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## **Third Space, Social Media and Everyday Political Talk**

*Scott Wright, Todd Graham, and Daniel Jackson*

### **Abstract**

Theoretical and empirical research into online politics to date has primarily focused on what might be called formal politics or on how activists and social movements utilize social media to pursue their goals. However, in this chapter, we argue that there is much to be gained by investigating how political talk and engagement emerges in everyday, online, lifestyle communities: i.e. third spaces. Such spaces are not intended for political purposes, but rather – during the course of everyday talk – become political through the connections people make between their everyday lives and the political/social issues of the day. In this chapter, we develop a theoretically informed argument for research that focuses on everyday informal political talk in online third spaces.

### **Introduction**

Thanks to its ubiquity, social media are increasingly being used by governments, elected politicians, political candidates, activists and citizens for political purposes. As such, the dynamics of political communication and civic engagement in these communicative spaces and networks have become a central nub of concern for scholars across a range of disciplines. As will be shown in more detail below, much scholarly attention in this sphere focuses on the activities of political elites in their attempts to communicate with the masses, or on how activists and social movements utilize social media to pursue their goals. The focus is therefore on the dynamics of

communication and engagement on social media in clearly political settings and often involving explicitly political actors. While much of this research has emphasized the potential of online spaces and networks for political knowledge-sharing, interpersonal deliberation and coordinated collective action, we argue here that it ignores the “everydayness” of political communication and engagement – and the importance of everyday political talk – and the lifestyle spaces and networks where such talk emerges.

Taking forward a new agenda for online deliberation research (Wright 2012a, 2012b), this chapter steps back from the domain of formal politics, and develops a theoretically-informed argument for research that focuses on the interactions of “ordinary” citizens’ informal political talk in everyday online spaces. First, we argue for the adoption of a more expansive notion of political talk: one that embraces the vernacular, expressive and porous characteristics of everyday public speech. We define political talk as something that a) emerges in the process of everyday talk, often interweaved with conversations that do not have a political character; b) includes mundane reflections upon power, its uses and ramifications; and c) possesses qualities that enable it to contribute to meaningful public action.

We are also concerned with where such talk occurs online, particularly in everyday, formally non-political, online “third spaces”: public spaces beyond the home (first space) or work (second space) where people can meet and interact informally and where political talk, organizing and action can occur. We are especially interested in the array of online communities dedicated to lifestyle issues such as personal finance, parenting/childcare, popular culture, sports, and hobbies. Such spaces, we argue, foster a connection between the personal and political and can potentially help bridge the gap between the everyday lives of participants and formal

politics. Our initial investigations of such spaces/communities suggests that much of the talk that takes place in these fora constitutes political talk that is reciprocal, reflexive and (often) deliberative and of a kind that could inform devolved, autonomous, self-representation, potentially activating people to mobilize and organize (collective) political action (Graham 2010, 2012; Graham and Harju 2011; Graham and Wright 2014; Graham et al. 2015).

In the following section, we provide a brief overview of the field of online deliberation research. Second, we establish the importance of everyday political talk as both an expression of political participation and as an essential lubricant to other forms of engagement. However, there are debates over the nature of political talk. Must it be deliberative, or do the more ambiguous and permissive environments offered by social and online media lead us to seek other ways to understand political talk embedded in the everyday? Third, we discuss the concept of third space, and set out the existing research in this area. Fourth, third space has been primarily associated with, and analyzed through, discussion forum-based communities. Here, we discuss and consider whether social media such as Facebook and Twitter constitute third spaces. Finally, we argue that everyday political talk – particularly in third spaces – has the potential to overcome many of the identified issues with online deliberation, including political polarization and the avoidance of political talk.

