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J. David WOLFGANG*

Self-Governance on Trial: A Public Sphere Analysis of News Website Forum Comments

Abstract

The online public sphere offers society an opportunity to pursue self-governance through rational-critical discourse of public issues. However, testing the effectiveness of the sphere involves studying the structure of the online forum (e.g. whether the forum allows for pseudonymous comments or not) and the quality of the content in the forum. This research studied online news forums on the topics of gun control and civil unions in Colorado to see what barriers to participating in the forum might exist in the structure of the forum and then what types of content was produced in the forum. The research showed that a forum allowing commenters to use a pseudonym led to comments with more exchange and critique of reasoned normative positions and use of supporting facts. However, neither the pseudonymous forum nor the identified forum had stronger levels of commitment to constructive dialogue in the forum. Also, commenters showed no reflexivity in their comments, meaning that participants were not assessing their own positions or changing their perspectives based on the arguments of others. While this shows that reducing barriers to accessing the forum helps to produce a public sphere environment, there is still work to be done in improving the level of constructive dialogue and stimulating negotiation and consensus building.

Keywords: Anonymity, online forums, Public sphere.

The Internet has changed the way that individuals communicate and has provided new opportunities for citizens to deliberate together in the pursuit of self-governance. This idealistic approach to public discourse in democracy, as postulated prior to the age of the Internet in the theory of the public sphere (Habermas, 1962), carries many assumptions about the ability of the individual to participate in the conversation, the nature of the conversation, the intent of the individuals participating in the conversation, and the ultimate outcome of the conversation. Whether an online conversation can approach the idealistic goals of the public sphere is as yet an untested assumption, but researchers have come closer to understanding the democratic potential of the Internet by looking at the ability of the individual to access public forums, the quality of the conversation in those forums, and the ultimate ability of the participants to reach consensus on public issues (Brundidge, 2010; Dahlberg, 2001; Dahlgren, 2005; Papacharissi, 2002). The purpose of this case study is to explore how news website forums facilitate conversations on public issues as compared with the ideal of the public sphere through the textual analysis of news website forum conversations about gun control and civil unions.

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The online public forum, when linked to a news story about an important public issue, has the potential to serve as a public sphere for participants seeking self-governance. Previous research shows that online forum participants, when presented with a highly-controversial topic, were more likely to offer reasons for their opinions, reference each other's ideas, and directly respond to each other (Freelon, et al., 2008). This research looks at structural attributes of how the forum is built in order to see if structure and access factors – such as the ability to speak with a pseudonym – influence the quality of the public conversation. This is studied through the hot-button issues of gun control and civil unions because of the contentious nature of the conversations, but also because of the necessity for a public conversation about these topics.

The Habermasian Public Sphere

Jürgen Habermas first postulated the theory of the public sphere in 1962 in order to tie the argument made by previous critical scholars that discourse could emancipate society from economic and political powers with his own assumption that the public could self-govern through discourse (Habermas, 1962; Marx, 1867; Hegel, 1812-1813; Kant, 1784). Habermas also relied on the argument of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno that each individual possesses the desire to pursue a rational society founded on reason (Horkheimer, 1937; Adorno, 1966). Habermas took this a step further in order to develop the public sphere concept by advocating that individuals pursuing self-governance could come together through rational-critical discourse in an attempt to liberate themselves from economic and political powers in society (Habermas, 1962).

The public sphere is advanced as an effective normative theory of deliberative democracy because, despite how ideal the values might be, it assumes three things: the presence of citizens who possess communicative competence, equal access for all potential participants, and separation from state and economic powers in the forum (Habermas, 1979; Habermas 1962; Hohendahl, 1979). The public sphere is often criticized for the same reasons – notably because it assumes that a forum can exist in which all citizens can actively access and participate equally (Hohendahl, 1979). Critics claim that the public sphere makes a broad assumption that certain minorities in society have an equal ability to access the sphere. This argument is often made in the historical case of the French Revolution, which lacked female participation, but was held out as a plausible case of the public sphere by Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Landes, 1988; Habermas, 1962).

