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Democratic Potential For a Multiplicity of Public Spaces: A Content Analysis of Media-Hosted Discussion Boards

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DEMOCRATIC POTENTIAL FOR A MULTIPLICITY OF PUBLIC SPACES: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF MEDIA-HOSTED DISCUSSION BOARDS

A Dissertation Presented

by

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my dear friend and colleague, the late Dr. Darlene Costa-Brown, who showed me, by the sheer power of her own example, just how enriching and emancipating faith in oneself can be. From some far off place she continues to challenge how I think, inspires me to embrace love in my heart, and motivates me to live a life of no regrets. And, just as all big sisters should, she still manages to kick my butt every now and then.

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the physical distance between them could have been less, my Bridgewater family has been nothing short of spectacular in hoisting me upon their shoulders and reminding that there would be light at the end of the proverbial tunnel. President Dana Mohler-Faria was ceaseless both with his encouragement and in granting me whatever professional flexibility I needed to accomplish the often frenzied juggling act of serving as a senior administrator and completing my doctoral studies. My colleagues and friends on the President's Cabinet (past and present) – Dr. Howard London, Mr. Miguel Gomes, Mr. Pat Cronin, Dr. Brenda Molife, Dr. Anna Bradfield, Mr. Fred Clark, Dr. Jason Pina, Dr. David Ostroth, Ms. Keri Powers and Dr. Barbara Feldman – have been true partners throughout this journey, always believing in me (especially when I could not find that belief in myself) and injecting good humor (and in some cases, not-so-good humor) along the way. Other professional colleagues and dear friends – Lisa Shaw, Tracey Keif, Laura Machado, Keri Weed, Karen Booth, John Winters, Eva Gaffney, Debi Bousquet and Jason Hebert (to name but a few) – have contributed either provocative insights and/or an immeasurable volume of kindness and love. I simply would not have made it to the finish line without the steady cheers of these fans along the way.

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ABSTRACT

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Since their inception, online discussion boards have intrinsically appealed to proponents of deliberative democracy, and those appended to Web-based news sources have been recognized as possessing the potential – whether realized yet or not – to engender meaningful discussions by engaged citizens on a range of public issues. In contrast, ardent critics of such forums contend they are merely raucous and unstructured repositories of expressions reflecting the darker side of human nature (e.g. incivility, vulgarity, *ad hominem attacks*, racism, homophobia, etc.).

This study assessed the deliberative quality of online postings made over a two-month period and affiliated with four popular news sites. The researcher administered an *a priori* content analysis scheme designed to gauge four key component measurements of a comment's deliberative quality (civility, politeness, justification and complexity) while also coding categorical information pertaining to the modality and constitution of precipitating news content. The findings revealed statistically significant differences in the overall deliberative quality of comments, as well as a wide range of differences within each of the component measures, across the four platforms. A broader matrix of comparisons (utilizing each of the categorical variables to group data accordingly) are

presented in alignment with five overarching research questions.

From the study emerges the need to embrace a different premise altogether when considering the efficacy of online discussion boards: to better understand whether or not this contemporary communicative construct is thriving or withering, it is first necessary to recognize that a multiplicity of online spaces exist, each theoretically serving different typologies of publics. Only after doing so does the researcher endeavor to offer an array of tailored reforms to better calibrate the expectations for participant engagement and information dissemination and synthesis.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Overview: A New Invitation to Construct Meaning

The coupling of Web-based news outlets and online discussion boards has grown increasingly commonplace. Among the traditional media outlets, including those as seemingly mainstream as *The New York Times*, National Public Radio and CBS News, technologies allowing readers, listeners and viewers to comment easily on what they have read, heard or seen have been integrated just as readily as within the domains of upstart blogosphere journalists, podcasters and YouTube mavens. Though there may be uncertainty as to whether demand for this technology has driven its deployment or its deployment has driven demand (for discussions of technological determinism see, for example, Postman, 1993), its increasingly ubiquitous presence and popularity are clear. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, consumers of online news are highly participatory and 37% of adults (and 51% of adults between the ages of 18 and 29) surveyed cited the "ability to comment" as one of the most popular features of Web-based news outlets (Purcell, 2010). At the same time, and even on some of the most traditional online news sites (such as WSJ.com, the online presence of *The Wall Street Journal*), articles written by bona fide journalists occupy the same level of prominence as user comments within much of the hypertextual frame.

Though much has been written about the Internet's broader implications on subjects ranging from the intrinsic opportunities for greater democratization of news reporting (see, for example, Papacharissi, 2002) to the inherent dangers for healthy citizenship affiliated with users' newfound abilities to tailor news content and curtail a

diversity of perspectives (see, for example, Sunstein, 2001; Van Alstyne & Brynjolfsson, 1997), such questions all begin with a shared – and enduring – assumption: the journalist is still the primary distiller of facts, information and analyses into news content that is then transmitted to and digested by an audience. Though the nearly universal accessibility of the Internet (at least in an American context) and the growing availability of news broadcasting tools have certainly widened the field of entry considerably for new journalists, their introduction and rise did not immediately transform the role of the journalist itself. Whether a foreign correspondent for *The Washington Post*, a blogger for *The Drudge Report*, or the host of an RSS-fed podcast, journalists as recently as a decade ago still operated clearly as elites (or insiders) and the public was still very much, to use Lippman's (1927) term, a "phantom" in that "the citizen gives little of his time to public affairs, has only a casual interest in facts and a poor understanding of theory" (Lippman, 1927, p. 25).

Commenting features and easy-to-use discussion interfaces are important technological developments to be sure, but far more important is what their marriage to traditional news outlets symbolizes: an implied invitation to the public to not only join a discussion but to participate in the synthesis of information and contribute in an open forum in which meaning may be considered, deconstructed and reconstituted over and over again. Within such a construct, the determination of the meaning of news content no longer resides exclusively, or concludes with, the journalist. Rather, the journalist can be seen as now playing a very different role: he/she germinates or furthers a conversation by offering an initial news report; the conversation is catalyzed by the explicit or implicit

invitation for members of the audience to discuss; and the journalist is then nearly always absent from the direct proceedings of said discussion.

As its central premise, this dissertation recognizes this change to be radically upsetting to the traditional norms of interaction and engagement (or lack thereof) that have long existed between the purveyors of news and audiences. A shift so seismic is worthy of deeper investigation in its own right, but it is the staggering speed with which this change occurred within the culture that makes such an exploration particularly intriguing. With so little time for adjustment, both progressive news outlets and forward-thinking participants alike struggle with how to best engender an appreciation for these forums as virtual agoras and not the cyberspace equivalent of the bathroom stall (see, for example, Goldberg, 2010; Perez-Pena, 2010; and Messmer, 2009).

As a secondary premise, this study readily acknowledges the enduring agenda-setting capabilities of news organizations (Iyengar & McGuire, 1993; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Beginning with Lippman's (1922) initial conclusion that the public responds not to actual events but to the "pictures in our heads" (p. 4) created largely by the reporting of the press, and steadily advancing through sophisticated explorations in contemporary political psychology illustrating the inherent powers of the elite to shape public opinion (see, for example, Zaller, 1992), the agenda-setting function is highly relevant to the current inquiry. Even during a time of considerable evolution and upheaval in how a burgeoning media connects with a diversity of audiences, Cohen's (1963) words still ring true: the press "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (p. 13).

Ultimately, this work seeks not only to better understand the various forces at play

within this expansive and often cacophonous discursive space, but also to apply the analytical findings to a program of practical reforms and an articulation of reasonable best practices. And while vibrant public spaces may take any number of forms – Habermas' (1989) rational-critical model, Hauser and Grim's (2004) rhetorical democracies, Mouffe's (2000) agonistic confrontations, and Schudson's (2011) monitorial citizenries are but a few – all stem from the shared tradition of civic virtue perhaps best captured by Arendt's (1958) notion of *vita activa*, in that the self is secondary to the public realm and one's merit is established by public conduct (Hauser, 1999). Absent a deeper and more pragmatic understanding of how new technologies do or do not possess the inherent capacity to energize such domains and excite healthy civic discourse, any proposed strategies to leverage or redefine the ways in which journalists serve the public – and of how the public serves journalists – would be premature. These spaces may hold the democratic potential to emerge and potentially flourish as bona fide publics, but before making any assessment it is first necessary to gauge how much of the exertion of discursive energy is merely about (at best) talking in circles or (at worst) what one former online ombudsman labeled "the digital equivalent of the loudest drunk in the bar" (Shepard, 2011).

Political News: A Key Ingredient of Democratic Vitality

While there is an ongoing and highly-charged debate over the efficacy (see, for example, Capella & Jamieson, 1997; Jamieson, 1993; Page & Shapiro, 1992) and political-economy (Bagdikian, 2004; McChesney, 1999) of contemporary news organizations, a well-functioning press is generally understood to be a necessary

ingredient to any political environment in which democratic values and robust debate flourish. Few critics would be given pause, for example, with a reminder of Winston Churchill's famous wartime pronouncement:

> A free press is the unsleeping guardian of every other right that free men prize; it is the most dangerous foe of tyranny… Under dictatorship the press is bound to languish, and the loudspeaker and the film to become more important. But where free institutions are indigenous to the soil and men have the habit of liberty, the press will continue to be the Fourth Estate, the vigilant guardian of the rights of the ordinary citizen (Ingelhart, 1998, p. 188).

Political information concerning the affairs of state and the nerves of government is synthesized and channeled through the media, thus introducing a powerful check-and-balance against the excesses of power. For James Madison, this dynamic was so essential that it functioned as, in effect, the cornerstone of the (then) radical new experiment in popular sovereignty:

> Nothing could be more irrational than to give the people power, and to withhold from them information without which power is abused. A people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with power which knowledge gives. A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both (Madison, 1900, p. 143).

Though the value of political information vis-à-vis democratic institutions may be accepted as a truism, there are sharp divisions in the understanding of the means by which such information is transformed into political knowledge, let alone the extent to which that knowledge sparks critical discussions, excites civic activity or informs political decision-making. For purposes of this study, two particular scholarly traditions are of interest: the mastery of political facts as a measure of political sophistication; and political cognition through the use of schema and heuristic cues. Though no single explanation comes close to explaining fully the discursive dynamics at work within

online discussion spaces, an understanding of each provides an effective orientation for beginning to conceptualize the analysis.

Political Literacy

Research placing an emphasis on the importance of the public's familiarity with political facts (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1997; Luskin, 1987; Neuman, 1986) begins with the assessment that the American political system is constituted by an amalgamation of disparate and even inconsistent normative values. As such, the ability of citizens to participate within such a system requires a relatively mature sense of political literacy. For those with a high degree of political literacy, the system functions quite well; for those without, the system can quickly become practically impenetrable and conceptually less democratic. Ultimately, varying levels of political knowledge contribute to a stratified and, potentially, reinforcing power structure. In their seminal work, *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters*, Delli Carpini and Keeter (1997) concluded that Americans know comparatively far less about how their political system functions than do the citizens of nearly all other industrialized nations, and citizens who are most informed about one topic tend to be most informed about all topics. They go on to argue that the distribution of political knowledge is an issue of power and not one of choice: better informed citizens are more likely to participate, discern their own self-interest, have stable opinions, and connect their opinions to political developments. Citizens need to be more engaged in politics, but the reasons for paying attention need to be clearer to them, the benefits of stronger citizenship must be more evident, and the opportunities to learn about politics should become more frequent, timely and equitable.

While numerous studies over an extended period of time offer evidence supporting the broader claim that Americans' political literacy is dangerously low (see, for example, Berelson, Lazarsfeld & McPhee, 1954; Converse, 1964; Entman, 1989; Converse, 2000), Delli Carpini and Keeter further conclude that levels have remained ostensibly constant over the past five decades. An explosion of new communications channels shrinking the chasm between those who govern and the governed (see, for example, Grossman, 1995; Abramson, Arterton & Orren, 1988) has done remarkably little to improve political literacy. At the same time and equally surprising, the waning of print-based news, with its natural bias for prioritizing the objective, rational use of the mind (Ong, 1982), and the rise of more televisual forms, which catalyze emotional responses (Hart, 1994) and reinforce entertainment as a supra-ideology (Postman, 2005), has hardly been to its detriment. Not only have levels of political literacy remained virtually unchanged but, as Page and Shapiro (1992) detail in their study of a nearly identical time period, Americans' collective policy preferences have been shown to be generally stable and, when they do change, they typically change in understandable and predictable ways.

Political Cognition

An emphasis on political facts necessarily privileges the idea that citizens are rational beings for whom the quality of their political decisions is based upon the clarity and the completeness of information. For Lippman (1922) and others, it is a false ideal to conceive of a public that is capable of managing its own affairs in this way, and it is folly to suggest the average citizen is "omnicompetent" (p. 21) in the manner necessary to flourish. The public, according to Lippman, does not express its opinion so much as

align itself against a set of choices that are proffered by governing or controlling elites. This "bewildered public" (p. 21) consists merely of spectators of political action who can, at best, confine their interests in the public to those things of great interest in a moment of crisis. This dim – or at minimum, sobering – view of citizenship was echoed by Downs (1957) in *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. Writing more than 30 years after Lippman, Downs (1957) concluded that rationally behaving citizens have little incentive to gather information before making political choices (or even choosing *to make* political choices at all) and struggled with the fact that citizens would ever turn out in large numbers to vote – and yet, to varying degrees, they generally do.

Concurrent advances in cognitive psychology (see, for example, Bartlett, 1932; Piaget, 1952) may partially explain how it is that citizens with deficient levels of political literacy and few incentives to pay closer attention can continue to be both grounded in a stable set of political values and adaptive to an increasingly complex universe of information. Building on Kant's (2003/1781) original notion of schema as an imaginative construct for linking non-empirical concepts to mental images of objects that had been experienced empirically, the cognitive literature brings to light the possibility of shortcuts employed by humans as they wade through a bevvy of observations. Within such a framework, the importance of political news is not so much connected to fueling one's supply of political information as it is to expanding the depth and range of political cognition and civic learning.

Understood from this perspective, and as noted by Graber (2001), the core features of political knowledge are not the facts they contain but the implications they hold for decision-making and action. She insists that citizens marshal an array of

inherent heuristic devices to pay attention to what they need and concludes, "When it comes to functionally useful knowledge, average citizens are moderately well informed" (p. 45). In his discussion of presidential campaigns, Popkin (1994) details the ways in which citizens employ low-information rationality to make reasonable, from-the-gut choices. Like Graber, he concludes that evaluating the health of the citizenry based solely on factual knowledge is both misleading and failing to address the deeper concerns of citizenship. Citizens are quite capable of relying upon and subconsciously tapping into any number of "cognitive holding spaces" to simplify assumptions, evaluate information, and make reasonable decisions. Key (1966) offers perhaps the most blunt description of reasons for optimism vis-à-vis the ability of citizens to process political information:

> [My] perverse and unorthodox argument… is that voters are not fools. To be sure, many individual voters act in odd ways indeed, yet by and large the electorate behaves about as rationally and responsibly as we should expect, given the clarity of the alternatives presented to it and the character of the information available to it. In American presidential campaigns of recent decades the portrait of the American electorate that develops from the data is not one of an electorate straitjacketed by social determinists or moved by subconscious urges triggered by devilishly skillful propagandists. It is rather one of an electorate moved by concern about central and relevant questions of public policy, of governmental performance, and of executive personality (p. 7).

Beyond the domain of individualized decision-making, the use of cognitive shortcuts also helps to explain many of the dynamics of group political behavior and begin to reveal how it is that ordinarily disinterested citizens can suddenly find themselves interested in collective activities. As Gamson (1992) argues, most citizens condition political knowledge through their own experiences, memories and reflections. As such, they possess a "latent political consciousness" (p. 20) that can be elicited by any number of collective action frames. Integral to the definition of collective action frames are the components of injustice (moral indignation expressed in the form of political

awakening), agency (awareness that is possible to alter conditions or policies through collective action), and identity (the process of defining a sense of belonging, typically in contrast to a sense of other). As this study is fundamentally concerned with the *discussions* existing within online forums – as opposed to one-off *pronouncements* or discursive *hit-and-runs* – an understanding of such dynamics is highly relevant.

Purpose and Nature of the Study

According to national trend data collected by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, a significant number of American adult Internet-users report they have posted comments on online news sites and the participation rate has risen significantly – 18% in February 2006, 22% in December 2007, 27% in September 2009, and 32% in September 2010 (the last time such data were collected) (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2012). This growth may be interpreted as somewhat understated given that the size of the American adult population of Internet-users has also risen steadily over the same period. Across the broader landscape of similarly functioning communicative technologies, the upward trajectory is as clear as it is consistent: Nielsen/McKinsey reports that the worldwide number of blogs has risen from 36 million to 173 million from October 2006 to October 2011 (NielsenWire, 2012); 51% of Americans had a Facebook account in 2011 versus 8% in 2008 (Webster, 2011); and the number of Americans using Twitter on a typical day quadrupled between November 2010 and February 2012 (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2012a). The inescapable conclusion is that, more than ever and at an expanding rate, users are publicly recording their thoughts and opinions, creating content, and contributing effort to enlarge the universe of discourse. It remains to be seen

if such users are behaving as a simple amalgamation of an increasingly noisy and disconnected audience or whether they might possibly be crossing a different threshold – that of conscious and participating citizens who, perhaps each in their own way, readily or accidentally embrace a mode of *vita activa*.

While dozens of recent studies within the field of political communications have assessed the implications this explosion of traffic has had on any number of important civic dynamics (see, for example, Himelboim, 2011; Bennett, Wells & Freelon, 2011; and Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009), very few have attempted the additional fete of gauging levels of discursive quality within such spaces. Too much attention in the past has been paid to the *volume* of content created, be it measured by force of strength or sheer numbers. The result has been an overemphasis on the two extremes of the cyber-optimism/cyber-pessimism continuum: either the surge in voluntary expression on matters of public interest is seen as a boon for the democratic spirit (see, for example, Anderson & Cornfield, 2003), or the rapid expansion in noise lessens the ability for citizens to resolve political differences through such a mode of discussion (see, for example, Sparks, 2000).

It must be noted that the choice to focus on the quality of discourse is made primarily to gauge a flavor of the overall civic-mindedness of discussants and to reveal, if possible, some of the more generalizable characteristics of groups populating each online discussion board. Doing so allows for a consistent and fair exploration of differences between the various groups, anchors the research trajectory to a rich literature pertaining to civic discourse and deliberation (see Chapter 2), and allows for the construction and administration of a comprehensive content analysis coding scheme (in this case, centered

around four unique measures of discursive quality – civility, politeness, complexity and justification; see Chapter 3). This approach also carries with it, however, an inherent challenge and limitation that must be identified at the outset: the methodology employed corresponds to but a single understanding of quality, one influenced significantly by the underlying theories and virtues of deliberative democracy. The narrowness of this approach notwithstanding, examining a large sample of public discourse through a common lens is useful for determining if, at least based upon one set of grounded measures, there are significant differences present across the broader population.

What may make this study unique is that, as it assesses the quality of public discourse with an eye towards civic-mindedness, it is also attempting to determine whether or not different kinds of online news content – understood in this investigation as the unique starting material for each of the online discussions considered – may have an impact on the quality of discourse that follows. Here, too, the methodology employed is attempting to unweave the densely woven tapestry of online discussions into some of its component threads. The chosen grouping categories are intended to be neither exhaustive nor arbitrary, but simply reflective of some commonsensical distinctions between one packet of news content and another. There are any number of differentiating choices that could have been made to explore differences and, given the exploratory nature of the study, the researcher deliberately focused on but two of the more obvious ones: categories describing the news channel; and categories describing the overarching focus of the news content itself.

The news channel dimension is of inherent interest because it describes, in essence, the technological mode (in this case, either print or audiovisual) through which

news content traverses to reach audiences. In addition, as this study focuses on the relatively new deliberative space of online discussion boards (one made possible by the advent of the Internet), it is compelling to distinguish between news channels that are native to the Internet Age and those that arrived in the pre-Internet era. It is conceivable that the very agency of a news organization may be understood quite differently by those born in cyberspace and in a time of ubiquitous social media than those that were not (see, for example, Braun & Gillespie, 2011).

With respect to the dimension of news content, numerous critics have tended to categorize political news as being about either the workings of democratic processes or tactics and gamesmanship (see, for example, Patterson, 1993). This study embraces the spirit of the existing lineage of scholarship while also, perhaps, streamlining and tailoring its underlying distinction for purpose of easier measurement; political news content is characterized as being either primarily focused on a mode of governing or a mode of campaigning. Additionally, each segment of news content considered by this study is labeled as being principally concentrated around domestic political topics (meaning germane to the United States) or those predominantly relevant to international affairs. Much has been made of the influence of the Internet in engendering a truly global perspective and mindset: cyber-optimists point to signs of political borders being made more permeable and the formation of a global village as a result of new technologies; cyber-pessimists see a strengthening of the innate human tendency towards balkanization (see, for example, Van Alstyne & Brynjolfsson, 1997). Again, this study is not so much concerned with validating or refuting such arguments but about marshaling them within the given methodology to consider an array of potential differences.

Once the vibrancy of the discursive space is examined deeply, the opportunity to reconsider and, if need be, reform the rules, procedures and guiding principles undergirding such forums arises. Emerging best practices and time-tested exemplars will be examined in brief, and a new menu of practical strategies – to boost discursive quality, improve efficacy of the forum, and further engender an appreciation for democratic dialogue – will be presented. First, however, the study must shine a light on the larger question of whether or not the historic relationship between journalists and audiences has fundamentally changed given the introduction of new technologies that readily encourage deliberation. Moreover, it is necessary to consider to what extent the fine line between audiences and citizens is being further blurred (or, perhaps, is coming into greater focus) as a result of users' engagement with new deliberative tools. To do so, the study begins by scrutinizing the quality of the given discourse and establishing where important differences may exist given the analytical approach. Only then can it envision the emergence of a difference set of dynamics altogether, one which may hold the potential for, first, understanding that a multiplicity of unique typologies of publics can reasonably exist, and second, supporting each of those typologies with a more sophisticated calibration of the space itself. As such, the more intrinsic value of this research is to demonstrate the idea that new technologies are important to the human condition not so much in that they alter it but because they may allow humanity to understand itself in a more deep and meaningful way.

Research Questions

Employing the methodology of content analysis prescribed in Chapter 3, the dissertation poses five overarching research questions:

(RQ1) As measured by the four characteristics of quality public discourse, what is the overall quality of the discussions taking place in the four online discussion forums and are there significant differences?

(RQ2) Among the four online discussion forums, what are the significant differences in the measures of quality public discourse between those news sites that offered printed materials versus those that offered multimedia segments?

(RQ3) Among the four online discussion forums, what are the significant differences in the measures of quality public discourse between Internet-native and traditional news sites?

(RQ4) Among the four online discussion forums, what are the significant differences in the measures of quality public discourse in discussions linked to stories/segments principally covering domestic politics and those principally covering international politics?

(RQ5) Among the four online discussion forums, what are the significant differences in the measures of quality public discourse in discussions linked to stories/segments principally covering governing/policymaking and those principally covering campaigning?

Organization of the Study

The dissertation is organized into five chapters. Chapter 2 follows this introduction with a thorough review of the existing literature. As the study positions itself at the intersection of numerous scholarly vectors, the chapter is understandably

bricolage in flavor. And while a wide variety of existing trajectories could factor in to the analysis, several emerge as being highly relevant. These include, but are not limited to: contemporary identifiers and dynamics of public spaces; enduring and emerging considerations for the interplay between journalistic integrity and the democratic imperative; the changing landscape for reporting, interpreting and digesting political news; and key elements of theory and practice as they pertain to deliberation (and particularly online debate) and public discourse. Lastly, the chapter will catalog the small number of existing studies that have sought to measure discursive quality in online spaces and begin to articulate the theoretical foundations behind how this study measures discursive quality as an indicator of an online community's civic health.

Chapter 3 describes in detail the specifics of the content analysis methodology employed in the study. Particular attention is given to the operationalization of the four variables of quality and, given the large number of content units, the process of training the coding team to achieve adequate levels of inter-coder reliability. Chapter 4 presents the findings achieved as a result of undertaking the given methodology and responds to each of the five research questions. Observations from a secondary analysis, which qualitatively (and holistically) reviews the most voluminous online discussion in each of the four forums, is also presented in this chapter.

As described previously, Chapter 5 considers the broader implications pertaining to the vibrancy and quality of this discursive space, reviews current and possible best practices, and develops a slate of recommendations with an eye towards improving democratic vitality. Before concluding, the overarching strengths and weaknesses of the study are assessed and opportunities for further research are offered.

Conclusion

Rapid – and accelerating – advances in technology have made it increasingly commonplace for users to create and marshal the content of their choice. Never before has the act of expression been easier to constitute, register and broadcast. Communication technologies are now as ubiquitous as they are instantaneous, and even the most novice of users can marshal an array of inexpensive – or even free – tools and transmission systems that not very long ago were limited to those who possessed sufficient means and/or sufficient focus and determination to convey their beliefs, conclusions or consternations. The ability of a U.S. Senate candidate tapping into her Twitter feed, for example, certainly raises new questions about the need for public relations or journalistic intermediaries. No less important, the anonymous poster of a hastily articulated online comment attached to a published story about said campaign causes one to wonder about the long-term health, plausibility and efficacy of more time-tested (let alone validating) techniques of writing letters to the editor or crafting op/ed pieces.

For many scholars, technology is already understood to be an extension of the self (see, for example, Turkle, 2005; Kurzweil, 2000): mobile devices and a cloud-based infrastructure are becoming as essential to users as opposable thumbs and rapid eye movements, while social media feeds and a plethora of information channels are as seamless to a user's experience as senses of smell, taste or touch. Critical to remember, however, is that what defines a *user* is not necessarily the same as what embodies a *citizen.* Simply interfacing with technology does not, in and of itself, meet or surpass the various thresholds of engaged citizenship. Similarly, activity per se does not necessarily

equate to the virtues of Arendt's *vita activa*. To be a citizen is to think and behave as a contributing member of a broader public; one's public deliberation should be forged of judicious argument, critical listening and earnest decision-making (Gastil, 2000) and strive (even if not always successfully) to advance the democratic ideals of empathy, egalitarianism and open-mindedness (Barber, 1984).

Through a professional acumen built on integrity and objectivity, and by functioning as the quintessential stewards of publicly relevant information and analyses, journalists have long served not only an invaluable scrutinizing function but also as catalysts for the transformation of content and activity into public deliberation and discourse worthy of democratic institutions and life. Profound changes in technology, and specifically the growing ease with which users can readily broadcast their opinions anonymously and without the need for validation or evidence, certainly holds the potential to disrupt the bearings of this invaluable balance wheel. The news industry certainly finds itself in the midst of similarly epochal change – and facing historic choices – as detailed by the most recent annual report of the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism:

> So far, news organizations are mainly using the popular networking platform, Twitter, to push out their own content rather than to engage with audiences, solicit information or share information they themselves did not produce… The problems of newspapers also became more acute in 2011. Even as online audiences grew, print circulation continued to decline. Even more critically, so did ad revenues. In 2011, losses in print advertising dollars outpaced gains in digital revenue by a factor of roughly 10 to 1, a ratio even worse than in 2010. When circulation and advertising revenue are combined, the newspaper industry has shrunk 43% since 2000. The civic implications of the decline in newspapers are also becoming clearer. More evidence emerged that newspapers (whether accessed in print or digitally) are the primary source people turn to for news about government and civic affairs. If these operations continue to shrivel or disappear, it is unclear where, or whether, that information would be reported… In sum, the news industry is not much closer to a new revenue model than a year earlier and

> has lost more ground to rivals in the technology industry. But growing evidence also suggests that news is becoming a more important and pervasive part of people's lives. That, in the end, could prove a saving factor for the future of journalism (Mitchell & Rosenstiel, 2012).

For this hope to become reality, and for the news media to reassert its invaluable role as a guardian of the public interest, the function of the journalist needs to be reimagined in the context of burgeoning, user-created content and heightened expectations for engagement. Absent a thorough assessment of the quality of such content, even given the presumed rawness of its current form, one could understandably infer that signal had overwhelmingly been squelched by noise. And yet, even if they are distracted by this cacophony, audiences continue to demand and consume significant quantities of news. It may very well be that audiences continue to assign high intrinsic value to the role journalists have historically played in helping to transform passive audiences into active citizenries, but the emergence of new tools may have altered the conditions by which that can both occur and be recognized. Perhaps even more important, the simple notion of a dichotomous partnership between the news media and its audiences may no longer be a sufficient construct to sort out the bigger questions of who is responsible for integrity and objectivity. In its place, revealed at least in part by the widespread utilization of new technological tools to support dialogue, arises the possibility of identifying a much richer and diverse multiplicity of public spaces in which both the purveyors and consumers of news may come together in a variety of ways to catalyze discussion, promote exchange, and create the conditions for a flourishing and invested citizenry. The roles, responsibilities and expectations of all involved could vary significantly from one public space to the next, as could the conditions for maximizing each domain's democratic potential.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

A Bricolage of Research Traditions

The scholarly trajectory of this investigation requires passage through a tremendously active, but also rather raucous, intersection of numerous research traditions. Occasionally, the boundaries between these fields of study are blurred beyond identifiability, while at other times the connective tissue that lies between them is not so readily apparent. Key influencing components drawn from the existing literature include: the virtues, complexities and realities of public spaces; an understanding of the various theories of public discourse as they pertain to the digestion of political news and potential activation of civic responsibility; the possible effects (positive, negative and neutral) new communication technologies may hold for the democratic imperative; and measures of quality for online public discourse.

Though this study may draw from a range of research perspectives, it is fundamentally grounded in Page's (1996) underlying premise that "[p]ublic deliberation is essential to democracy" (p. 1). As described in their comprehensive review of the empirical literature, Delli Carpini, Lomax Cook, and Jacobs (2004) note that the celebration of public deliberation has its origins in the city-states of ancient Greece and further flourished in the town hall meetings of colonial New England and bourgeoisie salons and cafes of Eighteenth Century Paris. Within at least one tradition of democratic theory (see, for example, Barber, 1984; Connolly, 1983; Dahl, 1989; Dewey, 1954/1927; Fishkin, 1992; Habermas, 1996; Mansbridge, 1983), public deliberation is understood to

be a cornerstone of participatory democracy and representative government. According to Chambers (2003), public deliberation:

> begins with a turning away from the liberal individualist or economic understandings of democracy and toward a view anchored in conceptions of accountability and discussion. Talk-centric democratic theory replaces voting-centric democratic theory. Voting-centric views see democracy as the arena in which fixed preferences and interests compete via fair mechanisms of aggregation. In contrast, deliberative democracy focuses on the communicative processes of opinion and will formation that precede voting… Although theorists of deliberative democracy vary as to how critical they are of existing representative institutions, deliberative democracy is not usually thought of as an alternative to representative democracy. It is rather an expansion of representative democracy (p. 308).

This connection of theory with purpose continues to be highly relevant in an era defined by rapidly evolving new media forms that are increasingly participatory and accessible, and a time in which rapid technological innovation has precipitated the expectation for a heightened mode of invention and the possibility for a greater variety of communication channels. Be that as it may, newer forms of media (not unlike all those that preceded them) continue to hold a highly contingent level of utility in empowering the public domain as each new innovation is shaped and conditioned by both the citizens who use them and the discourse that serves as their lifeblood.

Publics and Public Spaces: Competing Definitions and Dynamics in a New Age

As noted by Dahlberg (2007), many Internet-democracy commentators, researchers and practitioners embrace the notion and advocate for the further development of a deliberative "public sphere" as the ideal framework for citizen participation in politics. Within such spheres, rational-critical debate between citizens over shared problems and interests leads to better informed public opinion that can both guide and balance the work of officials and the systems of government (see, for example,

Benson, 1996; Bohman, 2004; Clift, 2003; Davis, 1999; Fung & Kedl, 2000; Gimmler, 2001; Noveck, 2000; Sunstein, 2001; Tanner, 2001; Wilhelm, 2000). Though the literature surrounding public spheres and their emergence, maintenance and expansion – or, more pessimistically, their dissipation, atrophy and decay – is as varied as it is vast, the primacy of discourse is central to nearly every relevant theoretical construct.

Though each theorist defines and positions the notion of public in a slightly (or in some cases, radically) different manner, each argument has a strong conceptual tether to discourse. As a foundational conception, an understanding of public has a multitude of connotations and innumerable philosophical origins. For purposes of this study, however, the seminal works of two theorists are particularly noteworthy in setting the stage for a consideration of public realms: Hannah Arendt's (1958) *The Human Condition* and John Dewey's (1954/1927) *The Public and Its Problems*.

Arendt (1958) noted that an underlying problem facing western philosophy was the subordination of action and appearance (what she labeled *vita activa*) to purer forms of thought and eternal essences (*vita contemplativa*). In calling for a reversal of this hierarchy, Arendt outlined the three forms of human activity: labor, work and action. Labor, she argued, consists of the things humans need to do to keep themselves alive. The results of labor are fleeting and the only record of labor's presence is human survival. In contrast, work is the process by which man creates a world of artificial things that endure over time. Critical to this understanding is the belief that a mode of work also sets the stage and establishes the conditions by which actions can occur. Action, in turn, is a uniquely human quality, speaks to mankind's ability to be novel and inventive, and is accomplished chiefly through speech and communication. Arendt

insists that action requires a sense of public, a term she defines as a place of commonality (i.e. occupied by shared structures and institutions generated from work) and political agency in that actions carry with them a degree of agency. For Arendt, who rejected neo-romantic notions of intimacy and emotional frameworks within the broader construct of public, the public sphere is a largely artificial place defined by civility and, when appropriate, solidarity. This was not a shortcoming, she claimed, but served as one of its greatest achievements in that it created the appropriate environment for contributing members of the public to determine their own affairs. One could argue that online discussion and comment boards, the discursive space examined by this dissertation, epitomize the very artificiality of which Arendt described.

