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(In)difference online

The openness of public discussion on immigration

Tamara Witschge

(In)difference online

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The openness of public discussion on immigration

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

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Introduction

Dutch multicultural society, once seen as a textbook example of how different cultures can live together, is under pressure. Whereas tolerance has long been seen as a trademark of Dutch society, in the last decade 'attitudes toward immigration and minority cultures appear to have become harsher' (Entzinger quoted by: Thränhardt, 2000: 172). Almost daily, the media report on the dichotomy between native and immigrant cultures and present the two 'groups' as being diametrically opposed. Tensions and anxieties are increasingly coming to the fore, and have intensified after incidents such as 9/11; the shift in politics stirred up by the late Pim Fortuyn, a Dutch politician who openly showed his contempt of Islamic culture; the Madrid bombings in 2003; the murder of filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a Muslim fundamentalist in 2004; and the London bombings of 2005.

Public debate on minorities focuses ever more on issues of social cohesion and asks to what extent natives and immigrants¹ can live together in a peaceful manner (Gijsberts & Dagevos, 2005: 66). Foreign media have also picked up on the perceived tensions. 'Increasingly, the Netherlands wonders whether diversity is always desirable', *the Economist* reported in April 2005. The public mood is described as 'deeply fearful of religious extremism and terrorism, and [one that] feels that too much stress has been laid on accommodating different values and faiths' ('The new Dutch model? – Living with Islam' 2005).

The differences between groups in society are perceived to be so substantial and fundamental that public debate seems close to reaching impasse; it is dominated by a discourse

¹In this thesis I use the terms 'native' (for *autochtoon*) and 'immigrant' (*allochtoon*), with the latter also referring to the children of immigrants (second-generation), whether or not they were born in the Netherlands. The official term currently used for those of immigrant descent (people with at least one foreign-born parent) is '*allochtoon*'. It covers both Western and non-Western immigrants, and applies to both first- and second-generation immigrants. Commonly, that is to say 'unofficially', the word *allochtoon* is used to refer only to *non*-Western immigrants and their children, and even more specifically to those of 'non-white skin colour' (Garssen, Nicolaas, & Sprangers, 2005: 96). In January 2005, about 1,7 (of a total of 16) million people living in the Netherlands were classified as non-Western immigrants. This total exceeded the number of Western immigrants (almost 9 percent of the Dutch population, with 1,4 million) at the end of the 1990s.

of 'us' versus 'them'. This focus on differences makes it difficult to exchange ideas constructively on how to deal with the problems that face today's society. Different groups in society do not seem to be willing to give each other room to speak of their experiences and opinions. Current public debate is (among other things) informed by the feeling that certain positions that have been suppressed for a long time, particularly against immigrants, can now be aired openly; there is finally freedom to speak one's mind, or even the 'truth' and a form of 'new realism' has emerged (Prins, 2002).

However, with this view, public debate has hardened and society has become polarized. Also, even though some argue that freedom of expression has increased, others feel that it is losing ground in the Netherlands:

In the Netherlands people say: if you don't like it here, you can leave. But views that are condemned by the majority should also be heard. Certain views are useful and clarifying. Nowadays, if you are anti-Muslim, you can say anything, but a view that opposes this cannot be expressed. In this fashion, it is not done to approve of the attacks on American targets in Iraq. The one camp can say anything, the other nothing. (...) It seems as though certain liberties are reserved for a large group, while the freedoms of a small minority are restricted (Böhler quoted in: Olgun, 2006).²

The British *Observer* similarly raised questions with regard to the limits on freedom of speech in light of the situation in the Netherlands following Theo van Gogh's murder. However, this concern pertains to the expression of anti-Muslim views, which would be repressed due to the climate in the Netherlands: 'Now, in a deeply polarized society, can free expression triumph over fear?' (Anthony, 2004).

In this situation where fear or disdain for the other, difference and tensions seem to dominate public debate, the question is how to deal with these differences in ways benefiting and not threatening democracy. In a democratic society, all citizens are ideally included in formal as well as informal politics, maybe not in the actual decision-making, but their voices should be heard in one way or another. Citizens should be granted equal rights and have equal positions in democratic society. These fundamental, basic rights of democracy are challenged in the Netherlands, or at least its citizens do not feel that they are always allowed to exercise these rights. The (perceived) differences between participants frustrate public debate, and seem only to be intensifying.

In a society with ever-increasing polarisation, facilitating dialogue becomes difficult. How can equality for different interests in society be ensured, when they are perceived to be diametrically opposed to each other? I will examine the way in which debate takes place when society is faced with (seemingly) insurmountable differences. How do these differences inform public debate and how do people interact with one another when confronted with these differences? I will specifically look at possible areas of in- and exclusion of voices and at the role new communication platforms play in this process.

²Britta Böhler was one of the lawyers of the alleged members of a terrorist cell called the *Hofstadgroep* on trial at the end of 2005. All Dutch quotes are translated by the author.

To examine what role difference plays in public discussion, I will discuss theories on the public sphere, or the realm where democratic debate (deliberation) takes place and where opinions are formed (Chapter 1). I will focus on the role difference plays in these conceptions of the public sphere. I will examine, in-depth, the notion of counter publics (coexisting multiple public spheres), as this notion provides ample space for difference in a democratic society. However, the idea that different views can be discussed in different publics or multiple public spheres (thus creating exclusive spaces for difference) does not answer the question of how different voices and different views come ‘together’ in public discussion. The question is, how can different views or discourses engage with one another in a divided society (by which I do not necessarily mean in a harmonized, consensus seeking, way)?

Next to this theoretical review of the role of difference, I will seek to answer the empirical question of how difference in public debate is dealt with in a divided society. Very little empirical research has been conducted to evaluate different solutions that normative theory provides for dealing with difference in the public sphere. Accordingly, I will aim to provide insight into the actual processes of public discussion in a divided or plural society. Can different discourses engage with each other, and if so how? I will examine how people discuss contested issues, and how difference is dealt with in this respect. Also, I will theorise the role of difference in public discussion, and will consider the strategies in dealing with these differences in a democratic way. I will examine these empirical questions by analyzing the public discussion on the contested issue of *immigration*, currently a fiercely debated topic in the Netherlands and a prevailing issue where difference is very prominent.

To examine the question of difference in public discussion, I not only concentrate on the discussion on a specific *issue*, but I will also focus on the public discussion in a very specific *space*, or platform, namely the Internet. I do this for two reasons. First, the nature of the Internet is such that it can (but not necessarily does) bring together different people, viewpoints, positions and arguments. I expand on this point in Chapter 2, but will raise a few issues here. In the first place, the ease with which people online can find others who are different from them is undeniable; human nature operates in such a way that one meets *like-minded* people in one’s own (offline) environment more easily than people from a *different* background (whether in terms of ethnic, geographical, class, educational background or other aspects of one’s background) or with different viewpoints. The Internet provides an opportunity to bring different voices together that otherwise would not come together. In the second place, it is often argued that people would let this difference come to the fore more easily online than offline. The Internet thus seems to allow for a more in-depth study of how differences in public debate play out. In the third place, the Internet facilitates a speaker’s role for anyone who desires to have one. Online debates are expected to be more inclusive of difference than offline debates, as different voices (in theory) have access to the same platforms.

This leads to the second reason for examining public debate online. Compared to traditional media, the Internet is said to be more inclusive of difference, and to be particularly suited for marginalized groups to voice their viewpoints in public debate. To exemplify this point, let me quote part of an online discussion from one of the web forums examined

in this thesis. Participants on this forum address the added value for minority voices to speak up on the Internet. A participant³ of the web forum *Maghrebonline*⁴ asks: 'Why do only ex-Muslims, or people that come from a Muslim country, and blacken and attack Islam get access to Dutch media?' *Ilyas28*⁵ replies: 'I know a lot of people who send columns to well-known newspapers, but, unfortunately, these pieces do not get published, because they try to tell a different story'. And he adds, 'The age of newspapers is almost over; people now have the possibility to voice their opinion through the Internet.' Both of these claims—that mainstream media offer a limited or distorted picture of Muslims and Islam, and that the Internet might hold a solution to this setting—are found increasingly on different Dutch web forums and websites dealing with issues of immigration and integration.

Whether these online opportunities also lead to a more nuanced picture of Muslims and Islam among members of the Dutch public remains to be seen. Many a commentator and Internet user view the medium as a polarizing force precisely because everyone can express him/herself freely; supposedly, 'anything goes' on the Internet. Furthermore, statements from the Internet are reported in mainstream media, to show how an ethnic civil war is imminent, and to show how dangerous the 'other' is.⁶ These discussions about the benefits and pitfalls of the Internet link up with discussions that have been taking place, and still take place, in academic writings on the potential of the Internet for democracy. In this thesis, I will examine these matters empirically.

Research question and design

In trying to understand dialogue on a contested topic such as immigration, and to make sense of how people online can voice, come to terms with, or overcome difference, I present the following research question:

To what extent is the public debate on Dutch web forums on the issue of immigration open to different voices and how do these different voices interact in this online debate?

The notion of *voices* refers both to the actors who express themselves and to the viewpoints that are expressed in online discussion. In this thesis, I look both at representation and inclusion in terms of *who* is speaking and *what* is said as well as at wilful exclusion from the

³*elsid* on www.maghrebonline.nl (9 May 2004, in the general discussion, thread 'Ephimenco, Hirsi Ali, Tahir, Elian, Ebru Umar').

⁴*Maghrebonline* is a very popular website that was started in 2000 by a group of students who wanted to address the negative media coverage of Moroccans in Holland. It now functions as a meeting place for different Dutch-speaking people, of various descents, but mostly young Moroccans. In Chapter 3, more information on the forum is provided.

⁵*Ilyas28* on *Maghrebonline* (9 May 2004, in the general discussion, thread 'Ephimenco, Hirsi Ali, Tahir, Elian, Ebru Umar'). *Ilyas28* identifies himself as male on the web forum.

⁶See, for instance, Etty (2004).

debate. The issue of ‘openness’ of debate comes back in all empirical chapters (Chapters 4-7). To examine the role of difference, I analyse public debates on immigration and integration that take place on popular Dutch web forums. The forums examined (*Fok*, *Maghrebonline*, *Maroc*, *Nieuwrechts*, *Politiekdebat*, *Terdiscussie* and *Weerwoord*) are popular in terms of the number of participants, discussions, and posts. The selection is made up of different types of forums: specifically political web forums (both more right-wing and left-wing), immigrant web forums and general web forums. Moreover, these forums produce a large amount of discussion on immigration and integration.

Openness of online discussions and the role of difference is analysed by examining the following four sub-questions:

- i) *How are web forums organised and in what way does this facilitate or hinder the openness of the debate?*
- ii) *To what extent do participants of online discussions view and use web forums as an open and inclusive platform specifically with regard to the discussion of immigration and integration?*
- iii) *To what extent are different actors and viewpoints included in online discussions on immigration and integration and how does this compare to the representation in newspapers?*
- iv) *How do different voices interact online when alternative voices are present(ed) in the debate and to what extent is this interaction open and inclusive?*

I examine these questions by looking at different aspects of the online debate on immigration and integration. In examining question (i), I analyse the norms for debate as specified and upheld by the forum management (Chapter 4). Question (ii) involves the evaluation of and attitudes towards web forum discussions by the participants. This is examined through an online questionnaire posted on different web forums (Chapter 5). Together, these first two questions form the basis for the analysis of specific cases of discussion, examined in light of questions (iii) and (iv). Questions (iii) and (iv) involve two cases of discussion, namely the debate on the issue of honour killings (which took place in the beginning of 2005) and the discussion surrounding the shooting of a head teacher by a boy of Turkish descent (which took place in the beginning of 2004), respectively (Chapter 6 and 7).

Chapter 1

Discussing difference in democracy

1.1 Introduction

Many have attempted to start a dialogue between different cultural groups in the Netherlands in the last few years, through initiatives by government, city councils, and non-profit organizations, amongst others.¹ The idea behind this dialogue is that groups in society (in particular natives versus immigrants, and within this latter group, Muslims specifically) are too far removed from one another. Sharing information and getting to know one another would create some sort of understanding and could take away, or at least lessen, the anxiety and tensions that exist between groups. Involving different societal groups in a collective discussion to find solutions to the problems today's society is faced with could, over time, create a social basis and support for decision-making.

In this chapter, I discuss an account of democratic theory in which public debate is central: *deliberative democracy theory*. I first discuss the value that this account of democracy attaches to public debate and what this debate should look like. A notion of debate has been developed—deliberation in the public sphere—that is seen as best suited for democracy. However, a number of concerns have been expressed with regard to this notion of deliberation, specifically regarding the inclusion of difference in the public sphere. As this thesis focuses on public debate in polarized societies, I discuss these concerns and address the ways in which exclusion in the public sphere comes about. Subsequently, I present an alternative conception of inclusion of difference in the public sphere: counter publics. Counter publics provide space for marginalized groups to voice their alternative discourse in a separate 'sphere'. One of the main concerns, however, is how to let different discourses *interact* with one another, rather than merely coexist in polarized societies. I will therefore introduce another account of deliberation that is open to difference and, at the same time, is focused on the interaction between different discourses in a collective space.

¹See, for instance, the day of the dialogue in Amsterdam (<http://www.amsterdamdialoog.nl>), and the 'broad initiative for social cohesion' by prime minister Balkenende (*Naar nieuwe evenwichten in de samenleving* (Towards new balances in society), 2005).

1.2 Deliberative democracy and the public sphere

In deliberative democracy public discussion lies at the heart of democratic society, and includes discussion that takes place at the level of the political elite as well as at the level of citizens. In this view of democracy, the basis for political decisions should lie with these citizens' deliberations. Citizens constitute the sphere—the public sphere—in which political will is developed and public opinions on matters of common concern are formed (McAfee, 2000: 96). The public sphere constitutes the arena 'for the perception, identification, and treatment of problems affecting the whole society' (Habermas, 1996: 301). It is here that 'new problem situations can be perceived [...] discourses aimed at achieving selfunderstanding can be conducted [and] collective identities and need interpretations can be circulated' (Habermas, 1996: 308). The public sphere is not necessarily a space in which immediate results or expert knowledge are produced; it is rather aimed at determining what is 'generally understandable, interesting, believable, relevant and acceptable, through the use of everyday language' (Eriksen & Weigård, 2003: 186).

Not every type of exchange within the public sphere is equally successful as a basis of will- and opinion-formation. Rather, the quality of actual formation and the outcome vary according to the way in which proposals, information and arguments are processed (Habermas, 1996: 362). What is important for this process is the means by which a majority is reached, or the quality of the antecedent debates (Dewey, 1954). The notion of 'deliberation' portrays the prerequisites and the ways in which discussions should take place in the public sphere. In general, it refers to an open and equal exchange of opinions and rational arguments in which people do not think in terms of their own interests, but let the better argument and the public interest prevail. This exchange then ideally leads to consensus and the 'common good' and legitimate decisions in society. Although no agreement exists on which exact elements constitute deliberation as these elements are intertwined, below I address the different elements of deliberation separately, omitting for the sake of clarity the (subtle) differences that exist between accounts of deliberation. I focus on the main elements in deliberative democracy as they have been identified in Habermas' and related accounts of deliberation, which I will refer to as the traditional or rational account. There are different, alternative accounts of deliberative democracy, a specific strand of which will be addressed in the subsequent sections. In these sections, I focus on the fundamental differences between the rational account and that of theorists stressing difference in society.

First, deliberative democracy theorists argue for *inclusion* for all. Central is the notion that *all* those affected by an issue or decision can participate in deliberation:

The political public sphere can fulfil its function of perceiving and thematizing encompassing social problems only insofar as it develops out of the communication taking place among *those who are potentially affected*. It is carried by a public recruited from the entire citizenry (Habermas, 1996: 365, emphasis in original).

Second, not only should all those affected be included, but they should also be *equal* within the public sphere. The basis is an egalitarian public of citizens, a society in which

equal rights of citizenship have become effective (Habermas, 1996: 308). The public sphere, thus, cannot be power-ridden and oppressed (ibid: 362). Participation 'is governed by the norms of equality and symmetry; all have the same chances to initiate speech acts, to question, to interrogate, and open debate' (Benhabib, 1994: 31). Deliberative democracy is conceptualised as 'democratic politics in which decisions and policies are justified in a process of discussion among *free and equal citizens*' (Gutmann & Thompson, 2000: 161 (emphasis by author)). The equal status of citizens in deliberative democracy theories is not so much about having preferences equally counted as in aggregative models, but rather about the equal opportunities that citizens have in cooperating in the 'public process of reasoned decision making' (Estlund, 2002: 5).

Third is the central idea of communicative rationality: Information and dialogue have to be processed *rationally* (Habermas, 1996: 362). Citizens have to be open to counterarguments and have the duty to provide reasons for their opinions and convictions (Eriksen & Weigård, 2003: 181). Decision-making is done by means of arguments offered *by* and *to* participants who are committed to the values of *rationality* and *impartiality*: this is the deliberative part according to Elster (1998: 8).

This relates to the fourth element in deliberation: transcending one's own interests by following the rule of *impartiality*. Citizens should be able to reach an enlightened understanding; they should have adequate and equal opportunities 'for discovering and validating (within the time permitted by the need for a decision) the choice on the matter to be decided that would best serve the citizen's interests' (Dahl, 1989: 112). Public deliberation asks its citizens to transcend their private interests and viewpoints for the sake of common good (Bohman, 1996: 5). Impartiality allows citizens to come to shared ways of thinking about social problems; deliberation then establishes *intersubjectivity*, the fifth element.

The outcome of deliberation is *consensus on the common good*. As such, deliberation in the public sphere ultimately leads to more legitimate decisions by the political elite. 'The procedures of communicative presuppositions of democratic opinion- and will-formation function as the most important sluices for the discursive rationalization of the decisions of an administration bound by law and statute' (Habermas, 1996: 300). Based on deliberation these decisions are legitimate because citizens argue rationally and listen impartially to reach consensus on what the common good is. The rational debate between equal participants, who are focused on the common interest, '*shapes the identity and interests* of citizens in ways that contribute to the formation of a public conception of common good' (Cohen, 2002: 89, emphasis in original).

1.3 Exclusion from and inequality within the public sphere

A number of concerns have been expressed with regard to this account of deliberation. Those relevant for this thesis involve the ways in which the criteria for deliberation in this account are impeding full inclusion of difference and disagreement in democratic society, rather than fostering it. The central question in this thesis is how different positions that

exist in society can come together in public debate. The concerns expressed against the rational account of deliberation focus exactly on this question. A number of concerns were specifically directed at Habermas' account of the 18th century bourgeois public sphere written in 1962 (translated into English in 1989). Although he has developed his views since then, the objections still remain relevant, as they also address many of the other theorists' accounts of deliberation and not only Habermas' conception. These concerns help to develop an alternative account of deliberation, one that more properly allows for the inclusion of difference.

Even though the concerns are interrelated and not mutually exclusive, I discuss them separately here for the sake of clarity. They relate to the suppositions regarding inclusion, rationality, impartiality, intersubjectivity, and consensus and address the ways in which these criteria impede full inclusion in the public sphere.

Inclusion

Even though deliberative democracy theorists aim at popular inclusion, the notion and suppositions of deliberation may obstruct the fulfilment of this inclusion; according to the traditional account of deliberation, certain voices may be excluded from the public sphere because of the specificity of the rules for discussion.

The strict norms of behaviour in the public sphere run the risk of excluding people; either one has to conform to the rules and setting of the public sphere or be excluded from it. This means that potential participants face a difficult decision: Either they operate according to the conventions, and leave behind the symbolic resources and routines that make their community unique, or they are excluded from the public sphere (Phillips, 1996: 238). This dilemma touches on one of the most prevalent problems of deliberative democracy theory regarding pluralist societies. It creates tendencies 'that exclude particular voices and homogenize discourse, compelling participants to assume speaking positions located through the practices of dominant groups' (Asen, 1999: 119).

The possible exclusion of voices and suppression of difference in the traditional account of the public sphere takes place in three ways: through styles, topics, and forums. Stylistic exclusion refers to the way in which certain types of speaking may be favoured over others. Topics may be restricted to matters of 'common concern', and *a priori* distinctions between what is public and what is private. Last, forums can exclude, for instance, through gate keeping in the mass media. Certain criteria, such as timeliness and cogency, determine which discourses are included and which are excluded, as they decide what gets published in the letters-to-the-editor section (Asen, 1999).

Rationality

Another major concern of critics of the traditional notion of public sphere involves the feasibility and desirability of a rational, detached mode of deliberation. This criterion, it is argued, reinforces exclusions based on gender, race, and class (Streich, 2002: 128). Privileging rational argument, 'an orderly chain of reasoning from premises to conclusion', might lead to privileging certain groups in society. Favouring 'articulateness' and dispa-

sionate and disembodied communication means that discussions are often not equally open to all ways of making claims and giving reasons (Young, 2000).

Merely recognizing 'alternative publics is not enough if they are to be subjected to the decision rules of the rationality that they may well have been formed to challenge' (Phillips, 1996: 242). If one considers only one form of rationality, there are basically two options available to participants of the public sphere discussions: They can either conform to the 'rationality of the dominant discourse' (and thus follow its discursive rules), or they can challenge it. The latter, however, at least in the view of the 'rational' public sphere as defined above, will be considered *irrational*, and thus participants challenging the dominant rationality will face possible exclusion from the public sphere.

As with the other criticisms, the main concern is difference, in this case regarding potential differences in discourse, and what is considered to be rational. Should the dominant discourse determine what is rational, and thus exclude all alternatives to it, or should a normative model of the public sphere include different modes of rationality (other than the dominant rational ones) and allow for alternative types of discourse?

Impartiality

The third criticism concerns the impartiality of participants, the assumption that status differentials can be bracketed and deliberation—as if participants are social equals—is possible. It is argued that the notion of bracketing social inequality is neither desirable nor feasible (Fraser, 1992). It is not desirable as 'bracketing or sweeping differences under the rug limits the range of public debate and in turn limits our range of solutions' (Streich, 2002: 131). It is not feasible because needs are always related to some partiality, a specific interest or position. The question is whether there can be such a thing as a 'neutral discourse through which participants can leave behind their values and partialities to develop some sense of a common good' (Phillips, 1996: 240). Sanders (1997) argues that it is highly unlikely that citizens can approach one another as equals, as prescribed by deliberative democracy theorists. To ask for impartiality and equality in debate is asking for something impossible and undesirable, as people are not able to leave their identity behind when entering the public sphere. Nor is it beneficial for democracy as politics is exactly about expressing and clarifying one's own position.

Intersubjectivity

Deliberation is aimed at coming to agreement on political issues by an exchange of reasons that everyone finds compelling, thereby reaching intersubjectivity. But, as Valadez (2001: 41) makes clear, this requirement of deliberation presupposes that participants' cognitive and moral frameworks are sufficiently similar. The differences in conceptual frameworks may, however, be incommensurable to the extent that fruitful dialogue and reasoned deliberation is impossible (ibid: 42). Young (1996: 122-123) adds that even when the influence of economic and political power is eliminated, this does not mean 'people's ways of speaking and understanding will be the same'.

This focus on a common framework 'reduces our understanding of the diversity of

subjectivities and rationalities that move through and between different frameworks' (Phillips, 1996: 241). It ultimately marginalizes groups representing a truly alternative perspective. Thus, it is argued, the public sphere should not be all-encompassing in single form, as this would result in 'filtering diverse rhetorical and stylistic norms through a single, overarching lens' (Fraser, 1992: 126).

Again, 'difference' is central to this criticism. The differences in (particularly multicultural) societies may be so large that there is not enough common ground for mutual understanding of an issue. If this common framework is the starting point, it may lead to *a priori* exclusion of (radical) alternatives.

Consensus

One of the most prevailing criticisms against deliberative democratic theory in the traditional form is that it aims at reaching consensus about the common good. Many theorists of deliberative democracy view unity or commonness either as the starting point of deliberation or as the outcome of it. But in pluralist societies such a common understanding cannot be assumed, as there are many 'sources of different social experience and often different interests' (Young, 2000: 41).

Even if consensus and unity would be feasible, some argue, they are not necessarily desirable. Fraser (1992: 125) raises the question: Would, 'under conditions of cultural diversity in the absence of structural inequality, (...) a single, comprehensive public sphere be preferable to multiple publics?' Too much focus on consensus, as well as assumptions on common interest, produce a situation in which it becomes very difficult for people to disagree (Bickford, 1996: 16). A democratic deficit could arise as a result of the 'sacralization of consensus' (Mouffe, 2000: 113). Conflict and division are inherent to politics. Deliberative democracy, by negating the ineradicable character of antagonism and through aiming at a universal rational consensus, can lead to 'violence being unrecognized and hidden behind appeals to "rationality"' (ibid: 22). In such a view of deliberation, dissent is only seen as 'a disruption in the inevitable progress toward some transcendent and universal consensus' (Phillips, 1996: 243). Furthermore, even when dissent is considered to be something productive (i.e., heuristic or corrective), it is still secondary to consensus, as the latter remains the overall aim.

Considering the common good as the outcome of deliberation is considered equally problematic. Definitions of the common good will often express the perspective of the dominant group and narrow the agenda for deliberation, thereby silencing other groups (Young, 2000: 43). In multicultural societies 'the high level of civic magnanimity and commitment to the common good required by deliberative democracy may be nonexistent or extremely difficult to obtain' (Valadez, 2001: 41).

Given these problems with the unitary notion of public sphere and deliberation, the challenge for theorists is:

to articulate models of the public sphere that value difference within a common enough framework so that questions of fairness and justice may be broached by par-

ticipants themselves. For this to be the case, difference must be viewed as a resource for—not an impediment to—meaningful dialogue (Asen, 1999: 116).

Taking these points of criticism into account, it is not necessary to aim at finding a single rationality through which to judge all communication in the public sphere. Instead, we should look for different rationalities that underlie different speech acts, as Phillips (1996) argues. Dissent ‘is not the opposite of consent, but rather (...) the boundary site where any consensus struggles against the encroachment of alternative rationalities, arguments, and interests’ (ibid: 244).

These criticisms against inclusion, rationality, impartiality, intersubjectivity, and consensus show the limits of the assumptions of deliberative democracy in a plural society. In this thesis, I focus on public debate in a divided society and examine how different groups that are perceived to be far removed from each other can meet and deliberate in the public sphere. In order to take diversity in society seriously and do it justice, it is crucial to develop a theory of democracy that takes stock of social difference and recognizes the ‘cultural specificity of deliberative practices, and proposes a more inclusive model of communication’ (Young, 1996: 123).

1.4 Aiming at inclusion: Marginalized voices

For voices other than the mainstream to be included in public debate, dissent should not merely be seen as an obstacle, but as inherently valuable to democracy. But how can marginalized groups make themselves heard? One way in which they can voice opinions is in counter publics or, as some say, by having multiple public spheres. The notion of counter publics or multiple public spheres has been developed precisely to do justice to the plurality that exists in society. It provides a space in which groups can discuss political issues within their community of equals, to help them emancipate and formulate their needs and desires. These counter publics form separate publics or public spheres in which not much difference and disagreement is found. Mainly, difference is present with respect to the mainstream public. A counter public does not necessarily have a link to the mainstream public sphere(s). The goal of a public sphere is, however, not just representation in one’s own group, but rather be seen, heard and taken into account within the general public sphere. The problem is how this engagement can take place, and which type of communication enables an engagement between different discourses. Moreover, how can difference and disagreement enter the public dialogue without being seen as mere obstacles that must be overcome? I provide an alternative account of deliberation, informed by the way theories focusing on difference have conceptualized the notion of deliberation. I argue that the one feature that allows for engagement and understanding through public debate in polarized societies is the openness of that debate.

1.4.1 Representation of marginalized groups in counter publics

Access for and representation of *all* citizens is the basis for an ‘equitable public sphere’ (Kosnick, 2004: 979-980). But the reality is that for many groups, the ideal of such an

open public sphere is difficult to attain, as not all groups and individuals enjoy this access to and representation in the public sphere. Simply stating that these groups are excluded from the public sphere is however not doing justice to the issue. The claim that groups and individuals are excluded from *the* public sphere is stating that there is only one public sphere (Dawson, 1994: 199). Instead of maintaining that there is *one* public sphere, from which groups can be excluded, Fraser (1992) argues that there are *multiple* public spheres existing next to each other. She presents the idea of *subaltern counter publics* (1992). She indicates that there 'are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (p. 123). In stratified societies, Fraser argues, 'arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of competing publics better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, overarching public' (p. 122).

A model of the public sphere that recognizes a multiplicity of publics provides an answer to the problems of 'singularity, uniformity, rationality, neutralization, and traditional norms and practices of communication' that have prevailed in early Habermasian and other all-encompassing notions of public sphere and deliberation (Goodnight & Hingstman, 1997: 353). But what does this notion of multiplicity of publics, or the existence of 'counter publics' entail? And can this notion help to envisage a more inclusive public debate in polarized societies?

Let me first address the first question: What does the notion of counter publics entail? Counter publics can be identified through their relationship to other publics, to which they are counter (Squires, 2002). The most important characteristic of counter publics according to Asen (2000) is the recognition of publics as being excluded from the wider public sphere. The 'counter' lies in participants' recognition of exclusion from wider public spheres and in the articulation of alternative discourses (p. 427). The counter status of these publics addresses elements of power, struggle and resistance that take place in and between the multiple public spheres.

Thus, the term counter public refers to a public that recognizes exclusions, and an attempt to overcome these exclusions by forming alternative publics through discursive practices. It shows how alternative public discourse is articulated in response to the exclusion of specific interests in the wider public sphere. What is important is that this articulation is not through withdrawing from the wider public sphere, but rather by challenging the discourse in this sphere. Participants of such counter publics 'still engage in potentially emancipatory affirmative practice with the hope that power may be reconfigured' (Asen, 2000). It is in this second feature of counter publics that the relevance of this thesis lies. How can different discourses interact? If we acknowledge the existence of multiple publics that are parallel to each other, how can they engage with one another? I will first address the dual character of counter publics before turning to the interaction between different discourses. On the one hand, counter publics form spaces for 'withdrawal and regroupment,' and on the other they 'function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics' (Fraser, 1992: 124). Hence, we need to distinguish between the *intrapublic*—the inward focussed address—and the *in-*

terpublic discourse. The latter is where the *public* nature of counter publics comes in. In 'directing their arguments outward to society as a whole,' they engage in a public act and show a belief 'in the transformative power of discourse' (Asen, 2000: 429). As such, counter publics should not be viewed as enclaves (as separatist publics), which assumes a publicist orientation. 'After all, to interact discursively as a member of public, subaltern or otherwise, is to aspire to disseminate one's discourse to ever widening arenas' (Fraser, 1992: 124). In this way counter public spheres can be a vital impulse for democracy; they 'may provide vital sources of information and experience that are contrary to, or at least in addition to, the dominant public sphere' (Fenton & Downey, 2003: 22).

Although counter publics themselves may seek interaction with or influence in the wider public sphere, the extent to which they succeed in this depends greatly on the members of the dominant public. Members of counter publics who enter the domain of the dominant public sphere may not be considered as equals (Squires, 2002: 461). Dominant publics censor, attack and otherwise hinder counter public discourses from being represented in the mainstream public sphere. Thus, even though the counter public's subaltern nature need not preclude interaction, in a more comprehensive arena problems may arise. The question is whether participants in this comprehensive sphere 'share enough in the way of values, expressive norms, and therefore protocols of persuasion to lend their talk the quality of deliberations aimed at reaching agreement through giving reasons' (Fraser, 1992: 126).

Here we come back to the question whether the notion of counter public can help to envisage a more inclusive public debate in polarized societies. The answer is that it does not readily provide such an account. Even though counter publics, or multiple public spheres, provide a space for alternative discourses, they do not provide a space in which different discourses come together. However, for public discussion to be truly inclusive, democratic theory asks for such a space, as otherwise the counter public's ideas and opinions remain in isolation. It is not enough to have discourses exist next to but separate from each other. It should be possible to theorise a platform on which these different discourses and publics come together, as well as a way in which they can come together in a democratic way. It is here that counter public theory is lacking; it is too focused on the formation of insular spheres and it neglects to theorise how the discourses from these insular publics can come together in a comprehensive sphere, or the wider public sphere. Viewing the publics as islands separated from each other hinders theorising the interaction between them.

In contrast, if we view these different discourses (the general or hegemonic and the alternative or counter) as part of one overarching public sphere, instead of these being grouped in separate spheres (one hegemonic and some counter), it is possible to imagine interactions between them. Such a view, I argue, is also more in line with how discourses are positioned in practice; people will be divided on a spectrum of positions in the public sphere, rather than separated completely from other perspectives. At the core of this public sphere we find the dominant, hegemonic discourse. At the periphery we find counter discourses, where people will be more or less loosely clustered together (in this way they may resemble counter publics). In between the core and the periphery a range of discourses are positioned. So rather than islands completely cut off from each other, discourses are

found scattered throughout the public sphere. Some events can cause the periphery and the core to be pulled further apart, and thus the discourses that were positioned in between the core and the periphery will shift, increasing polarization. However, these discourses in between the two can also enable the discourses at the periphery and the core to come together. In this way, they may form the pillars of a bridge between the different perspectives. Especially when public discourse is polarized, it may be difficult for discourses from the periphery to have a (meaningful) voice in the core because of the distance between the positions. For meaningful interaction to occur between these separate positions, the mediation of these in-between voices may not be sufficient. What is needed first and foremost is openness towards these alternative discourses.

1.4.2 Interaction between different discourses: Engagement through openness

Even though the traditional account of deliberation has been problematic, democratic theorists focusing on difference do not dismiss the idea of deliberation. On the contrary, deliberation is seen as the best method to deal with fundamental differences in polarized societies. Deliberation in which difference is valued tends to ‘broaden perspectives, promote toleration and understanding between groups, and generally encourage a public-spirited attitude’ (Chambers, 2003: 318). However, ‘a political debate between citizens with deep value conflicts is only possible if there is willingness to bridge some of the deep differences in basic values’ (Fennema & Maussen, 2000: 398). Reviewing the literature on alternative accounts of deliberation reveals that the main concern is openness: openness of the debate to different participants, types of discourses and positions. However, the main aim is not to have an affluence of *separate* positions, but rather to have participants *interact* with each other. This interaction should furthermore not be a simple clash of difference,² but should rather be an *engagement* between different discourses. Thus deliberation concerns openness or access of all participants *to* the debate, positions, and discourses, and *towards* the other’s positions and discourses. An explanation is necessary as to what these two forms of openness entail for public discussions.

At the very least, democracy and democratic communication refer to a situation in which the process of decision-making—and, therefore, the debate—is *equally open* to all. It refers both to entering the debate (*inclusion*) and to the position within the debate (*equality*): Each participant should be free to raise, question and challenge issues and positions and in so doing be free from coercion. This is where the role and importance of debate lies in democracy: ‘The democratic spirit or imaginary is fundamentally one of questioning. For the community’s rule to be their own, nothing can be taken for granted or closed off from critique and revision’ (Keenan, 2003: 10).

Openness, although similar to the criterion of inclusion and equality in rational deliberative democracy theories, is different in the sense that it does not merely seek the inclusion of all people, but also of different types of discourses and forms of communication (besides or beyond what the majority would argue to be rational). It is also different with regard to what is meant by equality. Here, equality means that everyone has the right

²Such as is sought by some proponents of radical democracy (e.g. Mouffe, 2000).

to raise issues, open up debates, provide information, and question others. This does not involve the bracketing of one's identity or interests, but rather sees the discourse to be informed by these identities and interests.

The requirement of openness goes beyond a hollow form of tolerance. Reasons that people provide in a debate need to be taken seriously and not be immediately excluded (Bohman, 2003b). The public nature of democratic communication suggests the inclusion of other citizens' salient reasons. There has to be inclusion of those with whom one disagrees, and a recognition that others are just as entitled to participate in defining society (Bohman, 2003a). However, public debates are not always equally inclusive of participants; they can be excluded from the debate completely, be denied access to it, or they can have unequal positions *within* the debate, as others do not grant them equal status and capacity to effectively influence the debate (Young (2000) refers to these two types of exclusion as external and internal, respectively).

These different types of exclusion refer to different types of power that some may hold in the debate. First, power *over* communication refers to the capacity to include or exclude participants from the discussion. The second type is power *in* communication, signifying the capacity to influence or determine *how* people speak (Pellizzoni, 2001). The nature and the degree of employment of this power vary. Exclusion (whether internal or external) may be intentional or unintentional; the use of power may be overt or covert; it may be direct but also indirect. Power may even involve the self-exclusion of participants, whether through withdrawing from the debate completely or altering one's contributions to it because of anticipated reactions or internalized dominant views.³ Openness to others and their positions requires a certain level of reflection on one's own position and its relativity (Asen, 1999: 123). To be open entails acknowledging the position of others. If we treat others and their positions as equal, we will by definition assess our own position and values carefully, and be open to, listen to and respect other perspectives. In order to take openness seriously, participants are thus forced to critically examine their cultural values, assumptions and interests, as well as the larger social context. However, in divided societies it may be particularly difficult for participants to understand the other's position.⁴ For this understanding to come about, it is necessary to explore types of communication other than the 'rational'.

Not only other positions and arguments need to be considered; it is also necessary to think about different ways of presenting them. Deliberative democratic theory can incorporate contestation, rhetoric and impassioned pleas, and is not limited to the rational exchange of arguments, which may favour a certain group over others (Streich, 2002: 130). It is important that the kinds of reasons that are allowed in the debate are not specified in advance, but rather depend on the process of deliberation which decides what is acceptable and what is not (Miller, 2000: 151-152). There may even be 'justifiable places for offensiveness, noncooperation, and the threat of retaliation' (Mansbridge, 1999: 222).

³For a discussion on this type of power inducing and sustaining internal constraints upon self-determination see Lukes (2005).

⁴Hamelink (2004) discusses the relation between human rights and dialogue, and the difficulty people may have in granting these rights to people outside their community.

This would help achieve authenticity, reveal pain, anger, and hate and could ultimately further understanding, as part of openness and engagement.

Young identifies the following types of communication that have a supplementary role to rational communication: greeting (public acknowledgement), rhetoric, and narratives (2000: 52-83). These three forms of expression can help participants to communicate with one another, particularly when faced with (seemingly) insurmountable differences. Greeting, by which discussants acknowledge each other as being included in the discussion, has the function of asserting discursive equality and (re)establishing trust between the discussants (p. 60). This can especially be of help in discussions in which people differ in 'opinion, interest, or social location' (p. 61). Rhetoric (affective, embodied, and stylistic aspects of communication) can equally be accommodating in communication geared towards problem solving or conflict resolution, as it aims to help translate across differences. Particular to the creation of understanding is the use of narratives. Some forms of exclusion in the public sphere occur 'because participants in a political public do not have sufficiently shared understandings to fashion a set of arguments with shared premises, or appeals to shared experiences and values' (p. 71). In such a situation, too often assumptions, experiences and values of some participants dominate the discourse. Too often those of others are misunderstood or even 'devalued or reconstructed to fit the dominant paradigms' (ibid). In these cases narratives can serve to foster understanding for those that have very different experiences. These different types of expression can thus be complementary to rational expression, and may even be necessary in discussions that feature difference.⁵

Deliberation may, through fostering understanding and appreciation of the other's convictions, concerns, and needs, allow different groups to transcend the awkwardness, fear, and hostility that might exist, and let people 'appreciate the plausibility of seeing the world from a different perspective' (Valadez, 2001: 34). Ultimately, if communication takes place in the open and inclusive way set out above, 'this dialogue enables people to navigate and interact across cultural and racial boundaries' (Streich, 2002: 138).