### **The Internet, Social Media and Online Deliberation**

The nature of political deliberation online has been studied for decades. We can identify four distinct phases within this research, characterized by attempts to keep pace with technological developments and interrelated changes in the sites and practice of online deliberation. In the earliest phase, there was little if any empirical

research; scholars tended to put forward hypotheses about what political debate would look like. For example, there was extensive debate about whether the perceived anonymity of online communication would lead people to talk more freely about politics, and often polarized debates about whether the Internet would be positively revolutionize deliberation or be its death knell (Rheingold, 1993). In response to this period of hype, there was an empirical turn in the literature – often described as the cyber-realist school because the evidence largely disproved the earlier hype. Scholars such as Davis (1999) and Wilhelm (2000), for example, operationalized Habermas-inspired definitions of deliberation to analyze political debate on Usenet discussion forums, finding that talk online was largely not deliberative but marked by polarization and flaming. Moreover, as the use and understanding of the internet as a space for political debate expanded, this was accompanied by more refined theorizing of the Internet as a public sphere and space for deliberation (see e.g. Papacharissi 2004; Dahlberg 2001). The third phase of the research acknowledged that the nature of deliberation online depended on a range of factors including the design of the website interface (e.g. Wright and Street 2007), the nature of the moderation and facilitation (e.g. Wright 2006) and how existing comments shape interaction (e.g. Sukumaran et al. 2011). It was also marked by a focus on the websites of formal politics, such as governments (e.g. Wright 2006, 2007; Coleman and Blumler 2009), legislatures/parliaments (e.g. Lusoli et al. 2006), political parties (e.g. Jackson and Lilleker 2009a) and elected representatives (e.g. Jackson and Lilleker 2009b; Gibson et al. 2003).

More recently, studies of the political uses and impacts of “newer” social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have blossomed and a small sub-stream of this has focused on analyzing the nature of debate that occurs in these

spaces. Often this follows similar themes to the early research, such as how technical affordances and moderation shape deliberation – while there also remains a significant focus on formal political actors and events. For example, Halpern and Gibbs (2013) have analyzed interactions on the Facebook and YouTube channels of the White House, finding that the greater anonymity of YouTube debates leads to more flaming and impoliteness than Facebook. Other studies have focused solely on Facebook, examining deliberative norms in newspaper Facebook pages (e.g. Stroud et al. 2014), pages set up to discuss public matters (e.g. Es et al. 2014), and political parties' use of Facebook pages to facilitate citizen dialogue (e.g. Steenkamp and Hyde-Clarke 2014).

Research into the nature of political debate on Twitter has been more voluminous, and we give only a brief summary here of some key points and arguments (much of this literature is discussed elsewhere in this volume). Boynton et al. (2014) have analyzed tweets mentioning the word “Obama”, capturing around 200,000 messages a day. Comparing their findings with previous research, they conclude that: “political communication on Twitter is a domain that is differentiable from the main Twitter stream [... there is] much greater use of hashtags, retweets, and urls in the political domain than what is true for the total stream of Twitter messages” (Boynton et al. 2014: 14). This points to Bruns and Burgess (2011b) earlier findings that ad hoc publics sometimes formed around hashtags. Second, research has shown that political debates on Twitter tend to be highly polarized, though topic, norms and the predilection of users affect this within the communication structure of Twitter (Colleoni et al. 2014; Himelboim et al. 2013). Third, numerous studies have identified often highly active super-participants (Graham and Wright 2014) in political debates on Twitter; these people often hold important positions in discussion networks; and

they tend to come from the political classes (Larsson and Moe 2012; Bruns and Burgess 2011a).