Though his perspective and underlying philosophy were very different than Arendt's, Dewey's faith in the public's ability to determine its own affairs was quite similar. Writing after the first World War but before the onset of the Great Depression, Dewey (1954/1927) argued that political meaning is created through conjoined action and a public consists of all those things that are directly or indirectly connected to the broader array of such actions. The challenge for the public, he posited, was one fueled by the context of modern industrial life. Homogenous communities of shared interests (e.g. Jefferson's agrarian democrats) had been replaced by loose, heterogeneous clusters of mass audiences. Until the "Great Society is converted into a Great Community," he argued, "the Public will remain in eclipse" (p. 142). Dewey described the Great Community as:

> a society in which the ever-expanding and intricately ramifying consequences of associated activities shall be known the fill sense of that word, so that an organized, articulate Public comes into being. The highest and most difficult kind of inquiry and a subtle, delicate, vivid and responsive art of communication must

> take possession of the physical machinery of transmission and circulation and breathe new life into it. When the machine age has thus perfected its machinery it will be a means of life and not its despotic master. Democracy will come into its own, for democracy is a name for a life of free and enriching communion… It will have its consummation when free social inquiry is indissolubly wedded to the art of full and moving communication (p. 184).

Few scholars describe a more obvious and essential role for discourse with respect to energizing public spheres than Jurgen Habermas (1989). This clarity, however, comes only with the privileging of the very particular kind of discourse Habermas identifies as the "ideal speech" type. Against the broader context of rational-critical debate, the ideal speech type is one in which all participants have an equal ability to engage in discourse, there is mutual respect by all involved for each individual's contribution to the discussion, and the speech itself is devoid of ideological connotations. In such a mode, which Habermas claims existed for only for a brief period of time in certain parts of Europe (Witschge, 2004), citizens come with private agendas to engage in strategic communications within the public sphere. What emerges as the victorious argument is the one that trumps all others based upon its own discursive strength. While ideal speech types and modes of rational-critical debate seem applicable only to very particular kinds of homogenous communities, Froomkin (2004) notes that individuals are only capable of practical discourse, which produces only provisionally legitimate laws or rules that apply only to the group or polity that produced them. Practical discourse cannot be achieved directly within society as a whole but only through the creation of smaller communities focused on discrete matters of import. Significant improvements in information technology, however, may hold the promise to bolster levels of communicative capacity. Discourse-enabling tools are being developed at a rapid pace and hold the potential to radically empower individuals operating in cyberspace. Froomkin is hopeful that some

combination of these tools will help to overcome the daunting problems of scale and draw discursive power back into the public sphere.

While many democratic theorists conceive of public as a type of space (real, virtual or otherwise), Hauser (1999) suggests something else entirely: the public as a rhetorical activity. By conceptualizing publics in this way, Hauser is able to explain why what appear to be outwardly inchoate political movements have a sense of integrity that would otherwise arise only from many years of maturation and the refinement of a common vocabulary. Describing the notion of public not so much as an environment but a mode of engagement, Hauser and Grim (2004) argue that there need not be the acceptance of a particular point of view but rather respect for the underlying belief that a given contribution occupies a central place in the constitution of public itself. Conceptualized in this way, there is less of an inherent need to form a single comprehensive sense of public. Instead, multiple publics form principally around issues and ultimately contribute to a broader sense of civic dialogue. While some theorists (see, for example, Gitlin, 1998), point to these public "sphericules" as either too chaotic or too assimilated, Hauser suggests that what is most important is that they are eventful, in that citizens become members of a public only by directly contributing to a broader activity. Considered in this context, a lack of consensus or the absence of sophisticated discourse within online discussion spaces need not necessarily be equated with the deficiency of a sense of public. What matters instead is a shared propensity by participants to openly contribute to the process of engagement, even if what is being contributed varies considerably from one participant to the next.

For Mouffe (2000), the very idea of consensus is antithetical to the broader project of democracy and is more likely to precipitate the onset of hegemony. Democratic conditions, Mouffe contends, originate from two seemingly incompatible sets of normative values – one based on the rule of law (e.g. rights, property, etc.) and the other based on popular sovereignty. Too often, in Mouffe's judgment, consensus is akin to the colonization of one of these sets of normative values over the other. Rather than strive to reach consensus, Mouffe advocates for a mode of agonism. The ongoing presence of adversarial conditions, along with the continuous reshaping of the public landscape based upon changing dynamics between adversaries, activates the democratic spirit.

Whether highly stylized or purposefully bereft of norms for interaction, publics and public spheres emerge from the supposition that an exchange of ideas ultimately empowers modes of deliberative democracy, be they narrowly or broadly constituted (Fishkin & Laslett, 2003). For a mode of communication to be deliberative, however, it must exist for far deeper purposes than simple transmission and reception of messages to and from citizens. Indeed, it is a communicative form that is both interactive and purposeful, defined as "debate and discussion aimed at producing reasonable, well-informed opinions in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information, and claims made by fellow participants" (Chambers, 2003, p. 309). Only when the participants understand their participation to be essential, and thus recognize that their exchange may have some concrete impact (no matter how large or small) on political outcomes, can the role of the public – and thus, the imperative of public deliberation – be both clear and strong.

Public Deliberation: Norms and Critiques

An extensive body of literature points to a surprisingly small number of norms vis-à-vis the ability of public deliberation to engender positive democratic outcomes (Delli Carpini, Lomax Cook, & Jacobs, 2004). If deliberation is sufficiently empathetic, egalitarian, open-minded and reason-centered, it is expected to result in the consequences of: heightened appreciation for the perspective of others; a broadened sense of one's own interests; the belief that citizens can work collaboratively to solve problems; enhanced legitimacy for the overarching political system; and the generation of social capital (see, for example, Barber, 1984; Gutman & Thompson, 1996; Mansbridge, 1983; Warren, 1992; Sunstein, 1993; Putnam; 2000). At the same time and no less important, there remains significant and reasonable doubt as to the practicality, appropriateness, efficacy and political significance of such a communicative form (Delli Carpini et al., 2004). Critics argue that forums for public deliberation are too infrequent, lack connectivity with the machinery of government, privilege the affluent and well-educated, and require a skillset not possessed by the typical citizen (see, for example, Brown, 2000; Hibbing & Thiess-Morse, 2002; Mansbridge, 1983; Mutz, 2002; Sanders, 1987; Schudson, 1997; Sunstein, 2001).

Fishkin (1992) places some of these concerns in context by arguing the quality of deliberation exists on a continuum between less deliberative and more deliberative. When, for example, arguments by some participants go unanswered by others, or when information that would be required to understand the force of a claim are absent, or when some citizens are unwilling to weigh in on some elements of the debate, the process is regarded as less deliberative. From a practical standpoint, and given the diversity of

perspectives, styles and aptitudes participants bring to any forum, a certain amount of incompleteness is expected and thus tolerable. The act of improving deliberation (i.e. moving it from a mode of less deliberative to more deliberative) has much to do with expanding levels of completeness.

As an activity, Lewinski (2010) suggests that forms of deliberation must be further differentiated as either horizontal or vertical criticism. In the former, a group of participants jointly objects to distinct elements of a complex argument put forward by an opponent. In the latter, participants act in sequence by deepening the previously voiced criticisms against one element of their opponent's argumentation. Such a definition is particularly relevant to this study and brings into sharper focus the methodological framework for scrutinizing the data in question. It is essential to understand that, within the discursive space of online discussion boards attached to media outlets, participants are responding *both* to the content of the linked story (written or produced by a journalist) *and* to the comments of one another (almost always non-journalists).

Much of the existing literature on public deliberation reinforces the blurring of the critical difference between notions of politeness and civility, a tendency that can unduly lessen the democratic merit of robust, animated and even heated forms of discussion (Papacharissi, 2004). Habermas (1989, 1991), for example, placed significant value on well-behaved interaction and emphasized the need for courteous turn-taking and well-mannered demeanor. In contrast, Lyotard (1984) thought quite differently of the logic of restraint and argued that anarchy, individuality and disagreement were the pathways to democratic emancipation. Equally noteworthy, Fraser (1992) suggested that adherence to a condition of politeness necessarily privileged those in power – specifically, wealthy,

white men – and reinforced existing power structures functioning to drown out individuality and uniqueness.

A number of scholars have found a way through this blurriness by utilizing a less idealistic framework and opting, instead, for a pragmatic approach. As one example, in her work on civility within the United State Congress Jamieson (1997) considers the need for a norm of reciprocity in that

> [T]he differences between members and parties are philosophical and not personal, that parties to a debate are entitled to the presumption that their views are legitimate even if not correct, and those on all sides are persons of goodwill and integrity motivated by conviction (p. 1).

Similarly, Papacharissi (2004) notes that before a behavior is termed uncivil, its implications for democratic society should be considered. As such, it is only when people demonstrate offensive behavior toward social groups that their behavior becomes undemocratic; anything less does not have lasting repercussions for the health of democracy.

Beyond norms (and subsequent critiques of those norms) of behavior, however, public deliberation is also very much about the content of an argument. While Habermas (1984) suggests that participants subscribe to an "orientation for reaching understanding" (p. 285), and Schudson (1997) insists that a commitment to try to reach consensus is the line of demarcation between deliberation and simple conversation, other scholars emphasize the overarching value of justification (see, for example, Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002; Entman, 2004; Wessler & Schultz, 2007). Essential to the power of public deliberation is the giving of justification for one's own claims, the demand of justification for others' claims, and the willingness to rebut and refine based upon the content of the ensuing interactions. Doing so shifts attention away from

participants and onto the substance of their contributions. Wessler (2008) proposes four different levels of analysis for such contributions (the idea, the utterance, the article and the page) while further noting that the justification and rebuttal/refinement criteria

> do not require that speakers in public deliberation actually aim at reaching understanding with their opponents. To have an enlightening effect on audiences, it is sufficient that justifications and counter-justifications be presented in public… debates conducted in front of an audience are as normatively valuable as dialogues between speakers, provided they adhere to their own set of normative standards (p. 4).

Taken as a whole, the expansive literature surrounding public deliberation is, in effect, focused on responding to an overarching question: what is it about the discourse present in certain kinds of public spaces that makes it distinct from ordinary discussion or even simple conversation? As has been discussed previously, the very act of engaging in public deliberation, along with varying degrees of a citizenry's commitment to continue to do so, are at the heart of any and all of the traditions supported by democratic theorists and proponents of deliberative democracy. The artifact of that deliberation, however, is the discourse itself; it is that which must be scrutinized to detect the array of forces at work within such spaces, let alone to begin to identify the significant differences that may exist among them.

Doing so is analogous to extracting and then analyzing a blood sample from a corporeal being. Just as a physician cannot determine critical biochemistry or toxicology levels through simple examination, neither can the researcher effectively gauge through casual observation the variety of democratic life forces that may be at work within a given public space. In a similar vein, a physician, after analyzing a blood sample, must then compare its levels to some established set(s) of norms that will allow them to take on meaning within the realm of lived experience. These norms, which typically both reflect

a rich understanding of history and offer a correlated sense of expectations given particular circumstances, can only serve as a generalizable resource of relatively unbounded definitions. Thus, just as a doctor's patient possessing excessively high levels of blood glucose (again, in comparison to a given norm) is not automatically diabetic, neither may an online discussion space that simply appears to be healthy and engaging – or perhaps more likely, presents itself as sick and off-putting – be easily characterized as advancing or retarding the project of deliberative democracy.

Fortunately, the affiliated literature offers insights into at least some of what those important norms may be and, at the very least, allows for the articulation of at least one possible compound description of what high quality (or to use the current metaphor, healthy) public discourse looks like. From there, the theorist can then begin to broach more complex investigations (as in the case of the concluding chapter of this dissertation) to assess the relative importance different communities may directly or indirectly place on a range of pathways to engage political news (e.g. the tools of political cognition, political literacy or collective action) or to help facilitate its processing and further dissemination (e.g. the concepts of Dewey's (1927) citizen journalists, Lippman's (1922) intelligence bureaus, or Sunstein's (2001) general interest intermediaries). Before describing the components of that compound defintion, however, it is first necessary to consider some of the unique characteristics of deliberative spaces that exist solely online. Moreover, it is helpful to summarize critical ways in which the introduction of new technologies require us to think differently (or in some cases, not so differently) about the processes of reporting and digesting political news.

Unique Dimensions of Online Deliberative Spaces?

In contrast to more traditional forms of deliberation (e.g. town hall forums, dueling op/ed pieces, televised debates, etc.), public deliberation occurring in cyberspace carries with it a host of new aspects that have been the subject of considerable study. Some of these new dimensions are structural in nature and the result of how the underlying technological infrastructure is oriented with respect to users. Other differences emerge from the variety of new ways with which users do – or do not – interact with one another. Each requires careful scrutiny and critics are wise not to become either too ensconced in either blind optimism or shallow cynicism. New technologies generally lead to new opportunities and a host of new challenges; online homes for deliberation are no different in this regard.

As noted by Plant (2004) and others, the technology of the Internet creates a coalescing force that enables the emergence of online groups. Such groups consist of either individuals or organizations that come together through an electronic medium to interact with respect to shared opportunities, challenges and interests. Hauben and Hauben (1997), as part of their comprehensive analysis of Usenet (one of the oldest and most diverse online communities), suggest that groups controlling their own information can be quite vibrant and successful, even if they lack formal rules or means of enforcing such rules. Citizenship, they claim, naturally evolves into a form of "netizenship" and members of online groups are highly skilled at fending off threats to the health of the community. While lauding the voluntary nature of online communities, Anderson and Cornfield (2003) note than an unfortunate consequence of such communities is a tendency for homogeneity. Despite the attraction of belonging to voluntary communities,

their rise can often intensify existing social and political dynamics. Group homogeneity, while often comforting to members, can have negative consequences for the broader development of society. Public deliberation benefits from a diversity of perspectives, though Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009) argue the potential for deliberation occurs primarily in online groups where political topics come up only incidentally. More pessimistically, Gandy (2002) concludes that the majority of the 100 most frequently visited websites in the world are dedicated to commerce and entertainment as opposed to political discourse. Barber, Mattson, and Peterson (1997) reinforce this notion in claiming that the Internet, as whole, has come to resemble the realm of shopping, play, entertainment and little else.

Within the online arena, users do not have to satisfy the same thresholds of self-identification as do participants in other deliberative spaces. Dutton (1996) argues that the ability to hide one's real identity (or at least to be given the choice to do so) precipitates a disinhibiting effect; participants are freer to express their honest opinions. In a similar vein, the research of Blader and Tyler (2003) suggests evidence of a correlation between the absence of nonverbal cues and an invigoration of discussion likely caused by the removal of barriers. A lowered, generalized sense of social presence online may encourage expression of dissenting voice and mitigate perceived risks of deliberative participation (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimmons, 2002). In contrast, Maldonado (1997), beginning with a premise that that topics of politics are too serious to engage with a stranger, argues that participants should necessarily identify themselves in order to act as responsible actors within any online debate. Poster (1997) contends that rational argument can rarely prevail in an online setting as identities are fluid and the conditions for encouraging compromise are lacking. Lastly, Davis (1999) offers a

sobering view of the democratic promise related to the Internet's interactive features. The traditional, predominant forces in American politics dominate the Internet, like all of its technological predecessors; such forces seek to sustain or expand their existing power relationships. As such, he argues, the Internet is hardly a revolutionary force for democratic virtues and interactivity is primarily an illusion.

Cyber-optimists maintain the Internet has and will continue to diversify the marketplace of ideas and provide new forums for public deliberation (see, for example, Papacharissi, 2002). Some observers, including Connery (1997), see in the Internet the opportunity to revive a Habermasian, coffeehouse-style (1989) public sphere, arguing that such spaces generate invaluable (even if contradictory and digressing) discussion that constitutes the basis of public opinion and informs affairs of state. At the opposite end of the philosophical spectrum, and building on Mouffe's (1999, 2000) theoretical foundation, Witschge (2004) notes the Internet holds tremendous potential to weaken hegemonic power and energize agonism in that it is rife with contradictory and digressive viewpoints. Irrespective of whether they possess the requisite ingredients for either a bona fide public sphere or mode of adversarial agonism, online spaces are heralded by nearly all cyber-optimists as having the ability to facilitate exposure to opinions beyond the confines of participants' immediate associations (see, for example, McKenna & Bargh, 2000). In stark contrast, cyber-pessimists (or cyber-skeptics) believe that while the Internet may hold considerable promise for realizing the democratic potential of society, it also betrays the proclivities of individuals to seek membership in communities of like-minded thinkers (see, for example, Davis, 1999; Sunstein, 2001), damages deliberative ideals by facilitating selective exposure to alternative perspectives (see, for

example, Van Alstyne & Brynjolfsson, 1997), and encourages interest in matters that have little to do with advancing coherent citizen engagement on matters of public significant (see, for example, Dahlgren, 2000). Much of the broader debate between cyber-optimists and cyber-pessimists, however, originates from the mode of inquiry and the community that is examined. When critics investigate heterogeneous communities, for example, they generally conclude the Internet engenders deliberative exchanges among open-minded individuals with dissimilar perspectives (see, for example, Dahlberg, 2002; Stromer-Galley, 2003). If, instead, they focus on homogenous (or even partisan) groups, they are likely to conclude that discussion spaces are not deliberative but rather echo chambers for dominant discourse (see, for example, Davis, 1999; Hill & Hughes, 1997, 1998).

In addition to the considerable body of research exploring the efficacy of online discussions occurring between users, it is important to reference a secondary (and more modest) literature: that which focuses on discussions occurring largely between users and themselves. Dumoulin (2003) labels these recursive and reflexive contributions "interactive monologues," while Wilhem (1999) argues their utterance reflects a communicative mode that is largely bereft of listening, responding or engaging in the type of dialogue that would typify healthy deliberation. Knapp (1997) is far more hopeful of where such expressions can lead, suggesting that the rigorous rhetoric of so-called "essayistic messages" are the critical starting material for transforming online groups into vivid public spheres. Others argue that such testimonies allow for the development of more coherent and comprehensive public opinion and the creation of a collective memory and archive (see, for example, Tanner, 2001).

Whether real or perceived, many of the unique features associated with online deliberative spaces may hold the potential to challenge and ultimately redefine not only how scholars assess the relative importance of citizens' tools for engaging with information (e.g. political cognition, political literacy and collective action) but also the ways in which citizens better calibrate their own utilization of such tools to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of their efforts.

Old and New Challenges of Reporting and Digesting Political News

Though the Digital Age brings with it any number of new dimensions for the synthesis, sharing and absorption of political news, the writings (and warnings) of a key critic writing nearly a century ago seem as relevant today as ever. Writing at a time when radio and television transmission of news was just entering the mainstream, and in contrast to many democratic theorists, Lippman (1922, 1927) was much less sanguine in his view of the capacity and capabilities of thinking and deliberating publics. For Lippman, the formation of public opinion was driven predominantly by issues with which participants had a high stake. Unlike Dewey (1954/1927) and others, Lippman argued that citizens should focus on contributing only to politics in which they could make a legitimate contribution and steer clear of all others. The idea that citizens were somehow "omnicompetent" and could make rational decisions if provided with sufficient information was highly dubious for Lippman. Not only was there simply too much information to process but citizens had no vested interest in digesting such a wide range of topics. The "pictures in people's heads" shaped by journalistic accounts – e.g. images of government, statescraft, policy-making and leadership in action – simply did not correspond to what the average citizen was living on a day-to-day basis. As such,

Lippman argued that affairs of state should largely be managed by elites and that knowledge bureaus staffed by objective professionals were needed to connect legitimate sources of executive power with a prevailing sense of citizen need and public opinion. Citizens, according to Lippman, still required a window or passageway to the complex machinery of government and the management of issues, but that passageway needed to be managed by professional administrators.

Though their ongoing debate over the roles and responsibilities of the public may have been among the most important of the early Twentieth Century, Dewey and Lippman both advocated for the further popularization of the mainstream press and the need to make the daily news more accessible. While they may have argued vociferously over the appropriate structures for news generation and vehicles for dissemination, they shared a deep understanding for the importance of news and its ability to connect narrowly-focused individuals with a broader sense of society. Despite the proliferation of media channels, formats and styles, the basic framework of this historic premise – and its squabbling over many of the finer points – remains quite contemporary. Bimber (2003), for example, notes that healthy public spheres need professional communicators to facilitate discussion among ordinary citizens. Similarly, Walsh (2003) argues that in a mass-mediated society average citizens, after receiving elite-originating communications, typically process and condition them through casual, often face-to-face conversations with those most immediately available or in closest communicative proximity.

Journalism forged on the work of elites, however, is the subject of intense and longstanding criticism. Entman and Herbst (2000), for example, argue that audiences – and not publics – are what drives journalism; political news is shaped through the media-

framing process and information is carefully packaged with audiences in mind. Capella and Jamieson (1997) place the public's state of apathy at the feet of the media in that it perpetuates a style-over-substance approach, replete with sound bites and flash in lieu of depth and objectivity. The rhythm of the news media is also increasingly out of synch with both deliberative ideals and the gradualness of policy-making. By portraying so many issues as crises and emergencies, the media triggers waves of attention focusing on a single problem and crowding out others (Wolfsfeld, 2000). At the same time, Patterson (1993) notes the dominant schema for the reporter has become the strategic game, thus leading to a 'horserace' style of journalism that is overly dramatistic. Every news story, he contents, is measured not by the extent to which it elevates the public's understanding but by its prescribed structure and conflict, problem and resolution, rising action and falling action, and clear beginning, middle and end. With respect to campaign discourse specifically, Jamieson (1993) similarly identifies the highly conventionalized genres of candidates and press discourse and notes that such forms can minimize argumentation and ignore the responsibilities of parties to shoulder the claims they make. When discourse becomes adlike, she maintains, argument, engagement and accountability are lost. Ultimately, Entman's (1989) Catch 22-like observation continues to be prophetic: to become sophisticated citizens, Americans would need high-quality, independent journalism; but news organizations, to stay in business, would need an audience of sophisticated citizens.

More recently, critics of the Internet's effect on journalism note that, as a medium, cyberspace is highly effective in supporting so-called narrowcasting. As the solidification of niche forms of communications directed at highly specific audiences

continues to expand, the participatory divide between the politically active and non-active will continue to widen (Bimber & Davis, 2003). Equally important, the predominance of increasingly specialized and personalized information is offset by the steady decline of what Sunstein (2002) calls 'general-interest intermediaries,' or objective journalists or officials who possess the agency to help the public sort through the cacophony of information. By and large, the Internet facilitates the distribution of information and circumvention of gatekeepers and other such intermediaries (Schapiro, 1999). Jamieson and Waldman (2003) advocate for the restoration of the press as custodians of fact, arguing that reporters need to help the public make better sense of competing arguments, defining terms, filling in gaps of information, assessing the accuracy of information offered, and relating claims and counterclaims to possible, real-world outcomes. Neuman, Just, and Crigler (1992) similarly propose a constructionist model of political communications, one that emphasizes the perspective of an active, interpreting audience; stresses interaction between such audiences and the media; and privileges common knowledge over public opinion, in that while news coverage may be dry and specific, audience reaction is affective and integrative.

The introduction of online commenting platforms may very well be born out of these same ideals and lofty goals. Though some scholars (see, for example, Schultz, 2000) have concluded there is little real connectivity between commenters and journalists, and most journalists do not read the comments for lack of time of interest, others suggest they provide an important window into the minds of readers. As one journalist from *The Guardian* recently noted:

> I've learned a hell of a lot from reading the Internet, and I'd guess that I've learned at least as much from the comments and amateur blogs as from professional

> writers. To take just one example, it was the commenters here on Comment is free who were railing against the injustices of work capability assessments introduced by this government and conducted by Atos, long before mainstream political journalists, even the most left-leaning Guardian columnists, picked up on the story. As a journalist, I am forever picking up nuggets of information on topics of interest from below the line. Of course, many turn out to be somehow (or entirely) inaccurate or misunderstood, but a significant minority are immensely useful. I find it genuinely unfathomable that other writers would cut themselves off from this goldmine of knowledge (Fogg, 2013).

Part of the lack of connectivity may be the result of a juxtaposition of two very different kinds of discursive norms. As Braun and Gillespie (2011) suggest, media organizations increasingly saddle themselves with the task of hosting an unruly user community that does not wish to – and generally is not obligated to – play by the norms of journalism. News provision, they suggest, is increasingly intertwined with community management, leaving many journalists frustrated, unprepared and demoralized. In addition, a decidedly subversive undercurrent (known as "trolling") infests many online commenting spaces. As one journalist from salon.com recently opined:

> the trolls really do hold tremendous power of persuasion. Why try to craft a well-reasoned argument, using facts and grammar, when the real way to influence how a person feels is a well-aimed "Kill it before it lays eggs," or the classic "Your stupid"? Even if the effect is divisive, at least it's substantial — to the point that it can strongly affect how one feels about the original piece itself (Williams, 2013).

It is precisely this diversity of opinion with respect to the broader value of online comments that makes a deeper and more objective investigation of their discursive quality so essential. Even the most overtly civic-minded spaces can be littered with foul language, personal attacks, racial epithets or hate speech. At least during the period of study, users' access to such spaces was typically quite unfettered; moderation, if it existed at all, was strikingly passive or woefully inadequate; and broader commitments to maintaining user anonymity were very much the norm. Though prevailing standards may

have changed considerably since that time (see Chapter 4), this investigation occurred during what might have been the proverbial perfect storm for revealing the miserable underbelly of public discussion occurring within online spaces. The words, sentiments and messages carried on these waves of toxicity can easily overpower a casual observer and drown out a more accurate understanding of what is actually transpiring at any given moment. Absent an objective process for measuring a forum's deliberative health, it would be impossible to sort through the noise with any degree of consistency (or perhaps at all), let alone to consider some of the broader opportunities and challenges for thriving in such spaces.

Measuring Discursive Quality: An Indicator of Civic Health

Formal study of online spaces has hardly kept pace with either the rapid evolution of existing spaces or the mushrooming of new ones. Such a conclusion is hardly surprising even against the backdrop of widespread and growing interest: If the investigation of an emerging construct did not prove challenging enough, one must also consider that the metaphysics of that construct are in a near continuous state of flux even as huge communities of users are seemingly able to adapt with relative ease. As such, when building a mechanism for measuring the overall civic health of a deliberative space, it is important not to become too preoccupied with the changing technological contours of that space. Rather than try to keep up with structure, a concerted effort to gauge generalized levels of civic-mindedness within such spaces must focus on discourse, the principal artifact of the activities taking place within those spaces. By employing such an approach, it is understood that any derived measures of discursive quality are not so

much valuable in their own right but for the extent to which they can sufficiently reflect different dimensions of civic health with a given online space. A thin but promising literature offers important insights into how to conceptualize the notion of discursive quality; a broad understanding of some of the central tenets of deliberative democratic theory help to close the remaining gaps. As described in the remainder of this section, four basic measures of discursive quality emerge: civility, politeness, justification and complexity). Procedures for operationalizing these concepts into a measurable set of variables follow in Chapter 3.

As noted previously, extensive scholarship exploring the ways in which public deliberation may catalyze or reinforce democratic activities point to a fairly limited number of conditions (Delli Carpini, Lomax Cook, & Jacobs, 2004). The measure this study labels as "civility" is a reflection of the condition Barber (1984) describes as empathetic, Gutman and Thompson (1996) consider to be egalitarian, and Jamieson (1997) structures as a norm of reciprocity. It is, in essence, the prerequisite that all members of a given community have a right to participate in public deliberation and that their legitimacy for doing will not be challenged even if their respective expressions and ideas may very well be. Papacharissi (2004) utilized the inverse of this measure of civility in her content analysis of 287 political discussion groups over a period of several months. "Incivility," as she categorized it, should be "operationalized as the set of behaviors that threaten democracy, deny people their personal freedoms, and stereotype social groups" (p. 267). In building her index of incivility, Papacharissi further assessed whether stereotypes were mild or offensive; antagonistic (i.e. clearly intended to offend) or neutral (i.e. not clearly intended to offend); and interpersonal (i.e. directed at another

commenter) or other-directed (i.e. directed at someone not present in the discussion, such as a politician, celebrity or journalist).

Too often, the measure this study refers to as "politeness" is the only one the casual observer can readily recognize. Here, politeness refers principally to the absence of name-calling, *ad hominem* attacks and vulgar language. It is essential to note that not only can the presence of impoliteness potentially overshadow or diminish the likelihood of other considerations, but using it as stand-alone indicator of a public space's civic health can be misleading. The literature on deliberative democracy contains an extensive set of arguments which privilege polite discourse and consider it a necessary ingredient to achieve democratic outcomes (see, for example, Habermas, 1989, 1991). An equally large and thoughtful array of scholarship advocates for just the opposite consideration, arguing, for example, that democratic emancipation needs to take advantage of unrestrained language (Lyotard, 1984) or that the conditions of politeness naturally privilege the powerful (Fraser, 1992). The concept is employed in this study not so much to locate it along this continuum but to clearly differentiate it from civility. In her work, Papacharissi (2004) was similarly careful to distinguish between the two dimensions and instead used validated measures of politeness based on Jamieson's (1997) and Jamieson & Falk's (1998) review of floor debate in the United States Congress; she ultimately concluded that while many discussions were impolite, few were uncivil.

A third measure employed by this study, "justification," recognizes that the subject matter conveyed through public discourse is not insignificant and shifts attention away from participants and onto the substance of their contributions (Wessler, 2008). Nearly all theorists of deliberative democracy emphasize the underlying value of

justification for engendering a shared sense of meaning or understanding within deliberative space (see, for example, Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002; Entman, 2004; Wessler & Schultz, 2007). For deliberation to be efficacious, they argue, discussants must give justification for their own claims, demand justification for others' claims, and be willing to rebut and refine their arguments based upon the strength of those claims. The research of Himelboim, Gleave, and Smith (2009) further demonstrates a correlation between heightened levels of justification and more prolific discussions. Their six-month analysis of approximately 40,000 authors across 20 political discussion groups identified authors who received an atypically large number of replies. More than 95% of comments made by these discussion catalysts contained content imported from elsewhere in cyberspace, and approximately two-thirds of their comments included links to stories available from traditional news organizations. In addition to those which rely upon external sources, the present study's concept of justifications also borrows from the social capital literature (see, for example, Putnam, 2000) suggesting that the tendency for individuals to choose to belong to active social networks may be tremendously beneficial in supporting a shared sense of civic responsibility. Within such networks, trust is established by sharing more personal information describing details of a particular lived experience. In a matter of speaking, such expressions of trust may be thought of as something of an internally validated justification.

The fourth and final measure – "complexity" – emerges from the recognition that public deliberation is a dynamic and ongoing process. While Habermas (1984), for example, suggests that participants must subscribe to an "orientation for reaching

understanding" (p. 285), Schudson (1997) insists that the commitment to try to reach consensus is the line separating deliberation from simple conversation. Irrespective of whether consensus is a necessary or even desirable motivation, what matters is that the generation of meaning is a highly contingent (and often non-linear) activity. Within deliberative space, discussants need the opportunity to sort through conflicting ideas, ask questions to approach higher levels of understanding, and even express their own uncertainty about a given topic. Stromer-Galley (2007) formalized elements of a content coding scheme with many of these very considerations in mind. Using data from the Virtual Agora Project (Muhlberger, 2005), in which residents of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania deliberated school policy online, Stromer-Galley constructed variables for, and then recorded instances of: agreement, a signal of support with something a prior speaker said; and question, a genuine inquiry directed to another speaker trying to seek information. Believing prior measures were overly complicated to administer (see, for example, Graham and Witschge, 2003), Stromer-Galley included elements in her coding scheme intended to "balance the need to capture the complexities of group interaction while being simple enough to achieve acceptable levels of intercoder agreement" (p. 21).

Conclusion

This brief review of the existing literature sets the stage for the development of an effective methodology to measure the quality of deliberation taking place in online discussion spaces affiliated with a limited number of news outlets. Though diverse, the collection of prior research examined herein serves as the theoretical foundation for systematically seeking the presence of four distinct (but not entirely unrelated) telltales of

a site's overall civic-mindedness. Once this exploration is conducted, it becomes far more feasible to consider why there might be both profound differences and revealing consistencies across the spaces examined. In doing so, it is important to note that this study examines only a very small – if still representative – sliver of online space. While a wide variety of electronic forums both exist and are arguably home to active, commenting publics (such as those found on Twitter, Reddit, etc.), this study is solely concerned with deliberative spaces operated and managed by the purveyors of news.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Overview: The Vicarious Nature of Content Analysis

As a forum, online discussion boards simply aggregate the various contributions users make to an ongoing, asynchronous conversation on a particular topic. For those forums affiliated with news outlets, a journalist's article (in the print universe) or multimedia segment (in the audiovisual realm) initially frame some of the dimensions of a topic and then precipitate a user-driven discussion. Furthermore, it is important to note that this study is concerned exclusively with discussion forums operating solely through the medium of written forms of communication. While a number of vehicles, such as CNN's iReport and YouTube's video response platform, allow for full video contributions, such forms are still relatively new and not widely used (or at least not when compared to written communication channels). As such, the utility of content analysis as a "method that uses a set of procedures to make valid references from text" (Weber, 1990, p. 9) is highly viable. While some computer-based forms of content analysis attempt to measure variables by gauging the simple frequency of terms relative to a pre-determined dictionary or corpus of words within a given sample (see, for example, Hart, 1989; Hart, 2002; and Hart, Jarvis, Jennings & Smith-Howell, 2004), the casual nature with which participants prepare and submit posts to an online discussion board (to say nothing of their propensity to use slang, abbreviations and emoticons) make this an ineffective strategy. A deeper and more thorough investigation – one that empowers and requires human coders to make judgments about the *meaning* of the words contained within user submissions – requires both a more robust definition of the

research technique and one that better establishes its descriptive power. While Krippendorf (1980) offers a similarly basic definition of content analysis – "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context" (p. 21) – his description of the texts themselves (i.e. the artifacts to be code) is particularly instructive for purposes of this study. He notes:

> The most distinctive feature of messages is that they inform someone vicariously, providing the receiver with knowledge about events that take place at a distant location, about objects that may have existed in the past, or about ideas in other people's minds. *Messages and symbolic communications generally are about phenomena other than those directly observed*. The vicarious nature of symbolic communications is what forces a receiver to make specific inferences from sensory data to portions of his empirical environment. This empirical environment is what we refer to as the *context of the data* (p. 22; italics added).

