The Context of Democratic Discourse: Deliberation and Debate in Online Discussion Spaces

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Abstract

Political talk can take on many different forms and occur in many different contexts. Throughout this dissertation, I examine how and why political talk occurs in specific online settings. In the process, my investigations can shed light on the nature of political talk in general. In Chapter 2, "Democracy, Technology, and Mediated Speech," I provide a literature review and intellectual history of the role mass media plays in shaping democracy. In Chapter 3, "Newspaper Comment Sections and The Deliberative Potential of Online Spaces," I examine how online news commenters organize conversation and debate. In Chapter 4, "r/Minneapolis and Framing Online Political Speech," I investigate how forum users evoke various senses of locality to frame political speech. Finally, in Chapter 5, "Twitter and Semantic Territorialization," I discuss how social media platforms lend themselves to the strategic manipulation and dissemination of political discourses.

Throughout my analysis of virtually mediated communication I reveal how virtual speech frameworks necessarily require a series of compromises and metonymies, which can have a significant impact on the type and tenor of political talk involved. Combined, and in the absence of further efforts to establish locality and co-presence, these frameworks tend to produce fragmentary speech and limited forms of engagement. Productive political talk can only flourish when speakers recognize each other as stakeholders and embrace a common means of at least potentially reaching consensus. Virtual spaces that are deliberately set up as more intimate and communal—coffee houses rather than vast public squares—are vital in encouraging this local sense of politics.

Ultimately, the internet is a triumph for democracy in terms of significantly reducing the barrier for entry in the political arena, bringing diverse audiences together in conversation, and undermining the influence of the state and other powerful institutions as gatekeepers. But these are necessary rather than sufficient conditions for realizing the deliberative ideal and nurturing civil solidarity. The nature of the forum, the medium of communication, and the mode of interaction can either encourage or discourage various forms of public engagement, but civil society remains an event that must be accomplished and re-accomplished by people.

Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

What are the promises and limitations of online political speech? As the Information Age (Castells 1996) enters its sixth decade and the Internet Era approaches its fourth, we are still attempting to grapple with the implications of living in a networked society. Debates concerning the internet as a medium of mass communication, in particular, are ongoing and wide-ranging. Can social media and other online platforms serve as, or at least come to resemble a "virtual public sphere" (DiMaggio et al 2001; Dahlgren 2005; Kittilson and Dalton 2011)? Can virtual organizing and networked protest help or hinder the success of political movements (Browning 2002; Tufekci 2017)? Does the Internet help or hinder *democracy*, itself—is online political engagement emancipating or limiting, enlightening or illusory (Hurwitz 1999; Schiffrin 2017)? This dissertation touches on a number of these debates, but focuses primarily on the specific act of speaking online, and how virtual media transforms political speech. Throughout this dissertation I hope to demonstrate how people engage with each other in online discussion spaces, and in the process come to better understand how people navigate politics and public spaces, both on- and offline.

Theory on political engagement suggests that rational debate can and does anchor democratic deliberation, and that mediated spaces can be central to such debate. However, the rise of various online spaces—from tweets to subreddits to comment sections—have seemed to correlate instead with political polarization and mudslinging rather than civil debate. Are these the sorts of spaces where rational, civil deliberation can and does occur? If not, why do people choose to engage others in this sort of medium? An overriding question remains, then: if people

do not achieve the Habermasian or Tocquevillian discursive ideal in online spaces, is there still value in such virtual talk? Do such spaces provide, as Rosenblum (2008) surmises, a means of coordinating group political action and organizing information, or does the internet merely emblemize the late modern threats of individual disembeddedness, dislocation, and disengagement? It is tempting to imagine the internet as a uniquely dangerous and modern threat—and to an extent it is, both in terms of how people engage each other politically and how they ingest political information.

This study will not, however, attempt to map out this threat, nor will it hope to surmise how the power of the internet-writ-large can be harnessed to improve democracy "out there." This study will shed light, however, on how and why people talk politics online, how they imagine online spaces, and how they invent new "places" in an entirely non-physical medium. Given this remit, the following chapters engage with a wide variety of literatures and theoretical perspectives, from deliberative democratic theory, to media studies, to the sociologies of politics, solidarity, communication, and phenomenology. This dissertation comprises:

1. "Democracy, Technology, and Mediated Speech": a literature review and intellectual history of the role mass media plays in shaping democracy;
2. "Newspaper Comment Sections and The Deliberative Potential of Online Spaces": a study of how online news commenters organize conversation and debate;
3. "r/Minneapolis and Framing Online Political Speech": an investigation into how forum users evoke various sense of locality to frame political speech; and

4. "Twitter and Semantic Territorialization": an examination of how social media platforms lend themselves to the strategic manipulation and dissemination of political discourses.

Combined, these approaches reveal not only the contours of *virtual* public speech, but of public speech in general, as I will discuss in a concluding chapter.

Motivating Questions: Political Communication and the Deliberative Ideal

Beyond the specific scope of online communication, this dissertation speaks to a number of general questions central to sociology, namely: how do people construct a sense of place, and how do they draw boundaries between public and private speech and activity? How is consensus achieved and maintained, and what degree of dissensus can be tolerated? How do people frame political and non-political speech? What forms of communication and coordination are required for a healthy, functioning civil society, and is common adherence to norms of "civility" sufficient? And finally, what *is* a "public," and does a new mode of interaction—such as the Internet—represent one monolithic public or many interlocking publics? As I will demonstrate, the "virtual turn" provides new challenges and opportunities in grappling with the nature of public spaces and political talk, but a change in medium merely alters political talk; it does not transform it into something unrecognizable. Regardless of the medium, political talk is itself structured, by speakers and audiences, by topics and styles, by frames and discourses.

The Public Sphere

As I focus to such an extent on political engagement and speech, I draw extensively on concepts developed by Jurgen Habermas and other deliberative democratic theorists. The deliberative democratic literature not only explicitly addresses the questions introduced above, but provides a useful metric for assessing deliberative speech, both online and offline. I am in no way asserting that online political speech is or should be deliberative, but the deliberative ideal as theorists such as Habermas and Young imagine it, provides a framework for understanding the practice and purpose of talking politics.

Habermas's (1984) concept of communicative rationality is not contingent upon, so he argues, transcendent speech norms or objective truths, but rather is grounded in the practical realities of everyday communication. Habermas is primarily concerned with the illocutionary (what does the speaker hope to achieve in speaking?) and perlocutionary (what effect did the speaker's words have upon the listener?) dimensions of speech, rather than its semantic content—namely, Habermas is interested in speech as an action, as something someone does in order to achieve some sort of goal. What separates "strategic" from "communicative" actions is the general attitude participants attach to acts: Is the act primarily oriented toward success, wherein the speaker hopes to influence her opponents so as to reach some personal end, or is the act oriented toward building understanding and consensus, wherein participants "pursue their individual goals under the condition that they can harmonize their plans of action on the basis of common situation definitions" (1984:286)?

Habermas's approach to discourse ethics has come under intense criticism, both for its perceived idealism and unworkability. Within the sphere of deliberative democracy theory,

Habermas's fiercest critics are agonist scholars such as Mouffe (2006, 2009), Connolly (2002), and Honig (2001). Mouffe, for example, recognizes the importance of free and open deliberation for healthy democracies, but rejects the notion that consensus building either can or should be possible in truly pluralistic societies. Rather the basis of democracy has always been on conflict and dissensus—deliberation might proceed from an agreement on the importance of certain rights and values, but such agreements will always remain provisional. The fundamental values and deliberative norms of democracy are always open to potential contestation. Regardless, however, of whether communicative rationality is a true component of political speech "out there," citizens doubtlessly behave as if civility should be a part of politics, and behave as well under the assumption that their fellow citizens follow roughly the same value system. In this regard, Habermas's outlining of communicative rationality provides a good heuristic for gauging the level of civility in public speech.