While much has been learned, there are, however, some important limitations in the literature on political debate and social media – that repeat patterns identified in earlier phases (Wright 2012a). First, surprisingly few studies analyze whether political debate in spaces such as Facebook and Twitter is deliberative – and related debates over what models of talk, discussion or deliberation should be used to assess this. Surprisingly, there has been very little focus on the extent to which such platforms foster discursive reciprocal exchange: the extent to which participants are actually *reading* and *replying* to each other’s posts; and the level of continuity – *extended reciprocal exchange* on a particular issue so that (normatively speaking) deeper levels of understanding can be achieved such as reflexivity and (communicative) empathy. Yet, words such as “conversation”, “discussion” and “debate” are routinely used. Second, there has been a disproportionate focus on formal political actors (e.g. elected representatives, candidates, activists, and journalists), institutions (e.g. political parties, campaign organizations) and external political events (elections, consultations, TV debates) in these spaces. Research – be it for methodological reasons or choice – has often *not* focused on the very aspects of social media that are marked out for it being so important: the facilitation of informal political talk amongst everyday citizens. While focusing on political hashtags, actors and events might be expedient in terms of research manageability, the danger is that this largely captures the usual political suspects – ignoring the vast amount of everyday political talk in such spaces. Let us unpack this analysis of social media and deliberation further by outlining exactly why everyday political talk is worthy of our attention.

## **Everyday Political Talk: Why Is It Important?**

Everyday political talk is considered an important aspect of democratic citizenship. It performs a key educative role in terms of citizenship; it is where public opinion can form and “in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body” it constitutes “a portion of the public sphere” (Habermas 1989).

Everyday conversations have been shown to change people’s political attitudes (Huckfeldt et al. 2004). Political talk can be considered a “fundamental underpinning of deliberative democracy” because, for Kim and Kim (2008: 51) “through everyday political talk, citizens construct their identities, achieve mutual understanding, produce public reason, form considered opinions, and produce rules and resources for deliberative democracy.” Similarly, Mansbridge (1999) argues that everyday political talk is a key aspect of the deliberative system. She conceives deliberation as a broader process, spread throughout time and space. It is the web of everyday political talk, which takes place over time and across different discursive spaces that prepare citizens, the public sphere and the political system at large for political action. While Mansbridge (1999: 212) notes that everyday talk is not always deliberative because it can lack considered, critical reflection – she argues that “theorists of deliberation ought to pay as much attention to citizens’ everyday talk as to formal deliberation in public arenas”, not least because if people do not understand how to talk and listen, formal public deliberations can fail.

Dahlgren argues that discussion is one of six prerequisites for participatory democracy (alongside knowledge, values, experience, identities, and affinity). In this sense, everyday political talk can be pre/proto-political; latent or standby; and “*potentially* political” – important to the “microdynamics of democracy” (Dahlgren

2006: 282). Such latent forms of participation can thus be “a good gateway toward the stirrings of a broader social consciousness” (Howe 2012), creating a sense of public empowerment and voice (Coleman 2013: 219–220). Finally, some scholars (e.g. Barber 1984; Fearson 1998) argue that political talk encourages shared perspective building, or what McAfee (2000: 134–135) calls complementary agency: intersubjective processes whereby people link their personal ideas, issues, and actions with one another, cultivating political agency, solidarity and community. Many scholars recognize and argue for the importance of everyday political talk to democracy. However, what it should look like is a highly contested normative debate, and it is to this debate we now turn.

### **The Nature of Everyday Political Talk**

Normative debates about the nature of everyday political talk have generally occurred in response to criticisms that using formal, typically Habermas-inspired models of deliberation is unrealistic and unfair. First, such an account ignores the nature of political talk, which tends to be fragmented, anecdotal, messy, incomplete, and less formally deliberative. Dahlgren (2006: 278–279, see also Van Zoonen 2005), for example, cautions against “clinging too rigidly to formal deliberation” because this “risks losing sight of everyday talk and its potential relevance for democracy. There remains an awful lot of discussion which can have political relevance but which has no status in a strict deliberative perspective [...] It is via meandering and unpredictable talk that the political can be generated, that the links between the personal and the political can be established.”