This added clarity concerning the overall power of the technique is undergirded by several important distinctions germane to the method itself: content analysis is an unobtrusive technique; it readily accepts untrusted data; it is context-sensitive and thereby able to process symbolic forms; and it is both easily scalable and capable of coping with large volumes of data (Krippendorf, 1980). Taken together, these four distinctions (or propositions, as Krippendorf calls them) point to a methodology offering the requisite data collection and analytical tools needed, most specifically, to construct imputed measures of deliberative quality, and, more generally, to gauge the efficacy of these spaces as forums for public discussion.

Data Collection

With the appropriateness and applicability of the content analysis methodology established, this section will describe key considerations to be explored as part of the broader data-collection process. Important dimensions include: defining clearly the unit

of analysis; determining key information delimiters for purposes of data categorization and grouping; addressing the essential mechanical procedures of, and underscoring rationale for, the sampling procedure associated with the current longitudinal study; establishing an algorithm for partitioning data; and identifying requisite safeguards to secure and archive electronic data.

Unit of Analysis

Discrete postings by individual users constitute the unit of analysis for this study. Such postings are entirely contained (i.e. they have a clear beginning and end) and there are no limits to either the number of users who may participate in a discussion or the number of times an individual user may post within that discussion. To be explicit, the current study makes no attempt to measure the relative volume of contributions by unique users; all postings are treated consistently and without any regard to the identification of the poster. For those users who contribute multiple postings to a discussion board, each posting is simply counted and assessed as its own unit. Though some prior studies have elected not to employ a user-blind data collection scheme (see, for example, Lewinski, 2010; Himelboim, Gleave, & Smith, 2009), there is insufficient information available to the current researcher to ensure the validity of uniqueness among users. Such a methodological decision may ultimately weaken the explanatory power and overall generalizability of the findings vis-à-vis other studies. An important point of distinction, however, is that said studies have typically examined postings made by users through a validated entry portal. In such cases, users possess login credentials affiliated with a credit card account number or other type of verifiable identifier.

Key Information Delimiters

Though individual postings may constitute the unit of analysis, each record of data is further associated with a select number of key information delimiters to track its concordance with different kinds of news articles and segments. Thus, while all postings are considered discrete units, they are all appended to a variety of journalist-created content. This study is concerned with several dimensions of that content, and each information delimiter corresponds to one of the five overarching research questions. These include: the name of the publication or broadcast source (RQ1); whether the journalist-created content is print-based or multimedia (RQ2); whether the publication or broadcast entity employing the journalist exists solely on the Web or has an antecedent in traditional media (i.e. newspapers, news periodicals, television) (RQ3); whether the journalist-created content is principally covering domestic politics or international politics (RQ4); and whether the journalist-created content is principally covering acts of governing and policymaking or campaigning (RQ5). The process for encoding these information delimiters is outlined in the next section.

Purposive Sampling of Targeted Online Discussion Forums

The discussion platforms of four online news sites – *The Daily Kos*, *The Los Angeles Times*, The Young Turks YouTube Channel, and The Associated Press YouTube Channel – were selected as a meaningful set of forums from which a purposive sampling of user contributions could be conducted. Derived directly from the data collection needs articulated by the study's research questions, two important dimensions needed to be accommodated by the choice of platforms: channel constitution and channel medium. As depicted in Figure 1 and for purposes of this study, channel constitution may be either

traditional (i.e. there is an antecedent news channel existing in the traditional print and broadcast media) or Internet-native (i.e. there is no antecedent news channel). Channel medium refers to whether the given format of news precipitating online discussion is print-based or multimedia. By utilizing four distinct data sources, both dimensional considerations (and combinations thereof) may be adequately considered.

		Channel Constitution	
		Internet-Native	*Traditional*
Channel Medium	*Print*	Daily Kos	Los Angeles Times
	Multimedia	Young Turks	Associated Press

Figure 1: Two Dimensions of News Channel Sample Selection

Within each of the four dimensional quadrants, the respective news channel was selected based on a combination of inherent credibility, measurable popularity and the ease with which the required data could be extracted. According to Alexa.com (2010a), the online edition of *The Los Angeles Times* (latimes.com) was the fifth most visited U.S.-based newspaper in the world at the time of data collection and bested only by *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post* and *USA Today*. Among the top five sites, only *The Los Angeles Times* presented its discussions in such a manner as to allow for straightforward archival in an electronic format. Similarly, *Daily Kos* (dailykos.com) was the fifth most visited U.S.-based web original at the time (Alexa.com, 2011b) and the only such site belonging to the category allowing users to post without a

verifiable account. In consideration of the audiovisual domain, the prominence of YouTube as the third most trafficked website in the world (topped only by Google's search engine (google.com) and Facebook's social media platform (facebook.com)) (Alexa.com., 2010c) made the platform an obvious choice. Within the YouTube universe of content, the Associated Press was the most popular news and politics channel based upon video views and The Young Turks placed third (first if rated by either the number of electronic subscribers or channel views) (VidStatsX, 2010).

It is important to note that the period of study corresponded to a time in which all four of the targeted news organizations, irrespective of their age of modality, found themselves in the midst of epochal change and engaged in a mode of significant (or in some cases, desperate) experimentation to take advantage of new technologies. The older outlets (the Associated Press and Los Angeles Times), which had successfully endured multiple paradigm shifts precipitated by successive technological advancements, were beginning to understand that this was to be no ordinary time. The Associated Press, for example, began as a non-profit print news collaborative among major New York papers in the mid-1800s and then, over the next century and a half, expanded its offerings to include photos (1935), radio stories (1941) and video segments (1994). Throughout this evolution, the AP never needed to think about changing the fundamental ways in which in operated: content was transmitted to member news affiliates through what was essentially a proprietary infrastructure. The fact that AP made the decision in 2006 to begin posting much of its content to YouTube (an entirely free and open channel owned by another entity) both reflected the staggering ways in which the media landscape was changing and revealed the radical steps news outlets would need to take if they wanted to

remain viable. Seemingly overnight, what had been a closed network between AP and its affiliates had been upended and affixed to, at least in comparison, a chaotic and at times unruly commenting community.

For *The Los Angeles Times*, in existence as a major daily newspaper since 1881, the story of its history prior to this period of rapid change was dominated not so much by technological shifts but by factors of political-economy. The paper's oscillation between boom and bust corresponded with dynamics of ownership and, more recently, its consolidation under the Tribune conglomerate in 2000. Through each period, however, the newspaper – at least in its role as a public entity and purveyor of news – operated in much the same way as it always had. As was the case with AP, by the mid-2000s *The Los Angeles Times* was forced to take steps that would previously have been anathema to its powerful editorial license. In June 2005, the editors of the paper took the unprecedented step of inviting the readership to use the emerging technological tool of a wiki to collaboratively rewrite a prominent editorial pertaining to the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. Though the experiment was compromised by hackers before its effectiveness could be gauged, the paper had clearly signaled just how far it could – and would – deviate from its norms to remain relevant with its audience.

For the newer outlets (*Daily Kos* and Young Turks, both launched in 2002), the rapidly changing technological and sociological conditions present at the time of their emergence meant that not only was a mode of experimentation welcome but it was also the only one they really new. Unconstrained by the inertia of a long history or the overhead of a significant infrastructure, both outlets were able to enter the arena as nimble and more expansive-thinking participants. *Daily Kos*, for example, did not have

to make the decision as to whether it was a news organization, a community of opinion-making or a hub for activism; it very easily became all three at once. And, particularly in comparison to most traditional outlets, it was able to quickly embrace new technological tools in far more prolific, meaningful and accepted ways (its longstanding use of wikis, for example, stands in stark contrast to that of *The Los Angeles Times*). Given the orientation of Young Turks and the ease with which it could operate in this different world, its decision to launch a YouTube channel in 2005 was as naturally evolutionary as it was blatantly revolutionary for the Associated Press. Young Turks, after all, had previously been a cable television access show and then a radio program on Sirius. After emerging as the world's first daily streaming online talk show, it later went on to build its own network across multiple platforms and produced original programming for 24-hour cable giants Al Jazeera and CNBC. To be able to make so many major shifts during such a short period of time would have simply been unthinkable in the decade prior.

Timeframe for Data Collection and Rationale

Data were collected from the four discussion platforms each day in the early evening (approximately 8-9pm EST) from February 1, 2011 to March 31, 2011. Though the study investigated a longer period of time than was arguably needed, the strategic decision was made to employ a larger sample size to allow for greater statistical scrutiny of data subsets and to provide the opportunity to perform supplementary analyses as needed. The timing of February-March presented a number of key seasonal advantages: the completion of the major American holidays and the subsequent conclusion of the consumer-driven, holiday news cycle; historical trends suggesting a period of significant activity for the major institutions of the United States government; and the lack of any

major, immediately imminent elections. The timeframe of early 2011 was selected because it was not expected to be a period of intensive campaign reporting (the mid-term Congressional campaigns had just concluded and the U.S. Presidential election was still more than 20 months away). Knowing that the run-up to a major election may fan certain partisan flames, the choice of timing constitutes a basic mechanism to control for what would otherwise be the overabundance of campaign related news and the potential skewing of ensuing discussions.

Random Selection of Affiliated News Articles and Segments

While the targeting of selected news sites was purposive, a sample of political news was selected each day using a consistent randomization scheme. From each of the four sites, a single story or segment was selected each day and it, along with all of its affiliated online comments, was recorded. Throughout the study period, the possibility existed for no new political news to be posted on a given day. During these rare times, no sample was collected and the process began anew on the following day. Some tailoring of the randomization process was necessary given the different ways in which the sites categorize and post political news. For two of the sites, *The Daily Kos* and the Young Turks YouTube Channel, all of the content was known to be focused exclusively on political topics. As such, any stories or segments posted that day (all of the sites have a time stamp indicating when content was originally uploaded) could simply be numbered sequentially and then sampled using a random number generator. In contrast to these sites, content on the online edition of *The Los Angeles Times* was divided into popular newspaper categories (e.g. Business, Sports, Health, etc.). Using the same randomization technique, samples were selected from all stories posted daily within the

site's Politics section (the configuration of the categories has since changed). Unlike *The Los Angeles Times* online site, the Associated Press YouTube Channel simply posted all its segments in a single repository irrespective of categorization. While the same randomization strategy could be employed, a secondary step was needed to check whether or not the given sample was political in nature. The researcher investigated each initial sample and, if it was not, in his best judgment, obviously political in nature, it was discarded for a secondary (or in some cases, tertiary) selection. A catalog of the articles and segments selected appears in Appendix A.

Differentiation Between Robust and Non-Robust Discussion Threads

As this study focuses on the quality of discourse occurring within deliberative spaces associated with political news reports, there was a need to account for the fact that different kinds of topics simply generate different volumes of response. Effectively controlling for the quantity of discussion demanded the development of a mechanism by which each sample (up to four per day throughout the period of the study) could be normalized. Building upon the research of Himelboim, Gleave, and Smith (2009), the unit components of every discussion were further organized as a collection of threads in that each unit could be categorized as either being a catalyst or a response. Catalysts were defined as those contributions that began a new thread of conversation within the broader discussion; responses were defined as, quite simply, non-catalysts. Thus, a single thread was defined as a catalyst plus any subsequent responses. The manner in which contributions are typically displayed in online discussion boards (and certainly for the four sites examined in this study), in that catalysts are aligned with the left margin of the frame and responses are indented, allowed for easy differentiation and categorization.

Once this categorization was completed, the mean length of all threads within each discussion thread was calculated. Threads with a length below the mean were discarded and the remainder were defined as being sufficiently robust for purposes of this study (see Appendices B, C, D and E for a summary of the sequestration). In effect, this process operationalized Fishkin's (1992) concept of the continuum between "less deliberative" and "more deliberative" discourse and, in doing so, is clearly focusing the study's exploratory powers on the more deliberative elements of the sampled online discussions. As a healthy side effect, it is important to note that this process entirely weeds out, irrespective of the varying lengths of threads, any threads that have only a catalyst and no responses. Such postings are, in effect, simple one-offs within the postings and neither trigger nor (in many cases) warrant a response. Based upon how this study defines deliberation, there is very little that could be described as "deliberative" about these postings.

Data Integrity and Preservation

Building an archival platform to catalog a large number of discussion units, print-based stories and multimedia segments required the utilization of several digital tools. As all discussion contributions appeared as printed text, time-stamped screen shots of each sample were saved in Portable Document Format (PDF). Affiliated, print-based news stories were similarly archived. For associated, audiovisual segments appearing on one of the two YouTube channels, the Xilisoft YouTube Video converter was used to save a permanent, Quicktime movie file of each. Data were exported incrementally to a readily accessible, cloud-based file system (GoogleDrive) with sufficient backup protection. As an additional step, verbatim copies of all files were concurrently stored on a local,

external hard drive and also subjected to a regimented program of daily backups. The syntax used in naming the files was intuitive and included consistent reference to the news source and date. At the end of the data collection phase, the researcher amassed – and continues to possess – a complete digital archive of all relevant data, and that archive is stored in multiple locations.

Coding Scheme and Process

Two months of data collection in February and March of 2011 resulted in the harvesting of 16,859 comments affiliated with more than 200 news stories and segments (see Appendix A). Following the application of the established procedure to differentiate between robust and non-robust discussion threads and focus exclusively on those threads determined to have higher-than-normal rates of participation, the total sample population of the study declined to 5,881 (a comprehensive description of the data is offered in Chapter 4). Subsequent months were used to develop an initial *a priori* content analysis coding scheme, to train a small team of coders, and to further calibrate the coding scheme. As noted by Weber (1990), Stemler (2001), and Riffe, Lacy, and Fico (2005), such an analysis mandates that coding categories, definitions and procedures be established in advance and based on existing theoretical foundations and methodologies. Revisions to the process may be made as necessary, particularly as coders are trained, inter-coder reliability tested, and coding instructions refined. Full encoding of the data was accomplished during the late Spring and Summer of 2012.

This section outlines critical elements necessary to establish and administer the *a priori* coding scheme. Attention is paid to: the usage of trained coders and refinement of

their work; the operationalization of key concepts into essential variables; the introduction of a formalized coding sheet; and necessary tests for reliability and validity.

Training and Management of Coders

Given the large amount of data and heeding Krippendorf's warning – "Probably the worst practice in content analysis is when the investigator develops his recording instructions and applies them all by himself…" (p. 74) – the careful training of a coding team became an absolute prerequisite for a reliable analysis. Two university students, both of whom were known to the researcher but not to one another, were recruited for the project and compensated for their efforts. One student was a master's level graduate student in communication at a large, public university; the second was an advanced undergraduate studying communication at a small, private college. The researcher held an initial, introductory session with both members of the team present. The research program was described in general terms and initial coding instructions were distributed. In keeping with the highest standards of reliability (see, for example, Krippendorf, 1980; Weber, 1990), modifications and refinements to the coding scheme, based upon the researcher's ongoing assessment of its effectiveness when utilized by the coders, were incorporated by the researcher in isolation from the coders; revised coding instructions were then given to the coders uniformly and independently. Following their initial group meeting with the researcher, the coders were not in contact with one another until all data had been fully coded.

Operationalization of Grouping Variables

Given the relevant concepts encapsulated by the overarching research questions, a handful of grouping variables needed to be introduced into the broader constructs of the

coding scheme. All of the grouping variables are nominal and two of them – channel constitution and channel medium (as shown in Figure 1) – could be coded effortlessly as they merely reflect the news source. Coding for two other grouping variables – geographic focus of political news, and topical focus of political news (illustrated in Figure 2) – required the participation of the coders. As part of their initial slate of instructions, coders were given access to the complete digital archive of news stories and segments and asked to code all of the news samples for each of the two grouping

	Grouping Variables	
	Geographic Focus	*Topical Focus*
Attributes	**Domestic**: Focus on the United States	**Governing**: Focus on Lawmaking, Policymaking and Public Policy Issues
	International: Focus on Nations Other Than the United States	**Campaigning**: Focus on Elections, Balance of Power Discussions and Political Strategy

Figure 2: Key Grouping Variables

variables (the final coding scheme appears in Appendix F and a quick sheet is provided in Appendix G). The technique proved effective and the coders agreed on the relevant attribute 97% of the time with respect to the geographic focus variable and 92% of the time with respect to the topical focus variable. On the very few occasions when the coders did not agree, the researcher made the final determination.

Operationalizing the Concept of Discursive Quality

Chapter 2 described the logic behind gauging discursive quality with respect to four distinct dimensions: civility, politeness, justification and complexity. Considered individually or in the aggregate, these measures may help to reveal a given discussion board's overall level of broader civic-mindedness, in that discourse can be considered the artifact of the deliberative activities taking place therein. This section, as well as two of the accompanying appendices, detail how each of these four concepts are operationalized into working variables to be employed within the content analysis methodology.

Operationalization of the concept of civility draws heavily from the work of Papacharissi (2004) and, to a lesser extent, that of Ruiz, Domingo, Mico, Diaz-Noci, Meso, and Masip (2011). Using Papacharissi's definition, civility is understood to be profoundly different – and thus requiring clear differentiation in any coding scheme – than the notion of politeness. Moreover, civility is a default mode of behavior that is violated (i.e. a mode of civility becomes a mode of incivility) when a discussant employs one or more of the following argumentative techniques: (1) she verbalizes a generalized or specific threat to democracy, democratic institutions or democratic values. In this case, democracy in considered to be an amalgam of the broader concepts of liberty, equality and the rule of law; (2) she verbalizes a threat to individual rights and freedoms. These threats may take the form of statements intending or promising to do physical, psychological or emotional harm with the goal of retarding the freedom to enjoy such rights and freedoms. In addition, these threats may be directed specifically at another discussant or more generally at a citizen or group of citizens; or (3) she employs one or more antagonistic stereotypes – that is, the discussant distinguishes, labels and makes a

judgment about a group of individuals – intended to antagonize, discredit or harm. These antagonistic stereotypes may be directed specifically at another discussant or more generally at a citizen or group of citizens. Though their work is focused on a very different research trajectory, the use of a "cooperative search for truth" variable by Ruiz et al. (2011) in defining a necessary feature of deliberative quality helps to corroborate the general framework advanced by Papacharissi (2004). In addition, analyses completed by Zhou, Chan, & Peng (2008) in examining the emergence of online public spheres in China effectively validated Papacharissi's original definition of civility.

With respect to politeness, the work of Jamieson (1997) and Jamieson and Falk (1998) proved highly instructive for purposes of the current study. Though Jamieson labels her framework a measure of civility and it has been employed and validated by numerous scholars since (see, for example, Kessler, 2008), its methodology is executed in concordance with gauging levels of politeness as defined by Papacharissi (2004). In contrast to civility, politeness is measured by the absence of such techniques as name-calling, pejorative utterances, vulgarity (Jamieson & Falk, 1998), hot-button words and inflammatory speech (Kessler, 2008). Similar to politeness, this study's coding scheme considers politeness to be the default mode of behavior unless a discussant marshals one or more of the following: (1) name-calling that is clearly intended to offend. These name-callings may be directed specifically at another discussant(s) or more generally at a citizen or group of citizens; (2) *ad hominem* attacks – that is, an attack on another's characteristics or authority without addressing the substance of the argument itself. Here, too, attacks may be directed specifically at another discussant or more generally at the public; or (3) vulgar language, either expressed explicitly or clearly implied in the use of

abbreviations, grawlixes or other obvious symbols. At the time of coding, all members of the coding team were given a static printout of the collectively constructed list of vulgar terms appearing in the online dictionary at noswearing.com. This dictionary served as both a resource and an objective arbiter of what constitutes vulgarity and what does not.

Justification is arguably the most straightforward measure of the quality of deliberation and was a key feature of nearly every methodology examined (Jamieson & Falk, 1998; Graham & Witschge, 2003; Papacharissi, 2004; Stromer-Galley, 2007; Kessler, 2008; Zhou, Chan, & Peng, 2008; Himelboim, Gleave & Smith, 2009). In this measure, justification is simply the expression of some form of evidence to support an argument or claim. The incorporation of evidence is indicative of the normative benchmark of logic and coherence (Habermas, 1984; see also Ruiz et al., 2011) and may take the form of supporting information ranging from the incorporation of third-party facts to the sharing of personal narratives. Within the current coding scheme, justification is considered to not be present unless one or more of the following criteria are met: (1) the discussant justifies an argument or perspective by providing supporting evidence in the form of cited facts, embedded documents, web links, or quoted/paraphrased comments from experts; (2) the discussant justifies an argument by providing supporting evidence in the form of a description of personal experience or a first-hand account.

Finally, the variable of complexity is an amalgam of several factors coalescing around the basic belief that the highest quality of deliberation is typically found in communities of debate characterized by a wide diversity of perspectives and the pursuit of deeper understanding (Ruiz et al., 2011). Stromer-Galley's (2007) variable of

"question" (a genuine inquiry into directed to another speaker trying to seek information), Zhou, Chan, and Peng's (2008) "complexity" (the presence of an idea that incorporates conflicting value claims into its own claim), and Kessler's (2008) "conflict" (the co-presence of separate, conflicting ideas or policy positions in the same utterance) constitute different facts of the same variable. For purposes of this study, complexity is not considered to be present in a comment unless the commenter has endeavored to do one or more of the following: (1) incorporate opposing viewpoints into a given post, irrespective of whether she agrees with those viewpoints; (2) express the same viewpoint in multiple ways; (3) articulates her lack of certainty on a topic; or (4) clearly asks an honest question (versus a strictly rhetorical one) in an attempt to better understand a topic or viewpoint.

The coding scheme for the variables of civility, politeness, justification and complexity is clearly described in Appendix F and further accounted for in Appendix G (the coding quick sheet employed by the coders). For each of the four variables, it is important to note that the study does not factor in any sense of gradation in the strength of the variable. Corresponding attributes are strictly binary in constitution and a key characteristic should be thought of as simply being present or not present. Additional instructions were given to the coding team to note comments that had been removed by the discussion moderator, flagged by users as spam (and thus blocked from viewing), were indecipherable (including appearing in a language other than English), or for which the coder could simply not otherwise make a clear determination.

Beginning with each of the four measures, a basic compound measure of deliberative quality was computed for each entry based upon a simple count of the

occurrences of civility, politeness, justification and complexity. Those entries with zero or one instance were categorized as "low" (coded as 1); those with two instances (the mid-point of the range) were categorized as "medium" (coded as 2); and those with three or four instances were categorized as "high" (coded as 3).

Though the study is chiefly concerned with the quality of deliberation occurring within robust discussion threads, an abbreviated secondary analysis examined indicators of quality within a representative sample of non-robust threads. Of the 16,859 comments, 10,978 were deemed to be non-robust. A sample size of 371 was needed to measure the population with a standard confidence level of 95% and a confidence interval of +/- 5%.

Initial Pilot Study, Calibration of Coding Scheme and Test for Intercoder Reliability

Both Lacy and Riffe (1996) and Neuendorf (2002) suggest a sample size of 30 as a rule of thumb for conducting an initial pilot study. Following this guidance, the researcher independently gave each coder an identical set of thirty units selected randomly from the net collection of 5,881 user comments; a random number generator aided in the randomization effort. Initial levels of intercoder agreement with respect to the four nominal variables of deliberative quality fell within a relatively narrow band of 64% to 73%. After discussing and carefully reviewing the coding decision-making with each coder individually, the researcher improved the precision of the coding instructions and conducted a second pilot study using the same process; again, a random sample of 30 non-duplicates was selected from the net data collection. Following the second iteration, intercoder agreement improved to a range of 72% to 83% across the four variables. Based upon subsequent discussions (similarly conducted by the researcher independently

with each coder), additional clarifications to the coding scheme were made and a formal test of intercoder reliability was undertaken.

Lacy and Riffe (1996) derive a formula for determining the requisite sample size needed to establish sufficient intercoder reliability levels for nominal content categories:

$$n = \frac{(N-1)(SE)^2 + PQN}{(N-1)(SE)^2 + PQ}$$

Within this formula, *N* is the total population; *SE* is the standard error corresponding to a given confidence interval; *P* is the presumed population level of agreement; and *Q*=(1-*P*). For the current study: *N*=5,881; *P*=0.8 (a conservative estimate based upon the insights of the pilot); *Q*=0.2; and *PQ*=0.16. Presuming a confidence interval of 5% and a desired level of probability of 95%, we can utilize the basic formula:

$$\text{Confidence interval} = Z(SE)$$

Z is the one-tailed Z-score associated with the given confidence level. Using the normal distribution, the Z-score for 0.05 (a 5% confidence interval) is 1.64. Solving for *SE*:

$$SE = \frac{Confidence\ Interval}{Z}$$

SE is computed as 0.0305 and the required *n* can now be calculated:

$$n = \frac{(5{,}881-1)(0.0305)^2 + (0.8)(0.2)(5{,}881)}{(5{,}881-1)(0.0305)^2 + (0.8)(0.2)}$$

Thus, a random sample of 174 test units are needed for the intercoder reliability test. As adapted from Riffe, Lacey, and Fico (2005), if an 80% agreement in coding a variable on those 174 test units is achieved, chances are 95 out of 100 that at least an 80% or better agreement would exist if the entire content population was coded by all coders and

reliability measured. The formal test for intercoder reliability revealed a very high level of concordance existing between the coders, as summarized in the following table:

Table 1: Summary of Intercoder Reliability Test

Variable	# Cases	# Agreements	# Disagreements	% Agreement	Krippendorff's Alpha
Civility	174	166	8	95.4%	0.813
Politeness	174	169	5	97.1%	0.943
Justification	174	165	9	94.8%	0.903
Complexity	174	166	8	95.4%	0.912

Examination of Research Questions

Basic contingency tables were developed for each of the five research questions and chi-square analyses were performed to test the respective null hypotheses:

(RQ1) There is no association between the deliberative quality (civility, politeness, justification, complexity) of comments and political news source;

(RQ2) There is no association between the deliberative quality (civility, politeness, justification, complexity) of comments and political news channel medium;

(RQ3) There is no association between the deliberative quality (civility, politeness, justification, complexity) of comments and political news channel constitution;

The remaining two research questions employed both the chi-square test and the more powerful Mantel-Haenszel analysis, which tested the following null hypothesis while also controlling for the news source

(RQ4) There is no association between the deliberative quality (civility, politeness, justification, complexity) of comments and the geographic focus of the corresponding article/segment;

(RQ5) There is no association between the deliberative quality (civility, politeness, justification, complexity) of comments and the topical focus of the corresponding article/segment.

Conclusion and the Need for Supplementary Analysis

The method of content analysis carries with it numerous, significant advantages that make it an excellent choice for purposes of this study: it is a non-obtrusive, non-reactive measurement technique; it recognizes that, because content often has a life beyond its production and consumption, longitudinal studies are possible using archived materials; and the quantification or measurement by coding teams permits reduction to large quantities of information that would be logistically impossible for close qualitative analysis (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2005, p. 38-39). While all of these pluses bode well for the current study, it is important to be mindful of and, to the extent possible, mitigate against, what are typically thought to be the overarching criticisms of the method. Holsti (1969), for one, recommends blending quantitative content analysis with supplementary qualitative analysis to offset any claims that the quantification of content may lead to its trivialization. Similarly, a supplementary qualitative analysis would be useful in identifying any key distinctions between manifest and latent content that the coding scheme is otherwise incapable of detecting.

Though it would be impractical to engage in a deep reading of the nearly 6,000 coded entries, the supplementary analysis identifies the most robust discussion threads for each of the four news sources. As a matter of differentiation, these discussion threads are those having the highest *total* measures of deliberative quality as computed by the given methodology. Put another way, these leading threads will have the most numerous, aggregate occurrences of civility, politeness, justification and complexity within a given thread.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Overview and Descriptive Statistics

The given procedures for harvesting a significant data set of user comments posted on media-hosted discussion boards proved highly effective. Over the course of the two-month data collection phase, nearly 17,000 comments affiliated with 201 unique political news articles and audiovisual segments across four popular sources were systematically recorded. A comprehensive inventory of selected news content (along with a corresponding comment count for each) appears in Appendix A. A more detailed breakdown of comment characteristics, including further differentiation among non-threads, catalysts and responses, appears in Appendices B,C,D and E. As shown in Table 2, 5,742 comments were analyzed over the course of the study; a very small number (139) of the 5,881 comments deemed to be in robust discussion threads were eliminated per the coding methodology. The Young Turks YouTube Channel accounted the largest number of comments (both recorded and analyzed), while *Daily Kos* generated threads of the greatest average length.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Purposive Sample of Comments

Source	# Comments Recorded	Mean Thread Length	# Comments Analyzed	% of Total
Associated Press	2,825	2.45	711	25.2%
Daily Kos	3,982	3.90	1,929	48.4%
Los Angeles Times	1,155	2.03	379	32.8%
Young Turks	8,897	3.22	2,723	30.6%
TOTAL	**16,859**	**3.20**	**5,742**	**34.1%**

In focusing the exploratory power of the study, the partitioning scheme limited the number of comments analyzed from a range of 25.2% (Associated Press) to 48.4% (*Daily Kos*). The website of *The Los Angeles Times* was the least prolific generator of comments, measured either by total count or mean length of each thread.

Given some of the skepticism for online discussion platforms outlined in the previous chapter, it was somewhat surprising that overall measures of deliberative across the whole of the robust stream proved to be noticeably high. As shown in Table 3, approximately 81% of all comments drawn from the robust sample were of medium or high deliberative quality. In contrast, only 29% of the small sample drawn from the non-robust discussion stream were similarly classified; 71% of comments were found to be of low deliberative quality. These findings suggest that the underlying assumptions employed in developing the methodology to differentiate between robust and non-robust discussions were valid.

Table 3: Deliberative Quality (Robust Versus Non-Robust Threads)

Thread Type	Low (Quality = 1)	Medium (Quality=2)	High (Quality=3)	# Comments Analyzed
Robust (All)	1,073 (19%)	2,254 (39%)	2,415 (42%)	5,742
Non-Robust (Sample)	263 (71%)	82 (22%)	26 (7%)	371

Findings: Research Questions

RQ1

The first research question examines whether or not there are significant differences in levels of deliberative quality of users' comments based solely upon the affiliated source of political news (i.e. Associated Press, *Daily Kos*, *The Los Angeles Times* and Young Turks). In addition to considering the aggregate measure of

deliberative quality, differences within the individual components (i.e. civility, politeness, justification and complexity) were also investigated across the four news components. Table 4 depicts the chi-square contingency table of political news source and deliberative quality. All differences are found to be statistically significant and the null hypothesis – that there is no association between the deliberative quality of discussion and source of political news – is rejected. Particularly noteworthy in the given set of findings is the consistency with which comments are found to be of medium deliberative quality across the four news sources. From a low of 35% (*The Los Angeles Times*) to a high of 40% (Young Turks), the range of the medium band is strikingly narrow, particularly when considered in contrast to the low and high bands. *Daily Kos* is clearly skewed far more heavily towards a higher quality of deliberation, as is, to a lesser extent, Young Turks. In comparison, Associated Press and *Los Angeles Times* tilt noticeably towards the negative end of the deliberative quality spectrum. Though considered in greater detail

Table 4: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Source and Deliberative Quality)

Source	Low (Quality = 1)	Medium (Quality=2)	High (Quality=3)
Associated Press	234 (33%)	275 (39%)	202 (28%)
Daily Kos	178 (9%)	751 (39%)	1,000 (52%)
Los Angeles Times	116 (31%)	131 (35%)	132 (35%)
Young Turks	545 (20%)	1,097 (40%)	1,081 (40%)

χ^2 (6, N = 5,742) = 287.400, **p < 0.001**

under the auspices of RQ3, it is interesting to note that positively-oriented comment streams are those affiliated with news sources that began in cyberspace (they have no precursor in traditional print or broadcast domains). Similarly, negatively-oriented comment streams are those occurring within the discussion platforms of news sources that have their origins in channels that long predate the Internet.

Tables 5 through 8 depict the chi-square contingency tables for each of the four components of deliberative quality (civility, politeness, justification and complexity, respectively) across the four news sources. Though the differences in each of the four are

Table 5: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Source and Civility)

Source	Uncivil (Civility = 0)	Civil (Civility = 1)
Associated Press	128 (18%)	583 (82%)
Daily Kos	122 (6%)	1,807 (94%)
Los Angeles Times	75 (20%)	304 (80%)
Young Turks	253 (9%)	2,470 (91%)

χ^2 (3, N = 5,742) = 120.685, **p < 0.001**

Table 6: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Source and Politeness)

Source	Impolite (Politeness = 0)	Polite (Politeness = 1)
Associated Press	382 (54%)	329 (46%)
Daily Kos	492 (26%)	1,437 (74%)
Los Angeles Times	208 (55%)	171 (45%)
Young Turks	1,008 (37%)	1,715 (63%)

χ^2 (3, N = 5,742) = 247.477, **p < 0.001**

Table 7: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Source and Justification)

Source	Unjustified (Justification = 0)	Justified (Justification = 1)
Associated Press	390 (55%)	321 (45%)
Daily Kos	882 (46%)	1,047 (54%)
Los Angeles Times	195 (52%)	184 (48%)
Young Turks	1,437 (53%)	1,286 (47%)

χ^2 (3, N = 5,742) = 28.748, **p < 0.001**

Table 8: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Source and Complexity)

Source	Non-Complex (Complexity = 0)	Complex (Complexity = 1)
Associated Press	546 (77%)	165 (23%)
Daily Kos	1,163 (60%)	766 (40%)
Los Angeles Times	253 (67%)	126 (33%)
Young Turks	1,893 (70%)	830 (30%)

χ^2 (3, N = 5,742) = 78.060, **p < 0.001**

highly statistically significant, an examination of the individual components reveals that the variances of those differences are, in some cases, highly consistent, and, in others, quite divergent. Civility, for example, was dependably high across all four news sources (from a high of 94% for *Daily Kos* to a low of 80% for *The Los Angeles Times*). In contrast, measures of politeness varied widely across the four, with two clear clusters emerging: *Daily Kos* and Young Turks occupied a higher band of politeness (with a range of 63% to 74%), while *The Los Angeles Times* and Associated Press occupied a much lower band (with a range of 45% to 46%). In the case of *both* the civility and politeness measures, however, news sources native to the Internet faired consistently higher than those with origins in traditional media.

