Trying not to fall out: the importance of non-political social ties in online political conversation

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Biography:

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This paper explores evidence from a large scale, mixed methods investigation into political conversation in various online niches, uncovering a model of deliberation in which shared cultural or social ties - non-political ties - seem to play an important role in holding a quorum together and encouraging exchange of diverse opinion without breakdown of the community. A shared sense of community identity is important within this model, but robust and stable individual identities – usually in the form of pseudonyms, but which sometimes translate to offline identities among sub-sections of the community - play an important role, too. These shared community spaces may offer democratic benefits by facilitating the testing of balkanised perspectives found within personalised digital media structures against diverse counter-perspectives.

Keywords: deliberation, community, online conversation, politics, digital methods, identity

Political deliberation in online spaces

Public participation in online political discussion is currently a hot topic, with pundits and scholars alike describing the impacts and affordances of social media, and their implicit algorithms and structures, on important civic instruments such as journalistic spaces and the public sphere. Modern digital media platforms are important parts of the contemporary public sphere, providing popular, mainstream methods of interpersonal communication on a range of scales, from one-to-one to one-to-millions. The mediation of the public sphere, and the impact of this on civic and democratic ideals, are not, however, new concepts and much has been written about the relationship between technologies, power brokers and publics and their impact on public information, understanding and debate.

Frameworks of deliberative democracy, set forth by scholars such as Arendt (1968), Habermas (1984) and Coleman (2004), provide an illustration of how discussion

of public issues by citizens, amongst themselves, can enhance democracy. Famously, Habermas (1989) described the public's ability to engage in rational critical debate, but identified social forces that might infringe on that ability. Recognising the existence of ideologies that could be used to control the social functioning of a society, he described how these must be challenged and deconstructed, allowing citizens to gain control of their opinion and beliefs and remove the political and social dogma that can be used to facilitate their domination by the ruling class. Modern ideologies permeate the media-dominated contemporary western societies and therefore Habermas' assertions of the need for rational thinking and decision making amongst citizens to enable democracy to function fairly persist.

Debates surrounding these frameworks have followed the developments of media technologies into the internet age, as scholars have put forth theories of online public participation in deliberative models of democracy (Coleman & Moss, 2012; Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004; Graham, 2010; Moss & Coleman, 2013; Moy & Gastil, 2006; Mutz, 2006; Torcal & Maldonado, 2014). The technological and communications revolution of the last 20 years has given rise to new methods of inter-personal communication, from email and message boards to contemporary digital and mobile social networks. These technological platforms enable the assembly of quorums from across the world, facilitating very large-scale conversation which may enable the kind of discourse highlighted by Habermas to reappear amongst the public at large(Sack, 2001). Engaging the public in more deliberative activity can transform political involvement from preference assertion to preference formation and the rational consideration of diverse perspectives can help to avoid the narrower forms of preference formation that result in antagonistic political dynamics (Coleman & Gotze, 2001). By providing diverse information and enabling very large-scale conversation, exchange of

views and deliberation, digital media has the potential to create more considered public political involvement.

Of course, despite these democratic potentials, we all too often see the more maligned side of online participation – the trolls and the bullying, the fake news and the echo chambers. Too often are online spaces used to stifle or silence certain voices and perspectives and to strengthen others. This expressive rather than discursive participation is contrary to Habermas' assertion that the formation, and eventual articulation of collective knowledge can be aided through the acts of interaction and exchange of opinion through which citizens can gain a comprehensive knowledge of public issues. This cross-cutting exchange involving listening and exposure to opposing views could be argued to be the basic essentials of deliberation; the minimum level of rational-critical debate (Mutz, 2006). Indeed, Mutz argues that it is the most important part of deliberation, without which all the other deliberative factors are meaningless. Mutz showed, however, that this cross-cutting debate is inversely proportional to the closeness of relationships between individuals as people tend to group along common lines of belief. This well-known 'echo-chamber' effect is created as participants choose not to consume content with which they disagree, or have content tailored to them by algorithms designed to provide a pleasant, and therefore probably conflict-free, digital product.