Second, privileging reasoning by means of argumentation as the only relevant communicative form also ignores the plurality and differences within modern

Western societies. As Eckersley (2001) argues, deliberation based solely of rationality privileges a “gentlemen’s club”: it is “too dispassionate, rationalist, disembodied, masculine, and Western/Eurocentric in its orientation in insisting only on certain modes of rational, critical argument in political discourse.” Similarly, Warren (2006: 171) states, “Those on the outside must often shout in order to enter the conversation, and when they shout, they do so with accents, mannerisms, and ways of making points that don’t fit with the dominant model of deliberation.”

This has led some scholars to call for the adoption of a more expansive notion of political talk: one that embraces the vernacular, expressive and porous characteristics of everyday public speech, rather than strictly instrumental or institution-bound conceptions. Within the context of deliberation and the public sphere, we have seen, for example, an emphasis on the performative (Kohn 2000); on the importance of rhetoric (Mayhew 1997); on the role of humor (Basu 1999); and other communicative forms such as storytelling, the use of narratives and greeting (e.g. Dryzek 2000). The role of emotions in deliberation and political talk has also been a key area of debate. Rosenberg (2004), for example, maintains that productive deliberation requires emotional connections between participants. Such connections, for example, fuel a participant’s effort to understand other positions and arguments.

Regarding online political talk, much of the empirical-based research has adopted very rational, Habermasian inspired models of deliberation (see Graham and Witschge 2003; Kies 2010), focusing on for example the level of rational-critical debate, reciprocity, discursive equality, and excluding most, if not all, of the other communicative forms and styles of political talk discussed above (some exceptions include: Polletta and Lee 2006; Graham 2009; 2010; 2012). Graham’s (2009) comparison of political talk between the (political) *Guardian Talkboard* (which

closed in 2011) and two forums dedicated to fans of reality TV, for example, found that expressives (humor, emotional comments, acknowledgements) were a common ingredient, accounting for a third or more of the posts in each case. Moreover, expressives tended to impede political talk in the Guardian while facilitate it in the formally non-political forums of reality TV. Graham attributes it to two factors (156–161): the topic and nature of political talk. His findings suggest that online political forums dedicated to traditional politics, like the *Guardian's Talkboard*, tend to foster a communicative environment centered on “winning” the debate. The use of expressives in such an atmosphere, when they were not ignored or discouraged, were used in a strategic way (e.g. humor as an ad hominem attack against other participants). While in the forums dedicated to reality TV, expressives seemed to play an important role in enhancing and facilitating political talk by fostering deeper levels of understanding and solidarity. This was due to the nature of the forum (2009: 168):

“[they were communicative spaces] where the mixing of the private and public was the norm, [spaces] 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.”

The nature of political talk in everyday online communities dedicated to lifestyle issues, topics and needs (e.g. TV/Films, parenting, personal finance) tend to be deeply rooted in the personal (see also Graham and Wright 2014; Graham et al. 2015; Van

Zoonen 2007). As researchers, they provide us a glimpse, at the micro-level, of the blurring between private and public, personal and political. We move on now to discuss the concept of third space where this type of talk is occurring.

### **“Third Space” and Everyday Political Talk**

While many researchers have made a compelling case for the importance of everyday political talk, the problem, as Mansbridge noted, is that such talk is rarely analyzed. For Hay (2002: 4–5), “we need political analysis which refuses to restrict its analytical attentions to obviously political variables and processes...” while Saward (2003: 166) concurs: “An extraordinary feature of the literature on deliberative democracy has been its unwillingness to take an encompassing view of democratic sites, institutions and procedures.” Building on Bauman’s (2005) concept of liquid modernity, Papacharissi (2011) argues that in an era of convergence (or perhaps hybridization in Chadwick’s 2013 language): “the political becomes more elusive, as there exist no longer sites that are anchored to politics, confirming what Arendt termed an emptiness of political space” (Papacharissi 2011: 76). This does not mean that the context does not matter, or that we can apply some kind of random, scattergun approach:

“If we accept that all forms of talk are of potential relevant for civic discussion, that politics can materialise even in unexpected contexts of daily conversation, this does not mean we would want to study any and all contexts of verbal interaction. Obviously, we would have to be selective about where we aim our analytical searchlights, trying to glean that which is beginning to percolate politically.”