What runs through all these accounts is *engagement* as outcome of the deliberation. Dryzek (2000) defines deliberation as the democratic communication that enables engagement across the boundaries of different discourses. In essence, engagement and challenge across discourses means 'that individuals can be brought to reflect upon the content of discourses in which they move' (Dryzek, 2000: 163). Engagement between discourses results in a deeper understanding of another's position. The transformation that deliberation envisages occurs in three steps according to Young (1996: 128):

- 1) Confrontation with different perspectives, interests, and cultural meanings teaches me the partiality of my own, reveals to me my own experience as perspectival.
- 2) Knowledge that I am in a situation of collective problem solving with others who have different cultures and values from my own, and that they have the right to

⁵ Other deliberative democracy theorists have likewise argued for inclusion of alternative communication to the rational. Bohman (1996: 59-66), for instance, argues for inclusion of different types of 'dialogical mechanisms' in deliberation, apart from the rational one.

challenge my claims and arguments, forces me to transform my expressions of self-interest and desire into appeals to justice. (...) 3) Expressing, questioning, and challenging differently situated knowledge, finally, adds to the social knowledge of all the participants. (...) This greater social objectivity increases their wisdom for arriving at just solutions to collective problems.

Thus, what is at stake for a society with deliberation that includes difference is not so much the legitimacy of political decisions through public opinion formation, but rather openness to, engagement in and understanding between positions. This, in the end, should lead to more democratic societies and legitimate political decisions that also consider alternative concerns.

1.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I identified the concern of difference in public debate within plural societies. First, I examined the role of public debate in general terms by discussing theories of deliberative democracy. I identified the problems with this account of deliberation regarding the inclusion of difference. Subsequently, I turned to an alternative conception of public sphere: that of counter publics. The main concern of this chapter was with the interaction between different and conflicting discourses: the mainstream and those counter to it. The principle requirement of public debate for enabling different discourses to come together is openness. Such openness should allow for the inclusion of different discourses, participants and viewpoints, for engagement between different discourses, and for mutual understanding in highly polarized societies.

To summarize, let me distinguish the key concepts used in this thesis. Public discussion (or public debate) on an issue is seen as pivotal to democracy in polarized society. It is the 'public communication about topics and actors related to either some particular policy domain or to the broader interest and values that are engaged' (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002: 9). This public discussion takes place within the *public sphere*, which is viewed in this thesis as a virtual space constituted by *all* public communication on political issues. This public communication involves actors who express positions and arguments. Within this public sphere different discourses exist, including ways of speaking that give meaning to experiences from particular perspectives (Philips & Jørgensen, 2002: 66-67).⁶ *Difference* in discourse reflects differences in perspectives, experience and ways of speaking. Discourses may thus be close together or far apart, depending on how contested an issue is. A distinction can be made between the mainstream, or dominant discourses and those counter to this dominant discourse, also called *alternative discourses*. The latter can be more or less clustered and resembles so-called *counter publics*, but do not necessarily have to be defined as such.

Deliberation is viewed as the political method to democratically deal with these differences between discourses. Deliberation involves a discussion that: (i) is equally *open* to

⁶Discourse is also viewed on the level of language. This will be addressed in the Methods Chapter, section 3.5.

all participants and viewpoints; (ii) in which participants are open towards each other's positions, involving *recognition* and consideration of these; (iii) includes the occurrence of *engagement* between different discourses; (iv) and results in an *understanding* for the other and his/her position.

The central, empirical question in this thesis is whether the openness in debate is feasible in societies at large; whether people are open to difference and oppositional positions; whether people are reflexive enough to listen to stories, pleas and arguments that are presented in ways that may be different to their own. To answer this question, I will examine the openness of the online debate on immigration; specifically, I will look at the openness of its participants and the way in which engagement can come about online. The Internet is often hypothesized to be more inclusive than other types of platforms of the public sphere. Before turning to the empirical analysis conducted in this thesis, I will discuss the claims and findings of other studies that involve openness of online debate.

Chapter 2

Discussing online: What difference does it make?

2.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I explained the notion of public sphere and the role of deliberation in it. With the arrival of the Internet¹ new interest in deliberation has arisen, as its features seem ideal for the type of communication that should take place in the public sphere.² Against this unbounded optimism there are equally opposing views, in which the Internet is seen as a medium that excludes, is unequal, and otherwise not suited for democracy.

The features of the Internet have led a number of scholars to examine the extent to which the Internet enables deliberation.³ Here the focus is on the Internet's potential to open up spaces for public discourse: To what extent does the Internet allow for an open and diverse discussion? In this chapter, I discuss some of the more prevalent claims, both positive and negative; why the Internet is (not) such an ideal space for democratic discussion and what empirical studies into democratic communication online demonstrate. To what extent does the Internet hold potential for open and inclusive debate and what role does difference play in this? Do online discussions allow for inclusion of alternative discourses?

¹Here, I refer to all Internet technologies that are considered to enable democratic discourse. These include the web (and all its different technologies for discussion), e-mail, USENET and newsgroups. For an overview, see for instance Barnes (2002). In Chapter 3, I will address the specific Internet technology that is examined in this study.

²There are many other types of political uses of the Internet, such as online campaigning, online voting, citizen information online, and e-consultation. I will not address these here, but rather will focus on the literature that is related to public sphere theory and deliberation.

³See for instance (from 2000 onwards): Ó Baoill, 2000; Dahlberg, 2000; Gastil, 2000; Jankowski & Van Selm, 2000; Wilhelm, 2000; Coleman & Gøtze, 2001; Gimmmler, 2001; Muhlberger & Shane, 2001; Sunstein, 2001; Tanner, 2001; Brants, 2002; Hagemann, 2002; Papacharissi, 2002; Price & Cappella, 2002; Savigni, 2002; Stromer-Galley, 2002; Tsaliki, 2002; Albrecht, 2003; Jenkins & Thorburn, 2003; Liina Jensen, 2003; Janssen & Kies, 2004; Kiss, 2003; Papacharissi, 2004; Trénel, 2004; Dahlgren, 2005; Wiklund, 2005.

2.2 How the Internet fosters openness

The 'Internet's capacity to support a public sphere cannot be judged in terms of intrinsic features' (Bohman, 2004: 132). Whether or not the Internet contains spaces that form or resemble an ideal public sphere depends on the way people use it, as the Internet 'itself does not bring about democratization or openness, but its diffusion does create new openings to struggle for democracy. How these opportunities will be realized depends to a large extent on popular action' (Warschauer, 2003: 183). Even though it is ultimately dependent on its use by people, expectations have been expressed with regard to the Internet's potential for democracy. The features that have led scholars to connect the Internet to, in particular, deliberative democracy include the unbounded space for interaction and the anonymity of this interaction. These features relate to the perceived openness of online space, both in terms of the quantity (the number and types of people participating) and the quality of interactions (in terms of the openness people encounter or experience).

First, the Internet is celebrated for its possibility of many-to-many communication (Coleman & Gøtze, 2001: 17), bridging time and place (Eriksen & Weigård, 2003; Street, 1997: 195), allowing for thousands to be drawn into one discussion (Warschauer, 2003: 25), and for the transmission of large amounts of information (O'Hara, 2002). It is generally seen as 'contributing to new ways of knowing, new strategies for gathering, storing, retrieving, and utilizing information' (Dahlgren, 2004: xv). 'Because of its horizontal, open, and user-friendly nature, the Internet allows for easy access to, and thus greater participation, in the public sphere' (Brants, 2005: 144). With the low (social and economic) costs of publishing, and the ease with which people can find a like-minded audience, this has created great optimism regarding the Internet's potential. Specifically, the speaker role the Internet enables is said to hold new and great opportunities.

Second, the nature of the Internet is seen as enabling not only the participation of *more* people, but also a more *heterogeneous* group. Cyberspace 'is a place where difference is not hard to find' (Dahlberg, 2001). 'The onward rush of electronic communications technology will presumably increase the diversity of available ideas and the speed and ease with which they fly about and compete with each other' (Page, 1996: 124). As O'Hara has stated, 'it is clear reasonable access to opposing views can generally be found' (O'Hara, 2002: 294). The ease with which search engines can be used to find like-minded people is equal to the ease with which one can discover different and disagreeing voices—probably much easier than in offline life.

The Internet thus seems to be an ideal place to locate different views expressed by diverse groups of people. It is seen a perfect space for individuals to expand their horizons, meet (or at least encounter) tens, hundreds or thousands of new people and be confronted with a range of new topics and views. However, do all these different people actually find each other on the Internet or do they seek only the like-minded? A number of empirical studies seem to confirm that people connect to heterogeneous publics. Stromer-Galley (2002; 2003) for instance found that one of the reasons that people participate in online discussions is indeed to find different viewpoints. Schneider (1997), in his study of the online discussion *talk.abortion*, indicated that when diversity is measured by the

introduction of new participants, *talk.abortion* could be considered a diverse arena and a dynamic conversational environment.

Robinson, Neustadtl, and Kestnbaum (2002: 300) examined whether 'Internet use may mean that the American public is becoming less or more diverse politically.' Based on earlier descriptions of Internet users, they expected it to be a space with people 'open' and tolerant to deviant or non-conforming individuals in society. The results of the study showed that Internet users were indeed more supportive of diverse and tolerant points of view than non-users. Wallace (1999: 74) found that disagreement does take place on the Internet. It becomes 'very heated and contentious' even when everyone in the exchange conforms to the group's written and unwritten norms.

Third, interactions can take place anonymously, allowing people to discuss with others without making their identity known. This would both create a more comfortable and a more equal environment for discussion, as status differences are indistinguishable. This could be one of the explanations as to why people seek difference online: In an anonymous setting, fear of isolation, humiliation, harming others, not being liked, disapproval and other reasons traditionally seen as reasons for avoiding politics would be reduced (Witschge, 2004). The actions of those engaged in politics would not be as easily ascribed to them and immediate pressures of others are lessened, since the participant is not physically present. As Wallace (1999: 124-125) has acknowledged, 'when people believe their actions cannot be attributed to them personally, they tend to become less inhibited by social conventions and restraints.' The ability of a group to pressure a 'dissenting' individual is lessened on the Internet and in this way the tendency to conform could weaken. Wallace (1999) summarized a number of empirical studies that find that dissenters indeed feel more liberated to express their views online than offline. This might result from the fact that the 'dissenter would not have to endure raised eyebrows or interruptions by members of the majority, or be made to feel uncomfortable about the failure to agree with the others' (ibid: 82). This could result in a more diverse public sphere, as those that do not feel free to speak offline might do so online.

Fourth, due to anonymity, the Internet is seen as providing the means to overcome inequality in debate. It is praised for its possibility to liberate participants from the social hierarchies and power relations that exist offline. This feature is seen as one of the strongest points of the Internet: 'If computer-mediated interaction can consistently reduce the independent influence of status, it will have a powerful advantage over face-to-face deliberation' (Gastil, 2000: 359). In a discussion forum, words would carry more weight than socioeconomic position; and where status cues are difficult to detect, stereotyping and prejudice lessen. This would even result in more participation and influence of lower status members. At least racism, ageism, and other kinds of discrimination against outgroups seem 'to be diminishing because the cues to outgroup status are not as obvious' (Wallace, 1999: 99).

2.3 Impediments to openness online

Against these more optimistic claims and findings regarding the Internet's potential to provide space for open public discussion, there are counterclaims and empirical findings suggesting that the Internet is not suited for open public discussion or a place where differences can be aired freely.

The first counterclaim concerns the view that the Internet is the medium of the many, allowing everyone to communicate with everyone at low costs. Even though the Internet is an efficient and cheap means of communication (relative to other audiovisual or print media), concerns regarding exclusion in terms of access remain. Although numerous claims exist as to how the Internet is broadening the representation of all sorts of groups that remain underrepresented in other media, this is not to say that access is unproblematic:

The centrality of the Internet in many areas of social, economic, and political activity is tantamount to marginality for those without, or with only limited, access to the Internet, as well as for those unable to use it effectively. Thus, it is little wonder that the heralding of the Internet's potential as a means of freedom, productivity, and communication comes hand in hand with the denunciation of 'digital divide' induced by inequality on the Internet (Castells, 2001: 247).

Even though many credit the Internet with the ability to allow citizens to speak up and provide marginalized groups with a possible audience, it is important to acknowledge that access is very problematic for some. In principle, in a deliberative democracy all citizens should have access to the political information spaces and be able to participate in the debates (Couldry, 2003: 11). However, not everyone has access to the Internet, and even if they do, they might not have the cognitive ability and technical skills to participate in online political discourse (see for instance: Bucy, 2000: 60). There may, of course, be different reasons for people not to participate, but what is important is that they have the active choice whether or not to do so.

For this reason, people should at least have the possibility of access, both in terms of economic access to Internet technologies as well as to the technological and social knowledge of how to participate online (Selwyn, 2004). At this time, not all citizens have the opportunity or capacity for effective and meaningful use of the Internet, and therefore the democratic potential of the Internet remains limited. In the Netherlands there are still differences in access between different groups in society even though access is ever increasing. In 2004, the Internet penetration in the Netherlands was as follows: 73 percent of the people had a computer with Internet access at home, including 76 percent of men and 70 percent of women.

The second claim that is challenged is that anonymity is good for online democratic debate. Even though the absence of social cues bodes well for equality in online discussion, a number of empirical studies counter this claim. In theory, participants of online discussions have an equal opportunity to post, and an equal opportunity to be heard. However, in practice this is often not the case. 'Online status is often directly reinforced by the

revelation of offline identities that are (...) readily brought into cyberspace' (Dahlberg, 2001: 15). By abusive postings, monopolization of attention, control of agenda, and style of communication some participants are able to make their voices heard more often than others. Schneider (1997: 85) concluded that participation in *talk.abortion* was not equal at all, but rather 'dramatically unequal.'

Herring (2000) showed that, although more and more women are getting online, research of online interaction does not support the claims of widespread gender anonymity. Users are sometimes not even interested in exploiting the potential for anonymous interaction. The use of one's real name can give more weight to a posting, because it 'lends accountability and a seriousness of purpose to one's words that anonymous messages lack' (Herring, 2000: 2). Even when gender is not being expressed voluntarily, there are differences in methods of expression, for instance in civility and length of message.

Third, although conversations on the Internet feature disagreements, 'virtual communities are often based upon people getting together with similar values, interests, and concerns' (Dahlberg, 2001: 10). Similarly, Wilhelm (1999: 172) found that most participants within a discussion group hold the same views on a political topic or candidate. This finding is congruent with Davis' findings from a study into political discussions online. He concluded that they become 'more than anything a forum of reinforcement' (1999: 162), dominated by like-minded participants who limited the diversity of opinions by not tolerating dissenting views. Dissenters are ignored, with the result that they become frustrated and finally give up and leave the discussion group. Not only are dissenters ignored, there is also a risk of 'vigorous attack and humiliation'; Davis concluded that 'Usenet political discussion tends to favour the loudest and most aggressive individuals' (Davis, 1999: 163).

This puts across the fourth challenge to the perceived potential of the Internet for open discussions: Its features, such as anonymity and the low costs (both social and financial) of online expression, have led people to speculate that the Internet will result in 'fragmented, nonsensical, and enraged discussion (otherwise known as flaming)' (Papacharissi, 2004: 260). The Internet will produce unrestrained and uncontrolled communication which will not benefit democracy, but rather polarize society even further (Sunstein, 2001).

Anonymity and the absence of physical presence—which is argued to be promising for democracy—are thus also seen as hindering a genuine democratic exchange. Barber, Mattson and Peterson (1997) argue that, even though anonymity can help promote safer and open discussions, it is anonymity that undermines the deliberative potential of the Internet, as it seems to cause a 'general lack of civility.' Likewise, Streck (1998) compared the Internet with a 'shouting match' resulting from the lack of sanctions and the power of anonymity and the inability to trace identity. Dahlberg (2001) also stated that flaming is attributed to the liberating effects of computer mediated communication—feeling freer to express oneself as one wishes. Although there are differences in the exact numbers of the frequency of flaming, it is clear that it occurs quite often, and that single flames can easily escalate into *flame wars*.

These counterclaims and findings suggest that the unbounded space for interaction and anonymity impede rather than further the blossoming of difference and inclusion in

public discussions. However, there is a more fundamental critique of anonymity in online spaces.

2.4 Discussing difference in online spaces

In the preceding chapter, I discussed the concerns regarding the inclusion of difference in the public sphere. The criticism against traditional theories of public sphere and deliberation is that they do not allow for genuine difference. It was argued that the main prerequisite for public debate is openness, both with regard to alternative discourses and to the participants that employ them. This involves inclusion of all participants and viewpoints in the debate. Specifically regarding debates on contested issues on which society is, or seems to be, divided, this openness of debate and of discussants towards each other is of major importance. The alternative voices can (but do not necessarily have to) be initially included in the public sphere in the form of counter publics, but at some stage they have to interact with the mainstream public sphere.

In this section, I examine the Internet's ability to include alternative voices and facilitate engagement between discourses. First, I will discuss the ambivalence of anonymity in online spaces. The role of the Internet regarding counter publics is the second point of analysis. This brings me to a conclusion about online openness and engagement, and specifically how these elements inform this study.

2.4.1 Anonymity and difference online

One important and not unproblematic feature of the Internet's potential for democratic communication is anonymity. This would allow communication with others without necessarily exposing one's gender, race, or other physical and identity markers. In Chapter 1, however, I argued that it is undesirable and impossible to have participants in the public sphere bracket their identity, as it suppresses difference and thus excludes the groups that are asked to leave their identity behind. But this is exactly what most arguments for the potential of the Internet with regard to democratic discussion are based on. There are three problems with this 'naive dismissal of the relations of power' (Travers, 2000: 15).

First, the Internet does not necessarily allow for an 'identity free' space, as a number of studies quoted earlier have found. In this respect, 'identity online is still *typed*, still mirrored in oppressive roles even if the body has been left behind or bracketed' (Nakamura, 2002: 4). Moreover, chosen identities facilitated by the technology such as online avatars but also nicknames, pseudonyms and other indicators of identity are not a complete eradication of offline identities but rather involve a shift of these identities into the online or virtual world. Even though the physical bodies of participants are not (necessarily) visible to other users, language and images portrayed online still reveal identity markers (whether shown consciously and in accordance with 'reality' or not). As this language and these images can contain more information about someone's identity (e.g. political affiliation or religion) than mere physical appearance, we have to wonder if online identity is not *less* bracketed than *more*.

The second problem with celebrating anonymity is that when identity is not spelled out online, offline ideologies are reproduced. As argued in the previous chapter, when one specific type of communication is idealised or preferred, specific groups are marginalized. The ideal of one type of expression governing the public sphere excludes other types and, hence, certain participants and viewpoints. Conversely, if these marginalized groups fit this one ideal type, it reproduces and reinforces the mainstream way of interaction. Instead of opening up spaces for difference online, anonymity—when taken to mean suppressing one's identity—reproduces gender, racial, and other relevant stereotypes.

This brings us to the third objection to seeking the Internet's potential for democratic discussion in anonymity: Asking people to leave behind their identity puts them in a difficult position. If anonymity asks the 'other' to remain 'in the closet', if the 'other' has to pretend s/he is something s/he is not, is this then an asset?

If people do not contest the norms that exclude them, they participate only partially. (...) They are merely 'enjoying' the privilege accorded to some by not contesting the assumptions that their silence means they match the underlying universals of the public sphere (...). As long as the terms of participation remain unchallenged, diversity fails to characterize participation in these spaces (Travers, 2000: 16).

Here we come back to points made earlier in Chapter 1, where the same question was asked: Is the bracketing of identity desirable (if feasible at all)? It was argued that identity will and should inform the manner of expression and the positions presented in political discussion. In the same fashion, we need to question the celebration of the Internet as a democratic place, because social cues are not present on it. This raises the question whether (and why) social cues and identity markers are something that should be left behind. These questions also allow us to be more aware of the way in which identity plays a role in online public discussion. Thus, the empirical question should be directed at uncovering what role difference plays in online discussion and who/what is in/excluded, rather than assuming these types of difference are no longer important online.

If online communication should not be stripped of identity markers but rather, should embrace difference, we need to evaluate such possibilities. Therefore, does the Internet allow for engagement between different discourses better than offline interaction?

2.4.2 Alternative spaces and counter publics online

If it is not desirable to leave one's identity behind, we need to discover whether the Internet enables difference and, if so, how. Instead of assuming that, or studying whether, online communication opens up the possibility of leaving behind our offline identities, it is important to look at whether genuine difference is present and tolerated online.

This requires looking at instances where exclusion takes place, and examining how mechanisms of exclusions work online. Much seems to suggest that oppression of difference online happens in the same way that it does offline: 'the likelihood that "coming out" as "other" would leave one open to marginalization on the bulletin boards and hence that the boards simply reflect power relations in off-line social spaces needs to be taken

seriously' (Travers, 2000: 18). Online, rules of conduct will naturally evolve or be consciously developed as in any other space in which humans interact. These norms can be very exclusive, causing some groups to feel inhibited to reveal their identity.

Bearing in mind these concerns, it may well be that the Internet's main potential for inclusion lies in the creation of separate spheres online, in a way that resembles counter publics discussed in Chapter 1. In such a space people can feel safe and can comfortably speak their mind. The Internet seems to hold a great deal of opportunity for counter publics, in that it provides a platform for marginalized discourses. The opportunities for taking on the speaker role pertain to the whole population that has economic and social access to the Internet, but the advantages are expected to be greatest for those who normally have not been able to take on this role, either in the traditional media or in other areas of the public sphere. It is here that we find the claims regarding the Internet's capability to empower marginalized discourses. Because of the low costs of 'publishing', participation in the public sphere is even attainable for people 'beyond elites in wealthy societies' (Bohman, 2004: 137), and those outside of centre of politics. 'The internet offers them a way not only of communicating with supporters, but also the potential to reach out beyond the "radical ghetto" both directly (disintermediation) and indirectly, through influencing the mass media' (Downey & Fenton, 2003: 198).

The Internet is viewed as a new discursive space that allows groups normally silenced in traditional media to 'voice themselves and thus become visible and make their presence felt' (Mitra, 2004: 493). As groups, institutions, and states do not have to compete for access, it is viewed as a counterweight to traditional media: it 'can be used by anyone, at any time, from any place on the planet' (Karatzogianni, 2004: 46). The flexibility of the Internet is seen as the key feature in overcoming social inequality and provides space to voice different discourses:

It can contain many different, even contradictory, "virtual communities": racist organisations use the same infrastructure as the members of the Association of Progressive Communications to spread their messages; anarchists share the same browser software as the financial organisations they are trying to destroy; pornography and sites promoting fundamentalists religions both flourish and are often found together in the vanguard of technical developments. (...) [T]heir presence highlights how the Internet, by being open to further modes of communication and interconnection, can offer scope for policy intervention designed to reduce inequalities. (Thomas & Wyatt, 2000: 43)

But even if the Internet offers great opportunities for groups to form coexisting counter publics, the question still needs to be addressed as to how engagement between different discourses comes about online, since this is the ultimate aim of exchange in the public sphere (as argued in Chapter 1).

2.5 Conclusion

Little is known about the actual empirical ways in which people use the Internet to discuss politics. Even though the number of empirical studies is growing, no conclusive answer has been given. There are numerous arguments on how the Internet can open up the debate as well as arguments stating that the Internet is not suited for democratic discussion. However, neither *the* Internet, nor the specific technologies it brings forth, inherently produces any type of communication. First of all, there is no such thing as *the* Internet. The literature (both empirical studies and more theoretical publications) reviewed in this chapter often addresses *the* Internet's potential for democracy. But the Internet is often taken to mean different things, such as newsgroups, web forums, chat rooms, or e-mailing lists. All of these types of communication have different characteristics and thus vary in their potential for democratic discussion. Second, though these diverse types of online communication may allow for certain types of interaction that to some extent meet the criteria of democratic debate, it is the user who has to employ the Internet for that purpose and in these specific ways.

The third problem in this body of literature concerns the assumption that because of its anonymity, online discussion offers space for difference. However, if one aims for engagement between different discourses, difference should be embraced and not bracketed or suppressed. Difference should be out in the open to create mutual understanding of various positions and experiences. The question thus becomes to what extent the Internet allows for openness towards and engagement between different discourses. Little is known about this issue, and it is the empirical focus of this thesis.

Keeping in mind the concerns regarding difference and engagement, this thesis examines various elements of openness in online spaces:

- *Structural openness* (Chapter 4): To what extent do online rules and norms that govern the online interactions foster or prohibit inclusion? Online spaces, like all spaces of human interaction, are guided by certain rules and norms. These rules and norms provide the boundaries of the online spaces and thus structure and limit its openness.
- *Participants' views on openness* (Chapter 5): The question is not so much about what difference the Internet allows for, but rather how people use the Internet. Do they use it to find others that have the same views (communities of like-minded) or do they use it to encounter a diversity of people and positions, or do they seek both? Next to these questions regarding the extent to which openness is sought by participants, I examine whether participants feel that the Internet also provides a space for this openness. Do users feel that the Internet provides more space for diversity than other media do, as the literature seems to suggest?
- *Online openness compared to offline openness* (Chapter 6): It is not only relevant to ask participants whether they feel that the Internet allows for diversity and whether this is more so than with other media, but also to examine whether this is actually the case in debates on contested issues. I thus examine these questions through a case study on a particular debate on immigration. Is it the case that more participants and viewpoints

are included online than in offline media, regarding a contested issue?

- *Openness towards alternative discourses* (Chapter 7): Related questions state whether online users are open to views and positions different from their own, and whether dissenters are included or excluded from the debate. What kinds of interactions take place between disagreeing participants, and do these lead to engagement and understanding or just more polarization? These questions are also examined through a case study of an online debate, examining whether engagement between different discourses is present and how this engagement can come about.

Chapter 3

Examining online discussions

3.1 Introduction

This thesis examines the way difference is dealt with in online debates, focusing on online public discussion on immigration and integration in the Netherlands. In this chapter, I discuss the methodological choices and considerations regarding the empirical research conducted. In examining interactions on web forums, I focus on discussions on immigration and integration, as it is currently an important issue in the Netherlands and dialogue is viewed as alleviating tensions in society. For the purpose of this thesis, immigration can be seen as an exemplary case as it is a contested issue, dealing with the (presumed) differences between the 'native' Dutch and those of immigrant descent.

Web forums are chosen to examine how different discourses come together and whether engagement is present. On these sites, interaction is not only *possible* but also generates the main reason for existence of the web space. This is not to say that engagement between discourses is impossible or less likely to occur on non-interactive spaces. I, however, chose to focus on web forums because they are specifically intended for discussion. People can raise issues, publish ideas, and present arguments. Web forums are designed to foster response to posts, even if authors of posts do not always (intend to) get one. After describing these web forums and their main features (section 3.2), a description follows of the choice of forums studied in this thesis (section 3.3). Subsequently, I will discuss the ethical considerations involved in studying communication on web forums (3.4). Section 3.5 provides a description of the main approach to research that is employed to examine in/exclusion of difference in public discussion: critical discourse analysis. The last part of the chapter introduces the research design and briefly discusses the methods used to answer each of the four research sub-questions identified in the Introduction. In the chapters that report on the empirical analyses (Chapters 4–7), I provide a more detailed description of the methods used and the specific types of analyses conducted.

3.2 Web forums

The analysis in this research focuses on discussions on immigration that take place on websites that use a specific format to enable discussion and to which debate is central: web forums.¹ Web forums are a specific form of Internet communication, even though they can use differing software formats. It can be defined as ‘an online public discussion area where users exchange ideas and information’ (Mann & Stewart, 2000: 219). There are a number of shared characteristics for this type of discussion: they are public; participants may remain anonymous; the discussions are organized through themes and topics; the discussions are facilitated or moderated; and participants do not have to be online at the same time.

Communication is open to all

Even though there are specific owners of web forums—collectives, individuals, political parties, foundations or media companies—anyone who wants to participate can access the discussion. Depending on the specific forum, a number of discussion features are accessible without registering and logging in. On the forums examined in this thesis, reading the discussion is open to all. Searching within the discussions or accessing the list of participants or their profiles, however, requires registration on most forums. With all forums in the sample, registration is required to initiate a post or reply to one. This registration involves acknowledging the basic rules of the forum and filling out a profile that includes providing a user name (which can be, and in most cases is, a nickname) and a functional e-mail address (to which the password needed for further participation is sent). If one prefers, the address can be made available to other participants of the forum, and is always available to the forum administrators. Other information that may be included in one’s profile is gender, date of birth, country or city of origin, and other personal information, depending on the forum. Some forums also give the opportunity to accompany one’s profile with a picture or signature. Whether or not participants have to register and log in to use other features of the discussion, like searching for key words on the site, viewing someone’s profile and user statistics, is dependent on the web forum.

Communication is (quasi) anonymous

Participants need not give their real name when registering for a forum, so they can participate anonymously if they prefer. However, certain information is available to the forum administrators. First, one has to have a functioning e-mail address, which, of course, does not have to display more specific contact information. Second, the administrators have access to the IP-address, which can then possibly be used to identify an individual.

¹ Other names, like web discussion, bulletin board, and conference are also used to describe this specific type of site.

Communication is moderated

On all the forums there is at least one moderator (but on most forums there are several), who has the role of enforcing the rules of the forum (often called 'netiquette'). When a participant's behaviour is perceived to be unacceptable, moderators can deny him/her access to the forum. Such a ban is the ultimate punishment on a forum, but normally only happens after a number of warnings. These participants can, of course, choose to sign in again under a different name. Moderators also edit posts of participants or ask this of the participants when deemed necessary. The process of moderation varies per forum and per moderator. In Chapter 4, the process of moderation and the various differences between the forums will be discussed.

Communication is guided by threads

Discussions online are divided into categories, sub-categories, and 'threads' or topics. For instance, on one of the analysed forums there is a category 'Departments', which is then further divided into sub-categories 'Economy', 'Internal affairs', 'Foreign affairs', and 'Immigration and Integration' (*Weerwoord*). Within these sub-categories, people can start 'threads' or 'topics' such as 'immigration and integration in the media'. A thread is a 'chain of postings on a single subject' (Mann & Stewart, 2000: 219). Participants cannot themselves create new categories, but when registered one can start a new thread. A thread starts with an initial posting, and can be followed up by replies. The number of postings and the order in which the threads are shown varies per forum and can, on most forums, be modified by the readers up to a certain extent; usually a thread has the latest reply on top. The order is thus often dependent on the date of reply instead of the date the thread was started. Icons are often used to either show the status of the thread (for instance, to indicate something is a 'hot topic' or a 'new topic') or to show its nature, according to the initiator of the thread.

Communication is a-synchronous

The web forums are all available 24 hours a day. Threads are only occasionally closed. In theory, discussions have no real ending. This not only means that people can participate in their own time, but also that they can take their time when phrasing their posts.

3.3 Selection of web forums

I examined the discussions on immigration on a number of web forums, selected after a thorough investigation.² The search for relevant web spaces started with a search engine query. To map the issue of immigration as it is represented on websites, I performed a search in August 2003 using a Dutch search engine searching for the words 'immigration', 'immigrant', 'immigrants', 'non-native', 'non-natives', 'asylum seeker' and 'asylum seekers',

²I would like to thank Nicolette Ouwerling for her assistance with the data collection.

using the or-function, which provides Dutch websites containing one or more of these words.

Using search engines for data collection is problematic (see, for instance, Wouters, Hellsten, & Leydesdorff, 2004), as they influence the result; to what extent and in exactly which way is often unknown. After comparing a number of the major search engines, such as *Google*, *Yahoo* and *MSN*, as well as a number of Dutch ones, I decided to use the most frequently used search engine in the Netherlands at that time: *Ilse.nl* (Benjamin, 2002). This decision was based on a comparison of the results, the little information there was on the algorithm or search method, the number and presentation of the results, and the availability of an 'or'-function. Only Dutch-language websites were included on the domains '.nl' and '.net' and '.org' (excluding the Belgian domain).

The search resulted in some 80,000 websites; the first 22 contained six of the seven keywords, 52 contained five, 139 had four, 399, three, and then from 613 to at least 2,000 websites contained two keywords. The search result was saved and the first 2,000 were examined within a month of their collection. The first 100 results were used to refine an earlier draft of a coding scheme, resulting into 15 categories. The first 500 results were then coded, the distribution of which can be found in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: *Distribution of categories of websites referring to immigration*

Web forum	Percent	Valid percent
Educational & research material	17	22
Media, articles, columns	15	19
Non-profit organization	13	17
Political party website, program or statement	13	17
Governmental organization	6	8
Personal homepage	4	5
Discussion forum	3	4
Religious groups	3	4
Local/regional group	2	3
Other political movement	1	1
Starting page immigrants & ethnic minorities [†]	1	1
Asylum seekers as minor part of other theme	6	—
Not relevant	8	—
Can't open/doesn't exist anymore	8	—

[†] A 'start pagina (starting page)' is a Dutch term for websites that are centred around a specific theme and which provides links to websites dealing with that theme. This can be for instance 'Islam', or 'politics in general' or 'Pim Fortuyn'. They are not necessarily centred on political themes; they also deal with holidays or health, for instance.

For a large part, the websites represented 'mainstream' voices also represented offline: the media, non-profit organizations, political parties and governmental organizations (61% of the coded web pages; excluding the non-relevant pages and those only indirectly referring

to asylum seeking and immigration). The largest category constituted information related to education or research (22%). Only a few of these 500 websites represented individual citizens, such as personal web pages and discussion forums. I acknowledge, though, that no general conclusions can be drawn from these data, and this was not the aim of the search; this initial coding and examination of 2,000 websites only aimed to identify relevant discussion sites. Following the links of these websites as well as those provided on so-called starting pages, more websites were examined.

To locate discussions on the issue of immigration, I specifically looked for websites where people discuss the *political* side of the issue. This is not to say that organizations that provide information for asylum seekers regarding legal procedures are not part of the political realm, but these do not fall within the focus of my research. Seven large Dutch web forums were selected for further analysis: *Fok*, *Maghrebonline*, *Maroc*, *Nieuwrechts*, *Politiekdebat*, *Terdiscussie* and *Weerwoord* (see Table 3.2).

Table 3.2: *Types of forums*

Forum	# users	# posts	Type of discussion forum
Fok	–	33954,358 [†]	Diverse topics, sub forum ‘politics’
Maghrebonline	3,947	91,324	Specifically aimed at Dutch Moroccans, diverse topics
Maroc	49,346	2184,589	Specifically aimed at Dutch Moroccans, diverse topics
Nieuwrechts [‡]	–	–	Linked to political party (political orientation extreme right-wing)
Politiekdebat	1,004	25,524	Aimed at discussing politics
Terdiscussie	688	210,159	Mainly aimed at discussing politics
Weerwoord	1,939	228,053	Mainly aimed at discussing politics

[†] The sub forum on politics has 995,764 posts.

[‡] The web host of the website of *Nieuwrechts* has closed off the site (supposedly because of financial reasons). On the new site there is no discussion forum.

This sample of forums is the result of the initial examination of online discussions, and includes some of the most popular web forums (in terms of the number of readers and postings) in the Netherlands. They represent more right-wing orientated (*Nieuwrechts* and *Fok*) and left-of-centre orientated websites (*Weerwoord*), as well as specific ethnic minority websites (*Maghrebonline* and *Maroc*), forums that are designed specifically for the discussion of politics (*Terdiscussie* and *Politiekdebat*) and general discussion forums (*Fok*, for instance) in which political discussion is just one issue among many.

3.4 Ethical considerations in studying web forums

There are a number of considerations that should be taken into account when using data from these forums. The main question is whether it is ethical to use data available (pub-

licly) online without informing the participants about such use of their communications. Should one attempt to obtain consent of all participants included in the research? Should the researcher, when quoting the online posts, refer to the original author, thereby crediting him/her?³

Hewson et al. (2003: 53) take on the position that researchers can use the 'data that have been deliberately and voluntarily made available in the public Internet domain (including on the www and in newsgroups) (...), providing anonymity is ensured.' The question is: When is something 'deliberately and voluntarily made available' online? This depends on the expectations of the participants of online communication. Here, two positions can be distinguished: the view that Internet research involves studying human subjects in space that should be protected, and the view that online interactions concern 'texts' and 'authors' (Basset & O'Riordan, 2002). First, the human subject being studied needs to be protected from harm and should not be involved in research without his/her knowledge and consent. The latter perspective considers online texts to be authored and made available deliberately and voluntarily. They are *published* as, for instance, a letter to the editor is published.

The expectations are paramount in determining the status of online communication and the ethics of using the data (Ess, 2002). Elgesem (2002) suggests that also the nature of the information (specifically its sensitivity) should be taken into account as this affects the expectations users will have. The expectations of participants of online discussions should thus inform the researcher as to whether an online space could be considered public or private. This study takes the web forums analysed in this thesis to be public spaces. More than that, they are examined in this thesis precisely because they are considered to be part of the *public* sphere. They are open to all, both with regard to reading and to writing. Moreover, I assume the participants of the web forums hold the same expectations. The forums they choose to participate in distinguish themselves by the fact that they have a large, heterogeneous, public, are aimed at discussion, and the participants actively seek to be read and responded to by others. I believe Mann & Stewart (2000: 46) are right when they argue that the online contributions are public acts that are deliberately intended for public consumption.

This is not to say that interactions on these forums are never private. Between different forums and even *within* forums the interactions can differ in nature. People use the same spaces to have more 'private conversations' and to publicly discuss public matters; the status it is given can vary per interaction. In this thesis, I only include those interactions that are public, precisely because they are public (see also: Lee, 2000). I examine *public* discussion, rather than private conversations online.

There is another issue to take into account. According to the position of Hewson et al. (2003), public online data can be used, but if and only if the anonymity of participants is ensured. So, we can analyse and use the data, but we have to make sure that the authors of

³For an overview of the ethical considerations when conducting online research see, for instance: Hewson, Yule, Laurent, & Vogel (2003); Lee (2000) and the special issue of *Ethics and Information Technology* 2002, 4(3).

the texts cannot be identified. This can be considered to be in conflict with the previous argument. If the interactions are public and *published*, they concern authored information. Apart from issues such as copyright, one could argue that using pseudonyms or ‘anonymising’ the authors is not doing justice to the status of their communication (Basset & O’Riordan, 2002). Authorship should be acknowledged, and the communications should be treated in the same way, as we would, for instance, treat letters to the editor, by quoting and referring to the author of the text.