Normative Journalism Theory

Journalism might play a role in developing the kind of forum for public discourse that could come close to meeting the expectations of the public sphere. Connecting the public sphere to the role of the journalist requires normative journalism theory about the expected role of the journalist, which can be broken down into four roles: monitorial, facilitative, radical, and collaborative (Christians et al., 2009). Under the Facilitative Role, it is expected that the journalist will provide the individual with an outlet through which to express oneself with

the goal of collective understanding and improving one's community through democratic pluralism (2009, p. 158-159). This is an expression of a journalist's expectation of his or her own role within the creation and maintenance of the public sphere. However, Habermas' criticism of the commercial mass media and the creation of a mass culture in society would go against the belief that a corporate entity could create a true public sphere because of the corporation's economic influence on that sphere (Habermas, 1962, p. 188-189; Carey 1995).

Criticism of online democratic dialogue

Beyond the mere creation of the public sphere in society, there is also a dispute whether the public sphere can be realized through democratic discourse online (Papacharissi, 2002). The Internet may create new opportunities for citizens to communicate with others, access new information, and create niche conversations about public issues; but there is no guarantee that all members of the public will have equal access to the conversation, that the conversation will be diverse, or that the members will be willing to participate in rational-critical discourse (Papacharissi, 2002). Researchers found that those who are educated and affluent typically dominate online forums rather than those who are less educated and less wealthy – who often lack access to the Internet. Participants in online conversations also tend to be white, employed, and male (Baek, Wojcieszak, & Delli Carpini, 2011). This undermines the legitimacy of the Internet as a forum for inclusive and egalitarian deliberation.

Operationalizing the public sphere online

The Habermasian public sphere assumes that the public can seek self-governance through the creation of an inclusive, diverse, egalitarian forum that promotes rational-critical discourse (Habermas, 1962). The concept of the public sphere can be broken down into three dimensions: structures, representation, and interaction (Dahlgren, 2005). When applied to online forums, the structural dimension is defined as how the forum is built in terms of "legal, social, economic, cultural, technical, and even Web-architectural features." The representation dimension refers to the output of the media in terms of "fairness, accuracy, completeness, pluralism of views, agenda setting, ideological tendencies, modes of address, and so forth." A weak structure can have effects on the representation within the content. Finally, the interaction dimension consists of citizen interaction with the media and with each other (Dahlgren, 2005, p. 149).

An initial assessment of the content within a possible public sphere begins by categorizing the forum based on who can access the sphere, how individuals can express themselves, and whether a responsive relationship exists between the participants (Bennett, 2004; Ferree, 2002). One can assess both the structural issues and the content issues by evaluating four features of the sphere: Does the forum allow for mediated discourse? Does the forum allow for previously excluded, or new, discussants? Are issues political in nature? And are the ideas judged on their merit rather than by the individual source (Poor, 2005)? Dahlberg took this a step further by operationalizing six key concepts that allow for a more in-depth assessment of the content: "exchange and critique of reasoned moral-practical validity claims," "reflexivity," "ideal role

taking,” “sincerity,” “discursive inclusion and equality,” and “autonomy from state and economic power” (Dahlberg, 2001, p. 623). These concepts cover the important issues of developing a reasoned argument, showing a willingness to consider the views of another, participating in a constructive dialogue, stating relevant facts to back up one’s opinion, and providing opportunities for all members of the community to participate in the forum. This test has been amended by others to allow for a textual assessment of specific instances of the absence or presence of qualities expressed by Dahlberg (el-Nawawy & Khamis, 2011).

The Online Public Sphere

Researchers have attempted to compare the quality of online discussion to that of face-to-face conversation with mixed results. Sunstein (2001; 2007) argued that “group polarization” would cause like-minded individuals to gather online in order to engage in conversation only with those whom they agree with. This phenomenon, he states, will cause individuals to pursue even more extreme viewpoints because of confidence and corroboration within the group (Sunstein, 2007, p. 66). However, other researchers have found that online political discussion and online news use contribute to a more heterogeneous political discussion than face-to-face conversation (Brundidge, 2010). Brundidge (2010) also found that some partisan discussion members were constructing barriers for conversation with social boundaries that made “exposure to political difference less likely” (p. 695). Much like in face-to-face conversations, political discussions online often happen in places that are not inherently political. Individuals who entered non-political forums online reported engaging in political discussions with individuals with whom they disagreed (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009).