This leads us to the importance of the spaces wherein political talk emerges, and we now turn to concepts of third space.

The concept of third space is built on a critique of Ray Oldenburg's concept of the third place. A third place, for Oldenburg, is a public space beyond the home or workplace where people can meet and interact informally. As the name suggests, they are place based spaces; the common denominator is the location of the participants and that community can thrive: "The third place is a generic designation for a great variety of public spaces that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals' and is a core setting of informal public life" (1999: 16). Oldenburg argues that third places perform a crucial role in the development of societies and communities, helping to strengthen citizenship and thus are "central to the political processes of a democracy" (1999: 67). Oldenburg cites numerous examples of third places from the traditional English pub to a Parisian cafe. It should be noted that, for Oldenburg, it is not that certain types of venue constitute a third place; rather they exist when venues and participants exhibit certain characteristics: they are place-based arenas beyond home and work with easy access, and a home away from home feel that is neutral and typically has a group of regulars that set the tone. In other words, not all pubs are third places: they are constructed through specific social and environmental characteristics. Mirroring de Tocqueville, Oldenburg argues that in third places decency is more highly regarded than wealth, status or education. For Lasch (1996: 122) such "considerations make it appropriate to argue that third place sociability, in a modest way, encourages virtues more properly associated with political life than with the 'civil society' made up of voluntary associations." Lasch (1996: 123) also confers upon third place and the everyday

political talk an important “protopolitical” status and questions whether “the decline of participatory democracy may be directly related to the disappearance of third places.”

Oldenburg was highly critical of the idea of virtual communities and the network society, which he feared isolated people in their homes (1999: 77) and so “atomized the citizenry that the term ‘society’ may no longer be appropriate” (1999: 204). Nevertheless, scholars of virtual community have considered whether they might be equivalent to a third place. Rheingold (2003: 10) for example, suggested that while online communities “might not be the same kind of place that Oldenburg had in mind [...] many of his descriptions of third places could also describe the WELL [online community]. Perhaps cyberspace is one of the informal public places where people can rebuild the aspects of community that were lost when the malt shop became a mall.” This analysis was broadly supported by Steinkuehler and Williams (2006) empirical study of whether online gaming platforms can be considered third places, which they concluded where “new (albeit virtual) ‘third places’ for informal sociability...”

Wright (2012b) has taken the theoretical analysis deeper, arguing for a re-theorization of the concept of third place. He argues that we should not privilege place-based communities over issue (or other communities) that often exist on and offline and that while there are barriers to participation in third spaces, there are also numerous barriers to third places. Following Oldenburg, third spaces can be commercial environments and are formally non-political, but political talk emerges within them through everyday conversation. A third space is, thus, a formally non-political online discussion space where political talk can emerge (see Wright 2012b for more details).

The analysis of online third spaces has started to take root, and we now know significantly more about the nature of political talk in such spaces – particularly within discussion forum-based lifestyle communities. First, it is worth noting that there *is* a significant amount of political talk in third spaces. Drawing on a representative national sample, Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009: 45) found that the most frequently visited types of online (discussion forum-based) communities – those revolving around e.g. hobbies – were in essence political with 53 percent of American participants engaging in political talk within such spaces. Focusing on the nature and quality of debate, a growing body of case studies have shown that political talk not only emerges in lifestyle communities, but it can be deliberative (as discussed above), and that it is typically deeply rooted in the personal, the everyday (Graham 2010; 2012; Graham and Harju 2011; Graham and Wright 2014; Van Zoonen 2007), and can lead to political actions or calls to action (Graham et al. 2015).