In sum, the discussions on web forums examined here are considered to be public texts that are *actively* and *deliberately* presented in public space. People contribute because they want to voice their opinion and want to be heard. Because of this, I will quote the text and refer to the authors.

3.5 Discourse analysis

In this thesis, public discussion is seen as constituting an important part of democracy and citizenship. It is viewed as ‘public communication about topics and actors related to either some particular policy domain or to the broader interest and values that are engaged. It includes not only information and argumentation but images, metaphors, and other condensing symbols’ (Ferre et al., 2002: 9). Public discourse comes about in various spaces, including public online spaces such as web forums.

The perspective on discourse taken here is that of *critical discourse analysis*.⁴ The term discourse refers to:

- language use as a social practice;
- the kind of language used within a specific field;
- a way of speaking which gives meaning to experience from a particular perspective (Philips & Jørgensen, 2002: 66-67).

In this thesis, discourse is analysed mainly at the level of specific discussions online.

By analysing the openness of public discussion on immigration, this study does not involve a full discourse analysis; it does not give equal attention to all aspects of the discourse. I will focus on the nature of the discourse with regard to ‘difference’: Which participants are represented and which are not, and which discourses are included and which are excluded? In this analysis special attention will be given to the different levels of power of actors in the debate: Who has the power to exclude voices from debate and what are the power relations within the debate? In addition, I raise the question whether or not there is engagement—interaction and dialogue—between discourses. This method of analysis fits well with the theoretical framework of this thesis, as it involves examining relations of power, particularly with regard to inclusion of marginalized discourses. It fur-

⁴For overviews and different approaches within the field of discourse analysis see: Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Dijk, 1997a, 1997b; Fairclough, 1995; Gill, 2000; Howarth, 2000; Philips & Jørgensen, 2002; Potter, 2003; Torfing, 1999; Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001.

thermore takes into consideration the idea of engagement between discourses, which in critical discourse analysis is seen as constituting social change.

A critical discourse analysis also calls for social relevance and explanatory critique. This implies that a social problem lies at the basis of the research, one that the research aims to help solve. The social problem that is addressed here is how alternative voices are met in public discussion and whether this allows for inclusion, engagement and understanding.

3.6 Research design

The approach of discourse analysis informs the empirical analysis of this thesis. The ways in which this approach takes form is discussed in detail in the chapters reporting on the analyses (Chapter 4–7). These analyses together examine the four sub-questions which will allow me to answer the main research question: *To what extent is the public debate on Dutch web forums on the issue of immigration open to different voices and how do these different voices interact in this online debate?* Here, I will briefly address the research design by introducing the methods used to examine the four sub-questions.

i) How are web forums organized and in what way does this facilitate or hinder the openness of the debate?

To answer this question, both the explicit and implicit norms for debate held by forum management are examined as well as participants' reactions to the management of the forum (Chapter 4). This analysis involves the mapping of power relations between moderators and users of the forums. What forms of power (to deny/grant access to participants and/or control the content of the debate) do moderators have and employ in their governing of online discussions? Three elements regarding forum regulation are included in the analysis of the web forum norms: the rules of web forums (netiquette); behaviour of and decisions made by forum moderators as well as participants' reactions to them; and moderators' presence in debates, their appointment, and participants' reactions to them.

The netiquette is analysed by means of a discourse analysis, in which I identify common themes in the argumentation of what is included on the forums and what is not. Besides the formal netiquette and the way in which forum administrators and moderators uphold it, I also examine the reactions of participants to the netiquette as well as to forum maintenance.

ii) To what extent do participants of online discussions view and use web forums as an open and inclusive platform specifically with regard to the discussion of the issues of immigration and integration?

Participants' evaluations of the nature of web forums are examined, and their attitude towards inclusion of difference online (Chapter 5). To answer this question an online survey is conducted that asks participants for a broad range of information to gain insight into who is discussing online, why they discuss online, and how they evaluate the online discussions.

iii) To what extent are different actors and viewpoints included in discussions on immigration and integration and how does this compare to the representation in newspapers?

Inclusion ideally results in the actual representation of difference in terms of a variety of actors, positions, and arguments. Only in this way can the goals of inclusion—both the voicing of all relevant issues, arguments and representations of all actors involved, and the opportunity to access all of these different positions and arguments—be reached. This involves analysis of the representation of actors (visible diversity, either through name or reference in text); representation of positions; and exclusions in the discourse.

The question of representation is examined in a case study in Chapter 6 on a particular issue within the broader debate on immigration and integration in the Netherlands: ‘*eerwraak*’ (honour killings). Representation and exclusion in online discussions are compared to those in offline debate. The discourse on honour killings in seven newspapers is compared to the discourse in three web forum discussions.

iv) How do different voices interact online when alternative voices are present(ed) in the debate and to what extent is this interaction open and inclusive?

The last case examines the online discussions in which an alternative voice expresses his opinion on a murder by a youngster of Turkish descent and aims to map the reactions to this alternative voice. I analyse whether or not engagement takes place by establishing whether participants are including one another in these debates, acknowledge and grant the other space to speak and address issues and arguments (Chapter 7). In addition, I examine whether alternative types of expression to the rational communication (such as greeting, rhetoric and narrative) are being employed and whether they foster understanding and engagement between discourses.

4.1 Introduction

Online forums are guided by explicit and implicit rules and norms that are upheld and enforced by forum management and abided to by participants (whether consciously or unconsciously). They provide the boundaries within which the public debate takes place. In Chapter 2, I stated that web forums are at times considered to be the ‘genuine’ public sphere, as they allow many-to-many interactions, and there are few restrictions in accessing this space (as compared to other media constituting part of the public sphere). In television, radio, and newspapers, there are technological barriers and journalistic gatekeepers limiting public access, if not making access impossible for a large section of the public. In contrast to the general idea about web forums’ openness, however, here too access can be controlled and restricted, not only because ‘providers, internet browsers and search engines pre-structure access to information’ (Koopmans, 2004), but also because participants and discourses can be excluded.

In this chapter I will examine the organizational openness of web spaces: their norms and rules. They are examined to more fully understand the online discussion on immigration and the role that the online debate can play as part of the broader public discourse. This chapter then seeks to answer the question: *How are web forums organized and in what way does this facilitate or hinder the openness of the debate?*

4.2 Methodology

To answer this question, I examine both the explicit rules and more implicit norms of the debate as put forward by forum management, as well as the participants’ reactions to them. Three elements of online regulation are included in the analysis:

- i) The rules of web forums (netiquette);
- ii) Behaviour of, and decisions made by forum moderators and participants’ reactions to them;

- iii) Moderators' presence in debates, their appointment, and participants' reactions to them.

Every web forum holds its own rules for discussion (often called netiquette), which are usually published in a specific place on the forum. When an individual first registers to become a member, she or he must, on most web forums, acknowledge agreement with a certain statement containing the rules of what is allowed on the forum and what is not. Most forums also have a thread entitled 'about this forum', in which further rules for the debate are laid out. The rules and norms point to what may be included in the debate, which participants can contribute, and which positions are not tolerated or included. I use the term 'rules' here for the rules that are *explicitly* laid down in the netiquette. 'Norms' refer to the *implicit* norms held by moderators and participants, guiding the moderators' interpretation of, and action upon, breach of the netiquette and other rules.

To analyse how the netiquette affects the relative openness of forums, a discourse analysis is applied that identifies who and what is allowed or not. With these results, the following questions are addressed: What is the underlying logic of who and what is included and excluded? Are certain groups, positions or ways of debating *a priori* excluded by the netiquette? Subsequently, the different means of moderation are analysed. These means are identified to assess the position of power of forum moderators. In addition, I analyse the way in which forum management is made discernible from other users and how moderators are appointed. Last, I examine the views of participants about moderation, moderators, and their appointment (other user attitudes based on a survey are discussed in the next chapter): What kind of questions and concerns do web forum users have regarding the decisions, appointment, and position of moderators?

For the analysis of the three elements of online regulation, seven large Dutch web forums that discuss immigration issues—*Fok*, *Maghrebonline*, *Maroc*, *Nieuwrechts*, *Politiekdebat*, *Terdiscussie* and *Weerwoord*—are examined (see Table 3.2 in Chapter 3 for a description of the forums).

4.3 Rules and regulations online: Netiquette

All forums in this sample explicitly mention the forum rules. When entering a debate as reading *and* 'speaking' participant, one has to agree to these rules. Other than this explicit rules section, almost all forums have a thread explaining the rules of behaviour. This observation is noteworthy, because in offline discussions the rules of the discussion are only rarely explicated. For offline debate they are expected to be self-evident but for online debates they are spelled out and emphasized. On one forum a parallel is drawn in the netiquette between offline and online public discussion, showing that offline rules are considered 'given':

You should behave according to all of the rules that you take into account when you participate in a public debate. (*Maroc*)

It seems that both forum administrators and participants feel there is something different about online discussions that makes it necessary to clarify and uphold rules online. Only three forums, however, explicitly state why they have rules. These explanations in addition remain very general. On *Fok*, there are rules 'to keep things pleasant.' On *Nieuwrechts*, they similarly state: 'Let's make it a good discussion together'; those who want to 'shout' should 'do this elsewhere.' On *Maroc*, 'you have to ensure that there is a pleasant atmosphere on the forum, so flaming is prohibited.'

The rules can be divided into two themes: banning of harmful expressions and manageability of the debate. Most of the rules in the netiquette are concerned with the banning of harmful expressions.

4.3.1 Harmful expression

Many rules in the netiquette pertain to how people should interact with one another, how they should behave *towards* each other. First and foremost, there is a rule regarding the banning of 'harmful expressions', such as flaming, threats, and insults (for a summary of the different rules on what is not allowed, see Table 4.1). All of the web forums mention racism or discrimination as a harmful form of expressions. This type of expression is thus a major focus in the netiquette, not only on forums centred around the issue of immigration, but also on the general forums. With the exception of *Fok* they also ban hurtful expressions like insults or threats. Flaming, religious or ethnic insults, and pornography are forbidden in four out seven forums. Three also mention 'illegal actions' in general. Some of these rules are written using 'legal' terminology, as if to lend it extra authority, as, for instance, in *Maghrebonline*:

You hereby declare that you will not post messages that are hurtful, obscene, vulgar, hateful, discriminating, threatening, or sexually oriented. Apart from this you have to obey appropriate laws and rules.

Some of this is clearly superfluous, as expressions like discrimination are against the law to begin with, but it provides an air of authoritative legality. What the moderators perceive to be 'vulgar' or 'hurtful', however, is not made explicit. Even though these terms are far from straightforward, they are presented on this and other forums as if they were unambiguous. Equally undefined is what the 'appropriate rules' are, or what they refer to.

Why these restrictions are part of the netiquette or how they benefit the discussion is not explained by forum administration. Even when no reference is made to the law, the rules are presented as 'facts' as if no arguments need to be given. Only quality of the discussion and 'feelings of the other' are mentioned a few times, as in the following example:

Messages that are obviously meant to malign others or their convictions will be fully removed without further notice. This has to do with the nasty discussion sphere that can arise because of a handful of diehards (*Maroc*).

Table 4.1: *Types of harmful expressions*

Forum	Type of expression						
	Racism/-discrimination	Hurtful	Flaming	Against religious, ethnic or other groups	Pornographic	Illegal actions	Other
<i>Fok</i>	racism and discrimination		flame wars		pornographic	illegal acts; law	violent or unnecessarily shocking material
<i>Maghrebonline</i>	racism and discrimination	insults; hurtful messages; threats		insulting the Prophet or Allah; anti-Semitic	sexually oriented	violation of Dutch law	obscene, vulgar, hateful
<i>Maroc</i>	racism and discrimination	maligning messages	flaming	anti-Islamic and anti-Semitic			obey all rules of public debate
<i>Nieuwrechts</i>	Nazist statements	abuse, insults insinuations, threats	shouting, cursing	referring to ethnic origin or sexual orientation			referring to diseases; calls for violence
<i>Politiekebat</i>	violation of article 1 of the constitution: discrimination	personal attack					language not suited for younger users (such as rude, crude and uncivil)
<i>Tendiscussie</i>	racism and discrimination	hurtful, hateful, threatening	unnecessary flaming		sexually oriented		obscene, vulgar, slanderous; abusive; obnoxious users
<i>Wernwoord</i>	racism and discrimination	hurtful, hateful, threatening		anti-Semitic; against people, countries, cultures, etc.	sexually oriented	violation of Dutch law	obscene, vulgar

There is further tension between the openness of the forums—most forums feel strongly about ‘freedom of expression’—and the limits of striking a fair balance between openness and the quality of debate. *Terdiscussie* states that freedom of expression is ‘absolutely crucial’ for an ‘optimal discussion’, but that they ‘at the same time employ rules of conduct to sustain a high level [of debate]’. On *Nieuwrechts* the limit of what is allowed is worded in terms of assumed correctness:

As you all know Nieuwrechts is a political party that stands for freedom of expression. On the Nieuwrechts forum everything can be discussed, as long as it happens in a (reasonably) correct way. Floods of abuse, insinuations and insults are not part of what is (reasonably) correct.

For them ‘being emotional’ falls within the limits of correctness, ‘being abusive’ does not:

Threatening pm [personal messages] and postings will result in a direct IP ban. Emotions are fine, but behave within the normal etiquette. Shouting and cursing is not what we want. (*Nieuwrechts*)

The forums think of it as their task, so it seems, to navigate between on the one hand, being an open forum where much, if not all, is allowed, and on the other hand, hosting a ‘good’ discussion in which some types of behaviour or communication need to be eliminated. The following quote clearly depicts this ambivalence, and once more makes clear the ambiguity of the notion of ‘harmful expression’:

It cannot be that everyone with a handicap, a disease, or other disorder (...) is being shitted all over to one’s heart’s content. This is not what the Fok! Forum was meant for and this is not what it will be like. To tell someone the truth is welcomed. A firm discussion is also welcomed. Simply ridiculing someone who is already in a (more) difficult position is not welcomed. (...) When the above is detected, a ban of at least a week will follow in all forums from now on. (...) A bit of civilized flaming is oftentimes quite enjoyable, we all are in for that, but be fair and pick someone of your ‘own size’. (*Fok*)

Forum management¹ here seems mostly concerned with how other participants are treated. In the next example, the same boundary between what is admissible and what is not comes into view, but here the forum management is more concerned with the quality of the debate:

¹I use forum management to refer both to the administrators and the moderators. On some of the forums this distinction is made. Administrators normally have somewhat more means to govern the forum than moderators (for instance, banning participants can only be done by the administrators on some forums). As not all forums have this distinction, I also use the term moderators as the general term to refer to both, unless the distinction is meaningful.

Of course it is still possible to make a joke here and there, but please make sure that it is not offensive, and that it is on-topic, and make sure that your joke is accompanied by a serious reaction. In this way topics can become of higher quality, and people can seriously ask a question without being ridiculed. And the serious forums can remain serious. (*Fok*)

These examples illustrate the tensions that forum managers feel they have to deal with: ‘civilized’ as opposed to ‘uncivilized’ flaming and (reasonably) correct forums in which discussants are allowed to be ‘emotional’ but not ‘abusive’. Forum management sees as its task to guard these boundaries, while providing an open space for people to discuss, away from the ‘normal’ governing forces. So, the moderators want to provide an open space where almost everything is allowed, but see themselves bound. In this, moderation is seen as a necessary evil. Such a view also exists in the discussions between forum users, as is later demonstrated.

There are also forums that do not aim at openness to all, but rather, at providing a safe haven for a specific group of users. These forums try to protect the ‘in-group’, their targeted users, through exclusion of the ‘out-group’, those that may harm their users. *Maroc*, for instance, says it is ‘meant for discussions about all sorts of topics *amongst ourselves*’.² If we take a closer look at this Dutch-Moroccan forum, it seems to be focused on one particular group (those of Moroccan descent living in the Netherlands) and its goal is to facilitate discussion among members of this group. *Maghrebonline*, likewise, mentions banning specific violations that may harm their central group of Muslim users: ‘Insulting our prophet or Allah is considered a grave violation of our forum rules’, while ‘pro-Zionists’ are prohibited from coming to this forum. The purpose of excluding certain groups from the forum is to prevent the site from becoming a platform for users who ‘help to create a negative image of Moroccans’ (*Maghrebonline*).

Two different types of exclusions pertaining to harmful expression can thus be identified. The first—rules aimed at establishing general openness—can be found on forums that aim to broaden the boundaries of what is permissible. The forum moderators strive to allow as much as possible, but find themselves confronted with ‘excesses’ that they have to reject. They want to be open to emotion, but not to abuse, they want to allow ‘civilized’ flaming, encourage ‘telling the truth’, but not hurting ‘weaker’ parties. *Fok*, for instance, falls within this category of maximum openness forums that aim to create a space where more is allowed than in other spaces of public debate. At the same time they struggle to define the rules that somehow are deemed necessary.

The second kind of exclusion—through rules for protection of a specific group—is found on forums aimed at safeguarding certain groups, and in so doing excluding other groups and specific types of expression, such as on *Maghrebonline* and *Maroc*. The latter type of sites is typical of counter publics that aim for emancipation of the ‘own’ group, as discussed in Chapter 1. Here the aim is not so much, however, to link to the general public—a second aspect of counter publics—that is to address the out-group and get

²The phrasing in Dutch is ‘onderlinge discussie’. Emphasis by author.

their voice represented, but rather to provide a space for the in-group to feel comfortable to speak their minds in an environment that is protected from the outside world.

This is an analytical distinction that does not fully explain all cases, as in practice forums can score on different aspects of these two categories. *Nieuwrechts*, for instance, aims to broaden the rules of discussion, as they want to create a space for their target group (extreme right-wingers), where this group is allowed to say more than would be possible in general public space. As such, it is countering public discourse, not by limiting but by opening up the rules.

Table 4.2: *Rules and guidelines regarding manageable discussion*

Web forum	Rules and guidelines
<i>Weerwoord</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - no double posting; - no posting that contains needlessly many or large pictures; - topics are locked when too big (over 6 pages; popular threads over 10 pages), unless one has good arguments against closing it; - no posts without added value; - threads that belong to a different topic are moved; - the topic of a thread and the content need to correspond.
<i>Fok</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - stay on topic; - no spamming or cross posting; - quote only relevant parts; - always add an (appropriate) reaction; - signature max. 4 lines.
<i>Terdiscussie</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - do not start a thread if there is already a thread on this topic; - threads that only consist of copied texts without contribution of the poster will be closed; - signatures cannot be too large; - pictures or texts that are too large can be removed.
<i>Maroc</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - no one-liners directed at one person; - stay on-topic.
<i>Maghrebonline</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - topics that belong to a different section will be moved.
<i>Nieuwrechts</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - do not add to a thread that has 'sunk' unless you have something to contribute.
<i>Politiekdebat</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - check for existence of threads before opening a new one and make sure it is in the right section.

4.3.2 Regulation of the form of the postings: Manageability

Most of the forum rules are concerned with the banning of harmful expression, and focus on the tone or the *content* of the postings. There are a few other forum rules that together can be captured under 'manageability of debate'. These rules all seem to be concerned with the organization of the discussions and the *form* of the postings (see Table 4.2 for an overview of the rules regarding manageability). Where *Fok* was limited in its banning of harmful expressions, they formulate quite a number of management rules, but not as many as *Weerwoord*. Several forums have rules on how to quote (i.e., only quote relevant parts of a message) and indicate that one should always include a reaction when replying to a post (i.e., to never just provide a quote).

Forums also request that participants limit the length of their signature in order to facilitate readability. Similarly, there are rules that say one should not reintroduce topics that have been discarded due to a lack of discussion, unless one really has something new to add. Another rule, intended to keep up the manageability of the forum, is that before someone introduces a new topic, s/he must first check whether that topic already exists within the forum. Participants should also ensure that the new topic is placed in the appropriate section. If not, moderators will move the thread to a different section of the forum. Furthermore, reactions should be on-topic; they must clearly relate to the topic at hand.

All of these rules are not as forceful as those on harmful expression, but make sense in terms of trying to enhance the manageability of a forum. It is not clear, however, how these rules are operationalised. When is something off-topic? Or in the wrong section? Which comments do not add anything new? All of this influences which posts are excluded or deemed inappropriate. The rules, and more specifically the way they are interpreted, may privilege certain groups and exclude others. Thus openness of the forums depends very much on how the rules are maintained and on those enforcing them.

4.4 Moderation

When viewing the potential of web forums for open discussion, moderators hold an interesting position. They are the key to the openness of forums as they decide on in/exclusion of certain types of expression and certain participants. Although it is often claimed that on the Internet anyone can say anything, previous discussion shows that online communication is clearly regulated. In this section, I discuss the means that moderators have to govern online communication. Next, I examine whether there is information (and if so what kind) on the selection of the moderators. Finally, I discuss objections and queries that participants raise on the forums regarding moderation.

4.4.1 Means of moderation

Moderators basically have five means of moderation, which can be thought of as ascending in terms of the extent to which they are impinging on participants' action/text and their

room for inclusion and engagement:

1. Participating in the discussion;
2. Moving texts;
3. Changing/deleting texts;
4. Issuing warnings and giving penalty points;
5. Banning a participant.

I will not discuss these means in detail, or empirically examine the frequency with which they are employed and their direct consequences. Rather, I introduce these five means of moderation in general terms. The aim is to set out the different means that moderators have to influence the debates. In this, I focus on mapping the general boundaries to the openness of discussions that moderation establishes. As such, I will also not differentiate between the forums, but briefly discuss the five means.

Participating in discussions

Though not stated in the official forum rules, the forum moderators participate frequently and intensively in the discussions. Many of the moderators are among the top twenty posters. In Table 4.4, the number of posts per moderator is presented, providing an indication of the presence of moderators in the discussion. Between five and ten percent of their posts are actual moderation, the other 90% show them participating in discussion by giving their personal view. However, as moderators they have quite a bit more influence than 'regular' participants. This type of interference in the debate can thus be seen as an indirect form of moderation, as, even though they do not regulate the debate as such, they may influence the content and direction of it. In this way it may also involve an indirect and subtle form of power to exclude participants or their contributions. By setting the tone of discussion and conveying their convictions, moderators may cause people to withdraw from discussion, or alter their contribution. After all, it concerns those in power to formally exclude participants that are sharing their beliefs and opinions.

Moving texts

Though not necessarily more influential than participating in the discussion, but probably more intrusive for the author whose text it concerns is the ability and power to move a particular text to a different section of the forum. The web forums all have a division of topics, where participants can start 'threads'. If deemed inappropriate for a certain topic, the moderator can move posts and whole threads from one topic to another. This happens with regard to 'serious' topics as well as 'small talk'. The above type of interference in the debate (participation in debate) more pertains to influencing the discourse in it; this and the following types of moderation concern direct regulation of and power in the debate (but these may equally lead to self-regulation of the discourse by participants).

Changing and deleting texts

An intervention that goes even further than a simple moving of a text is the changing or deletion of (parts of) texts by the moderators. In this case there is actual censorship and a direct exclusion of certain texts. This type of censorship takes place on all forums. There are different reasons behind excluding a texts, as, for instance, the inappropriateness of it. On *Fok* it says:

There is a new rule, to take effect at once, with regard to posting in serious forums (...). Off-topic, senseless, and insulting postings will simply be removed from the topics.

Another very common reason for deleting or modifying a text is its (assumed) undesirability: 'Racist and anti-Semitic slogans or calls will be removed immediately' (*Maroc*). These latter 'violations' often do not only result in a disciplinary measure with regard to the text but also with regard to the author of the text: such measures are called *warnings* (or penalty points) and *bans*.

Warnings

All forums, except for *Nieuwrechts*, make use of warnings. A warning is an announcement 'by a member of the crew to a user, requesting not to repeat a certain action' (*Fok*). On the forum *Maroc*, penalty points are given instead of warnings, though in effect that carries the same meaning. Likewise, on *Weerwoord* there is a system of yellow cards (which are ultimately succeeded by a red card). Warnings and penalty points can be followed by a ban, if the moderators deem this a necessary or appropriate reaction to a participant's behaviour.

Bans

All forums have the possibility of banning participants. A ban means depriving someone of the right to post. Bans vary in degree, depending on the deemed seriousness of the violation. Usually a ban takes place after a warning has been issued, but this is not necessarily the case. The variations in the extent of the ban are:

- *In time* (from 48 hours to a permanent/indefinite ban): All of the forums have this variation in time;
- *The number of sub-forums the ban pertains to*: The ban can concern either the whole forum, or be specified in terms of sub-forums. This distinction can be found on *Fok*, where there is a strong demarcation between the different sub-forums (if someone is excluded from the politics section s/he is not necessarily excluded from the news section);
- *A nick-ban or an IP ban*: this distinction is, for instance, made on *Maroc*, where the 'normal' ban involves a nick ban: a ban for a specific login-account, related to a specific nickname used to register. An IP ban is even more far-reaching: In this case, the participant is not only unable to use his or her log-in account combined with a specific

nickname, but is also unable to create a new account or use an old account using the same IP address. At *Nieuwrechts* the IP ban is the only type of ban mentioned in the forum rules. The other forums do not specifically mention this IP ban, but may use it.

These types of bans are used regularly. All forums, except for *Maroc* and *Nieuwrechts*, have specific threads in which bans (and on *Weerwoord* also the warnings) are announced, and reasons for the bans are provided.

4.4.2 Moderation is non-negotiable

When discussing the rules, I argued that openness of the forums depends very much on how the rules are interpreted and thus on those enforcing them. Even though the Internet is often seen as a space for the free flow of information, online discussions are often controlled. Even more, forums state that users have little input in this process of moderation. On four of the forums (*Fok*, *Maroc*, *Nieuwrechts*, and *Terdiscussie*) it is explicitly stated that moderation is non-negotiable. Suggestions are usually appreciated (or so it says in the forum rules) but such cooperation is encouraged to take place through private e-mails rather than via the public discussion itself. Requesting the banning of a specific participant is not tolerated, nor is it allowed to discuss actual bans. Some examples:

Requests by users for bans of others are not welcome, and can result in a ban of the user making the request. (Alleged) violations observed by users can, of course, be reported. However, we prefer to receive those by e-mail, ICQ, MSN, or IRC. The FAs [Forum Administrators] in turn decide if and which action should be taken. (*Fok*)

There will be no discussion about bans and penalty points. Also we do not want people to start topics with questions about a ban or penalty points of their own or other users. If people have questions, they can send them to [webmaster]. (*Maroc*)

Concrete complaints can be sent to the administration; administration decides and no form of appeal is possible. (*Nieuwrechts*)

In the forum rules there is a particular focus on the personal responsibility of the users regarding one's own posts as well as posts of other users. Everyone has the obligation to report misuse of the forum. Users are furthermore obliged (under penalty of a ban) to ignore posts that are provocative or aggressive. Here again, they are asked to react only with a personal message to the moderators. Even though their input is valued in this case, the outcome is once again non-negotiable.

A number of the forums (*Fok*, *Maroc* and *Politiekdebat*) refer to the fact that rules can be applied at the moderators' discretion. Some forums (*Fok* and *Politiekdebat*) state that they can change the policy at any time and without prior notification. These specifications leave less room for the users to appeal certain decisions, and make it difficult to ensure an equal debate. Forum moderators have the right to act against the users of the sites, even when that action is not based on the policy. The sometimes (seemingly) arbitrary

moderation, or at least its lack of transparency, is exemplified by the following disclaimer to the netiquette of *Fok*:

- *Fok* reserves the right to evaluate posts and threads of its own discretion when a policy does not suffice;
- The contents of the policy can be changed, without prior notification, at all times;
- Moderators of specific forums decide for their own forum how strict it will be: what is allowed in one forum, is not necessarily allowed in another;
- One cannot derive any rights from preceding acts, decisions of moderators and rules mentioned in the policy;
- The moderators can and will diverge from common rules. Their sense of justice comes from feeling, not from predetermined rules.

These types of disclaimers make it very difficult for users to be able to contest decisions, and gives forum moderators substantial means to decide upon the in/exclusion of participants and their texts. The openness of forums depends largely on the actions of the moderators.

4.5 Forum moderators

It seems that the interpretation of the rules of moderation is obscure, and at times quite undemocratic. It thus becomes important to know who the moderators are and how they are ‘installed’. Are they elected or appointed, and if they are appointed, by whom? And how do forum participants respond to this? When examining the moderators it becomes apparent that on many forums it is unclear who the moderators are and how they are appointed. Table 4.3 provides an overview of the information that is available about the institutional arrangement vis-à-vis moderators and administrators of various forums. On all the web forums there is one general ‘administration account’ (mostly in the form of ‘administration@webforum’). They are rarely used, however, as almost all of the moderation and administration is done through separate accounts of individual moderators and administrators.

Some of the forums clearly indicate who the moderators are, either in a specific section on the web or in the user profile. In this respect, *Fok* is the most transparent forum: It not only has a post in which the moderators and administrators introduce themselves, but they are also made visible through identifiable labels such as ‘forum moderator’ and through use of a colour label. On some forums, there is a moderator introduction (ranging from a quite extensive description—providing information on the age, gender, and profession or interest of the moderators—to a mere mentioning of the names of the persons that have moderation rights). The remaining forums reveal nothing about who moderates, unless a moderator leaves or a new one is appointed. This seems to suggest that one can only get to know such matters when spending a considerable amount of time on the forum. In any case, with the exception of *Fok*, forum management is not well introduced and made

Table 4.3: *Institutionalisation of forum management*

Web forum	Introduction of the moderator(s)?	Separate indication for moderator(s)?	Information on appointment of moderator(s)?
<i>Fok</i>	Yes, introduction per sub forum.	Yes, with colouring and label.	Only by requesting users to apply to become moderators.
<i>Maghrebonline</i>	Only when newly appointed; no separate place where they are introduced.	Yes, through label.	No information.
<i>Maroc</i>	No.	No.	No information.
<i>Nieuwrechts</i>	Only when newly appointed; no separate place where they are introduced.	Some moderators have labels indicating this.	No information.
<i>Politiekdebat</i>	Yes, moderators are mentioned per topic.	One with label 'site admin'; all others have no labels.	No information.
<i>Terdiscussie</i>	Yes, separate item in which moderation team is introduced; functions and authority indicated per moderator.	Yes, through label.	No information.
<i>Weerwoord</i>	Yes, in the topic 'about this forum' they are mentioned.	No separate indication.	No information.

visible.

None of the forums explicate how moderators and administrators are appointed. Only *Fok* advertises a position for moderator for which they ask users to apply, by providing a brief CV, motivation, and interests in the forum. Even in this case, though, no insight into the actual process of appointing the moderators is provided. On all of the other forums the process through which forum management is appointed remains even more of a mystery.

Table 4.4 provides more data on the activities and background of the different moderators. Information of this kind is at times difficult to find. On *Maroc*, for instance, there is a separate page with information on the administration. However, two of the three administrators mentioned there have not been active on the forum in the last two years. Moreover, in the forum statistics on user groups, it says that there are 149 people in the group 'admin/moderators'. It remains unclear, however, who they are and how they may

be recognized, and even if they indeed all have moderation rights.

As Table 4.4 shows, there are a number of active moderators in the different forums who contribute a considerable percentage of the posts. As previously argued, quite often these moderators are prominent participants of the discussions rather than moderators of the discussions.

Table 4.4: *Number of posts per moderator*

Web forum	Moderator (label [†])	# of posts	Year of registr.	% of total	Average per day
<i>Fok</i> [‡]	Sidekick (moderator)	35,472	May 02	–	32
	Sizzler (moderator)	13,978	Sept 02	–	15
<i>Maghrebonline</i>	Saidxxx	7,651	Nov 02	7.35	8.04
	XOR© (super admin)	537	Nov 00	0.52	0.32
	Admin (admin)	208	–	0.20	0.02
	AMA (moderator)*	136	Dec 04	0.13	0.74
	Beheer (admin)	1,090	Jul 01	0.08	0.76
<i>Maroc</i>					
<i>Nieuwrechts</i> [◇]	Blokkie (no label)	4,525	–	2.97	–
	Michiel (admin)	3,295	–	2.17	–
	Onkies (admin)	3,267	–	2.15	–
	Lothar (no label)	2,694	–	1.77	–
	John Nederland (moderator)	2,521	–	1.66	–
	Nederland (admin)	988	–	0.64	–
	Malord (moderator)	824	–	0.54	–
	Still Thinking (guest)	–	–	–	–
	Batman (no label)	6,883	Jan 04	17.20	8.99
	Sven (no label)	2,246	Jan 05	5.53	16.76
<i>Politiekdebat</i> [*]	Roel (site admin)	1,562	Jun 03	3.85	2.04
	Toad (admin)	6,811	Feb 02	4.56	5.6
	Mephisto (admin)	5,247	Feb 02	3.53	4.3
<i>Terdiscussie</i>	Wilmer (moderator)	3,982	–	2.67	4
	Gerbski (moderator)	3,004	May 02	2.01	2.6
	Democraat	982	Jun 04	0.66	2.8
	Miies (admin)	938	Feb 02	0.63	0.8
	Chris (admin)	340	Feb 02	0.23	0.3
	Mediadesign (admin)	69	Feb 02	0.05	0.1
	Tuxje (admin)	13	–	0.01	0
<i>Weerwoord</i>	Mirjam (no label)	5,554	Mar 02	3.03	4.73

Continued on next page

Web forum	Moderator (label [†])	# of posts	Year of registr.	% of total	Average per day
	John Wervenbos (admin)	4,063	Feb 01	2.23	2.59
	Theo (no label)	3,933	Mar 03	2.16	4.93
	Mark Paalman (no label)	3,132	Feb 02	1.72	2.58
	Cliff (admin)	2,543	Nov 00	1.39	1.53
	Niels (no label)	1,807	Nov 00	0.99	1.09
	Melisz (no label)	1,515	Feb 01	0.83	0.93
	Weerwoord admin.	567	Nov 00	0.31	0.34

[†] 'No label' does not mean that there is no label at all (usually labels are assigned to user groups), but that there is no specific label indicating that this moderator belongs to forum management.

[‡] As *Fok* makes a clear distinction between the sub forums and its moderators, I only include here the moderators of the sub forum 'Politics'.

* It seems this moderator has a separate account as a user, which is used more frequently (also for moderation).

◇ This forum has had to restructure recently and some people lost their status; the statistics may thus be tainted.

★ At *Politiekdebat*, there are moderators assigned to specific topics. 'Roel' is the overall administrator (he has access to all discussions), and the other two are the specific moderators for the topic 'ethnic minority policy and integration'.

4.6 Users' perspectives of moderation

Even though moderation is non-negotiable there are numerous instances where people do react to the forum rules, the way in which they are upheld and by whom. Here, I will discuss some of these reactions, and the debates they result in. The discussion of these debates is not aimed at presenting all (or a representative sample) of the concerns of users. It does aim to show the way in which the lack of transparency presented above can lead to questions and unease for the forum participants.

With regard to the rules, there are not many objections made on the forums. Only a few web forum participants feel that moderation should not exist at all; most of the participants feel moderation *is* necessary and unavoidable. This, for instance, becomes clear in the discussion initiated by the forum administrators of *Terdiscussie*. They ask whether moderation should be stricter, by removing all off-topic messages, in order to increase the quality of the discussions. One of the participants draws a parallel with offline discussions to explain why s/he is against this:

If you have a discussion with people, in real life, and someone makes a futile, or 'off-topic' remark (spots a beautiful woman, for instance), then you won't shout, 'shut up!', now will you? (...) Internet is pre-eminently a space to freely give your opinion, unhindered by your personal contacts that you do have in daily life. (Torero, *Terdiscussie*, discussion: act stricter, 12 Feb 2004, 10:53)

Both advocates and opponents of strict(er) moderation use this comparison to offline in-

teractions. Indeed, there are many references to the (alleged) openness of the Internet in comparison to other discussion platforms. Many see this transparency as its main value, and feel that online communication should be moderated as little as possible. Online communication is, after all, *online*; the rules that may apply offline should therefore not necessarily be followed online. Advocates of more moderation likewise draw the comparison to offline interaction:

We are on a discussion forum, so argumentation has to be at the basis of every post. (...) Even on the Internet one has to obey rules. (INDO4LIFE, *Terdiscussie*, discussion: act stricter, 12 Feb 2004, 17:29)

In general, the objections made on the web forums are thus not as much about the rules, but rather concern the way in which moderators interpret and uphold the rules. A main question raised by participants is to what extent moderators should use their power to interfere in discussions. In choosing to close off certain threads, for instance, they decide what is included and what is not. A number of *Terdiscussie* participants are not happy with the closing of a number of threads on Islam:

You (the moderator) are here for the users, if you keep up this attitude you will chase people away from the forum; you don't have to decide what the users find interesting, they know this well enough themselves. (Armand, *Terdiscussie*, Censorship on this forum again?, 21 Nov 2004, 12:37)

It is the users who decide what is said, not the moderators, right? (Jeroen, *Terdiscussie*, Censorship on this forum again?, 21 Nov 2004, 17:56)

Moderators do not feel accountable to the users of the forums, and hold the key to whom and what is included and excluded. A last example of a discussion clearly illustrates the unease with the power and the predispositions of moderators:

After hanging around on maroc.nl for three years, I was forced to leave. Mainly because I have been chased away by the moderators with their stupid penalty point system. So now I'm looking for a new place to go. But before I put my energy in my writing, I would like to know how strict the moderators are here. Is there room for critical, sharp, and sometimes fierce but fair opinions from autochthonous side? (Seif, *Maghrebonline*, How are the moderators here, 12 Jan 2005, 13:10)

They don't have penalty points here, and there is no telling how the moderators will decide upon something. (Jena, *Maghrebonline*, How are the moderators here, 12 Jan 2005, 19:21)

Moderators don't do much except to follow our Farid's [the top-poster in this forum, with 13% of the posts] lead in banning Jewish and (according to him) Zionist sympathies without any warning or dialogue. (allemaal, *Maghrebonline*, How are the moderators here, 13 Jan 2005, 01:32)

After this post, *Seif*, the initiator of the discussion replied with: 'Apparently there is not much difference with Maroc.nl. Ah well, why would there be: Moroccans are Moroccans'.³ Because of this comment, *Seif* was banned on the 14th of January 2005. The ban is titled: 'Bye Bye Seif', and only contains a quote of the last sentence: 'Ah well, why would there be: Moroccans are Moroccans'. There is no further explanation. The 'super administrator XOR©' who banned *Seif* uses a remarkable image of the role of a forum administrator in his profile. There are two persons depicted through emoticons: an administrator and a user of the forum. The user states 'BLABLA*SPAM*BLABLA BLA*FLAME*BLA,' at which the administrator proclaims: 'cut it out!!' The user in turn says 'No!!' and the administrator shoots the user in the cheek. The user begs for mercy. The reply is a shot between the eyes (with a laughing administrator). The 'lesson' shown at the end is: NEVER F*CK WITH AN ADMIN.