Thus, in online spaces a tension exists between freedom of expression, in all forms, including the most aggressive and abusive, and participation in productive, civil deliberation. This paper stems from a study which investigated this tension and the dynamics that exist within spaces and communities that manage to effectively deal with it. With the use of one important case study, this paper illustrates how community identities and practices, as well as shared non-political social ties, can help to bridge the

divides between politically diverse participants, and bind a quorum together strongly enough to allow it to discuss politics rigorously, but in a civil manner.

Technology, identity and conversation

Identity, technology and the public sphere have long been linked in the literature, including from the perspective of media practice. Numerous examples exist of innovative interface and platform design being utilised within digital products to encourage conversation that conforms to one or more deliberative ideals (Birchall & Coleman, 2015). This focus on technological design is not always successful, however, as while the interface can provide tools for participants, these tools are not omnipotent in the development of conversation. Human agency impacts the development of conversation in two ways. Firstly, participants maintain agency over their actions and are able to shape their own contributions and control their own behaviour; scholars have illustrated how appropriation of a technology by users, after the design phase, can shape the outcomes of usage of technology in the same way that the design can (Dix, 2007; Mackay & Gillespie, 1992). Secondly, administrators retain the ability to intervene in the processes through which conversation emerges, influencing the result, such that, as Wright and Street (2007) found, a technology may produce different effects upon dialogue depending on the policies employed to shape it. When spaces are designed to tackle the tension between freedom of expression and incivility, this human agency consists, therefore, as both behaviour that is contrary to the expected and acceptable models of participation imagined by the designers of a space, and as techniques to counter this problematic behaviour. The balance and relationship between these two forms – or the social contract between contributors and administrators (De Cindio, 2012) – is a vital dimension of the success of deliberative spaces, facilitating accountability and trust between all parties in the community inhabiting the space. In

open, online spaces it is all too often the case that uncontrolled contribution to conversations fails to provide high levels of conformance to many of the deliberative ideals, particularly rationality and interactivity (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011), due to difficulties such as high volumes of contribution or aggressive interactions (Wright, 2006, 2009). Responding to this problem requires 'social as well as technological approaches' (Schuler, 2009, p. 300) and the agency exhibited by administrators in order to address this balance may be manifest as direct intervention, designed into spaces in the form of moderation or facilitation, or authentication systems that limit anonymity or permit pseudonymity.

Identity in this context can be conceptualised as a name – a label through which a contributor can be recognised and held accountable – and as performance or expression of self by the contributor. The technology facilitates the latter through its participatory nature (as will be discussed shortly) but can control the former through systems of authentication. Authentication methods vary in form: strong methods, such as those used by banks and institutions may use forms of verification such as postal confirmation of address; weaker methods may require just email confirmation and may allow the use of semi-anonymity through pseudonyms. Therefore, interface design can afford complete anonymity during participation, absolute onymity in participation through hard authentication, or semi-anonymity through pseudonymity, with individuals identifiable as an online persona, but one that is not linked to 'real', offline identity. Furthermore, the methods of expressing this identity vary and combine, including textual labels and names, avatars and other images and in-depth profiles. These methods often overlap within the spectrum as they are implemented in different ways. For example, pseudonymity can easily be anonymity when users can have multiple accounts, or share or hijack names, but procedures exist to allow an online presence