Much of the research done on third spaces focuses primarily on older social media platforms, namely discussion forums. However, what about new, popular social media platforms/networks? Some of the research discussed above (and below) has shown that there is a lot of formal and everyday political comments (and perhaps debate) on social media. However, it remains unclear whether Facebook and Twitter – or different parts of these social media – meet the criteria of a third space. It is to this question that we now turn.

### **Twitter and Facebook: Third Spaces?**

Clearly, Facebook and Twitter have highly political areas, be it political party or elected representative Facebook pages and groups or Twitter accounts, while people can also use political hashtags to link their tweets to specific political public spheres.

We would argue that such areas are not third spaces because they are explicitly political. However, in a similar vein to Habermas' revised model of the public sphere, there are constellations of public, private and potentially third spaces within social media. Put simply, the question is not whether Facebook or Twitter is a third space, but whether there are pages, profiles (and so on) that constitute a third space. While explicitly political Facebook groups and hashtags do not meet the criteria of a third space, the problem – as with the broader definitions of politics and the political discussed in this chapter – is that what constitutes a political hashtag has what might be called soft edges. Thus, there is an element of judgment involved in making such distinctions. Because researchers often use explicitly political hashtags (when not focusing on political actors or events) to create an initial corpus of political tweets, we argue that there has been relatively little research into the potential for third spaces to form on social networking sites (SNS). There are several ways to overcome this limitation, such as to select clearly non-political hashtags. However, our concerns do not stop here.

As has been argued previously, the design of public space affects the nature of deliberation that occurs, be it “rooms, buildings, streets, squares, parks, etc.” (Drucker and Gumpert 1996: 280) or the nature of website interfaces and the norms and structures of communication (Wright and Street 2007). We are concerned that the interface design and discursive structure in Twitter and on Facebook groups, pages, and profiles might serve to undermine the potential for third spaces to form. To explain our concerns, we will focus on Twitter. In theory, we believe that a hashtag could constitute a third space, including having a group of “regulars” and the structure of a discursive community (see Bruns and Burgess 2011b). However, it remains unclear whether hashtags might be so fluid and lacking in a sense of a group identity

amongst the regulars that they do not form a third space. Put simply, the discursive formations in social media such as Twitter might lack the requisite sense of identity that contributes to third space, and thus they are at best weak examples of third space. Second, the structural form of communication on Twitter, and to a lesser extent Facebook groups/pages, does not facilitate deliberation (as argued above regarding reciprocity). In particular, the lack of threading and often more broadcast (as opposed to discursive) form on Twitter makes meaningful reciprocal and reflexive interaction harder, thus potentially hindering the development of deeper relationships, a sense of community.

Recent research on everyday political talk on Twitter supports such an analysis. For example, Brooker et al. (2015) found that Twitter discussion of a controversial British TV documentary on people receiving state welfare (*Benefits Street*) tended to be more kneejerk, one-off (as opposed to discursive) comments in the broadcast form. However, “off peak” participants (i.e. the debates that continued after the broadcast) tended to have more depth, bringing in their own experiences and perspectives to counter or support narratives from the documentary, and to broaden the debate to broader social issues that would be indicative of a third space. Semaan et al.’s (2014) qualitative analysis of social media use amongst 21 US citizens found that participants used a range of political and non-political spaces, routinely switching between platforms to meet their needs and that they went out of their way to seek out a diverse range of information and discussants. Put simply, participants noted that each medium had different characteristics (e.g., Twitter is a broadcast medium, their Facebook profile is more private) and shaped their interactions accordingly. This suggests that to understand third space online, we might need to move beyond

focusing on individual platforms in isolation (Wright 2012a), and to study the interactions on *and* between these platforms in hybrid forms (Chadwick 2013).

