that take place in such spaces characterised by argument and debate (as often found in political forums), or do people utilized the potential of third spaces to provide support, networking and community building, leading to various forms of political action?

Notes

1. See e.g. Eliasoph's (1998) research on why people avoid political talk in (face-to-face) public settings.
2. See Graham (2009, pp. 8–11) for a more comprehensive account of these conditions.
3. See Goodin (2008) and Mansbridge (1999) for a discussion on the deliberative system; i.e. viewing deliberation as a broader process, which is spread throughout time and space.
4. Note that both Strandberg (2008) and Tsaliki (2002) examined a mix of forum types (not intended for comparison), but forums hosted by newspapers were the dominate type. Winkler (2005) analysed both consultations and a forum hosted by the EU. Jankowski and Van Os's (2004) study included a government sponsored forum where local politicians participated. Davis (2005) also investigated chats and blogs.
5. See Dahlberg (2004) for a critical account of past frameworks used for empirical analysis.
6. See Graham (2008) Kies (2010) and Stromer-Galley (2007) for three fruitful sets of deliberative measures.
7. See also Wright's (2012b) argument.
8. See research by Graham and Harju (2011).

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