Habermas's overarching goal for uncovering the dimensions of rational deliberation is to work toward building the institutional spaces within which such deliberation is possible. In other words, Habermas is motivated, in part, by an effort to reclaim the public sphere and its moderating and mediating role in politics. Fundamentally, the public sphere can be distinguished from the state (through which, nonetheless, public authority is exercised), and the private realm of individual autonomy (within which, nonetheless, a sense of "publicity" is cultivated). Habermas (1989:18-26) traces the rise of the public sphere to the expansion and depersonalization of the state on the one hand and its separation from "society" on the other.

Thus the public sphere is the realm of thought and activity in which a people come to recognize themselves as a people. Social bonds might be based upon a shared history, a

rationally agreed upon system of laws, or a sense of common purpose and manifest destiny—what remains is the understanding that society, itself, rather than divine or supernatural power, imposes its own unique requirements on the individual: "Society is the form in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance, and where the activities connected with sheer survival are permitted to appear in public" (Arendt 1958:46). The publicly minded individual is required to imagine her place in society, to articulate where her personal needs and desires end and his public commitments begin, and to assert the degree to which she is willing to sacrifice his autonomy to the public welfare.

But is society primarily "public" or "private"? Habermas (1989) asserts that, in the heyday of the liberal public sphere, the role of the government was limited primarily to regulating trade and maintaining order. As such, there was a clear distinction between the state and the primarily private society. "Public" was narrowly defined as "state-related," and "the public" was that part of society that was specifically oriented against the state; the public sphere, then, was primarily a realm of thought rather than experience. The heyday of the public sphere was relatively short lived, however, as the lines between state and economy, public and private, gradually blurred and then collapsed. The bourgeois, and bourgeois alone, were so capable of rational-critical debate precisely because their wealth and education allowed them to see past narrow economic interests (Habermas 1989). As the state grew increasingly involved in the economy and society—the rise of welfarism—and as the franchise expanded to include the un-propertied classes, politics become less about achieving rational consensus over a common interest and more about a proliferation of interests negotiating and extracting concessions (such as social rights) from the state (Habermas 1989). As mentioned previously, Habermas's

subsequent work on communicative rationality is an effort to identify the conditions necessary for reclaiming rational-critical debate and the deliberative form of democracy in a world where the "public" and "private" dimensions of public life seem to be hopelessly intertwined.

Other deliberative democrats tend to reject Habermas's characterization of a single, monolithic coordinating public sphere, either in its liberal bourgeois heyday or today. Fraser (1992), for example, argues that civil society is less a comprehensive public than a locus of multiple, interlocking publics, while Benhabib (2004) points to the importance of "democratic iterations" in translating broad-scale civic virtues into comprehensible local contexts. Empirically, Perrin (2005) reveals how different settings, different forums, and different topics of discussion reveal markedly different understandings of citizenship. In a focus group study drawn from five different kinds of civic organizations—Presbyterian and Catholic churches, labor unions, business organizations, and sports groups—Perrin argues that such deliberative contexts provide their own "political microcultures," each containing their own cognitive logics, methods, and resources in approaching politics.

More recently, Hart (2017), studied three different "voices" in American politics over time: the people, via letters to the editor; the press, via news reports; and politicians, via the speech transcripts of Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump, and their political rivals. Hart concludes that while the press tended to rely upon a "dissatisfied" speech style, and politicians employed a "hortatory"—referring to deep seated American values—the people tended to focus less on ideology and candidates and more on the issues at hand (Hart 2017:579). Overall, however, all three spheres spoke more philosophically in 2016 than in previous election seasons—focusing to a greater extent on principles and values rather than pragmatic solutions to problems.

From a more ethnographic approach, Lichterman (1996) examines how members of political communities make sense of their world, and how common reference points will differ depending on the particular location. In his study of environmental movements, Lichterman reveals how movement actors are politically engaged through a "personalist" style. Personalism, in contrast to more utilitarian forms of individualism, as well as thick forms of communitarianism, allows for an approach to politics that emphasizes individual creativity and self-fulfillment. Contra communitarian fears that emphasizing the individual will lead to an impoverished conception of the common good, Lichterman argues that personalism allows for a sense of community broadly in line with Habermas's ideals of integrative plurality; one in which self-fulfillment leads to critical self-reflection and the free and open critique of movement goals (Lichterman 1996:19).

Baiocchi's (2003) ethnographic study of government-sponsored assemblies in Porto Alegre, Brazil similarly examines political engagement at the group level. Baiocchi's work challenges Habermas's elite-based model of the public sphere as, despite lacking resources, education, and a liberal political culture, citizens of Porto Alegre's poorest districts were nonetheless capable of forging a collective will through reasoned deliberation, a vocabulary of common needs, and a state-sponsored institutional setting. Thus, Baiocchi proposes expanding the conception of the public sphere beyond private, autonomous, voluntary institutions.

Stewart and Hartmann (2020) similarly argue that a new structural transformation of the public sphere requires reconceptualizing it as an autonomous and interstitial social field existing between markets, governments, and civil society—one with its own cultural and institutional logics. Countering Habermas's vision of the public sphere as purely a realm of rational-critical

intersubjective communication, Stewart and Hartmann assert that the public sphere plays host to a far wider variety of individual and organizational actors, communicative styles, cultural repertoires, and approaches to public engagement. In advancing a vision of a pluralistic, multifaceted public sphere, Stewart and Hartmann cast doubt both on the *possibility* of deliberative talk in the public sphere as well as the worthiness of individuals and individual interactions (as opposed to institutional and organizational contexts) as units of sociological analysis. While I agree that the public sphere never is, was, or will be exclusively a*bout* public deliberation, I would still argue that the public sphere is still a field within which actors can and do build deliberatively-oriented spaces—however imperfectly realized—and that the deliberative approach to talk is still an important mechanism for articulating democratic values and building democratic communities. There is value, as well, in observing how individuals interact in these spaces, in revealing the strengths and limitations of virtually mediated political talk, and in understanding how participants navigate issues of identity, locality, and boundary-making.

These debates and perspectives are central to understanding democratic deliberation in the internet era. How does mediated political discourse matter for our capacity to engage with each other over important public issues? As discussed above, this dissertation explores how virtual spaces represent multiple, interlocking, often mutually opposed publics with their own hierarchy of values, speech styles, and means of exclusion. Assuming there is just one undifferentiated public would mean assuming that the mode and style of communication would be markedly similar across different contexts and topics of discussion—so long as such spaces were generally assumed to be public. Conversely, assuming multiple publics would indicate, supporting Fraser's (1992), Licherterman's (1996), and Perrin's (2005) studies, different

approaches to communication when the underlying dimensions—such as locality and communality—are altered. This dissertation is in line with these studies—seemingly similar discussion spaces do, indeed, represent different models of public and shape, to varying levels of success, meaningful public engagement.