### **Political Polarization and the Avoidance of Politics**

One of the most prominent debates, to date, has been whether the internet will become polarized, with like-minded people flocking together, enabling them to ignore alternative viewpoints. This is problematic because “the benefits of deliberation depend on disagreement, which is defined in terms of interaction among citizens who hold divergent viewpoints and perspectives regarding politics” (Huckfeldt et al 2004: 11). Surveys, for example, show that Americans regularly talk about politics in their everyday lives, but that this is amongst like-minded people (Mutz, 2006). Often associated with Sunstein’s (2001) *Daily Me*, the fear is that online debate could exacerbate this problem: “discussions via the Internet are more likely to be as narrow or perhaps even narrower than those across the backyard fence. Those with differing views gravitate to their own discussion groups” (Davis and Owen 1998: 124). For Van Alstyne and Brynjolfsson (1997: 3–4), this is because: “If IT provides a lubricant that allows for the satisfaction of preferences against the friction of geography”, such as communicating with like-minded people, the internet might lead to apparently “local heterogeneity” to “give way to virtual homogeneity as communities coalesce across geographic boundaries.”

The potential for homophily are explicitly embedded into the architecture of much social and digital media. Search technologies and the increasing personalization of the internet experience can facilitate this, using past actions and choices to filter “your” internet. For example, we can choose to add and remove Facebook friends, which has a filtering effect, but this is exacerbated by the Edgerank filter, which

attempts to sort the information presented to people potentially without the user even realizing (Pariser 2011). While this can be seen as a helpful way to cope with data overload, and can in theory improve the user experience, there are concerns that it can remove alternative political views from people's feeds.

Empirical research has often found that politics online is polarized. For example, Gilbert's et al. (2009: 2) study of blogs found that they were echo chambers, with agreement outnumbering disagreement in comments by over 3:1, and this rose to 9:1 for political blogs. Bloggers are often found to be segregated along political boundaries (Adamic and Glance 2005; Lawrence et al. 2010). Social network analysis has identified similar trends in Twitter topic networks (Himmelboim et al. 2013) and on political debates on Twitter more broadly (e.g. Smith et al. 2014). Content analysis of political, and particularly partisan-framed online groups, has also found polarization (e.g. Davis 1999; Wilhelm 2000). News and broader political information consumption online has a polarized structure that leads to the reinforcement rather than challenging of existing views (e.g. Smith 2011).

The picture is not completely straightforward though. A large-scale, broader study by Gentzkow and Shapiro (2011) found that "ideological segregation on the Internet is low in absolute terms..." and there is evidence that people at least claim to want to hear alternative voices (Stromer-Galley 2003). Of course, people may still attempt to avoid people or threads where they experience or perceive cross cutting debate. As Mutz (2006: 12) argues: "The level of heterogeneity in a person's political *network* is not necessarily the same as the heterogeneity of the social *context* he or she inhabits. One can certainly influence the other, but hearing the other side takes place at the level of discussants within a network rather than within some larger, aggregate social context." In other words, we need to analyze not just macro-heterogeneity but

also actual interactions at the micro-level, and this speaks to the danger that people can simply choose to avoid talking about politics online: that there is not just a left-right polarization, but also a polarization between those that do, and do not, talk about politics online.

The notion of avoiding politics is perhaps most strongly associated with Nina Eliasoph's seminal ethnographic analysis of political talk in (offline) arenas like social clubs in America. Eliasoph (1998) observed that when political issues were mentioned, people avoided talking about the issue because they did not want to show disagreement or ignorance. Both Mutz and Martin (2001) and Noelle-Neumann (1984) have reported what can be seen as related findings: the spiral of silence theory suggests that if people feel that they belong to a majority it encourages political talk. Having set out these challenges, how might third spaces provide an environment that can limit them?