Next to discussing the rules and the way these rules are upheld on forums, the participants also discuss those that uphold them: the moderators. On many forums, the lack of institutional clarity regarding the appointment of moderators results in questions from the users. After the appointment of a number of extra moderators on *Nieuwrechts*, one of the participants asks about the process of selection:

How come there are so many new moderators on this forum? And what is the difference between administrator and moderator? I see that a number of people who arrived at the forum later than I became moderator or administrator. Yet, I have never seen a call 'We need moderators or administrators, anybody?' Is the moderation position a special favour to friends of Michiel [Michiel Smit, the front man of *Nieuwrechts*]? Or is it offered to people in a PM [Personal Message], because they are active in the movement? (Tinus, *Nieuwrechts*, Moderators and administrators, 14 May, 17:44)

At this, *Michiel* himself replies:

It is not a matter of favouritism. There are a number of people who offered themselves in reaction to a few vague people who have been coming here the last weeks. It concerns people who are very active on the forum and who were involved with other plans. In turn we spoke about how we can keep the discussion civil. People can always sign up, and then we'll see how to take it from there. (Michiel, *Nieuwrechts*, Moderators and administrators, 14 May, 17:52)

The lack of transparency leads many users to speculate about the role of favouritism or nepotism in the process. One of the participants of *Terdiscussie*, *Jakhals*, asks if it would be possible for her/him to get a job at the forum.⁴ One of the administrators answers:

Maybe your posts have to be of the same high level as mine are ☺. Every now and then a position opens up and then you have to apply . . . There is no such position at the moment. (Mephisto, *Terdiscussie*, Who owns Terdiscussie?, 19 Sep 2004, 17:14).

³Seif, *Maghrebonline*, How are the moderators here, 12 Jan 2005, 02:50

⁴De Jakhals, *Terdiscussie*, Who owns Terdiscussie? 19 Sep 2004, 17:14

At this *Jakhals* continues to ask:

How many posts are required? Do you have to become a meeter [a certain group of users of the forum] to be eligible? Do you have to be a left-winger? (De Jakhals, *Terdiscussie*, Who owns Terdiscussie?, 19 Sep 2004, 17:22)

According to an ex-moderator, *Reason*, this is not the case: 'Political ideas are not considered; as long as people are not extremists, political preference is not important'. 'Everyone who is reliable', *Reason* continues, 'and is good at discussing and shows this frequently, has a chance of becoming a moderator.'⁵ The discussion continues with this line of questioning; *niccion* does not really feel 'that things are being done that objectively'. S/he furthermore asks whether there are rightwing administrators on the forum at all.⁶

The lack of transparency further leads to frustration among the users as it is not entirely clear when moderators moderate, and when they 'just' participate in the debate. Since moderators are participants of the forum as well, they will never be able to be objective or impartial in their maintenance of the discussion:

A moderator should never BOTH participate AND be a moderator at a forum. Conflicts of interest have to be prevented at all times, quite simply because it stirs up a whole lot of discussion. After all, moderators are also only human, and therefore they make mistakes. (Edu, *Terdiscussie*, Act stricter, 24 Feb 2004, 11:42)

On *Weerwoord* a complaint was made by one of the forum participants at the *Meldpunt Discriminatie Internet*.⁷ In the discussion following this complaint the lack of transparency is discussed once more:

Rules—as far as they are unambiguous—are nowhere to be found on this forum and *if* they (summarily) are specified at all, they are violated (...). So there is only one rule and that is the—completely non-transparent—unwritten rule that some *Weerwoord* participants have more rights than others. (koekoeksjong, *Weerwoord*, FAQ about the precious topics from the by-you-much-hated Islam, 5 June, 20:31)

Users often question the process of appointment of moderators. In particular, some feel discriminated against, as the decisions made by the forum management are often to their disadvantage. They see no possibility to become moderators themselves or for other people like them to hold such a position. By examining people's reactions to the forum moderation, it becomes clear that participants do not always feel they are treated justly and equally.

These quoted debates on web forums are only a few examples of the way in which users assess and understand moderation on particular web forums. The way in which moderators act and govern online communication is very important for users, and it is

⁵Reason, *Terdiscussie*: Who owns Terdiscussie? 23 Sep 2004, 12:14

⁶niccion, *Terdiscussie*: Who owns Terdiscussie? 23 Sep 2004, 14:07

⁷MDI, a governmental organization that handles reports of discrimination on the Internet.

clear that users are at times struggling to understand what is and what is not allowed on forums. Participants try to identify the boundaries of the space and some have a difficult time positioning the moderators and themselves in this space. What can be observed is an established interaction between the users and the moderators, which to a large extent determines how the discussion evolves. It also determines what is allowed and what is not allowed. Particularly for new users, it is sometimes difficult to enter this space with all its existing rules and the implicit norms that may surface and that are difficult to determine the exact nature and impact.

How this influences the openness of the debate cannot be determined in general terms. Whether the debates are positively or negatively affected depends on the discussion. In some discussions exclusion of certain types of expressions and participants may foster openness, whereas in others it may foreclose it. However, what we do see is that the moderators exert power on different levels. First, they have the direct power to exclude participants and their contributions to the text. Second, they also have power by influencing participants to self-monitor their contributions, or even to fully withdraw from debates. We have seen that participants try to establish the boundaries between what they are allowed to move, which is then incorporated into their behaviour. As such, the moderators have a more indirect but significant form of power over the communication of the participants. Third, the fact that moderators participate heavily in the discussions themselves may increase their influence in this respect, whether they do so consciously or not. We see that it is difficult for forum participants to challenge this power of moderators.

4.7 Conclusion

In light of the question on the structural openness of web forums, I analysed the rules and moderation of seven popular Dutch web forums: *Fok*, *Maghrebonline*, *Maroc*, *Nieuwrechts*, *Politiekdebat*, *Terdiscussie* and *Weerwoord*. Examining the netiquette of these forums, I found that the web forums are in general aimed at openness. The netiquette is not intended to rigidly determine how participants should behave, and the emphasis is on creating a comfortable environment for different types of users by urging participants not to express harmful language such as flaming, threats, and insults.

The netiquette focuses on what is *not* allowed, and how participants should *not* behave. There are only very few guidelines on how one *should* behave online, and if there are, they are framed in terms of enhancing the manageability of the web forum. As such, we can observe an administrative logic behind the forum rules, as they focus on the manageability of the forum, and motivate their rules with this criterion. This can be seen as a disclaimer: We do not want to have rules, but some rules are necessary. Most of the web forums actively position themselves as open spaces (most often in comparison to other spaces for discussion). No matter how open they consider themselves to be, however, they feel they have to set norms for debate. More specifically, they feel the need to set these guidelines and exclude certain types of behaviour exactly because they want to create open spaces. It is with this in mind that forum management presents the norms as a necessary

evil, a paradoxical means to a larger end. On the forums there is an ongoing struggle between ensuring the quality of debate by upholding rules, and providing a space in which freedom of expression reigns, therefore generating an open platform.

The web forums focus on different types of openness, and accordingly exclude different forms of communication. In this we can distinguish two types of platforms relating to a different kind of openness of the web forums: (i) forums focusing on a broad *inclusion* and extensive freedom of expression, forming general platforms aimed at providing an open space for all; and (ii) forums focusing on *protection* of a specific group of users, forming platforms that resemble counter publics in that they aim to provide openness for a specific group. Both of these platforms consider themselves as more open than traditional media: The first platform sees itself this way because it allows more types of expression and broader content than these media, and the second because it focuses on providing a space for groups that are denied access to traditional media. Moreover, the rules of the counter public forums aim at protecting members of the in-group from harm. They enhance openness for the in-group by excluding certain expressions from the out-groups. *Maroc* and *Maghrebonline* are examples of this second type of platform. They aim to provide an open space for Dutch Moroccans, where they can feel comfortable and free to discuss. To ensure openness for the group of Dutch Moroccans, the forum management excludes communications that might inhibit this openness and as such tries to protect them from harm. But also on general platforms, such as *Fok*, forum rules are aimed at protecting users from harm, in this case, however, it pertains to *all* users, not just a specific group of users.

Consequently, both types of forums have rules that exclude certain types of communication. The question is whether such exclusions open up or rather close off the discussion. For some types of prohibited communication, such as flaming and discrimination, these exclusions close off discussion because more extreme contributions are excluded, while at the same time the discussion is opened by attracting more participants to the discussion or by making the participants more well-disposed towards each other. It is difficult to envisage how flaming in the form of personal attacks could help to open a discussion. The same could be said for the rule about discrimination. In such cases, it can be argued that the right to equal treatment should prevail over freedom of expression and over inclusion of all types of positions and communications.

In the web forums, moderators decide on these matters. Whether or not their specific decisions foster or inhibit openness is difficult to ascertain; the outcome differs per decision. What is important is the transparency of these decisions. This will help to determine whether these exclusions enable or foreclose engagement between different discourses. Forum administrators and moderators have extensive discretionary power with regard to which participants, positions, and discourses get access to the online debate. Questions regarding who has the authority to determine this access, how they have received this authority, and how they are using it, are therefore of great importance.

In the forums examined in this thesis, the transparency on these matters leaves a lot to be desired. The rules are often poorly defined if defined at all, and the way the moderators act upon them is unclear. The web forums are also lacking in information pertaining to

the appointment and presentation of moderators. On almost all forums, it is unclear who the moderators are or at least how they are appointed. Only if one is completely immersed in a particular forum will it become clear how moderation takes place and by whom. This lack of transparency limits the democratic nature of the forum.

Furthermore, there are few possibilities for users to appeal these matters. Whether this necessarily influences the possibility for engagement is not clear, but it is apparent that users at times feel they are treated unfairly and are (unjustly) excluded from the debate. The actions of the moderators may thus create a type of atmosphere in which some people feel more comfortable to voice their opinions than others. Through this, the possibility of different discourses interacting (and hence the possibilities for engagement between them) in a certain space may be limited.

The users that discuss moderation on the forum seem to view the web forum as a *public* space that belongs to the users. They consider forum management in a number of instances to be too strict, undemocratic and too arbitrary. They seem to hold the view that *they* should be the judges of what goes on at the forum and not necessarily the forum administrators. The latter do not share this view as they conversely feel that web forums are not *public* spaces (even though they maintain they should be *open* spaces). The moderators hold the implicit view that the web forums are much more a *private* space, where they are the 'host' and the participants are their 'guests'. This logic helps the moderators to arrive at the aims set for the forum. This may explain their autocratic governance of the forum and also the lack of explanations and motivations for the forum rules and the way they are upheld.

Going back to the main question of this chapter—how web forums are organized and in what way this facilitates or hinders the openness of the debate—we can conclude that the organization of web forums, if viewed as platforms of public sphere, lacks in democratic nature and transparency, both in terms of the forum rules and in the way these are upheld. This is a first impingement on the openness of debate, as the decisions made by forum moderators are excluding texts and/or its authors. Also, the moderators hold different forms of power operating in the web forums. Next to the direct power to alter or reject contributions and exclude participants, the moderators hold power over communication as they determine to a large extent the boundaries of the forums, and thus who feels free or welcome to participate in them, and in what way they feel they can participate. The latter determines the *way* in which people speak as well as *what* they say, thereby affecting the openness of discussion. As such, the organization of web forums, establishes (and limits) to a large extent the openness of debates. It then becomes the question how the users of the space further fill this in.

Chapter 5

Participants' views on discussing online

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter provided insight into the boundaries of web forums' in- and exclusiveness by examining the implicit and explicit rules that guide online communications. I discussed users' reaction to these rules about forum moderation and their maintenance as expressed in forum discussions. I concluded from these discussions that a number of users do not agree with the moderation, feel that discussions are not as open as they should or could be and that some participants and contributions are wrongfully excluded. In this chapter, I examine user evaluations of the openness of web forums through a survey to provide a broader picture of the evaluation of forums' openness by users. The aim here is to gain insight into the way the forums are perceived by the users and to establish whether they view web forums to allow for an inclusive debate. Do the users consider web forums to be the open and inclusive space the public sphere is supposed to be?

I have observed a tension between the views of the users as expressed on the forums and those of the moderators. The users considered the space to be 'theirs' that should be ruled by, or at least *for* them, whereas the moderators viewed it more as a private space merely made available to the users. The question is how open users are towards diversity and difference. Even though the structural openness, forum management, set some of the boundaries of the forums, the attitude of the participants determines how the openness of online communication is filled in. Not only their view on openness—how open should web forums be—but also their evaluation—how open do they think the web forums are—is important. Together these views give insight into the web forums' potential for providing an open and inclusive public sphere. The question that I seek to answer in this chapter is: *To what extent do participants of online discussions view and use web forums as an open and inclusive platform specifically with regard to the discussion of the issue of immigration and integration?*

The data on the users' views regarding openness were collected through an online questionnaire, which was announced on five web forums. I first introduce the procedure of selecting the web forums, problems of sampling, representativeness, and other method-

ological issues.

5.2 Methodology

The research was conducted using an online survey tool of the Amsterdam School of Communications Research (ASCoR), and published on a university domain (for a more extensive account on the issues of sampling, representativeness, and content of the questionnaire see *Appendix A*). Respondents were recruited through an online request to participate in the survey. The Internet population does not allow for generalization to the population at large; Dutch Internet users are not representative of the whole of the Dutch population (for issues of sampling in online studies see, for instance: Hewson et al., 2003). Thus, no inferences to the Dutch population at large can be drawn, not even to Dutch Internet users. The method does allow, however, for considerable understanding of participants of large Dutch web forums. It was also here that the request for survey participation was posted. An invitation was posted on the following forums: *Fok*, *Maghrebonline*, *Maroc*, *Nieuwrechts*, and *Weerwoord* (*Politiekdebat* and *Terdiscussie* did not give their consent for the post).¹

There are a number of issues relating to the representativeness of the sample. Somewhat problematic is the fact that the sample consisted of only volunteers who actively followed the link to the survey. As Hewson et al. (2003: 38) have pointed out, volunteers have been found to differ, for instance, on personality variables. They are likely to be more interested in the topic of political discussion online than those *not* participating in the survey. In addition, the sample is very dependent on who visited the web forum at the time the announcement was posted. Threads normally move ‘downwards’ in the topic. This depends not only on the date and time of the initial message but also on the number of replies (the more replies, the more prominent the thread). Thus, if many people reacted, the message remained in a prominent place for a longer time than on those forums where no one reacted. This resulted in more responses from the participants of web forums where the survey already attracted a lot of attention. This caused problems with regard to generalizability of the findings. The chance that people participate is dependent on when and how often they visit the forum, check the specific section the request was posted on, and how many reactions the request received.

There is a dominance of *Fok* participants in the group of respondents. *Appendix B* (Table B.6) shows the forums that respondents visit to discuss politics.² 121 out of 207 (58%) respondents state that they use *Fok* for discussing politics online. This might very well be a dominance that exists in the population (it does not necessarily mean an overrepresentation of *Fok* users), but the small number of users of other forums makes it difficult to draw any conclusions on the influence of, or difference between the various forums. I therefore discuss the findings without distinguishing between the forums (and thus without trying

¹As is explained in *Appendix A*, the questionnaire seems to have been announced on at least one other website, outside of the initiative of the researcher.

²It was possible to give more than one site. On average respondents provide the address of two web forums.

to establish whether there are significant differences between the different users), and treat all respondents as participants of 'online political discussions' rather than users of specific forums.

When looking at the actual composition of the group of respondents, it becomes clear that those who filled out the questionnaire are indeed not a representative sample of Dutch society (see *Appendix B* for the demographics). Over 80% of the respondents are male.³ The respondents are relatively young: the mean (*M*) age is 32 years (standard deviation [*SD*] = 12.7). Fifty percent are younger than 30 years; only 12% are older than 50, and there are no respondents older than 70.⁴ The respondents are highly educated, with more than three quarter of them having followed either higher education or university,⁵ compared to 25% in Dutch society.⁶ The vast majority (almost 70%) is not religious: Not even 10% consider themselves Catholic (compared to 30% in society); the Dutch reformed (both 'Gereformeerd' and 'Hervormd') are also less well-represented with 8% in this study versus 18% in society. Other religions are well-represented in this study: 6% consider themselves Muslim (compared to 6% in society), and 1.6% adhere to Hinduism (0.6 in society).⁷ Finally, most of the respondents are natives, rather than (first or second generation) immigrants.⁸ In comparison to the official statistics on Dutch society, this is an acceptable representation: In this sample there are 10% Western immigrants (both first and second generation), compared to 9% in society in 2005. The non-Western immigrants are slightly underrepresented with 7% in the sample, compared to 10% in Dutch society.

As the questionnaire was announced on political discussion forums online, unsurprisingly, the respondents of the questionnaire are highly interested in politics (*M* = 1.39; *SD* = 0.66). Sixty-six percent (154) claim to be highly and 31% (72) rather interested. Only four (2%) respondents state they are moderately interested, and three (1%) are not interested in politics at all. It is difficult to say whether this interest in politics is equally distributed over all participants of online political discussions, but it does hint at a more than average interest in politics. In 2002, the percentages for a representative sample⁹ were: 15% highly interested, 42% rather interested, 21% moderately interested, 14% hardly interested, and 7% not interested at all in politics.

In terms of party membership, the respondents also show more political engagement than average: 23% of the respondents state they were a member of a political party at the time of filling out the questionnaire, 16% state they have been member of a political

³See *Appendix B*, Table B.1: Gender of the respondents.

⁴See *Appendix B*, Table B.2: Age of the respondents.

⁵See *Appendix B*, Table B.3: Level of education of the respondents.

⁶All of the statistics used to compare my data to the Dutch population come from the Central Bureau for Statistics (CBS, Statline, *cbs.nl*), unless indicated otherwise.

⁷See *Appendix B*, Table B.4: Religion of the respondents.

⁸See *Appendix B*, Table B.5: Descent of the respondents.

⁹All of the statistics used to compare the data on political interest and activities come from a study amongst a random sample of the Dutch population conducted in 2002 (*Culturele Veranderingen (Cultural Changes)*, 2002), unless otherwise indicated. The phrasing of the questions that are compared here were equal or similar to the phrasing of questions in this study.

party are but not anymore, and 61% state they never have been a member. In 2002, the numbers for a representative sample were: 9% are a member, 6% have been a member but not anymore and 85% have never been a member.

Of those entitled to vote, 91% say they would exercise the right if parliamentary elections would be held today. Another 6% would go and vote if they would be entitled to vote (that is, 14 out of the 15 respondents that are not entitled). Voting intention is relatively high in the Netherlands, but the respondents of this questionnaire (with 97% that would vote) score even higher than general Dutch society (where 85% said they would vote, and 7% would maybe vote).

In addition, people show great interest in news and politics in their daily media use (Table 5.1). The vast majority of respondents watch the news (almost) daily. They watch current affair programmes and read newspapers slightly less. The majority listens to the news on the radio and discusses politics with friends at least once a week. Their Internet use shows the same high level of involvement; almost 70% read online discussions (almost) every day and 80% contribute to online discussions at least once a week. One third reads the online news pages (almost) daily. All in all, the respondents form an interested and involved public, as could be expected from respondents of political discussion forums.

Table 5.1: *General interest in news and politics*

How often do you undertake the following activities:	(Almost) daily	3 to 4 times per week	1 to 2 times per week	Less than once per week	Never
Watch the news on TV	72.1	13.5	7.4	5.6	1.4
Watch current affair programmes	46.5	22.3	20.5	7.0	3.7
Read the newspaper	58.6	14.0	13.0	9.3	5.1
Follow the news on the radio	29.8	17.7	14.4	18.1	20.0
Discuss politics with friends	21.9	20.9	29.8	23.7	3.7
Read online discussions	66.5	17.7	12.6	1.9	1.4
Post in online discussions	43.7	19.1	17.2	14.0	6.0
Read Internet news pages	66.5	10.7	11.2	7.4	4.2

$n = 215$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .703$

The majority of respondents (71%) do not feel politics is too difficult for them to understand and they consider themselves better informed than others (69% agree or strongly agree). At the same time, only a fourth of the respondents disagrees with the statement *People like me have no influence on the government's actions* (see Table 5.2). This is in conflict with the 'normal' scale of political efficacy; there is no correlation between the different

Table 5.2: *Political efficacy*

To what extent do you (dis)agree with the following statements:	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Politics is sometimes so difficult that people like me cannot understand what is going on	3.87	1.10	232
People like me have no influence on the government's actions	2.57	1.21	233
I think I am better informed on politics than others	2.20	1.06	233

1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree, *M* = mean, *SD* = Standard deviation, *n* = number of participants answering the particular question

indicators.¹⁰ Apparently the three items do not tap into one underlying variable.

An explanation could lie in the specific audience the forums attract, which might experience a distance between themselves and the ruling politicians. They are politically engaged, but do not feel represented by the government. In Chapter 4, I observed that a number of web forums (including *Fok*) want to provide a space in which users are free to say what they want, and which differs from traditional media. They position themselves against these 'mainstream' discussion platforms that are 'controlled' by the political elite, and thus are limited in terms of access and width of the debate. It could well be that a number of these spaces fulfil exactly this role for participants: Forums are a space to voice opinions that (they feel) are not expressed (and not heard enough) by their representatives.

This impression is supported by the respondents' voting behaviour (see Table 5.3). Over a quarter of the respondents claim to have voted for one of the newly formed anti-establishment parties (*Geert Wilders* and *Nieuwrechts*); the governing parties only receive 20%. This was a trend that was observable in Dutch society as a whole at the time of the questionnaire, but not in such a strong direction. Polls¹¹ for that particular period (18 March – 28 May 2005) point to a loss for the then governing parties (CDA – 21%, VVD – 16% and D66 – 3%). But in the polls, these parties still had 40% of the votes, whereas not even a quarter of the respondents in this study indicate they would vote for one of the governing parties.¹²

The high percentage of *Nieuw Rechts* voters can be explained by the fact that the request to participate in the survey was posted on the *Nieuwrechts* forum. However, even if we exclude the *Nieuwrechts* participants (16 in total), and respondents for whom information on the forum they came from is missing (75 respondents), the anti-establishment parties still receive many votes. *Geert Wilders* (17%) and *Nieuw Rechts* (3%) receive almost

¹⁰ Cronbach's *alpha* of the two positive political efficacy indicators and one reversed negative approximates zero with a score of .072

¹¹ www.politiekebarometer.nl

¹² Note that the main difference is in the percentage that would vote for the CDA, only 2% indicate they would vote for this party at the next elections.

Table 5.3: *Voting behaviour*

Political party	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent [†]
(Groep) Geert Wilders	42	18.7	21.9
PvdA (Labour Party)	32	14.2	16.7
VVD (Liberal Conservative Party)	28	12.4	14.6
SP (Socialist Party)	23	10.2	12.0
GroenLinks (GreenLeft)	19	8.4	9.9
Nieuw Rechts (New Right)	19	8.4	9.9
D66 (Liberal Progressive Party)	13	5.8	6.8
CDA (Christian Democrats)	4	1.8	2.1
Christenunie (Christian Party)	3	1.3	1.6
Other	9	4.0	4.7
Do not know yet	27	12.0	
Blank	6	2.7	
<i>Total</i>	225	100.0	100.0

[†] Excluding 'Don't know,' and 'Blank.'

20% (21 out of 108) of the votes, and the government parties receive as little as 29%.

Having introduced the demographics of the respondents and their political interest, in what follows I first discuss respondents' online discussion attitudes and behaviour towards immigration. I will then address the ways in which people discuss politics and immigration specifically on online forums. Last, I turn to the notion that is central to this thesis: openness. How important do participants of forum discussions find openness, and how do they evaluate the openness of the web forums?

5.3 Participants' (online) discussion attitudes and behaviour

As Table 5.1 showed, the respondents discuss politics very frequently online. Two thirds of the respondents read online political discussions (almost) daily and half post messages to online political discussions (almost) daily. To specify these results, the respondents were asked where they access the Internet to discuss politics, and which platforms they use. 208 people (89%) state they access discussions from home, 70 (30%) from work, 44 (19%) use a connection at their school, and three respondents (1%) discuss politics from an Internet café connection (more than one answer could be given here).¹³

With regard to the types of discussion platforms that are accessed, most of the respon-

¹³Another 3% (7 people) state they have other means of accessing the discussions.

Table 5.4: *Forum used to discuss immigration and integration*

Web forum	Frequency	Percent
fokforum.nl [†]	92	50.3
nieuwrechts.nl [†]	18	9.8
weerwoord.nl [†]	18	9.8
dutchdiseasereport.nl	14	7.6
maghreb.nl	5	2.7
maghrebonline.nl [†]	4	2.2
opinari.nl	4	2.2
maroc.nl [†]	3	1.6
politiekdebat.nl [†]	3	1.6
cyberty.nl	2	1.1
other (websites mentioned once each)	16	9.9
no answer	4	2.2
<i>Total</i>	183	100.0

[†] Web forums examined in Chapter 4.

dents (86%) mention web forums.¹⁴ Other manners of discussion are through chatting (21%), e-mail groups (13%), and newsgroups (9%)¹⁵ (here too, more than one answer could be given). For most, web forums are the only way of discussing politics online. This does not automatically mean that they actively choose this method over others or that they evaluate this type of communication higher than other types. The reasons for discussing immigration on web forums are discussed in the next section, but they do not indicate why they choose web forums over other types of online communication.

When asked specifically about their discussion behaviour regarding immigration and integration, almost all of the respondents (203, or 94%) answered they had read or written posts on immigration and integration in the past half year on one or more online discussion forums. This, of course, was to be expected as the respondents were recruited from web forums on which immigration is an important issue. However, most participants came from general forums and the invitation to participate in the survey was posted

¹⁴That not 100% state they use web forums (whereas the announcement was made on web forums), might be because the announcement was also posted on different websites, which were not necessarily web forums (see *Appendix A*). Even though the announcement explained that the questionnaire was about online discussion of politics, there were three people that stated they do not discuss politics online. The last explanation might lie in a different definition of web forums. Two people stated that they discuss politics in different ways than the ones mentioned above, namely through forums. So, apparently they take forums to be different from web forums.

¹⁵Another 4% (8 people) state that they discuss politics on a different platform.

in general threads, asking for people who discuss *politics* on the Internet, not specifically immigration. As such, the number can be considered remarkably high. When asked to give the address of the web forum they most frequently used for this purpose, 26 different forums were given (see Table 5.4). The *Fok* forum was the dominant web forum.

Just as web forums are the prevailing way of discussing politics (as compared to other online methods), Internet discussions represent the most frequent manner of discussion immigration and integration (Table 5.5). Almost 60% discuss the issues often (29%) or very often (31%) online, which is more than with friends and family. Other ways of discussing the issues are practiced much less: 36% discuss it (very) often with colleagues; only 7% (very) often attends public debates; not even 5% writes an opinion piece or letter to the newspaper often.

Table 5.5: *Discussion of immigration and integration*

How often do you participate in the debate on immigration in the following ways:	Very often	Often	Some-times	Almost never	Never
Write posts in Internet discussions	30.7	28.8	28.4	7.9	4.2
Discussion with family and/or friends	17.7	38.6	32.1	9.3	2.3
Discussion with colleagues	7.0	28.8	31.6	21.9	10.7
Attend public debate	2.3	5.1	15.8	21.4	55.3
Write opinion/letters to newspapers	2.3	2.3	14.4	19.1	61.9

$n = 215$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .712$

The frequency with which people discuss immigration and integration is not related to the attitudes of respondents on these issues. The attitudes towards immigration are quite evenly distributed, with the exception of the question on 'adjustment to Dutch culture of immigrants,' which is supported by most (Table 5.6). It could be that both people that feel strongly *positive* about immigration as well as those that feel strongly *negative* about it discuss the issue more often. However, this is not the case. The frequency with which people discuss the issue seems to be independent from the strength and direction of their attitude towards immigration and integration. One explanation might be that the issue of immigration is of general interest, making people discuss the topic even though they do not feel specifically strong about it. This corresponds with the general interest respondents have in news and politics. The variable 'general interest' (the indicators of Table 5.1 taken together, $M = 2.04$, $SD = 0.68$) does correlate with how often people discuss immigration (the indicators of Table 5.5 taken together, $M = 2.75$, $SD = 0.71$). If people are more interested in news and politics, they discuss the issue of immigration more frequently ($r = .46$).

In addition, when asked to describe why they discuss immigration and integration online, quite a number of people refer to their general interest in politics, news, and the

Table 5.6: *Attitude towards immigrants*

To what extent do you (dis)agree with the following statements:	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Immigrants should adjust to Dutch culture	1.99	1.15
The Netherlands should send back as many asylum seekers as possible	3.11	1.46
Immigrants take advantage of social services	2.99	1.24
Immigrants are an enrichment for Dutch society	3.12	1.20

1 = Strongly agree, 5 = Strongly disagree, $n = 187$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .802$

issue of immigration (see Table 5.7). Nine percent explain they are generally interested in politics, news and society, and state that immigration is part of this, 'nothing less and nothing more.' Others explain they discuss immigration specifically because it is a pressing issue at the moment in the Netherlands (12%). Fourteen percent discuss the topic because of their unease and dissatisfaction with Dutch society. Some of them are quite explicit in that they want to change things by discussing the issue online, as one of the respondents explains:

I am annoyed with the daily routine with respect to immigration and integration. I want to help by discussing.

Table 5.7: *Reasons for discussing immigration online referring to interest in politics and the issue of immigration (open question)*

Reason	Frequency	Percent [†]
General interest (in societal issues)	15	8.5
Immigration as pressing issue	22	12.4
Unease/dissatisfaction Dutch society	25	14.1
To voice criticism against Islam	4	2.2

[†] This percentage indicates the percentage of respondents that gave this reason taken over the total amount of the people (177), not the percentages taken over the 247 reasons given.

Others say they enter the discussion because they want to fight right-wing extremism, explain that the multicultural society is nonsense, or because they are worried. Four respondents (2%) explicitly state they discuss the issue to somehow change society. They want to 'mobilise an anti-Islam electorate', 'refute the multicultural lie', or 'rectify the

brainwashing of 6 years of secondary school and 10 years of biased reporting by NOS [Dutch Broadcasting Foundation] news’.

5.4 Openness of web forums

The respondents participate in discussions on immigration in several ways, though mainly online. One of the aims of the questionnaire is to examine *why* people discuss online, in order to establish what the benefits of online discussion may be over other platforms for public debate, and how the respondents regard openness and inclusiveness of the online debate. This has been examined through both open-ended and closed questions. In the discussion on deliberative democracy in Chapter 1, several criteria for debate were introduced, and openness towards difference was identified as the most important requirement of public discussion in plural societies.

The openness of the forums is constituted by the forum participants’ interactions (and to a certain extent bounded by forum management, as discussed in the previous chapter). To a large extent, the users determine the openness of forum discussions on immigration and integration. The medium can facilitate a certain type of interaction, but the actual use of it determines the openness and inclusiveness of the discussion. The questionnaire provides information on two elements of the participants’ views on openness: How they value openness online and how they rate the actual openness of the forums on which they discuss immigration and integration.

5.4.1 Openness online

With a total of 247 reasons provided by 177 people, the average amount of reasons per person is 1.4. As Table 5.8 shows, a quarter of the respondents indicate ‘exchanging information and opinions’ to be the reason for participating in the discussion online. This exchange of information and opinions entails more for the participants than merely expressing one’s own opinion. It is a multifaceted process and participants state they want to ‘form their opinion’, ‘gather and share information’, are ‘curious as to how others feel about the issue’, want to ‘compare viewpoints’, and ‘test their own view’. A respondent states:

I want to view problems from as many different perspectives as possible and then form an ‘objective’ judgement about it. On forums everyone can make himself heard, so here I get to see the most perspectives.

This respondent specifically refers to seeking a diversity of opinions online in addition to exchanging information. This reference to the diversity can be found in almost 20% of the responses. It is also mentioned that one can encounter voices different from those expressed in the mainstream media. Some seek these other opinions to inform themselves, others seek them for the challenge of discussing them. Searching for difference turns out to be a dominant theme:

[I discuss online] to read that other people have different experiences and [because] those do not appear in the newspaper.

Simply because there are a lot of people that are rightwing [on the forum] and this means I get more opposition.

In addition, 12% of the respondents refer to the importance of the size of the forum, often relating this to the size of the audience they (think they) reach and to the variety of opinions they may encounter. Respondents seem to equate size of the forum to the diversity of opinions that exists on it.

Table 5.8: *Reasons for discussing immigration online referring to openness or diversity of the forum (open question)*[†]

Reason	Frequency	Percent [‡]
To exchange information and opinions	48	27
Diversity on the forum	35	20
To voice or encounter alternative views	26	15
The size of the forum and its audience	22	12
To find like-minded/similar people	11	6
Open forum (high level of tolerance)	7	4
Broadness of the forum	4	2

[†] The remaining reasons that were mentioned on the open-ended question (next to those introduced in Table 5.7), and that were mentioned more than once, were: quality of the forum (13%) and to pass the time/ fun activity (5%).

[‡] This percentage indicates the percentage of respondents that gave this reason taken over the total amount of the people (177), not the percentage taken over the total number of reasons given (which is 247).

Some participants explicitly state that they are seeking *alternative* views in the online discussion. Almost 15% of the respondents express the wish to hear or represent an alternative view against the mainstream views on immigration and integration:

I mostly participate to add a leftist sound to the predominantly rightist discussions.

[I] post to express an opposing view when I get too annoyed by what people write.

[I choose this forum] to read opinions that are not expressed in daily politics.

A few respondents (4%) explicitly link the perceived openness of the forum to tolerance. Compared to other types of discussions or forums, they feel that here, they can say anything. The specific forum they participate in provides a space where they can express their

criticism and where they expect not to be censored. One participant explains that ‘there are not so many forums where freedom of expression is taken seriously.’ In conclusion, the findings of the open-ended question show that openness of forums seems to be highly regarded with much importance attributed to it.

The results presented in Table 5.9 (answers to the closed questions) support the finding that expression of opinions is an important factor (76% find this (very) important). The views on diversity online point to the high status that the users attribute to the openness of web forums. In concurrence with its prominence in the answers to the open question, 86% find diversity of opinions (very) important in their choice to participate in the political discussion online.

Table 5.9: *Importance of openness in the choice to participate in online political debate (closed question)*

How important are the following aspects in your choice to participate in the political debate online:	M	SD
Diversity of opinions	1.67	0.85
Express one's opinion	2.06	1.05
Find like minded	2.83	1.19

1 = Very important, 5 = Not at all important, $n = 187$

Far fewer respondents (6% in the open ended question) state they are looking for like-minded people, seeking support for their ideas or people with the same background. One respondent visits the website Indianfeelings.nl in order to get recognition from his own community. As another says:

[I discuss on this forum] to seek like-minded, [for] the feeling that you're not alone in your views.

Finding like-minded voices plays an important role in participants' motivation to discuss online, the responses to these closed questions show that it is still an important feature of the online debate (40% find this (very) important). Even though one may expect that those who seek diversity of opinions online would not seek like-minded people, there is no correlation between the importance of seeking diversity and seeking like-mindedness. Thirty-two percent of the respondents find seeking diversity of opinions as well as seeking like-minded opinions (very) important. Thus, for one third of the respondents, having like-minded perspectives represented on the forum is important, while at the same time, they value diversity.

The reactions to the statements pertaining to the regulation of the Internet seem to confirm the general notion that the Internet has to be open. Table 5.10 shows that most of the online discussants are not in favour of more Internet regulation to prevent either

Table 5.10: Views on Internet regulation

To what extent do you (dis)agree with the following statements:	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
The Internet should be regulated better to prevent racism	3.49	1.381
The Internet should be regulated better to prevent religious fundamentalism	3.58	1.343

1 = Strongly agree, 5 = Strongly disagree, *n* = 187

racism or religious fundamentalism (only 27% and 21% are in favour of the respective regulations).

The question is, to what extent is regulation needed to secure openness of the forum, and does objecting to regulation mean being more in favour of a forum's openness? This dilemma can also explain the finding that the importance of diversity of opinions online is not correlated with whether the Internet should be better regulated. There are apparently more ways to ensure diversity of opinions. Disagreeing that the Internet should be better regulated can also mean that one is happy with the existing level of regulation. In general, the findings seem to indicate that openness online is regarded highly by forum participants. But how do they evaluate the forums' openness in practice?

5.4.2 Experienced openness online

A number of items in the questionnaire were included to examine how openness is experienced in online discussions. How free do people feel to express their opinions on immigration and integration on their forum of choice? How does this compare to how open they consider other media to be? Table 5.11 shows that the participants do find diversity in the forum they visit most. Almost 80% agree with the statement: *On this forum I encounter a lot of different opinions with regard to immigration and integration*. In addition, respondents agree that: *On this forum I encounter opinions that I do not find in my family, or in my circle of friends and acquaintances* (64%) and with the statement *On this forum I encounter opinions that I do not find in other media* (55%).

Almost 50% of the respondents feel their views are not represented in the mainstream media. They also agree with the statement that *The Internet offers a possibility to bring opinions to the fore that are not heard elsewhere* (84% (strongly) agrees). Similarly, most respondents (strongly) disagree with the statement that *On the Internet the same opinions are expressed as elsewhere*. One of the respondents illustrates this point in his/her comments at the end of the questionnaire, whilst at the same time expressing feelings of anxiety in what this may result in:

The fact that the Internet is an uncontrolled mess has broken the monopoly of mainstream media. I don't need them anymore; I don't have to listen to their interpreta-

tion of the facts anymore. That is on the one hand liberating, as the NOS [Dutch Broadcasting Foundation] or De Volkskrant [a national newspaper] are prejudiced institutes that try to proclaim their political viewpoint. On the other hand, they give way to radical opinions that blossom on the Internet. [If you want to, you] can directly see the things NOS interprets for us on the Internet through C-span, but eventually [you] can also discover that the Jews are behind 9-11 on elqalem.nl [a critical Muslim website]. Because we have Dutch media that are leftwing (the media should be both right and leftwing), the chances are that viewers and readers only find a satisfactory answer in conspiracy theories on the Internet. Very dangerous.

Feelings about the openness of the debate also relate to the perceived equality on a forum. Table 5.11 shows that the vast majority (88%) agrees with the statement *I feel free to express my opinion on the subject of immigration and integration*, while three-quarters feel everyone has an equal chance to express their opinion. Half of the respondents, however, do feel that a small number of participants dominate the discussion; though in theory all

Table 5.11: *Openness of online forums*

To what extent do you (dis)agree with the following statements:			
<i>Openness of the forum:</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
I feel free to express my opinion on the subject of immigration and integration	1.60	0.89	183
I encounter a lot of different opinions	1.76	0.99	183
Everyone has equal chance to express their opinion	1.94	1.13	183
A small number of participants dominate the discussion	2.59	1.16	183
<i>Openness compared to other media:</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
I encounter opinions that I do not find in other media	2.5	1.22	183
The Internet offers a possibility to bring opinions to the fore that are not heard elsewhere	1.76	0.90	187
On the Internet the same opinions are expressed as elsewhere	3.53	1.16	187

1 = Strongly agree, 5 = Strongly disagree

participants are equal in the online discussions, in practice discussions are dominated by a few. The latter idea that discussions are dominated by a small number of participants is in accordance with the findings from studies looking at the equality of online discussion, as was discussed in Chapter 2. Furthermore, even though diversity and exchange of opinions are said to be important, and people do encounter a lot of different viewpoints that they do not elsewhere, more than half of the respondents agree with the statement *I do not change my opinion as a result of the discussion* (58% (strongly) agree). Openness does then not necessarily mean preparedness to change one's opinion.

