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BEYOND 'POLITICAL' COMMUNICATIVE SPACES: TALKING POLITICS ON THE WIFE SWAP DISCUSSION FORUM

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Abstract

Net-based public sphere researchers have examined online deliberation in numerous ways. However, most studies have focused exclusively on political discussion forums. This article moves beyond such spaces by analyzing political talk from an online forum dedicated to reality television. The purpose is to examine the democratic quality of political talk that emerges in this space in light of a set of normative criteria of the public sphere. The analysis also moved beyond an elite model of deliberation by investigating the use of expressives (humor, emotional comments, and acknowledgements). The findings reveal that participants engaged in political talk that was often deliberative. It was a space where the use of expressives played a significant role in enhancing such talk.

Keywords: Online Deliberation, Political Talk, Popular Culture, Public Sphere

Beyond ‘Political’ Communicative Spaces: Talking Politics on the Wife Swap Discussion Forum

One evening before dinner, a few friends and I sat and watched television.[1] As I flipped through the channels, one of my friends shouted out, “Leave that on. I like that show.” At the time, I had no idea what show she was referring to, and as such, I sat there patiently. As the introduction of the series began, I thought to myself, “Please, not another one of those reality TV shows.” Sure enough, it was exactly that, a series called Wife Swap. Wife Swap, originally broadcasted in 2003 by Channel 4 (UK), is an award winning reality television series, which focuses on the lives of families. For two weeks, the mothers of two families trade places. Given the contrast in the families selected, the show presents a lively form of entertainment from the screams of anger to the laughter of joy. However, entertainment was not the only thing that Wife Swap provided that evening amongst friends. It also, and unexpectedly, provoked political talk. During the first commercial break, we began discussing the behaviors of the two families. By the end of the show, these particular behaviors ignited several discussions on the importance of parenting for society.

Before the show began, I had had a somewhat negative impression of reality television. Stealing a line from Neil Postman’s (1985) book, my thought at the time was, “Yes, we are amusing ourselves to death.” However, after watching the show and participating in the communicative space that it provoked, I began to question my initial impressions of reality television and other popular forms of entertainment. Shortly after, I began exploring entertainment-based discussion forums. What I found was numerous communities tied to reality television. Although much of what I read was not political, there were a number of times when political talk did emerge. For example, I came across discussions dealing with everything from bullying among British youth to the Iraq War, indicating that political talk is not bound to those spaces dedicated to conventional politics (see also Graham & Harju, 2011; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006; Van Zoonen, 2007; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009).

Net-based public sphere researchers have examined online deliberation in various ways. However, most studies have focused explicitly on political discussion forums thereby neglecting an array of other genres. As discussed above, reality television forums also host political talk, which contributes to the web of informal conversations that constitute the public sphere. Moreover, these spaces are relevant today when we considered the notion of a shift in politics. As a result of complex economic, political, and social changes brought on largely by globalization, new relationships between citizens on the one hand, and traditional institutions and the political elite on the other, have brought about what some have called life politics or lifestyle politics (Bennett, 1998; Giddens, 1991). Individuals here increasingly organize political and social meaning around their lifestyle values, as opposed to traditional structures and institutions. Thus, we not only need to be more inclusive about where to look, we also need a more flexible notion of political talk that allows us to capture the lifestyle-based political issues that arise in online spaces.

The aim of this article is to move beyond political spaces by examining political talk within a reality television forum. By political talk, I am referring to everyday political conversation carried out freely between participants, which is often spontaneous and tends to lack purpose outside the purpose of talk for talk's sake, representing the practical communicative form of communicative action (Habermas, 1984, p. 327). It is through such talk whereby citizens achieve understanding about the self and each other, representing the fundamental element of the public sphere. By political talk, I am referring to a public-spirited way of talking whereby individuals make connections from issues under discussion to society.

The purpose of this study is not merely to identify political talk as it appears within the Wife Swap forum, but to determine its quality in light of a set of normative criteria of the public sphere. It is also to move beyond a formal notion of deliberation by investigating and exploring how expressive

speech acts interact and influence the more 'traditional' elements of deliberation. Thus, I present the following two research questions: To what extent does political talk within a reality television forum satisfy the normative conditions of the process of deliberation of the public sphere, and what role do expressives play in political talk and in relation to the normative conditions? Together, these questions seek not only to offer insight into the quality of such talk, but also to provide a better understanding of its expressive nature. Moreover, they seek to improve one's understanding of how political talk occurs outside the realm of online political forums.

The Normative Conditions of the Public Sphere

Assessing the democratic value of political talk requires normative criteria of the public sphere. Net-based public sphere researchers have been heavily influenced by the work of Habermas. Though some have constructed different aspects of his theory of communicative rationality and the public sphere, a thorough specification is required. Thus, I offer a set of public sphere criteria: the normative conditions of the process of deliberation.[2]

Habermas envisions a strong democracy via a public sphere of informal citizen deliberation oriented towards achieving mutual understanding, which critically guides the political system. The public sphere and the web of everyday political conversations that constitute it becomes the key venue for deliberation. Habermas argues that when participants take up communicative rationality in everyday conversation, they refer to several idealizing presuppositions. Drawing from these (1984, 1987, 2001), seven criteria are distinguished,[3] which provide the necessary conditions for achieving understanding during the course of political talk and create a communicative environment based in and on fairness by placing both structural and dispositional requirements on the communicative form, process, and participant:

- The first condition is the presence of rational-critical debate, which represents the guiding communicative form. It requires that participants provide reasoned claims, which are critically reflected upon; that is, political talk requires the use of rationality and critical reflection.
- The second and third related conditions are coherence and continuity. They require that participants stick to the topic of discussion until some form of agreement or understanding is achieved before withdrawing from it.
- The fourth, fifth, and sixth conditions represent three dispositional requirements for achieving mutual understanding. First, reciprocity requires that participants listen and respond to each other's questions, arguments, and opinions. However, reciprocity alone does not satisfy the process: reflexivity is required. Reflexivity is the internal or subjective process of reflecting another's argument or position against one's own. Again, the process does not stop here; empathy is required. Deliberation calls for empathic perspective taking: the ability and willingness to imagine another person's position by understanding matters from their perspective.
- The final condition is discursive equality, which is aimed at maintaining equality among participants during the deliberative process. First, the (forum) rules that coordinate the process cannot privilege one individual or group of individuals over another. Second, it requires an equal distribution of voice. In other words, one individual or group of individuals should not dominate the conversation. Finally, it requires that participants respect each other as equals thereby prohibiting abusive and degrading communicative practices.

Expressives and Deliberation

Analyzing deliberation in informal online communicative spaces (such as the Wife Swap forum) requires a more inclusive definition of what constitutes political talk. Privileging rationality via argumentation as the only relevant communicative form ignores the realities of everyday political conversation. In particular, it ignores its expressive nature. Some democratic theorists maintain that rational discourse needs to be broadened, allowing for communicative forms such as greeting, gossip, rhetoric, and storytelling (Dryzek, 2000; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Young, 1996). Others argue that emotions and humor are essential to any notion of good deliberation (Basu, 1999; Mendelberg, 2001; O'Neill, 2002; Rosenberg, 2004). Indeed, expressives are inherent to political talk, and it would be hard to imagine people actively engaging in such talk if their emotions were not there to provoke them to do so. Moreover, as some of the authors above have argued, expressives may play a role in facilitating deliberative talk.[4] For example, humor and acknowledgements may foster a communicative atmosphere conducive to achieving deeper levels of understanding.

With the exception of a few studies (see e.g. Graham, 2010; Polletta & Lee, 2006), past net-based public sphere researchers have tended to ignore the role of expressives. However, if we are to provide a better understanding of how people talk politics online or to assess its democratic value, a more flexible approach is required.[5] Thus, in the analysis that follows the use of expressive speech acts is investigated, focusing particularly on the role they play in relation to the normative conditions of deliberation. By expressives, I am referring to humor, emotional comments, and acknowledgements. Humor (e.g. jokes and wisecracks) represents a complex emotional speech act that excites and amuses. Emotional comments are speech acts that express a person's feelings or attitude, while acknowledgements represent speech acts that acknowledge the presence, departure, or conversational action of another person, such as greeting and complimenting.

Methodology

The Wife Swap forum is hosted by Channel 4's (UK) online community pages, and according to the site, it is a place where fans can "chat about Wife Swap". The data gathered consisted of the individual postings and the threads in which they were situated. The selection of the data was based on the broadcasting dates of the series, which represented a three-month period.[6] The sample contained 79 threads consisting of 892 postings. This initial sample was first coded employing Graham's (2008) criteria for identifying political talk. His criteria, which were inspired by Mansbridge (1999), allow a researcher to capture both conventional and lifestyle-based political issues that arise during the course of everyday conversation. All threads that contained a posting in which (a) a participant made a connection from a particular experience, interest, or issue to society in general and which (b) stimulated reflection and a response by at least one other participant, were coded as political threads.[7]

Once identified, political threads were subjected to three phases of coding (see Figure 1). The coding scheme and instruments that were adopted for analysis are based on the methodological approach developed in Graham (2008, 2009).[8] During the first phase, postings were coded for one or more of three message types: reasoned claims, non-reasoned claims, and non-claim responses. A posting that provided reasoning with its claims was coded as an argument, and all arguments that directly challenged or refuted another claim were coded as critical reflection. A posting that did not support its claim with reasoning was coded as an assertion. Regarding non-claim responses, postings were coded for commissives and acknowledgements. A posting that assented, conceded (a partial assent), or agreed-to-disagree with another participant's claim or argument from an opposing position was coded as a commissive. A posting that acknowledged the presence, departure, or conversational action of another participant (e.g. greeting, thanking, or complimenting) was coded as an acknowledgement. The unit of analysis during this phase was the individual posting.[9]

Once all postings were coded, those that provide reasoned claims (arguments) were carried forward to the second phase where they were coded for their use of supporting evidence. Evidential content was categorized into four types: facts/sources, comparisons, experiences, and examples.[10] The unit of analysis during this phase was the individual argument.

During the final phase of analysis, all postings were coded for communicative empathy and discursive equality. Messages suggesting that their authors had imagined themselves in another participant's position (either cognitively or emotionally) were coded as empathetic exchanges. Messages that degraded (to lower in character, quality, esteem, or rank) another participant or their argument were coded as degrading. The unit of analysis again was the individual posting. In all three phases, the context unit of analysis was the discussion thread and the relationship between postings within them.