With respect to the justification measure, and as shown in Table 7, there was little difference across the four news sources and all were tightly clustered around the 50% mark. Though there is a much wider variability with respect to the complexity measure (from a high of 40% with *Daily Kos* to a low of 23% with Associated Press), all suffer from low levels of complexity within their respective comment streams. Complexity is the *only* variable for which fewer than one-half – and for three of the sources, fewer than one-third – of the comments linked to all news sources contain the requisite indicator affiliated with quality deliberation. If complexity is a key ingredient of healthy online deliberation, it is found far less often than not across the whole of the data examined.

RQ2

The second research question examines differences in deliberative quality of user comments based upon channel medium, the first of two dimensions differentiating the precipitating news sources. As described in the preceding chapters and depicted in

Figure 1, channel medium may be either multimedia/audiovisual (as in the case of the Associated Press and Young Turks YouTube channels) or print (a la *Daily Kos* or *The Los Angeles Times*). As revealed in Table 9, print-based news stories precipitated, with

Table 9: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Medium and Deliberative Quality)

News Medium	Low (Quality = 1)	Medium (Quality=2)	High (Quality=3)
Multimedia / Audiovisual	779 (23%)	1,372 (40%)	1,283 (37%)
Print	294 (13%)	882 (38%)	1,132 (49%)

χ^2 (2, N = 5,742) = 118.952, **p < 0.001**

statistical significance, higher quality comments but not by an overwhelmingly large margin. Both multimedia and print-based news sources yielded comments that tended to be of higher quality than not (the aggregate of medium- and high quality comments were 77% and 87%, respectively).

Subsequent chi-square contingency tables for each of the four components of deliberative quality are shown in Tables 10 through 13. With moderate to high

Table 10: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Medium and Civility)

News Medium	Uncivil (Civility = 0)	Civil (Civility = 1)
Multimedia / Audiovisual	381 (11%)	3,053 (89%)
Print	197 (9%)	2,111 (91%)

χ^2 (1, N = 5,742) = 9.988, **p < 0.01**

Table 11: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Medium and Politeness)

News Medium	Impolite (Politeness = 0)	Polite (Politeness = 1)
Multimedia / Audiovisual	1,390 (40%)	2,044 (60%)
Print	700 (30%)	1,608 (70%)

χ^2 (1, N = 5,742) = 61.406, **p < 0.001**

Table 12: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Medium and Justification)

News Medium	Unjustified (Justification = 0)	Justified (Justification = 1)
Multimedia / Audiovisual	1,827 (53%)	1,607 (47%)
Print	1,077 (47%)	1,231 (53%)

χ^2 (1, N = 5,742) = 26.614, **p < 0.001**

Table 13: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Medium and Complexity)

News Medium	Non-Complex (Complexity = 0)	Complex (Complexity = 1)
Multimedia / Audiovisual	2,439 (71%)	995 (29%)
Print	1,416 (61%)	892 (39%)

χ^2 (1, N = 5,742) = 58.539, **p < 0.001**

statistical significance with respect to each of the four comparisons, we can say conclusively that news conveyed through the print medium spawned comments that were of higher deliberative quality relative to each of the four measures. These differences were larger for the variables of politeness and complexity (print-based news sources yielded comments that were, in each case, 10% more polite and complex than those precipitated by multimedia/audiovisual-based sources) and nearly nil for the variable of civility (91% versus 89%).

RQ3

The third research question examines differences in deliberative quality of user comments based upon the second of two dimensions differentiating the precipitating news sources: news channel constitution. As shown in Figure 1, the grouping variable of news channel constitution can take on one of two attributes: web original (i.e. native to the Internet) or traditional (i.e. non-native to the Internet). On the surface, the findings affiliated with RQ3 are very similar to those of RQ2. Comments of high or medium

deliberative quality are, with a high degree of statistical significance, more frequent in platforms hosted by web-original news sources than traditional ones (85% versus 68%, respectively; see Table 14). The same is true with respect to each of the individual components of deliberative quality: civility (92% versus 81%; see Table 15), politeness (68% versus 46%; see Table 16) and complexity (34% versus 27%; see Table 18) are noticeably higher for web-original news sources than traditional ones. As is the case elsewhere, differences between the two dimensions with respect to the component of justification are less obvious and have more modest statistical significance (see Table 17).

Table 14: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Constitution and Deliberative Quality)

News Constitution	Low (Quality = 1)	Medium (Quality=2)	High (Quality=3)
Internet-Native	723 (15%)	1,848 (40%)	2,081 (45%)
Traditional	350 (32%)	406 (37%)	334 (31%)

χ^2 (2, N = 5,742) = 172.798, **p < 0.001**

Table 15: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Constitution and Civility)

News Constitution	Uncivil (Civility = 0)	Civil (Civility = 1)
Internet-Native	375 (8%)	4,277 (92%)
Traditional	203 (19%)	8887 (81%)

χ^2 (1, N = 5,742) = 108.836, **p < 0.001**

Table 16: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Constitution and Politeness)

News Constitution	Impolite (Politeness = 0)	Polite (Politeness = 1)
Internet-Native	1,500 (32%)	3,152 (68%)
Traditional	590 (54%)	500 (46%)

χ^2 (1, N = 5,742) = 182.690, **p < 0.001**

Table 17: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Constitution and Justification)

News Constitution	Unjustified (Justification = 0)	Justified (Justification = 1)
Internet-Native	2,319 (50%)	2,333 (50%)
Traditional	585 (54%)	505 (46%)

χ^2 (1, N = 5,742) = 5.156, **p < 0.05**

Table 18: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Constitution and Complexity)

News Constitution	Non-Complex (Complexity = 0)	Complex (Complexity = 1)
Internet-Native	3,056 (66%)	1,596 (34%)
Traditional	799 (73%)	291 (27%)

χ^2 (1, N = 5,742) = 23.183, **p < 0.001**

RQ4

The fourth and fifth research questions focus on differences in the deliberative quality of comments relative to generalizable differences in the *content* of the news stories and segments themselves (see Figure 2). Specifically, RQ4 examines whether or not there are statistically significant variations in user comments based upon the geographic focus of the political news stories (understood to be predominantly focused on either domestic affairs or international issues). In contrast to prior results and as shown in Table 19, there appears to be no statistically significant difference in the

Table 19: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Geographic Focus and Deliberative Quality)

Geographic Focus	Low (Quality = 1)	Medium (Quality=2)	High (Quality=3)
Domestic	884 (19%)	1,879 (40%)	1,967 (41%)
International	189 (19%)	375 (37%)	448 (44%)

χ^2 (2, N = 5,742) = 2.941, p = 0.230

deliberative quality of comments based upon the geographic focus of the affiliated political news content. As revealed in Tables 20 through 23, the same can be said for differences in all four of the components of deliberative quality.

Table 20: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Geographic Focus and Civility)

Geographic Focus	Uncivil (Civility = 0)	Civil (Civility = 1)
Domestic	469 (10%)	4,261 (90%)
International	109 (11%)	903 (89%)

χ^2 (1, N = 5,742) = 0.674, p = 0.412

Table 21: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Geographic Focus and Politeness)

Geographic Focus	Impolite (Politeness = 0)	Polite (Politeness = 1)
Domestic	1,729 (37%)	3,001 (63%)
International	361 (36%)	651 (64%)

χ^2 (1, N = 5,742) = 0.280, p = 0.597

Table 22: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Geographic Focus and Justification)

Geographic Focus	Unjustified (Justification = 0)	Justified (Justification = 1)
Domestic	2,414 (51%)	2,316 (49%)
International	490 (48%)	522 (52%)

χ^2 (1, N = 5,742) = 2.284, p=0.131

Table 23: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Geographic Focus and Complexity)

Geographic Focus	Non-Complex (Complexity = 0)	Complex (Complexity = 1)
Domestic	3,171 (67%)	1,559 (33%)
International	684 (68%)	328 (32%)

χ^2 (3, N = 5,742) = 0.114, p = 0.736

Because the grouping variable of geographic focus cuts across the content of all four news sources, it is possible to run the more powerful Mantel-Haenszel analysis and examine the subsequent chi-square contingency tables for each of the components of deliberative quality while controlling for political news source (see Tables 24 through 27). Though a large sample of comments was harvested to allow for this additional level of granularity of analysis, it becomes immediately evident that the number of comments

Table 24: Results of Mantel-Haenszel Analysis (Geographic Focus and Civility Controlling for Political News Source)

Source	Geographic Focus	Uncivil (Civility = 0)	Civil (Civility = 1)
Associated Press	Domestic	94 (20%)	476 (80%)
	International	34 (24%)	107 (76%)
Daily Kos	Domestic	114 (6%)	1,682 (94%)
	International	8 (6%)	125 (94%)
Los Angeles Times	Domestic	70 (19%)	298 (81%)
	International	5 (45%)	6 (55%)
Young Turks	Domestic	191 (10%)	1,805 (90%)
	International	62 (9%)	665 (91%)

χ^2 (1, N = 5,742) = 0.351, p = 0.514

Table 25: Results of Mantel-Haenszel Analysis (Geographic Focus and Politeness Controlling for Political News Source)

Source	Geographic Focus	Impolite (Politeness = 0)	Polite (Politeness = 1)
Associated Press	Domestic	309 (54%)	261 (46%)
	International	73 (51%)	68 (49%)
Daily Kos	Domestic	460 (26%)	1,336 (74%)
	International	32 (24%)	101 (76%)
Los Angeles Times	Domestic	203 (55%)	165 (45%)
	International	5 (45%)	6 (55%)
Young Turks	Domestic	757 (37%)	1,239 (63%)
	International	251 (35%)	476 (65%)

χ^2 (1, N = 5,742) = 3.049, p = 0.081

affiliated with internationally-focused news stories from *The Los Angeles Times* (n=11) is insufficient to extract any reasonably conclusive findings. Prefaced with this important limitation, however, it is clear that neither civility nor politeness vary in a statistically significant way with respect to geographic focus while controlling for the remaining three political news sources. At the same time, there is insufficient statistical significance to suggest that similar variations within the complexity indicator, though seemingly apparent, are not by chance alone. It is only in the variable of justification that we see

Table 26: Results of Mantel-Haenszel Analysis (Geographic Focus and Justification Controlling for Political News Source)

Source	Geographic Focus	Unjustified (Justification = 0)	Justified (Justification = 1)
Associated Press	Domestic	300 (53%)	270 (47%)
	International	90 (64%)	51 (34%)
Daily Kos	Domestic	818 (46%)	978 (54%)
	International	64 (48%)	69 (52%)
Los Angeles Times	Domestic	186 (51%)	182 (49%)
	International	9 (82%)	2 (18%)
Young Turks	Domestic	1,110 (56%)	886 (44%)
	International	327 (45%)	400 (55%)

χ^2 (1, N = 5,742) = 7.034, **p < 0.01**

Table 27: Results of Mantel-Haenszel Analysis (Geographic Focus and Complexity Controlling for Political News Source)

Source	Geographic Focus	Non-Complex (Complexity = 0)	Complex (Complexity = 1)
Associated Press	Domestic	426 (75%)	144 (25%)
	International	120 (85%)	21 (15%)
Daily Kos	Domestic	1078 (60%)	718 (40%)
	International	85 (64%)	48 (36%)
Los Angeles Times	Domestic	247 (67%)	121 (33%)
	International	6 (55%)	5 (45%)
Young Turks	Domestic	1,420 (71%)	576 (29%)
	International	473 (65%)	254 (35%)

χ^2 (1, N = 5,742) = 1.690, p = 0.194

any substantive differences based upon geographic focus of news content while controlling for news source. Of particular note, the Young Turks YouTube Channel generated comments that were significantly more justified for international-focused segments than domestic ones. Interestingly, the AP YouTube Channel saw the opposite result as its comments were significantly more justified for domestically-focused segments than domestic. That there can be this kind of acute variability within a single commenting platform (YouTube) is worthy of additional consideration and scrutiny.

RQ5

Similar to the fourth research question, the fifth examines variability in the deliberative quality of comments relative to the topical focus of the precipitating news content. In this case, topical focus may be either campaigning-specific or governing-specific (a more thorough description of the differentiation can be found in Chapter 3 and is summarized in Table 2). As shown in Table 28, differences in deliberative quality based upon topical focus are slight though of statistical significance. In addition, per Table 29, there is almost no variance in the component characteristic of civility between campaigning-focused and governing-focused stories and segments (these tiny differences are statistically significant). In contrast, Tables 30 through 32 reveal modest but

Table 28: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Topical Focus and Deliberative Quality)

Topical Focus	Low (Quality = 1)	Medium (Quality=2)	High (Quality=3)
Campaigning	236 (22%)	420 (40%)	408 (38%)
Governing	837 (18%)	1,834 (39%)	2007 (43%)

χ^2 (2, N = 5,742) = 12.826, **p < 0.01**

statistically-significant differences with respect to politeness (60% of comments are polite for campaigning-focused content versus 65% for governing-focused content), justification (45% versus 50%, respectively) and justification (45% versus 50%, respectively). In each case, those comments generated by governing-focused stories and segments possess more of the characteristics of higher deliberative quality.

Table 29: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Topical Focus and Civility)

Topical Focus	Uncivil (Civility = 0)	Civil (Civility = 1)
Campaigning	85 (8%)	979 (92%)
Governing	493 (10%)	4,185 (90%)

χ^2 (1, N = 5,742) = 6.226, **p < 0.05**

Table 30: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Topical Focus and Politeness)

Topical Focus	Impolite (Politeness = 0)	Polite (Politeness = 1)
Campaigning	429 (40%)	635 (60%)
Governing	1,661 (35%)	3,017 (65%)

χ^2 (1, N = 5,742) = 8.674, **p < 0.01**

Table 31: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Topical Focus and Justification)

Topical Focus	Unjustified (Justification = 0)	Justified (Justification = 1)
Campaigning	581 (55%)	483 (45%)
Governing	2,323 (50%)	2,355 (50%)

χ^2 (1, N = 5,742) = 8.488, **p < 0.01**

Table 32: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Topical Focus and Complexity)

Topical Focus	Non-Complex (Complexity = 0)	Complex (Complexity = 1)
Campaigning	766 (72%)	298 (28%)
Governing	3,089 (66%)	1,589 (34%)

χ^2 (1, N = 5,742) = 13.956, **p < 0.001**

As was possible for RQ4, utilization of the Mantel-Haenszel analysis offers deeper insights into differences in the deliberative quality of comments based upon the topical focus of news content while controlling for news source. For the Associated Press and *The Los Angeles Times* (both traditional in terms of the grouping variable of news constitution), measures of civility were noticeably and statistically significantly higher for comments affiliated with stories focused on campaigning than governing (see Table 33). In contrast, differences of politeness were starkest within the *Daily Kos*; 75%

Table 33: Results of Mantel-Haenszel Analysis (Topical Focus and Civility Controlling for Political News Source)

Source	Topical Focus	Uncivil (Civility = 0)	Civil (Civility = 1)
Associated Press	Campaigning	0 (0%)	32 (100%)
	Governing	128 (19%)	551 (81%)
Daily Kos	Campaigning	17 (8%)	184 (92%)
	Governing	105 (6%)	1,623 (94%)
Los Angeles Times	Campaigning	22 (16%)	112 (84%)
	Governing	53 (22%)	192 (78%)
Young Turks	Campaigning	46 (7%)	651 (93%)
	Governing	207 (10%)	1,819 (90%)

χ^2 (1, N = 5,742) = 8.089, **p < 0.01**

Table 34: Results of Mantel-Haenszel Analysis (Topical Focus and Politeness Controlling for Political News Source)

Source	Topical Focus	Impolite (Politeness = 0)	Polite (Politeness = 1)
Associated Press	Campaigning	16 (50%)	16 (50%)
	Governing	366 (54%)	313 (46%)
Daily Kos	Campaigning	68 (34%)	133 (66%)
	Governing	424 (25%)	1,304 (75%)
Los Angeles Times	Campaigning	71 (53%)	63 (47%)
	Governing	137 (56%)	108 (44%)
Young Turks	Campaigning	274 (39%)	423 (61%)
	Governing	734 (36%)	1,292 (64%)

χ^2 (1, N = 5,742) = 4.403, **p < 0.05**

of comments were found to be polite for governing-focused stories versus 66% for campaigning-focused stories (see Table 34). Measures of justification were significantly higher in the Associated Press, *Daily Kos* and *The Los Angeles Times* for governing-focused stories and segments versus those that were campaign-focused; there was no perceivable difference for Young Turks (see Table 35). In addition, higher levels of complexity were significantly skewed towards governing-focused content across all of the news sources (see Table 36).

Table 35: Results of Mantel-Haenszel Analysis (Topical Focus and Justification Controlling for Political News Source)

Source	Topical Focus	Unjustified (Justification = 0)	Justified (Justification = 1)
Associated Press	Campaigning	21 (66%)	11 (34%)
	Governing	369 (54%)	310 (46%)
Daily Kos	Campaigning	111 (55%)	90 (45%)
	Governing	771 (45%)	957 (55%)
Los Angeles Times	Campaigning	80 (60%)	54 (40%)
	Governing	115 (47%)	130 (53%)
Young Turks	Campaigning	368 (53%)	328 (47%)
	Governing	1,068 (53%)	958 (47%)

χ^2 (1, N = 5,742) = 5.779, **$p < 0.05$**

Table 36: Results of Mantel-Haenszel Analysis (Topical Focus and Complexity Controlling for Political News Source)

Source	Topical Focus	Non-Complex (Complexity = 0)	Complex (Complexity = 1)
Associated Press	Campaigning	31 (97%)	1 (3%)
	Governing	515 (76%)	164 (24%)
Daily Kos	Campaigning	137 (68%)	64 (32%)
	Governing	1,026 (59%)	702 (41%)
Los Angeles Times	Campaigning	91 (68%)	43 (32%)
	Governing	162 (66%)	83 (34%)
Young Turks	Campaigning	507 (73%)	190 (27%)
	Governing	1,386 (68%)	640 (32%)

χ^2 (1, N = 5,742) = 11.770, **$p < 0.001$**

Supplementary Analysis

Identifying the Most Robust Discussion Threads By News Source

Utilization of the given procedure to identify the thread of highest aggregate deliberative quality for each of the four precipitating news sources yielded the selection described in Table 37. Given previous findings, it is not surprising to learn that the leading threads on *Daily Kos* and Young Turks were noticeably longer than those on *The Los Angeles Times* or Associate Press. Similarly expected was the fact that the leading

Table 37: Leading Discussion Threads For Each News Source

		Channel Constitution	
		Web Original	*Traditional*
Channel Medium	*Print*	**Daily Kos** Leading Thread: # of Comments: 121 Aggregate Quality: 355 Average Quality: 2.93 Precipitating Article: "So-called 'Right to Work' and the assault on the middle class"	**Los Angeles Times** Leading Thread: # of Comments: 6 Aggregate Quality: 17 Average Quality: 2.83 Precipitating Article: "State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley resigns"
	Multimedia	**Young Turks** Leading Thread: # of Comments: 48 Aggregate Quality: 121 Average Quality: 2.52 Precipitating Segment: "Def. Secretary Gates: Crazy Wars in Iraq, Afghanistan"	**Associated Press** Leading Thread: # of Comments: 33 Aggregate Quality: 69 Average Quality: 2.09 Precipitating Segment: "Raw Video: House Abortion Debate Gets Personal"

threads precipitated by news in the medium of print had comments of higher average deliberative quality than those contained within threads affiliated with multimedia-based news.

The supplementary analysis requires a deep reading of each of the four leading threads and the active scanning for readily apparent patterns that may not otherwise be discernable from the results of employing the broader content analysis coding methodology alone. Though this secondary analysis admittedly is limited as it investigates but a single thread for each news source, what emerges across the four is highly significant both in terms of clarity and consistency: Each thread reflects a definitive (and remarkably contained) style of deliberation that is relatively easy to describe, and the overarching tone of each of these styles appears to be highly associated with that of the precipitating stories and segments themselves. While potential reasons for these styles and correlations will be discussed in Chapter 5, it is first necessary to review the general patterns.

Daily Kos: Bounded and Cerebral

The *Daily Kos* article – "So-called 'Right to Work' and the assault on the middle class" – could hardly be described as, nor would there any expectation of it being, an objective piece based solely upon a resuscitation of facts; even the headline of the piece suggests its overt subjectivity. In fact, large portions of the article take the form of a syllogism intended to build a cogent argument. Consider the following passage, annotated with components of the logical construct:

> (*Major Premise*) In fact, RtW laws actually represent the government interfering in what employers can do, by preventing employers and unions from agreeing to "union security" clauses. A union security clause says that if the union represents you, you have to pay your share of the costs they incur. (*Minor Premise)* So what

> banning that type of agreements means is that if someone gets a job in a unionized workplace, the union has to represent them, but they have no responsibility to the union. They get the wages and benefits negotiated, however improved those may be (union members earn, on average, 28% more than non-members), and don't contribute to the costs of negotiating. If they're fired illegally, the union represents them for free, no matter how much staff time and resources go into defending them. And if they feel like the union didn't do well enough representing them for free, they can sue. (*Conclusion)* You can see where this goes. People enter as freeloaders, happy to have improved wages and benefits and help when they have a problem with the boss, and happy to let someone else pay for it. But that freeloading weakens the union, and in the end, working conditions and pay are driven down for everyone: RtW states have an average wage of $5,500 lower than other states (Clawson, 2011; italics added).

By their very nature, syllogisms are a construct of deductive reasoning that employ the steady application of reduction until truth becomes apparent. Employing this kind of argumentative tool lessens the likelihood for alternative conclusions, and it is intriguing that both the form and the function of the deliberative exchange that follows are both overtly rational and also especially narrow – and narrowing – in focus. Note the following sequence of comments (online usernames follow in italics):

- Public unions and private unions are entirely different things. Private unions negotiate with a private company; the rest of us are not involved. If they succeed, the company and union prosper. If not, they fail. Public unions negotiate with the public in general. Public employees being paid more mean private employees being paid less due to paying higher taxes. (*Sparhawk*)

- Public unions negotiate with the employer, just as private unions do. Public employees being paid more can mean a wide variety of things. In some cases, it means actually having better employees who do a better job with a stronger commitment to it. Just because a union negotiates in support of public employees does not mean it operates against the public's best interests. (*Julie Waters*)

- Thank you, Julie. As usual, it's always assumed public employees make a lot more than private employees. It's not always the case. (*daphnepf*)

- It's not the case at all. It depends on the job and the situation. Some do quite well, but it's easy to make things look worse than they are buy quoting top-level salaries (*Julie Waters*)

- It's frequently not the case as several studies have shown. There are big differences depending on educational level. Those with the least education tend to do somewhat better as public employees than as private employees. Those with more education tend to do worse. (*Meteor Blades*)

- I agree, public sector workers' pay and benefits are based upon the averaging of wages earned in the private sector; public sector unions (police, firefighters, teachers, et al.) have become the new enemies in American politics. It is strange to find individuals willing to blame Veterans Affairs nurses bringing in $36K/year that they need a pay cut because their meager take home pay is destroying the livelihood of all other Americans… (*Epsilon*)

- The only time where it is the case is in areas where the local government is hiring the most skilled workers, as in rural areas. Then, the most educated and skilled workers are doing government IT, teaching, policing, lawyering, etc. They may have a higher wage but it still is lower usually than they would make in a more urban area. (*elfling*)

- The problem is hiking taxes on poor/middle class to pay for service union wage hikes. Why can't the service unions collectively call on a wealth tax to fulfill obligations made to them? The Dems are in trouble to the extent that they ask the private sector working and middle-class, which has seen stagnant wages for the last decade, to "suck it up" by shouldering a higher tax burden. And regrettably, some Dem governors are doing just that. (*PatriciaVa*)

- True and though not really the issue it's an effective way to rile the middle class who is paying the lion's share of the taxes. The Democrats need to do two things – link tax hikes for the highest earners with collective bargaining agreements and be specific about expectations for labor, public and private. We need to define expectations for wages, unemployment, health care and pensions and strive for national standard. Even if the super rich start to pay their fair share, what is it and what's it for? Getting these answers will diffuse the ageless issues used by the parties that impede getting closure. *(kck*)

As civil and polite as it is cerebral and abstract, this thread (the longest and of highest aggregate quality in the whole of the study) rarely drifts beyond the boundaries of the logical form contained within the precipitating article. Equally noteworthy, the self-selected members of the community police themselves (for better or worse) and rarely allow for a wider field of perspectives. When the divergence of viewpoints become too great, an offsetting, converging force will often try to intervene and reign in the

discussion back to a more reasonably norm for the community. Consider the following exchange:

- I look around my apartment and see a flat panel tv, glasses, chairs, a stereo, etc. All of that stuff was created by the private sector. The police just help make sure that stuff isn't stolen or broken. In exchange for that service, I give up a stereo I might have otherwise had. The more expensive the police are, the less stuff I have for my own consumption. Education is a little different because it is an investment (pay now, gain later). But police and fire services are a total dead loss – necessary, I agree, but they don't make anything useful and draw off the stuff that is made (*Sparhawk*)

- Production isn't possible without public services. Without public services, there will be no investment and no production. Take a look around at the world at places where the government is unable to enforce property rights, where there are no universally enforced laws, where education and security are private goods to be paid for by those than can afford them. They draw little investment, produce little, and everyone is worse off as a result. (*WellstoneDem*)

- Both of you are making valid points. The two real and complicated questions are: 1. When does the number of dollars paid to the public employee in total compensation exceed the value of the service provided? At that point, if not before, one should certainly be in favor of reducing the compensation of the public employee. 2. Could one find an equally qualified individual for less money? At that point, one can legitimately argue that the compensation should be reduced. (*Justanothernyer*)

Beyond those who help keep the core arguments of the discussion intact, other members of the online community take it upon themselves to expose others who do not fall within the narrow band of the prevailing political persuasion (in this case, liberal progressivism), either to ensure that near-outliers are widely known or to suggest to far-outliers that their views are not welcomed. Examples include:

- She's a centrist. Her signature is sort of a broad hint in this area. And minus the apparent rationalizations, all centrism is about using the power of the government to facilitate upward transfer of wealth. (*alizard*)

- But outside Wall Street, the Richistani, and the political class they fund and the media they own, sightings of real centrists in the wild are rare. For the

obvious reason, all that's in it for the rest of us in centrism is lots and lots of trouble. (*sturunner*)

- Your anti-worker right wing bullshit gets old. Well paid workers contribute more to the economy no matter the source of their income. Libertarians are clueless, I swear. The concepts of society and the common good completely escape you, don't they? (*happy camper*)

- Shhhh… or this Ayn Rand reading guy who is calculating everyone's net worth to society is going to suggest that our children go out and get jobs. I can hear it already: Child Labor Laws – bah humbug. (*Puddytat*)

Los Angeles Times: Competing Attributions

In stark contrast to blog-style articles originating from *Daily Kos*, stories posted on the website of *The Los Angeles Times* typically adhere to the same journalistic standards as political news that are physically printed in nearly any mainstream, American newspaper. If any news analysis is performed, it is merely to aid the reader in connecting the often scattered dots of a more complex news reality and not to offer political judgment. Nowhere in the selected precipitating news story from *The Los Angeles Times* is an opinion offered. Instead, the article takes the form of a well ordered, just-the-facts recounting (in this particular case, of why a prominent State Department spokesperson abruptly resigned), complete with the requisite nut graph and string of attributed details. Consider the first four paragraphs (style annotations appear in italics):

> (*Nut Graph)* The State Department's top spokesperson resigned Sunday, three days after criticizing the Pentagon for its treatment of a soldier imprisoned on charges of leaking U.S. government documents posted on the WikiLeaks website. (*Attributed Detail*) P.J. Crowley, the assistant secretary of State for public affairs, told a group at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on Thrusdayt that the Pentagon's treatment of Pfc. Bradley Manning was "ridiculous and counterproductive." His comments were made public by a blogger who attended the session. (*Attributed Detail*) Manning was forced to sleep naked for several days under military rules intended to keep maximum-security prisoners who may be suicidal from injuring themselves. Manning's lawyers say he also has been made to stand at attention naked, and there was no justification for his treatment in custody. (*Attributed Detail*) President Obama defended the Pentagon at a news

> conference Friday, when ABC reporter Jake Tapper pressed him about Crowley's comments. Obama said he had been assured that Manning's treatment was "appropriate and was meeting our standards." (Richter, 2011)

Though comments posted on the website of *The Los Angeles Times* are not nearly as voluminous as they are elsewhere, the leading thread reveals a deliberative style that is, once again, noticeably consistent and perhaps taking its queue from the form of the precipitating news story. In this case, the whole of the deliberative exchange exudes an overarching sense of certainty based upon two very distinct kinds of attributions: righteousness, or the direct appeal to higher-level (if abstract) virtues of morality and humanity; or the seeming concreteness of lived experienced. In the rather basic conservative-versus-liberal argument that ensues, one camp exclusively utilizes one beacon of certainty while the other is steadfast in tapping into the other. Though the comments generally possess civility, politeness, and in several cases justification (thus yielding higher measures of deliberative quality), it is difficult to imagine that any common ground or co-created political meaning could emerge from the deliberations. Nowhere in the exchange is there even a whiff of doubt as to the certainty of each user's respective argument, not unlike the style of the news story itself:

- They made him stand at attention? Poor dear. My drill instructors at Parris Island would have been devastated for the unhappy little guy. Manning is, or was supposed to be, a soldier. We have an all-volunteer military. Nobody asked him to enlist. Soldiers occasionally stand at attention. And as for requiring him to sleep without his footie jammies, well… He's confined to a military brig, not at Club Fed. Here's a hint for Bradley: "Actions have consequences." (*Kinnison*)

- Actions have consequences? Here's one… the belief that information on ongoing wars that cost human lives everyday needed to be freely available. Here is Mr. Crowley who lost a 3 decade long career for saying what he believed in the land of the free. And both could have simply kept quiet. If they were Wall Street CEOs throwing away money and lives, that would have been ok, if there were warmongering politicians sending young soldiers to

fake wars, that would have been ok. Here a hint for Bradley and others – "Free thought has consequences." (*neilm101*)

- From a retired member of the Armed Forces: It may be the land of the free… but you give up certain rights when you join the military, the police, the intelligence services, or the Department of State. This is the issue: You can't simply go blabbing your mouth because you feel like it. Manning or Crowley. (*Salmon)*

- "I was just following orders" – soldier of the 3rd Reich (*mr. gittes*)

- These comments show the mentality of the conservative mind. Evil and perverse. It's part of their DNA. (*senior*)

Young Turks: Reverence for the Cult of Personality

Unlike the other three sources of political news, the Young Turks YouTube is the only one with reporting emanating from a single individual – in this case, the channel's creator and longtime host, Cenk Uygur. As is the style of so many broadcasted talk show hosts, bloggers, and so-called political "commentators" (i.e. pundits), Uygur typically establishes a provocative but also strong and clear position early on in his segment (indeed, the leading thread is affiliated with a segment that indirectly identifies Uygur's position in its very title – "Def. Secretary Gates: Crazy Wars in Iraq, Afghanistan") and then incessantly reinforces his point with a rapid-fire succession of facts (volleyed in a staccato style), leading questions, unchallenged assumptions and quick conclusions. The style indicators (shown in italics) are clearly evident in the following section of his report:

> (*Clear and Provocative Position)* In terms of Afghanistan, we're still there and not withdrawing. (*Leading Question*) So, if our Defense Secretary thinks this is such a terrible idea, why do we continue to stay there? (*Clear and Provocative Position – Continued*) It's a very fair question. (*Fact #1)* And, by the way, the DNC just passed a resolution saying that Obama needs to do a speedy withdrawal from Afghanistan; so the Democrats agree. (*Fact #2)* And, oh by the way, ABC News did a poll two months ago saying 60% of Americans think it was the wrong idea to go into Afghanistan. (*Unchallenged Assumption*) My guess is that if you

> did a poll – and I've seen others polls – that if you asked should we leave as soon as possible the percentage would be even higher and past 70%. (*Quick Conclusion*) So, if we all agree, let's go… let's get out of there. (Uygur, 2011a).

Not surprisingly, the comment that then spawns the leading thread is also both provocative and clear in establishing its position:

- Iraq sure, it was a big mistake… But don't tell me for a second that we shouldn't have gone into Afghanistan. That's bullshit. We had to go over there and fuck those bitches up. (*MrHav1k)*

The comment immediately following the catalyzing post is, in turn, very much a leading question that triggers its own bombardment of facts:

- All wars are bullshit. Name one war that was done, solely chosen by the people, for the people. Instead all ward are started by special interest groups. Normal people just want to have some land and house, a family, a little respect and getting old peacefully. (*georgemargaris*)

- What about World War 2? (*theRekcabofD*)

- Napoleonic Wars? (*sulmagnificent*)

- Ummm… the American Revolution? (*darkraider47*)

- Just for the sake of being a douche, I'm pretty sure the old Spartans eventually went to war because they all wanted to show everyone how awesome they were at killing. (*AsifIcarebear3*)

- World War I, many Americans at the time, wanted to remain isolated from the Great War in Europe. (*EvilFingers*)

- WW2. If we hadn't fought that this entire world would be controlled by a racist totalitarian state with only "Aryans" as the last ones living.