The participants' evaluations of the forums' openness can be seen in two forms: one is the openness of the forum itself and the other is the openness of the online discussions compared to the openness and inclusiveness of other media.¹⁶ The statements pertaining to the general openness of the forum constitute the first form of openness:¹⁷

- I feel free to express my opinion on the subject of immigration and integration;
- I encounter a lot of different opinions;
- Everyone has equal chance to express their opinion;
- A small number of participants dominate the discussion.

Almost 80% consider online forums to be open in this sense. In contrast, not even 5% feel online forums are closed. The mean score is 2.2 ($SD = 0.71$), once more indicating the perceived openness of the forums.

The second type of openness of online discussion is the openness compared to other media, and comprises the statements:¹⁸

- I encounter opinions that I do not find in other media;
- The Internet offers a possibility to bring opinions to the fore that are not heard elsewhere;
- On the Internet the same opinions are expressed as elsewhere.

Concerning this type of openness, we see that the majority considers online forums to be more open than traditional media (64%). A mere 8% consider online forums to be more closed than their offline counterpart ($M = 2.2$, $SD = 0.81$). This second type of openness correlates positively with the statement *In traditional media (newspaper, television and radio) my opinion is not represented* ($r = .52$). This suggests that people who feel they are not represented by the traditional media agree more strongly that the Internet

¹⁶A Principal Component Analysis (Rotated, *varimax* method) seems to confirm the existence of these two types underlying the openness of online discussions (see next footnotes for *eigenvalue* and factor loadings).

¹⁷The *eigenvalue* of the factor is 1.9. The factor loadings are respectively: .81; .66; .79; .44. Cronbach's *alpha* for this dimension is .6 (with the last variable reversed). Scores for both types of openness (means taken over the four statements): < 2.5 = open; 2.5 - 3.5 = neither open nor closed; > 3.5 = closed.

¹⁸The *eigenvalue* of the factor is 1.7. The factor loadings are respectively: .77; .77; .73. Cronbach's *alpha* is .62 for this dimension (with the second variable reversed).

allows for a wider representation and inclusiveness than people that do feel represented by traditional media.¹⁹ In addition, people that more often write letters to newspapers regard the openness of the Internet less strongly as compared to traditional media ($r = -.27$). So the Internet—although considered open by most—seems to hold more potential for those that feel they do not have access to or are not represented in traditional media.

On the whole, for the respondents the importance of openness in online discussions is apparent. The participants value openness as one of the main reasons for discussing online and they actually perceive online discussions to be open, in fact more so than other media. One of the aspects of online discussions emphasised in the literature is its (perceived) anonymity, which could make people feel free to express their views in public. For the respondents in this sample, anonymity is reasonably important: 45% of the respondents state that it is a (very) important aspect in their choice to participate in the online political debate. However, in comparison to the other reasons, it is less important. In the open question, only one participant referred to anonymity as one of the reasons for discussing online. Moreover, this feature does not relate to the openness that people experience online: It does not affect the perceived freedom to express their opinion—not for either of the two types of openness identified above. It could be that this particular sample does not benefit from this feature as much as others do, since they are already active politically and discuss politics in other ways as well. In this sample there is, however, no relationship between the relative importance attached to anonymity and the frequency with which other discussion platforms are used. People who participate less in discussion with family, friends or colleagues, attend fewer public debates or contribute less to public debates, do not value anonymity more.

Another relevant finding is that diversity is a more common motivation for online discussion than finding like-minded individuals. This seems to suggest that participants value the online space more as a place to find difference than as a space to form a counter public, where people aim at discussing matters with like-minded (the in-group), rather than with a wider public (see Chapter 1 for a more extensive account of counter publics). It may be that this finding can be fully explained by the fact that the sample represents more participants of general discussion forums. It is important to examine whether there is a difference between discussants of general discussion forums (such as *Fok*) and those forums that aim at a specific audience (such as *Maroc* and *Maghrebonline*, focusing on Dutch Moroccans), or are affiliated to a specific political party (for instance *Nieuwrechts*) or political movement (such as *Stormfront*, a neo-Nazi website). These latter types of websites can be considered more as counter publics because of their narrow focus, but this is only one aspect of counter publics (the forums mentioned here, do not, according to other aspects of the definition, fall into the category of counter publics). What is relevant here is to see whether or not participants of these spaces aim at a specific homogenous

¹⁹The separate correlations (Pearson's r) of the statement 'In traditional media (newspaper, television and radio) my opinion is not represented' with the three statements constituting relative openness are as follows: 'I encounter opinions that I do not encounter in other media': $r = .366$; 'The Internet offers a possibility to bring opinions to the fore that are not heard elsewhere': $r = .459$; and 'On the Internet the same opinions are expressed as elsewhere': $r = -.341$.

audience and actually prefer like-minded participants in the forum rather than diversity.

First, participants of forums that have a specific focus and that resemble, in this sense, a counter public, do value finding like-minded more than participants of general forums ($n = 36, 137$; $M = 2.22, 2.93$; $SD = 1.12, 1.16$ respectively). However, there is no difference between the two groups in the extent to which they deem diversity important; the counter forum participants even regard it slightly higher ($n = 36, 137$; $M = 1.69, 1.64$; $SD = 0.82, 0.83$ respectively). Likewise, the counter public forum participants hardly differ in their evaluation of the general openness of online discussion ($n = 39, 140$; $M = 2.12, 2.20$; $SD = 0.81, 0.68$ respectively). They do differ, however, in terms of their evaluation of the openness of web spaces compared to the openness of other media: Counter public forum participants consider this comparative openness to be bigger than general forum participants ($n = 36, 137$; $M = 1.93, 2.30$; $SD = 0.77, 0.80$ respectively).

5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined the question of the users' perspective on openness through an online survey. The respondents were mainly young, high-educated males who were very politically active. In Chapter 4, I concluded that a number of participants questioned the openness of the forums, as they did not agree with the way rules were upheld, and how participants and contributions were excluded from the forum. Those evaluations of the forum's openness concerned the unsolicited expressions of discontent by users of the forums. Through the results of the survey reported in this chapter, I established that in terms of the opinions expressed on the forums, the users generally view and establish web forums as open platforms for discussion.

The participants are politically active and discuss the issue of immigration in several ways, both offline (i.e., with friends and family) and online, but it becomes clear that online discussion is conducted more often than offline. In addition, discussion on web forums is for many respondents the only way of discussing issues online. The most prominent reason provided for discussing immigration on web forums was the exchange of ideas and the discovery of different opinions. The respondents attach much value to diversity of opinions as well as to the possibility to express their own opinion online.

Next to valuing diversity of opinions online, the respondents experience this diversity when discussing immigration. Participants consider the web forums as spaces where difference is found and opinions are freely expressed; they consider the online spaces to be open for discussion. Openness of online debate is one of the most important aspects of discussing online. In Chapter 2, I mentioned two features of online communication that are said to foster this openness online: the anonymity of online communication and the virtually unlimited space for interaction (which includes the low access restraints to this space). From this sample it became clear that, though anonymity is of reasonable importance, it is not one of the most essential features. Less than half of the respondents consider it to be an important feature for discussing online. Also, anonymity does not affect the perceived openness of online discussion; those that value anonymity more do

not think the Internet provides a more open space than those that value anonymity less. Furthermore, people that do not discuss immigration on other platforms (such as attending offline public meetings, sending letters to the newspapers, discussing with friends, family or colleagues) do not value anonymity more than those that do utilise these other discussion platforms.

The other feature that is argued to produce openness of debate—the unbounded space for interaction—proves to be of more importance. The participants seem to view the Internet as a space where everyone is able to express her or his own opinion and encounter those of others, allowing for a discussion. It does not only refer to people expressing their own thoughts but also to people being able to hear from others, whether people are seeking for like-minded or alternative voices, or both. Thus, online spaces are considered to be open spaces. The results of the survey showed, moreover, that there are two elements to the openness of web forums: Respondents do not only consider the forum they discuss on to be open, but in addition they regard it to be more open to difference than traditional media.

Participants focus on the Internet's potential to encounter difference rather than to find like-minded people and to form counter publics. Confrontation with other discourses is more important than seeking confirmation of one's own viewpoint. We have to keep in mind, though, that most of the respondents in this sample participate in web forums that do not have a specific topical or audience focus. The majority of the visited web forums are general discussion forums with a diverse public. It could well be that the participants who do value finding like-minded individuals attend web forums with a specific focus and audience. The survey showed that the participants of web forums that have a specific political affiliation, (ethnic) target group, or topic, indeed value finding like-minded people more than the participants of general discussion forums. However, this difference was only slight. The participants deemed encountering a diversity of opinions just as important as the participants on general discussion forums. Also, no difference was found regarding the openness of web forums; the specific forums that could be regarded as counter publics were deemed as open as the general forums. However, compared to traditional media, the openness was deemed slightly higher by the participants of specific forums than by those of general forums. Apparently, the participants of forums that resemble counter publics regard the online spaces as more inclusive than the participants of general forums. But this is a difference in degree and not in nature.

The question that arises is whether the participants are open enough towards alternative positions to engage with them and not just have different positions merely coexist. It is difficult to derive this type of information from the attitudes of the participants, but answers to one particular survey question suggest that this engagement does not really occur, and the participants only rarely change their opinion as a result of the discussion.

6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter it became clear that web forum participants seek out diversity. They furthermore state that the web forums they visit to discuss immigration show great diversity. This chapter will examine a specific case to see to what extent this diversity is indeed present. The argument often goes that the Internet allows for more inclusive debates, since everyone can voice their opinion. There are considered to be no or few gatekeepers, allowing for more and diverse people and positions to be represented online than in offline media.

The research question addressed in this chapter is: *To what extent are different actors and viewpoints included in online discussions on immigration and integration and how does this compare to the representation in newspapers?* This will be examined by mapping the different types of actors in an offline and an online debate and by subsequently comparing the extent to which different positions are included in these debates. To examine who and what is included is not enough, however, to determine the openness of the debate. It is important to look also at who and what is *excluded* from public debate. Discourse can exclude certain types of people and certain types of positions, and as such control the issue. I will therefore also look at specific instances of exclusion through the discourse. The analysis involves the following elements:

- Representation of actors (visible diversity, either through name, or reference in text);
- Representation of positions;
- Discursive exclusions.

The question of representation and exclusion is examined in a case study that examines a particular issue within the broader theme of immigration and integration: ‘*eerwraak*’ (this can be translated as revenge for honour, and includes ‘honour killings’ but also other physical violence to ‘restore’ the honour of a family; henceforth referred to as honour killings). This issue received much attention in the Netherlands after the media reported

on a number of these killings, and Hirsi Ali, a then-member of parliament, initiated a parliamentary debate.¹ The statements of Hirsi Ali are chosen as the starting point of the analysis, which allows for a clear time frame in which to analyse the online debate. This will then be compared to the offline public debate in the media.

6.2 Methodology

This case study is designed to gain insight into the variety of actors and positions represented in the online debate and to allow for a comparison of the openness of the offline media. Discussions on honour killings on three web forums are compared to those in seven newspapers. Newspapers were taken as the counterpart of online debates as they (and letters to the editors in particular) resemble online posts in a number of ways.

Newspapers are traditionally seen as (carriers of) the public sphere. The perceived insufficiency of newspapers in this respect is one of the reasons that many scholars look to the Internet for a revival of the public sphere (for an overview of recent studies, see Chapter 2). Newspapers (as opposed to other media, such as television and radio) are comparable to online forums in that they involve written exchanges, which are set apart from face-to-face and other oral communication, where:

Speakers have little or no time for reflection and overly deliberate construction, and listeners have little or no time for overly deliberate reconstruction or review. (...) Writing on the other hand is, typically, planned and reflective. Writers have time for deliberative construction, for editing and for rewriting (Kress, 1986: 403).

And, although they have different status and selection procedure, both newspapers and online forums allow people to contribute content. Letters to the editor and other sections of newspapers intended for inclusion of readers' contributions provide a space for people to participate in the public debate. A number of quality newspapers in the Netherlands have extended these spaces in the last few years, but the question remains whether there is truly a diversity of actors and positions, and how this compares to the representation online. In spite of criticism directed towards moderators (see Chapter 4), it is argued that the selection mechanisms for newspapers are still much more exclusive than for online debates. 'Typically, editors select well-written and cogently argued contributions (...) rather than openly offensive pieces (...) and these are generally in keeping with the established ideological direction of the publication' (Morrison & Love, 1996: 45-46). Does it follow that online debate shows more variation in terms of content, given that access should be more straightforward?

Finally, at least one empirical study has shown that participants in online debates feel that online contributions are comparable to writing letters to the editor. Over half of the participants of an online survey in Denmark found online discussion to be more comparable to composing letters to the editor than to participating in a town meeting,

¹Ayaan Hirsi Ali was a member of parliament at the time of the debate. She served starting in January 2003 and resigned in May 2006.

writing to politicians, talking to politicians, discussing politics with friends, colleagues or family and other forms of political participation (Liina Jensen, 2003: 370).

6.2.1 Selection of issue and timeframe

On 4 February 2005, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, then Member of Parliament for the VVD (Liberal Conservative party) was interviewed for *De Volkskrant*, a major Dutch newspaper. Some of her statements in this interview were specifically related to honour killings, whereas the rest of the article gave her view on Dutch 'multicultural' society. She proposed to use the new terrorism law (allowing for the use of information from the intelligence service to be used in court as evidence) to deal with honour killings, specifically putting families that are suspected to commit honour killing 'under permanent surveillance' and 'tap their phones'.

This interview was published a week before a parliamentary debate took place on the issue (10 February 2005). Both offline and online, the number of contributions to the debate on honour killings increased after Hirsi Ali's statements. I will analyse the contributions up to one month after publication of the interview (4 February 2005 – 4 March 2005). The rationale for this time period is twofold: The offline debates and the online debates seem to have died out after this period, and this timeframe provides a feasible number of articles for analysis.

6.2.2 Selection of newspaper articles

The articles within the chosen time frame were selected from seven newspapers. Since only web forums with a national character were included in the analysis, I selected only national newspapers. The selected articles came from the following newspapers (the number of articles per newspaper is presented in square brackets): *Het Algemeen Dagblad* (AD) [4], *NRC Handelsblad* (NRC) [3], *Het Parool* [4],² *De Telegraaf* [4], *Trouw* [4], and *De Volkskrant* [6]. In addition, five articles from a free newspaper (*Metro*) were included. All news articles, letters to the editor, columns and other opinion articles mentioning 'eerwraak' (honour killings) were selected for the analysis.³ This resulted in a total of 20 general newspaper articles and ten opinion contributions.

6.2.3 Selection of web forums

The online discussions chosen for this particular study come from the sample of web forums identified in Chapter 3. On these forums, a search was conducted to find discussions on honour killings. The web forums *Fok*, *Weerwoord*, and *Maroc* contained relevant material in this time frame. On the other four forums there were no discussions focusing on honour killings within the timeframe of the study.⁴ The three forums represent different

²This newspaper is focused on Amsterdam and its environs, but also has a wide national distribution.

³Using *Lexis Nexis*. *Metro* was manually searched by selecting the archived PDF-files of the paper (to be found on www.clubmetro.nl)

⁴The archives of *Nieuwrechts* and *Politiekdebat*, two websites in the sample, were not available at the time of data collection.

types of websites:

- *Fok* is a general Dutch discussion website with thousands of members and hundreds of thousands of posts on thousands of different threads. Here, a discussion was started in the political section of the website on 4 February 2005 at 15:25 by *Umm-Qsar*. The thread was titled ‘Honour killings not Terrorism.’ The thread ended within 48 hours, with the 36th posting on 6 February at 13:51.
- *Weerwoord* is a discussion forum that is specifically aimed at political topics. Here, *Koos* posted a message in the section ‘Immigration and Integration’ on 4 February 2005 at 4:08. The thread was called ‘Hirsi Ali wants to employ the AIVD [Dutch Intelligence Services] against honour killings.’ There were 64 reactions to the initial post that contained a quote from an online news site regarding Hirsi Ali’s plans. The last post dates from 6 February at 18:40.
- *Maroc* is a website that is specifically aimed at people of Moroccan descent living in the Netherlands, but sees increasingly ‘native’ Dutch people participating in the forums. Here, a thread called ‘The debate on honour killings’ was started by *Te quiero*, quoting a column about honour killings (by Anil Ramdas) that appeared in *De Volkskrant* on 14 February 2005. *Te quiero* made this initial posting on 20 February 2005 at 00:44. There were 37 reactions within two days; the last message was posted on 21 February at 20:47.

6.2.4 Analysis of the debate

For the selected newspapers, representation of actors was examined by establishing who is given voice, either by being an author of an opinion piece, column or letter-to-the-editor, or by being quoted in the newspapers. The latter refers to those instances where actors were either directly quoted or whose message was paraphrased. In the latter case the actor has to be the one ‘speaking’, so interpretations or evaluations of the actor’s expressions were excluded. These instances are not considered to give voice to the actors (for a similar method of coding see: Ferree et al. (2002)).

The authors were coded as actors with a voice when they deal with the topic at hand and express an opinion about how honour killings should be viewed or provide arguments for these opinions or alternative solutions to the approach proposed by Hirsi Ali. Most of the content in the newspaper articles dealt only with the (evaluation of the) process of the debate: *when* it was held, *who* started it and who does not agree with the way the debate was evolving. Basically, they all concerned statements that mentioned the *form* but are not about the *content* of the issue at stake in the debate. As these statements neither help citizens to form opinions and arguments, nor inform them about possible positions with regard to the content of the debate, the authors of such contributions are not coded as *actors*. In contrast, those actors, who are *quoted*, but did not give a judgement on the content of the discussion of honour killings, *are* included, as this does say something about who is seen as important in the discussion and who is given voice.

The actors were coded for relevant identity markers, such as gender, ethnicity (of

‘immigrant descent’ or ‘native Dutch’) and whether or not they are part of the political elite. The political status indicator distinguished the following values: Politician for a governmental party (that includes governmental actors such as Ministers); Politician for the opposition; Administration; Citizen; Academic; and Columnist.

For the online discussions, all the participants were seen as actors in the debate, and where possible, they were coded for relevant indicators (gender and origin). In addition, their ‘status’ within the forum was coded, by including the date they first registered (which helps to determine whether the discussion is dominated by those who have participated for longer periods of time, or whether there is an even distribution between them, newcomers and everyone in between). Also, the average number of postings was provided in order to give an indication of whether ‘heavy users’ dominate these particular debates or not.

Apart from the question of who is represented, the case of honour killings is used to provide an in-depth analysis of the ways in which the discourse includes or excludes groups. Inclusion in the debate does not only mean having a voice in it, but is also reflected by the content of the debate: Is the discourse inclusive? Here, two elements are taken into account. First, the discourse can be exclusive in that it suggests participants and/or viewpoints to be inferior to others. Exclusion can also come about by ignoring participants or their contributions. Second, exclusion and inequality in debate can be established by referencing to ‘us’ and ‘them’, which creates a division between those who are seen as belonging to this society/public/group, and those who are not. In this chapter, a discourse analysis is conducted to examine the mechanisms of exclusions that are present in the debate.

6.3 Who is represented?

I examined seven newspapers (30 articles, of which 20 are news articles, eight opinion pieces and columns, and two letters-to-the-editor) and three discussion forums (139 contributions) within the timeframe of a month. Within these contributions, the difference in saliency of the issue of honour killings is telling in itself. But to assess and compare their relative openness, I need to examine other aspects, such as the diversity of representation of actors and their opinions.

6.3.1 Representation in newspapers

In the seven newspapers 22 people were given a platform to voice their opinion in this period, eight of whom were authors of columns or opinion pieces and letters-to-the-editor⁵, and the other 12 actors were quoted in news articles. Table 6.1 shows a fairly varied distribution in terms of gender and origin. Ten out of 22 actors are female, and ten are male (for two people the gender is unknown). Five actors are of immigrant descent, whereas 16 are native Dutch. When compared to the number of immigrants in Dutch society, we see that actors of immigrant descent are well- if not over-represented. However, if one

⁵In two of the opinion pieces no author was specified.

Table 6.1: *Voices in newspapers*

Sources quoted/Authors	Freq.	Position [†]	Gender	Descent	Type [‡]
Hirsi Ali (VVD-MP)	12	gov. pol.	female	immigr.	quoted
Donner (CDA-Minister)	10	gov. pol.	male	native	quoted
Albayrak (PvdA-MP)	4	opp. pol.	female	immigr.	quoted
Van Aartsen (VVD-chair)	4	gov. pol.	male	native	quoted
Kraneveldt (LPF-MP)	3	opp. pol.	female	native	quoted
Sterk (CDA-MP)	3	gov. pol.	female	native	quoted
Timmer (police coordinator)	3	civil serv.	male	native	quoted
Van Eck (researcher VU)	2	academic	female	native	quot/aut
Verdonk (VVD-Minister)	2	gov. pol.	female	native	quoted
Azough (GroenLinks-MP)	1	opp. pol.	female	immigr.	quoted
Bouali (columnist)	1	columnist	female	immigr.	author
Civil servant Justice Dept.	1	civil serv.	–	–	quoted
Donck, van der (unknown)	1	citizen	–	native	quoted
Doorn, van (columnist)	1	columnist	male	native	author
Dorsman (lawyer)	1	citizen	male	native	quoted
Haersma Buma, v (CDA-MP)	1	gov. pol.	male	native	quoted
Hemelrijk (columnist)	1	columnist	female	native	author
Hesseling (housewife)	1	citizen	female	native	quoted
Hooreman (unknown)	1	citizen	male	native	author
Kaam, van (student)	1	citizen	male	native	quoted
Pamelen, van (columnist)	1	columnist	male	native	author
Ramdas (columnist)	1	columnist	male	immigr.	author
<i>Total</i>	56				

[†] gov. pol. stands for a politician from a government party (at the national level), including Ministers; opp. pol. stands for a politician whose party is in opposition.

[‡] Type of actor specifies whether the voice is quoted in the newspaper or the author of a piece published there.

holds the view that the issue of honour killings affects immigrants more than natives and they should therefore hold a special place in the debate, then they are relatively poorly represented.

The quoted number of actors that belong to the political elite does not show such a

wide distribution (see Table 6.2). Six out of 22 actors are politicians from government parties (including two Ministers). Only three members of the political opposition are included and another two are civil servants. Together, the political elite take up more than two thirds (44 out of 56 quotations) of the voice given in newspapers. Although five out of 22 of the quoted actors are (presented as) citizens, they only represent five out of the 56 total quotations.

Table 6.2: *Type of actors in newspapers*

Type of actors given voice	Number of actors	Times given voice
Politician (governmental party)	6	31
Politician (opposition)	3	9
Administration	2	4
Citizen	5	5
Columnist	5	5
Academic	1	2
<i>Total</i>	22	56

Citizen voices only appear in the free newspaper, *Metro*, and once in *Algemeen Dagblad* (see Table 6.3). Newspaper readers are only confronted with oppositional political voices in six out of 30 news articles; in 17 articles statements of governmental politicians are found. Readers of *De Volkskrant* encounter exclusively voices of the government on this matter. In contrast, *Algemeen Dagblad* quotes oppositional politicians five times.

Table 6.3: *Actors per newspaper*

Source	Newspaper						
	Volkskrant	AD	NRC	Trouw	Parool	Metro	Telegraaf
Politician (gov.)	8	6	5	3	3	1	5
Politician (opp.)	–	5	1	1	1	–	1
Administration	2	1	–	–	1	–	–
Citizen	–	1	–	–	–	4	–
Columnist	–	–	1	3	–	1	–
Academic	–	1	–	–	1	–	–
<i>Total</i>	10	14	7	7	6	6	6

6.3.2 Representation online

Online there is broader participation (43 contributors in three forums with 139 contributions) and a different distribution (see Table 6.4). Very prominent is the inequality of gender on *Fok*. Women are virtually absent, except for one, who posts only one message

(out of a total of 36 posts). On *Weerwoord*, no information is provided about the gender of the users. Taking the names of the participants as indicators,⁶ there are only two 'obvious' females and five males. On *Maroc* more equality can be found. Here, participants can indicate their gender by choosing for female, male and 'onzijdig' (no gender). Five women are represented, four men and four 'onzijdig'. Also prominent is the lack of participation by members of the political elite. Where they dominated the discussion offline, in the online debate they are not represented.

With regard to the origin or descent of the participants, little information is found on both *Fok* and *Weerwoord*; very limited variety is suggested when taking names as indicators. Six out of 14 actors on *Fok* have 'Dutch' names and in the others, no specific reference to other nationalities can be found, except for *desiredbard*, who refers to Ireland as his home country (most names are nick names that do not resemble 'real' names). On *Weerwoord* seven names seem to be 'Dutch' and one participant refers to Curacao as his/her country of origin. No information was found in suggesting immigrant descent. On *Maroc* there is information on 'national affiliation'. Participants are asked to choose a flag for their profile when registering. Even on this site, aimed specifically at Dutch Moroccans, the majority of the flags are Dutch. This, of course, does not necessarily mean that the participants are not of immigrant descent, but they are not presenting themselves as such. In addition to the Dutch flag, the following flags appear once each: Moroccan, Spanish, Surinamese, Turkish and that of Liechtenstein.⁷

In terms of the type of online users in the particular discussions, specifically *Maroc* and *Fok* show heavy users. However, on all of the websites there are also less frequent posters participating. Moreover, heavy users do not dominate these specific discussions (in terms of the number of contributions per participant). Likewise, 'new' and 'experienced' (in terms of their registration date) are equally represented in the discussions; neither group dominates the discussion. However, when looking at the dynamics of the discussion, particular participants do dominate the discussions. On all three forums, the top three posters are responsible for more than half of the contributions. On *Weerwoord* one of the contributors alone is responsible for one third of the messages. This concurs with other studies into the dynamics of online discussions, as discussed in Chapter 2.

6.3.3 Comparing the newspaper and online debate

The newspaper debate featured 22 actors in 30 contributions distributed over seven newspapers. In the three forums examined, 43 actors contributed 139 posts to the debate. The latter debate thus contains more actors and more interactions, but is there also a wider representation? Comparing the representation in newspapers with that in the online debate,

⁶Whether this is a less reliable method than the method of taking the self-presentation of their gender remains a question. However, it is the *representation* I am after; that which is perceivable by others. This representation can come as much from a name as a gender sign.

⁷I do not wish to imply that these are then necessarily the countries from where the participants originate. It is, however, these countries that are now represented for the other participants in the discussion. They do seem to suggest some affiliation. That these are not static attachments is illustrated by the fact that half a year after data collection, the participant holding the flag of Liechtenstein now holds the flag of Luxembourg.

there are a number of similarities and differences between the two. Both the newspaper debate and the online debate have one or two dominant voices. In the newspapers, there are two (MP Hirsi Ali and Minister Donner) that together make up almost 40% of the debate. Online, the top three posters (the most frequent poster of each forum) together make up almost 30% of the discussion. In both debates, the majority of the participants is (or seems to be) of native rather than immigrant descent.

Table 6.4: *Online participants*

Participant	Freq.	Gender	Origin	Total # posts	Average	Member since
<i>Participants on Fok</i>						
opa	9	male		1683	23	Oct-99
pool	6	male		7730	390	Dec-03
sjun	4	male		12438	420	Apr-03
Musketeer	3	male		138	17	Jan-05
desiredbard	2	male		1711	180	Nov-04
Jereon	2	male		2627	120	Jul-03
SCH	2	male		66794	1980	Nov-02
Umm-Qsar	2	male		1057	60	Apr-03
Chewy	1	male		4341	150	Jan-03
GewoneMan	1	male		7270	360	Jan-04
Gia	1	female		13877	240	Apr-00
IntroV	1	male		1391	25	Jan-01
pberends	1	male		38534	1440	Jul-03
tommytheman	1	male		1133	60	Jan-04
<i>Total</i>	36			11480	390	
<i>Participants on Weerwoord</i>						
Koos	20	male		391	65	Nov-04
Alfatrion	7	–		2420	73	Aug-02
Theo	7	male		3677	141	Mar-03
Xeno	7	–		1547	50	Oct-02
Anne	4	female		1486	57	Mar-03
Torero	4	–		2449	66	Apr-02
Moppersmurf	3	–		609	55	Jun-04
waarbenik	3	–		702	47	Feb-04
Circe	2	–		1102	38	Dec-02

Continued on next page

Participant	Freq.	Gender	Origin	Total # posts	Average	Member since
Gert	2	male		73	2	Dec-01
J. Wervendbos	2	male		3795	74	Feb-01
curacaoteam	1	–		3971	95	Nov-01
Eduard Genen	1	male		1440	206	Oct-04
Olga	1	female		206	11	Oct-03
P040	1	–		616	41	Feb-04
<i>Total</i>	65			1632	68	

Participants on *Maroc*

Ron Haleber	10	male	NL	4109	137	Nov-02
sjaen	6	female	NL	1109	101	Jun-04
mark61	4	male	–	17071	1004	Dec-03
Goodnight	3	female	Morocco	6992	388	Nov-03
tr_imparator	3	male	Turkey	1279	426	Feb-05
Mill	2	none	–	2308	68	Jul-02
S@deeQ	2	male	Morocco	722	52	Mar-04
Simon	2	none	Liechtens.	8712	235	Apr-02
Te quiero	2	none	NL	618	103	Nov-04
~Panthera~	1	female	NL	13226	357	Apr-02
Couscousje	1	female	NL	19740	439	Aug-01
Japio	1	none	Spain	76	8	Aug-04
Rabi'ah	1	female	Suriname	4417	147	Nov-02
<i>Total</i>	38			6183	266	

However, immigrants seem to be better represented in the newspaper debate, if not in terms of the number of participants, than at least in the frequency with which they are given voice. Another difference between the newspaper and online debate concerns the representation of citizens versus the political elite. The latter is far more dominant in the newspapers whereas citizens dominate the online discussion. A last major difference in representation is that of gender: In the newspapers, 10 out of 22 participants are female (two of which the gender is unknown), online only eight women are represented among 43 participants (12 are unknown). These women contribute only 18 messages out of a total of 139.

Thus, apart from the dominance of the political elite in the newspaper debate, it seems to represent a more diverse public than does the online debate. This is quite contrary to the expectation of online debate as being more accessible to and thus more inclusive of a wider public. Contrary to newspapers, however, online participation is to a large extent a matter of self-selection. There are no mechanisms in place that try to ensure a balanced representation. There are only gatekeepers to *exclude* people, not to actively *include* people, as may be the case in the reporting by journalists and in the publication of opinions pieces

in newspapers.

We have to keep in mind, though, that a large part of the representation of female and immigrant voices in the newspapers is due to one particular actor: Ayaan Hirsi Ali. The question is to what extent this representation influences the content of the debates: Does more diversity in terms of participants also mean more diversity in terms of positions?

6.4 Which positions are represented?

Looking at both the offline and the online debate, the most prominent disparity between the two is the difference in the amount of information that is given. The newspaper articles focus mainly on the *process* of the debate instead of the *content*. Only in nine out of 30 articles the content of Hirsi Ali's proposal on how to deal with honour killings is considered (in five of the articles a negative position is taken, in one a positive, and in three articles there is no position). Most of the articles, however, only deal with the actors involved, how they regard each other, and what role they play in the honour killings discussion. Hirsi Ali's suggestions are not taken well by government actors or some oppositional politicians. Most of the newspapers' attention is devoted to these critiques. The few statements that do relate to the issue of honour killings show surprisingly little variation; only two favour linking honour killings and terrorism, and ten are negative. Four statements are neutral towards Hirsi Ali's suggestion, or are at least uncertain, stating for instance: 'Anyone can be suspected of honour killings. And if we do so, why not also for other murders?' (Minister of Justice Donner in *De Volkskrant* 11 February 2005).

What remains remarkably absent in the newspaper debate is the argumentation around the positions on honour killings in general and (a lack of) its relation to terrorism in particular. Very little information is given about honour killings. Except in one article that reports on an interview with the national coordinator investigating honour killings (a prestigious member of the police force, who is a national expert on the topic), almost no information is provided about what honour killings are, its possible causes, or alternative solutions.

In contrast, such information and expressions *can* be found in the online debate. Online, they discuss the issue, provide arguments, react to each other and share information (see Table 6.5). Online, participants use different types of sources to inform each other, provide additional information, and dispel fallacies. In addition, the range of viewpoints and ways of looking at the issue seem to be much broader. Here, the debate is also dominated by legal aspects and whether or not the actions in question can be seen as honour killings, but these issues generally seem to be much more present than in the newspapers.

In analysing the discourses, two main themes can be identified: how honour killings should be viewed and how they should be dealt with. In the discourse, two solutions are discussed for both themes. The two primary views that emerge on how honour killings should be seen are: (i) as a terrorist act; and (ii) as a cultural or religious phenomenon. In terms of how honour killings should be dealt with, two main perspectives arise: (i) who should deal with honour killings in the legal sense (i.e. is the intelligence service

Table 6.5: *Types of expression on web forums*

Type of utterance	Frequency			
	<i>Fok</i>	<i>Weerwoord</i>	<i>Maroc</i>	<i>Total</i>
Reaction to others	12	36	1	49
Statement about issue	14	20	3	37
Argument for statement	7	18	1	26
Alternative solution	7	17	0	24
Providing information	6	13	2	21
Asking for information	2	4	1	7
Personal attack	0	0	6	6
Meta-talk about the discussion	0	2	1	3
<i>Total number of messages</i>	36	65	38	139

indeed the right body, as Hirsi Ali suggests); and (ii) whether honour killings are an issue to be dealt with through a signal of disapproval (from the media, public opinion or politicians). Before going into this, it is important to point out that these themes are very much interdependent and intertwined. I will discuss the view of honour killings as a cultural or religious phenomenon in Section 6.5, as this view is very specific in that it involves discursive exclusions of participants in debate and viewpoints.

The question of *who* should deal with honour killings is closely related to the question of *how* honour killings are viewed. Should they be viewed as ‘normal’ murders, like Minister Donner seems to suggest, or is there something inherently different about them, thus providing a reason to deal with them differently? And if the latter, what is it that sets honour killings apart from other murders? These questions, while hardly touched upon in the newspapers, form the focal point of attention in the online debate.

Many discussants do not view honour killings as normal crimes, as is illustrated by the following examples:

Little sons who slaughter their sisters by order of the family with a cultural/religious motive, I do not view as a ‘normal’ crime. (Koos, *Weerwoord*, 4 February 2005, 14:26)

More than that: in the presence of the whole family cutting the throat of the girl . . . A ‘normal’ crime . . . It’s about time that Donner [Minister of Justice] is harassed by the terror that takes places in society. (Torero, *Weerwoord*, 4 February 2005, 14:32)

You cannot compare honour killing to a murder after a row in a bar. It is a cultural phenomenon in which the murderer enforces the group norm onto the victim. (Simon, *Maroc*, 20 February 2005, 12:53)

These statements seem not only to suggest that honour killings are different from other murders, but that they are a more brutal type of murder. There is an underlying scale of

severity: 'normal' murders, honour killings and terrorism. One of the participants uses this scale in his reasoning as to why honour killings should not be treated as terrorism:

By calling cases that are clearly not terrorism-related, such as honour killing, terrorism, she [Hirsi Ali] doesn't take real terrorism seriously enough. A real terrorist has the intention to overthrow the state, disrupt society, create fear, etc. (Pool, *Fok*, 4 February 2005, 15:39)

This fits with the view that the Dutch Intelligence Services should not be employed to deal with honour killings, but should deal with more 'serious' crimes, such as terrorism. Many participants tend to agree with this view, as will become apparent when later discussing the legal theme.

But there are also participants who do see parallels between terror and honour killings. Here, the focus is on 'terror (*terreur*)' against individuals, rather than 'terrorism (*terrorisme*)'. A number of discussants take the victim's perspective; they feel that the victims are clearly being terrorised:⁸

I find honour killing terror. Often against the woman, and certainly against the individual. (John Wervenbos (moderator), *Weerwoord*, 4 February 2005, 19:07)

Women and individuals who are not allowed to develop and emancipate under penalty of manslaughter and murder are all in all terrorised; it cannot be much more concrete. (John Wervenbos, *Weerwoord*, 5 February 2005, 00:01)

This view triggers several counter positions:

But according to that reasoning there are many violent crimes that you can range under 'terror.' I view terror mostly as an attempt to violently influence the government or public opinion. (Xeno, *Weerwoord*, 4 February 2005, 23:46)

Of course honour killing is a normal crime and not terrorism. Family terror is not terrorism. (Gert, *Weerwoord*, 6 February 2005, 18:15)

It becomes clear that participants have very specific and varying notions of what terrorism is. For some, an individual being terrorised signifies that the crime itself should be seen as terrorism, while others reserve the label 'terrorism' for crimes against states. There are still others in the debate who take a different perspective and argue that honour killings can be viewed as an act of resistance against Dutch society, by placing cultural values above the law (a train of thought that also returns in the next section):

⁸Here, even though the victim's perspective is taken with a particular focus on the female victims, no parallel is drawn with domestic violence. This parallel is, oddly enough, entirely absent from the discussion on honour killings.