identifiable by a pseudonym, but tied to a real identity in the system back end. Thus, the participatory benefits of hidden 'real' or offline identities can be combined with the benefits to civility afforded by accountable identities (Ford & Strauss, 2008). Approaches to identity management have been used in various ways in different online situations, with diverse effects. Bernstein et al (2011) describe a spectrum of anonymity that is present in recent digital media environments – Facebook insisting on real names, MySpace and Usenet allowing anonymous commenting, and various models in between including the pseudonyms of Slashdot which allow users to protect their real identity while building up an online profile to use in the space (Bernstein et al., 2011, p. 51). Research has shown that these authentication models can have a real effect on participation. Many have argued that anonymity is detrimental to productive online community participation due to the lack of accountability, integrity, trust and cooperation that is otherwise provided by the use of real names and stable pseudonyms (Hiltz, Johnson, & Turoff, 1986; Kilner & Hoadley, 2005; Millen & Patterson, 2003; Rains, 2007). Others, however, have argued that anonymous spaces can actually have positive impacts on participation by enabling those who do not feel that they can speak up in other environments (Grudin, 2002; Kling, Lee, Teich, & Frankel, 1999; Lampe & Resnick, 2004). In online environments these effects are not mutually exclusive, of course. Focussing on the popular website 4chan, Bernstein et al. (2011) described how anti-social behaviour thrived in a very popular discussion thread in which 90% of participants contributed anonymously. However, the researchers also observed that this anonymity allowed participants to discuss sensitive topics with more confidence. Furthermore, while some social bonds were missing due to the anonymity, others were maintained through alternative methods such as the inclusion of slang in messages,

which was used to indicate pre-existing knowledge and experience of novel communication techniques and therefore status within the community.

Goffman's theory of the presented self (1959) helps to explain why identity - and therefore anonymity and pseudonymity - are important concepts during conversation as the 'public self' is acted out through social interaction. The performance of identity extends beyond textual contributions to richer media which augment online identities alongside the content of any contributions, and these more visual identities can be a source of bias in group formation (Lea, Spears, & de Groot, 2001). The profiles and contributions of users are therefore all part of identity performance which can influence participation through the social bonding that occurs through identity, rather than conversation content alone. This performance will shape contribution to conversations as individuals construct the identity that they wish to present, conforming to or challenging identity-related concepts such as social acceptance amongst peers. In online settings, these social forces can be related to the type of identity requirements present within a space, and 'social acceptance concerns should be less salient in … anonymous settings since there is no public "self" that the individual has to manage' (Chen & Berger, 2013, p. 582). Anonymous participation may be important, therefore, in political conversation, allowing participants to explore difficult issues without the pressure of identity maintenance. When social acceptance is less of a pressure, participants may be able to have conversations about controversial topics more comfortably.

Within deliberative participatory initiatives issues of identity, anonymity and participation are drawn into sharp focus and the comfort of anonymity does not necessarily translate into successful deliberation. Scholars have linked some of the problems identified within contributions to deliberative spaces directly to the concepts

of authentication and anonymity, describing how perceived anonymity can remove some of the moral and social cues that otherwise shape speech (Wright, 2006, p. 553) and release the contributor from responsibility for their words (Coleman & Moss, 2012, p. 8). Stable and reliable identities are important in online deliberation as they allow participants to keep track of each other as they interact and exchange opinion and information, maintaining relationships and strengthening trust. Accurate identities are important for the maintenance of Habermasian deliberative ideals, as they allow participants to recognise, find and contact each other and fully understand the quorum present at any particular moment, particularly important in asynchronous conversations, occurring over an extended period of time (Coleman & Moss, 2012, p. 8).

The spectrum of authentication described by Bernstein et al. (2011) is clearly an important factor that needs to be considered in a study of online political conversation. While authentication methods may help to provide the accountability that is required of a deliberative space, the trade-off is in the introduction of barriers to entry to conversations. Designed as methods to increase the deliberative quality of conversation by modifying or excluding contributions that do not meet the specific deliberative ideals of an initiative, these techniques can have clear consequences on democratic participation through potential exclusion and curtailment of voice. The level of authentication present in a system should be relative to the duties being performed in an online space. For instance: 'unverified identities are enough for writing a comment in a blog, whereas strong authentication is required for participating in a deliberative consultation' (De Cindio, 2012).

A more holistic and context-aware perspective on the role of identity in conversation allows some of the more subjective, human characteristics of participation to be included. Identity management extends beyond the formal technological structures

provided within digital spaces and plays out within content, communication, and implicit connections between participants. The analysis outlined below allowed a model of community identity management to be uncovered that had real implications for political conversation within a specific online niche. In this example, technological systems of pseudonymity played a part in individual and community identity management, but wider, real-world and offline factors were arguably more important.