- The Libyan revolt? (*bersaba*)

- French revolution, American revolution, etc… the list just goes on and on. (*redryan2000*)

- Defensive wars… can't blame the US for WWII. Can't blame the French for WWI. Wars of aggression, more accurately, are bullshit, which is why they are technically outlawed under international law. (*Redfingers*)

- Name one war? Okay. First one that comes to mind is the Yellow Turban Rebellion from 184-205 against Emperor Ling. (*falconfira*)

- Defeating Hitler was in the best interest of every human on the planet. (*soundslave*)

Though many contribute to this thread in a manner that suggests a relatively high level of deliberative quality (based upon the given methodology), there is very little being accomplished in the way of arriving at a more vibrant sense of understanding or co-created meaning. The thread barely takes the form of a discussion at all and is merely an accumulation of rather disjointed pseudo-facts; lost is any specific attention paid to debating the efficacy of recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. As the amassing of unrelated facts continues to snowball, no members of the community step in to attempt to reign in the conversation and refocus it with a renewed sense of purpose, let alone endeavor to synthesize the discussion into any kind of cogent conclusion. While they may behave with civility and politeness, employ justification, and express modest levels of complexity in their expression, members of the community very rarely attempt to moderate or conclude. Given that Uygur's popularity with his viewers arguably borders on that of a cult of personality (not unlike other single-voice purveyors of political news content), members of the community may not see it as their place to do so; those functions are reserved for the community's leader (Uygur), who, noticeably, never directly engages with posters.

Associated Press: Accidental Crusader

The final segment, drawn from the YouTube Channel of the Associated Press, not only covers a highly politically charged topic (abortion) but also does so without the presence of any journalist, commentator or moderator at all. The three minutes of so-

called raw video (the segment is entitled, "Raw Video: House Abortion Debate Gets Personal") is of a *single* – if graphic – exchange between two members of Congress: one is male, likely pro-life, and identified as being a Republican from New Jersey; the other is a female, seemingly pro-choice, and introduced as a being a Democrat from California. The exchange, though brief, has nothing in the way of lead-up or post hoc assessment; it is merely the audiovisual record of one small block of a lengthier floor debate:

> (*Male, Republican, New Jersey*) I am talking about the scandal of these unborn children and calling it choice. There is nothing, whatsoever, benign or caring or generous or just or compassionate or nurturing about abortion. Earlier one of our colleagues called abortion "healthy" for the child. Abortion dismembers children, piece to piece… in late-term abortions, the doctors goes in with a pair of forceps and literally hacks that baby to death… it is not healthy for children and it is not healthy for women either. (*Female, Democrat,* California) I had planned to speak about something else but the gentleman from New Jersey has just put my stomach in knots. I am one of those women he spoke about just now. I had a procedure at 17 weeks pregnant with a child. That procedure you just talked about was a procedure I endured. I lost a baby, but for you to stand on this floor and to suggest as you have that somehow this is a procedure that is either welcomed or done cavalierly or done without any thought is preposterous. To think that we are here tonight, debating this issue, when the American people are scratching their heads and wondering, what does this have to do with me getting a job? (Associated Press, 2011)

If the leading thread extracted from the Young Turks discussion board lacked a definitive contributor who was attempting to coalesce or steer the conversation, it is safe to say that the same cannot be said for the Associated Press' top thread. As shown in the following exchange, and then repeated again and again throughout the thread (not shown), the user *Viracocha711* takes it upon herself/himself to counter nearly every pro-life-leaning entry made on the board:

- Abortion should be up to the carrying woman. No one else. (*Gahagafaga*)
- Not at all you murdering son of a bitch. (*wefanworld*)
- Seriously, grow up! (*Viracocha711*)

- I just can't come up with a good reason to allow anyone (even the mother) to kill a baby or fetus. I don't claim to be right. I just can't think of one good reason. (*fermos11111*)

- Are you truly that ignorant? What about a 13yr old girl who has been repeatedly raped by her stepfather? Or a mother who will die if she continues on with a pregnancy? Or a 30yr old woman was brutally raped. YOUR COMMENT SICKENS ME! (*Viracocha711*)

- She obviously had an abortion and is trying to make herself feel better by justifying killing babies… did I hit the nail on the head or what? (*fermos11111*)

- Who had an abortion and is trying to make themselves feel better? Abortion is a woman's right! It is her body! END OF STORY. If we force women to do things then that sets the stage to force anyone to do whatever the governments says when it comes to one's body. We are a SECULAR nation and everyone has the right to govern their own bodies. Folks just need to mind their own business! It's that simple! (*Viracocha711*)

Though almost none of her/his adversaries offer counterstatements to the given retorts (even though the majority do continue to contribute in other threads affiliated with the same segment), *Viracocha711* should not be considered a so-called "Internet troll," the popular term given to a person who attempts to wreak havoc within online discussion boards by posting inflammatory and often topically unrelated messages so as to upset the ordinary flow of communication. Instead, the user's online persona is more depicted as that of an accidental crusader, a person who clearly operates with a heavy sense of righteousness and who somehow must fulfill the duty of speaking out but would otherwise like to see the very argument itself subside. In this manner, and as illustrated on the final comment shown above, *Viracocha711*'s responses often blend a supercharged, emotional expression with a conclusion of utter simplicity – "… folks just need to mind their own business." In this way, his/her style is not unlike that of the Democratic House Member, who, after revealing something highly personal, reduces the

magnitude of the issue by saying, "To think that we are here tonight… when the American people… are wondering, what does this have to do with me getting a job?"

Interestingly, a brief (and admittedly non-scientific) scan of *Viracocha711* throughout cyberspace reveals an approach to commentary that is hardly accidental. A Google search of this unusual term yields approximately 6,400 unique results, and it is relatively easy to determine that the user is actually an American male in his mid-40s who works as a computer engineer and lives in suburban Atlanta, Georgia. Clearly spending copious amounts of time in dozens (if not hundreds) of online communities, *Viracocha711*'s modus operandi is to capitalize upon politically charged moments (always originating with the words or actions of a prominent political figure(s)) by employing them as an invitation to defend – or perhaps more accurately, to assert – his political views within a broader community. Not surprisingly, there can be no swaying the opinions of such an unlikely crusader: a moment of (distant and detached) political controversy provides him the requisite agency to defend, just as his innate righteousness anchor his beliefs to a bedrock of certainty.

Conclusion and Summary of Findings

In their most basic form, these findings support a simple but profound conclusion: there are powerful, overarching differences in the kinds of Internet-based conversations happening across all of the news platforms investigated. Essential to a deeper understanding of the potential and threat they possess vis-à-vis democratic discourse – let alone the proliferation of reforms to strengthen what works well and mitigate against what does not – is the understanding that such spaces should not be considered myopically. Even when taking care to recognize the heterogeneity of users, critics of

online discussions too often leap to blaming what they see as a singular platform of communication that precipitates a uniform result. As but one recent (and, at the time, landmark) high-profile example, the editors of *Popular Science* in 2013 made the decision to eliminate online comments entirely claiming that "trolls and spambots" had diminished their ability to make good on the magazine's "141-year commitment of fostering lively, intellectual debate and spreading the word of science far and wide" (LaBarre, 2013). In an online explanation to readers, the site's content director argued:

> Comments can be bad for science. That's why… we're shutting them off… That is not to suggest that we are the only website in the world that attracts vexing commenters. Far from it. Nor is it to suggest that all, or even close to all, of our commenters are shrill, boorish specimens of the lower Internet phyla. We have many delightful, thought-provoking commenters. But even a fractious minority wields enough power to skew a reader's perception of a story, recent research suggests… If you carry out those results to their logical end – commenters shape public opinion; public opinion shapes public policy; public policy shapes how and whether and what research gets funded – you start to see why we feel compelled to hit the "off" switch (LaBarre, 2013).

Indeed, commenters may very well shape public opinion in the manner described, but it must not be forgotten that while commenters, even if they are interfacing with one another using tools that did not exist a decade ago, are fundamentally the same human beings with the same tendencies. In an essay featured in *The New Yorker* entitled "The Psychology of Online Comments," Konnikova (2013) urges caution against *Popular Science's* choice of throwing the proverbial baby out with the bathwater, suggesting:

> Whether online, on the phone, by telegraph, or in person, we are governed by the same basic principles. The medium may change, but people do not. The question instead is whether the outliers, the trolls and the flamers, will hold outsized influence—and the answer seems to be that, even protected by the shade of anonymity, a dog will often make himself known with a stray, accidental bark. Then, hopefully, he will be treated accordingly (Konnikova, 2013)

In advancing her point, Konnikova draws heavily upon the work of Yzer & Southwell

(2008) whose social and psychological research attempts to place this straw man fallacy in proper context:

> The recent emergence of new media, or better, new communication technologies, has afforded substantial commentary regarding societal effects, the latest chapter in a decades-old trend that rises and falls with each new communication technology. [We] do not deny that the current generation of communication technologies differs from predecessors… [we] argue against the need for wholesale changes in theory to understand the effects of these technologies. New communication technologies do not fundamentally alter the theoretical bounds of human interaction; such interaction continues to be governed by basic human tendencies. What is perhaps most interesting about these new technologies is their ability to provide new or previously rare contexts for information expression and engagement (Yzer and Southwell, 2008, p.8).

It is against the backdrop of these emerging possibilities for different forms of interaction and exchange that the findings of this chapter are summarized and also depicted in the form of a single table included as Appendix H:

- In total: The sample of threads deemed to be robust generated a vastly higher level of deliberative quality than the sample of non-robust threads. When postings catalyze more lengthy conversations, these conversations are approximately six times more likely to be of high deliberative quality than those that do not generate lengthy conversations. To put it another way, the quantity of comments in a thread appears to be positively correlated with its discursive quality. Though they can be anything from racist to vulgar, negative comments do not appear to hold the same ability as positive ones to sustain a conversation. Intrinsically, this may be avery positive sign for the underlying health of public discourse.
- In response to RQ1: There are large and statistically significant differences in overall measures of discursive quality across the four platforms, thus lending

further credence to the need of considering their idiosyncrasies. Interestingly, and as shown in Figure 3, all four platforms had a nearly identical share of comments demonstrating a middle level of quality. This consistent band, accounted for, in each, about one-third of the total with a range of just five basis points (35 to 40). In contrast, low-quality comments had a range of 24 (9 to 34 basis points) and high quality comments had a range of 26 (28 to 52). With respect to individual measures, civility was dependably high across all four platforms; politeness varied considerably; justification was reasonably consistent across the four and clustered around 50%; and complexity was uniformly low across the four.

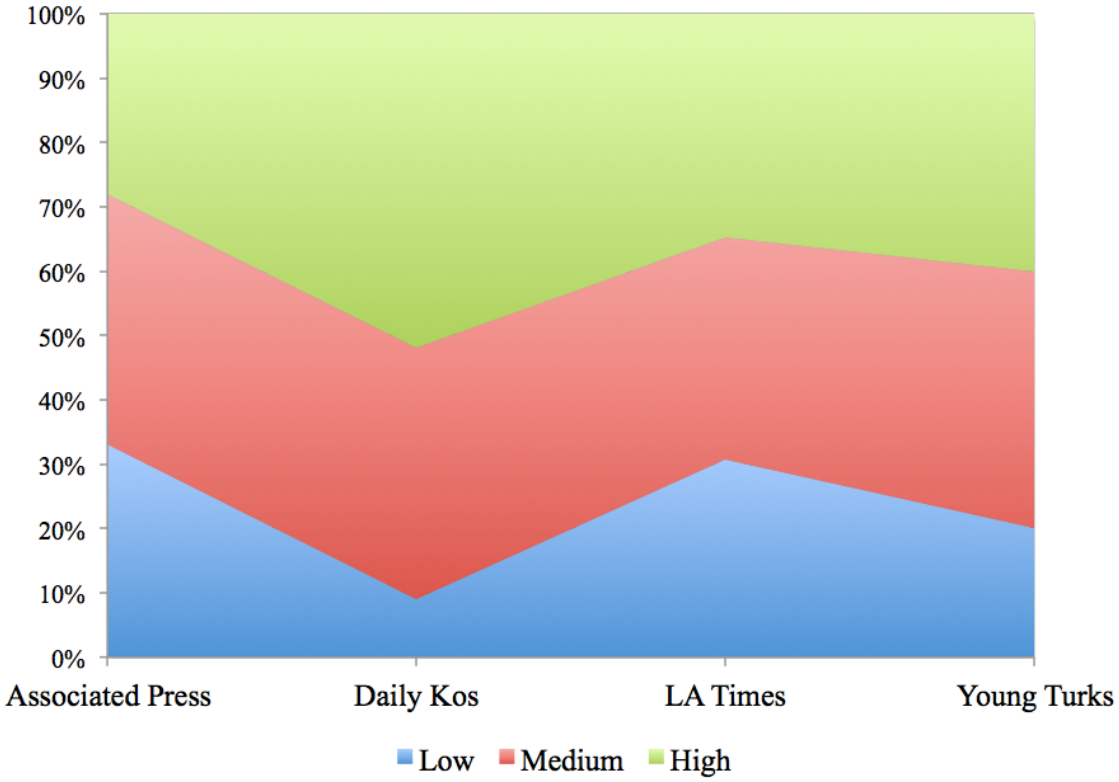

Figure 3: Measures of Discursive Quality Across Four Platforms (% of Total)

- In response to RQ2: Print-based news generated higher quality comments than

audiovisual news; the same was true for the four individual indicators of quality.

- In response to RQ3: News coming from Internet-native sources generated higher quality comments than news from traditional sources; the same held true for the component indicators.
- In response to RQ4: News covering international issues was no different than news covering domestic issues vis-à-vis the quality of comments; this was also the case for each of the individual indicators. The Mantel-Haenszel analysis (controlling for news source) revealed two intriguing outliers: the Young Turks generated comments that were significantly more justified for international-focused segments; the AP generated comments that were significantly more justified for domestic-focused segments.
- In response to RQ5: News stories focused on a mode of governing were very slightly – though statistically significant – different than news stories covering issues of campaigning. Those stories focused on governing generated higher quality comments; the same was true for each of the four component measures. The Mantel-Haenszel analysis (again, controlling for news source) revealed that, for the AP and *The Los Angeles Times*, civility was noticeably higher for campaign-focused stories than governing-focused stories. For *Daily Kos*, politeness was noticeably higher for articles covering governing than those examining campaign-related issues.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Preface

One does not have to have the vision and perspective of Buckminster Fuller, Gordon Moore or Ray Kurzweil to appreciate the extent to which new technologies – and new attitudes surrounding those technologies – have accelerated the rate of change throughout modern society. To put it more simply: Things move pretty fast in the Digital Age. Thus, before commencing a discussion of the implications of the findings contained within this study, it is first necessary to review some of the key shifts – some of them rather extraordinary – in both the prevailing wisdom and the quality of tools available to catalyze (or in some cases, squelch) the power and prevalence of online comments.

When this investigation first began several years ago, there were already telltale signs that the pressures faced by news organizations to adequately monitor and moderate these relatively open discursive spaces were mounting. For some, their concerns centered around a bevy of new ethical and legal dimensions – questions of corporate liability, concerns for slander or libel, etc. – arising from the blurred line of responsibility existing at the intersection of professionally-edited, journalist-produced news content and the so-called "Wild West" of comment boards (see, for example, Rosen, 2011). Others were concerned about the potential tarnishing of their own reputations resulting from their willingness to host a platform containing sentiments that were toxic, racist, xenophobic or homophobic (see, for example, Sloane, 2013). As one example, *The Attleboro Sun Chronicle*, a modest daily newspaper based in Southeastern Massachusetts, garnered national and international attention (see, for example, Kirchner, 2010) when it made the

landmark decision to begin charging users 99 cents for a dedicated login before they could post comments. The newspaper's editor, Mike Kirby, shared the following in an interview with the author:

> The decision was taken out of basic need. We're a small paper that wants to be engaged with the community and our readers, but our news staff was simply not big enough to keep up with the volume of comments that needed to be monitored. On top of that, there was a situation in which a string of comments defaming the character of a local city official put us in a real bind. We didn't author what was written but the words were sitting on our server and readily viewable from our webpage. Commenters don't have the burden of proof upon them that journalists do. The 99-cent fee was actually the brainchild of our [information technology] guy. He thought that if we required people to charge a tiny fee – 99 cents – to their credit card, we would have a clear record of who they were. This was first and foremost about protecting the integrity of the paper. It really didn't matter to us if people remained anonymous within the user community and pseudonyms were still allowed. But if something got really sticky we had a way to more clearly show what was our content and what wasn't. And, if it gave people a little more skin in the game and made them think a bit more before they posted, that was certainly okay, too (M. Kirby, personal communication, February 5, 2012).

Since data for this investigation were first collected, major news-providing organizations everywhere have wrestled mightily with these overarching questions and many have used anonymity controls as a primary level. In one recent tally, of the largest 137 newspapers in the United States – those with daily circulations in excess of 50,000 – 49% have banned anonymous commenting while an addition 9% never allowed commenting (of any form) in the first place (Santana, 2014). Some, such as *The Chicago Sun-Times*, heralded the spirit of the forums but felt compelled to hit the pause button in in April 2014 until such time as either technology or attitudes (or both) could mature:

> The world of Internet commenting offers a marvelous opportunity for discussion and the exchange of ideas. But as anyone who has ever ventured into a comment thread can attest, these forums too often turn into a morass of negativity, racism, hate speech and general trollish behaviors that detract from the content. In fact, the general tone and demeanor is one of the chief criticisms we hear in regard to the usability and quality of our websites and articles. Not only have we heard your criticisms, but we often find ourselves as frustrated as our readers are with

> the tone and quality of comments on our pages... Again, we are not doing away with comments. But we do want to take some time and work on the qualitative aspect of how they are handled and how we can foster a productive session rather than an embarrassing mismatch of fringe ranting and ill-informed, shrill bomb-throwing (Newman, 2014).

Others news outlets, such as the periodical *National Journal*, have made the reluctant choice but expressed no intention of ever going back:

> We believe that public service is a noble calling; that ideas matter; and that trustworthy information about politics and policy will lead to wiser decisions in the national interest. Those principles are reflected in everything we do – from the stories we write, to the events we produce, to the research and insights we offer our members. But there's one place where those principles don't seem to hold: in the comments that appear at the end of our Web stories. For every argument, there's a round of ad hominem attacks – not just fierce partisan feuding, but the worst kind of abusive, racist, and sexist name-calling imaginable. The debate isn't joined. It's cheapened, it's debased... and research suggests that the experience leaves readers feeling more polarized and less willing to listen to opposing viewpoints (Grieve, 2014).

As an alternative to eliminating anonymity altogether, and sensitive to its potentially beneficial disinhibiting effects, other news providers have ramped up their monitoring and moderating functions considerably. *The Huffington Post*, for example, made the decision to employ a large team of specialists trained to ensure that comments met a certain standard of civility and soon thereafter required user identities to be validated through Facebook (Toth, 2014). This latest decision upset many longtime commenters who benefited from the platform's (once) leading-edge system of progressive credibility badges and other online tools used to differentiate users based upon the overall quality of their comments over a period of time. One prolific commenter signed off rather poignantly:

> 4 Plus years... 7900 fans... 2600 friends... 63000 comments... after a Networker Badge, a Superuser Badge, a Moderator Badge, a Third World America Badge, a Predictor Badge, a Beta Tester Badge AND most significantly, a Political Pundit Badge. Each represents something very real to me: commitment, connection,

> trust, concern, foresight, judgment and wisdom recognized by HP. I THOUGHT THAT HP WAS GOING TO HAVE A LONG TERM PLACE IN MY LIFE... Day in and day out, it was HP that was my intellectual oasis, my debate club. It was a point of connection with folks who really wanted to consider complex issues and speak in nuances tones. I took part in some really wonderful conversations. One of them involved 23 interchanges with a nurse who altered my understanding of the nature of the choices that women make in matters of reproductive health. In others I fought long and hard with those representing the other side of the political and social spectrum and, in the end, agreed that we could disagree without being disagreeable. I have been moved by many similar testimonials here in the last several days. HP has been a friend, a companion to many of us. I understand that HP has changed. Arianna Huffington envisioned a place where a virtual community of serious conversationalists could gather but that vision has given way to one of service as a global platform for the dissemination of information. The move to all Facebook comments is part of that (Nieman Journalism Lab, 2014).

As another example, National Public Radio utilized an off-site, contracted service to perform essentially the same type of initial monitoring function and then announced it was taking an additional step:

> [The service] has improved the situation significantly, but it hasn't yet gotten the community to that goal of the civil discussion that you value. Balancing the desire to encourage free and open discussion and the need to prevent spam and harmful comments, we believe we've come up with a compromise that will be satisfactory to most of our members. Starting today, all new users to the site will go through a period in which all of their comments are reviewed by a community manager prior to the comments appearing on the site. We expect this review to take fewer than 15 minutes for each comment. Once a user has established a reputation for following the commenting guidelines all of his comments will appear immediately after posting. Community managers will only review comments in response to a specific report from other community members (Myers, Stencel, & Carvin, 2011).

Closer to the center of the current investigation, though all four of the news outlets included in this study had anonymous commenting interfaces in place at the time of data collection in 2011, all required third-party credentialed user accounts (i.e. connected to a credit card, social media site, or some other identity verifier) by the close of 2013. It is

important to review the evolution of the three platforms (both the Associated Press and Young Turks operate on YouTube) in some detail.

YouTube: Better Tools But Commerce Trumps Discourse

YouTube (and its parent company Google) had long been regarded by many as the proverbial "cesspool" of Internet discussion platforms (see, for example, Tate, 2014). As one popular blogger noted, "YouTube is a comment disaster on an unprecedented scale. All of the worst things that could be said have been said here: YouTube IS the room with the million monkeys and the million typewriters, but they haven't even gotten half-way though Hamlet yet because they're too busy pitching feces at one another" (Hermann, 2012). In an attempt to improve its reputation, YouTube in late 2013 took the controversial step of requiring all would-be commenters to have a validated Google+ account before they could post. The move was met with fierce criticism from a variety of different audiences and was interpreted by some, including one of YouTube's original co-founders, to be a thinly-veiled ploy to boost market share for its struggling social media platform (Johnson, 2012). An international petition (currently in possession of more than 269,000 signatures) logged on change.org argued, "Google is forcing us to make google+ accounts and invading our social life to comment on a youtube video and trying to take away our anonymous profile. They are also trying to censor us unless we share the same worldview as they do" (Change.org, 2014). Even writers for *The New York Times* (long an organization with strict commenting policies and safeguards) questioned the announcement in noting:

> These steps should encourage more civilized discourse. But I'll miss the old regime. As news sites and e-commerce sites moved to tidy up their comments sections... there was (some modicum of) value in YouTube remaining a portal to chaos. The comments, for now, are human, even if all too human. They

> counterbalance the shiny, happy videos of screaming goats and laughing babies. Sure, they'll make your stomach turn, but isn't it beneficial to feel that way from time to time? There's something useful in reminding oneself that under the cleanest streets of the fanciest neighborhoods, there's a sewer. Soon YouTube comments will be less obscene, more decorous and quite possibly more substantive. They'll also be less revealing (Lapidos, 2013).

Less than one month following the decision, commenting traffic on YouTube plummeted by an estimated 40% (Sloane, 2013) and business analysts were quick to point out that the company's overall sanitation strategy had worked:

> [The response to the YouTube decision] confirms that people are much less courageous about making racist, sexist, homophobic, and altogether vile comments in public when there's a chance those comments could get linked back to their offline person. It also makes YouTube more attractive to major brands who might want to advertise on the site, an initiative the company has taken quite seriously lately in light of recent deals with big-time media buyers and its hiring of an executive from consumer goods giant Procter & Gamble. In the past, brands have had to worry about having their content placed beside hateful anonymous comments, as happened when Cheerios posted a ground-breaking ad earlier this year featuring a mixed-race family. The new comment policy gives them greater confidence that investing in YouTube ads and sponsored content will not get wasted amidst a sea of ignorance, making them that much more likely to give YouTube more of their money (Taube, 2013).

Perhaps somewhat lost in the debate surrounding YouTube's decision to disallow anonymity (and, by extension, to mandate linkage with its in-hose social media platform) was the company's release of a much more robust set of commenting and reviewing tools intended to transform the way commenters engage in a community setting and catalyze comments into conversations. Key changes included: comments from the video creator being ranked very highly and surfacing more regularly in the comment stream; elevating comments from popular personalities on YouTube and users in one's Google+ network higher up the comment chain; and greater standing given to more highly engaged commenters who have historically received positive (i.e. "thumbs up") feedback from their previous posts. At the same time, video owners were given new abilities to calibrate

their preferences between automatic posting of submitted comments and manual approval; and to create a blacklist with words that automatically push comments into the review queue or block users (Lardinois, 2013).

Important to note, neither the Associated Press nor the Young Turks, whose audiovisual segments and affiliated comment streams are hosted on YouTube, offer any additional guidance or rules above and beyond what is required by YouTube.

Los Angeles Times: A Well-Lawyered Corporate Response

In contrast to YouTube, *The Los Angeles Times* appears to have embraced a decidedly legalistic response in response to the challenge of allowing its online commenting platform to evolve given the torrent of negativity surrounding the poor quality of postings. Owned by the multinational media giant Tribune, *The Los Angeles Times* requires each of its (now) registered users to certify that they understand its terms of service, memorialized in a dense, 12-page document. No attempt is made to inspire the spirit of healthy discourse or engender democratic debate; instead, the rules merely address the boundaries of possible entries. Users are warned not to engage in communication that, among a wider array of possible qualities:

> … contains vulgar, profane, abusive, racist or hateful language or expressions, epithets or slurs, text, photographs or illustrations in poor taste, inflammatory attacks of a personal, racial or religious nature... is defamatory, threatening, disparaging, grossly inflammatory, false, misleading, fraudulent, inaccurate, unfair, contains gross exaggeration or unsubstantiated claims, violates the privacy rights of any third party, is unreasonably harmful or offensive to any individual or community... or discriminates on the grounds of race, religion, national origin, gender, age, marital status, sexual orientation or disability, or refers to such matters in any manner prohibited by law (*Los Angeles Times*, 2013).

Such a policy clearly exists to protect the corporation (as opposed to any members of the discursive community) and its overarching utility is derived more from its very existence

(and users' recorded compliance with it) than any of the actual content it contains. Moreover, the legal nature of the document reflects both binary thinking and a detached orientation that is reactive only when necessary. Nowhere, for example, are any exemplars offered to illustrate proper and improper online behavior. Language and word choice are considered to be either compliant or non-compliant; any consideration or judgment of nuance is weighed down by repeated pronouncements of rights reserved by the corporation. Even in the briefer and more colloquial user FAQ (frequently asked questions), the same arm's-length-style guidance endures:

> Readers are reminded to post comments that are germane to the article and write in a common language that steers clear of personal attacks and/or vulgarities. We reserve the right to remove any user or user's comments that are identified as inappropriate. Examples of these types of infractions are comments that include: abusive, off-topic or foul language... racist, sexist, homophobic or other offensive terminology... attacks that celebrate the death, injury or illness of any person, public figure or otherwise... Comments are filtered for language (*Los Angeles Times*, 2014).

Though members of the online community are given the ability to report abuse (i.e. lack of compliance with the terms of use) on a particular comment, flagged comments remain posted until such time that they can be investigated by a *Los Angeles Times* staffer. No mention is made of who these staffers are, what a reasonable response time is for their adjudication, or how a decision to filter a comment may be appealed. The entire process is nameless and mechanistic; it occurs absent any engagement either between commenters or between commenters and the moderators.

One small improvement to the platform (though still occurring at the requisite arm's length) is the denotation of certain comments as so-called "Editor's Picks." An increasingly common designation granted by large, American newspaper sites (and originating with *The New York Times*), an Editor's Pick at *The Los Angeles Times* is a

comment "than an editor has identified as insightful and thought-provoking that help[s] further the dialogue" (*Los Angeles Times*, 2014). While such an engagement is arguably beneficial to the democratic health of the discursive community, it falls short in several critical ways: the name of the editor (a typical large newspaper has many) is never revealed; his/her thinking behind choosing a given article for the denotation is never explained; and nowhere is the broader "dialogue" given proper context.

Daily Kos: Straight Talk and Empowering Users to Be Activists

In stark contrast to *The Los Angeles Times*, *Daily Kos* not only utilizes straight – and at times, borderline crude – talk to convey its discussion standards but also to clearly give the benefit of the doubt to commentators when it comes to interpretations of their postings. With respect to the former, founder Markos Moulitsas (a.k.a. "Kos") could not be more unabashed in his articulation of the community's norms: "The core of the *Daily Kos* behavior guide is simple: don't be a dick. While we go into some depth below about sanctionable behavior, it's not an all-encompassing list. There are always types of behavior that while not listed below, rise to the level of "dickishness", and as such are actionable" (Moulitsas, 2013).

From a technical perspective, the managers of *Daily Kos* (the blog operates as a limited liability corporation (LLC) under the name Kos Media with Moulitsas having controlling interest) have placed the responsibility to monitor and police discussions directly into the hands of the community. Users have two powerful tools at their disposal – the ability to "uprate" (or publicly support) a given comment thus giving it greater emphasis in the discussion; and the capacity to immediately "hide" entries they deem to have risen to the aforementioned level of "dickishness" (along with more carefully

identified types of behavior). Culturally, however, and unlike other commenting platforms, there are significant consequences for employing either in haste; users must do so very judiciously and with great care:

> Our new reporting tools make it easier to track hidden comments and who [hid] them. If we determine that a comment should not have been hidden, those [who did so] will lose their ratings ability for a period of time, progressively longer for each infraction until that ability is removed forever. Uprating personal insults is as bad if not worse than making the insult itself because this rewards the insulters and encourages them to continue the same behavior. Doing so will likewise cost users their ratings privileges for a period, with long penalties for repeat infractions (Moulitsas, 2013).

At the same time, users are clearly reminded of the fact that "In baseball, a tie goes to the runner. At *Daily Kos*, any gray area will be decided in favor of the commenter. So if you're not sure that something should be [hidden], then don't [hide it]. Because if the situation is that iffy, chances are that it'll be you who gets burned. [The ability to hide comments] is for clear and obvious violations (Moulitsas, 2013).

Though it uses very different terms than the variables named in this study, *Daily Kos* essentially tackles the current study's fundamental distinction between civility and politeness head-on and prescribes different norms. Threats of violence, bigotry and personal insults (all of which are germane to the variable of civility) are dealt with specifically, as is the broader topic of language usage. Moulitsas, whose spent some of the 1980s living in his mother's native country of (then) war-torn El Salvador insists:

> I grew up in a country where people were killed for their political beliefs. It's not fun. Violence has no place in our political discourse. It's not kosher to wish violence against each other, and it's not cool to wish it against our enemies. This does not mean that all forms of cartoon violence, literary references, metaphors and the like are barred. It does mean that threatening to beat up or kill someone, or suggesting that people should kill themselves, or saying that poison should be put in somebody's crème brûlée, or making similar remarks, even as a joke, is prohibited and can lead to banning" (Moulitsas, 2013).

With respect to bigotry, Moulitsas set the following guidelines concluding with a nod towards the community's activist style: "Any language designed to denigrate someone on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, religion, nationality, physical appearance, etc. is prohibited. Leave that shit to the Republicans" (Moulitsas, 2013). And on the subject of personal insults he further maintains:

> It is impossible to have a real debate when you call the other party, say, "batshit insane." At that point, you're not engaging in debate, you're just engaging in a pissing match. And while that may be fun for you, it isn't fun for anyone else. So maintain a sense of decorum. There are plenty of people on the site who avoid [having their comments hidden] despite engaging in the most contentious topics. It can be done. Just be courteous and stick to the facts (Moulitsas, 2013).

When it comes to the choice of foul or vulgar language, however, *Daily Kos* is very clear in not only distinguishing it from other kinds of controversial behaviors but also maintaining its presence goes part and parcel with spirited exchange. Moulitas was unapologetic in writing, "I don't care about language. We're adults. If potty words make your ears bleed, I recommend Disney.com. Of course, there's a difference between "that's fucking awesome!" or "that's fucked up!" and "fuck you" or "you're a fucking asshole." If you know the difference, you're an adult" (Moulitsas, 2013).

Though *Daily Kos* clearly appeals to a liberal/progressive audience, its organizers contend that all political arguments need to be pulled apart and that dissent is the lifeblood of healthy discussion. Unlike other commenting sites, *Daily Kos* has a clear policy against the declaration of so-called "debate free zones," spaces where a user posts his/her contribution and then ostensibly asks for it to simply be memorialized. The board's standards on the matter are made blatantly clear, connected to the community's core identity, and reflect the broader commitment of preparing users for more activist forms of politics:

> Some users have asked about the ability to declare their diary off-limits to their detractors, so that they can discuss a topic without having opponents intrude. This would apply to internally contentious issues like Israel-Palestine, Snowden-NSA, and guns. Or primaries where the community is divided among the contenders. While I find some validity in the request, and considered it deeply, fact is it conflicts with the debate-centric focus of the site. We're not an echo chamber, nor do I want it to become one. So if you want to be spared dissent, *Daily Kos* just won't be the place for you. If you can't handle dissent, then maybe political activism is not the thing for you (Moulitsas, 2013).

Implications

Sorting Through the Noise: Recognizing the Multiplicity of Online Publics

The fact that news platforms everywhere – and certainly including those scrutinized by this study – have responded so very differently to the emerging questions of anonymous commenting should serve as yet another powerful reminder that there is no singular conceptualization, consistent useful definition, nor matrix of commonly agreed upon norms that present a unified understanding of what constitutes an online public – be it from the perspective of news providers, audiences or both. The desire to seek one is not only a sure path to disappointment but also serves to reinforce unhealthy stereotypes; such stereotypes may ultimately cloud the more progressive realization that there is significant potential for a great multiplicity of publics (each with different norms and expectations) to emerge and operate in ways that fundamentally support an underlying sense of civic responsibility, catalyze the shaping of public opinion and formation of political meaning, and are generally understood to be advancing democratic virtues.