Whether you can call it terror I don't know, but you can view it, I think, as a ritual murder by people who find their culture/religion more important than our laws. And that asks for a different approach than normal crimes. (Koos, *Weerwoord*, 4 February 2005, 19:17)

In terms of the legal ways of dealing with the issue of honour killings, online discussants explore a broader range of possible ways of dealing with it than can be found in the newspapers. They view the issue from multiple angles and try to determine whether or not the new terrorism law should be utilised in dealing with honour killings. Many of the discussants feel that the current competences of the police in tracing criminals are sufficient for dealing with honour killings and the Dutch Intelligence Services (AIVD) should not be used for such a matter:

What do these people have to do with state security? Police business . . . they can also tap phones. (waarbenik, *Weerwoord*, 4 February 2005, 11:39)

Just to know of the murder/assault beforehand is enough to be arrested. (waarbenik, *Weerwoord*, 4 February 2005, 12:28)

Many feel that the AIVD already have their hands full and is not the proper agency to deal with this crime. Others agree with Hirsu Ali, mostly providing pragmatic reasons, as the following quote demonstrates:

But the AIVD does have the means to track and map these sorts of crimes. That it's not terrorism is no reason. And that it's not possible by law [to use the AIVD] isn't either. Then they should just change the law. (Moppersmurf, *Weerwoord*, 4 February, 22:24)

That some of the participants are very ingenious in thinking of alternative ways of dealing with the issue, and really attempt to find a suitable solution becomes clear from the proposal to form a *CARE-police*:

There used to be a *zedenpolitie* [vice squad] that dealt with *zedendelicten* [decency offences]. (Does it still exist?) Why don't we expand this or a new squad that deals with excesses against the general norms and values (which used to be called *zedes* [customs]) of ethnic, cultural and religious background. *CARE-police* (*Culturele Achtergronden Religies en Etniciteit* [Cultural Backgrounds Religions and Ethnicity]). (Eduard Geenen, *Weerwoord*, 5 February, 13:43,—emphasis by author)

The discourse in the online debates shows that many consider honour killings to be a very severe crime. It is also apparent that respondents do not feel that this crime is being given the attention that it should. According to the online discussants the issue is considered too mildly, both in law, as in politics. Part of the problem is that the public, legal, and political signal of disapproval is too weak. Therefore, a call is made for increasing this societal signal in order to make known the 'Dutch' aversion to these crimes:

Honour killing was for years a mitigating circumstance in determining the sentence. I cannot believe it. It should be punished much more severely than 'normal' murder. And it should not only be fought with laws, but also through public opinion. So, no more keeping silent, as the Netherlands still does, but make clear that we find this outrageous. (Koos, *Weerwoord*, 4 February 2005, 19:17)

In any case [there should be] more severe punishments and attention in the media. I also think that Ministers Verdonk and Donner should make their stance known on this matter. (Koos, *Weerwoord*, 5 February 2005, 00:27)

In this respect even the term 'eerwraak (revenge for honour)' is challenged. One of the participants links this term to the way this issue is viewed:

Such a premeditated murder shouldn't have such a euphemistic name as 'eerwraak.' In my opinion, it is better to mercilessly expose the immaturity and unscrupulousness of those people who cooperate in this murder. (sjun, *Fok*, 6 February 2005, 08:35)

In addition, others link the Dutch societal condemnation of the crime with a possible condemnation within the community in which honour killings are practiced:

That's why it's so important that honour killing is condemned *within the [Islamic] community*. For that to happen, politicians will first have to communicate the view that honour killing is not tolerated. (Koos, *Weerwoord*, 5 February 2005, 17:21—emphasis by author)

In general, the call for condemning the crime in Dutch public discourse is concurrent with the notion of honour killings originating from cultural values of ethnic and religious minorities within the Netherlands. Many discussants explicitly link the practice of honour killings with culture and religion. This particular perspective is explored more in-depth in the section 6.5.

I ended the preceding section by concluding that the newspaper debate is relatively more inclusive, diverse and open, with women and immigrants relatively better represented than in the online debate. This is not the case, however, regarding diversity in the positions presented. Online, even though there is little diversity in terms of participants, more information is provided, more positions are considered, and alternative solutions to the problem are discussed. In the newspapers almost no positions are discussed, very little information is provided, and hence the content of the debate is very meagre. This might well be a result of the news values that determine what is reported on. The process or *form* of the debate in terms of conflict seems to have been more interesting than the *content*.

Besides this, there are a number of mechanisms of exclusion in the debate that have to be considered, which are linked to the view that honour killings are a cultural or religious phenomenon.

6.5 Discursive exclusions

A considerable part of the discussion on how honour killings should be viewed is concerned with the alleged cultural or religious nature of the phenomenon. The discussions about honour killings demonstrate ways of exclusion through language. Exclusion occurred through the explicit suggestion of the inferior position of participants and viewpoints and by means of 'othering'. Though not very frequently, people and positions are treated as inferior. One of the participants, for example, refers to the education of other participants (VMBO, the lowest level of Dutch secondary school) to suggest an inferior quality of debating. Moreover, they are considered 'Dumbos' and are not treated as equals. This specific participant (*Ron Haleber on Maroc*) does not take the opposing position seriously. Another example of such excluding discourse is aimed at another participant of *Maroc*, who, after claiming to resist integration is told to 'veil himself in exotic clothes and build some wooden huts and dig his own well' (*sjaen on Maroc*). Unwillingness to integrate into Dutch society is ridiculed and equated with being 'backward' or 'primitive'. This indicates an *a priori* exclusion of this participant and his views.

The second form of discursive exclusion, that of 'othering', or the discourse of 'us' versus 'them', is much more widespread. Passionate ideas exist regarding the cultural norms that should prevail; participants express a strong notion of what is Dutch and what is not. Participants also address 'ownership' of the problem of honour killings and thus who should deal with it. Through the discussion online and at times also in the portrayal of the issue in the newspapers, it is apparent that honour killings are seen as something 'outside' of Dutch society; this phenomenon has no place in the Netherlands. This coincides with the conception that it is a criminal offence, but yet there is more to it. Unlike the ways in which other crimes might be discussed, honour killing is seen as 'foreign' to Dutch society and its values and practices. Through this discursive practice, some participants of the discussion imply that this practice may have a place *outside* of the Netherlands, but not *inside* it. The following examples illustrate this point:

In any case it [honour killing] is not normal, at least not in *our* culture YET. (xeno, *Weerwoord*, 4 February 2005, 17:52—italic emphasis by author)

It should be made clear that honour killing is not tolerated anymore *over here*. (Koos, *Weerwoord*, 4 February 2005, 19:17—emphasis by author)

The discourse is not only about which practices are anathema in the Netherlands, but also about *who* is practicing them. The act is regarded as 'foreign' to the Netherlands; 'foreigners' thus practice it. The discussion asks whether someone who commits such a crime can or should be viewed as a Dutch citizen. This again shows that the concept of honour killing is viewed not just as any crime, but one that somehow tears at the roots of the nation state. This is also why some discussants view it as terrorism, as something that challenges the very basis of the legal system.

[Honour killing is] murder with the aim to *resist the ruling system*. In that sense you could compare honour killing to terrorism. (...) The slogan: 'Your nation state is

not mine' has taken root in Holland. (opa, *Fok*, 4 February 2005, 23:10—emphasis by author)

It [The Netherlands] is *their* nation state. *They* will deny it, particularly their duties to it, but yet these duties apply. *We* are entitled to enforce these duties, which brings with it that they can enjoy the rights. (Pool, *Fok*, 4 February 2005, 23:30—emphasis by author)

The following examples show that not everyone considers honour killings to be 'foreign', while at the same time illustrating that terrorism has a strong ethnic and religious connotation:

There's bound to be natives who have killed someone in the family, which can resemble honour killing. That's why I don't think it is terrorism. (pberends, *Fok*, 4 February 2005, 20:34)

As honour killing takes place in different cultures, like the Christian, you can possibly call it terrorism, in my opinion. (anne, *Weerwoord*, 6 February 2005, 15:42)

If Christian cultures also experience honour killings, then honour killings cannot be viewed as terrorism. This not only excuses Christians, but also opens the door for a different view on Islam. But with it comes a feeling of superiority and difference: Honour killing is not only 'foreign' but is also 'backward' and 'barbaric':

To me it seems particularly useful to monitor all types of deeds that are inspired by *backward foreign* 'values'. (Torero, *Weerwoord*, 6 February 2005, 00:02—emphasis by author)

We're fed up with all this *Islam* shit. Take a firm line, it is the only remedy to such *barbaric* matters! (GewoneMan, *Fok*, 4 February 2005, 23:36—emphasis by author)

If it is not a Dutch phenomenon, but one that is 'foreign' to the Dutch, the question thus becomes: Whose problem is it? Is it Dutch society that has to cope, and is Dutch society really affected, apart from being confronted with something participants feel should not occur within Dutch borders? In this respect the following quote expresses that it is not *our* wives who are affected by honour killing:

That they also make their *own* wives' lives miserable is annoying, but that has to be dealt with in a different way. (xeno, *Weerwoord*, 4 February 2005, 8:57—emphasis by author)

The notion that for some it is merely an 'annoying' issue becomes clearer through the solution people present. It seems that participants care more about *where* honour killings take place (not in the Netherlands) than to *whom* it happens. The discourse suggests that participants do not inherently condemn it, as long as it does not take place on Dutch soil. Instead of solving the problem and eliminating its causes, the discussants advertise shifting the problem:

Honour killing is completely unacceptable in the Netherlands (...) People who want such a society, build this elsewhere, for my part, but not here in the Netherlands. (John Wervendos (moderator), *Weerwoord*, 5 February 2005, 0:01)

This can never become part of *Dutch* constitutional state and people who want to adhere to and practice principles such as honour killing can mercilessly be *deported* as far as I am concerned. Then they can go to countries where honour killing is more or less socially accepted. (John Wervendos (moderator), *Weerwoord*, 4 February 2005, 19:07—emphasis by author)

Discursive exclusions are sometimes combined with suggestions of literal exclusion:

Honour killing in the family? Kick them ALL out without mercy! (Circe, *Weerwoord*, 5 February 2005, 14:43—emphasis in original)

This position is questioned by one of the participants: How far would one have to go in deporting people, what if they are Dutch or Surinamese? The solution proposed by this discussant, though, is equally, or even more excluding:

You also have madmen amongst the Dutch-white-townspeople-and-country folk ethnicity [sic]. What do you want to do with them? Deport them as well? Or Surinamese or Antilleans? I do think, however, that those with double nationalities should be mercilessly *deported* and have their Dutch citizenship withdrawn, when there is conclusive evidence of serious criminality. Children or no children, rich or poor. I couldn't care less...deport these corrupting forces. (Eduard Geenen, *Weerwoord*, 5 February 2005, 13:14—emphasis by author)

An alternative solution that is less popular, but still advocated by some, is to bring about cultural change within the group that practices honour killings through a transferral of Dutch values. In the 'inburgeringscursus' (a citizenship course that aims at teaching immigrants the Dutch language and cultural values), the 'other' can be taught how 'the Dutch' deal with certain issues in family life, and hence how to become 'Dutch' in that respect. The following quotes show how some discussants view this cultural transformation:

The phenomenon of honour killing has a clear cultural (specifically Turkish) background. (...) Only a change in culture will really solve the problem with this group. (...) Demanding that the issue honour killing becomes an explicit part of the 'inburgeringspakket' (how we DO deal with this in Holland) would be much more realistic. (Theo, *Weerwoord*, 4 February 2005, 17:11—emphasis in original)

We have to explain clearly to newcomers how *we* deal with issues *here* such as divorce and children who run away. *Give them alternatives*. (Willem Timmer, in *De Volkskrant*, 10 February 2005—emphasis by author)

Honour killing should not happen *here*. The current rules suffice, but *more openness* is needed in *the culture*. (Tineke Hesseling, housewife, *Metro*, 5 February 2005—emphasis by author)

Through *integration* it has to become clear that this [honour killing] does not fit in *our culture*. (Rob van Kaam, student, *Metro*, 5 February 2005—emphasis by author)

The ‘other’ is shown the ‘Dutch’ way, which is expected to result in the necessary shift in practices and values. There are some discussants, however, who propose a slightly less one-directional type of solution, which puts more agency with the community in which honour killings are a tolerated and practiced phenomenon. These discussants ask for emancipation from within the community in order to bring about change:

The resistance against primitive matters such as ‘honour killing’ will eventually have to come through the *emancipation of Muslims themselves*. (curacaoteam, *Weerwoord*, 5 February 2005, 20:17—emphasis by author)

That’s why it’s so important that honour killing is going to be condemned *within the [Islamic] community*. (Koos, *Weerwoord*, 5 February 2005, 17:21—emphasis by author)

Even though different in outlook, here too the discourse is filled with stereotypes of the Islamic community. At this point, however, the issue at least seems to be a shared issue, and involves the ‘other’ in its proposed solutions.

On the whole, the practices and strategies of discursive exclusion—exclusion through playing down and ridiculing the arguments, and through ‘othering’ the ‘owners’ of the issue—show that this online discussion does not allow for full difference. The sometimes extreme ‘otherness’ may have functioned as a barrier for those defending honour killings or with a more nuanced position. People may have withdrawn from the debate or were shunned, or altered their contributions to it. I have identified this as a covert form of power in Chapter 2, as people put constraints on their own participation. The fact that this type of power is covert does not take anything away from its influence. We could even say that this is:

the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having [or expressing] grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial (Lukes, 2005: 28).

6.6 Conclusion

Openness of discussion ideally leads to inclusion of different types of participants and positions in the debate. If online discussion is more open than offline discussion, it can

be expected to find more types of participants and positions represented on that medium. In this chapter, I examined the extent to which Dutch web forums give room to a broad range of viewpoints regarding the debate on the specific issue of honour killings, and have compared this to the actors as well as positions represented in Dutch national newspapers.

I analysed seven newspapers and three web forums within a one month time period. These platforms contained, respectively, 30 and 139 contributions on the issue of honour killings as a reaction to the debate initiated by MP Hirsi Ali. I found that a variety of actors in terms of gender and ethnicity could be heard, but almost no citizens or other non-governmental actors were represented in the newspaper debate. However, aside from the dominance of the political elite, the newspaper debate was more inclusive than the online debate. Contrary to the representation in the newspapers, in the online debate there was little evidence that those of immigrant descent were represented. One can argue that what is most important is the representation of people of immigrant descent, since honour killings are viewed as a practice of the 'other'. The basic ingredient for engagement, that different actors with different views are present, was limited in this discussion. Many references are made in terms of what religious or ethnic minorities should do, but no dialogue can be found in the forums that were analysed. Even on the Moroccan-Dutch web forum the debate seemed to be dominated by 'native' Dutch.

In the newspapers a more diverse public thus participated in the discussion; women and immigrants are better represented. This seems to contradict the expectations of online debate. But to what extent does this representation influence the content of the debates: Does more diversity in terms of participants mean more diversity in positions? In this debate, I found that this was not the case. In the newspapers, the issue of honour killings was mainly about the process of the (parliamentary) debate. Rather than presenting different points of view, the issue was described procedurally without defining the issue and without having different perspectives explored and questioned. Thus, even though there is little online diversity in terms of participants, more information is provided, more positions are considered, and alternative solutions to the problem are discussed. Does this make the online discussion less or more open than the newspaper debate?

It is clear that access to the online discussion, though dependent on access to the Internet, is easier than access to the newspaper debate. Accordingly, more citizens are represented online. For those who do not have contacts in the newspaper world it is, of course, difficult to access this discussion platform. However, even though access is easier online, and more diverse positions are addressed in the discussion, counter arguments in the online debate stayed within the limits of what were described as Dutch cultural values and the Dutch legal system. No real alternative position was presented, and the 'other' was not present in the debate. In this sense the debate was not inclusive, although there are no direct indications that these views were excluded. In this case neither engagement nor understanding for the 'other' can be established. His/her position is not voiced (even though speculated on by those present in the debate). In this way fear, frustrations, and prejudices about the other remain unresolved and unchallenged.

It is uncertain whether there would have been space for an alternative discourse to enter the debate. Discursive exclusions show how the other is not considered to be a

Dutch citizen, and power to determine what is and what is not Dutch is not readily extended to the other. The denying of citizenship and thus the legitimacy to participate in the debate does not only pertain to actual perpetrators of honour killings but seems to include immigrants and Muslims in general. This denying of a basic right seems to foreclose the possibility of optimal engagement. It remains unclear, however, how the debate would have transpired had such alternative voices been present.

Chapter 7

In/exclusion of alternative voices

7.1 Introduction

In Chapters 4 and 5 I examined the openness of web forums in light of forum regulation as well as how they are viewed by users. In both studies, it became apparent that openness of web forums is considered important (though moderators seem to have a different idea from discussants on how to reach such openness). In the users' view, openness materialises in a diversity of opinions. But to what extent can diversity actually be found online, and how do forum participants deal with alternative voices when they are expressed online? In Chapter 6 I examined to what extent a diversity of opinions is found in the online discussion on the topic of honour killings. In this debate, no real alternative position was expressed (even though there was more diversity in terms of positions than in the newspaper debate) and several types of discursive exclusions were found.

In this chapter I will examine the way a discussion evolves when an alternative position *is* presented. What happens to the openness of a debate when a voice enters that is different from the dominant discourse? The research question that guides the analysis is: *How do different voices interact online when alternative voices are present(ed) in the debate and to what extent is this interaction open and inclusive?* I will analyse how alternative voices are expressed and how they are received. The Internet might provide a platform for alternative voices in the form of counter publics, but if and how these voices find their way into general public debate, with the out-group, is a matter to be more thoroughly examined. The inclusion of dissenting and alternative voices is seen as a major asset of the Internet, but what happens when such a voice is included? I seek to answer this question by examining the case of Ertan.nl.

7.2 Ertan.nl: An alternative voice online

Ertan.nl,¹ a critical web logger, operates in the context of the changed and polarized public debate in the Netherlands and forms an alternative or radical voice. Ertan provides a 'satirical view on Dutch Society by a Muslim, every Sunday, when the Christians are having a rest day.'² His columns are very confrontational and distressing to some, while appreciated by others.³ He insults and provokes, but also initiates and feeds debates.

According to his own writings, Ertan is a Dutch Muslim of Turkish descent. He takes on a very specific and unique role in Dutch public discourse on the issues of immigration and integration. His website 'provides an open medium for the Dutch Muslim society' and aims at 'voicing opinions that are not presented or that are distorted in the media.' In addition to his website, Ertan participates in public debate through online discussions elsewhere, such as on websites for Dutch people of Moroccan and Turkish descent, Islamic websites, a Dutch school forum, the Young Socialist website, and a website for young homosexuals.⁴ Due to the content of his website and the posts on several forums, Ertan has become a well-known and for many, an unwelcome presence in the online discourse on immigration and integration in the Netherlands.

This chapter focuses on the reactions to a specific online message from Ertan and examines the kinds of strategies that are adopted to deal with this unconventional voice. First, I describe the specific message as well as the online forums where the post is discussed. Second, I explain the method used to examine and map the different reactions to the post. Third, through discourse analysis, I map the different reactions to Ertan's posts and columns. Fourth, I analyse the openness of debate on the issue as well as whether engagement between different discourses comes about. Finally, I examine the role of alternative types of expression such as narrative, greeting, and sharing of personal experiences.

7.2.1 Murat, I love you; or how contestation comes about

The post of Ertan and the focus of this chapter deals with a fatal shooting at a secondary school. On 13 January 2004 a 17-year-old student, Murat D., shot his teacher in the head. The boy, born in the Netherlands and of Turkish descent, had been suspended from school a few days before the killing. When word got out that the shooting concerned a

¹At the time of study (May 2004), the website was hosted on the Ertan.nl domain, but the website temporarily moved to Ertan.biz (visitors to Ertan.nl were redirected to this site) before moving back again to Ertan.nl. Ertan was requested by his web host to take this route as a consequence of the commotion about his columns. This was not the first time he had to move to a different domain; before Ertan.nl, the domain was Ertan.tk. He has several websites that redirect the visitor to his page, or contain the contents of his columns. These sites are: <http://ertan.reallyrules.com/>; ertan.ontheweb.nl/; ertan.blogspot.com; www.ertan.tk; <http://home.planet.nl/~cihat/>. The website continues to shift domains and URLs.

²Ertan.nl, last accessed May 2004.

³Positive reactions are almost exclusively found on his own website. Elsewhere (regardless of the type of website) people mostly disagree with him. But even in many of these cases messages such as 'where is Ertan? I kind of miss him' pop up from time to time.

⁴I used the search engines google.nl and ilse.nl to search for Ertan on other Dutch language websites.

boy of Turkish descent, the issue quickly received an immigration or integration frame by the public as well as the media.

Five days after the shooting, Ertan wrote a column in which he sympathized with Murat. He posted the column on his website and on a number of web forums:

‘Murat, I love you,

You could have been my kid brother. What you did is not your fault, son, it is the fault of this rotten society in which we, unfortunately, live. The dirty tricks of the so-called tolerant Dutchmen I know better than anyone else. They get under your skin and do so in a very sly manner. But who gets blamed in the end, yes, our culture, that supposedly is no good, whereas it’s their culture that is rotten to the bone.

Even though we are born and bred here we are treated differently. My declaration of support to you was mercilessly removed from discussion forums of the public broadcaster. When a Dutchman gives his opinion this is called freedom of speech, but if a Muslim does so, he is censored or confronted with the question why he doesn’t return to his own country, if he doesn’t like it here. Holland apparently isn’t our country.

Belittled, oppressed and mentally abused, you are not the only one, Murat. You did not see any other way to vent your suppressed feelings of hate than to shoot a bullet through the head of your teacher. What choice do you have when this society leaves you no other way out? To let them belittle, oppress, and mentally abuse you? Anyone with a little bit of honour doesn’t allow that.

Believe me, there are a lot of Muslim youngsters out there like you with a lot of suppressed feelings of hate towards everything that is in any way related to Dutchmen. Therefore, I fear this won’t be the last of it. On the contrary, it will only worsen, especially when a youngster like you can only feel safe with a gun in his pocket.

Hang in there, Murat and turn to Allah. I, as a Turkish Muslim brother, love you and find you a true hero, as you stood up for yourself.’

This message was posted on Ertan.nl,⁵ and on (at least) the following three discussion forums:⁶

- *Newsgroup nl.politiek*: a general political newsgroup in which Ertan (using the nickname *ErTaN*) initiated a thread, titled ‘Murat, I love you’ on 18 January 2004, at 6:48. The

⁵There were almost a thousand reactions on the website. The messages were very polarized, ranging from ‘I will kill you and all Muslims’ to ‘I completely agree with you Ertan’. The majority of the posts were of the first category. As a result, Ertan was requested by his provider to seek a new provider. After doing this, Ertan decided to limit the possibility of reacting to his website and all of the reactions to his column were deleted.

⁶I have used the search engines *google.nl* and *Ilse.nl* to find the sites where this specific post of Ertan was posted. I acknowledge that the fact that I could not find other websites containing this message does not mean that it does not exist elsewhere on the Net. Even though the Newsgroup is not a web forum (the focus of this thesis) I decided to include the newsgroup discussion here. As the results will show, the interactions were not notably different on the newsgroup. Furthermore, newsgroups can be accessed through the web as well, which makes them very alike to web forums in layout.

- last post appeared the next day, at noon, and by that time 30 participants posted 53 messages.
- *Web forum Leefbaar Nederland*: a web forum on the website of a small populist political party called *Leefbaar Nederland* (Liveable Netherlands). Again, Ertan (this time using *ertan.nl* as nickname) started a thread titled ‘Murat, I love you’. He posted the message on 19 January 2004 at 12.24. The thread closed the next day at four o’clock in the afternoon. There were 33 messages in total, posted by 18 participants.
 - *Web forum Fok*: a Dutch discussion website which is also examined in the other studies in this thesis. *Salvation* started a discussion thread, containing Ertan’s column ‘Murat, I love you’, referring to www.ertan.nl as the source. The thread is called ‘Ertan.nl: Too sick for words’ and started on 24 January 2004 at 21:36 and ended one hour later, with 55 messages posted by 29 participants.

I have not examined Ertan’s website; although people initially could post reactions, the format of his site (a web log) is not directed at a discussion between participants.

Using a discourse analytical approach, I examined the 139 reactions on the three forums specified above (see Appendix C for the participants of the forums)⁷ to Ertan’s column in order to identify different strategies that people adopt to deal with an unconventional voice such as Ertan’s. After having thoroughly read and reread the material, I drew up an extensive and detailed list of categories. These were later regrouped identifying broader strategies, which were used in reaction to Ertan’s posts. The strategies are very prominent and almost all of the posts use one or more of them.⁸ I will first describe these different types of strategies before turning to the question that shapes this analysis: To what extent does Ertan’s alternative voice actually open up public discussion for difference and allow for engagement?

7.3 Online strategies of dealing with difference

When looking at the posts on the three forums, a first finding is that the ‘place’ in which the discussions are held does not seem to influence or affect the way in which people react. The reactions show remarkable similarities, despite the fact that there are differences in the discussions. Ertan himself started the thread on *nl.politiek* and *Leefbaar Nederland*, but not on *Fok*. The forums are also different in nature: *nl.politiek* is a general political discussion group that is not affiliated with any political party or movement and seems to have quite a diverse public. *Leefbaar Nederland*, on the contrary, is specifically connected to a political party and is therefore likely to attract a specific audience.⁹ *Fok* is not a political forum per se: The website hosts discussions on all sorts of topics, from music, philosophy, and gardening to political matters.

⁷There were 141 messages in the three forums, two of which were the original message posted by Ertan.

⁸85% of the posts use one or more of the strategies. The other 15% are off-topic.

⁹And it does, concluding from the issues addressed and the opinions voiced on the website and the web forum as a whole.

Despite these differences in the forums, there is substantial homogeneity in the reactions.¹⁰ One striking similarity is that none of the reactions on any of the forums discusses the *content* of Ertan's post. This will later be examined in detail, but for now I will concentrate on the actual reactions. Three common themes or 'strategies' can be identified: (i) attempts in finding ways of 'eliminating' Ertan; (ii) discussing his authenticity; and (iii) stereotyping. These themes can be found at all stages of the discussion, and often more than one strategy can be found within one single post. The theme 'eliminating Ertan' is most common, followed by his authenticity and the theme of stereotyping.

7.3.1 Eliminating Ertan from 'our' society

The most common type of reaction to Ertan's post is an attempt to find a way of silencing or, even literally, eliminating Ertan. Within this strategy three categories can be distinguished: (i) statements to the effect that Ertan does not belong to 'our' society; (ii) calls for the use of violence against Ertan; and (iii) discussion of the more technological possibilities for silencing him (eliminating his voice from the Net).

Twenty posts by 17 participants fall within the first category, stating that Ertan does not belong to 'our' society.¹¹ Thirteen posts (by 12 participants) ask or argue for the use of violence against him.¹² While the latter is plainly undemocratic (not to mention illegal), the first is also problematic. In the debate it is, however, seen as a legitimate argument. It seems that because Ertan is of Turkish descent, he can be 'sent back' whenever the 'real' Dutch people want him to (even though his writings suggest he was born here). The same argument is used against Murat, the boy that killed his teacher, in some letters to the editor of newspapers.¹³ He should be sent to prison, in Turkey rather than in the Netherlands. Similar suggestions are made in the debate on honour killings (discussed in Chapter 6, Section 6.5), where the suggestion was that those who want to commit honour killings should do this elsewhere, not in the Netherlands. The same exclusion mechanism of 'othering' is applied in the debate with Ertan, but in a more extreme form, as both legal rights are denied to him and violence is proposed.

Whether this is merely rhetoric used to exclude opinions and to make the author feel that s/he has fewer rights, is not clear. It is clear, however, that it plays a major role in the discussion. Ertan is not allowed to speak his mind on the subject. If he is unhappy with the situation he should just go back to Turkey. Ertan himself identifies this in his column beforehand: '[If a Muslim gives his opinion] he is censored or confronted with the question why he doesn't return to his own country, if he doesn't like it here. Holland apparently isn't our country'. Yet, this remains the reaction of most people to Ertan's post. Freedom of speech apparently has its limits and people with Ertan's ideas and mentality operate

¹⁰Judging from the names used on the websites, most participants (apart from Ertan) seem to be 'natives'.

¹¹Ten of these were posted on *nl.politiek*, seven on *Leefbaarnederland*, and three on *Fok*. This means that relatively there were more on *Leefbaarnederland*.

¹²Again, the *Leefbaarnederland* forum had relatively more posts in this category: five, against three on *nl.politiek*, and five on *Fok*.

¹³See, for instance: Metro brieven (letters), 15 January 2004, 'Laat de schutter zijn straf in land van herkomst uitzitten' (Make the killer serve his time in country of origin).

outside of these limits and thus do not belong here in 'our' society. Some participants suggest how to deal with such dissent:

There will be a time, dear Ertan, that we are going to eliminate people like you from our society. Passport or no passport, born and bred here or not. Your mentality doesn't belong here! (Arno, *nl.politiek*, 18 January 2004, 07:09)

These sort of undesirable elements should be eliminated from our society immediately. Rebelling against a society of which you are a part is not done. (indahnesia.com, *Fok*, 24 January 2004, 22:03)

Well, with these ideas they should lock you up or withdraw your passport and have you leave the country. (Cor, *Leefbaarnederland*, 19 January 2004, 13:57)

The third way of trying to silence Ertan is through depriving him of the possibility to speak on the Net. Participants discuss different technological and social steps that can be taken to exclude him from web forums and from the web in general. One participant of *nl.politiek* sent a message to the moderator of the newsgroup stating that Ertan's post is abusive, and indicating he should be excluded from the forum.¹⁴ There is no indication whether the moderators honoured this request, by either closing down the thread or by excluding him.

The other two forums, however, did close the discussion after a short period. After one day, *Leefbaarnederland* put the post of Ertan and all the replies in the 'trash' (a separate place on the forum where the thread can still be accessed but which indicates that the discussion is seen as peripheral). Ertan himself was banned from the site, as were two extreme right-wing participants, *White Angel* and *ProudtobeWhite*, whose messages did not differ much from other messages in terms of *what* was said, but rather *how* it was said. The forum administrator explained that Ertan's post was provocative, did not serve any purpose, and showed no respect for the friends and family of the deceased teacher.¹⁵ The web forum *Fok* closed the thread after one hour, stating that: 'everything has been said',¹⁶ making it impossible to further discuss Ertan's post.

Both *nl.politiek* and *Fok* discuss other ways of silencing Ertan. Some participants want to 'get his site offline',¹⁷ or predict it would be hacked soon,¹⁸ or cease to exist altogether,¹⁹ without giving any explanation or argument for such claims. Next to the abundance of silencing suggestions, a few participants (including Ertan himself) argue that Ertan only uses his right to freedom of speech, and that he is not violating any laws. As Ertan states in the *Leefbaarnederland* forum:

¹⁴Francina, *nl.politiek*, 18 January 2004, 07:12.

¹⁵Victor Reijkersz, Administrator, *Leefbaarnederland*, 20 January 2004, 16:13.

¹⁶CartWOMan (Forum Admin), *Fok*, 24 January 2004, 22:42.

¹⁷AltamirA, *Fok*, 24 January 2004, 21:55.

¹⁸Jan Peter, *nl.politiek*, 18 January 2004, 11:38.

¹⁹xstatic1975, *Fok*, 24 January 2004, 22:33.

You cannot withdraw my passport, let alone lock me up, as it is my right as a Dutchman to use my freedom of speech. (ertan.nl, *Leefbaarnederland*, 19 January 2004, 15:19)

7.3.2 Ertan's authenticity

A considerable number (18) of posts do not react to the content of the post but only talk about Ertan as an individual and whether he is real or a 'troll'²⁰ and should thus be ignored altogether. The fact that Ertan shows contempt for non-Muslims and non-Turks,²¹ has a website²² registered by S. Asuk,²³ and has expressed himself fiercely against homosexuals in the past,²⁴ suggests to the participants that Ertan is real and a Turk. The main reason people do not believe he genuinely is a Turk, is his use of the Dutch language: 'his Dutch is too good to be a Turk'.²⁵ A number of people are convinced Ertan is not who he says he is and even speculate that he is a Dutchman who wants to provoke and polarize Dutch society. Or as one participant puts it:

It seems inconceivable that the Turkish community, apart from a few nutcases, will approve of such a dirty message. It will have a huge impact, however, on Muslim haters. This causes me to suspect we are dealing here with an ancient propaganda trick, which we will often come across, especially given the possibility the Internet offers in this respect. (Henk Senster, *nl.politiek*, 18 January 2004, 17:25)

Here, one of the features of the Internet (anonymity) leads to suspicion and moreover, to (as some will argue, rightly so) ignoring some of the messages on the Internet. However, many believe that Ertan's post truly represents the ideas of a group in society, even if he is not who he says he is. Because of the discussion about his authenticity, the content of his post is not addressed as much as the 'phenomenon' that is Ertan. In this way, the possibility of having a genuine debate on the issues raised by Ertan is annulled.

7.3.3 Generalization

A number of participants 'expose' Ertan's stance as the 'true' Muslim attitude, and see it as evidence that politicians should monitor Islam.²⁶ This generalization or stereotyping reveals the feeling of superiority of the Dutch or Western beliefs and values, as the following quote shows:

²⁰A troll is someone who deliberately tries to frustrate the discussion.

²¹Bartels, *nl.politiek*, 18 January 2004, 08:01.

²²Yew Betcha, *nl.politiek*, 18 January 2004, 07:45. Even though it is interesting that some people apparently feel that if one has a website, this thus means one exists, it does not fit the scope of this thesis to further address this issue.

²³salvation, *Fok*, 24 January 2004, 22:00.

²⁴R@b, *Fok*, 24 January 2004, 21:54.

²⁵For instance: Job, *nl.politiek*, 18 January 2004, 16:55.

²⁶Cor, *Leefbaarnederland*, 19 January 2004, 13:42.

There truly is a group out there that thinks in this way, a way that is completely logical for them, namely out of a culture of honour, which we discarded after the Middle Ages. (idontlikepizza, *Fok*, 24 January 2004, 22:25)

Countering this strategy of generalization there is a considerable number of posts arguing that Ertan is *not* representative of all Muslims, Turks or immigrants. Some are a direct reaction to these posts, and question the lines of argumentation. Other messages that counter generalization plainly state that Ertan is bad for Muslims or Turks. A few examples:

I know many Turks and they condemn this deed [the murder]. With this expression of sympathy many Turks will be disgusted by you and will feel ashamed that you are of Turkish descent. (bbw/cno, *Leefbaarnederland*, 19 January 2004, 17:51)

You are ruining it for many Turks who are doing well. (Agostinho dos Santos, *Leefbaarnederland*, 19 January 2004, 23:28)

Your post is unworthy for a Turk, you are doing your brothers and sisters more harm than good with this. (Van Vliegen, *nl.politiek*, January 18 2004, 07:30)

[Ertan is] working hard to confirm prejudices. (...) They are the ones who really ruin it for their 'group' in society. (blieblie, *Fok*, 24 January 2004, 21:42)

7.4 Engagement with the 'other'

It becomes clear that the quality of the discussion leaves a lot to be desired. Table 7.1 specifies the types of expression present. One third of the posts (46) contain personal attacks, like the ones quoted below:

[Ertan is] a nutcase. (Ahimsa, *nl.politiek*, 19 January 2004, 00:41)

So piss off, asshole. (PietHein, *nl.politiek*, 18 January 2004, 07:16)

Ertan, you are a filthy Muslim. (cor, *Leefbaarnederland*, 19 January 2004, 12:40)

The second most frequent type of expression consists of reactions to others in the discussion (18 out of 141 posts), but few of these deal with the topic at hand (the murder that Murat committed, and the possible causes for it). Of the eight statements that do deal with it, only three are supported by arguments. Alternative approaches to viewing the murder committed by Murat and its causes are only provided in two messages. Information was rarely provided (in 10 posts) and hardly ever asked for (in two posts).

The discussion does not result in engagement, as alternative positions are not heard and are thus not properly included. Further, dialogue between discourses is not present, let alone the establishment of any understanding for the other. It is instead dominated by

Table 7.1: *Types of expression on web forums*

Type of expression [†]	Frequency			
	<i>Leefbaarnederland</i>	<i>nl.politiek</i>	<i>Fok</i>	<i>Total</i>
Personal attack	17	23	6	46
Reaction to others [‡]	6	10	2	18
Meta-talk about the discussion	3	5	5	13
Providing information	2	6	2	10
Statement about the issue	3	5	0	8
Argument for statement	1	2	0	3
Asking for information	0	0	2	2
Alternative approach to issue	2	0	0	2
<i>Total number of messages</i>	33	53	55	141

[†] Not every message contained one of these types of expression, and some contained more than one type of expression.

[‡] Quotations combined with related own content, or otherwise referring to previous posts.

personal attacks; none of the participants really acknowledge Ertan's position or make an effort to address it in one of the 139 reactions to his message. The closest acknowledgment of his stance is when one of the participants asks the following (after someone reported Ertan to the forum administrator for being abusive):

Why? This is a very useful contribution. We should know how people really think about Dutch society? Very useful information, and he means it, you're not prohibiting that, are you? (...) You won't hear this if you let the professional foreigners speak, affected as they are by the Dutch welfare bureaucracy. (Yew Betcha, *nl.politiek*, 18 January 2004, 07:19)

The participants disagree with Ertan's position, but no one addresses the content and substance of his arguments. There is thus neither inclusion nor engagement with his discourse. Their only concern seems to be with finding a way to eliminate him and his point of view, either directly or through doubting his authenticity and representativeness.

It could be argued that it is Ertan's position in favour of Murat that closes the door to dialogue. But this would suggest that public debate is rather limited in terms of the content that can be discussed, as well as the way that this content needs to be presented. If public debate can only take place in ways tolerated or prescribed by the dominant public, and can only portray what the dominant public allows, the limits of public debate are rather narrow and thus, the role of such debate in democracy is not optimal, and could be restricting the space of thought and discourse.

7.5 The use of alternative types of communication to establish engagement

There are various considerations of democratic debate, ranging from the view that it should follow strict criteria (such as the traditional account on deliberation discussed in Chapter 1) to the view that the most radical, unmediated and proscribed forms of debate should be included (as argued, for instance, by Mouffe (2000)). The first account has been criticised for not being inclusive of difference; however, the question remains whether radical accounts do allow for such inclusion. In Chapter 1, I argued that there is more at stake than mere inclusion or tolerance of different positions. Rather, there should be *engagement* between different discourses; people should reflect upon the content of their *own* discourse through an encounter with the other's discourse. This is what openness stands for: Not only the inclusion of all participants and positions, but discussants should also be open towards others and their positions. These different discourses should not merely coexist, but also interact. In the discussion of Ertan's support for Murat, there does not even seem to be space for the different discourses to coexist (rather, the one discourse is directed at excluding the other), let alone space for engagement. Difference functions as a polarizing force.

Theorists like Young (2000) argue that deeply divided topics need types of communication that are different from rational communication. In Chapter 1, a number of linking expressions were identified, such as narratives and greetings. With contested issues like immigration in the Netherlands, these communications may help to create understanding of the 'other'. However, in the analysed debate none of these other types of communication were present. We have Ertan's testimonial, and even though he shares some of his experiences of being an immigrant struggling in today's Dutch society, no bridging replies follow that, in one way or another, show some understanding of his position.

But how can these alternative types of communication be beneficial in public discussion on this debate? With this question in mind, I turn to a discussion on another forum that seemed to potentially bridge different discourses more than the discussions examined above. It concerns a different forum, different participants, and other factors may play a role here, but I want to use this case to explore the use of the different types of communication and the possible role they may play in a discussion.

On *Maghrebonline*,²⁷ a website set up for Dutch Moroccans but also frequented by natives, a discussion started after a demonstration by a group of adolescents at Murat's school (see Appendix C for information on the participants of this debate). They were demonstrating to show their support for the killer two days after the murder, because they felt there was too much negative information about him in the media. They used a banner stating the same as Ertan's heading: 'Murat we love you'.²⁸ The day after this demonstration, *Yesmina* started a discussion on *Maghrebonline* called 'Murat' (Friday 16 January 2004). Fifteen participants (about half of the participants appear to represent

²⁷See Chapter 3 and 4.

²⁸The original text on the banner was English.

immigrants) post 61 messages in six days, after which the discussion died out. Three participants dominate the discussion by writing over half the contributions, among them the initiator *Yesmina*. She is very outspoken about the youngsters' actions in her initial post, and writes:

I do not feel sorry for Murat and have no mercy either! He did not have mercy when he pointed the gun at that teacher!! I feel very ashamed that something like this CAN HAPPEN in the Netherlands. To applaud someone who is disturbed!! They should throw all these disturbed people in jail! And his friends go on to applaud him as if he did not commit a crime and is not responsible for a death and he deserves his punishment. To then shout on TV We love you Murat (...) as if he has done nothing wrong. (Yesmina, *Maghrebonline*, 16 January 2004, 00:18—emphasis in original)

This discussion has a similar starting point as the discussions started by Ertan and his column: There is an initial expression of support for Murat followed by strong condemnation. However, what happens in the *Maghrebonline* discussion is of a very different nature than in the discussion examined before. A dialogue develops and there seems to be engagement between different discourses. The most prominent elements in this discussion are the use of narrative, greeting and other personal addresses.