Research Context and Methods

The analysis featured in this paper was generated within a larger project (Birchall, 2016) which investigated the characteristics of online political conversation in the UK, generated in response to a range of political events that took place in 2014 (including television debates about the Scottish independence referendum and the UK membership of the EU). To study the online conversation that emerged as a national public responded to these political events, the study necessarily worked at large scale, using automated, digital methods to select, harvest and analyse data.

Keywords and search engines were used to discover relevant content and bespoke screen scraping software was used to harvest entire conversations, consisting of hundreds, thousands and occasionally tens of thousands of contributions. This software also enabled automated processing of the collected data in which the building blocks of social interactions and arguments within conversations – such as replies, quotes, mentions - were identified through the HTML structures that held them. This semantic information was used to generate metrics which quantified deliberative features of the conversation, including the creation of social network maps to represent the connections and exchanges between participants.

To understand the human phenomena at the root of these patterns, however, more qualitative research was required, and an iterative, mixed methods approach –

involving text analysis and coding, surveys and interviews – was used to evaluate, reappraise, and give meaning to the headline figures of the automated analysis. The specially designed methodology provided the specificity and depth necessary to analyse human behaviour within unique niches on the web, alongside the ability to generalise across the high number of data points. This approach attempted to bridge the gap between the small scale, qualitative methods of investigation of many studies of online conversation, and the large scale, data-centric, algorithmic methods of big data studies that have entered the debate more recently (Anderson, 2008; Baym, 2013; Bazeley, 2004; Boyd & Crawford, 2012; Gitelman & Jackson, 2013; MacMillan & Koenig, 2004; Manovich, 2011; Roberts & Wilson, 2002).

Using a coding schema based on that of Graham (2008), interactions between participants within conversations were categorised to identify important deliberative features such as rebuttals, refutations and counter-assertions to identify instances where disparate opinions were encountered. The schema also identified abuse, curbing and off-topic contributions, allowing the context of interactions to be illustrated within argument maps to complement the social networks generated earlier. Through this coding, three key metrics were generated. Firstly, connectedness, a measure of the proportion of contributions that included social interaction which was calculated as a percentage figure and through social network analysis in the form of the mean number of connections per message (average node degree). Secondly, the amount of cross-cutting exchange, representing the proportion of interactions in which disparate opinion was encountered. Thirdly, a quantitative dominance metric which illustrated the relative level of contribution by each member of the quorum present, allowing investigation into the roles of participants and the impacts of these on the community.

This methodology provided both a large and diverse set of case studies of political conversations in online spaces and a set of bespoke metrics - designed to measure specific characteristics of deliberative conversation – by which to compare the conversations (Birchall, 2016). Most of the conversations analysed conformed to the liberal individualist model of communication described by Freelon (2010), characterised by personal expressions of opinion rather than deliberative exchanges. This model was most notable within the institutionally-linked spaces of formal political participation such as petitions and consultations (see Figure 1) but was also present in the majority of the case studies. However, some conversations stood out in contrast to this majority, consisting of highly connected and cross-cutting conversation. These examples existed within the common interest forums; spaces where political conversation occurs, such as on political websites like ConservativeHome or LabourList, in the UK (see Figure 2). However, the most connected and cross-cutting examples were those in spaces where people had a particular, non-political common interest and bond to tie them together, even when discussing politics, and it is the analysis of these stand-out examples which is presented in this paper. Qualitative analysis in the form of interviews with site administrators and contributors and online focus groups with participants from the conversations (taking place within the forum itself) enabled investigation into how these spaces and interests were involved in the development of connected and cross-cutting online political conversation. Through this research insight was gained into the existence and importance of a shared group identity and associated group practices which help to maintain the civil relationships that might otherwise be put under strain by diverse political conversation. It is this non-political bond that is important in the model described in this paper, in which this shared identity and group practices work with a pseudonymous identity management system to help the

community to engage in diverse, cross-cutting, but civil and respectful political conversation.