Finally, it is an open question whether people consider virtual spaces to be "public" in the first place. Do people log on to engage each other publicly or, rather, to expand their private sphere—to broadcast their identity, cultivate personal relationships, and simply reach out to others in ways that would otherwise be impossible in physical spaces? In short, do people value the internet because it offers a means of free expression and communication, or because it offers yet another dimension of sociability, to be and feel co-present with others? As I argue in subsequent chapters, navigating this public/private divide is actually crucial for meaningful deliberative exchange. Deliberatively-oriented discussion needs to maintain a sense of "publicity"—that is, of speaking as a stakeholder to an audience of interested stakeholders—but grounding one's arguments in biographical detail and a specific point-of-view is crucial for building empathy, common identities, and good-faith engagement. Thus, it becomes important to examine the illocutionary intent behind various speech acts, even when the topic of discussion appears to be explicitly political and the discursive space appears to be explicitly public.

Deliberative Dreams and Structural Realities

I focus on the virtual discussion spaces precisely because these spaces are explicitly constructed along deliberative democratic principles and precisely because the internet was and is heralded as a means of revolutionizing the public sphere. In the earliest internet era of MUDs and

BBBses, intellectuals (Negroponte 1995; Browning 1996) portrayed virtual spaces as vast digital frontiers in which the traditional markers of status could be cast aside and users could forge new forms of solidarity through discussion and debate. "Cyberians" (Netanel 2000) saw networked communication as a means of decolonizing the democratic lifeworld and predicted that virtual communities would ultimately supplant the state as the primary instrument of democratic decision making and will formation. The advent of social media saw the advancement of similar claims. Again, social media platforms were heralded as means of empowering citizens to speak truth to power, listen to each others' views, and explore novel new solutions to common problems (Shirky 2011; Al-Jenaibi 2014; Gainous and Wagner 2014).

The major social media platforms see (or at least portray) themselves as extensions of the public sphere, and explicitly espouse deliberative democratic principles, such as: guaranteeing openness, safeguarding diversity of thought, and providing a means of bridging gaps and building communities. Meta (Facebook's corporate owner) frames its mission as giving "people the power to build community," and empowering people to "be heard and have a voice—even when that means defending the rights of people we disagree with."[1] Reddit wants to "bring community, belonging, and empowerment to everyone in the world" and preserve the "free flow of ideas."[2] Twitter (now X) is the most upfront in imagining itself as an explicitly public space in which productive discussion survives and thrives: "Twitter's mission is to promote and protect the public conversation—to be the town square of the internet."[3]

[1] "Meta Corporation's Principles." (https://about.meta.com/company-info/)
[2] "Reddit's Mission First." (https://www.redditinc.com/blog/sharing-our-company-values)
[3] "Twitter 2.0: Our continued commitment to the public conversation" (https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2022/twitter-2-0-our-continued-commitment-to-the-public-conversation_

For their part, social network users seem to acknowledge (or at least pay lip service to) the deliberative democratic principles undergirding discussion spaces. We can see the deliberative ideal at play from the top down in the various community commenting guidelines across virtual forums, such as Reddit's r/Politics:

> The topic of politics is generally one that is very contentious and one that people are very passionate about. People who visit /r/politics have a variety of opinions and beliefs that span the entire political spectrum.
> …
> It's important to mention here that we don't censor people due to their opinions. People are completely allowed to post an opinion that is not factually true, or that you believe is incorrect, or that you find unacceptable for whatever reason. Everyone is entitled to their own opinions even if you disagree with them - in these instances, remember to debate civilly and focus your efforts on explaining why you disagree. Attack the argument and not the user.[4]

Reddit's r/News forum similarly attempts to promote a "a civil, healthy, community for diverse discussion and respectful conversation"[5] and enforces participation standards designed to weed out trolls, bots, and bad actors, such as requiring the user to have at least 300 "karma" (approval points). As I will demonstrate in subsequent chapters, we can see the deliberative ideal from the bottom-up as well, as speakers at least attempt to hold each other accountable to common discussion norms of civility and self-accounting. I demonstrate as well that the style of virtual public imagined, both by architects and users—ad hoc issue public in the case of news story comment spaces, town hall or coffee house in the case of Reddit forums, town square in the case of X/Twitter—has a significant impact on the type and tenor of deliberative political talk speakers can accomplish.

But dreams for a deliberative, democratic, and open virtual public sphere are one thing, structural realities are another. Countless controversies surrounding various social media

[4] "The Rules of /r/Politics." (https://www.reddit.com/r/politics/wiki/index#wiki_general)
[5] "Submission Rules" (https://www.reddit.com/r/news/wiki/rules)

platforms over the past decade have revealed the disconnect between messaging and motive. Platforms such as Facebook were initially able to disguise themselves as free and independent forums akin to the BBSes and MUDs of the mid-nineties, but have subsequently come under fire for their role in spreading disinformation via automating information dissemination (Pasquale 2017), and for tacitly allowing other corporations, governments, and lobbying groups to disguise propaganda as public discourse (Golumbia 2013). Following its takeover by tech billionaire Elon Musk, X (nee Twitter) has launched a series of controversial measures, such as monetizing its verification system, that have effectively neutralized its ability to serve (at least in the eyes of many of its users) as a font of informed discussion and commentary.[6] Reddit has recently been mired in its own monetization controversy by deciding to charge third party developers for access to its data while simultaneously refusing to acknowledge the unpaid labor of thousands of subreddit moderators.[7] Hundreds of the site's most prominent subreddits went offline in protest during the summer of 2023.

Naturally, social media platforms were never as open, independent, and free as their owners liked to claim and their users liked to imagine—Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit were and always have been ad- and information-selling businesses first, and public forums second. Recent controversies have simply revealed how entrenched social media platforms are in the underlying political and economic structures of society. Far from realizing the potential of the "digital frontier" era of the internet, the social media era represents a re-colonization of sorts of the

[6] Myers, Steven Lee, Sheera Frenkel, and Tiffany Hsu. 2023. "Tweets Become Harder to Believe as Labels Change Meaning." *The New York Times*, April 26.

[7] Morrison, Sara. 2023. "The Ongoing and Increasingly Weird Reddit Blackout, Explained." *Vox*. Retrieved October 19, 2023 (https://www.vox.com/technology/2023/6/14/23760738/reddit-blackout-explained-subreddit-apollo-third-party-apps).

virtual lifeworld. As more and more people have adopted new platforms and virtual lifestyles—as virtual interaction has become more and more embedded in everyday life—they have been followed by powerful actors chasing new audiences and markets. As I discuss in Chapter 2, this exploration, congregation, and refeudalization process has repeated itself numerous times with each new great leap forward in communication technology. What sets the internet apart, however, is the degree to which virtual interaction has become embedded in the lifeworld—to the extent that computer-mediated communication ceases to be perceived as "mediated" at all (Sunstein 2017). In a world in which the information, people, and settings encountered by the user are perceived as a "natural" extension of the everyday, but are, in fact, algorithmically determined, the implications of this embeddedness are disturbing indeed. This knowledge provides crucial context to my subsequent investigations.

My goal in this dissertation is to understand virtually mediated political talk, and to that end I have set out to explore explicitly public and explicitly political discussion spaces. However, power relations suffuse every aspect of virtual interaction just as they suffuse every aspect of face-to-face interaction. I explore the types of virtual spaces I do because they are explicitly constructed and maintained by users to be spaces for political deliberation, but I do not make the mistake of assuming that such spaces are completely independent of the broader structural context, that their users are not a subset of a subset of internet users, or that the internet is not itself a segmented, fragmentary, and contingent series of relations and affordances rather than a static landscape.