The first three messages were by *Yesmina*, the first of which is quoted above. They reveal a fierce disapproval put into strong words. The first reaction is a post in which the author tries to establish some understanding of the youngsters that were demonstrating by using narrative:

Regarding the demonstration, you should not forget they are teenagers who are trying to come to terms with what happened. Of course, it is strange to demonstrate in that way and on that place, but this you can expect from youngsters. They probably knew Murat well and considered him to be a good friend. I'm not trying to justify it, but I view it as a struggle with their own feelings. Such an experience is difficult even for adults that are involved. (HenkM, *Maghrebonline*, 16 January 04, 01:01)

This participant is trying to shed light on the experiences of the friends of Murat, and attempts to come to an understanding of their situation and their subsequent actions. The discussant furthermore acknowledges that his view is not the only view (*I view it as ...*), expecting that it will also be met with disapproval (*I'm not trying to justify it, but ...*). He tries to create an atmosphere for understanding the youngsters' actions, by linking them to their own situation and to the situation of 'adults' for whom such an experience would be equally difficult.

Others in the discussion similarly try to relate the experiences of the youngsters to their own situation. In the following example, the discussant does not try so much to identify with the youngsters, but rather with their parents:

I'm sorry henk, but I do not agree with you; if it were my children that were confronted with such a situation, I would be present and available myself for the process of dealing with it. (PeterJan, *Maghrebonline*, 16-01-04, 12:13)

This participant feels that the demonstration is not the appropriate way of dealing with their grief, and that it is important that parents are there for the young people during this difficult time. In this way, the discussant acknowledges the difficulty of the situation for the youngsters, without condemning them (as was done by *Yesmina*), pointing rather at the responsibility of the parents in this matter. He comes to this position by considering what *he* would do, if *his* children were involved. The method of personalizing the incident helps to determine one's opinion on the matter and plays an important part in understanding the other situation.

Another important element that determines the tone of the discussion is also present in this quote: personal address. Although this participant undoubtedly knows that *Henk* is not the only person reading his comment (six postings by three people precede it) and probably does not have the intention of solely addressing *Henk*, he starts his posting with 'I'm sorry henk, but I do not agree with you.' This personal address suggests that *PeterJan* has weighed *Henk's* position and only then decided he does not agree. It even suggests that it is not so much his unwillingness to agree, but that their views on the issue are different. To apologize for this disagreement suggests respect and that both views can coexist. He ends his post with 'I know that I touch upon a sensitive issue [the responsibility of immigrant parents] here, but it really disturbs me.' These types of expression soften the tone of the discussion, and make differences seem less fundamental and more easily surmountable.

Another response of *PeterJan* combines a personal address with his own experiences from his personal life and that of his family members. After being asked by *Ann* whether he knows how difficult the situation of the youngsters is on VMBO (the lowest level of Dutch secondary school), *PeterJan* replies:

No, Ann; my secondary education started at a LTS [Lower Technical School] (40 yrs ago) but was/is not comparable to what constitutes VMBO at this time. (...) What I fear (and I even notice it at home) is a hardening of natives against immigrants. My wife is working at *buro jeugdzorg* [institute for youth care] and is regularly confronted with similar situations [the terrible situation a number of Turkish families are in, according to one of the other discussants]. The shocking percentage of immigrants in their caseload and the inaccessibility/language problems are enormous. (PeterJan, *Maghrebonline*, 16 January 2004, 12:59)

All these little pieces of information, personal experiences, narratives, and efforts to empathize with others are aimed at trying to get a better grip on highly complex, contested, and emotional problems. Personal address, respect, acknowledgements and other ways of letting the other know that you have listened to their position and considered it. Such strategies soften the tone of the discussion, which started off quite harshly.

I am not denying that these forms of address could be ‘mere’ rhetoric, aimed at convincing the other of one’s own position. However, if such rhetoric is what is needed to connect people and help them consider positions and experiences different from their own, then rhetoric does more good than harm to the discussion. Neither do I wish to imply that these types of address are all that is needed in public debate, or that the differences between people or disagreements will vanish because of them. Instead, I argue that these types of communication are necessary conditions for starting an open debate on contested issues. They create a sphere in which people feel respected and comfortable enough to open up to other (and ‘foreign’) positions and are not reserved for sharing their own personal experience and opinions. Sharing personal experiences or other narratives may prove to be a prerequisite for understanding.

In the second part of the discussion, it becomes clear that such a bridging of discourses can be very fragile. The discussion turns from an open discussion into a debate in which personal attacks and off-topic contributions have free play. In the 21st post, *Jena* starts to rant against one of the other participants, whom she accuses of being a Jew hater. While many of the contributions before this first personal attack deal with the actual topic (see Table 7.2), only three out of 41 posts deal with the topic after *Jena*’s posting. Even though there are still quite a number of reactions to other posts, the discussion loses its contextual direction and focus.

Table 7.2: *Types of expression on Maghrebonline*

Type of expression	Frequency		<i>Total</i>
	Before first personal attack	After first personal attack	
Reaction to others	13	13	26
Statement about issue	13	3	16
Alternative approach to issue	12	2	14
Argument for statement	9	3	12
Providing information	6	5	11
Personal attack	0	6	6
Asking for information	2	2	4
Meta-talk about the discussion	1	1	2
<i>Total number of messages</i>	20	41	61

Before this particular post of *Jena*, nine out of 20 posts provide arguments for their statements; after, only three out of 41 provide arguments. Also, the amount of information asked for and provided decreases rapidly. But most importantly, whereas in the first phase of the discussion participants genuinely present alternative ways of viewing the matter (12 out of 20 posts), these are no longer provided in the second phase (only in two out

of 40 posts). Thus, where the discussion started to facilitate some understanding of the different positions, after a specific flaming the course of the discussion changes. At this point, the participants who contributed to the debate in the first phase with their personal experiences do not return to the discussion.

7.6 Conclusion

This second case study examined what happens when the voice of a counter public enters the main public discourse. Even though Ertan constitutes an alternative or radical voice online, it does not seem that he was successful in opening up the discussion on immigration and integration. No dialogue came about on the basis of his column. Instead, the participants were unanimous in trying to find ways to exclude him. They do so, not by addressing the content of the message, but rather by trying, in one way or another, to 'eliminate' his voice. Neither Ertan as a participant nor the content of his post is acknowledged by the other participants. This means that even though the discussion platform initially allows for inclusion of Ertan's voice, the participants are not open. Thus, there is only external inclusion (Ertan has access to the debate) but no internal inclusion (he does not have an equal position in the debate); others do not grant him equal status and capacity to effectively influence the debate (see for the distinction: Young, 2000). As a result, there can be no engagement between the positions, as he only has formal, not meaningful, access to the debate. Also, no understanding for the other comes about, as the debate and its participants are lacking in openness.

Thus, the technology may allow for Ertan to have a voice in the public domain, but what happens with this voice depends on the other 'inhabitants' of this space. Ertan's emotional appeal is perhaps bound to attract strong reactions, but did the discussants try hard enough to remain open to it? If one wants to listen to an alternative voice, there is enough in Ertan's message to deal with in a serious manner. But if one cuts oneself off from the other, there is likewise material in the post to foreclose any serious discussion.

What happens when people are open towards each other and seek to bridge existing differences? To examine this, I analysed a discussion on *Maghrebonline* that features alternative positions. Here, strong contributions were present, as in the Ertan discussions. However, a few participants were open to 'connect' to the other, and tried to understand the other's position. They tried to establish understanding between different perspectives in different ways. These discussants determined the tone of the debate (and softened it) by acknowledging the other discussants, particularly those with whom they disagreed. The debate featured inclusion of difference, engagement between different positions, and through the dialogue some level of understanding was seemingly established.

This case shows the role that greeting plays in debates on contested issues. Particularly in an environment where participants cannot see one another, such greetings have an important function. They show that someone has acknowledged the other's presence, hereby showing that s/he has taken the post seriously. This acknowledgement of presence is even more important because the discussions often do not take place synchronously.

As such, greetings can provide for some sort of continuity in a space where this may otherwise feel unnatural; greetings may help to establish a feeling for the discussion. One only exists for the others in the debate when s/he contributes through posting. When someone acknowledges the other and considers his/her post, this also tells one s/he is willing to discuss it with you. Greetings from the other thus grant the other a voice in the debate. In the examined debate, apologizing for disagreeing with the other also brought this about. This shows at least a willingness to agree, and thus that the specific discussant is not unwilling to relate to the other's perspective.

Next to greeting, the sharing of personal experiences and connections to one's everyday life were also very important in connecting with the other. These testimonials and narratives allow for an understanding between different perspectives. It became clear how these function in the discussion of an emotional and contested issue. It allowed for connection between different discourses, and allowed for engagement. Thus, breaking with the dispassionate and rational discourse advocated in Chapter 1, in this case, helped the discussion. However, this case also showed that openness of the debate is very fragile. The greetings created an open atmosphere in which participants felt free to share personal stories. But even though participants can work hard to create this comfortable atmosphere, others can always come and 'crash the party'.

Greetings and other types of communication determining the tone of debate thus form an important part of the discussion. The question is to what extent these types of expression would have been helpful in the other three analysed debates. In these debates it was more a direct reaction to the one proclaiming support rather than about the youngsters whose actions were reported on in the news. It may be that this was an important aspect in the debate. The *Fok* discussion, however, was also an indirect reaction, as Ertan himself did not initiate or participate in the debate. Here, the discussion was as heated and discarding as the other debates were. Another difference was in the age of those proclaiming support for Murat; In the case of Ertan it concerns an adult, whereas the others were adolescents, and in addition were directly involved, being friends of Murat. We see that discussants trying to establish understanding take on a pedagogical tone in their messages. The fact that the youngsters are not attributed full responsibility may be an explanatory factor for the established level of understanding. However, the way in which this was done still points to the importance, or necessity of, openness in the debate and discussants, as well as to the way in which it was established through the use of narrative, greetings, and testimonials. Whether this openness and these types of expression would have been sufficient in the Ertan debate remains speculative, but their role in the *Maghrebonline* discussion is clear.

Conclusions

Online discussion spaces do not necessarily produce an open exchange of views on the controversial issue of immigration, contrary to the expectations of many commentators and users who regard those spaces as fulfilling an ideal of ‘openness’. Instead, many of the earlier-analysed online discussions on immigration are not inclusive of difference and diversity; and, in some cases, participants in online discussions are even hostile to alternative voices.

The Internet is said to provide the ideal space for open and democratic discussion by many academics (see Chapter 2 for an overview of the literature) for two reasons: (i) the *unbounded space for interaction* and (ii) the *anonymity of interaction*. The Internet enables many-to-many communication while bridging time and space thus allowing thousands of people to be engaged in a single discussion. The low social and economic costs of publishing and the ease with which people can find both an audience of like-minded people as well as one with different opinions, create great optimism regarding the Internet’s potential. The Internet could facilitate not only the participation of *more* people, but also of a more *heterogeneous* group of people. Moreover, interactions can take place anonymously, allowing people to discuss with others without divulging their identity. This should create a more comfortable environment for discussion. Also, because of its anonymity, the Internet is often seen as providing the means to overcome inequality in discussions.

In this thesis I have examined these claims focusing on the debate in the Netherlands on the contested issue of immigration. This issue has been heavily debated in the last decade and it has led to a polarization of Dutch society, with little meaningful dialogue between different groups in society. Opinions diverge substantially, making open discussion all the more important. The research question examined in this thesis is: *To what extent is the public debate on Dutch web forums on the issue of immigration open to different voices and how do these different voices interact in this online debate?*

I have shown that discussions about immigration on popular Dutch web forums provide very little diversity in terms of who is represented. Moreover, even though users often perceive web forums as open, the actual discussions on them are actually not so open, according to various aspects of openness, as specified below. Furthermore, it be-

comes apparent that when different voices *are* represented, most of the discourse is aimed at eliminating the alternative voice rather than incorporating it into the discussion. In this final chapter, I will expand this conclusion by re-visiting the theoretical framework introduced in Chapters 1 and 2 in light of the empirical findings presented in Chapters 4–7. I will discuss the implications that the empirical results have for the role of public discussion in democracy as well as for the role of web forums in debates about contested issues.

The question of openness

The traditional account of deliberative democracy (Chapter 1, Section 1.2) concentrates on public discussion in society and views the ideal discussion as an inclusive and equal exchange of opinions and arguments. Here, people do not think in terms of their own interests, but let the better argument prevail. Deliberation in this view is needed to allow for a rational process of public opinion formation and to thereby reach consensus, the common good and legitimate decisions in society (Bohman, 1998). The space in which this deliberation takes place is the public sphere—the arena where societal problems are identified and preferences regarding solutions for these problems are developed. But though this account aims at inclusion for all, it has been criticized for not being inclusive of difference, due to its favouring of rational communication. Marginalized voices run the risk of being excluded from the public debate because this definition of deliberation requires the suppression of differences in ways of speaking and addressing public matters.

The focus in this thesis has been on the openness of public debate in a multicultural society in general, and to alternative or marginalized voices in particular. In Chapter 1, I discussed an account of the public sphere that—in reaction to the shortcomings of the traditional account of deliberation—focuses on the inclusion of these alternative voices: *the theory of counter publics*. A counter public recognizes exclusion and attempts to overcome it by forming an alternative public through discursive practices (Asen, 2000). Counter public theory shows how alternative public discourse is articulated in response to the exclusion of specific interests in the wider public sphere. What is important is that this articulation of alternative discourse does not aim at withdrawing completely from the wider public sphere, but rather at challenging the discourse in this sphere. I have argued that counter public theory is lacking in the sense that it fails to explain and theorize the interaction between dominant publics and counter publics. Viewing counter publics and dominant publics as parallel spheres is problematic because it leaves no space for interaction between these publics. For it to be meaningful, the most important aspect of public debate in polarized societies is that the different discourses of these publics interact. Only this interaction will allow engagement and understanding between these different publics.

Based on theories focusing on the inclusion of difference in democracy, I argued that there is one main requirement for such interaction to come about: *openness* of the discussion. This openness has two key elements: (i) openness in terms of the inclusion of different participants, positions, and types of communication, and (ii) openness of partic-

ipants towards these different types of participants, positions and communication. Only when these two are combined may the debate transcend the stage in which these positions, participants and discourses merely coexist. The aim of open public discussion is neither the coexistence nor the simple clash of different discourses, but rather the *engagement* between them, a reflection upon one's own discourse in light of the other's discourse. Engagement between discourses must ultimately result in the discussants *understanding* each other's positions.

To examine whether the elements of openness can be found in public discussions in a polarized society, I analysed online debates on immigration in the Netherlands. Immigration is a contested issue in Dutch society and features differences that are perceived to be insurmountable. It becomes relevant to see to what extent openness of the debate can be found in such a context. I focused furthermore on a specific type of online communication, namely web forums. These web forums can be seen as providing a space for public discussion on political issues, enabling democratic discussion that is inclusive of difference.

In Chapter 2 (Section 2.2) I have provided an overview of claims pertaining to the Internet's potential for democratic debate. An important point that needs to be addressed here is that *the* Internet does not exist, contrary to what much of this literature seems to suggest. Different technologies and different user contexts may produce different experiences of Internet communication (Thomas & Wyatt, 1999: 694). Moreover, neither the Internet in general nor the specific types of online communication, such as web forums, *inherently* produces one particular type of communication, whether open and democratic debate, heated, fragmented, or nonsensical debate. The different types of online communication may allow for certain types of interaction that meet the ideal of democratic debate to a greater or lesser extent, but it is the users who must employ Internet communication with *that* purpose and in *those* specific ways. So, even though online communication may have certain features that allow for a more open debate than other platforms do, the actual openness of the space depends on the way in which users of these spaces view and employ these spaces.

To examine empirically the actual openness of online debates on immigration, four sub-questions were formulated, which were each answered in a separate study reported on in Chapters 4–7:

- i) *How are web forums organized and in what way does this facilitate or hinder the openness of the debate?*
- ii) *To what extent do participants of online discussions view and use web forums as an open and inclusive platform specifically with regard to the discussion of immigration and integration?*
- iii) *To what extent are different actors and viewpoints included in online discussions on immigration and integration and how does this compare to the representation in newspapers?*
- iv) *How do different voices interact online when alternative voices are present(ed) in the debate and to what extent is this interaction open and inclusive?*

Online openness examined

These four sub-questions are respectively answered in Chapters 4 to 7. The first two chapters examine the possibilities and limitations of web forums to allow for an open debate. They pertain to the structural openness of web forums (how are they regulated, which concerns the first criterion of openness: Who is included and who is excluded in the debate) and the attitude and behaviour of the users (the second criterion of openness: Are the participants themselves open towards difference). The second two questions are examined through case studies, which look at the extent to which the criteria of openness are met, and whether this also results into engagement and understanding.

Structural openness

To answer the question of the structural openness of web forums, I analysed the rules and moderation, as well as users' reactions to them, of seven popular Dutch web forums: *Fok*, *Maghrebonline*, *Maroc*, *Nieuwrechts*, *Politiekdebat*, *Terdiscussie* and *Weerwoord* (Chapter 4). I conducted a discourse analysis identifying themes in the rules of web forums and examined the ways these rules were upheld by moderators. Examining the netiquette of these forums, I found that, in general, web forums aim to provide an open space for discussion.

I distinguished two types of platforms that each aim at a different type of openness of the web forums: (i) general platforms aiming to provide an open space for all; and (ii) platforms that resemble counter publics, aiming to provide openness for a specific group. The moderators of both of these platforms consider themselves more open than traditional media: The first because it allows for more types of expression and different content than these media, the second because it focuses on providing a space for groups that are denied access to traditional media. Moreover, the rules of the counter public forums aim to protect members of the in-group from being harmed. They enhance openness for the in-group by excluding certain expressions of the out-group. On general platforms, rules aim to protect all its users from harm.

Thus, both types of forums have rules that exclude certain forms of communication. The question is whether such exclusions open up or rather close off the discussion. For some types of prohibited communication, such as flaming and discrimination, these exclusions open up the discussion (either by attracting more participants to the discussion or by making the participants better disposed towards each other). It is, for instance, difficult to envisage how flaming could help to open up the discussion. The same could be said for the rule on discrimination. It can be argued that the right to equal treatment should prevail over freedom of expression and over inclusion of all types of positions and communications.

Even though the netiquette is not formulated to rigidly determine how participants should behave and web forums are generally aimed at openness, the rules do determine to a large extent the boundaries of expression for discussants. In web forums, moderators uphold the rules, and thus have the power to create the boundaries of the space.

This enforcement involves different types of power: power *over* and *in* communication, which can be both direct and indirect. Moderators have power *over* communication in the sense that they can decide to exclude certain participants and/or texts. In addition, their role gives them power *in* communication, as they can influence the actual content of the debate. This influence is not only based on their capacity to exclude participants and texts (direct power) mentioned above, but also on their symbolic power in participating in the discussions (a more indirect form of power). Moderators were found to be highly active participants in the debates, and thus affected the content of debate, not only directly by their own contributions but also by influencing the writing of other participants through these contributions. These two types of power—*over* and *in* communication—may produce a third type. Moderators may induce (whether intentionally or not) the self-constraint of participants, causing them to alter or withdraw their contributions.

Given the extent of power, the transparency of moderators' decisions becomes very important. Transparency helps to determine whether these exclusions enable or rather foreclose engagement between different discourses. In the forums that were examined in this thesis, transparency leaves a lot to be desired: Little information is provided about who the moderators are, how they are appointed, and how they make their decisions. Furthermore, there are few possibilities for users to appeal against the appointments and decisions. Whether this necessarily influences participation in web forums is not clear, but it is apparent from users' comments that they at times feel they are treated unfairly and are (unjustly) excluded from the debate. The actions of the moderators may thus create a type of atmosphere in which some people feel more comfortable voicing their opinions than others. This might limit the possibility of different discourses interacting in a certain space (and hence the possibilities for engagement between them).

Some form of participant moderation may open up the space. Users view the forums as open spaces and more importantly as *public* spaces. In this they seem to differ from forum moderators. Even though the latter also consider the forum to be an open space, they at the same time consider the forum to be a private space to which users are merely granted conditional access.

Perceived openness

In Chapter 5, the question of the users' perspective on openness was examined through an online questionnaire. Respondents were recruited through web forums. They were mainly young, highly educated males who are politically active. It was established that these users view web forums as open platforms for discussion concerning the opinions expressed on the forums. They mainly wish to exchange ideas and encounter different opinions, and they attach much value to diversity of opinions. They indicate that they also find this diversity when discussing immigration online. In keeping with the expectations of a number of scholars regarding online discussion spaces (Chapter 2), the forum participants perceive the Internet to be a space where people can easily voice their opinions. They do not only consider the forum in which they discuss to be open, but in addition they regard the Internet as more open to difference than traditional media.

Since diversity is important, participants focus on the Internet's potential to encounter difference rather than to find like-minded people and to form counter publics. This finding is contrary to what many scholars expected, who anticipated people to seek confirmation rather than challenging of their viewpoints online. But for the users examined, confrontation with other discourses is seen as more important than seeking confirmation of one's own viewpoint. However, most of the respondents in this sample are active on web forums that do not have a specific focus, either in topic or affiliation. The majority of the visited web forums are general discussion forums with a diverse public. It could well be that the participants who appreciate finding like-minded others attend web forums with a specific focus and audience. The survey indeed showed that the participants of web forums that have a specific political affiliation, (ethnic) target group, or topic, value finding like-minded individuals more than the participants of general discussion forums. There was, however, only a slight difference. On the other hand, these participants deemed encountering a diversity of opinions just as important as did the participants on general discussion forums. Furthermore, there is no difference regarding web forum openness: Specific forums that could be regarded as counter publics were considered as open as general forums. Compared to traditional media, however, the openness of web forums was deemed slightly higher by the participants of specific forums than by those of general forums. Apparently, the participants of forums that resemble counter publics regard the online spaces as being more inclusive than the participants of general forums do. This is a difference in degree, however, not in nature.

The question that arises is whether participants are open enough towards alternative positions to engage with them rather than simply having different positions coexist with their own. It is difficult to deduce this type of information from the attitudes of the participants, but answers to one survey question suggest that this engagement does not really occur; participants only rarely change their opinion as a result of the discussion. So, the question becomes, to what extent diversity actually informs the online debate. To examine whether openness can be found on web forums and how people deal with diversity, I conducted two case studies. These case studies looked at the openness in terms of representation comparing online and offline discussions, and the inclusion of and interaction with alternative voices (the third and fourth sub-questions, respectively).

Openness and inclusion represented

Openness of a discussion ideally leads to inclusion of different types of participants and positions in a debate. If an online discussion is more open than an offline discussion, one expects to find more types of participants and positions represented on that former platform. In Chapter 6, I examined the representation of actors and positions in a public debate. The issue chosen for the first case study was that of honour killings in the Netherlands. To examine whether the online debate is open and whether this debate is more inclusive of difference than the offline debate, the representation of participants and viewpoints online were compared with those in newspapers. Aside from the dominance of the political elite in the newspaper debate, and even though there are more postings

and participants online, I found that the newspaper debate is more inclusive than the online debate. A more diverse public participates in the discussion offline: Women and immigrants are better represented. This seems to conflict with the expectations of online debates.

But to what extent does this representation influence the content of the debates? Does a greater diversity of participants mean a greater diversity of positions? This was not the case in this particular debate. Even though there is little diversity in terms of participants online, more information is provided, more positions are considered, and alternative solutions to the problem are discussed. In the newspapers, almost no positions are discussed at all, very little information is provided, and as a result, the content of the debate is meagre. *More* positions are represented online but *less* diversity is shown in participants. Does this make the online discussion less or more open than the newspaper debate?

It is clear that access to online discussions, though dependent on Internet availability, is easier than access to the newspaper debate. Accordingly, more citizens are represented online. For those who do not have contacts at newspapers, of course, it is difficult to access this platform. However, even though online access may be easier and more diverse positions may be addressed in the discussion, no real alternative position is expressed: There is no support for honour killings, and even more 'nuanced' positions could not be found in the debates. In this case neither engagement nor understanding can be established for the 'other'. His/her position is not voiced (even though speculated upon by those present in the debate). In this way fear, frustrations, and prejudices about the other remain unresolved and unchallenged.

We need to think about whether there would have been space for an alternative discourse to enter the debate. Even though formally the alternative voice may have had access, the dominant discourse may have created such an environment that alternative discourses were not presented or maybe even not envisaged; people self-censored. Thus, there may not have been external exclusion of participants (power *over* communication: no participants that we know of have been formally excluded from the online debate), but the discourse may have (intentionally or unintentionally) prevented the 'other' from entering the debate with an alternative position.

Furthermore, the discursive exclusions show how the 'other' is not considered to be a Dutch citizen with the power to determine what is and what is not Dutch. This denial of citizenship not only pertains to actual perpetrators of honour killings but also seems to include immigrants and Muslims in general. This denial of a basic right of citizenship seems to foreclose any engagement from occurring, but it remains uncertain how the debate would have transpired had such alternative voices been present.

Openness to counter discourse

The second case study examined what happens when an alternative voice does enter the main public discourse (Chapter 7). Ertan.nl, a web logger, has actively sought to present an alternative view on immigration and integration. He not only seeks to address possible members or supporters of his 'counter public' but also tries to represent his ideas in other

spaces and address the dominant public, the out-group. As such—aiming to provide an alternative position, while at the same time aiming to address the dominant public—Ertan can be considered a good example of a (member of a) counter public. I examined the openness towards him and the possibility for engagement between him and the members of the dominant public by looking at three discussions, which were initiated by a proclamation of support by Ertan for a youngster of Turkish descent who shot and killed his teacher at a secondary school.

This proclamation of support led to strong reactions in the online discussions. The participants of the discussions in which this proclamation was published all sought to counter Ertan. They do so not by addressing the content of the message but rather by trying, in one way or another, to eliminate his voice, and in some cases advocating even his physical elimination or removal from Dutch society. Neither Ertan as a participant nor the content of his post is acknowledged by the other participants, and in two cases the discussions were closed (one within the hour, the other after 26 hours). Even though the discussion platform allows for inclusion of Ertan's voice, the participants are not open to his view. Thus, whilst the technology may allow for Ertan to have a voice in the public domain, what happens with this voice depends on the other 'inhabitants' of the space. The question is if Ertan's emotional appeal is perhaps bound to attract strong reactions, or whether the discussants did not try hard enough to be open to it. Most likely both of these features contribute to the countering of Ertan. If one wants to listen to an alternative voice, there was enough substance in Ertan's message to deal with it in a serious manner. But if participants prefer to cut themselves off from the other, there was also enough material in the post to foreclose any serious discussion.

But what happens when people *are* open towards each other and seek to bridge existing or perceived differences? To address this question, I analysed a discussion that also began with a proclamation of support for the boy who shot his teacher. In this discussion, alternative positions and extreme contributions were also present, but a few participants were open to 'connect' to the other and tried to understand his/her position. They attempted to establish this understanding in different ways. These discussants determined the tone of the debate (and softened it) by acknowledging the presence of the other discussants, particularly those with whom they disagreed.

This case exemplifies the role that style plays in debates on contested issues. Particularly in an environment where participants cannot physically see one another, greetings have an important function for openness. This may help to establish a feeling for the discussion and they can provide some sort of continuity in a space where this may otherwise feel unnatural. When someone acknowledges the other and considers his/her post, this also conveys that s/he is willing to discuss it. Greetings thus grant a voice. In the examined debate, apologizing for disagreeing with the other also brought this about. This shows at least willingness to agree, and thus that the specific discussant is not unwilling to relate to the other's perspective.

Next to greeting and apologizing, the sharing of personal experiences and references to one's everyday life were also very important in connecting with the other. These testimonials and narratives allow for understanding between different perspectives. In the case

study, it became clear how these function in the discussion of an emotional and contested issue. It allowed for a connection between different discourses to be established, and thus for the possibility of engagement. However, this case also showed that openness in the debate is very fragile. The greetings created an open atmosphere between people in which participants felt free to share personal stories. But it was short lived, as even though participants can work hard to create this comfortable atmosphere, others can always 'crash the party'.

The openness of online debate on contested issues

Let me return to the central question: *To what extent is public debate on Dutch web forums on the issue of immigration open to different voices and how do these different voices interact in this online debate?* I found that even though both the users and the moderators of web forums claim that the forums are open, there is little diversity of voices to be found. Moreover, when this diversity *is* present, the discourse in the discussion seems to focus on eliminating it. The research also suggests an important role for alternative styles of communication to the rational detached mode of communication. Does this conclusion pertain to online debate in general, or does this finding relate directly to the 'contestedness' of the topic of immigration?

The research shows that alternative voices are excluded in several ways, some more overtly than others. A very explicit use of power to exclude the alternative voice is to seek its elimination from the debate or even from society. Participants may ask for violence against an alternative voice, for the actor's imprisonment, or 'deportation'. The latter involves an even more invasive way of using power to exclude people: the denying of (elements of) citizenship and thus of rights such as participation in debate, on the basis of descent. A major part of the discussion on immigration deals with 'Dutchness': Who is viewed as a Dutch citizen? This very much determines who is allowed access to public debate and who is given a stake in the discourse on immigration and integration.

There appears to be a strong definition of what is Dutch when determining which issues are 'Dutch' and should thus determine public discourse (and follow or precede on the political and media agenda). The honour killing case and the Ertan case show that what is 'foreign' to 'the Dutch' is not supposed to be on the public or political agenda; the Dutch do not have to deal with it. Moreover, as in the public discourse, when the 'other' (in this case immigrants and Muslims) is not viewed as Dutch, s/he has a difficult time trying to enter and being heard in the debate, let alone influencing it. The debate is *about* the other but not *with* him/her. In the debate on honour killings, I came to the conclusion that there are no real alternative positions, and that there actually is no space for what some consider as an extreme voice. The discourse was so homogenous in terms of banning honour killings that people may have refrained from entering the debate in the first place. The debate was also so concentrated on the non-Dutchness of the act of honour killings, that some people were excluded from it *a priori*.

We see that openness to difference is limited in online debates and that voices are

excluded from entering the dominant discourse in several ways. The question remains whether this type of exclusion depends on the issue at stake. After all, many of the exclusions are centred or based on questions of social and national identity. Would we find such exclusions on less contested issues?

The research cannot give an answer to this, but I would argue that we could expect more exclusion in the debate on contested issues than in those on non- (or less) contested issues. Precisely the fact that an issue is deemed contested points at the (perceived) differences between positions and the emotions involved in the issue. This emotional status and distance between participants will make it difficult for people to engage and relate to one another. It will make people more prone to clash and deny each other certain rights, such as equal standing in the debate. In addition, the need for alternative styles of expression that I have identified applies more to such cases than to less contested issues.

The conclusions regarding the process of the debate, the exclusions and possible solutions may thus not be readily translated to non-contested issues. But can they be translated to contested issues other than those connected to immigration? I expect them to do so, at least to a certain extent. The nature of contested issues, with high stakes and social distance, would induce a certain amount of exclusion. In other cases, this exclusion may involve the construction of a different 'other' who is denied a stake in the debate. That is generally dependent on the social, political and general cultural context. This study took place during a socially and politically 'turbulent' time in the Netherlands, with polarization and a harsh tone dominating the debate, especially related to immigration.¹ The need for alternative types of communication, such as greetings, testimonials and narratives may have been crucial in this case. However, I believe that generally speaking, when strong emotions and stark differences are present, these alternative types of expression are necessary to soften the tone, and make people more prone to open up and listen. It is this pivotal quality of participants in debates—the ability to listen—that is lacking in both practice of and in the theory on public debate (Bickford, 1996). Further research should give us insight into these and related matters, not only regarding other contested issues, but also with regard to the specific issue of immigration in other national contexts.

Criteria for public discussion

The traditional account of deliberative democracy (referring to an open and equal exchange of opinions and rational arguments leading to consensus) has been criticized, and in my discussion of it, I have focused on the criticism pertaining to difference. In particular, the following five elements were addressed: inclusion, rationality, impartiality, intersubjectivity, and consensus. The discussion of these elements, and the critique on them—the ways in which they impede full inclusion of difference and disagreement in plural societies, rather than fostering it—was mainly theoretical: how they may *a priori* exclude alternative ways of expression and alternative voices. The research that was con-

¹Note that many issues were framed as immigration issues, like the honour killings and the murder of the teacher, even though they do not necessarily have to be framed in such terms.

ducted in this thesis allows for the empirical establishment of how these elements foreclose difference in public debate on a contested issue in a plural society.

Regarding *inclusion*, I have argued that the strict requirements for communication as set by traditional deliberative democracy theorists, limit public discussion and possibly exclude certain voices as well as suppress difference. With Asen (1999) I argued that this exclusion can come about in three ways: through styles, topics and by forums. In the thesis I have shown that, by favouring some types of communication over others (as the traditional account does) certain voices are excluded from debate. We see that some powerful actors in the online debate to a large extent determine what is accepted in this space. First of all, the forums themselves controlled (whether directly or indirectly) the styles and topics of communication. The netiquette and decisions of moderators to ban participants or delete certain posts limits the range of topics addressed and the ways in which people communicate. In the case of Ertan, we saw that one forum banned Ertan, thus suppressing this alternative voice, and two forums closed the discussion after a short while, thereby closing off the possibility of discussing this particular topic. In addition to forum management there was a second force determining the tone and content of discussion: the dominant discourse. The dominant discourse can influence the participants to withdraw or comply, influence moderators to take action, and/or ignore the alternative voice in such a way that s/he has no influence in the debate, even though s/he has access to it.

This also shows where the danger lies in preferring *rationality* and one type of communication in the public sphere. Rationality refers to the requirement for citizens to be open to counterarguments and to provide reasons for their opinions and convictions; information and dialogue have to be processed rationally. The cases analysed here showed clearly how certain types of expression and opinions were not tolerated in the public debate. In this way, the dominant public limits the range of expressions accepted in the online public sphere, even though in the survey the participants of online discussions maintained they are seeking difference online. The voice expressing an alternative position is considered 'irrational' and is thus not taken seriously or ignored altogether in the public debate. What is more, at times means are sought to eliminate it.

The cases examined here further demonstrate the difficulty with *impartiality* and *intersubjectivity* when people are divided over an issue. In the traditional account, deliberation asks its citizens to transcend their private interests and viewpoints for the sake of the common good. First, we see that the needs and desires of participants are very much entwined with political positions and that these need to be attended to first in order to make a meaningful contribution. Specifically when coming from a subordinated position, these needs and desires need to be addressed from a subjective standing. This will also help to create understanding, as I will argue below. The difference that exists between the dominant and the alternative public further makes intersubjectivity—coming to shared ways of thinking about social problems—very difficult, as the cognitive and moral frameworks are not sufficiently similar on the issues examined in this thesis. The cases show that ways of speaking and understanding differ and that intersubjectivity was difficult, if not impossible, to reach.

This brings us to the final point of concern with traditional deliberative democracy

theory as addressed in Chapter 1: the aim of *consensus*, or one shared idea of the best outcome. The idea of consensus presumes that through deliberation, participants come to one position that is preferred over others by letting the better argument prevail. If the aim of the discussions examined here were consensus, then in both the honour killing debate and in the Ertan case the consensus would be one in which the alternative discourse is not incorporated. In the case of the honour killing debate, it is not incorporated because it is not expressed at all, and in the Ertan case it is not incorporated because it is considered irrational and ignored as a genuine position.

In Chapter 1, I argued that a model of public sphere and public discussion needed to be developed that values difference instead of suppressing it. However, as Asen (1999) states, in such an account the public discussion still needs to be held within a framework that is shared enough so that questions of fairness and justice may be addressed by participants themselves. In divided societies it is exactly this framework that may be lacking. Alternative types of expression to the rational discourse may help to create such a framework. An alternative account of deliberative democracy was developed in this thesis, in which discussion is viewed as the method to democratically deal with differences between discourses. Deliberation involves a discussion that: (i) is equally *open* to all participants and viewpoints; (ii) in which participants are open towards each other's positions, involving *recognition* and consideration of these; and that results in (iii) *engagement* between different discourses; (iv) and in *understanding* for the other and his/her position.

This alternative conception of the role of public discussion as suggested in Chapter 1 is much more modest in its aims, though at the same time, more demanding for its participants. The aim of public discussion is to come to an understanding for the other through engagement between different discourses, rather than consensus. The cases analysed show that for this to come about, a certain level of openness is needed towards the positions and ways of communication of the other. And, as the *Maghrebonline* case shows (Chapter 7), participants have to breach the traditional public sphere rule of rationality and dispassionate expression, as other types of expression are needed to be able to reach some level of understanding in light of the vast difference between participants and their discourse. Leaving behind the detached mode of communication may thus actually be necessary to foster understanding, or at least make differences seem less insurmountable. Greetings and other public acknowledgements as well as rhetoric and the sharing of personal experiences through narratives are helpful, and may even be necessary to soften the tone of the debate and to create an atmosphere in which people are more inclined to open up towards the other and their beliefs, opinions and arguments, even though they are different from their own.

Internet and public debate

The last question I want to address here is that of the implications of the findings for the Internet's potential for public debate. What kind of contribution can online discussions make to the larger public sphere, specifically in light of the aim of inclusion of marginal

groups or alternative voices? Of course, we need to keep in mind that the main focus of study in this thesis was web forums, and not other types of Internet spaces. Whether or not there are differences between web forums and other types of online discussions regarding their openness to difference remains a topic for investigation. Also, I have concentrated on seven popular Dutch web forums that, though the sample includes both general as well as specialised forums, may be different in its potential for openness than smaller forums. Having said this, I still want to make some general comments on the Internet's potential for open public debate.

The finding that some actors seek to exclude alternative voices from the general discussion forums seems to suggest that the Internet's main potential lies in the possibility it offers in the formation of so-called counter publics. In such online counter publics, groups could focus on discussions among themselves, and be protected from the out-group, or the wider public sphere. As I introduced in Chapter 2, several theorists consider this possibility to be the main contribution of the Internet. There are two problems with this argument. One, can the Internet offer such spaces when the 'dominant' discourse does not want them to exist? In this thesis I have shown that—though in theory, everyone is free to contribute to the online discourse—not only does it remain difficult for alternative voices to enter the dominant discourse online, but even the mere existence of alternative voices is threatened online. Even though there are oceans of space online for alternative voices, the tolerance for these voices does not necessarily equal this space. The case of Ertan is exemplary of the difficulty that alternative voices face; he exists as a mere insular space separate from the dominant discourse, as his web presence is constantly being threatened. Even though the Internet may offer virtually unlimited space, admission to enter that space is limited.