[Figures 1 and 2 near here]

Social ties, relationship maintenance and participant roles

The clearest examples of this dynamic between social ties and deliberation were political conversations within spaces in which participants congregated due to a common interest other than politics (such as rock climbing or motoring, both of which featured in case studies). These conversations were characterised by Freelon's deliberative model of participation (2010) and mapped directly to the parapolitical spaces described by Dahlgren (2005). This shared interest, separate from the political topics being discussed seemed to be a crucial part of holding the quorum together as participants sought to maintain social bonds despite political differences.

One case study – the political conversations between members of the UK rock climbing community on the UKClimbing.com forum – illustrated this point most clearly, scoring highly in metrics for connectedness and cross-cutting exchanges, and also featuring practices of group identification and bonding, such as the use of climbing-specific vocabulary and reference to climbing within conversations. Studies have shown that participant roles can be important in deliberation - Graham and Wright (2014) identify super posters, agenda setters and facilitators within deliberative conversations – and some of these were observed within the data here. Social network analysis of conversations from this space discovered that each contained dominant figures in terms of quantity of contribution, but the proportion of contribution was spread widely through the quorum. There were typically several participants making more than one contribution and even when there was one contributor providing most of the content, several others were highly active as well. Notably, the less well-connected

contributors were often still connected directly or indirectly to the core of the network. The community may be dominated to an extent by an active core of contributors but these contributors interact with all participants, performing the roles of agenda-setter and facilitator at the same time. This core of contributors that replied to participants was noted by contributors who were well aware of participants that actively stoked conversation, as this excerpt from an interview with one UKClimbing forum user (participant #27) showsdescribed:

> "I think [the popularity of the discussion about Scottish independence] was more by chance... the forum had one of the most passionate pro-Yes men in the world on it... Had he been on fly fishing weekly you'd have [found that space instead]".

Indeed, the presence of particularly active contributors seemed to be acknowledged and valued by the UKClimbing community, as interview excerpt with another user illustratesillustrated by a response from another forum user (participant #7):

> "It's a community of which I've been a member for a long time. It's had its ups and down but there is a hard core of contributors whose views I respect".

Of course, connectedness is only part of this picture of deliberative quality and one of the interesting characteristics of the UKClimbing case studies was the fact that this connectedness, influenced by a core of contributors that reached out to other contributors, was maintained at the same time as a high presence of diverse opinion and cross-cutting exchange. The relatively highly cross-cutting nature of these connections was illustrated by the manual analysis of argumentative exchanges – the interactions in which participants encountered opposing viewpoints – on this platform. For example, the map shown in Figure 3, representing the contributions to a conversation about EU membership included high levels of interaction and opinion exchange within the conversation. As can be seen in the map, these interactions consisted of long, multi-branched chains of messages with both agreement and disagreement present. Cross-

cutting exchanges were the most common example of interconnection, making up 67% of replies within the sample, though chains were often made of an assertion with consecutive amicable messages of agreement, with occasional breaks, or endings that were cross-cutting.

According to models of Freelon (2010), this form of conversation is to be expected amongst participants that conform to the deliberative democratic model of participation as contributors seek reciprocal conversation in which inter-ideological questioning and response is present. These characteristics were present within the UKClimbing contributors and some of the comments from interview questions relating to individuals' motivation for contributing suggest that participation was motivated by a desire to discover new perspectives and information and engage with others who have opposing views. For example, forum user #20 stated that:

> "Debates for me normally progress into a two-way conversation within the thread with quite in-depth posts where we are both trying to address all the points raised, with evidence. These interactions are the experience. In a good debate, you're forced to examine your own view, modify it, find evidence to support it, and to satisfactorily deal with challenges. I might occasional change my mind"

and forum user #11 said:

> "The interactions make it more engaging: you're forced to consider other views, and often have your own challenged. Makes you think, makes you look at possible weaknesses in your own arguments as well as other peoples".