Insert Figure 1 about here.

Regarding expressives, the aim was to investigate how they were used during political talk and whether they tended to facilitate or impede deliberation. Thus, additional textual analyses on the use of expressives were conducted. Specifically, several separate in-depth readings on the use of expressives for each were carried out with particular attention being paid to identifying the type, analyzing the social structure, and examining their use in relation to the normative conditions. In each case, the selected material was read, re-read, and worked through. Additional literature aided in the analysis; Shibles (1997) taxonomy of humor and Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, and O'Connor's (2001) categorization of primary and secondary emotions were consulted as a means of categorization.[11]

Identifying Political Talk

There were 9 threads containing 288 postings coded as political threads, which represented 32% of the initial sample. What were the topics of these discussions? This question was addressed by categorizing the political lines of discussion, which consisted of 233 postings, into topics based on the issues discussed.[12] The dominant topic of discussion was the welfare state, which consisted of 105 posting, representing 45% of political talk. Discussions here focused primarily on welfare reform in the UK and on the morality of the welfare system. Though these discussions seemed to resemble conventional political issues, they were often driven by the life experiences of forum participants. Participants would bring their life lessons to these debates, which dealt with experiences such as losing a job, providing care for a loved one, and the difficulties encountered with the National Healthcare Service. In other words, these debates were often driven by narratives and storytelling.

The welfare state was not the only political topic of discussion. Indeed, a majority of the discussions dealt with two topics: parenting and family. For example, discussions on the life of a single mother, bullying among British youth, child obesity, and the parenting practices of immigrant/minority families were some of the issues discussed. Thus, much of political talk centered on issues that were more individualized and lifestyle oriented. These topics tended to foster political talk that was both personal and authoritative in nature. Because participants were speaking like parents and bringing their knowledge and experiences to the debate, at times, they assumed the role of an expert, speaking with an authoritative voice when criticizing others.[13]

Political Talk and the Normative Conditions

In the following section, the results from the analysis of the seven normative conditions, as discussed above, are presented.

Rational-Critical Debate

Rational-critical debate requires that the discussions be guided by rationality and critical reflection. The level of rationality was assessed by calculating the number of reasoned claims in relation to the total number of claims made. Overall, participants were rational. There were 219 claims made. Out of these claims 185 were reasoned, which represented 84% of all claims, indicating that being rational was the norm. In terms of postings, nearly 60% provided arguments (reasoned claims), while only 12% contained assertions (non-reasoned claims).[14] The exchange of claims, which represented 72% of the postings, was the guiding communicative form. Regarding critical reflection, nearly a third (32%) of reasoned claims represented rebuttal and refute arguments, which appeared in nearly a quarter of the postings.

Coherence

Coherence refers to the consistency of postings within each thread. Do participants stick to the topic of discussion? Postings were categorized into lines of discussion based upon the relatedness of issues discussed. The level of coherence was determined by assessing the number of topic changes and the relevance of such changes. Within the 9 threads, 21 lines of discussion were identified. There was one thread where participants did not deviate at all from the issue under discussion, while there were 6 lines, which contained only 16 postings, coded as complete departures'.[15] In other words, 94% of the postings were coherent.

Continuity

Continuity requires that a discussion continue until something approaching mutual understanding is achieved before participants withdraw from it. This was assessed in two ways, by measuring the level of extended debate and the level of convergence. First, the level of extended debate refers to the frequency of continued interaction between participants via the use of arguments. A

problem with much past research into online deliberation has been its lack of a systematic approach to analyzing extended debate. However, in this study, lines of discussion within each thread were coded for argument depth via the presence of at least one strong-string. A strong-string refers to a minimum of three argument interaction, ideally in the form of critical reflection. By calculating the total number of strong-string claims in relation to the total number of claims, the level of continuity was assessed. There were 13 strong-strings. The average number of a strong-string was 11 with the largest totaling 31 claims. Approximately 63% of all claims were involved in strong-string exchanges; this represented nearly half of the postings. Moreover, 85% of these claims were reasoned, and nearly half were in the form of critical reflection, indicating both the rational and critical nature of these exchanges.

The second indicator of continuity was the degree of convergence achieved during the course of a discussion, identified by the number of commissive speech acts. There were 17 commissives, which represented approximately 6% of the postings. As a means of determining the level of convergence, the number of commissives was compared to the lines of discussion. There were 9 threads, which contained 10 political coherent lines of discussion. The average number of commissives per line was 1.7 (SD = 2.31) with 8 of the 10 lines achieving at least one form of convergence. Additionally, the analysis suggests the importance of extended debate in achieving convergence. In particular, 15 commissives were a product of strong-string exchanges.

Reciprocity

Reciprocity was measured by combining the percentage of replies to postings with a degree of centralization measurement.[16] The latter allows for an investigation into the social structure of the discussion threads. Online deliberation research has typically measured reciprocity by only identifying the percentage of postings coded as replies. This approach focuses on measuring individual acts of

reciprocity at a participant-to-participant level. Such an approach fails to capture the social structure of a discussion thread. For example, a thread may have a high level of replies, but the social structure of those replies may be centralized, looking more like a one-to-many or many-to-one discussion rather than a web of reciprocal exchanges. Thus, in order to assess the forum as a whole, the dual results for each of the nine threads were plotted along a double axis matrix in order to assess the forum for reciprocity.