As one recent (and, admittedly, downright hilarious) example of this stereotyping, comedian John Oliver of HBO's *Last Week Tonight* made a direct appeal to Internet commenters on the subject of so-called "net neutrality." Oliver enlisted their help in

registering negative feedback on the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) website during its period of open comment:

> Good evening, monsters. This may be the moment you've spent your whole lives training for... For once in your life, we need you to channel that anger, that badly spelled bile that you normally reserve for unforgivable attacks on actresses you seem to think have put on weight or politicians you disagree with or photos of the ex-girlfriend getting on with her life or non-white actors being cast as fictional characters... We need you to get out there and for once in your lives focus your indiscriminate rage in a useful direction. Seize your moment, my lovely trolls, turn on caps lock and fly, my pretties! Fly! Fly! Fly! (Oliver, 2014).

Though the strategy proved highly effective for purposes of fanning the flames of dissent (the FCC website actually crashed the very next day from the influx of traffic), the combination of its nearsightedness and satirical forcefulness crowded out the possibility of Oliver catalyzing a more thought-provoking response from the considerable majority of commenters who, based at least upon the findings of this study, could have registered their opposition with comments of higher deliberative quality. In choosing to activate the stereotypical Internet trolls, and speaking to them as if they were one in the same with the whole of the online public (however defined), the plan mobilized a disruptive force as opposed to one that could be more expansive, serious and contributory.

To be clear, no one understanding of online public could or should be privileged over another. What matters most for purposes of the implications of this study is the crying need to consider cyber-communities, spaces, platforms and fora not as a unitary construct but as multiplicity of ideas and dynamics. Even the underlying methodology employed in this study (using an a priori coding scheme to analyze the content of individual comments based upon four reasonable measures), though relatively easy to demonstrate the high level of face validity the scheme enjoys, is deliberately grounded in but one particular understanding of how deliberative quality operating within an online

public may be assessed. Be that as it may, it is the utilization of a common set of measures – applied scientifically and effective in neutralizing any normative judgments or personal biases along the path of exploration – that allows one to understand these conversations at a deeper level. To build upon a metaphor used in Chapter 1, while the "loudest drunk in the bar" may be extraordinarily distracting, the ability to block him or her out presents the opportunity of examining the pluses and minuses of the whole "tavern" far more effectively and holistically.

As was revealed throughout the findings of this study, statistically significant differences in overall levels of deliberative quality were detected across the four platforms. It was further discovered that Internet-native and print-based news platforms were home to comments of a higher quality than, respectively, traditional and multimedia-based news sites. The overarching content of the precipitating story or segment, irrespective of the platform upon which it was hosted, was either not a statistically significant factor (as in the case of the international-domestic dichotomy) or a minuscule one (as in the case of the governing-campaigning dichotomy). These findings give rise to the need to further investigate what differences are present between similar kinds of platforms; the results of subsequent analyses are documented below.

Table 38: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Source and Deliberative Quality) – Internet-Native Sources Only

Source	Low (Quality = 1)	Medium (Quality=2)	High (Quality=3)
Daily Kos	178 (9%)	751 (39%)	1,000 (52%)
Young Turks	545 (20%)	1,097 (40%)	1,081 (40%)

χ^2 (2, N = 4,652) = 122.269, **p < 0.001**

Table 39: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Source and Civility) – Internet-Native Sources Only

Source	Uncivil (Civility = 0)	Civil (Civility = 1)
Daily Kos	122 (6%)	1,807 (97%)
Young Turks	253 (9%)	2,470 (91%)

χ^2 (1, N = 4,652) = 13.409, **p < 0.001**

Table 40: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Source and Politeness) – Internet-Native Sources Only

Source	Impolite (Politeness = 0)	Polite (Politeness = 1)
Daily Kos	492 (26%)	1,437 (74%)
Young Turks	1,008 (37%)	1,715 (63%)

χ^2 (1, N = 4,652) = 68.499, **p < 0.001**

Table 41: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Source and Justification) – Internet-Native Sources Only

Source	Unjustified (Justification = 0)	Justified (Justification = 1)
Daily Kos	882 (46%)	1,047 (54%)
Young Turks	1,437 (53%)	1,286 (47%)

χ^2 (1, N = 4,652) = 22.445, **p < 0.001**

Table 42: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Source and Complexity) – Internet-Native Sources Only

Source	Non-Complex (Complexity = 0)	Complex (Complexity = 1)
Daily Kos	1,163 (60%)	766 (40%)
Young Turks	1,893 (70%)	830 (30%)

χ^2 (1, N = 4,652) = 42.668, **p < 0.001**

Table 43: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Source and Deliberative Quality) – Traditional Sources Only

Source	Low (Quality = 1)	Medium (Quality=2)	High (Quality=3)
Associated Press	234 (33%)	275 (39%)	202 (28%)
Los Angeles Times	116 (31%)	131 (35%)	132 (34%)

χ^2 (2, N = 1,090) = 4.855, p = 0.088

Table 44: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Source and Civility) – Traditional Sources Only

Source	Uncivil (Civility = 0)	Civil (Civility = 1)
Associated Press	128 (18%)	583 (82%)
Los Angeles Times	75 (20%)	304 (80%)

χ^2 (1, N = 1,090) = 0.471, p = 0.471

Table 45: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Source and Politeness) – Traditional Sources Only

Source	Impolite (Politeness = 0)	Polite (Politeness = 1)
Associated Press	382 (54%)	329 (46%)
Los Angeles Times	208 (55%)	171 (45%)

χ^2 (1, N = 1,090) = 0.133, p = 0.716

Table 46: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Source and Justification) – Traditional Sources Only

Source	Unjustified (Justification = 0)	Justified (Justification = 1)
Associated Press	390 (55%)	321 (45%)
Los Angeles Times	195 (52%)	184 (48%)

χ^2 (1, N = 1,090) = 22.445, **p < 0.001**

Table 47: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Source and Complexity) – Traditional Sources Only

Source	Non-Complex (Complexity = 0)	Complex (Complexity = 1)
Associated Press	1,163 (60%)	766 (40%)
Los Angeles Times	1,893 (70%)	830 (30%)

χ^2 (1, N = 1,090) = 1.150, p = 0.284

Table 48: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Source and Deliberative Quality) – Print Sources Only

Source	Low (Quality = 1)	Medium (Quality=2)	High (Quality=3)
Daily Kos	178 (9%)	751 (39%)	1,000 (52%)
Los Angeles Times	116 (31%)	131 (35%)	132 (34%)

χ^2 (2, N = 2,308) = 133.933, **p <0.001**

Table 49: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Source and Civility) – Print Sources Only

Source	Uncivil (Civility = 0)	Civil (Civility = 1)
Daily Kos	122 (6%)	1,807 (94%)
Los Angeles Times	75 (20%)	304 (80%)

χ^2 (1, N = 2,308) = 73.557, **p < 0.001**

Table 50: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Source and Politeness) – Print Sources Only

Source	Impolite (Politeness = 0)	Polite (Politeness = 1)
Daily Kos	492 (26%)	1,437 (74%)
Los Angeles Times	208 (55%)	171 (45%)

χ^2 (1, N = 2,308) = 129.361, **p < 0.001**

Table 51: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Source and Justification) – Print Sources Only

Source	Unjustified (Justification = 0)	Justified (Justification = 1)
Daily Kos	882 (46%)	1,047 (54%)
Los Angeles Times	195 (52%)	184 (48%)

χ^2 (1, N = 2,308) = 4.176, **p < 0.05**

Table 52: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Source and Complexity) – Print Sources Only

Source	Non-Complex (Complexity = 0)	Complex (Complexity = 1)
Daily Kos	1,163 (60%)	766 (40%)
Los Angeles Times	1,893 (70%)	830 (30%)

χ^2 (1, N = 2,308) = 5.582, **p < 0.05**

Table 53: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Source and Deliberative Quality) – Audiovisual Sources Only

Source	Low (Quality = 1)	Medium (Quality=2)	High (Quality=3)
Associated Press	234 (33%)	275 (39%)	202 (28%)
Young Turks	545 (20%)	1,097 (40%)	1,081 (40%)

χ^2 (2, N = 3,434) = 60.930, **p < 0.001**

Table 54: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Source and Civility) – Audiovisual Sources Only

Source	Uncivil (Civility = 0)	Civil (Civility = 1)
Associated Press	128 (18%)	583 (82%)
Young Turks	253 (9%)	2,470 (91%)

χ^2 (1, N = 3,434) = 73.557, **p < 0.001**

Table 55: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Source and Politeness) – Audiovisual Sources Only

Source	Impolite (Politeness = 0)	Polite (Politeness = 1)
Associated Press	382 (54%)	329 (46%)
Young Turks	1,008 (37%)	1,715 (63%)

χ^2 (1, N = 3,434) = 65.33, **p < 0.001**

Table 56: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Source and Justification) – Audiovisual Sources Only

Source	Unjustified (Justification = 0)	Justified (Justification = 1)
Associated Press	390 (55%)	321 (45%)
Young Turks	1,437 (53%)	1,286 (47%)

χ^2 (1, N = 3,434) = 0.979, p = 0.322

Table 57: Results of Chi-Square Analysis (Political News Source and Complexity) – Audiovisual Sources Only

Source	Non-Complex (Complexity = 0)	Complex (Complexity = 1)
Associated Press	546 (77%)	165 (23%)
Young Turks	1,893 (70%)	830 (30%)

χ^2 (1, N = 3,434) = 14.497, **p < 0.001**

As shown in Table 38, there were statistically significant differences in the level of deliberative quality of online comments attached to the two Internet-native news sources (*Daily Kos* and Young Turks). Tables 48 and 53 reveal the same can be said for, respectively, comments affiliated print-based news sources (*Daily Kos* and *The Los Angeles Times*) and audiovisual news sources (Associated Press and Young Turks). This second case is particularly notable in that it reveals a statistically significant difference in the quality of comments operating within a *single* platform (YouTube). Similar analyses of these three pairings were conducted for each of the component measures of quality; the

results are shown in Tables 49-52 and 54-57. With the exception of a single comparison – the justification variance within the audiovisual news sources (Table 56) – statistically significant differences were detected across the board.

In contrast, and as shown in Table 43, there were no statistically significant differences between the quality of comments generated within the Associated Press and *The Los Angeles Times* (i.e. the two traditional news sources). Moreover, none of the component measures registered any statistically significant differences (see Tables 44-47) for this pairing.

Taken as a whole, these findings begin to paint the broad brush strokes of a conceptual picture in which not only is one platform very different than another, but also one in which a more intrinsic hierarchy of platforms might be present. The innovation of the Internet (even with all of its warts, garbage and noise) may be at least partly responsible for creating the technological, cultural and behavioral superstructure that allows a multiplicity of publics – and, perhaps even more important, types of publics – to emerge. To better understand the potential implications for this suggestion, however, it is first necessary to return to a more fundamental discussion of the meaning of public, and to consider how this overarching sense of multiplicity may allow one to think with greater specificity and granularity about the opportunities, needs and challenges of online communities as they attempt to better embrace the democratic.

A Multiplicity of Online Publics: Differentiating Community Needs for Information Engagement/Processing and Discursive Norms

As summarized in Chapter 2, an extensive and growing body of scholarship has attempted to articulate a wide array of cogent definitions – and, by extension, conditions and expectations – for what is meant by "public" (a term that has a tendency to be used

rather colloquially). While this study remains deliberately neutral and makes no consideration of which definition may be superior – be it more plausible and practical; possessing greater efficacy in catalyzing democratic spirit; or more open and accessible to a diversity of viewpoints – it does seek to explore some of the profound ways in which they are different. While no subset could conceivably be wholly representative of the gamut of meanings, four were chosen and dissected in an attempt to illustrate some of the contours of the broader range and to further reinforce the need to consider a multiplicity of constructs. Three of these have been described previously: the rational-critical "public sphere" relying upon the utilization of the idea speech type (Habermas, 1989); "agonistic confrontations," which privilege adversarial conditions in debate over the need for compromise and consensus (Mouffe, 2000); and "rhetorical democracies" assigning high intrinsic value to rhetorical contributions that contribute to a broader public activity and promote civic dialogue (Hauser & Grim, 2004). The fourth involves Schudson's (2011) concept of a so-called "monitorial citizen."

Perhaps highly relevant within the contemporary period of 24-hour news cycles, instantaneous information and a plethora of vehicles and channels, a monitorial citizen is oriented with a "defensive rather than proactive" (Schudson, 2011, p. 311) posture. Though not detached from political activity, monitorial citizens are highly politically cognitive and readily scan their respective information environments – or, as Schudson puts, continuously "keep an eye on the scene" (p. 311) – for news germane to their needs and interests. They can become highly politically active when needed but otherwise choose to stay out of the conventional political fray. Schudson's research, too, clearly has at least some lineage in the political psychology literature (see, for example, Popkin,

1994; Graber, 2001) as monitorial citizens must recognize particular schema in switching back and forth between modes of inaction and action, all while exhibiting a default mode of low-information rationality (Popkin, 2004).

To systematically disentangle some of the overlapping features of these different definitions of public, they are assessed against a troika of possible community needs. It is important to note that those selected were hardly intended to be exhaustive. Rather, they are intended to be both commonsensical and reflect the range of existing considerations and dynamics covered in the Chapter 2.

	Community Need: Info Engagement			**Community Need: Info Processing**			**Community Need: Discursive Norms**			
	← thinking		acting →	← bottom-up		top-down →				
Definition of Public *Typological Examples Ordered Neediest to Non-Neediest*	Political Literacy	Political Cognition	Collective Action	Citizen Journalist	General Interest Intermediaries	Intelligence Bureaus	Civility	Politeness	Justification	Complexity
Public Spheres	above average	average	below average	above average	above average	above average	above average	above average	above average	above average
Agonistic Confrontations	average	above average	average	above average	average	average	above average	average	above average	above average
Rhetorical Democracies	average	average	above average	average	above average	average	average	below average	average	average
Monitorial Citizenship	below average	above average	above average	below average	above average	below average	below average	below average	below average	below average

Figure 4: A Multiplicity of Online Publics and Needs

As depicted in Figure 4, these three clusters – representing the community needs of information engagement, information processing and discursive norms – constitute the

horizontal axis within an array depicting a hierarchy of definitions of public. The four given typologies of public (i.e. public spheres, agonistic confrontations, rhetorical democracies and monitorial citizenship) constitute the vertical axis. Within each corresponding cell, a relative assessment of importance is proffered in an attempt to suggest which needs are most vital to which typology; needs are expressed as having above average, average, or below average importance to a given typology. Ultimately, these typologies are ordered on the chart in descending order from highest levels of aggregate need (public spheres) to lowest levels of aggregate need (monitorial citizenship).

The first cluster, the need of information engagement, contains three subheadings: political literacy, political cognition and collective action. While all of these terms have been defined previously, it is important to note that they have been arranged along the axis in the form of a continuum between engagement in the form of thinking and engagement in the form of acting. When examined in this way, clearer differences between the typologies begin to emerge. Public spheres, for example, require a high degree of political literacy but very little in the way of collective action. For agonistic confrontations, the inherent adversarial conditions demand that participants be very quick to think on their respective feet as the debate evolves, thus demanding a higher than average level of political cognition. Within rhetorical democracies, collective action gives the typology its very form in that they need to be eventful so that individual rhetorical contributions, however inchoate, can congeal into a broader collective expression. Lastly, monitorial citizens need not possess much in the way of political literacy but the sense of both knowing when to act (through the cues of political

cognition) and then having the will to act (by embracing collective actions) are of paramount importance.

The second cluster places the community's need for information processing at its conceptual center and builds upon the seminal debate of the 1920s between Walter Lippman and John Dewey describing the role and power of journalism in industrial society. Here, too, the subheadings are arranged on a continuum – this time operating between top-down and bottom-up information processing – and appear in three forms: Lippman's (1922) intelligence bureaus (most top-down); Dewey's (1927) citizen journalists (most bottom-up); and Sunstein's (2001) general interest intermediaries.

In Public *Opinion*, Lippman (1922) noted that citizens were increasingly incapable of knowing the world directly and could arrive at political judgments based upun the "pictures in our heads" (p. 4), or

> the insertion between man and his environment of a pseudo-environment. To that pseudo-environment his behaviour is a response. But because it is behaviour, the consequences, if they are acts, operate not in the pseudo-environment where the behaviour is stimulated, but in the real environment where action operates." (p. 10).

To mitigate against possible perceptual distortions to said pictures (arising from dynamics as disparate as government censorship to groundbreaking innovations in information transmission), Lippman advocated for the creation of elite-driven intelligence bureaus that would be the guardians of knowledge and the stewards of reason. Such elites would be tenured in their positions for life and be disconnected from actual decision-making; Lippman argued that "the only institutional safeguard is to separate as absolutely as it is possible to do so the staff which executes from the staff which investigates" (Lippman, 1922, p. 201). The steadfast commitment of such bureaus to

privilege fact rather than propagating and promulgating symbols would serve, Lippman believed, as a powerful remedy to the emerging ills of modern society:

> I argue that representative government, either in what is ordinarily called politics, or industry, cannot be worked successfully, no matter what the basis of election, unless there is an independent, expert, organization for making the unseen facts intelligible to those who have to make the decisions. I attempt, therefore, to argue that the serious acceptance of the principle that personal representation must be supplemented by representation of the unseen facts would alone permit a satisfactory decentralization and allow us to escape from the intolerable and unworkable fiction that each of us must acquire a competent opinion about all public affairs… This organization I conceive to be in the first instance, the task of a political science that has won its proper place as formulator, in advance of real decision, instead of apologist, critic, or reporter after the decision has been made (Lippmann, 1922, p. 31-32).

Dewey's (1927) response, as memorialized in *The Public and Its Problems*, echoed Lippman's diagnosis of the public's poor health but offered a fundamentally different remedy. Rather than look beyond the masses and elevate the role of elites, Dewey aspired to align the creation and dissemination of knowledge more with the realm of lived experience. Doing so would require a radical shift in the prevailing expectation of each person's civic – or in Dewey's parlance, community – responsibilities:

> The essential need, in other words, is the improvement of methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion. That is the problem of the public. We have asserted that this improvement depends essentially upon freeing and perfecting the processes of inquiry and of dissemination of their conclusions. Inquiry, indeed, is a work which devolves upon experts. But their expertness is not shown in framing and executing policies, but in discovering and making known the facts upon which the former depend. They are technical experts in the sense that scientific investigators and artists manifest expertise. It is not necessary that the many should have the knowledge and skill to carry on the needed investigations; what is required is that they have the ability to judge of the bearing of the knowledge supplied by others upon common concerns (p. 209).

Though Dewey's seminal political text is notoriously light on hard details, his concluding thoughts give rise to the citizen journalist (though he does not here use the actual term)

and his/her invaluable role in formulating, disseminating and digesting a community's intelligence:

> Vision is a spectator; hearing is a participator. Publication is partial and the public which results is partially informed and formed until the meanings it purveys pass from mouth to mouth. There is no limit to the liberal expansion and confirmation of limited personal intellectual endowment which may proceed from the flow of social intelligence when that circulates by word of mouth from one to another in the communications of the local community. That and that only gives reality to public opinion. We lie, as Emerson said, in the lap of immense intelligence. But that intelligence is dormant and its communications are broken, inarticulate and faint until it possesses the local community as its medium (p. 219).

Much later, and in what could be seen as something of a conceptual fulcrum between the two sides of the Dewey-Lippman debate, Sunstein (2001) highlights the importance of general interest intermediaries (such as daily newspapers, news periodicals, and nightly news broadcasts) that provide elements of a shared cultural narrative and a common frame of reference. The number and reach of such intermediaries, he contends are very much on the decline as a result of both a rising consumerist orientation by the general public and the introduction of new technological tools to filter content. The erosion of the intermediary function retards the exposure of people to opinions, ideas and perspectives that they may not otherwise seek out on their own. Sunstein sees this development as antithetical to a well-functioning system of free expression:

> First, people should be exposed to materials that they would not have chosen in advance. Unplanned, unanticipated encounters are central to democracy itself. Such encounters often involve topics and points of view that people have not sought out and perhaps find quite irritating. They are important partly to ensure against fragmentation and extremism, which are predictable outcomes of any situation in which likeminded people speak only with themselves. I do not suggest that government should force people to see things that they wish to avoid. But I do contend that in a democracy deserving the name, people often come across views and topics that they have not specifically selected. Second, many or

> most citizens should have a range of common experiences. Without shared experiences, a heterogeneous society will have a much more difficult time in addressing social problems. People may even find it hard to understand one another. Common experiences, emphatically including the common experiences made possible by the media, provide a form of social glue. A system of communications that radically diminishes the number of such experiences will create a number of problems, not least because of the increase in social fragmentation (Sunstein, 2001, p. 9-10).

Taken together, these three subheadings – citizen journalist, general interest intermediaries and intelligence bureaus – present a range of options to aid in the description of how different types of publics respond to the need of information processing in very different ways. Public spheres, for example, are places of timely, highly-rationale news digestion and discussion. Such discussants rely heavily upon objective sources for analysis of complex issues (the output of intelligence bureaus), embrace the ordering and prioritization of those issues (the work of general interest intermediaries), and then actively contribute to robust discussions in which such inputs are rationally equated to the perspective of lived experience (the duty of a citizen journalist). In stark contrast, a well-functioning public consisting of monitorial citizenship discounts the need for either citizen journalism or intelligence bureaus. Participants, who are perpetually scanning the landscape of information for topics impacting their unique affairs, instead rely heavily upon general interest intermediaries to help them monitor the news stream most efficiently. Rhetorical democracies similarly rely upon such intermediaries to engender, and then sustain, the critical mass of the rhetorical event, while agonistic confrontations are typified by debating gladiators wielding their respective contributions to citizen journalism as primary weapons.

Lastly, the third cluster considers a range of possible (though certainly not exhaustive) discursive norms that overlap with the measures of deliberative quality employed by this study. Not surprisingly, public spheres, in employing an ideal speech type, place above average importance on meeting all four of the discursive norms. For very different reasons, three of the four norms are also highly important for the success of agonistic confrontations. Requiring the presence of an adversary, for example, is a profound expression of civility (at least as it is defined in this study), just as a deliberate preference for adversarial conditions undoubtedly conveys an appreciation for the complexity associated with any argumentative position. Rhetorical democracies, as Hauser (1999) and others have shown, are often too quickly dismissed by casual observers as being too raucous (i.e. very impolite), even though they may very well constitute vibrant publics. Finally, monitorial citizens, with their keen ability to scan the landscape and heavy utilization of general interest intermediaries to help them find relevancy, are far less susceptible to be distracted or intrigued by any particular discursive patterns.

Exemplars of Vibrant Online Publics: Best Practices and New Tools

Now that some of the key features of different typologies have been disentangled using a common rubric of community needs, it becomes possible to search for different (existing) exemplars of each and to further investigate some of the more novel approaches and tools such spaces utilize to catalyze democratic exchange. The previous section detailed a conceptual framework within which such a multiplicity of public spaces could both theoretically exist and – if closely aligned with a given set of

community needs – thrive. It follows, then, that the current section will describe actual flourishing domains that ably demonstrate the presence of this multiplicity.

Of all the news platforms examined by this study, *Daily Kos* clearly distinguished itself as hosting comments that were of a very high level of deliberative quality. As shown in Table 4, 91% of all comments examined were of middle or high levels of quality. *Daily Kos* was also the only news outlet in which a majority of the comments examined (51%) were deemed to be of high quality. In addition, the channel accounted for comments containing the highest measures of civility, politeness, justification and complexity – in some cases by a very wide margin – thus affording it some of the critical qualities defining a public sphere.

With respect to its community's needs for creating, managing and digesting information, it similarly places great importance on providing for both bottom-up and top-down forms of engagement, as well as for types that are somewhere in between. Among the sites investigated by this study, *Daily Kos* was home to far-and-away the most prolific commenters and, based upon even a cursory reading of its comments, it is plain to see that even some of its most infrequent and casual participants make substantial contributions. Citizen journalism is alive and well on the site and, on fairly regular occasion, particularly provocative, illuminating or poignant comments rise to the level of receiving treatment within the hypertextual frame that is akin to a bona fide article written by a member of the staff. Many of these same commenters, too, appear on the site's real-time leaderboard of authors which is readily searchable based on several rankings derived from overall community response (e.g. most recommended, most prolific, most followed, highest mojo (a compound measure computing overall impact)).

The broader technical design of the site, which affords users an opportunity to focus in on popular content, and provides managers with the opportunity to showcase a range of stimulating discussions, functions as an able general interest intermediary. Though content is voluminous, participants and organizers alike have considerable tools at their disposal to sort through information and find what is most relevant. Lastly, *Daily Kos* maintains something of its own intelligence bureau in the form of dKosopedia.com, an in-house attempt to actively build and strengthen a political encyclopedia. Currently consisting of over 14,000 topical entries (ranging from subjects as varied as "Hurricane Katrina" to the "Evolution of the Credit Default Swap"), the encyclopedia is frequently cited as a source of evidence by commenters on the site. During its launch, Moulitsas (2004) likened dKosopedia to a virtual, open-source, community-driven think tank.

Equating even further with the given typology of a public sphere, *Daily Kos* and its participants rely upon a steady resuscitation of political facts to build their arguments and engage in debate. The best arguments are generally not those made by commenters demonstrating the highest levels of political cognition (though such skills are not unimportant) but by those who have the best researched and cited claims. Interestingly, the site's tagline – "News. Community. Action." – likely overstates the willingness of participants to truly engage in collective action. *Daily Kos*, not unlike other public spheres, is a highly discursive space where conversation and rational thinking have preference over bona fide deeds.

None of the other news platforms considered by this study (*Los Angeles Times*, Young Turks, Associated Press) come anywhere close – at least in their current forms – to meeting the community needs of any of the given typologies. Much can be learned,

however, from looking beyond this simple set and identifying other spaces in which these typologies are clearly thriving. The Room for Debate webpage of *The New York Times*, for example, bears a great resemblance to the given typological definition of an agonistic confrontation. Similarly, Ta-Nehisi Coates' blog – a component of *The Atlantic* magazine – is a rich and powerful example of a living and evolving rhetorical democracy (or perhaps, more granularly, an ongoing series of rhetorical democracies). Lastly, the Collaborative Discovery Engine (also known as "Opinion Space"), an innovation of the College of Engineering and School of Information at the University of California at Berkeley, when applied to such public affairs projects as the State of California Report Card, demonstrate how a monitorial citizenry can be highly active and viable. Each of these three are assessed in brief.

Though it understandably emanates from one of the largest, most influential and best-resourced mainstream newspapers in the world, *The New York Times'* Room for Debate platform may very well constitute the most progressive and ambitious attempt to modernize the role of traditional media while not supplanting its historic core. Here, elites (i.e. *New York Times* reporters and editors) still generate and disseminate news content in much the same way that they have for more than 160 years. What comes next, however, is another matter entirely. In a very clear and deliberate way, Room for Debate creates the conditions for an agonistic confrontation, and even the title of the forum itself suggests consensus should not be an overarching goal. To begin a dialogue, *Times* editors author a very brief synopsis of a given issue, embed one or more links from recent articles that appeared in the paper, and then ask several guiding questions to aid in

framing the debate. In one recent example, involving the water crisis in the western United States, the introduction read as follows:

> With water increasingly **scarce in the drought-ravaged American West**, many states could face drastic rationing without rain. Even with more sustainable practices, the **future of water in the West is not secure**. Population growth, conflicting demands for resources, and the unpredictable nature of a changing climate will all exacerbate the crisis of an already parched landscape. What are the best ways to share the water? And how can we ensure it lasts for the foreseeable future? (*New York Times*, 2014, June 9, emphasis added to indicated embedded hyperlinks).

A handful of debaters representing at least two (but often more) sides to a given issue are then invited by the *Times* to contribute an essay of not more than 500 words to energize discussion and seed what will then be a more expansive discussion among members of the online community. In the given example, six debaters, emerging as credible citizen journalists, included: a professor from the University of Arizona whose research investigates the economics of the water supply; a senior fellow at the Public Policy Institute of California who advocates for a water rights exchange; a renowned dietician from the Netherlands claiming that American diets and consumption habits are responsible for water shortages; the director of a non-profit recycled water research foundation; an urban water policy expert; and the general manager of a regional water authority. Each of their contributed essays states a clear claim that is then supported by considerable evidence in the form of facts, specialized research findings, or short descriptions of relevant lived experiences. The broader community then engages in a lengthy debate that is both civil and representative of the broader complexity of the issue. No attempt is ever made, however, to arrive at a single answer to the questions that have been asked; instead, members of the online community engage as adversaries (with varying degrees of politeness), staking their claims and justifying their positions. In this

rather intensive back and forth, contributions ranked as readers' favorites (the platform offers such a tool) are typically those that either best connect some of the issue's conceptual dots or reveal a provocative, alternative dimension. To put it more simply, political cognition is an invaluable asset to the community.

A second storied news outlet, *The Atlantic*, is home to another flourishing exemplar of one of the four typologies defined previously. Ta-Nehisi Coates, a senior editor and popular blogger for the periodical, is actively creating, supporting and catalyzing an impressive series of rhetorical democracies (without naming them as such) surrounding some of the most profound political issues of the day. To better understand his approach, the researcher examined his broader involvement with the online community following the publishing of one of his most prominent recent features – the May 21, 2014, cover story arguing for reparations for African-Americans.

It is important to note that Coates has an established reputation within the online arena for doing something that is, on the one hand, rather easy to describe, but, on the other, tremendously time consuming. In an interview with NPR On the Media's Bob Garfield, Coates described both sides of the coin:

> I always tell people it's like a dinner party, and I try to host it that way. I try to keep the conversation interesting, in terms of what is the bane of all comments sections, and that is, you know, rude commentary, people going over the line, trolling, that sort of thing. I generally follow the same rules, so I always tell people, if you were in my house and you insulted one of my guests, I would ask you to leave. I don't understand why it would be any different in a comments section... [the time I have to invest in keeping the conversation civil and directed] is way, way too much, and more than I ever expected. I invest at least as much time in curating and in hosting as I do in actual writing. It can get really, really hectic. Blogging will burn you out, period. I think blogging plus having to curate definitely is a load. And I'm of the mind that it's not something that somebody should do for the rest of their life (Garfield, 2013).

For as long as he chooses to sustain the juggling act, then, Coates will continue to be the exceedingly rare combination of mainstream journalist, abounding blogger, and perhaps most important of all, extraordinarily committed moderator. While Coates carries with him the credibility of an elite journalist, his blog is clearly one in which is the sole master, and his rules, though hardly onerous (he expresses them quite casually and even comically) reveal that he is the lone enforcer, judge and jury of what is appropriate and what is not:

> We've been through this before, but it's a good time to go through it again. Here are the basics of commenting here. One thing worth adding is that I need people to understand that this is a moderated space. I know that most blogs do a minimum of moderation. But there's quite a bit here. It's all after the fact and transparent, but this is supposed to be a dinner party. It's not a food fight. Here are some road rules: 1.) Try to assume the good will, and honest motives, of your fellow commenters. Half of the unnecessary beef I see up here comes from basic misunderstandings. I'm not saying that there aren't really differences. There most certainly are. But the point is to spend our time on those, as opposed to what we "think" someone was trying to imply. 2.) Try not to be unnecessarily antagonistic. This rarely happens here, but I generally find that an extra heap of sarcasm ("Heh. Yeah, that's real intelligent.') or the occasional tweaking ("I'll be commenting on you momma tonight!") or even the threat for bodily harm ("What's that about Michelle Obama? I'LL CUT U!!!") tends to serve as distractions. I mean, it's fun, but probably not good for the neighborhood. 3.) If your comment is "held for moderation," it rarely means that you've said something objectionable. More likely you've managed to trip the spam filter. Send me an e-mail. I'l fish it out as soon as possible. 4.) It's worth remembering that this is a liberal blog, written by a guy whose politics are unfailingly liberal. So if you see me defend Huck or Palin, it's probably not because I'm "going soft" on them, being "too polite," or "a sleeper agent for birthers the nation over." It's most likely just on that one issue. 5.) There are no set of rules for why someone might be deleted or banned. The only big one holds that if you came here, through google's news portal, to tell us why Sarah Palin is our country's foremost intellectual, you will be banned. Beyond that, don't be an ass, and we'll be fine. 6.) White people. Never, ever comment on one of my barbershop threads. We tried this once. Someone ended telling me to go to Hair Cuttery. In Obama's America, I thought you guys might be ready. You're not and hence banished to the bleachers. Just kidding. Sorta. I mean damn, Hair Cuttery?? 7.) Claiming that conversate isn't a word, is a bannable offense. Ditto for "irregardless." And "overstand." All words are words. That is all (Coates, 2010).

Though he may be unapologetic for his chosen level of monitoring and moderating, he readily recognizes that subjects as controversial as reparations demand that discussants have sufficient space and freedom to engage in this shared exploration of a very sensitive topic. In this way, such a discussion becomes the very kind of public event Hauser (1999) suggested in his discussion of rhetorical democracies, in which individual contributions made by members of what would otherwise be considered to be an inchoate group create a coalescing force that can result in collective action. As opposed to searching for the destination of some elusive truth reached through rational-critical means (as in public spheres) or the sustainment of adversarial conditions required to fend off the onset of hegemony (as in agonistic confrontations), rhetorical democracies derive energy from their evolutionary nature. Coates, an African-American whose own thinking changed radically on the subject of reparations over a three-year span, is creating the conditions by which others can share in the ongoing journey (though he obviously remains at the helm). In the initial moment of discussion, Coates offers not only a very lengthy, multi-part essay on the topic to prime the conversation but also a relatively open space within which discussants can express more raw opinions and perspectives. He opens the forum by suggesting:

> Here is your uncurated space to talk about reparations. Later we will have a curated space according to the usual rules on my blog. Even though this is uncurated – it is still moderated. In other words, you still have to obey basic *Atlantic* rules of commenting. No one will try to steer the conversation, but namecalling and blatant trolling will still bring the pain of banhmmer. Think of this as Hamsterdam. But what happens in Hamsterdam, must stay in Hamsterdam (Coates, 2014).