This disconnect between deliberative dream and structural reality is no more obvious than in my analysis of Twitter discourse in Chapter 5. In this chapter, I discuss how Twitter's

self-stated *raison d'être* as "the internet's town square" helps as much as hinders deliberative talk, and regardless runs up against its *true* nature as a news aggregator, (mis)information disseminator, and ad-seller. From the perspective of the user, the conditions under which who sees what and who interacts with whom are deliberately left opaque. Twitter's openness does indeed allow for the creation of contingent, sentiment-based "affective publics" (Papacharisi 2015), as well as more durable networks founded on common identity, experience, and political organization, as found on "Black Twitter" (Carney 2016; Booten 2019; Thompson 2020). However, Twitter's openness just as easily allows for it to be reconceptualized as a semantic arena and a means for various bad faith actors (whether they be individual users, bots, or organizations) to manipulate public sentiment.

That being said, I would argue that there is still value, both politically and sociologically, in looking for genuine deliberative talk and genuine democratic community building online. Regardless of the current state of the information-industrial complex, scholars and activists of the earliest internet age still have a point: there remains great *potential* for virtual communication to enliven discourse, empower speakers, and provide new avenues of democratic participation and public engagement. "Is 'the internet' good for democracy?" is in itself not a particularly answerable question, though I hope this dissertation sheds some light on the relationship between virtual communication and democratic practice. But a question I still think worth asking in 2023 is: what can virtual publics accomplish in forging new solidarities and new understandings of democracy? And beyond that: what sorts of publics—virtual or otherwise—can attract the sorts of speakers and speaking styles that make this meaningful engagement possible?

Empirical, Intellectual, and Methodological Approaches

Throughout this dissertation I attempt to trace the contours of democratic political speech in online spaces. In the process, I interrogate concepts such as what it means to be "in public" or "a public," how deliberative speech is achieved, and how the context of speech limits one's possibilities. Empirically, I analyze three fundamentally similar virtual "spaces": a newspaper comment section, a reddit discussion thread, and a series of politically-minded tweets on Twitter. Architecturally, these spaces appear identical—nested text chains (comment threads) simulating face-to-face conversation. However, these contexts point to different ways of imagining and organizing publics. Both a discussion of inequality attached to a *Star Tribune* article and a discussion of UBI programs on r/Minneapolis are anchored to a physical community—Minneapolis proper—but these discussions betray differing senses of locality. The former context represents a highly limited and ad hoc "issue public" (Converse 1964), whereas the latter comes closer to recreating an enduring community with enduring ties. As a result the approach to, and content of political speech differs in these spaces as well. In contrast to both these contexts, Twitter represents a wide open public square, where any and every potential topic and mode of discussion is fair game. As earlier discussed, this lack of locality allows for unfettered, strategically motivated political speech characterized by definitional struggles and attempts to remap the semantic terrain.

Intellectually, this dissertation is in conversation with a number of different theoretical literatures. I begin by laying down a general foundation in media and communication studies: how have scholars addressed the relationship between democracy and mediated speech? How have new technological innovations pointed to new ways of understanding deliberative

democracy? Having laid down this groundwork, in my analysis of newspaper comments I turn to whether and how actors are attempting to recreate deliberative democracy in online spaces. This requires asking: what is "deliberative democracy" in the first place, what are the ideal conditions under which it flourishes, and does shifting the conversation to a virtual context help or hinder this endeavor? Following this analysis, I shift focus from the intent behind, to the content of online political speech. On the phenomenological level, how are users encountering virtual spaces? How do they imagine their interlocutors and the setting of discussion, and how does the application of these schemas shape political speech?

In my investigation of talk in the r/Minneapolis subreddit (Chapter 4), I draw extensively on Erving Goffman's frame analysis. Goffman's writings on frameworks and frames provides terminology for mapping out the "platform effects" of a particular virtual context, as well as exploring how people conceive of and participate in political discussion. In my final analysis of "semantic territorialization" on Twitter, I observe how political speech is approached when participants demonstrate little willingness to engage in good faith discussion, or even discussion at all. How are political frames deployed strategically, to sway public opinion and shape public discourse? With these questions in mind, I move beyond Goffman in drawing upon the broader literature centered on strategic frame analysis in political communication. On the whole, this dissertation aims to bring together diverse voices to understand not only virtually mediated political speech, but some of what motivates *any* form of political speech regardless of platform or context.

Methodologically, across the three empirically-oriented chapters of this dissertation, I employ a form of text-mediated interaction analysis that attempts to remain sensitive to the

nuances of discussion in virtual spaces. For each chapter I scrape web content and code comments in a systematic manner, but this coding stage is a preliminary step to a more interpretive engagement with the data. This type of analysis calls for a cultural sociological methodology that does not map very well onto traditional modes of qualitative research: On the micro-level, the examination of online speech would seem to require a kind of symbolic interactionist analysis, but of asynchronous "interactions" in which neither the observer nor the speakers are explicitly aware of the roles they are expected to perform or even whether they are truly speaking to each other or to an empty room. Not *every* online speech act engenders a response; not every action necessitates or implies interaction. On the macro-level, such an examination would seem to require an ethnographic approach, but of communities stripped of most of the traditional cultural markers associated with community—of material artifacts, of immediate interactions, of body language and turn-taking, of established role hierarchies, of stable or persistent presentations of the self; someone online could be anyone, many ones, or no one. The others we encounter online are not people but rather their residue, an assemblage of images and words that, combined, might point toward a person. As such, any qualitative analysis of online spaces as much resembles discourse analysis as much as conversational analysis, and historical analysis as much as ethnography.

Thus, particularly in Chapters 3 and 4, my methodological approach is in the tradition of the ethnomethodological conversational analysis of, e.g., Harold Garfinkel (1967) and Harvey Sacks (1995). I am concerned with how participants construct virtual spaces in and through text-mediated interaction, and am thus interested in both the content and communicative mechanics of online speech. However, virtual exchanges are phenomenologically distinct from

everyday conversations—comments and tweets are meant to be simultaneously interpreted as both speech and text by both participants and external audiences. While they frequently attempt to evoke the off-the-cuff immediacy of speech, comments are nonetheless deliberately constructed outside of the moment, drawing, in a much more conscious manner, on symbolic narratives, frames, and codes. In terms of online political speech, how do comments and commenters define, enact, and interpret different visions of "the good"? My methodological approach reflects as well, then, the discourse analysis and cultural sociology of, e.g., Jeffrey Alexander (2006) and Francesca Polletta (2006). Focusing as it does on how users strategically manipulate the meaning of civil discourses, the methodology of Chapter 5 is most firmly in this cultural sociological realm.

I have built my methodological approach around the analysis of online speech acts, while bearing in mind online comments' dual nature of "speech" and "text." Any speech act contains three elements: the illocutionary (the speaker's motivation by saying something), the locutionary (what is accomplished in saying something) and the perlocutionary—what are the consequences of saying something to others. In my coding frameworks I attempted to capture these "by," "in," and "of," dimensions of online political talk. This framework is most apparent in my analysis of *Star Tribune* comments, where I explicitly code comments in terms of illocutionary intent—"proffers" versus "gestures"—and perlocutionary effects—"volleys" versus "assists"—with some attention paid to the locutionary content in terms of tone and style. In contrast, my approach to the r/Minneapolis study focuses discourse analysis, focusing as I do on the implicit framing of political speech. Here, I code comments and responses in terms of the types of politics they're evoking: moral (appeals to urbanism and environmentalism), ethical

(appeals to equity, opportunity, prosperity, and autonomy), and procedural (appeals to efficacy and efficiency). In my analysis of Twitter, I collect all instances of definitional struggles concerning democracy across a two-week period of heightened rhetoric just prior to the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Here, my approach to locutionary analysis is looser and more inductive, coding tweets in terms of how speakers evoke appeals to morals of tradition, purity, and godliness as they strategically attempt to reorient the political discourse.