First, as Figure 2 indicates, the level of replies was high; only two threads maintained a reply percentage indicator less than 75%. The percentage of replies for all threads was at 78%. Second, the degree of centralization measurement is set on a scale of 0 to 1 (De Nooy, Mrvar, & Batagelj, 2005). Zero represents the ideal decentralized thread, while one stands for the ideal centralized thread. As is shown, there were no threads moderately to highly centralized. On the contrary, four of the nine threads were moderately decentralized (those between .250 and .500), while more than half of the threads were highly decentralized (those $\leq .250$). Finally, regarding the reciprocity matrix, threads that fell within the strong decentralized web quadrant (the top left quadrant) were considered to have a moderate to high level of reciprocity. As is shown, all nine threads fall within this quadrant. In order to make a sharper distinction between these threads, a second set of criteria was added (represented by the dotted lines) as a way of distinguishing between those maintaining a moderate level with those possessing a high level. As is shown, three threads contained an ideal level of reciprocity (threads $\geq 75\%$ and $\leq .250$). With the exception of two threads, the remaining four threads fell within the top right corner (threads $\geq 75\%$ and between .250 and .500), indicating a moderately high level of reciprocity.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Reflexivity

Reflexivity requires that participants reflect another participant's argument against their own. The first step in determining the level of reflexivity is to identify the type and level of evidence use because higher evidential content indicates that a participant has taken the time to reflect the opposing position against their own (Kuhn, 1991). There were four types of evidence identified: examples (56%), experiences (27%), (cited) facts/sources (10%), and comparisons (7%). Wife Swap participants frequently used evidence to support their claims; 58% of all arguments used supporting evidence.

However, determining the level of evidence use is only the first step in ascertaining the level of reflexivity. Next, arguments were subject to four criteria. When a posting or series of postings (a) provided a reasoned claim; (b) used evidence to support that claim; (c) were responsive to challenges by providing rebuttals and refutes; (d) and provided evidence in support of that defense or challenge, they were coded as part of a reflexive argument. After applying these criteria, 11 reflexive arguments, which consisted of 37 postings (13%), were identified. The average number was slightly more than 3 postings per argument with the largest totaling 10. Moreover, 20% of all arguments (37 arguments) were coded as reflexive arguments.

Empathy

Imagining another person's position and trying to understand matters from their perspective is important to deliberation. As deliberation is a social process, conveying empathic consideration to another participant is crucial. When participants do not communicate their empathic thoughts or feelings, empathic relationships tend not to emerge. Therefore, messages were coded for communicative empathy. The analysis revealed that 28 messages, representing 10% of the postings, were coded as an empathetic exchange. During the course of political talk, participants would convey empathic considerations with statements such as, "I really understand where you're coming from",

"I'm trying to imagine what it would be like", and "I understand. I have been there before." These exchanges tended not to be polarized. In other words, 18 of these exchanges occurred across argumentative lines.

Discursive Equality

Discursive equality requires both an equal distribution of voice and substantial equality among participants. First, the distribution of voice was determined by measuring the rate and distribution of participation. Forums that maintain a distribution of voice skewed towards a small group of frequent posters are considered discursively unequal. There were 125 participants responsible for the 288 postings within the Wife Swap sample. As Table 1 shows, the level of one-timers was high, representing 57% of the participants. However, the distribution of participation was egalitarian. The most frequent posters (posting five or more messages) were responsible for less than a third of the postings.

Insert Table 1 about here.

However, the distribution of voice tells us little about the level of substantial equality. Do participants respect and recognize one another as having an equal voice? This question was addressed by coding postings for neglected arguments and degrading exchanges. For example, when a participant degrades another participant's person or argument (even if unwittingly), this not only indicates disrespect but also creates an atmosphere of inequality. First, 30 arguments lacked a reciprocal exchange, which represented 16% of arguments. However, a closer reading revealed that there was no trend to the act of neglecting. Second, regarding active acts of inequality, there were 28 messages coded as degrading, which represented 10% of the postings. However, most of these exchanges were

directed at forum participants claiming to be a Wife Swap family member from the series. When leaving these exchanges aside, the level of degrading among forum participants was low.

The Use of Expressives

In the following section, the findings on the use of expressives (emotional comments, humor, and acknowledgements) are presented.

Emotional Comments

Expressives were a common feature of political talk, appearing in 56% of the postings. Emotional comments accounted for 62% of expressives and appeared in 39% of the postings. Overall, the analysis revealed three aspects on the use of emotions: their type, their social structure, and their relationship with variables of deliberation. First, the most frequently expressed emotion was anger. In particular, anger represented 56% of emotions, which usually came in the form of disgust, dislike, or annoyance. Anger was typically directed towards the family members appearing on the series. However, participants did communicate other types of emotions. Specifically, sadness (15%), love (15%), and fear (9%) were also expressed on occasion.

The second aspect of emotional comments was their social structure. Emotional comments tended to fuel more comments that were emotional in the form of rant sessions. Approximately 53% of emotional comments (62 postings) were engaged in a rant. There were seven rants. The average number was nearly 9 with the largest totaling 15 postings. Rant sessions were mostly directed at the parenting behaviors from the series. Though rants tended to be polarized (ranting together not at each other), they were often driven by advice giving (e.g. on parenting practices), which in turn sparked more critical-reciprocal exchanges between participants.