We argue, following Brundidge (2011) and Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009) that political talk in *third spaces* is less likely to be polarized and quite simply it is harder to "avoid". Why might this be so? First, to polarize would require that people had, and understood, ideologically informed views that they could gather around, which is not necessarily true outside of the political classes in countries such as the UK where there has been a shift to the center and more fluid political identity (Wright 2012b). Second, whether this be a discussion forum, Facebook group, or Twitter hashtags, people normally "visit" third spaces because of some kind of shared tie, be it that they have an interest in cooking, fashion, football, or parenthood. Crucially, though, the tie is *not* political and thus while people might have similarity in background, it is more likely that people will inadvertently (Brundidge, 2011) come across people with divergent political views as social boundaries appear to be weakened online. Third,

while we argue that third spaces are a *form* of virtual community – many people have a strong sense of community identity with strong ties – third spaces have a fluidity that facilitates a wide range of weak ties too. If Mutz (2006: 54) is correct to argue that: “The solution [to political polarization] resides in part in more political conversations among ‘weak ties’, that is those who are not intimate friends or family members”, we believe that third spaces facilitate this. Subsequent, work by Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009) tested their hypothesis: the dominant form of political interaction online was found to be homogenous, as would be expected given their earlier research. However, their representative survey data found that non-political forums were less polarized than explicitly political ones. Thus, we argue: “[...] fragmentation theory makes little sense once we move beyond the politically oriented communicative landscape” (Graham and Harju 2011: 29). While there may be polarization *within* forums around specific topics or sub-forums, this is rarely about politics, and similarly some people might avoid “political” sub-forums, but such talk emerges across a wide range of threads, sub-forums and topics (Graham et al. 2015; Graham and Wright 2014).

## **Conclusion**

Social media represents part of an ongoing convergence between media, audiences, and publics. Here, convergence melds and blurs traditional boundaries among media and audiences; citizens and consumers; and producers and consumers (Papacharissi, 2011). There is an important opportunity here then, to see social media as occupying the ambiguous territory of everyday public space, where the personal and even the private can quite comfortably overlap with the political. As our chapter has shown, across a range of social media platforms, everyday political talk is present, and in

some cases thriving. For us, this makes understanding the dynamics of these everyday encounters of pressing concern for researchers.

Much of our focus of late, and within this chapter, is on a) everyday political talk and b) third spaces. Such work is establishing third spaces as places where we can better understand the interwoven nature of politics and everyday life. Moreover, whilst the vast majority of conversations in such spaces are non-political, when conversation does turn political we are discovering how it can overcome some of the problems traditionally found in online discussion in political spaces. We should not be nonchalant about such findings: they contradict many early theoretical and empirical studies, and should prompt us to ask further questions about what is happening in such spaces. Here, more work should examine the relationship between talk in everyday spaces and political action. Our own work has begun to unpack this, but many questions remain, not least the flows of conversations and political actions between online and offline environments, and between different social media platforms.

Understanding the dynamics of everyday political talk and participation matters. It has much to say in the context of ongoing reflections on the health of civic life in many Western democracies. As Papacharissi (2011: 78) argues, “it is possible that our quest for civic behaviors has not produced the desired results because we have not been looking at places that civic behaviors now inhabit: spaces that are friendlier to the development of contemporary civic behaviors”. If we look in the right places, and ask the right questions, we can see some of the new repertoires emerging through social media.

Here, we see numerous fruitful avenues for future research on third spaces. The first is the relationship between some third spaces and government or government

agencies. Whilst they are first and foremost “non-political” everyday spaces devoted to various lifestyle issues, forums such as Netmums and MoneySavingExpert in the UK have attracted the attention of government officials, who are tapping into the online communities for policy consultation purposes (see Graham et al. 2015). Further research into the nature and impact of these relationships is important.

Another area in need of further research is the views of participants in the forums. This could include interviews with key actors, such as people identified as having made calls to political action and forum administrators and owners. The former could explore whether actions were actually taken and what role the forum played, while the latter could help us to better understand how owners conceive the political role (if any) of their forum, and whether/how they go about facilitating this. Alongside interviews, focus groups or surveys with a broader range of participants could explore people’s views of political talk and calls to action in the forum (do they avoid it?); whether they get involved in political actions through the forum (and what influences this decision); and the background and broader political activity of participants (is it the ‘usual suspects’?).

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