Online deliberation participants are more likely to see their conversations as being diverse than those who have conversations face-to-face, and there are possibilities for increased inclusiveness in online conversation for those in communities with little diversity (Baek, Wojcieszak, & Delli Carpini, 2011). Researchers found that political moderates are just as likely as ideologues to participate in online deliberation – meaning that the potential for civic engagement could be high. However, participants also self-report lower levels of political engagement than those who deliberate in a face-to-face environment (Baek, Wojcieszak, & Delli Carpini, 2011). In an experiment looking at how individuals deliberate in conversations surrounding a highly controversial topic or a consensus topic, researchers found that individuals presented with a highly controversial topic were more likely to offer reasons for their opinions, reference the ideas of their peers in their own statements, directly respond to one another, and use insults (Freelon, et al., 2008). The experimental study also found no difference in the individual’s willingness to participate in online discourse depending on the individual’s stated political identity (Freelon, et al., 2008).

Structural Issues

Habermas (1962) placed great emphasis on the importance of the individual’s ability to access the public sphere in order to lend credibility to the sphere. From a historical perspective, he believed that a sphere could not exist if individuals were “*eo ipso* excluded” (Habermas, 1962,

p. 85). Dahlgren (2005) argues that access to the sphere is highly dependent on how spheres of deliberation are structured, which is a product of the democratic values of the society.

“A society where democratic tendencies are weak is not going to give rise to healthy institutional structures for the public sphere, which in turn means that the representational dimension will be inadequate.” (Dahlgren, 2005, p. 149)

Pseudonymous commenting. Many news websites allow visitors to interact with one another in a conversation related to the content by facilitating a public discussion board. These public forums have typically allowed participants to keep their identity secret to the other participants; however, many news organizations are now requiring participants to sign-in to a major social networking site (e.g. Facebook.com) in order to comment. These social network sites require users to use their real names, then pass that information on to the news website which then posts the comment with the participants’ real names. The growing trend of removing pseudonymous commenting options from news websites (e.g., *The Buffalo News* and *Voice of San Diego*) is supported under the belief that commenters will contribute higher quality content if they are required to use their real name, however, there is no research into whether using one’s real name does lead to higher-quality content (Reader, 2012; Sullivan, 2010).

Pseudonymity and the Internet. An individual’s full name gives social meaning to the others they interact with, and there are many ways in which individuals attempt to mask some part of that meaning by purposely not disclosing a certain aspect of their identity. There are multiple types of “identity knowledge” – as one can expose their legal name, their location, a pseudonym linked to their name or location, a pseudonym not linked to any identifying information, and/or a social categorization of one’s identity (Marx, 1999).

Research shows that the ability to speak anonymously or pseudonymously helps to break down power structures and, specifically, women are more likely to take advantage of reduced social cues in order to continue to not only mask their identity, but also their gender. Women were also more likely to attempt to represent themselves using traditional male social cues (Flanagin, et al., 2002). In another study, researchers found that individuals placed in an anonymous online brainstorming group were more likely to give criticism of others because there was no fear of retribution (Nunamaker, et al., 1996). Researchers found that despite allowing for a lower-threat environment, anonymity in online group communication also leads to an increase in dysfunctional behavior. However, this effect can be controlled to some extent by an active conversation facilitator who attempts to diminish the negative comments (Pinsonneault & Heppel, 1996). An analysis of online reader comments in response to a news organization’s decision to ban anonymous comments found that commenters appreciated speaking anonymously for three salient reasons: in order to allow the public to speak truth to powerful institutions, to protect individual privacy while allowing for free expression, and as a self-liberating and cathartic experience (Reader, 2012).

However, research has also shown some support for the discounting hypothesis – that anonymous speakers are perceived to be less credible and less trustworthy in online group communication. There was no significant difference in the credibility or trustworthiness of anonymous sources as compared to identified sources, however, when controlling for perceived anonymity (whether the participant perceives the individual to actually be anonymous) there was greater support for the discounting hypothesis (Rains, 2007a). This shows that when readers perceive the speaker to be anonymous and have great trouble identifying any charac-