The final aspect of emotions was their relationship with variables of deliberation. First, nearly three-quarters of emotional comments were expressed via arguments or nearly half of all arguments were emotional. Emotions here seemed to enhance political talk constructively as opposed to igniting irrational debate, as Mary's posting below illustrates:[17]

> I am appalled at the lack of understanding of the need which often drives immigrant families to Great Britain in the first place. Education is perceived by many, if not most, immigrant families as the most inportant [sic] gift they can give their children. The need to make money, and the economics involved which allow the distribution of that wealth back to their home communities is the driving force that has immigrant families tolerating the downsides [sic] of life in host countries and watching the programme last night highlighted downsides [sic]of British life that were embarrassing to see.

In this thread, a political discussion on immigrant families in the UK emerged. As Mary's posting exemplifies, these types of arguments were often less about expressing raw and intense feelings at something or someone, but rather emotions were used to highlight the importance of an issue. Emotions also were used in relation to portraying life experiences and stories, as Jane's posting below illustrates:

> I couldn't agree more with [Mary] society is going down the pan! I teach in a Secondary school and am regularly told to F*** Off by pupils who refuse to be disciplined which really hurts me. I make it very clear that if they talk when I am talking then they are not learning themselves and they are also preventing other pupils from learning. Kids today cannot accept discipline. One kid told me that if his parents don't mind him swearing why should I? he thought nothing of letting rip with a string of obscene profanities in a class where there were

several kids who were extremely embarrassed and upset by this tirade. If the school suspends them then the parents come in and demand to know why!!! Parents!!! Who would have them?

In this thread, a political discussion on the importance of parenting for society emerged. In these types of discussions, participants would support their arguments with personal experiences. In some cases (like above), they were used to stress and explain problems in society, while in other cases, they were used to suggest solutions to those problems. Emotions also seemed to add weight to these arguments by providing a sense of genuineness and realness to their claims.

Finally, emotions were a typical ingredient of degrading exchanges. When degrading did occur, more than three-quarters of these exchanges expressed some form of anger towards another forum participant.

Humor

The second most common expressive was humor. It accounted for 23% of expressives and appeared in 15% of the postings. The analysis revealed three aspects on the use of humor. The first was its social function. For example, humor may be used for social bonding, to express frustration and anger towards authority, criticize another, or to reinforce stereotypes (Basu, 1999; Koller, 1988). However, Wife Swap participants used humor mostly to entertain. Humor here usually came in the form of wisecracks, jokes, and sarcasm and typically focused on making fun of the families appearing on Wife Swap series. Thus, it contributed little constructively to the issues under discussion and was oriented more towards having a laugh with (or sometimes at) fellow participants.

The second aspect of humor was its social structure. Humor invited more humor. When a participant posted a joke, for example, it usually provoked a string of humorous comments in return.

Such exchanges accounted for 56% of these comments. There were six humorous exchanges. The average number was four with the largest totaling seven postings.

The final aspect of humor was its relationship (or lack thereof) with variables of deliberation. First, humor was rarely used in conjunction with arguments. Specifically, only six humorous comments were coded as rational humor. Second, humor rarely fostered degrading. In particular, only six of the comments were used to degrade (make fun of) another participant. Finally, humor rarely led discussions off the topic; only 10 comments were coded as off the topic of discussion.

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements accounted for 15% of expressives and appeared in 9% of the postings. There were four types of acknowledgements identified: thanking (43%), complimenting (36%), apologizing (18%), and congratulating (4%).[18] Thanking and complimenting were the most popular, representing more than three-fourths of acknowledgements. As discussed above, participants often shared personal stories with each other. When participants did compliment, it was typically used in conjunction with these stories as a means of support, while thanking tended to be given in response to that support. Consequently, complimenting and thanking seemed to foster a supportive and encouraging communicative environment.

Discussion

Political talk was no stranger to the Wife Swap forum. The behaviors and the lifestyle choices of the families from the Wife Swap series ignited political discussions. However, the range of topics discussed was limited with much of the debate focusing on parenting and family. Consequently, political talk represented a more lifestyle oriented, personal form of politics. Conventional political

topics such as health care reform were typically discussed in a more personal manner. The discussions were often driven by participants' life experiences and stories, which is consistent with Van Zoonen's (2007) research on similar entertainment-based forums.

The Wife Swap forum performed fairly well with respect to the seven normative conditions. It was a communicative space where the exchange of claims was common practice, and the quality of those exchanges was generally high. Levels of rationality, coherence, reciprocity, the use of supporting evidence, and substantial equality were all moderately high to high, while levels of critical reflection, extended debate, reflexivity, and communicative empathy were reasonable. However, there were several conditions where Wife Swap's performance differed from previous studies.

First, research (Brants, 2002; Wilhelm, 1999) suggests that extended debate on a single issue within online forums is uncommon. However, the findings from Wife Swap revealed that a substantial number of arguments were engaged in extended debate, which was typically critical in nature. One possible reason for this discrepancy is that these studies relied mostly on observations, as opposed to any systematic operationalization of extended debate. However, there does seem to be a link with Beierle's (2004) survey research of participants from a governmentally sponsored forum. His findings suggest that during the course of online debate participants developed a sense of commitment to the discussion. To some degree, this seemed to be the case in the Wife Swap forum.