Of course, such quotes represent only a subset of the community and the conversations, and other responses showed that there were clearly alternative approaches that some participants felt needed to be challenged., fFor example, forum user #20 went on to say about his participation on the site:

"Mainly it's for personal satisfaction of developing my own views (in the cases where I'm arguing with someone clever and reasonable from another viewpoint). But some people's views are so harmful and badly thought out that I feel compelled to explain how reason proves their view to be nonsense. In those cases it is more a compulsion rather than for the enjoyment of the debate."

and forum user #15 describes a similar motivation:

"…and it's fun knocking down some of the more spurious, ill-informed or irrational posters!".

These confrontational approaches provide the potential for disharmony amongst the quorum as positions are challenged, often aggressively. But despite this potential for disharmony, the quorums manage to maintain the overall civility and cohesiveness, alongside connectedness and a cross-cutting nature, that defines the high deliberative quality of these conversations. Perhaps one reason for this could be an interesting feature of the argument map shown in Figure 3. This feature is identified by the chains of connected grey nodes – the significant sub-conversations where contributions went off-topic but maintained a level of connectedness. In this conversation about Scottish independence, a sub-theme of UK-Australian migration emerged. The thread was initially sparked by an attempt at curbing – silencing the voice of an Australian observer – that initially led to an emotional exchange but moved on to become an amicable conversation about the contributors' personal circumstances. This kind of off-topic exchange, wholly within a single conversation thread, amongst the other contributions, was common on this platform; indeed, off-topic conversation threads were present in several the most connected and cross-cutting case studies. Perhaps this feature of cordial interaction, stemming from an altercation, is one of the reasons that this community can maintain the productive conversation observed, despite the diversity of opinion present. Graham (2010) and Basu (1999) have both illustrated how social conventions and

interconnections such as humour, or 'banter' can act as the glue that bonds communities together. These shared communicative practices help to create personal bonds, strengthen shared identity and opinion and repair social ties that have been frayed. Illustrated in this study is an alternative form of this social glue, in the form of off-topic sub-threads, existing within striking examples of truly reflexive exchanges in which disparate opinions were shared and reflected upon in a deliberative manner. These by no means made up the bulk of the contributions of the forum, but certainly contributed to building the community that existed in this space that consistently produced highly connected and cross-cutting political discussion.

[Figure 3 near here]

Communities form for many different reasons; the communicative dynamics discussed here are only part of the story and manifest within a particular environment. In this case study, the social bonds between climbers, identifying collectively as a group and seeking to maintain cordial relationships within the community, were a key factor. These non-political social ties, maintained beyond the political discussion, helped participants to interact; as the forum manager stated in an interview:

> "*Climbers define themselves as climbers and hence they 'feel' they relate to other* climbers better. They are mostly happier asking for advice on plumbing on this forum than on a specific plumbing forum, for example, since it is a more comfortable and less intimidating environment. This has been less successful with regard to *[closely affiliated forum] UKHillwalking since hillwalkers don't define* themselves so precisely as hillwalkers".

This sentiment was echoed in responses from conversation participants themselves, such as this statement from forum user #9:

> "We are generally climbers first, then keyboard warriors second. There is a sense of community, a bit like having the conversation in the pub after a day on the hill".

This case study provides a prime example of Dahlgren's parapolitical space, in which shared cultural concepts are discussed and in which political views can emerge through debate (2005, p. 153). Participation here conforms somewhat to the model of deliberative participation put forth by Freelon (2010) as the requisite characteristics such as inter-ideological questioning and response are present. It also conforms somewhat to the communitarian model, with shared community language and a general environment which 'upholds the cultivation of social cohesion and group identity above the fulfilment of individual desires' (Freelon, 2010, p. 1180). However, the ties that bring these participants together are not ideological, there aren't specific political values or beliefs shared by the whole group, nor even frameworks for analysing and contemplating political subject matter. Perspectives are diverse and opinions likewise, yet this community clearly form an important category of political participation through interactive discussion. Individual roles within the quorum, particularly active contributors – super-posters and agenda setters – seem very important, but these are not distinct groups in this space. Individuals take on some of those roles at different times, due to the requirement to maintain the shared, external, social bonds that are a distinctive feature of this category of space. This observation augments the findings of Graham and Wright (2014): while participatory roles exist, individuals don't necessarily perform them in any regular way, but rather possess the capabilities to do so and choose to perform them when deemed necessary.