Chapter Organization

Here follows a more detailed overview of subsequent chapters in this dissertation. Chapter 2, "Democracy, Technology, and Mediated Political Speech," places contemporary discussions of virtual deliberative democracy within the broader historical context. Primarily a literature review and intellectual history, this chapter traces how various great leaps forward in communication technology expanded potential audiences and promised new means of imagining democracy and civil society. The emancipatory potential of these technological breakthroughs, however, has never been fully realized, as new divisions inevitably emerge and old power interests inevitably arise to exploit new audiences. The relationship between democracy and new communication technologies is characterized by a "boom and bust" cycle of congregation and homophilization. A potential new common civic culture emerges only to fall prey to processes of fragmentation and refeudalization.

For example, scholars such as Toqueville and Habermas speak of the importance of a free press in giving voice to a rising bourgeois political class and establishing the foundations of a nascent liberal public sphere. The bourgeois "society of letters" paved the way for political

communities to imagine themselves *as* societies, autonomous and distinct from the state, and with their own interests. Early newspapers, conceived as a means of speaking truth to power, became the primary means of shaping and expressing public opinion. While this early public sphere imagined itself as representing the "general" interest, however, it was firmly rooted in the bourgeois class. The rising influence of the press led to an expanded readership and the "massification" of politics. New stakeholders emerged whose class interests proved antithetical to those of the bourgeoisie and the concept of a common political culture, rooted in liberal democratic values, began to erode.

Concurrently, the press came to be a commercially viable industry in itself. In selling to a mass audience, riven by political differences, newspapers abandoned their political role and adopted a position of scrupulous neutrality—all the better to sell ad space to the widest variety of actors and maximize profit opportunities. Thus print media shifted away from acting as an expression of public opinion to acting as an institution in itself, with its own interests and motives—interests and motives that reflected those of its powerful ownership. Print media's retreat from a self-consciously active role in the public sphere contributed to the demise of a common political culture.

The technological developments of the 20th century followed a similar dynamic. The emergence of television again promised to bring together and inform an even larger political community. For the first time, not just hundreds or thousands but millions and tens of millions of people were able to experience events simultaneously. This newfound immediacy and intimacy allowed viewers to imagine themselves as part of a greater national or even global community; but, again, as viewership grew a sense of a shared civil sphere slipped away. Television's primary

mode of expression is oral and visual—inundating viewers with a succession of images and soundbites, but without accompanying discourses of truth-telling. Television news became increasingly centered on actors and events rather than narrative contexts, blurring the line between information and entertainment and portraying politics in particular as a form of gameplay. Audiences were simultaneously massified and individualized; individual viewers were left on their own to sort out the signal from the noise. The dislocation of news from context and the fragmentation of meaning led to an even more frustrated and apathetic citizenry. Democracy in the age of television reflects a trend toward the homogenization and concentration of corporate media power on the one hand and the fragmentation and dislocation of meaning on the other.

Finally, as with previous technological transformations, the internet simultaneously accelerates and undercuts mass media processes. A shared public discourse remains just as elusive, but the internet does offer a means of escaping (in part) the totalizing impulse of mass media conglomerates. Participating in virtual public spheres means being an active *user* rather than a passive *reader* or *viewer*. In the process, where a medium such as television blends forms of expression such as "news" and "entertainment," the internet upends the mode of communication itself, blurring the boundary between producer and consumer. The internet is a medium of instantaneous production, dissemination, and interpretation, rendering it far more difficult for powerful media actors to control the message.

Additionally, the virtual community is simultaneously global and local. Finding a local community of interest, free from state and sectional influence, has never been easier. However, while geographical distances and local identities have become less salient in the internet age, issues of boundaries, inclusion, and exclusion remain. The fundamental challenges of political

communication—to abide by common speech norms and a commitment to understanding one another—are just as pressing in the online context as in face-to-face interaction, even as they appear in new configurations. Thus, while the potential remains for the internet to serve as a digital commons, bringing diverse communities of interest together onto neutral terrain, it just as often amplifies dangerous forms of exclusion and disinformation. The relationship between democracy, technology, and political communication will always be complex. New bases for expanding audiences and bringing together new political communities might emerge, but the same obstacles will persist.

Where Chapter 2 maps out the broader historical terrain of mediated speech, Chapter 3, "The Deliberative Potential of Online Spaces," focuses on the specific challenges and opportunities of online political communication. How might online spaces become virtual publics where deliberative speech might flourish? This chapter addresses two goals: first, I draw upon the deliberative democratic theory of Habermas, Benhabib, Young, and others to establish some explicit criteria for defining deliberative spaces, both in virtual and face-to-face contexts. Namely, deliberative spaces must a) welcome all participants, b) establish and enforce common speech norms of validity and understandability, and c) be universally recognized as public spaces where participants anticipate co-presence with others.

Subsequently, I apply these criteria to a case study of comments attached to an online newspaper article concerning economic inequality in North Minneapolis. I focus on this particular arena of online speech because, in theory, newspaper comment sections represent a form of ad hoc "issue public," where interested stakeholders can gather together to debate salient topics. This deliberative ideal is embraced by newspapers themselves, who seek to build diverse

virtual communities of readers, free to share their unique insights in "substantive, mutually, respectful exchanges."

However, while these virtual readership communities might seem attractive candidates for fostering deliberative speech, I observe that they too often fail to reach this ideal. On its own, this observation is hardly surprising—the deliberative ideal is difficult to reach in *any* context—but there are many aspects of online communication that make deliberative speech in virtual settings uniquely challenging. As I am interested in participants' willingness to engage in deliberative speech, a large portion of my analysis focuses on illocutionary intent rather than perlocutionary consequences—what are the speakers attempting to accomplish in their speech, and what are the results? In dividing comments and replies between gestures and proffers, volleys and assists, I reveal that online communication norms impose some special constraints. Many comments were mere gestures, a form of heckling or commentary that imagines an audience in the most general sense and certainly does not anticipate a response. Other comments did serve as "proffers" by staking an argumentative claim and assuming an engaged and critical audience; however, the sorts of exchanges that ensued were too often brief and limited.

The ad hoc issue publics that comment sections represent are sufficiently open, but they fail to satisfy the criteria of reasonableness and publicity. Online anonymity, in particular, acts as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, anonymous, open participation can cancel out extrinsic factors such as bias and prejudice that have so long hampered face-to-face political communication. On the other hand—as would be obvious to anyone who has spent appreciable time in comment sections can attest—online anonymity more often encourages dishonesty, disinformation, harassment, and other forms of bad faith engagement.