This three-step process – priming the conversation, allowing for an open period of period, and then curating a discussion – is highly effective in not only activating and propelling

the rhetorical democracy but also in readying discussants to be actively engaged in contributing to a shared and dynamic search for a deeper understanding.

If Ta-Nehisi Coates' blog is demonstrative of the potential that newer technologies, when administered appropriately, hold in empowering rhetorical democracies, it is safe to say that the groundbreaking work of the CITRIS Data and Democracy Initiative at the University of California at Berkeley may possess equivalent capacity to enliven monitorial citizenries. Noting that the most common interface for Internet comments is a list, sorted either chronologically or by binary ratings, researchers endeavored to build an interface that was both more readily scannable and did not have a tendency to lead to cyberpolarization and the the reinforcement of extreme opinions. Employing a combination of discursive and engineering tools (deliberative polling, dimensionality reduction and collective filtering), the team introduced a so-called "collaborative discovery engine" named Opinion Space (Faridani, Bitton Royokai, & Goldber, 2010):

> Opinion Space solicits opinions to a set of controversial statements as scalar values on a continuous scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree) and applies dimensionality reduction to project the data onto a two-dimensional plane for visualization and navigation, effectively placing all participants onto one level playing field. Points far apart correspond to participants with very different opinions, and participants with similar opinions are proximal. One of our goals is to move beyond one-dimensional characterizations of opinion: the arrangement of points is statistically optimized to convey the underlying distribution of opinions and does not correspond to conventional left/liberal and right/conservative polarities. Participants are also asked to contribute a textual comment in response to a discussion topic; each comment is associated with the position of the contributing user in the visualization space. We designed Opinion Space to be a self-organizing system that rewards participants who consider the opinions of those with whom they might normally disagree (p. 1175-1176).

In a controlled experiment, when Opinion Space was compared with a traditional (i.e. chronological) list interface, participants read a similar diversity of comments but

were significantly more engaged with the system and had noticeably higher agreement with and respect for the comments they read (Faridani, Bitton Royokai, & Goldberg, 2010). Beyond being a potentially invaluable improvement for how monitorial citizens can more efficiently navigate online discussion spaces, Opinion Space has been utilized to engender such a public's participation on a much grander scale. The California Report Card, for example, a joint project between CITRIS and California's Lieutenant Governor, was designed to rethink the ways in which citizens and government officials interact. An op-ed penned by the lead collaborators suggested that the state's collective intelligence could be amplified through a better utilization of technology, noting:

> The methods used to find out what citizens think and believe are limited to elections, opinion polls, surveys and focus groups. These methods may produce valuable information, but they are costly, infrequent and often conducted at the convenience of government or special interests. We believe that new technology has the potential to increase public engagement by tapping the collective intelligence of Californians every day, not just on election day. While most politicians already use e-mail and social media, these channels are easily dominated by extreme views and tend to regurgitate material from mass media outlets. We're exploring an alternative (Newsom & Goldberg, 2014).

The alternative they describe is a mobile-friendly extension of the Opinion Space platform designed to streamline and organize public input for the benefit of policymakers and elected officials. Participants are initially asked to assign letter grades relative to the State of California's performance on six timely issues: implementation of the Affordable Care Act; quality of K-12 public education; affordability of state colleges and universities; access to state services for undocumented immigrants; laws and regulations regarding recreational marijuana; and marriage rights for same-sex partners (California Report Card, 2014). Once completed, participants are invited to virtually join other Californians in a virtual coffee house, in which six mugs are situated around a table.

Each mug corresponds to a unique suggestion made by another participant as to which public policy issues should be considered for inclusion in the next version of the Report Card. Mugs that are further away from the front of the table (the frame uses a first-person perspective) are suggestions likely to be less agreeable to the current user, just as mugs closer to the front are likely to be more agreeable. The user is then asked to rate the relative importance of the proposed issue for the next report card and also to assign a letter grade for the state's current level of effectiveness with respect to that issue. Just before submitting the completed report card, the user is asked to contribute his/her own submission of an important issue.

In this process, an extraordinary amount of useful data is being collected to inform civic leaders as to public opinion. Not only do elected and appointed officials gain an overarching sense of their ability to make progress on matters of public import, but they also gain a sense of which matters are of greatest concern. Interestingly, while the system allows for a large amount of information to be conveyed and shared, it is hardly a discursive space. Short of writing a one sentence suggestion at the end of the engagement, participants do little more than interacting with on-screen sliding scales. And yet the power of the tool – to convey citizen perspectives, to avoid special interest barriers or filters, and to take individualized communicative action that is then synthesized into both aggregate and granular political pulses – cannot be denied, nor can its initial popularity (statistics posted on the site show that more than 30,000 citizens throughout all of California's 58 counties have participated). Researchers have no immediate plans to incorporate any kind of traditional discussion forum into the platform and, nor would it appear is there any pressing need to do so.

Unleashing the Democratic: Guiding Questions For Tailored Reforms

By now it should be abundantly clear that there is no such thing as a singular definition of what constitutes an online community, let alone how it should behave, what it needs to thrive, who it needs to encompass, or why it exists in the first place. As such, trying to articulate even a modicum of guiding principles to best energize the public or more optimally inspire them towards a mode of democratic participation would be foolhardy. As this study has shown through the administration of an objective content analysis employing several measures of reasonable face validity, there are vast differences operating within different kinds of discussion boards; even within a singular platform, when controlling for disparate kinds of precipitating thematic content, such differences are highly significant. At a more conceptual level, this analysis gives rise to the idea of a multiplicity of publics, different typologies that each require fundamentally different starting materials and must satisfy various combinations of inherent community needs if it is to thrive. Embracing the notion of a multiplicity further suggests that there is no one way to exercise the democratic within online space, nor is there a corresponding, unitary mechanism for measuring the efficacy of such spaces.

And yet, it is equally clear that any number of digital forums have begun to figure out, at minimum, how they can get better. Colorful metaphors conjuring images of the loudest drunk at the bar, cesspools of hate-soaked racism, or monkeys writing Shakespeare while flinging feces begin to reek of complacency and the desire for a quick escape. In contrast, true pioneers – from the organizers of the *Daily Kos* to Ta-Nehisi Coates to information theorists at UC Berkeley to an inventive editorial page team at the "gray lady" – have refused to surrender their underlying belief that new technologies, if

utilized carefully, can help to unlock more of the potential arising from democratic exchange. In profoundly different ways, each demonstrates time and time again that the conveners of an online community – whether directly involved or detached, whether operating by a doctrine of rules or tapping into their own intuitions, whether seeking consensus or demanding adversarial conditions, whether creating the conditions for deliberation or the harvesting of pubic opinion – are perhaps the most prominent determinant of its likelihood of success. Though it can often be a fantastically exhausting, muddy and even thankless task, the more time and thought a convener gives to the overarching "why" and "how" of an online community the better off that community generally is.

One highly relevant finding of this investigation (RQ3) revealed significant evidence that news sources native to the Internet generated comments of much higher deliberative quality than those attached to news sites predating it. One possible explanation may be found in the fact that the Internet, as a superstructure, is radically different than the communication technologies proceeding it. Instead of being just a more flexible and robust channel for the transmission of information, the Internet created the conditions for truly multi-directional transmission and reception. In setting up platforms born in cyberspace, conveners were obliged to think more holistically about these new dynamics and consider the array of new opportunities and challenges associated with them. In contrast, the organizers of traditional news sites, at least initially, largely just bolted commenting interfaces (of disparate flexibly and possessing a wide variance of user tools) and continued to operate as they always had. This is not to say traditional news outlets cannot catch up to their Internet-native counterparts (e.g. both

The Atlantic and *The New York Times* have clearly made great strides), but it does mean that it requires a completely different approach – and much more expansive thinking – surrounding the role of journalists, the consideration of audiences, and the very purpose of political news in the first place.

What follows then, is not so much a how-to guide as it is a preliminary framework of critical guiding questions. Organizers need to understand and as clearly as possible articulate their respective motivations for offering online comment opportunities in the first place. Concurrently, members of the online community should have reasonably clarity regarding not only the participative expectations placed upon them but also a fair sense of how their needs as a coalescing public (corresponding to a variety of different typologies) will be met. In effect, active and deliberate consideration of these many questions functions as something of a calibration within a given public space. This effort, as illustrated in Figure 5, accounts for the interplay that has typically operated between the worlds of deliberation and news while also recognizing (given the introduction of new technologies) newer opportunities to modulate discursive norms and content attributes. Within the conceptual space of this historic back-and-forth, participants and journalists alike may possess greater opportunity to define the relative importance they place on the shared community needs of information engagement and processing. The calibrating choices they make should ideally correspond to the type of public they wish to be. While this study examined the broad contours of four such typologies (public sphere, agonistic confrontation, rhetorical democracy, monitorial citizenship), it is important to remember that a large but indefinable number – a multiplicity – theoretically exist.

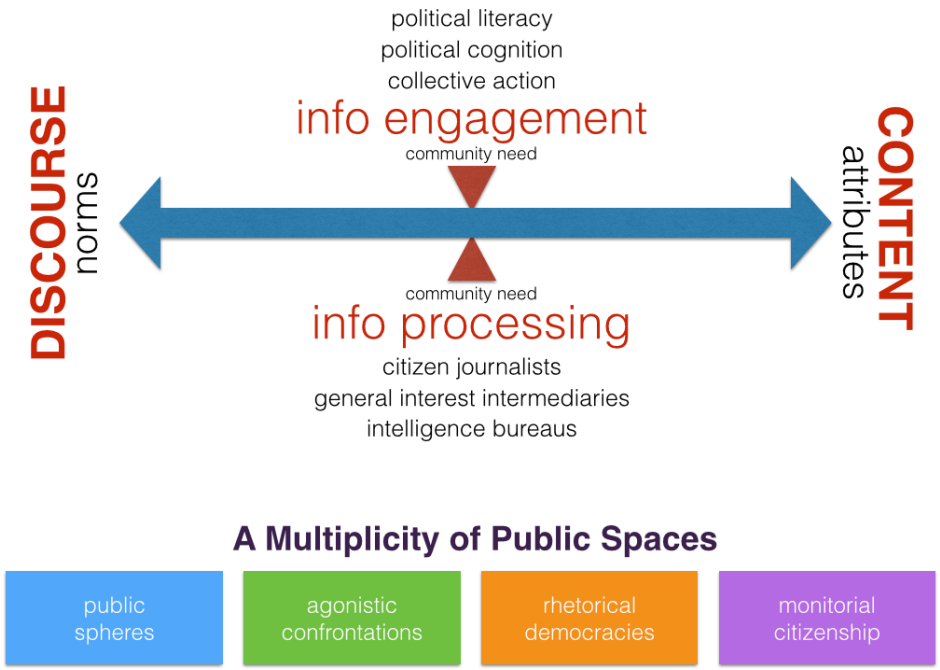

Figure 5: Calibration of Public Spaces

While there are, indeed, multiple ways to excite and enliven the democratic within such spaces, they will almost certainly fail if these calibrating decisions are not considered, even if only modestly. An emerging truism of online spaces vis-à-vis their democratic potential may very well be that choosing NOT to offer the opportunity for participation at all may be preferable than doing so either cavalierly or carelessly. Democracy is no easy proposition, and while a few key experimental advancements can generate great reason for optimism, a handful of failures certainly can erode confidence quickly.

As online platforms come into existence or as they seek to evolve, conveners (and, if possible, audiences alike) should begin by posing to themselves a basic but all-important question: Can we identify and clearly articulate the overarching mission, objective(s) and basic motivation(s) that allowed the idea of this discursive space to arise

in the first place? Grappling with this question is an extraordinarily important precursor to either launching a platform or making improvements. The answer can take on any number of forms and examples include (based upon this exploratory study) but are not limited to: to generate rationale discourse and strive for a consensus of understanding; to ensure that as many viewpoints as possible are given the opportunity to weigh in, all the while ensuring that no one perspective colonizes another; to allow for an ongoing, shared discovery of issues that are continuously evolving in their own right; to engender widespread participation and encourage people to take action beyond the discursive space; to allow members of a given audience to readily communicate their perspectives and opinions to elites (e.g. journalists, elected officials, etc.); to offer constructive critique of a given news article based upon a wealth of different vantage points and perspectives; to serve as a populist counterweight to elite-created news content; to engage in direct or indirect communication with the author or creator of content in an attempt to optimize the relevancy of current editorial trajectories; and to exploit a broader community's collective intelligence while synthesizing individual contributions into a salient sense of collective public opinion. An answer to this fundamental question helps both to gauge the level of a convener's inherent readiness to seed and then manage an online community while also revealing some of the basic contours of what typology of public may be most optimal given the particular circumstances.

Beyond the question of a site's raison d'être, additional initial reflection is needed to help establish and introduce a broader understanding of what participation both entails and even means. Rather than relying upon a single holistic question, this exploration involves a handful of important asks: are participants encouraged to cite externally

verifiable facts when making postings; are statements drawing upon participants' political cognition (including those arguments that begin with "I think") appreciated or generally frowned upon?; do participants have to clearly identify themselves and validate their authenticity?; is anonymity acceptable or not?; should participants asking questions of or debating with one another be encouraged?; should participants asking questions of or critiquing the author be acceptable?; what is the approximate range of viewpoints a community would hope to have, and should participants take responsibility for ensuring this range?; how often is one expected to participate in the community?; is a participant expected to respond to challenges made to his/her posting?; are participants expected to help other participants possessing vastly different viewpoints find common ground?; are participants invited to or given incentives to submit their own content that may be presented for more pronounced distribution?

The third set of questions address both the expectations for human monitoring and moderating as well as the deployment of various technological tools to either aid in that process of serve as a surrogate. As has been shown, the more high-functioning platforms have a very clear answer to the question: who (or what) is monitoring the site and what is their (or its) expectation for when a responding action may be necessary? Beyond this fundamental question, however, a number of other guiding choices come into focus: do participants have the power to identify postings that have either high or low value given the community's mission and standards?; do participants have a mechanism for reporting what comments may constitute a threat to the community, and if so, is the sequestration of comments automatic or subject to review?; who is the final arbiter of this decision and is there a reasonable appeal process?; what are the consequences of engaging in activities

that undermine the mission of the site?; how are these consequences enforced and by whom?; if an automatic system of filtering or moderating exists, what does the underlying logic look like?; how is content (both precipitating news content and subsequent comments) optimally organized given a community's needs?; are participants empowered with the abilities to either block or showcase other participants?; does the community have access to a repository of facts, vital information or examples that model appropriate participation?

Finally, conveners and participants alike must consider carefully the set of discursive norms that define the community. As has been shown, seemingly similar kinds of online spaces can have vastly different rules governing the appropriate use of language, and technical aids to filter out bad language (as they are unable to infer meaning) are often woefully inadequate. Generally, communities need to decide if they are highly prescriptive in what is acceptable and what is not (often requiring the clear statement of a corpus of words and terms that are off limits) or, as in Coates' blog or the *Daily Kos*, provide an equally clear, broader expression of where participants can and cannot go with respect to their underlying intentions. Though this study examined in depth four discursive norms – civility, politeness, justification and complexity – they were never intended to be exhaustive. While each deserves careful attention as to its relative importance, there are numerous other considerations that could be addressed to better establish expectations: are participants expected to use proper English when posting or are shortcuts and slang readily embraced by the community?; is there a standard range for the length of a contribution?; are alternative, less literal contributions to the discussion acceptable (i.e. video clips, sounds recordings, artistic expressions,

etc.)?; should there be a moratorium on the utilization of logical fallacies (i.e. red herrings, straw men, etc.); how does the community feel about more excitable forms of speech, such as the choice to use all capital letters, an overabundance of exclamation points or particular clauses that speak to anger or passion?

Not surprisingly, all of these questions as well as their overarching categorization began with an appreciation for the kind of multiplicity outlined throughout this chapter and summarized in Figure 4. For the scholar, the challenge remains to continue to better understand what is potentially an ever-expanding and ever-evolving constellation of definitions and possibilities for democratic engagement within this multiplicity. For the practitioner (conveners and participants alike), the pressing need is to establish what a community hopes to be (and, just as important, what it hopes not to be), to allow form to follow intended function, to be both deliberate and open-minded in encouraging its evolution, and to remain circumspect when presented with silver bullets or game-changing innovations. Technology may foster new possibilities to awaken the democratic; just as easily, it has the potential of lulling participants into thinking it has somehow become an easy proposition. No matter the era or the tools at one's disposal, Churchill's comments continue to ring true: "No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time" (Churchill, 1974).

Limitations of the Study

Even as this study arguably sheds new light on many of the profound differences that exist within online communities, and though it addresses some of the pathways to better unleash the latent democratic potential of a multiplicity of online publics, it is

essential to document its underlying limitations. While a handful of the investigation's weaknesses arose from resource and time constraints, more often than not its shortcomings were the result of an inherent tension: while the overarching research trajectory intended to operate at the frontier of existing research and scholarship on the bricolage of subject matter, the landscape of online platforms – along with the tools associated with them, prevailing thinking surrounding them, and the response of news organizations towards them – continued to evolve at an accelerating rate. Thus, some of the critical decisions made with respect to the overarching research design may, at times, appear to a reviewer to be too arbitrary or narrow-minded. If there is an air of artificiality about the study, it is the result of having to be decisive in choosing to peel back the first several layers of the proverbial onion, all the while knowing there are both many layers to the onion and, possibly, many other vegetables to consider. What follows, then, is a summary of the investigation's 10 most significant weaknesses.

First and foremost, it is important to note the data set analyzed could be regarded as at least somewhat dated. Three years of age would not typically be considered old by content analysis standards, but the rapid pace of digital evolution makes what happens in online spaces to be something of an outlier in this regard. Case in point, all four of the news sources considered by this study (along with countless others) saw significant changes to their approaches to managing online comments between the time data were first collected and when they were analyzed. It is known that, at least in the case of YouTube, some of these changes had a profound impact on the overall number of comments posted. At the same time, the introduction of new tools – such as those allowing users to hide, filter or prioritize the comments they see – arrived on the scene

after data had been collected but before findings could be assessed. For example, the chronological ordering of comments (the only choice when data were harvested) is now just one of several sequencing options available to users (and hardly the most popular one at that). Quite literally, the whole interface through which users engage with an online community has shifted significantly during the period of study. As a result, the generalizability of the findings into current and future periods becomes somewhat problematic.

Equally a concern for the overall strength of the study's generalizability was the decision to scrutinize comments coming from just four news sources; as shown in Figure 1, each of these four organizations represented a respective quadrant in the 2x2 array between channel modality and channel constitution. While care was taken to choose the occupants of these quadrants with respect to overall popularity and (at least then) concern for relative consistency in the commenting interfaces across the four, it is too much of a conceptual leap to suggest that any one platform could ably or wholly represent one of these groups. Not only did the study's findings clearly demonstrate that significant differences in deliberative quality existed across the discussion boards of the four news sites, the significance of those differences was also readily apparent in forums that shared the same commenting platform (i.e. Young Turks and Associated Press, both of which operate on the YouTube platform). Moreover, while the original grouping technique (as shown in Figure 1) proved invaluable in systematizing the preliminary exploration of the discursive landscape, what emerged from the analysis is the need to think of a different organizing construct altogether, and one more in line with what is depicted in Figure 4.

Added to this important question of representativeness is the potential for inherent biases to be present based upon ideological predispositions within the different online communities. Again, while the choices of news sources were made judiciously to best meet the data needs corresponding to the study's primary research questions, a troubling consideration is that the broader left-right spectrum (at least from an American perspective) is not well represented. *Daily Kos* and Young Turks, for example, are unabashedly leftist-progressive in advancing their activist agenda. In addition, *The Los Angeles Times* is widely regarded as having a left-of-center editorial slant. Though it has its critics on both the right and the left, the Associated Press operates as an apolitical, not-for-profit corporation feeding print articles and audiovisual content to member news organizations around the world. The absence of a right-leaning news organization from the mix weakens the overall generalizability of the findings. For example, while the findings did show that commenters communicated differently (at least in terms of the four measures of deliberative quality) across these four left-leaning and centrist discussion boards, it is entirely possible that this finding would not hold true if right-learning news platforms were examined. A fuller investigation would have adopted a more holistic consideration of the ideological spectrum.

This concern raises another issue: outside of the brief inspection in the supplementary analysis, no attempt is made to think more granularly as to who are the actual commenters making discursive contributions. As individual comments constitute the unit of analysis for this study, a more thorough understanding of actual participants would certainly have been helpful (and likely further illuminating). And while the methodology was deliberate in harvesting data from anonymous users, there could have

been a greater accountability of, at minimum, the uniqueness of users. As it is currently constructed, and as it was used to differentiate between robust threads and non-robust threads, the research design is incapable of distinguishing between, for example, a lengthy back-and-forth between two users and a sustained conversation among a larger group of participants. The total number of unique users within a given conversation is simply not a consideration. While anonymous platforms make it relatively easy to invent and utilize new pseudonyms (all of which is non-verifiable by the researcher), it is fairly easy to tell, at least when one is reading a chain of comments, when a given chain is a dialogue between a few and when it is among many. As the content analysis scrutinized individual postings, however, and not chains, individual pseudonyms attached to each of the nearly 17,000 comments registered would have been required to first be collected and then used to differentiate (using a more sophisticated procedure) between robust and non-robust discussions.

Beyond the data set and questions of broader sampling is the need to reconsider the measures of deliberative quality. As a strictly exploratory study, the current investigation can make do with binary attributes to the variables of civility, politeness, justification and complexity. To go any further, however, more complex measures will be required. As of now, the research design cannot gauge the difference between a comment that contains a single instance of vulgarity and one taking the form of a profanity-laced tirade. It can merely distinguish between "polite" and "impolite." With no gradations, there is no possibility of using the methodology to conclude, for example, that one comment is "less polite" or "significantly less polite" than another. Equally important, the broader measurement of overall quality (as the simple sum of the four

component measures) can take on only one of only five values. Though it would require considerably more work (plus time and resources), introducing greater precision into each of the measurements would not only reveal much more in the way of depth but also make the methodology more portable for future investigations.

Given what has been articulated as the emerging need to consider a multiplicity of online publics, it is reasonable to assume that the given calculation of deliberative quality is heavily skewed towards certain typologies of publics and away from others. As discussed previously and illustrated in Figure 4, the four components of deliberative quality utilized in this study are important norms within the construct of public spheres; they are less important for agonistic confrontations and rhetorical democracies, and they have little value for monitorial citizenship. Adding their measures together makes a fair degree of sense for public spheres and their prescribed mode of employing so-called "ideal speech types." Here, this compound measure of deliberative quality makes intuitive sense and would likely be highly correlated with overall levels of efficacy and vibrancy within such a space. Against the backdrop of other typologies, however, this definition begins to lose meaning.

Finally, there is an enduring concern as to the decision to separate (irrespective of the given methodology) robust from non-robust threads. While doing so revealed higher levels of deliberative quality at work in robust threads (and, correspondingly, much lower levels within non-robust threads), there is indeed something inherently artificial about the choice to distinguish between types of chains (or to even think in terms of chains) in the first place. Before the advent of user-friendly management and sorting tools, participants simply viewed a chronological list (with responses to a given post indented accordingly).

It is simply not known, nor does this study truly take into account, the extent to which users are able (or even seek) to wander through the bevy of comments and navigate their way down particular threads. No less important, the metaphor of the "loudest drunk at the bar" is an important one. Given the study's design, the researcher is able to easily filter out the "drunk's" effect; participants, who actually exist in the space, have no such capabilities (or certainly did not at the time when data were collected).

In choosing to focus on robust threads, too, this research clearly sets its sights on delving into the differences between the segments of online discussion boards that are already working, on average, rather well. Doing so is somewhat counterintuitive and, as has been shown, the widespread negative criticism hoisted upon such forums is largely born out of of their darker elements (and thus, more prevalent in non-robust threads). In the hopes of ultimately proposing a slate of tailored reforms intended to better unleash the democratic potential of such spaces, the researcher was deliberate in attempting to better understand what was inherently healthy and then trying to find ways of further improving that health. An alternative approach could have been to scrutinize what was most destructive and then prescribe ways to mitigate against – or better still, neutralize – those factors.

Opportunities for Additional Research

Most immediately, and as implied by the preface to Chapter 5, it would be highly worthwhile to repeat the study, using much the same methodology, and examine what impact (if any) the elimination of pseudonyms and anonymity from the four platforms investigated have had on the underlying findings. Anonymity has both psychological and

sociological pluses and minuses associated with it, and gauging the net effect may shed new light on where in the multiplicity it could be of benefit.

The study would, unquestionably, benefit from both a significant expansion of its time horizon and the utilization of a more extensive array of news sources. Given that so many news sites have already tinkered – or in some cases, overhauled – their commenting platforms, the possibility naturally arises for a series of pre- and post-change content analyses to be conducted and then compared. The Digital Age is creating tools at an astonishing pace; the need to maximize the speed of roll-out and implementation, however, more often than not far outweighs the necessity of gauging their effectiveness. Such investigations could perform an invaluable public service and engender an appreciation for better assessing what already exists.

Perhaps the most ambitious new direction for this research would be to blend the methodologies of content analysis and active experimentation. Conceivable if not easily, different online communities could be created with each modeled upon a particular typology of public. Different stimuli could then be applied – be it the introduction of different community expectations, the tweaking of rules, changes to the digital infrastructure, a modulation in the overarching approach to moderation, etc. – and the various impacts measured. What the current study has shown is that there is a need to consider an array of differently constituted online publics. What it cannot yet show is the extent to which the various components (needs, norms, etc.) of these publics may possess different power in activating the democratic. The ability to consider the possibilities at hand with greater sophistication, all the while recognizing that there is no optimal engineering, would be an invaluable step forward.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

SAMPLE OF POLITCAL NEWS ARTICLES/SEGMENTS PRECIPITATING USER COMMENTS

Date	Source	Title	# Comments
2/1/11	Young Turks	U.S. oil drilling in response to Egypt protests?	353
2/1/11	AP	Obama: Egypt's transition must begin now	43
2/1/11	Daily Kos	GOP redistricting efforts languishing	35
2/2/11	Young Turks	Barbara Bush pro-gay ad	464
2/2/11	AP	Gibbs: Obama condemns violence, calls for change	66
2/2/11	Daily Kos	H.R. 3 hides even bigger dangers than redefinition of rape	48
2/3/11	Young Turks	Record profits during recession?	157
2/3/11	AP	Bernanke: Economy better; budget unsustainable	33
2/3/11	Daily Kos	GOP unveils pro-greenhouse gas legislation; White House vows veto	83
2/3/11	LA Times	House Republicans propose $74 billion in budget cuts	20
2/4/11	Young Turks	GOP budget lie exposed	105
2/4/11	AP	Unemployment falls to 9.0%, only 36K new jobs	59
2/4/11	Daily Kos	Census shows a dramatic browning of America	130
2/4/11	LA Times	Obama urges Egypt to go into transition process 'right now'	9
2/5/11	Young Turks	Mark Foley loves young Republicans	150
2/5/11	AP	US backs Egypt reform moves, seeks support	35
2/5/11	Daily Kos	The folly of raising the Social Security retirement age	88
2/5/11	LA Times	Egypt's talks with opposition are 'extraordinary,' a possible turning point, John Kerry says	8
2/6/11	Young Turks	Senator's blatant lie about big coal	106
2/6/11	AP	Elaborate ceremony for Reagan centennial	21
2/6/11	Daily Kos	The final verdict on the Bush Doctrine	105
2/6/11	LA Times	Conservative Democrats switch to GOP across the deep south	34
2/7/11	Young Turks	Rand Paul – Cut foreign aid (Is he right?)	525
2/7/11	AP	Obama: White House, CEOs must work together	72

2/7/11	Daily Kos	Blue Dogs feeling ignored by Pelosi	89
2/7/11	LA Times	Obama a business booster in Chamber of Commerce speech	59
2/8/11	Young Turks	Tea Party R's kill Patriot Act?	62
2/8/11	AP	Biden touts high-speed rail investment in Philly	62
2/8/11	Daily Kos	Health insurers continue to drop children's coverage	94
2/8/11	LA Times	Most Americans say Obama is handling Egypt about right, Pew poll says	3
2/9/11	Young Turks	Tea Party rep. wrong about stimulus bill	60
2/9/11	AP	Napolitano: Threat may be highest since 9/11	98
2/9/11	Daily Kos	White House to propose cutting energy assistance for poor	260
2/9/11	LA Times	House Republicans' spending cuts fall short of goal	31
2/10/11	Young Turks	Sarah Palin vs Rick Santorum – CPAC strike back on Fox News	140
2/10/11	AP	Top intel officials: Terror remains top US threat	18
2/10/11	Daily Kos	ME-Sen: Snow removal: Tea Party Express targets Olympia Snowe	96
2/10/11	LA Times	CPAC: Donald Trump says he's considering a 2012 presidential run	60
2/11/11	Young Turks	How being gay kills – GOP Representative	222
2/11/11	AP	Govt. to wind down Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac	12
2/11/11	Daily Kos	WSJ: White House will leave Social Security out of budget	56
2/11/11	LA Times	CPAC: Mitt Romney says Obama is 'weak president'	112
2/12/11	AP	Paul wins Conservatives' straw poll	83
2/12/11	Daily Kos	Obama gives preview of budget: Freezes and investments	158
2/12/11	LA Times	Ron Paul of Texas wins CPAC presidential straw poll	28
2/13/11	Young Turks	Fox News Egypt panel rips democracy	88
2/13/11	AP	Obama takes scalpel to budget, avoiding pain	106
2/13/11	Daily Kos	So-called "Right to Work" and the assault on the middle class	215
2/13/11	LA Times	John Boehner: 'Not my job' to convince skeptics on Obama birth, religion	110

2/14/11	Young Turks	President Obama's budget proposal – analysis	85
2/14/11	AP	Clinton: GOP 2011 budget devastating for security	65
2/14/11	Daily Kos	Ezra Klein: The White House is calling for Social Security Talks	107
2/14/11	LA Times	Obama begins rollout of budget certain to spark strong debate	83
2/15/11	Young Turks	GOP in favor of loose nukes?	189
2/15/11	AP	GOP: No presidential leadership on budget	27
2/15/11	Daily Kos	Poll: Overwhelming support for immigration reform with border security, path to citizenship	59
2/15/11	LA Times	Senate passes extension of Patriot Act provisions	14
2/16/11	Young Turks	Boehner OK w/ Americans losing jobs	131
2/16/11	AP	New Obama spokesperson steps into spotlight	43
2/16/11	Daily Kos	Can Republicans avoid a federal shutdown without ditching their tea partiers?	91
2/16/11	LA Times	CBS News poll: Most Americans don't want to strip healthcare law of its funding	8
2/17/11	Young Turks	Obama sides with Tea Party?!	250
2/17/11	AP	Bernanke: Fed moving ahead on financial revamp	16
2/17/11	Daily Kos	Boehner threatens shutdown over spending bill	205
2/17/11	LA Times	Sarah Palin making rounds among socially conservative groups	36
2/18/11	Young Turks	Investigations on WMD lies that led to Iraq war	202
2/18/11	AP	Raw video: House abortion debate gets personal	150
2/18/11	Daily Kos	Pelosi blasts GOP's 'so be it' attitude towards government shutdown	41
2/19/11	AP	House passes sweeping cuts to domestic programs	200
2/19/11	Daily Kos	CPAC, bowing to Santorum's conservative stool, bans groups that support gay equality	50

2/20/11	Daily Kos	Senate panel to cut Social Security and Medicare is based on imaginary theory of legislation	70
2/20/11	LA Times	After House passage of GOP budget cuts, lawmakers head home to hear from voters	26
2/21/11	Daily Kos	Deficit commission members forget they didn't make recommendations	52
2/21/11	LA Times	Gallup: Solidly Democratic states are down by half	4
2/22/11	Young Turks	Mike Huckabee a dangerous candidate for president?	137
2/22/11	AP	Oil prices surge as Libya protests mount	21
2/22/11	Daily Kos	State of the Nation Poll: More Dem voters say we're on 'wrong track'	46
2/22/11	LA Times	Harry Reid offers plan to avert government shutdown	20
2/23/11	Young Turks	O'Reilly – Obama won't defend liberals	164
2/23/11	AP	Obama dispatches Clinton for talks on Libya	113
2/23/11	Daily Kos	House GOP scrambles to avoid blame for government shutdown	37
2/23/11	LA Times	Gay marriage: questions and answers about the Obama administration's decision	25
2/24/11	Young Turks	Crusades OK to radical Republican Santorum	170
2/24/11	AP	Mideast unrest translates to higher fares	3
2/24/11	Daily Kos	Freshman GOPer wants funding restored for program he cut	54
2/24/11	LA Times	Mitt Romney, Tim Pawlenty show support for Wisconsin governor	14
2/25/11	Young Turks	President Obama vs himself on unions	287
2/25/11	AP	White House: U.S. to impose sanctions on Libya	37
2/25/11	Daily Kos	House Committee takes aim at housing rescue programs	20
2/25/11	LA Times	State's racial past could hurt a presidential run by Haley Barbour	15
2/26/11	Young Turks	Cenk proud of Wisconsin protesters	203
2/26/11	AP	Anti-American protest in Pakistan	52
2/26/11	Daily Kos	Simon Johnson: U.S. isn't in fiscal crisis, but we're on our way	34
2/26/11	LA Times	'Tea Party' activists rally at national policy conference	43
2/27/11	Young Turks	Universities vs poor students	216
2/27/11	AP	Obama welcomes governors to White House	42