Second, research suggests that achieving acts of convergence during the course of online deliberation is rare (Beierle, 2004; Dunne, 2009; Jankowski & Van Os, 2004; Jensen, 2003; Strandberg, 2008). However, this was not the case in the Wife Swap forum. Almost all lines of discussion ended in at least one act of convergence. One explanation for this may have something to do with the nature of the forum. As discussed above, Wife Swap participants often employed affirming,

supportive, empathetic, and personal communicative practices. This along with the personal nature of the issues discussed seemed to have placed more emphasis on understanding, making acts of convergence easier to achieve.

Finally, studies on online deliberation found substantial inequalities in the distribution of participation within a variety of online forum types, structures, and contexts (Albrecht, 2006; Brants, 2002; Coleman, 2004; Dahlberg, 2001; Dunne, 2009; Jankowski & Van Os, 2004; Jensen, 2003; Winkler, 2005). However, the distribution of participation within the Wife Swap forum was not skewed towards a small group of participants. In other words, the discussions were not dominated by a small group of popular participants who frequently spoke to one another. One possible explanation could have something to do with the issues discussed. Since many of the participants were parents, and much of the debate focused on parenting and family, this may have created a communicative space where participants were on more of an equal footing; that is, they all had something to contribute. This, combined with the caring, supportive, and personal nature of the forum, may have persuaded them to voice that something.

One aim of this article was to provide insight into the role expressives play in online political talk. The findings suggest that expressives were a common ingredient. Moreover, with the exception of humor, which seemed to be a non-factor, expressives tended to facilitate political talk rather than impede it. Emotions in particular played an integral role in the discussions. Though anger was the emotion of choice and was often expressed via rant sessions, emotions tended to play a constructive role during the course of the debates. Participants would frequently provide life experiences and stories, which were typically laced with emotions in a constructive way. They seemed to offer a valuable means of conveying problems and solutions to those problems, while providing a sense of genuineness and realness to the arguments. Moreover, it seems that Rosenberg (2004) may be right in suggesting

that productive deliberation requires emotional connections between participants. Such connections within Wife Swap seemed to fuel participants' effort to understand other positions and arguments. Finally, acknowledgements too seemed to foster a civil, cordial, and encouraging communicative atmosphere thereby enhancing political talk, which is similar to Barnes, Knops, and Newman's (2004) findings on deliberation in offline settings.

Conclusion

Political talk is not bound to conventional political spaces nor is it to party politics. The findings above suggest that discussion forums dedicated to reality television provoke citizens to engage in political talk, a key ingredient of both the public sphere and citizenship. Thus, researchers need to be more inclusive and begin exploring the various genres of the online communicative landscape. Solely focusing on political spaces provides us not only with an incomplete picture, but also with a distorted one. Are the participants of political spaces a true representation of whom and how citizens talk politics online? By moving beyond such spaces, online deliberation research can provide a more comprehensive account of political talk in the net-based public sphere.

The discussions that emerge in these spaces are an interesting object for research because they offer us insight into what matters to everyday citizens. They tap into a public sphere that is driven by citizens' everyday life knowledge, experiences, and identities. Moreover, they offer us insight into when the personal becomes political. Thus, future research needs to be more inclusive about what constitutes political talk. However, one question that emerges from this study is whether such talk contributes to meaningful political action. In other words, to what extent 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 nonpolitical spaces) transfers into participation in the political process and/or collective action in the public sphere.[19]

One of the difficulties with conducting a normative analysis is the lack of clear benchmarks in the literature regarding what satisfies the conditions of deliberation at the level of the forum. There have been few attempts by scholars to define specific benchmarks.[20] Moreover, for some conditions such reflexivity and empathy there is little research available to help establish such cut-offs. The analysis above represents an initial step. First, for reciprocity and convergence, benchmarks have been provided. Second, the criteria for establishing such benchmarks were given. Finally, though benchmarks were not specified, normative judgments were made, which provides a basis for future research to build upon.

The findings from this study also suggest that we need to move beyond elite models of deliberation. In Wife Swap, expressives were a common ingredient and made, for example, a distinct contribution to the use of reasoning. Given the lack of empirical research, there still is a need for more descriptive and exploratory studies on the use of expressives. The findings here suggest that when the topics of discussion become personal within a nonpolitical context, expressives play a prominent role in enhancing political talk. Future research should begin exploring and comparing the use expressives within different contexts, either by examining political talk within the various genres of discussion forums (see e.g. Graham, 2011) or by employing experimental designs. Moreover, this research could help scholars and practitioners develop more productive and beneficial online deliberative projects.

One of the limitations of this study is that it focused exclusively on the text. Though the indicators for reflexivity, empathy, and discursive equality proved useful, ideally, such conditions require a mixed methods approach. They require a combination of an analysis of the text alongside

methods that gauge participants' experiences, perceptions, and feelings. For example, reflexivity represents an internal process. Although this can be partly deduced from the postings, future research could complement such an approach by conducting interviews or focus groups with participants to determine whether the use of arguments and counter arguments achieve higher levels of understanding. This mixed methods approach is one of the ways forward for creating comprehensive indicators of deliberation.