Such issues can potentially be addressed through rigorous moderation. Of greater concern is how the architecture of the medium itself encourages brevity, generalization, and confrontation. Deliberation requires a firm sense of co-presence—in anticipating an audience of fellow stakeholders, participants are induced to follow mutual standards of speech and recognition. Online speech too often lacks this critical sense of co-presence, rendering it exceedingly difficult to keep track of speaker and listener and to distinguish speaker from speech. Good faith attempts at online speech require extra care in extending gestures of co-presence and establishing one's own bona fides as an interested stakeholder. A few participants do, indeed, attempt such gestures by couching their arguments in biographical detail. More often, however, even good faith discussion is driven by dry, perspective-less, argument from nowhere. Ultimately, on a phenomenological level, ad hoc issues publics act as a *space* but not a *place*. Fleeting online settings fail to provide a sense of enduring community or accountability to others.

Both Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, "Framing Online Speech," explore how online participants attempt to establish a sense of "locality" to anchor their discussion. In Chapter 4 I again examine comments attached to a contemporary news item—in this case an article concerning a pilot universal basic income program—but this time within the context of a broader virtual community: the r/Minneapolis subreddit. Both *Star Tribune* comment sections and r/Minneapolis evoke a sense of "place"—Minneapolis proper—and both potentially serve as issue publics. But while comment sections are strictly ad hoc, subreddits such as r/Minneapolis exist above and beyond the comment chains themselves. I.e., r/Minneapolis residents operate under a much more

elaborate participation and setting framework—a "coffee house" community within which various topic-driven issue publics are nested.

Star Tribune comments rely exclusively on the shared assumption that they are Minneapolitans speaking to Minneapolitans to build a sense of community. There exists a physical locale "out there" anchoring speech, but this connection is tenuous and difficult to maintain without concerted effort. Members of r/Minneapolis, by contrast, can draw upon dual, mutually reinforcing localities. Minneapolis proper still serves as an anchoring point, but the subreddit itself provides an enduring sense of "place" with enduring identities, norms, standards, inside jokes, and meta-commentary. As such, I argue that these sorts of virtual communities provide more fertile ground for productive and deliberative political talk. In the discussion I analyzed participants were more willing to hold others accountable as stakeholders, were more focused on keeping the conversation local and avoiding grand moral claims, and were quicker to enforce community civility standards. Naturally, the constraints inherent in online text-based speech remain, but building and reinforcing a sense of place goes a long way in mitigating these factors.

Where Chapter 3 is primarily an illocutionary and perlocutionary analysis (what are speakers attempting to accomplish in their speech, and how do others respond?), Chapter 4 focuses more on the locutionary content of that speech. What sorts of assumptions do participants make in navigating political speech? What frameworks are participants operating under, and what sorts of semantic and interpretive frames are they applying? In examining the mechanics of online political speech I draw extensively on Erving Goffman's frame analysis. While Goffman is more concerned with complexities of interpreting and navigating face-to-face

interaction, his insights can be applied to virtual contexts as well. Goffman provides a useful vocabulary for mapping out the terrain of virtual spaces in-depth, allowing me to explore the setting, participation, expression, and discussion frameworks involved in navigating online political speech.

With these frameworks in place, I am then able to trace the contours of a "master frame" (Benford and Snow 2000) of political talk. All political talk—that is, talk about politics and mutually defined political subjects—is oriented toward the public good, how it can be achieved, who can lay claim to it, and whether competing interpretations of it are truly irresolvable. There exist "higher" and "lower" levels of political talk, however. The highest order, moral political talk, occurs when participants anticipate insuperable disagreements over what constitutes the good and/or what goods *must* take precedence over others. "What *is* good?" Ethical political talk, by contrast, involves assuming that there is substantive agreement over goods but not necessarily over their relative priority. "What good should we be pursuing at this moment?" Finally, procedural political talk involves inferred agreement over both goods and their priority, with the discussion shifting toward the practicalities of *realizing* those goods. "How do we bring about the good?"

In analyzing political talk over UBI in r/Minneapolis, I reveal sustained efforts to keep arguments at the level of the ethical and the procedural. Participants largely operated under the assumption that they were Minneapolitans engaging with Minneapolitans over issues of common concern; that they all valued their community and wanted what was best for it. When more inflammatory moral political talk broke out, participants were quick to "downshift" and substitute moral political frames for ethical or procedural ones. This willingness to agree that

agreement is possible comes down to both the topic of discussion (UBI resists easy ideological framing) and, more importantly, the ability of community members to evoke a palpable sense of place.

Chapter 5, "Twitter and Semantic Territorialization," explores a virtual setting where this sense of place is far more elusive and, by extension, the political talk tends to be far more strategic. Where previously I had focused on "good faith" political talk, in Chapter 5 I examine how users deploy "bad faith" political talk. How do actors attempt to use social media platforms and communication tactics to establish favorable narratives and influence public opinion? Here I shift my analysis of virtual settings to the social media platform Twitter, with its own communicative constraints and interactive frameworks. Twitter, contrary to the settings discussed in Chapter 3 and 4, is imagined to be universal and placeless—a wide open "public square" rather than a comparatively intimate and limited town hall. This lack of locality, in addition to architectural constraints such as character limits, renders Twitter ideal for a form of strategic "gameplay." In a practice of what I call "semantic territorialization," actors do not advance good faith arguments so much as exploit ambiguities to lay claim to the political high ground. In particular, I focus on how right-wing Twitter users deploy a fragment of a claim—"we're a republic, not a democracy!"—as a means of softening the ground for more radical, authoritarian, anti-liberal, and anti-democratic arguments. In collecting and analyzing over a thousand tweets from a two-week period, I observe how right-wing Twitter users seek to reframe "democracy" as something dangerous, subversive, and even *communist*. In the process, these Twitter users are able to legitimize minoritarianism, the elimination of voting rights, and the challenging of election results as valid political positions.

While the previous chapter was exclusively in conversation with Goffman, Chapter 5 involves a discussion with the broader frame analysis literature. This chapter hopes to demonstrate how conceptions of the frame commonly found in political media analysis—as static "packages" of meaning—need to be updated for the social media age. I argue that on platforms such as Twitter, where users act as simultaneous content producers and consumers, frames are deployed far more contingently than they have been supposed to in other studies. While I agree that frames are deployed strategically, I argue that frames do not just appear in higher order institutional attempts to sway public opinion but in all stages and all levels of political talk. Individuals, in addition to media corporations, government agencies, and political campaigns, deploy frames as a practical means of organizing political speech.

Definitional struggles such as the ever-present "republic-not-democracy" demonstrate how settled political truths are always open to contestation and radical frame substitutions are always available. The simultaneous homogenization and homophilization of virtual spaces means that virtual denizens are simultaneously participating in vast open forums and narrow, exclusionary echo chambers. As a result, radical reinterpretations of "universal" political values tend to emerge and propagate spontaneously and unpredictably. Semantic territorialization represents this point of emergence. Authoritarian-minded Twitter users exploit the openness of the platform to redraw the political map and act as the thin end of the wedge in justifying anti-democratic rhetoric.

How Virtual Spaces Shape Talk

Can virtual spaces be conducive to the sort of reasonable discussion and democratic will-formation that Habermas and other deliberative democrats envision? Or is virtually mediated communication more conducive to different forms of interaction and public engagement, such as spectacle, performativity, and identity-formation? This dissertation is an examination of both how people interact online and how they intersubjectively construct the spaces within which such interactions occur. How actors imagine their sense of "place" has a profound impact on the potential for democratic deliberation online. Not all virtual spaces are created equal, and as I demonstrate the type of political talk varies greatly depending on how actors perceive and present themselves to their audience, how they evoke various senses of "locality" in their interactions, and how they apply various phenomenological frameworks and discursive frames to the topic of discussion.