We have furthermore seen that it may prove difficult to create a genuine 'insular' space resembling a counter public. Online, it is very difficult to 'keep out' members of the out-group. *Maghrebonline*, for instance, is to an increasing extent populated by 'native' Dutch rather than first and second-generation immigrants of Moroccan descent (the main target group). Though several rules are formulated to protect the in-group, it resembles less and less a counter public in the sense of a homogenous emancipatory public. I mention this example to show that the Internet's potential to form counter publics should not be taken for granted. However, this is not necessarily negative, since interaction between discourses should be the point of departure.

This brings us to the second problem with viewing the Internet's potential mainly in terms of forming these separate spaces. Next to the practical limitations, it leaves us with the problem of interaction between discourses on a theoretical level. Engagement can only come about when people encounter each other. Focusing on the technological potential to form insular publics does not bring about such encounters. So, do web forum discussions allow for meaningful interaction? And does encountering them also result in engagement?

In this thesis I have argued that whether or not different voices come together online depends on the openness of the discussants to each other. Whether or not engagement comes about when different discourses are present in the online discussion is determined by the participants. The Internet does provide for both the space and infrastructure to let different discourses engage. Moreover, if people do want to encounter difference, and are

open to it, the Internet holds many possibilities. Offline it may be difficult for people to find others with a different background and with different perspectives. Online, difference is not so difficult to find. In this respect it is promising that the general discussion forums, rather than the specific forums, seem to be the most popular, that 'natives' go to Moroccan websites, and that people like Ertan seek to voice their opinion on general forums. The focus of users on diversity of web forums also bodes well in this respect.

One should keep in mind, though, that *encountering* the other is not sufficient; not only openness to difference is needed, but the discussion also needs openness of the participants towards each other. This is not inherent to the technology of the Internet. The transformation has to be made by people themselves. Particularly on contested topics like immigration in polarized societies, such transformations are difficult. To this end, I have addressed the role of alternative styles of communication, such as greetings, narratives, and testimonials. When these are included in the debate they soften the tone of the discussion, and as such make differences seem less insurmountable. These types of expression rather than rational communication may be able to establish the necessary bridge between different discourses in society, though it remains up to the people to cross it. If people are indifferent or even hostile towards difference, full inclusion and understanding will not come about.

A.1 Sampling

The survey was conducted using the ASCoR-survey tool and published on a university domain. Respondents were recruited by posting an online request to participate in the survey. As is often claimed, generalizing from Internet samples is problematic (for issues of sampling in online studies see, for instance, Hewson et al., 2003); Internet users are not representative for members of Dutch society at large, and the sample of Internet users participating in the questionnaire are not necessarily representative of all participants of large Dutch web forums. There is no information on who participates on these forums and thus it is impossible to compare the sample of respondents that filled out the questionnaire with the larger population. Even though this limits the extent to which the conclusions can be generalized, the motives of users to discuss online and their evaluation of such discussions do give insight into general trends.

I used non-probabilistic sampling methodology in this study by obtaining volunteer participants (for an overview of types of online sampling see: Hewson et al., 2003), and I relied on web forum participants to come across the announcement of the survey as I (and in one case, the forum administrator) posted it in on different forums. The message advertising the survey read:

Research into political discussion on the Internet

The University of Amsterdam is conducting research on the way people use the Internet to discuss politics. We are very interested in your view, and hope you will take the time to fill out the questionnaire. Filling out the questionnaire will take approximately 10 minutes. We are also very interested in your view even if you do not post, but only read messages in this discussion. Thank you very much in advance!

You can find the questionnaire here:

http://www2.fmg.uva.nl/comlab/surveys/politieke_discussies.html

I first sent a request to forum moderators to ask for permission to post the above announcement on their website. I sent this request to the web masters of the following web forums (the e-mail addresses of the web masters were obtained through the website)¹:

- <http://www.maghrebonline.nl/>
- <http://www.weerwoord.nl/>
- <http://www.terdiscussie.nl/>
- <http://www.maroc.nl/>
- <http://www.politiekdebat.nl/>
- <http://forum.fok.nl/>
- <http://islamforum.vrijspraak.org/>
- <http://www.nieuwrechts.nl/forum>

After the first request I received two positive reactions (from *Weerwoord* and *Fok*). I sent another message nine days after the initial request. The forum *Politiekdebat* reacted on this second request, with the message that they did not participate in these types of requests, but that they would like to have more information to make an informed decision. Upon sending more information, the Webmaster did not respond.

Since requesting email responses from the moderators did not always prove to be effective, I also contacted web forums through their interaction feature on the website (if they had this). With *Maghrebonline* this resulted in a positive response. Similarly, with *Nieuwrechts* I asked for permission to post the request through their web site, as there was no contact information available on the forum. Also, I tried to find alternative e-mail addresses of web masters or moderators. For instance, with the forum *Maroc*, I did not get a response using the Webmaster-address, but I did get a positive response using an 'info'-address. After receiving a very low response from the web forum participants of *Maroc* and *Maghrebonline*, I also asked permission to post it on <http://www.forums.marokko.nl/> (with no response) and <http://www.amazigh.nl/> (with a positive response, and the agreement that the link would be posted, but I have never been able to find the link on the website, or to obtain further information on the status of the posted link).

The request was posted in different sections of the web forums. On *Weerwoord* the announcement was moved towards 'the notice board'. On *Fok* the announcement was placed in the 'politics' section of the web forum. On *Maghrebonline* the message was posted in 'general discussion', and on *Maroc* I posted the message in the section 'wie schrijft die blijft'. On *Nieuwrechts*, the Webmaster posted the announcement.

What is important to mention here is that the announcement initially posted by me (or as requested to be posted) was also posted on other sites than the selected few. It was posted on discussion sites other than web forums (such as web logs). This is not necessarily a 'contamination' of the data, as the respondents were asked about their experiences on web

¹This is the same selection of forums as examined in Chapter 4 (for motivation behind this sampling, see Chapter 3), except for *Islamforum*. *Islamforum* was added to try to ensure response from those of immigrant descent.

forums (and were asked which *web forum* they attend most frequently, and to answer the question with that particular forum in mind). A question was included to gain insight into which site people came from when linking to the survey. However, 99 participants in the survey (almost 40%) did not provide this information. Of the respondents that did provide the information, the majority indicated that they came from *Fok*. Together with *Nieuwrechts*, *Dutch Disease Report* (note that the request to participate in the survey on this site was not posted by me), *Maghrebonline*, and *Weerwoord* this constitutes 90% of the sites from which people linked (see Table A.1).

Table A.1: *Forum from which respondents linked to the URL of the questionnaire*

Web forum	Frequency	Percent
<i>Fok</i>	91	58
<i>Nieuwrechts</i>	16	10
<i>Dutch Disease Report</i>	13	8
<i>Maghrebonline</i>	12	8
<i>Weerwoord</i>	11	7
<i>Maroc</i>	3	2
<i>UvA</i>	2	1
Via a friend	2	1
Opinari	2	1
Other [†]	6	4
<i>Total</i> [‡]	158	100

[†] There were six other sites provided, each by one participant.

[‡] There were 99 missing values regarding the question from which forum participants came from.

In relation to the link to the questionnaire, I tried to make participating as easy as possible, so participants only had to click on the link. Thus, participants did not have to obtain a login and password before filling out the questionnaire. This made it easier for participants and should thus potentially increase the response. Using this approach, however, makes it difficult to determine whether unique participants filled out the questionnaire. To check whether people filled out the questionnaire more than once, the IP-addresses were checked and double entries were deleted.

The fact that I have used only volunteers that actively followed the link to participate in the survey may be problematic. As Hewson et al. (2003: 38) point out, volunteers have been found to differ on, for instance, personality variables. Also, the sample is very dependent on who visits the web forum at what time after the announcement is posted; Threads normally move ‘downwards’ in the topic, depending not only on the date and time of the initial message but also on the number of replies to this initial message. Thus, on those forums where there was a lot of interest in the thread (resulting in replies), the message

remained in a prominent place longer than on those forums where no one reacted. This resulted in an even higher response by participants of web forums where the survey attracted a lot of initial attention. This causes problems with regard to whether the findings can be generalized: Which people participated in the survey is dependent on the moment at which they visit the web forum (and thus also depends on how often they visit the web forum, increasing the probability that heavy users participate), check the specific section the request was posted in, and how many reactions the request received. One last element that may be important here is the fact that people volunteer to participate (and make the active choice to follow the link). These respondents are likely to be more interested in the topic of political discussion online than those that do not participate in the survey.

There are a number of important elements to discuss in terms of which people participated. First, the announcement was placed in different sections of the various web forums, as to allow for different types of participants to take part. Secondly, the announcement was placed on the web forums at different times. Third, the number (and type) of reactions varied considerably per web forum, thus influencing the visibility of the request. Last, people that visit online forums, and particularly the sections where the announcement was posted, are often interested in online political discussion, and may thus be interested and willing to fill out a questionnaire on the topic, allowing for a broad representation.

A.2 Online questionnaire

The survey deals with different topics: demographics; political interest and efficacy; attitudes towards immigration; participation in debate on immigration and integration; Internet statistics; the discussion forum used for discussing immigration and integration; evaluation of the online discussion; reasons for discussing online; and other attitudes towards discussing online. I will discuss these topics in this section. The full questionnaire (both in Dutch and English) is included below.

Demographics: With regard to demographics, the following variables were included in the questionnaire: age, gender, education, country of origin (own, mother, father), and religious affiliation.

Political interest and efficacy: Examining participants of political discussions, and asking about their political interest is, of course, important. It is essential to look at how interested and active they are, what their political preference is, and how political efficacious they consider themselves to be. Also, a number of politically related activities are considered in the questionnaire: How often do people watch news programs on television, read newspapers, listen to radio, talk to friends about politics, read contributions to political web discussions, and read Internet news pages?

Attitude towards immigration: Along with the participants' political preference, the questionnaire asks for their attitudes towards immigration: How strong are their feelings, and

are they positive or negative? How does this relate to the frequency with which they discuss the issue?

Participation in debate on immigration and integration: To examine the extent to which online discussion of the issue of immigration is supplemented by offline discussion, respondents are asked how frequently they discuss immigration and integration in the following ways: discussion with friends/family, discussing with colleagues, attending public meetings, writing letters to the editors of newspapers, and writing contributions to Internet discussions.

Internet statistics: First, the question of access is raised: Where do people access the Internet? Second, do people participate in online debate through web forums, e-mail groups, chat, newsgroups or other types of online discussion? Third, how often does the respondent discuss politics online? Last, which specific forum(s) is used to discuss politics (open question)?

Evaluating the discussion forum that is used to discuss immigration and integration: Apart from asking questions that raise more general issues of discussing politics online, the survey aimed to ask specifically about the online discussion of immigration and integration. Respondents are first asked whether they discuss these issues online, and if so on which forum and for what reasons (open question). They are then asked to answer the questions that follow with that specific forum in mind. To evaluate the forum with regard to the discussion of immigration and integration, the respondents are asked about whether people feel free to give their opinion; if there is diversity of opinions; whether some participants dominate the discussion; if everyone has equal opportunity to contribute; if they change their opinion as a result of the discussion; if they encounter other opinions than those of family and friends; and whether they encounter other opinions than those expressed in traditional media.

Reasons for discussing online: Apart from the open question, the questionnaire also consisted of closed items regarding reasons to discuss online. Respondents are asked to what extent the following items form a reason to participate in online debate: anonymity, encountering a variety of opinions, expressing oneself, finding like-minded, being able to stay at home while discussing with others, writing instead of speaking about opinions and arguments.

Other attitudes towards discussing online: To further gain insight into the motivations for and evaluations of participation in online debates, the following items were raised with the respondents, to see to what extent they feel that: they do not feel represented in traditional media; the Internet allows for a representation of voices not heard elsewhere; the Internet should be better regulated to prevent religious fundamentalism; the Internet should be better regulated to prevent racism; on the Internet we can find the same voices as in other media.

Questionnaire

1. In welke mate bent u geïnteresseerd in politiek?
To what degree are you interested in politics?
 - Sterk [*Highly*]
 - Gewoon [*Normal*]
 - Matig [*Moderately*]
 - Weinig [*Slightly*]
 - Niet geïnteresseerd [*Not interested*]
2. Bent u lid van een politieke partij?
Are you a member of a political party?
 - Nee, en ik ben nooit lid geweest.
[*No, and I have never been a member.*]
 - Nee, maar ik ben in het verleden lid geweest.
[*No, but I have been a member in the past.*]
 - Ja. [*Yes.*]
3. In welke mate bent u het eens of oneens met de volgende stellingen?
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
[Five answering categories ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree]
 - Politiek is soms zo ingewikkeld dat mensen zoals ik niet goed kunnen begrijpen wat er speelt.
[*Politics is sometimes so complicated that people like me cannot properly comprehend what is going on.*]
 - Mensen zoals ik hebben geen invloed op wat de regering doet.
[*People like me do not have influence over what the government does.*]
 - Ik denk dat ik beter geïnformeerd ben over politiek dan anderen.
[*I think that I am better informed about politics than others.*]
4. Als er vandaag verkiezingen zouden zijn voor de Tweede Kamer, zou u dan gaan stemmen?
If today there were elections for Parliament, would you vote?
 - Ja. [*Yes.*]
 - Nee. [*No.*]
 - Ik heb geen stemrecht, maar anders zou ik wel stemmen.
[*I am not entitled to vote, but if I could I would vote.*]
 - Ik heb geen stemrecht, maar anders zou ik ook niet stemmen.
[*I am not entitled to vote, but if I could I would not vote either.*]
5. Op welke partij zou u stemmen?
Which party would you vote for?
 - CDA [*Christian Democrats*]

- PVDA [*Labour Party*]
- VVD [*Liberal Conservative Party*]
- SP [*Socialist Party*]
- LPF [*List Pim Fortuyn*]
- GroenLinks [*GreenLeft*]
- D'66 [*Democrats*]
- Christen Unie [*Christian Union*]
- SGP [*State Reformed Party*]
- Geert Wilders
- Nieuw Rechts [*New Right*]
- Blanco [*Blank*]
- Weet nog niet [*Don't know yet*]
- Anders, namelijk: [*Differently, namely:*]

6. Hoe vaak onderneemt u de volgende activiteiten per week?

How often every week do you undertake the following activities?

[Answering categories ranging from: (Almost) daily; 3 to 4 times/week; 1 to 2 times/week; Less than once/week; Never]

- Naar het nieuws op televisie kijken.
[*Watching the news on television.*]
- Naar actualiteitenprogramma's kijken, zoals Twee Vandaag, Nova, Netwerk, Den Haag Vandaag of Buitenhof.
[*Watching current affairs programmes.*]
- De krant lezen.
[*Reading the newspaper.*]
- Het volgen van nieuws en actualiteiten via de radio.
[*Following news and current affairs on the radio.*]
- Met vrienden over politiek praten.
[*Discussing politics with friends.*]
- Het lezen van bijdragen aan politieke internetdiscussies.
[*Reading online discussions.*]
- Het plaatsen van bijdragen aan politieke internetdiscussies.
[*Posting in online discussions.*]
- Internet nieuwspagina's lezen, zoals bijvoorbeeld nu.nl.
[*Reading Internet news pages.*]

7. Op welke plaats(en) gebruikt u het internet om over politiek te discussiëren? (meerdere antwoorden mogelijk)

In which of the following places do you use the Internet to discuss politics? (several answers possible)

- Thuis [*At home*]
- Werk [*At work*]
- School [*At school*]
- Internetcafé [*At an Internet café*]

- Anders, namelijk: [*Other, namely:*]
8. Op welke manier(en) gebruikt u het internet om over politiek te discussiëren? (meerdere antwoorden mogelijk)
In which way(s) do you use the Internet to discuss politics? (several answers possible)
- E-mail(groepen) [*Email groups*]
 - Webfora [*Web forums*]
 - Chat [*Chat*]
 - Newsgroups [*Newsgroups*]
 - Anders, namelijk: [*Other, namely:*]
9. Welke discussiefora bezoekt u op het internet? Geef u a.u.b. de precieze webpagina, indien dit mogelijk is.
Which discussion forums do you visit on the Internet? If possible, please provide the exact website.
 [Open question]

De volgende vragen gaan over de onderwerpen immigratie en integratie.

The following questions concern the issues of immigration and integration.

10. Hoe vaak neemt u aan het debat over immigratie en integratie deel op de onderstaande manieren?
How often do you participate in the debate on immigration and integration in the following ways?
 [Answering categories ranging from never, almost never, sometimes, often, very often]
- Discussiëren met familie en/of vrienden.
 [*Discussing with family and/or friends.*]
 - Discussiëren met collega's.
 [*Discussing with colleagues.*]
 - Naar debatbijeenkomsten gaan.
 [*Attending public debates.*]
 - Het schrijven van brieven en/of opiniestukken naar de krant.
 [*Writing opinion pieces/letters to newspapers.*]
 - Schrijven van bijdragen aan internetdiscussies.
 [*Writing posts in Internet discussions.*]
11. Heeft u in het laatste half jaar op één of meerdere internetdiscussiefora gelezen en/of geschreven specifiek over immigratie en integratie?
In the past half year, did you read and/or write about immigration and integration on one or more Internet discussion forums?
- Ja [*Yes*]
 - Nee [*No*]

12. Op welk internetdiscussieforum discussieert u het meest over immigratie en integratie? (Als er meerdere zijn, kiest u de belangrijkste.)

On which Internet discussion forum do you most often discuss immigration and integration? (If there is more than one, please choose the most important.)

Beantwoordt u de volgende vragen voor het discussieforum dat u bij de vorige vraag hebt ingevuld.

Answer the following questions for the discussion forum that you have entered in the previous question.

13. Wat zijn de redenen dat u op dit forum over de issues immigratie en integratie discussieert? Onder discussiëren verstaan we zowel het lezen als plaatsen van berichten.
What are the reasons that you discuss the issues of immigration and integration on this forum? By discussing, we mean both the reading and the posting of messages.

14. In hoeverre bent u het met de volgende stellingen eens of oneens?

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

[Five answering categories ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree]

- Op dit forum voel ik me vrij om mijn mening te uiten ten aanzien van immigratie en integratie.
[On this forum I feel free to express my opinion on immigration and integration.]
- Op dit forum kom ik veel verschillende meningen tegen over immigratie en integratie.
[On this forum I encounter a lot of different opinions on immigration and integration.]
- Op dit forum overheersen enkele deelnemers de discussie over immigratie en integratie.
[On this forum a few participants dominate the discussion on immigration and integration.]
- Iedereen heeft op dit forum evenveel kans zijn/haar mening te geven over immigratie en integratie.
[On this forum everyone has equal chance to express their opinion on immigration and integration.]
- Ik verander niet van mening door de discussie op dit forum over immigratie en integratie.
[I have not changed my opinion as a result of the discussion on immigration and integration on this forum.]
- Op dit forum kom ik meningen over immigratie en integratie tegen die ik niet tegenkom in mijn familie, vrienden- of kennissenkring.
[On this forum I encounter opinions on immigration and integration that I do not encounter in my family, or in my circle of friends and acquaintances.]
- Op dit forum kom ik meningen over immigratie en integratie tegen die ik niet tegenkom in andere media.
[On this forum I encounter opinions on immigration and integration that I do not encounter in other media.]

15. Geef u aan in welke mate de volgende aspecten van belang zijn bij uw keuze om deel te nemen aan het politieke debat op het internet.

Please indicate the extent to which the following aspects are important for your choice to participate in online political discussions.

[Five answering categories ranging from very to not at all important]

- Anoniem blijven. [*Remaining anonymous.*]
- Veel verschillende meningen tegenkomen. [*Encountering a diversity of opinions.*]
- Mijn mening laten horen. [*Expressing one's opinion.*]
- Gelijkgestemden vinden. [*Finding like minded individuals.*]
- Het gemak van thuis te kunnen blijven en toch met anderen discussiëren.
[*The ease of staying at home, while discussing with others.*]
- Schriftelijk in plaats van mondeling meningen en argumenten verwoorden.
[*Expressing one's opinion and arguments in writing instead of orally.*]

16. In hoeverre bent u het met de volgende stellingen eens of oneens?

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

[Five answering categories ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree]

- In de traditionele media (krant, televisie en radio) wordt mijn mening niet vertegenwoordigd.
[*In traditional media (newspaper, television and radio) my opinion is not represented.*]
- Het internet biedt een mogelijkheid om meningen onder de aandacht te brengen die op andere plaatsen niet aan bod komen.
[*The Internet offers a possibility to bring opinions to the fore that are not heard elsewhere.*]
- Het internet moet beter gereguleerd worden om religieus fundamentalisme te voorkomen.
[*The Internet should be regulated better to prevent religious fundamentalism.*]
- Het internet moet beter gereguleerd worden om racisme te voorkomen.
[*The Internet should be regulated better to prevent racism.*]
- Op het internet komen dezelfde meningen aan bod als in andere media.
[*On the Internet the same opinions are expressed as elsewhere.*]

17. In hoeverre bent u het met de volgende stellingen eens of oneens?

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

[Five answering categories ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree]

- Nederland moet zo veel mogelijk asielzoekers terugsturen.
[*The Netherlands should send back as many asylum seekers as possible.*]
- Allochtonen leveren een positieve bijdrage aan de Nederlandse samenleving.
[*Allochtonen are an enrichment for Dutch society.*]
- Allochtonen maken misbruik van de sociale voorzieningen.
[*Allochtonen take advantage of social services.*]
- Allochtonen moeten zich aanpassen aan de Nederlandse cultuur.
[*Allochtonen should adjust to Dutch culture.*]

18. Wat is uw hoogst genoten opleiding (al dan niet afgerond)?

What is the highest education you have received (whether completed or not)?

- Lagere school [*Primary school*]
- VMBO, MAVO, LBO [*Lower level secondary*]
- HAVO, VWO [*Higher level secondary*]
- MBO [*Intermediate vocational education*]
- HBO [*Higher vocational education*]

- WO [*University*]
- Anders, namelijk: [*Other, namely:*]

19. Waar bent u geboren?

Where were you born?

- Nederland [*The Netherlands*]
- Nederlandse Antillen, Aruba [*Dutch Antilles, Aruba*]
- België [*Belgium*]
- Duitsland [*Germany*]
- Indonesië [*Indonesia*]
- Marokko [*Morocco*]
- Suriname [*Suriname*]
- Turkije [*Turkey*]
- Anders, namelijk: [*Other, namely:*]

20. Waar is uw vader geboren?

Where was your father born?

- Nederland [*The Netherlands*]
- Nederlandse Antillen, Aruba [*Dutch Antilles, Aruba*]
- België [*Belgium*]
- Duitsland [*Germany*]
- Indonesië [*Indonesia*]
- Marokko [*Morocco*]
- Suriname [*Suriname*]
- Turkije [*Turkey*]
- Anders, namelijk: [*Other, namely:*]

21. Waar is uw moeder geboren?

Where was your mother born?

- Nederland [*The Netherlands*]
- Nederlandse Antillen, Aruba [*Dutch Antilles, Aruba*]
- België [*Belgium*]
- Duitsland [*Germany*]
- Indonesië [*Indonesia*]
- Marokko [*Morocco*]
- Suriname [*Suriname*]
- Turkije [*Turkey*]
- Anders, namelijk: [*Other, namely:*]

22. Wat is uw leeftijd?

What is your age?

23. Tot welke kerkelijke gezindte of levensbeschouwelijke groepering rekent u zichzelf?

To what religious denomination do you consider yourself to belong?

- Geen [*None*]
- Rooms-katholiek [*Roman Catholic*]
- Nederlands Hervormd [*Dutch Reformed*]
- Gereformeerde kerken [*Reformed*]
- Hindoeïsme [*Hinduism*]
- Islam [*Islam*]
- Boeddhisme [*Buddhism*]
- Jodendom [*Judaism*]
- Anders, namelijk: [*Other, namely:*]

24. En tot slot. U bent een:

And to conclude. You are a:

- Man [*Man*]
- Vrouw [*Woman*]

Heel hartelijk bedankt voor het invullen van de vragen! Heeft u nog opmerkingen naar aanleiding van deze vragenlijst?

Thank you very much for filling out the questionnaire! Do you have any additional remarks in relation to this questionnaire?

Table B.1: *Gender of the respondents*

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	154	82.4
Female	33	17.6
<i>Total</i>	187	100.0

Table B.2: *Age of the respondents*

Age	Frequency	Percent
15-20	20	10.8
20-25	42	22.6
25-30	31	16.7
30-35	19	10.2
35-40	25	13.4
40-45	15	8.1
45-50	11	5.9
50-55	10	5.4
55-60	5	2.7
60-65	3	1.6
65-70	5	2.7
<i>Total</i>	186	100.0

Table B.3: *Level of education of the respondents*

Education	Frequency	Percent
Primary school	2	1.1
Lower level secondary	3	1.6
Higher level secondary	22	11.8
Intermediate vocational education	16	8.6
Higher vocational education	66	35.5
University	76	40.6
Other	2	1.1
<i>Total</i>	187	100.0

Table B.4: *Religion of the respondents*

Religion	Frequency	Percent
None	128	68.4
Roman-Catholic	17	9.1
Islam	11	5.9
Dutch Reformed	10	5.3
Reformed	5	2.7
Hinduism	3	1.6
Judaism	2	1.1
Buddhism	1	0.5
Other	10	5.3
<i>Total</i>	187	100.0

Table B.5: *Descent of the respondent*

Descent	Frequency	Percent
Native	155	83.3
First generation Western immigrant	3	1.6
First generation non-Western immigrant	8	4.3
Second generation Western immigrant	15	8.1
Second generation non-Western immigrant	5	2.7
<i>Total</i>	186	100.0

Table B.6: *Forums visited to discuss politics*

Forum	Frequency
fok.nl	121
nieuwrechts.nl	25
weerwoord.nl	25
dutchdiseasereport.com	19
maghrebonline.nl	11
geenstijl.nl	10
maroc.nl	7
opinari.nl	7
politiekdebat.nl	7
forums.marokko.nl	6
maghreb.nl	6
stand.nl	5
meervrijheid.nl	4
nl.politiek	4
tweakers.net	4
democrates.net	3
janmarijnissen.nl/weblog	3
leefbaarrotterdam.nl	3
pim-fortuyn.nl	3
terdiscussie.nl	3
benjebangvoormij.nl	2
cyberty.nl	2
forum.scholieren.com	2
freespeechsite.net	2
freethinker.nl	2
graverdammer.vrijspraak.org	2
indianfeelings.com	2
indymedia	2
jovd.nl/forum	2
msn.nl	2
netwerk.nl	2
nu.nl	2
politics.be	2
sp.nl	2
viva.nl/forum	2
vlaamsbelang.be	2
vpro.nl	2
vrijspreker.nl	2
Other forums (each mentioned once)	58
<i>Total</i>	370

Table C.1: *Participants of discussions analysed in Chapter 7*

Participant	Freq.	Gender
<i>Participants on LeefbaarNederland</i>		
Bbw/cno	4	–
Cor	4	male
Ertan	4	male
Ton	3	male
AU tochttoon	2	–
Proud	2	–
Ron2004	2	male
White Angel	2	–
Agostinho dos Santos	1	–
De Noorderling	1	–
Frans	1	male
Inge	1	female
Isabel	1	female
J. Wervendbos	1	male
LH	1	–
Piet_Hermus	1	male
Vinboy	1	male
Wisper	1	–
<i>Total</i>	33	
<i>Participants on newsgroup nl.politiek</i>		
Bartels	4	–
Henk Senster	3	male

Continued on next page

Participant	Freq.	Gender
Jan Peter	3	male
Job ter Haar	3	male
Marco van der Slot	3	male
Yew Betcha	3	–
Ahimsa	2	–
Bellboy	2	male
Dakduvel	2	–
DickSchneider	2	male
Ertan	2	male
Francina	2	female
PietHein	2	male
Quint Ondaatje	2	male
Wij	2	–
Willem-Jan Markerink	2	male
Arno	1	male
C@rio	1	–
Dr. Bam Bam	1	–
HalloHierIsTieWeer	1	–
Hieke	1	female
Islamietje	1	–
Name	1	–
Pan Gerwazy	1	–
Quint	1	male
Raaskal	1	–
Ramsey	1	–
Supergonzo	1	–
Van Viegen	1	–
Wim	1	male
<i>Total</i>	53	

Participants on *Fok*

gelly	9	male
blieblie	4	male
idontlikepizza	3	male
Re	3	male
salvation	3	male
xstatic1975	3	male

Continued on next page

Participant	Freq.	Gender
CartWOman	2	female
Dr.Daggla	2	male
jagermaster	2	male
Lelyzee	2	male
Leviathan23	2	male
Lief_Adje	2	male
R@b	2	male
AltamirA	1	male
ClioSporT	1	male
Conflict	1	male
greedkillingz	1	male
Hayek	1	male
indahnesia.com	1	male
Klonk	1	male
KreKker	1	male
Lucille	1	female
MissyMirjaM	1	female
Nature	1	male
Sharkdoggie	1	male
SuperUli	1	male
TilburgPosse	1	male
Vampier	1	male
veldmuis	1	male
<i>Total</i>	55	

Participants on *Maghrebonline*

Saidxxx	14	male
Yesmina	9	female
jena	8	female
ann-	7	female
HenkM	3	male
miloud	3	male
Mohammed Al Amir	3	male
PeterJan	3	male
allemaal	2	–
Chrif R	2	–
Hajar M.	2	–

Continued on next page

Participant	Freq.	Gender
Kernheimer	2	–
Japser	1	male
Roland Ronceval	1	male
Runny	1	male
<i>Total</i>	61	

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Samenvatting

De Nederlandse multiculturele samenleving, eens gezien als schoolvoorbeeld van hoe verschillende culturen samen kunnen leven, staat onder druk. Hoewel tolerantie lang als handelsmerk van Nederland gezien werd, lijkt de houding jegens immigranten en minderheidsculturen het laatste decennium harder geworden. Bijna dagelijks rapporteren de media over de tegenstelling tussen de autochtone en allochtone cultuur. Spanningen treden steeds meer op de voorgrond en zijn in kracht toegenomen na gebeurtenissen als 11 september, de politieke verschuiving aangewakkerd door wijlen Pim Fortuyn, de aanslagen in Madrid in 2004, de moord op filmmaker Theo van Gogh door een moslimfundamentalist in 2004 en de aanslagen in Londen in 2005. Het publieke debat over immigratie richt zich steeds meer op het vraagstuk van sociale cohesie en of autochtonen en allochtonen wel samen kunnen leven.

In een situatie waarin angst of minachting voor de ander, (menings)verschillen en spanningen het publieke debat domineren, is het de vraag hoe op een democratische manier met de bestaande verschillen kan worden omgegaan. In een samenleving waarin steeds meer polarisatie bestaat, kan het moeilijk zijn om een dialoog te bewerkstelligen. In deze dissertatie heb ik onderzocht hoe de verschillen in de Nederlandse samenleving het publieke debat informeren en hoe mensen interacteren wanneer zij geconfronteerd worden met deze verschillen. Meer specifiek heb ik het publieke debat over het vraagstuk van *immigratie* geanalyseerd op een specifiek discussieplatform: dat van *webfora*. De centrale vraag van het onderzoek luidt: *In hoeverre is het publieke debat over immigratie op Nederlandse webfora open voor verschillende discoursen en hoe interacteren deze verschillende discoursen in dit online debat?*

In het onderzoek wordt zowel gekeken naar representatie en insluiting in het debat (wie spreekt er en wat wordt er gezegd?) als naar uitsluiting van het debat. De openheid van het debat staat centraal in het onderzoek aangezien openheid wordt gezien als het belangrijkste criterium voor het publieke debat. Na een bespreking van de traditionele theorie van deliberatieve democratie en het alternatief hiervoor van *counter public* theorie, besluit ik Hoofdstuk 1 met de in deze dissertatie gehanteerde definitie van deliberatie waarin openheid als belangrijkste kenmerk gezien wordt. Openheid kent twee belangrijke

aspecten: i) openheid in termen van insluiting van verschillende deelnemers, standpunten en wijzen van communicatie; en ii) openheid van deelnemers ten opzichte van de andere deelnemers, en hun standpunten en communicatiewijzen. Deze openheid kan leiden tot *engagement* tussen verschillende discoursen en tot begrip voor de ander.

Het internet wordt vaak gezien als het ideale platform voor het publieke debat vanwege de ongelimiteerde ruimte die het biedt voor interactie alsmede de anonimiteit van de interactie. Deze twee kenmerken zouden moeten zorgen voor een discussie waarin vele (en veel verschillende) mensen deelnemen die zich vrij en gelijkwaardig voelen in het debat (zie Hoofdstuk 2). In deze dissertatie wordt empirisch onderzocht in hoeverre de discussies over immigratie op het internet open zijn en tot *engagement* en begrip leiden.

Om de mate van openheid te bepalen heb ik het publieke debat over immigratie geanalyseerd op zeven Nederlandse webfora (*Fok*, *Maghrebonline*, *Maroc*, *Nieuwrechts*, *Politiekdebat*, *Terdiscussie* en *Weerwoord*). Deze webfora zijn populair in termen van aantallen deelnemers, discussies en bijdragen. De selectie van fora beslaat verschillende typen fora: specifiek politieke fora (zowel meer links- als rechtsgeoriënteerd), fora gericht op allochtonen en algemene webfora. Vier verschillende aspecten van openheid worden onderzocht aan de hand van vier deelvragen in Hoofdstukken 4–7. Hieronder volgt een korte uiteenzetting van de bevindingen in deze hoofdstukken.

i) Hoe zijn webfora georganiseerd en op welke manier bevordert of bemoeilijkt dit de openheid van het debat? (Hoofdstuk 4)

De analyse van de normen en regels (netiquette) op webfora laat zien dat webfora er in het algemeen op gericht zijn een open discussieplatform te bieden. Er zijn twee soorten fora te onderscheiden die beide een andere vorm van openheid proberen te bewerkstelligen: i) algemene fora die gericht zijn op het bieden van een open platform voor allen; ii) fora die erop gericht zijn openheid te bieden voor een specifieke groep. Beide typen platform hanteren bepaalde regels om deze openheid te bewerkstelligen. De manier waarop dit gebeurt is echter niet altijd even transparant. De moderator heeft een zeer cruciale rol in het bepalen wie er communiceert, wat er wordt gecommuniceerd en op welke wijze. De daadwerkelijke openheid van de fora wordt in grote mate bepaald door deze actoren en feitelijk is er weinig ruimte voor gebruikers hier tegenin te gaan.

ii) In hoeverre zien en gebruiken deelnemers van online discussies webfora als open platform, in het bijzonder met betrekking tot de discussie over immigratie en integratie? (Hoofdstuk 5)

Om inzicht te krijgen in de redenen voor het deelnemen aan online discussies en de waardering van de deelnemers hiervan, is er een online vragenlijst afgenomen onder deelnemers van online discussies. De respondenten (grotendeels jonge, hoogopgeleide, politiek geïnteresseerde mannen) noemden de diversiteit van webfora als één van de belangrijkste kenmerken van het online debat. De respondenten nemen deel om hun eigen mening te uiten en die van anderen te vernemen. Ze ervaren de webfora waarop ze discussiëren over immigratie en integratie als open en beschouwen het internet als meer divers dan traditionele media. Hoewel deelnemers diversiteit belangrijk achten, en de online discussies als open ervaren, veranderen zij slechts zelden van mening naar aanleiding van een

discussie. Waar openheid lijkt te zijn, vindt er geen *engagement* plaats.

iii) In hoeverre zijn verschillende actoren en standpunten aanwezig in de online discussie over immigratie en integratie en hoe verhoudt dat zich tot de representatie in kranten? (Hoofdstuk 6)

In Hoofdstuk 6 wordt het debat over het onderwerp van eerwraak geanalyseerd zoals dit plaatsvond in februari 2005 in kranten en op webfora, om te bepalen of het online debat meer insluitend is (en er dus meer verschillende deelnemers en standpunten gerepresenteerd zijn). Deze analyse laat zien dat, hoewel de politieke elite het debat in de kranten domineert en er meer berichten en deelnemers zijn online, de krant toch meer diversiteit kent in deelnemers qua sekse en afkomst. Hiertegenover staat dat er online meer diversiteit is in termen van de gepresenteerde standpunten. Echter, ook hier zijn geen daadwerkelijke alternatieve discoursen aanwezig en is het discours dat wel aanwezig is in het debat zeer uitsluitend. Aangezien de ander niet gehoord wordt in het debat, vindt er geen *engagement* plaats en kan er geen begrip voor de ander worden bereikt.

iv) Hoe interacteren verschillende discoursen in het online debat wanneer er alternatieve discoursen aanwezig zijn en in hoeverre is deze interactie open? (Hoofdstuk 7)

In Hoofdstuk 7 worden online discussies geanalyseerd waarin wel een alternatief discours aanwezig is. Het betreft hier discussies rond de moord op een conector door een scholier van Turkse afkomst. Ertan.nl, een kritische weblogger van Turkse afkomst, betuigt op verschillende fora steun aan de jongen die de moord pleegde. De analyse van de reacties op deze steunbetuiging laat zien dat, hoewel Ertan online een alternatief discours kan presenteren, het debat en de deelnemers niet openstaan voor dit alternatieve discours. Aangezien het debat er op gericht is het alternatieve geluid uit te sluiten, is het onmogelijk om tot *engagement* en begrip te komen. Om te bepalen in hoeverre alternatieve communicatiewijzen kunnen helpen bij het overbruggen van grote verschillen, wordt een tweede discussie geanalyseerd die gestart is naar aanleiding van een steunbetuiging aan de dader, maar waarin tot op zekere hoogte wel *engagement* en begrip tot stand komen tussen verschillende discoursen. Deze discussie laat zien welke rol begroeting, narratief, het delen van persoonlijke ervaringen en retoriek kunnen hebben in het publieke debat over omstreden issues. Deze vormen van communicatie kunnen de toon van het debat verzachten, en de deelnemers meer welwillend en open ten opzichte van elkaar laten handelen. Zodoende wordt de mogelijkheid voor *engagement* en begrip vergroot.

Deze vier empirische studies laten zien dat, hoewel zowel gebruikers en moderators van webfora de online discussies als open beschouwen, er weinig diversiteit is. Wanneer er wel diversiteit is in de discussies, is het discours er op gericht dit uit te sluiten van het debat. Een belangrijke rol is weggelegd voor alternatieve wijzen van communicatie. In de *Conclusies* van de dissertatie bespreek ik de implicaties van deze bevindingen. Gelden deze bevindingen alleen voor het issue van immigratie, of ook voor andere omstreden issues? Wat zeggen de bevindingen over de ideale vorm van een publiek debat? Welke criteria zouden moeten gelden voor discussies, en wat zijn de gevolgen die aan deze criteria

verbonden zijn? Welke conclusies kunnen we trekken ten aanzien van het internet en het publieke debat? Hoewel er een zee aan ruimte is op het internet om alternatieve discoursen te uiten, zal dit geen verschil uitmaken tenzij deelnemers aan het publieke debat zich openstellen voor deze discoursen en ze deze niet onverschillig en vijandig tegemoet treden.