Finally, what does Wife Swap have to do with it? It was a communicative space where participants not only engaged in political talk, they also engaged in deliberative talk. It was a space where the use of expressives played a key role in enhancing such talk. It was a space where the mixing of the private and the public was the norm, a space where participants took personal experiences and life lessons and bridged them to society at large, fostering a more personal form of politics. All of this seemed to foster a communicative environment that was more about understanding rather than winning, about fostering solidarity rather than polarization. It seems that Eliasoph (2000, pp. 82-83) was right when she suggested that communicative spaces organized around family and parenting may be fruitful spaces for "cultivating deep citizenship". As she states, "If political conversation is happening anywhere, these are likely places to look."

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Notes

[1] I would like to thank the anonymous referees and guest editors Stephen Coleman and Giles Moss for their insightful feedback and comments.

[2] Drawing from Habermas, Dahlberg (2004) provides another comprehensive set of public sphere criteria.

[3] There are 11 conditions. However, discursive freedom, sincerity, and structural autonomy and equality were omitted due to the scope of this article. See Chapter 2 in Graham (2009) for a complete account.

[4] Barnes (2005) and Barnes, Knops, and Newman's (2004) analyses of citizen deliberation offline found that humor, storytelling, and greeting played a significant role in facilitating political talk.

[5] See also Coleman and Blumler (2009) and Freelon's (2010) arguments for adopting more flexible approaches to examining online deliberation in the net-based public sphere.

[6] The data were taken from all threads originating between January and March 2005 within the sub-forum Wife Swap. The data were retrieved in November 2005 from http://community.channel4.com/groupee/forums/a/cfrm/f/31060416. The data are available upon request.

[7] An illustration of the categories (using examples from the Wife Swap forum) is available in Graham (2008, pp. 22-23).

[8] More information regarding the research design and methodology is available in Graham (2009, pp. 41-65).

[9] The coding categories were not mutually exclusive. A single post may have contained multiple message types.

[10] A single argument may have used multiple forms of supporting evidence.

[11] A systematic account of the analyses conducted here are available in Graham (2009, pp. 61-63).

[12] Fifty-five postings were not included because they were nonpolitical and/or incoherent.

[13] An in-depth analysis of the topics and triggers of political talk in the Wife Swap forum is available in Graham and Harju (2011).

[14] A posting containing more than one argument was only counted once, and this likewise applied to assertions.

[15] Out the 15 coherent lines, 5 were nonpolitical (39 postings) and 10 were political (233 postings).

[16] A posting was coded as a reply if it quoted another message; cited another participant; or it clearly interacted with the content of another posting.

[17] All call signs have been replaced with invented ones.

[18] There were 28 acknowledgements identified. The total percentage does not add to 100 due to rounding.

[19] See also Wright's (in press) recommendations for future online deliberation research.

[20] Kies's (2010) detailed empirical analysis of online deliberation is one of the few exceptions.

Table 2
The Wife Swap *forum's* Rate of Participation and Distribution of Postings

		Posting rate			Posting distribution		
		Participant frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent	Posting total	Percent	Cumulative percent
Postings	1	71	57	57	71	25	25
	2	14	11	68	28	10	35
	3	18	14	82	54	19	54
	4	13	10	92	52	18	72
	5 to 9	6	5	97	41	14	86
	≥10	3	2	99	42	15	101
	Total	125	99		288	101	

Note: The total percentages due not add to 100 due to rounding.

Figure 1. Coding scheme overview for analyzing the discursive structure and normative characteristics of political talk.

Figure 2. Level of replies and degree of centralization in the political threads of the Channel 4's Wife Swap forum.