As is common with the rise of new communication technology, dreams of the internet as an open, emancipatory, and cosmopolitan space have met the reality of disinformation, division, and dissensus. The internet is only the newest site of engagement between structural forces endemic to democracy, but it is important to acknowledge just how much online spaces have altered the ways in which people engage each other and the world. More than any other technological innovation, the internet allows for the contraction of time and space, the instantaneous dissemination of information, and the establishment of heretofore impossible to imagine social networks. I suspect that about as much free and rational deliberation occurs in virtual as in "real life" spaces, regardless of the emancipatory potential of online talk, but people

nonetheless still choose to engage in politics online, and treat such talk as a matter of real value and consequence.

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CHAPTER 2: DEMOCRACY, TECHNOLOGY, AND MEDIATED POLITICAL SPEECH

Introduction

Communication technologies and the democratic imaginary are closely linked. Benedict Anderson (2006) famously traced the idea of the nation, and the origin of modern liberal democracies, back to the rise of print capitalism. The emergence of new communication technologies led to radical reorientation in how actors conceived of truth, time, and space. The availability of materials printed in vernacular languages undermined the conception that only "sacred" languages offered exclusive access to the truth. The growing, horizontally configured community of letters undermined the conception of a hierarchically oriented society, contributing to the emergence of the idea of a public sphere independent from the state (Habermas 1989). In short, according to Anderson and other scholars of nationalism and modernity (Habermas 1989; Giddens 1990; Bauman 1999), political society as we know it could not exist without a corresponding technological revolution in communication.

From the printing press (Tocqueville 2004), to television (Greenberg 1964), to the internet (Negroponte 1995), various great leaps forward in communication technology have been held up as emancipatory and radical transformations of the public sphere. In collapsing time and space, such revolutions allow for ever-larger numbers of citizens to engage with each other and with current events, to transcend parochial interests and geographic boundaries, and to bind citizens together with new means of imagining community and democracy. And yet, while newspapers played a crucial role in the initial emergence of a public sphere (Habermas 1989),

television drew together mass audiences and dramatically altered public opinion formation (McLuhan 1962), and the internet ushered in a new "information age" (Castells 1997), the changes mass media has wrought on democratic society have never been as total or complete as initially imagined. Communication technologies might have altered, in part, the ways people interact with, and relate to, each other, but they have yet to succeed in overcoming the same problems that have always riven democracies—problems such as the the unequal distribution of power, the elite manipulation of public opinion, and the inability to reconcile legitimate differences in interest with a common civic culture. Mass media, for all its ability to draw together newer, larger, global audiences and communities, cannot transcend political differences, merely push them into different configurations and onto different platforms.

The following is an intellectual history of the relationship between democracy, civil society, and communication technology. With each new revolution in mass media, these accounts begin with optimism for their emancipatory potential before gradually coming to reckon with how these new media landscapes are inevitably colonized by existing systems of power. This is not to understate such technologies' transformative potential—that, too, will be obvious in the following sections—only to assert that the relationship between mass media and political power is complex and multidimensional. The next section, "Mass Media and Democracy" will cover the emergence of the liberal public sphere in the late 18th century, and the roles, both cultural and institutional, newspapers and television have played in shaping public opinion and defining the boundaries of civil society. Subsequently, "The Internet Age" will broaden the focus slightly to the sociological dimensions of virtual communication and virtual communities before

returning to the relationship between the internet and the public sphere just prior to the rise of social media and the next great expansion and integration of communication technology.

On the whole, this chapter will demonstrate that how we talk about politics will always be shaped by the broader, dialectical relationship between homogenization and homophilization in political communication. The advent of a new communications technology is heralded—by scholars and contemporary audiences alike—as a means of incorporating more into the public sphere, bridging status divides, and providing a platform in which consensus can be forged from a variety of viewpoints. In short, each new leap forward in communication technology becomes a new basis for imagining a democratic public and of reconciling difference and sameness. However, this newfound optimism eventually confronts old realities—various structural divisions (re-)assert themselves, and various interest groups begin to stake out their own fiefdoms in the new media landscape. Thus even as a mass audience emerges and more and more engage with new media, new spheres of influence begin to exert their influence and dreams of a new democratic imaginary and common civic culture begin to fade.

Mass Media and Democracy

A perennial question for both sociologists and political theorists (Weber 2004; Schumpeter 1950; Lipset 1960) is how to reconcile democratic government with an increasingly complex and bureaucratized state. How, and to what extent is the state a legitimate expression of its citizens' interests, and what instruments are available to citizens in making informed decisions on good government? A free press, and more generally, access to mass communication technologies, has long been held up (Toqueville 2004) as a vital component of any functioning democracy. The

press, according to classical political theory, is the foundation of a healthy civil society, drawing together diverse components of society, building associational ties, and helping to foster a common civil discourse and standard of rhetoric.

Alexis de Toqueville (2004:78) makes the case for the importance of a free press, arguing that "the sovereignty of the people and the liberty of the press may therefore be correlative." The necessity of a free press goes beyond merely serving as a check on government overreach or speaking truth to power, however. As older traditional ties of kinship and tradition have dissolved, the press serves as *the* institution binding democratic societies together, fostering a new, civil solidarity.

> When men are no longer united among themselves by firm and lasting ties, it is impossible to obtain the co-operation of any great number of them unless you can persuade every man whose help you require that his private interest obliges him voluntarily to unite his exertions to the exertions of all others.
> …
> Newspapers therefore become the more necessary in proportion as men become more equal and individualism more to be feared. To suppose that they only serve to protect freedom would be to diminish their importance: they maintain civilisation. (Tocqueville 2004:220)

The emergence of the press, and of mass communication, is what makes participation in democratic societies possible: "newspapers make associations, and associations make newspapers" (Tocqueville 2004:221).

Tocqueville was, naturally, speaking from a time when modern democracies and modern industrial societies were still in their infancy, and subsequent evaluations of news media and the role they play in civil society have been less than sanguine. As the franchise expanded beyond landed white men, as the power of a select handful of news institutions have increased, and as the demands of the administrative state have grown, the press has periodically come under fire

for failing to properly inform its readers, sowing division, sensationalizing the news, and reinforcing capitalist and state power.

Habermas (1989), like Tocqueville, recognizes the importance of a free press to the early development of democracy and a robust public sphere. In the late 18th century, the press emerged as an important means of expression for a newly prominent bourgeois class. Educated, liberal, rational, and literary, the bourgeois class employed the press as a means of debating salient political issues, articulating the general (as opposed to parochial and self-centered) interest of "the public," and holding the power of the state in check. Newspapers, at this point in history still "small handicraft business" (1989:181), were explicitly political organs and part of a broader, rarefied bourgeois society of letters oriented toward building up a common civil culture and against the state. The liberal public sphere emerged as the bourgeoisie was able to wrest the intellectual monopoly away from the church and the state, and defend "society," generally construed as a separate and autonomous realm of thought and political activity. The press played a vital role in helping both to shape and represent public opinion as the only legitimate source of the law in democratic societies.