Developing deliberative behaviours

It is not surprising that the most interactive and cross-cutting conversations had some very active participants, as engaged debate requires repeat contributions. Previous research has highlighted how interactive groups of participants can facilitate conversation in a forum (Albrecht, 2006; Graham & Wright, 2014; Oldenburg, 1999;

Panyametheekul, 2011). The evidence observed in this study illustrates all three of the different forms of dominance put forth by Graham and Wright - the super-posters, agenda setters and facilitators (2014, p. 628). However, the quantitative domination metric used in this study describes particular participants that stand out from the crowd. Across the wider study these contributors arose from different models of participation: the inflammatory 'trolls' that post regularly to elicit numerous responses; the moderators, facilitators or the expert voice that act to inform and guide the discussion. In the specific model presented here, the super-contributors were those that speak a lot and, crucially, engage with others. This particular role played by influential participants within a conversation, helped to facilitate productive discussion amongst the wider quorum.

Facilitation and moderation are important features of a conversation space and, while they can sometimes emerge organically out of shared community norms and practices as was seen in the UKClimbing forums, they are often the product of decisions by designers and administrators, implemented deliberately to shape conversation. Across the wider study significant differences were identified in conversation structure that were attributable to facilitation strategies. Structural facilitation through platform design, for example, by requiring participants to craft contributions as replies to other users, and facilitation through a central authority, such as through Q&A-style conversations are two such examples. The first of these helped to create conversation that was focussed, but ultimately not well connected or cross-cutting; the last helped to create conversation that featured, amongst a structure that was highly facilitator-centric, small pockets of interactions around the fringes of the conversation. The facilitative role observed in the most quantitatively dominant participants of the model presented here was different, in that it also reflected a level of interactive dominance – where these

very active contributors connect across the quorum – perhaps as influential, or even controlling participants. Research, such as that by Lewis, Holton and Coddington. (2014) has shown that facilitation by journalists and authors within the comments section that accompanies their work can have a significant effect upon the dynamics of a conversation; the involvement of an influential participant seemingly providing order and civility within a conversation. In the emergent conversation of the shared interest forum, the highly engaged participants, aided by the shared social ties and group identity, provide this function. Moreover, this function is provided without the shadow of control that can exist within conversations that have an institutional facilitator or moderator, allowing the community itself to feel like they are developing the conversational dynamics that they desire.

These social ties and participant roles are important in regulating political conversation in this one particular online niche, but across the internet political conversation occurs regularly in less favourable conditions, with less productive results. For example, when political institutions reach out to mainstream digital media spaces – seeking to find citizens in their favoured places rather than to draw them in to institutionally linked, or overtly political places – they face a challenge to engage citizens in participation outside of the action-oriented model of individual expression described earlier, and free from flaming, trolling and other behaviours common in these spaces. Based on the evidence discussed here, part of that challenge may lie in encouraging participation in roles that help to facilitate productive conversation. Preece and Schneiderman propose the Reader-to-Leader framework to describe how users first encounter social media in the capacity of a reader, and gradually become more active in the space by contributing small amounts before going on to collaborate with others and assume leadership roles (Preece & Shneiderman, 2009, p. 2). As well as quality content,

resources that encourage participation must be provided, such as instructional guides and interactive interface features (Preece & Shneiderman, 2009, p. 18). Use of mainstream spaces requires the ceding of control over interface and platform design features to the commercial entities that create and control the space, and their market-driven policies. However, participatory practices within such a space are still open to manipulation. Exploitation of the agency that participants, including facilitators and super-contributors, command over their conversational behaviour may offer an opportunity to create the conditions necessary for connected, cross-cutting conversation to take place, through policies of interactive dominance which aim to engage as many participants as possible. Combining thoughtful facilitation with the technical features of contemporary digital media – such as notifications of contributions to content that is relevant to a user – it may be possible to recreate some of the interactivity and engagement of social media in general in a political sphere. Techniques such as positive feedback, encouragement and gratitude from facilitators may increase repeat contributions and interactions through the provision of the kind of gratification and positive self-affirmation that has been so successful in commercial services.