Figure 1

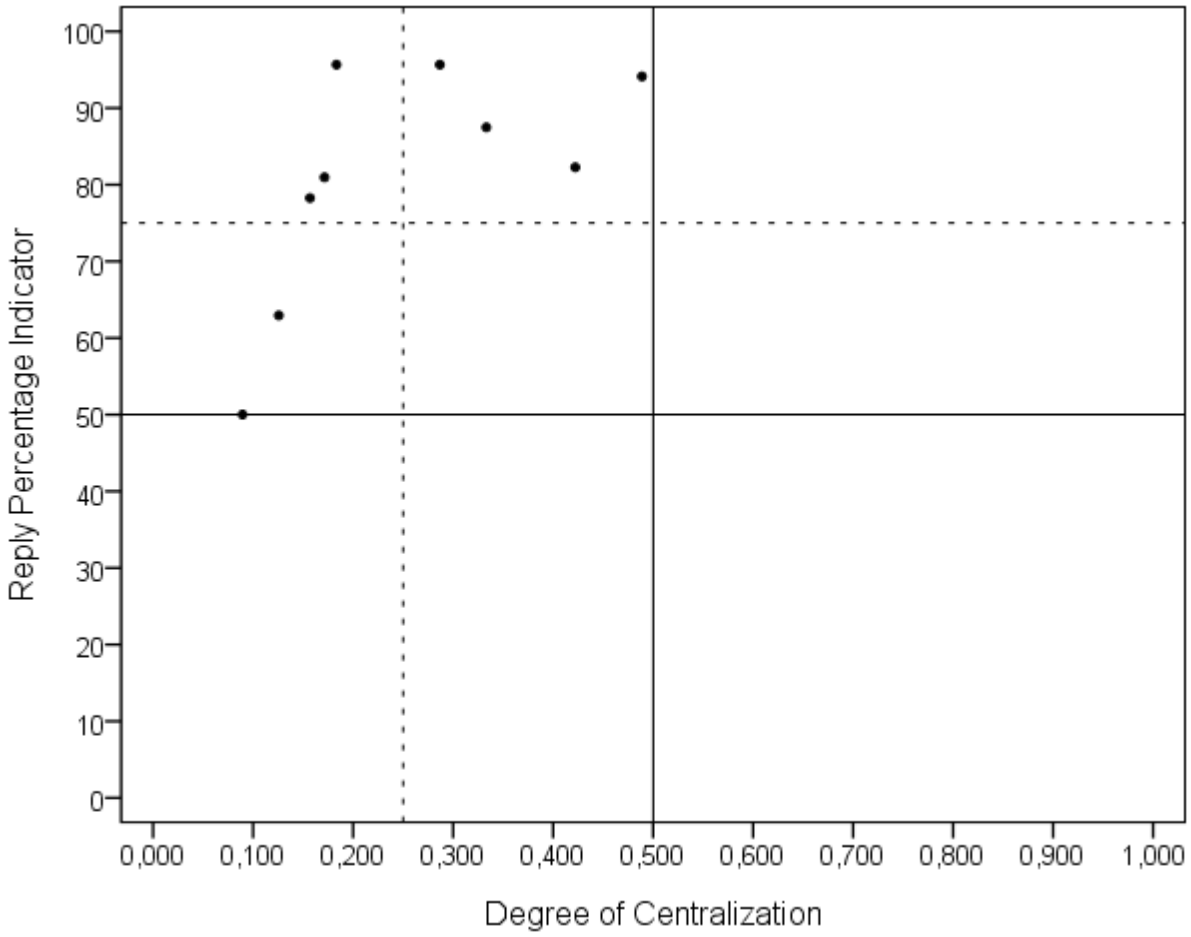
Reply Percentage Indicator
100
90
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
0,000
0,100
0,200
0,300
0,400
0,500
0,600
0,700
0,800
0,900
1,000
Degree of Centralization

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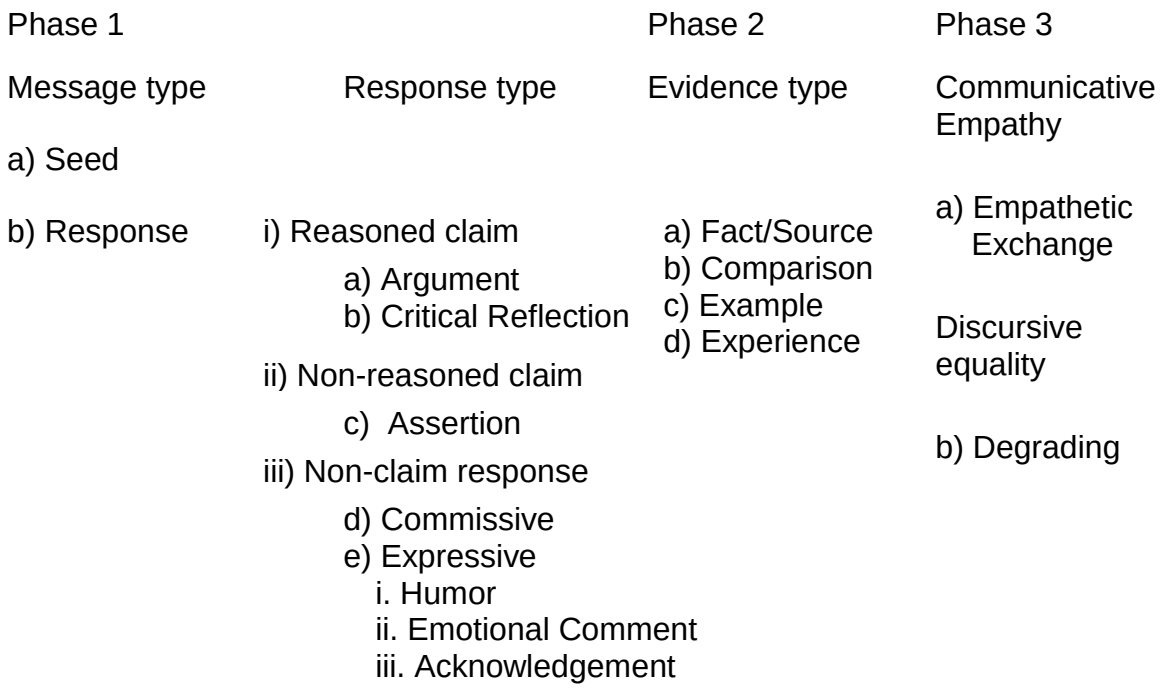
Figure 2


Phase 1
Message type
Response type
Phase 2
Evidence type
Phase 3
Communicative Empathy
a) Seed
b) Response
i) Reasoned claim
a) Argument
b) Critical Reflection
ii) Non-reasoned claim
c) Assertion
iii) Non-claim response
d) Commissive
e) Expressive
i. Humor
ii. Emotional Comment
iii. Acknowledgement
a) Fact/Source
b) Comparison
c) Example
d) Experience
a) Empathetic Exchange
Discursive equality
b) Degrading