2/27/11	Daily Kos	Treasury's housing finance plan misses the mark	91
2/27/11	LA Times	Boehner signals reluctance about shutdown	5
2/28/11	Young Turks	Corporate tax cuts screwing states	315
2/28/11	AP	Obama offers alternative health care option	89
2/28/11	Daily Kos	Sarah Palin's popularity drops with Republicans. Again.	66
2/28/11	LA Times	GOP governors to launch ads backing Wisconsin Gov. Walker	8
3/1/11	Young Turks	Def. Secretary Gates: Crazy wars in Iraq, Afghanistan	234
3/1/11	AP	Mortgages to cost more without Fannie, Freddie	13
3/1/11	Daily Kos	House GOP votes unanimously to protect big oil subsidies	59
3/1/11	LA Times	House vote first step in averting government shutdown	12
3/2/11	Young Turks	'Federal government dumbass program' – Senator Hatch gives absurd speech	59
3/2/11	AP	Supreme Court hears argument over post-9/11 arrest	18
3/2/11	Daily Kos	NBC/WSJ: People overwhelmingly side with the unions; say leave Medicare, Social Security alone	82
3/2/11	LA Times	With stopgap funding bill passed, budget sparring resumes	2
3/3/11	Young Turks	Fox won't suspend Huckabee, Palin – 'fair and balanced' ploy	196
3/3/11	AP	Obama tells Libya's Gadhafi to go	65
3/3/11	Daily Kos	The public: Yes to union givebacks, no to the end of collective bargaining	97
3/3/11	LA Times	New Gingrich a step closer to Presidential bid	16
3/4/11	AP	Unemployment dips to 8.9 pct., 192K jobs added	38
3/4/11	Daily Kos	Republicans issue a new round of government shutdown threats	45
3/4/11	LA Times	GOP tries to sell idea that less spending means more jobs	90
3/5/11	Young Turks	GOP deficit plan would cost jobs – report	72
3/5/11	AP	Michael Moore rallies Wis. pro-union protesters	49
3/5/11	Daily Kos	GOP Senators try to block stricter rules for for-profit colleges	62

3/6/11	Young Turks	Coburn against Hingrich for President in 2012	60
3/6/11	Daily Kos	Open thread for night owls: Get ready for the 'womancession'	66
3/7/11	Young Turks	GOP college voter suppression & Michele Bachmann's IQ	334
3/7/11	AP	Report: Military leadership needs more diversity	66
3/7/11	Daily Kos	The latest GOP attack on health reform: middle class tax hikes	51
3/7/11	LA Times	GOP Presidential content begins to warm up	32
3/8/11	AP	Debate over Congress hrg. On Islamic radicalism	45
3/8/11	Daily Kos	GOP Senators push for more drilling as they cuts in renewables research	53
3/8/11	LA Times	Likely GOP presidential candidates praise GOD, criticize Obama in Iowa	9
3/9/11	Young Turks	Report: Banks horrible for investors	159
3/9/11	AP	Imams denounce House Muslic hearings	54
3/9/11	Daily Kos	Cantor: Democrats wrong to oppose Social Security, Medicate benefit cuts	105
3/9/11	LA Times	Leaders of Obama debt commission go rogue	33
3/10/11	Young Turks	Down goes Senator Ensign	131
3/10/11	AP	King: Muslim radicalization must be probed	74
3/10/11	Daily Kos	Pelosi: Bachmann's affordable care act charges 'imaginry'	376
3/10/11	LA Times	House Republicans vow to uphold the Defense of Marriage Act	51
3/11/11	LA Times	After Japan quake, Obama holds firm on oil reserves and drilling	20
3/12/11	Young Turks	Why Republicans cut education	500
3/12/11	AP	Wis. Gov. says support will grow for new law	139
3/12/11	Daily Kos	Palin, Huckabee send aides to RNC meeting on 2012 campaign	73
3/12/11	LA Times	State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley resigns	30
3/13/11	Young Turks	Why are gas prices going up? – Obama vs GOP	193
3/13/11	AP	Hawaiians offer hope and help for Japan	32
3/13/11	Daily Kos	Assault on student voting: Just the latest GOP overreach	78
3/13/11	LA Times	Haley Barbour bashes Obama on economic and energy policies	8
3/14/11	Young Turks	Republican defends big oil subsidies	168

3/14/11	AP	Obama 'heartbroken' over Japan devastation	86
3/14/11	Daily Kos	House Republicans come out swinging on job creation	63
3/15/11	AP	Energy chief: US will learn from Japan disaster	38
3/15/11	Daily Kos	The latest GOP non-jobs agenda: Repealing Wall Street refor	72
3/16/11	Young Turks	Crazy gun law – Caught on tape at open mic	162
3/16/11	AP	Japan nuclear crisis rattles financial markets	32
3/16/11	Daily Kos	Pelosi: We'll help Boehner pass funding bill – if he'll compromise	51
3/17/11	Young Turks	New tax rates for the rich possible	377
3/17/11	AP	Obama Trip Aims to Reinforce Latin American Ties	22
3/17/11	Daily Kos	House progressives reflect on being in the minority	24
3/17/11	LA Times	Democrats move to repeal Defense of Marriage Act	5
3/18/11	Young Turks	1/4 America kids in poverty & record profits, bonuses	47
3/18/11	AP	Obama: Coalition prepared to act in Libya	62
3/18/11	Daily Kos	Former Attorney General Mukasey lobbies for U.S. Chamber to gut foreign bribery law	45
3/18/11	LA Times	Sarah Palin traveling to India and Israel	26
3/19/11	Daily Kos	The continuing death of the FEC	53
3/20/11	AP	Raw video: Obama plays soccer	63
3/20/11	Daily Kos	Sarah Palin's 2008 campaign game-changer: Sarah Palin	118
3/20/11	LA Times	Obama juggles Libya war, Brazil trade	9
3/21/11	Young Turks	John McCain – Obama waited too long on Libya	419
3/21/11	AP	Obama lauds Chile's transition to democracy	15
3/21/11	Daily Kos	What do all Scandinavians, Belgians and Dutch have than 52 million Americans don't? Health care	106
3/21/11	LA Times	Tim Pawlenty files paperwork for Presidential bid	11
3/22/11	Young Turks	Called out – 2012 GOP Presidential hopefuls	240
3/22/11	AP	U.S. loses jet on 4th day of Libya operation	41
3/22/11	Daily Kos	Geithner poised to blow big loophole in Wall Street reform	121
3/23/11	Young Turks	Republican BS on Obama's handling of Libya	308
3/23/11	AP	GOP Presidential hopefuls off to slow start	17

3/23/11	Daily Kos	Donald Rumsfeld offers Obama advice on Libya	75
3/23/11	LA Times	Healthcare law's condition is anything but stable on its anniversary	11
3/24/11	Young Turks	Disastrously wrong predictions from Republicans on health care reform	249
3/24/11	AP	Census: One in six Americans are Hispanic	138
3/24/11	Daily Kos	Newtered: Mass scrubbing of Newt Gingrich's Twitter archive	64
3/24/11	LA Times	White House plans private briefing on Libya for Congress next week	3
3/25/11	Young Turks	Barbour for amnesty for illegal immigrants?	159
3/25/11	AP	Economy stronger, but oil prices a concern	30
3/25/11	Daily Kos	Cantor denies making progress to avoid government shutdown	32
3/25/11	LA Times	No big stars in a nebulous field of Republican hopefuls visiting Iowa	5
3/26/11	Young Turks	1 in 4 Americans have criminal record	48
3/26/11	AP	GOP address: Critical of health care overhaul	55
3/26/11	Daily Kos	Fed: Household wealth plummets 23% in two years	169
3/26/11	LA Times	House Republicans prefer bite-sized bills	7

APPENDIX B

DISCUSSION BREAKDOWN: LATIMES.COM

Date	# Comments	# Non-Threads	# Catalysts	# Responses	Mean Length	# Threads Examined	% Threads
2/3/11	20	14	3	3	1.00	0	30.0%
2/4/11	9	9	0	0	N/A	0	0.0%
2/5/11	8	6	1	1	1.00	0	25.0%
2/6/11	34	19	6	9	1.50	3	44.1%
2/7/11	59	18	13	28	2.15	6	52.5%
2/8/11	3	1	1	1	1.00	0	66.7%
2/9/11	31	15	6	10	1.70	3	52.6%
2/10/11	60	22	11	27	2.45	3	63.3%
2/11/11	112	27	26	59	2.26	10	75.9%
2/12/11	28	13	6	9	1.50	1	53.6%
2/13/11	110	15	25	70	2.80	14	86.3%
2/14/11	83	22	20	41	2.05	4	73.5%
2/15/11	14	3	4	7	1.75	2	78.6%
2/16/11	8	2	3	3	1.00	0	75.0%
2/17/11	36	18	6	12	2.00	2	50.0%
2/20/11	26	9	6	11	1.83	3	65.4%
2/21/11	4	4	0	0	N/A	0	0.0%
2/22/11	20	10	4	6	1.50	1	50.0%
2/23/11	25	8	5	12	2.40	2	68.0%
2/24/11	14	6	3	5	1.67	1	57.1%
2/25/11	15	10	2	3	1.50	1	33.3%
2/26/11	43	18	9	16	1.78	4	58.1%
2/27/11	5	2	1	2	2.00	0	60.0%
2/28/11	8	2	2	4	2.00	1	75.0%
3/1/11	12	6	2	4	2.00	0	50.0%
3/2/11	2	2	0	0	N/A	0	0.0%
3/3/11	16	11	2	3	1.50	1	31.3%
3/4/11	90	33	17	40	2.35	6	63.3%
3/7/11	32	9	10	13	1.30	1	71.9%
3/8/11	9	6	1	2	1.00	0	33.3%
3/9/11	33	7	7	19	2.71	3	78.8%
3/10/11	51	19	12	20	1.67	5	62.7%
3/11/11	20	10	3	7	2.33	1	50.0%
3/14/11	30	10	6	14	2.33	2	66.7%
3/15/11	8	3	2	3	1.50	1	62.5%
3/17/11	5	1	2	2	1.00	0	80.0%
3/18/11	26	7	7	12	1.71	3	73.1%
3/20/11	9	5	2	2	1.00	0	44.4%
3/21/11	11	9	1	1	1.00	0	18.2%

3/23/11	11	5	2	4	2.00	1	54.6%
3/24/11	3	3	0	0	N/A	0	0.0%
3/25/11	5	5	0	0	N/A	0	0.0%
3/26/11	7	7	0	0	N/A	0	0.0%
TOTAL	**1,155**	**424**	**239**	**485**	**2.03**	**85**	**62.7%**

APPENDIX C

DISCUSSION BREAKDOWN: AP YOUTUBE CHANNEL

Date	# Comments	# Non-Threads	# Catalysts	# Responses	Mean Length	# Threads Examined	% Threads
2/1/11	43	24	9	10	1.10	1	44.2%
2/2/11	66	39	7	20	2.86	2	40.9%
2/3/11	33	29	2	2	1.00	0	12.1%
2/4/11	59	17	9	33	3.67	2	71.2%
2/6/11	35	27	3	5	1.67	2	22.9%
2/7/11	21	10	3	8	2.67	1	52.4%
2/8/11	73	26	15	32	2.13	4	64.4%
2/9/11	62	32	11	19	1.73	4	48.4%
2/10/11	98	73	12	14	1.17	1	26.5%
2/11/11	18	18	0	0	N/A	0	0.0%
2/12/11	12	9	2	1	1.00	0	25.0%
2/13/11	83	38	10	35	3.50	3	54.2%
2/14/11	106	54	11	41	3.72	4	49.1%
2/15/11	65	24	13	28	2.15	3	63.1%
2/16/11	27	19	2	6	3.00	1	29.6%
2/17/11	43	25	5	14	2.80	1	44.2%
2/18/11	16	14	1	1	1.00	0	12.5%
2/19/11	150	30	16	104	6.50	4	80.0%
2/20/11	200	88	25	87	3.48	6	56.0%
2/2311	21	18	1	2	2.00	0	14.3%
2/24/11	113	49	16	38	2.38	5	47.8%
2/25/11	3	3	0	0	N/A	0	0.0%
2/26/11	37	31	3	3	1.00	0	16.2%
2/27/11	52	23	9	20	2.22	2	55.8%
2/28/11	42	26	6	10	1.67	4	38.1%
3/1/11	89	45	12	32	2.67	4	49.4%
3/2/11	13	13	0	0	N/A	0	0.0%
3/3/11	18	13	2	3	1.50	1	27.8%
3/4/11	65	36	7	21	3.00	2	43.1%
3/5/11	38	21	5	12	2.40	2	44.7%
3/6/11	49	22	5	22	4.40	1	55.1%
3/8/11	66	36	9	21	2.33	1	45.5%
3/9/11	45	26	5	14	2.80	1	42.2%
3/10/11	54	16	6	32	5.33	2	70.4%
3/11/11	74	26	14	34	2.43	3	64.9%
3/13/11	139	67	19	53	2.79	8	51.8%
3/14/11	25	6	4	15	3.75	2	76.0%
3/15/11	86	37	18	31	1.72	8	57.0%
3/16/11	38	22	3	13	4.33	2	42.1%

3/17/11	32	17	3	12	4.00	1	46.9%
3/18/11	22	15	3	4	1.33	1	31.8%
3/19/11	57	33	5	19	3.80	1	42.1%
3/20/11	59	37	5	17	3.40	2	37.3%
3/21/11	93	40	8	5	5.63	3	14.0%
3/22/11	15	9	2	4	2.00	1	40.0%
3/23/11	30	19	5	6	1.20	1	36.7%
3/24/11	17	5	5	7	1.40	2	70.6%
3/25/11	138	52	24	62	2.58	7	62.3%
3/26/11	30	25	2	3	1.50	1	16.7%
3/27/11	55	30	9	16	1.78	4	45.5%
TOTAL	**2,825**	**1,414**	**371**	**991**	**2.45**	**111**	**48.2%**

APPENDIX D

DISCUSSION BREAKDOWN: DAILYKOS.COM

Date	# Comments	# Non-Threads	# Catalysts	# Responses	Mean Length	# Threads Examined	% Threads
2/1/11	35	5	8	22	2.75	2	85.7%
2/2/11	48	10	10	28	2.80	4	79.2%
2/3/11	83	18	15	50	3.33	5	78.3%
2/4/11	115	26	23	66	2.87	6	77.4%
2/5/11	84	10	16	58	3.63	5	88.1%
2/6/11	105	22	16	67	4.19	4	79.0%
2/7/11	77	27	14	36	2.57	5	64.9%
2/8/11	94	17	15	62	4.13	4	81.9%
2/9/11	254	16	26	212	8.15	4	93.7%
2/10/11	85	24	10	61	6.10	3	83.5%
2/12/11	140	15	21	104	4.95	9	89.3%
2/13/11	215	17	20	178	8.90	3	92.1%
2/14/11	107	16	18	73	4.06	4	85.0%
2/15/11	59	9	8	42	5.25	4	84.7%
2/16/11	79	14	12	53	4.42	6	82.3%
2/17/11	181	35	30	116	3.87	8	80.7%
2/18/11	41	10	10	21	2.10	2	75.6%
2/20/11	58	13	9	31	3.44	3	69.0%
2/21/11	49	10	9	30	3.33	3	79.6%
2/22/11	46	10	11	25	2.27	4	78.3%
2/23/11	37	19	8	10	1.25	2	48.6%
2/24/11	54	26	9	19	2.11	2	51.9%
2/25/11	20	7	5	8	1.60	2	65.0%
2/26/11	34	8	5	21	4.20	3	76.5%
2/27/11	85	9	17	59	3.47	5	89.4%
2/28/11	66	12	16	38	2.37	4	81.8%
3/1/11	59	18	8	33	4.12	3	69.5%
3/2/11	82	14	15	53	3.53	7	82.9%
3/3/11	97	9	14	74	5.29	2	90.7%
3/4/11	45	17	8	20	2.50	2	62.2%
3/5/11	60	18	7	35	5.00	2	70.0%
3/6/11	64	16	10	38	3.80	4	75.0%
3/7/11	51	14	8	29	3.62	3	72.5%
3/8/11	51	21	12	18	1.50	6	58.8%
3/9/11	74	16	14	44	3.14	3	78.4%
3/10/11	36	12	8	16	2.00	3	66.7%
3/12/11	73	8	13	52	4.00	3	89.0%
3/13/11	77	23	15	29	1.93	5	57.1%

3/14/11	62	28	14	21	1.42	3	56.5%
3/15/11	69	14	11	44	4.00	3	79.7%
3/16/11	51	17	7	27	3.86	2	66.7%
3/17/11	23	12	5	6	1.20	1	47.8%
3/18/11	45	15	3	27	9.00	1	66.7%
3/19/11	52	10	9	33	3.67	3	80.8%
3/20/11	107	24	18	65	3.61	6	77.6%
3/21/11	104	8	15	81	5.40	3	92.3%
3/22/11	116	15	18	83	4.61	6	87.1%
3/23/11	74	26	14	34	2.43	5	64.9%
3/24/11	64	12	14	38	2.71	6	81.3%
3/25/11	32	17	6	9	1.50	3	46.9%
3/26/11	163	21	19	123	6.47	5	87.1%
TOTAL	**3,982**	**810**	**646**	**2,522**	**3.90**	**196**	**79.6%**

APPENDIX E

DISCUSSION BREAKDOWN: YOUNG TURKS YOUTUBE CHANNEL

Date	# Comments	# Non-Threads	# Catalysts	# Responses	Mean Length	# Threads Examined	% Threads
2/1/11	353	102	34	217	6.40	10	71.1%
2/2/11	464	262	50	152	3.04	10	43.5%
2/3/11	157	62	21	69	3.28	7	57.3%
2/4/11	105	36	16	53	3.31	4	65.7%
2/5/11	150	85	17	48	2.82	6	43.3%
2/6/11	106	30	14	62	4.43	3	71.7%
2/7/11	525	268	40	217	5.43	7	49.0%
2/9/11	62	47	6	9	1.50	2	24.2%
2/10/11	60	42	4	14	3.50	1	30.0%
2/11/11	140	86	39	15	2.60	7	38.6%
2/12/11	223	123	32	78	2.44	9	49.3%
2/14/11	88	44	9	35	3.89	4	50.0%
2/15/11	85	32	13	40	3.08	3	62.4%
2/16/11	189	70	29	90	3.10	9	63.0%
2/17/11	131	67	16	38	2.38	6	41.2%
2/18/11	250	90	38	122	3.21	17	64.0%
2/19/11	202	137	20	45	2.25	4	32.2%
2/23/11	137	57	21	59	2.81	10	58.4%
2/24/11	164	68	25	74	2.96	8	60.4%
2/25/11	170	83	19	68	3.58	5	51.2%
2/26/11	287	101	39	147	3.78	8	64.8%
2/27/11	203	66	31	106	3.42	7	67.5%
2/28/11	216	112	28	76	2.71	8	48.1%
3/1/11	315	83	43	189	4.40	5	73.7%
3/2/11	234	89	29	116	4.00	4	62.0%
3/3/11	59	29	9	21	2.33	3	50.8%
3/4/11	196	98	20	79	3.90	6	50.5%
3/6/11	72	32	7	33	4.71	2	55.6%
3/7/11	60	34	7	19	2.71	3	43.3%
3/8/11	334	192	52	90	1.73	19	42.5%
3/9/11	131	60	14	57	4.07	5	54.2%
3/10/11	159	74	17	68	4.00	5	53.5%
3/13/11	500	188	58	254	4.38	13	62.4%
3/14/11	193	76	27	90	3.33	6	60.6%
3/15/11	168	113	17	41	2.41	3	34.5%
3/17/11	162	68	27	27	2.48	10	33.3%
3/18/11	377	163	47	167	3.55	14	56.8%
3/19/11	47	20	11	16	1.45	5	57.4%
3/22/11	419	198	54	167	3.09	14	52.7%

3/23/11	240	107	38	95	2.50	8	55.4%
3/24/11	308	140	47	121	2.57	18	54.5%
3/25/11	249	120	33	96	2.91	10	51.8%
3/26/11	159	58	18	83	4.61	5	63.5%
3/27/11	48	18	9	21	2.33	3	62.5%
TOTAL	**8,897**	**4,030**	**1,145**	**3,684**	**3.22**	**316**	**54.3%**

APPENDIX F

CODING INSTRUCTIONS AND SCHEME

Overview & General Instructions

This study is investigating the quality of online user comments posted to online discussion forums hosted by one of four political news channels: *The Los Angeles Times* website, the *Daily Kos* website, The Young Turks YouTube Channel, and the Associated Press YouTube Channel. Data were collected over a two-month period beginning February 1, 2011 and concluding on March 31, 2011. A gross total of 16,859 comments were archived over the study period and, based upon a partitioning methodology designed by the researcher, a subset of 5,881 comments require encoding.

As a member of the two-person coding team, you will be responsible for encoding approximately one-half of this subset. The researcher is supplying you with printed copies of all comments you have been assigned to code. You are also being given full access to the digital archive of news content affiliated with these discussions as your assistance is needed in categorizing the collection of articles and segments.

You will receive compensation from the researcher according to the employment contract provided to you. In fulfillment of that agreement, you are required to:

- Utilize the provided coding scheme to the best of your ability and with as uniform a level of focus as possible. Though the data set is large, you are being provided with ample time to complete the coding assignment. As such, be sure to code only when you are well rested and can give the requisite attention to the project.

- Enter all coding data directly into the online GoogleDrive spreadsheet assigned to you. News source and date information have been preloaded into the spreadsheet and correspond to identifying information appearing on the printed sheets. You may open and use the online spreadsheet whenever you wish and as many times as you wish. Contact the researcher if you have any questions about the online spreadsheet or if you encounter any problems accessing it.

- Refrain from communicating with the other member of the coding team in any way until such time as the researcher has received all coding data. Should you have any questions about the coding scheme or any particular data elements, please contact the researcher exclusively.

- Complete all coding by September 1, 2012. Please contact the researcher immediately if, for any reason, you anticipate you will not be able to complete the assignment by this deadline.

Coding Scheme: Measures of the Quality of Deliberation

Each comment is considered discreet and must be coded separately as its own row within the online spreadsheet. Columns correspond to four measures of deliberative quality (civility, politeness, complexity and responsiveness) and are described in detail below.

Civility Measure

Can you answer yes to one or more of the following questions?

a) The discussant verbalizes a generalized or specific threat to democracy, democratic institutions or democratic values. Democracy is considered to be an amalgamation of the broader concepts of liberty, equality, and the rule of law.

   Example Yes: *"The U.S. Supreme Court should be disbanded and replaced by a committee of the NRA."*

   Example Yes: *"Freedom of speech should be eradicated."*

   Example No: *"When 2012 rolls around, we need to elect a new president."*

   Example No: *"I cannot believe in this day and age, with so many people below the poverty line, you can still vote Republican."*

b) The discussant verbalizes a threat to individual rights and freedoms. These threats may take the form of statements intending or promising to do physical, psychological or emotional harm with the goal of retarding the utilization of such rights and freedoms. Moreover, these threats may be directed specifically at another discussant or more generally at a citizen or group of citizens.

   Example Yes: *"If you're not gainfully employed, you should have no right to vote."*

   Example Yes: *"I'm going to rip [username's] tongue out so he can't yap any more!"*

   Example No: *"Pro-gay advocates need to take to the streets in protest of the Defense of Marriage Act."*

   Example No: *"If you don't like it, get off our duff and do something about it!"*

c) The discussant employs one or more antagonistic stereotypes – that is, the discussant distinguishes, labels and makes a judgment about a group of individuals – that are intended to antagonize, discredit or harm. These antagonistic stereotypes may be directed specifically at another discussant or more generally at a citizen or group of citizens.

   Example Yes: *"Cutting the capital gains tax just means more fancy sports cars and private jets for the uber-rich."*

   Example Yes: *"… [username] is a typical soccer mom who is convinced her kids are little angels that do nothing wrong."*

   Example No: *"Senior citizens are worried about the future of Social Security – and they should be!"*

   Example No: *"He's no different than many new immigrants who will work long hours for little pay and then send most of their money back to their home country."*

If you can answer yes to any of the above questions, **Civility = 0**.

If you cannot answer yes to any of the above questions, **Civility = 1**.

If the comment has been removed, flagged as spam, is indecipherable (including if it appears in a language other than English), or you simply cannot tell, **Civility = 99**.

Politeness Measure

Can you answer yes to <u>one or more</u> of the following questions?

a) The discussant engages in name-calling that is clearly intend to offend. These name-callings may be directed specifically at another discussant or more generally at a citizen or group of citizens.

   Example Yes: *"Senator King is an obnoxious prick."*

   Example Yes: *"[Username] is a total fraud and shouldn't even be allowed to post on this discussion board."*

   Example No: *"Politicians generally do a lousy job in terms of truly understanding the needs of their constituents."*

   Example No: *"[Username] is totally wrong in her analysis. She's looking at the wrong kinds of data."*

b) The discussant engages *ad hominem* attacks – that is, the discussant attacks another's characteristics or authority without addressing the substance of the argument. These attacks may be directed specifically at another discussant or more generally at a citizen or group of citizens.

Example Yes: *"I don't expect you to understand. After all, you're poor."*

Example Yes: *"[Username] has no business lecturing us about tax policy."*

Example No: *"President Bush lied to us. He said in the campaign he wouldn't raise taxes… and then he did."*

Example No: *"I can understand why the rich don't want a national health care program. It will likely lead to higher taxes and nearly all of them have private insurance already."*

c) The discussant uses vulgar language appearing in the dictionary at www.noswearing.com. These words may be expressed explicitly or clearly implied in the use of abbreviations, grawlixes or other obvious symbols.

Example Yes: *"How the f**k are we supposed to do that?"*

Example Yes: *"Holy @#$%&! You can't be serious!"*

Example No: *"Our taxes are going up again?! Jesus H. Christ!"*

Example No: *"The House of Representatives makes we want to barf."*

If you can answer yes to any of the above questions, **Politeness = 0**.

If you cannot answer yes to any of the above questions, **Politeness = 1**.

If the comment has been removed, flagged as spam, is indecipherable (including if it appears in a language other than English), or you simply cannot tell, **Politeness = 99**.

Justification Measure

Can you answer yes to <u>one or more</u> of the following questions?

a) The discussant justifies an argument or perspective by providing supporting evidence in the form of cited facts, embedded documents, web links, quoted/paraphrased comments from experts, etc.

   Example Yes: *"Senator Johnson took in $190K of PAC money according to the Center for Government Reporting."*

   Example Yes: *"How can [username] say that? Doesn't he remember what he posted two days ago?: www.youtube.com/acqwr122"*

   Example No: *"Everyone knows that Republicans favor small government."*

   Example No: *"President Obama has a war chest of $59 million already!"*

b) The discussant justifies an argument by providing supporting evidence in the form of a description of personal experience or a first-hand account

   Example Yes: *"When I got laid off from my job my unemployment benefits were only $600 per month. How can I survive on that?"*

   Example No: *"The average person receiving unemployment benefits gets about $600 per month. That's not very much at all."*

If you can answer yes to any of the above questions, **Justification = 0**.

If you cannot answer yes to any of the above questions, **Justification = 1**.

If the comment has been removed, flagged as spam, is indecipherable (including if it appears in a language other than English), or you simply cannot tell, **Justification = 99**.

Complexity Measure

Can you answer yes to <u>one or more</u> of the following questions?

a) The discussant incorporates opposing viewpoints into a given post (irrespective of whether he/she agrees with those viewpoints)

Example Yes: *"Who can tell who's right? Conservative say Obamacare will bankrupt the country. Liberals say health care is a right we owe our citizens."*

Example No: *"I agree with liberals in saying that access to affordable health care is a right just the same as free speech or worship."*

b) The discussant expresses a viewpoint in more than one way

Example Yes: *"The build-up of the military gets a bad rap. Not only does it stimulate large sectors of the economy but it also leads to the development of new technologies that improve every-day quality of life."*

Example No: *"The build-up of the military gets a bad rap. It stimulates large sectors of the economy."*

c) The discussant verbalizes his/her lack of certainty

Example Yes: *"I've wrestled for years with the abortion question and I still can't decide if I'm pro-choice or pro-life. My values as a citizen are at odds with my values as a Catholic."*

Example No: *"The pro-choice position is the only position that's consistent with the Bill of Rights."*

d) The discussant clearly asks an honest question (and not a rhetorical one) in an attempt to better understand an issue

Example Yes: *"How many young people voted in the last election?"*

Example No: *"Vote Democrat and expect lower taxes? How dumb do you think I am?*

If you can answer yes to any of the above questions, **Complexity = 0**.

If you cannot answer yes to any of the above questions, **Complexity = 1**.

If the comment has been removed, flagged as spam, is indecipherable (including if it appears in a language other than English), or you simply cannot tell, **Complexity = 99**.

Coding Scheme: Categorization of Corresponding Article/Segment

Each comment corresponds to an original printed article or broadcasted audiovisual segment. Two additional columns are included on the online spreadsheet and coders are asked to make appropriate categorizations of each corresponding article/segment.

Geographic Focus

Does the segment or article focus the **majority** of its attention on (1) political issues, discussions or considerations within the United States; or (2) political issues, discussions or considerations outside of the United States?

If (1), **Geographic Focus = Domestic**.

If (2), **Geographic Focus = International**.

If you cannot tell, **Geographic Focus = Cannot Tell**.

Example Domestic:	An article describing the Democratic Party's opposition to the Defense of Marriage Act.
Example International:	A segment describing widespread protests of the G7 summit in Paris.

Topical Focus

Does the segment or article focus the **majority** of its attention on (1) lawmaking, policymaking or public policy; or (2) on elections, balance of power discussions or political strategy?

If (1), **Topical Focus = Governing**.

If (2), **Topical Focus = Campaigning**.

If you cannot tell, **Topical Focus = Cannot Tell**.

Example Governing:	A segment describing a United Nations debate to dispatch humanitarian aid to Syrian refugees.
Example Campaigning:	A article detailing the current field of Republican Presidential candidates and their odds of winning the Iowa caucuses.

APPENDIX G

CODING QUICK SHEET

Pre-populated by Researcher:

Date of Article: ___ / ___ / 2011

Source:
- □ Associated Press YouTube Channel
- □ Young Turks YouTube Channel
- □ Los Angeles Times Website
- □ Daily Kos Website

Channel Constitution:
- □ Internet-Native
- □ Traditional

Channel Medium:
- □ Print
- □ Multimedia

Discussion Thread ID: Thread #: ___ Sequence #: ___

To Be Populated by Coding Team Members:

Measures of the Quality of Deliberation

Civility:
- □ 0 YES
- □ 1 NO
- □ 99 N/A

(a) threats to democracy; (b) threats to individual rights and freedoms; (c) antagonistic stereotypes

Politeness:
- □ 0 YES
- □ 1 NO
- □ 99 N/A

(a) name-calling; (b) ad hominem attacks; (c) vulgarity

Justification:
- □ 0 NO
- □ 1 YES
- □ 99 N/A

(a) cited facts; (b) cited personal experience

Complexity:
- □ 0 NO
- □ 1 YES
- □ 99 N/A

(a) opposing viewpoints; (b) multiple viewpoints; (c) lack of certainty; (d) honest question

Categorization of Corresponding Article/Segment

Geographic Focus	□ Domestic □ International □ Unable to Determine
Topical Focus	□ Governing/Policymaking □ Campaigning/Strategizing □ Unable to Determine

APPENDIX H

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

	Quality (M+H)	Civility = 1	Politeness = 1	Justification = 1	Complexity = 1
(RQ1) Quality: News Source	p < 0.001	p < 0.001	p < 0.001	p < 0.001	p < 0.001
AP DK LA YT	67% 91% 70% 80%	82% 94% 80% 91%	46% 74% 45% 63%	45% 54% 48% 47%	23% 40% 33% 30%
(RQ2) Quality: Channels I Medium	p < 0.001	p < 0.01	p < 0.001	p < 0.001	p < 0.001
Multimedia/Audiovisual Print	77% 87%	89% 91%	60% 70%	47% 53%	29% 39%
(RQ3) Quality: Channels I Constitution	p < 0.001	p < 0.001	p < 0.001	p < 0.05	p < 0.001
Internet-Native Traditional	85% 68%	92% 81%	68% 46%	50% 46%	34% 27%
(RQ4) Quality: Focus I Geographic	p = 0.230	p = 0.412	p = 0.597	p = 0.131	p = 0.736
Domestic International	81% 81%	90% 89%	63% 64%	49% 52%	33% 32%
Controlling for News Source	--	p = 0.514	p = 0.081	p < 0.01	p = 0.194
AP: Domestic International	--	80% 76%	46% 49%	47% 34%	25% 15%
DK: Domestic International	--	94% 94%	74% 76%	54% 52%	40% 36%
LA: Domestic International	--	81% 55%	45% 55%	49% 18%	33% 45%
YT: Domestic International	--	90% 91%	63% 65%	44% 55%	29% 35%
(RQ5) Quality: Focus I Topical	p < 0.01	p < 0.05	p < 0.01	p < 0.01	p < 0.001
Campaigning Governing	78% 82%	92% 90%	60% 65%	45% 50%	28% 34%
Controlling for News Source	--	p < 0.01	p < 0.05	p < 0.05	p < 0.001
AP: Campaigning Governing	--	100% 81%	50% 46%	34% 46%	3% 24%
DK: Campaigning Governing	--	92% 94%	66% 75%	45% 55%	32% 41%
LA: Campaigning Governing	--	94% 78%	47% 44%	40% 53%	32% 34%
YT: Campaigning Governing	--	93% 90%	61% 64%	47% 47%	27% 32%

Stastically Significant Variance

< 5% (or not s.s.)	5% -10%	10% -15%	15% -20%	> 20%

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