However, in mainstream digital spaces the jump from contributor to facilitator may be difficult as it requires trusting and/or respectful relationships between participants, which are all too often lacking (Jhaver, Ghoshal, Bruckman, & Gilbert, 2018; Wright, 2006). Increased engagement and repeat activity brought about through skilled facilitation may help to build the kind of communities in which participants value their membership and thus seek to maintain the social bonds that membership entails – but in mainstream spaces there is scant evidence of the sort of communities seen in the niche environments of the tight-knit special interest forums.

Third spaces in a networked public sphere

The evidence provided above highlights two important conditions for online political conversation: productive participant roles and shared social ties. The first could possibly be engineered in some way by platform designers, but the second is usually a product of the community itself. Rather than trying to recreate these conditions, an alternative perspective might embrace these niche communities as part of a connected public sphere. Acknowledging their existence, we can look for connected spaces in a network through which political action is generated, to be acted out elsewhere. Benkler, Roberts, Faris, Solow-Niederman and Etling (2015) used hyperlink analysis to identify connected online content related to a high profile case of online activism. They revealed a diverse network in which major organisations played a role in motivating citizens from across society to act. Within such a network the political action taking place in consultations and similar initiatives may have been generated elsewhere in alternative spaces, in which interactive discussion takes place. Conversation that emerges in non-political forum spaces has been shown to play an important role in the facilitation of political action (Graham, Jackson, & Wright, 2015a, p. 662) and mobilization of citizens (Graham, Jackson, & Wright, 2015b, p. 12). Multiple spaces for participation could be connected within a network, the overall participatory experience combined in a multi-stage process that ends with individual statements in policy related space which may be the result of different models of participation in earlier rounds of discussion where opinion is formed and action encouraged.

To take political action within this network, citizens must first be made aware of formal participatory spaces and be motivated to visit and participate. This could happen through various mechanisms, such as through a general interest in an institutionally-linked initiative; a personal interest in a policy being discussed; through exposure to a news story; or by the involvement of an advocate or activist group. It is this

motivational force that may link the action-oriented model of participation with other, possibly more deliberative models occurring elsewhere. Action-forming chains of individuals within the network may be long or short, perhaps running from an institutional press-release, to a newspaper comments section, to an advocacy group, to a consultation, or perhaps jumping between parapolitical spaces in special interest forums and ideologically congruent communities in advocate group spaces. Indeed, Dumas et al. (2015) described how particular groups of activists can capitalise on this model to spread messages of action through large networks. In this networked model, the interactive discussion, or lack thereof, occurring within formal political spaces becomes less important if that discussion is occurring elsewhere, and the importance of alternative spaces for political discussion is illustrated. Activists seeking to mobilise and foment action may target their efforts on communities that converge around political topics and issues, where political preferences are more often predetermined and expressed, rather than the non-political special interest groups where preferences may be more dynamic. Non-political special interest groups may act, therefore, as an important democratic safety check for their participants, where the ideologies and balkanised perspectives of the personalised digital media structures can be tested against diverse counter-perspectives.

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Figure 1. Social network map of a conversation on the government-run Red Tape Challenge consultation website (node size denotes activity of contributor). This space was characterized by personal expressions of opinion rather than deliberative exchanges, illustrated by the low number of connected messages.

Figure 2. Argument map of a conversation on the Conservative Home website (black nodes represent disagreements, grey nodes off-topic exchanges). This is one of the unusual examples of a highly connected and cross-cutting conversation, which occurred mainly in common-interest forums.

Figure 3. An argument map of a conversation on the UKClimbing forum (black dots represent cross-cutting exchanges, grey dots off-topic exchanges). The most connected and cross cutting of all case studies, conversations in this space often featured off-topic exchanges which helped participants to maintain the relationships that were strained by political difference.