This era of the late 18th to early 19th century would prove to be the golden age of the press (and the liberal public sphere more generally). Habermas asserted that the small size and cultural and economic homogeneity of the bourgeois class meant it was easy for them to imagine their interests as the "general" interest of society, overcome superficial status distinction and build up bonds of civil solidarity. At the same time, the foundations of bourgeois political theory were the fundamental equality of all before the law and the notion that democratic legitimacy hinges upon the participation of all stakeholders. This democratization of the public sphere was

an inevitable result of the tension between bourgeois liberal sphere's original class limitations and its principled openness. "Electoral reform was the topic of the nineteenth century," wrote Habermas, "no longer the principle of publicity as such, as had been true in the eighteenth century, but of the enlargement of the public" (1989:133). As a result, it quickly became clear that the bourgeois' interests were not necessarily "society's" interests, and class divisions could not so easily be ignored or papered over with high minded rhetoric.

Concurrently, the rise of industrial capitalism exacerbated these class divisions even further, and undermined the notion that private life produced relatively equal persons who in public discourse might address the general or public interest. The inequalities always present in civil society ceased to be "bracketed" and became instead the basis of discussion and action. The conception of politics shifted from a society of private individuals organizing to protect themselves against the state to the state increasingly serving as the arbiter between competing class interests and guarantor of social rights. These developments are not, in themselves, bad or unnecessary, but they did prove fatal for the public sphere as originally construed.

As Habermas writes, the "refeudalization" and fragmentation of society replaced a common civic culture of engagement and rational debate with one of passive consumption. Mass media followed mass democracy and mass industrialization, as shallow, homogenized art, literature, and commentary became the only means of connecting such disparate interests. As a result, Habermas argues, political discourse is hollowed out and public opinion is defanged—[t]he world fashioned by mass media is a public sphere in appearance only" (1989:171). The role of the press in the massification of politics is one increasingly dominated by capitalism. In attempting to sell to mass audiences, riven by political differences, newspapers

abandoned their political role; the press was "released from the pressure to take sides ideologically; now it could abandon its polemical stance and concentrate on the profit opportunities for a commercial business" (1989:184). Newspapers saw their role increasingly as (commercially viable) neutral purveyors of information, all the while selling lucrative ad space to whomever was willing to pay.

Walter Lippmann, reporter and political commentator, provides the most famous polemic on the relationship between mass media and democracy in industrial America. In *Public Opinion* (1922) and subsequently *The Phantom Public* (1925), Lippmann paints a bleak picture of the state of mass democracy in the 1920s United States. Democratic theory, Lippmann argues, places too much of an emphasis on an "informed" public naturally endowed for self-government. The emergence of such a public, and such a rarefied public sphere, has failed to materialize: "the ideal of the omnicompetent, sovereign citizen is, in my opinion...unattainable" (Lippmann 1925:362). Rather, the "public" such as it is, is composed of self-interested individuals whose curiosity toward, and understanding of, public affairs is always shallow, fragmentary and incomplete. The failure of mass democracies to cultivate a truly informed public rests upon both structural and individual limitations. Structurally, the public lives in a chaotic, complex world, where their attention and social contacts are necessarily limited, and so must rely upon news stories that are increasingly simplified and distorted. Individually, the limitations of the human mind prevent true understanding except of an exceedingly narrow range of topics—particularly as citizens are distracted by their own interests and affairs. As Lippmann put it:

> The individual man does not have opinions on all public affairs. He does not know how to direct public affairs. He does not know what is happening, why it is happening, what ought to happen. I cannot imagine how he could know, and there is not the least reason for thinking, as mystical democrats have thought, that the compounding of individual

> ignorances in masses of people can produce a continuous directing force in public affairs…(1925:362)

The individual citizen, according to Lippmann, is, and can only aspire to be, a political dilettante.

The role of news media in "informing" the public is limited by both citizens' and newspapers' commercial concerns: "we expect the newspaper to serve us with truth however unprofitable the truth may be. For this difficult and often dangerous service...we expected to pay until recently the smallest coin turned out be the mint" (Lippmann 1922:321). To be informed, the public gets what it pays for. Beyond commercial interests, however, the press's task within advanced democracy is unenviable, if not impossible, responsible as it is for recording, packaging, and disseminating the "truth" for mass consumption on a daily basis. The press can either provide quantity or quality, but not both, and thus the public is provided only with a simplified reconstruction of the truth. The public is "not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations. And although we have to act in that environment, we have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can manage with it" (1922:16).

As a result, Lippman argued, modern, bureaucratic, administrative democracies cannot possibly rely upon an informed public to make decisions and guide policies—that role must be taken up by a body of highly trained and specialized political elites. The role of the public, and of public opinion, is largely passive. Administrative democracies only require the public in moments of rupture and crisis; only then must the public step and decide who should solve the problem and ensure the government does not overstep its mandate. "The public will arrive in the middle of the third act and will leave before the last curtain, having stayed just long enough perhaps to decide who is the hero and who the villain of the piece" (1925:365). The aim of the

news media, then, should be to educate the public just enough that they will know who to turn to in the moment of crisis.

The Press and Television News Media in the Late 20th Century

Commentary on mass media in the 20th century followed a similar pattern to what Tocqueville, Habermas, and Lippmann, observed regarding the 18th and 19th centuries. Scholars—both at the time and looking back historically—express an initial outburst of enthusiasm for new media only to become steadily more disillusioned and disenchanted. New communication innovations are initially lauded as emancipatory, spreading information to new audiences, and providing them with new means of engagement and expression. Hopes for a newly expanded and well-informed public, however, subsequently encounter the reality of institutionalization and corporate monopolization. The media ownership class closes ranks and asserts ever greater control over the media landscape, even as audiences fragment and polarize. This "boom and bust" cycle of emancipation, congregation, institutionalization, and homophilization would repeat itself with subsequent advances in communication technology.

Bagdikian (1973, 1990) spoke to this tension in observing the evolution of print media in the 20th century, as the initial Tocquevillian enthusiasm for print media confronted corporatization and the rise of a new media ownership class. Beginning in the post-World War II era, newspaper ownership shifted from small groups or single families to large corporate chains, and news organizations were increasingly run according to the same conventional standards as other business sectors. From the bottom, to meet the demands of an increasingly more educated and cosmopolitan postwar audience, the journalist class began to professionalize. Where once

journalism was seen as a working-class occupation, and the training process something akin to apprenticeship, the 1940s-1960s saw the rise of an institutional, academic approach to journalism. New journalists "brought a different view into the newsroom—conditioned by formal study and book knowledge of politics, social forces, and economics as opposed to the simplistic standards previously accepted on most papers" (1973:571). These twin processes of the corporatization of leadership and the professionalization of the journalist class has produced an enduring struggle over message control. Journalists, better educated and more conscious of their role within civil society, began pushing back against institutional constraints and an increasingly monolithic and politically conservative ownership class.

Such struggles are sporadic and ineffectual in the face of media monopolization, however. By 1990, Bagdikian (1990:21) noted, "twenty-three corporations control most of the business in daily newspapers, magazines, television, books and motion pictures" leading to a full-scale "private ministry of information." Bagdikian observed that such monopolization is disastrous for a functioning democracy; corporate monopolization inevitably produces message homogenization, limiting readers' access to information and tightly controlling how that information is disseminated. Imperfect as it was, the "yellow journalism" era of the 19th and early 20th centuries, with its smaller-scale and idiosyncratic media fiefdoms, at least allowed a closer approximation of a "marketplace" of ideas, with hundreds of smaller dailies and alternative newspapers able to compete for an audience's attention. Such competition did not always produce higher quality journalism, but it did produce and cultivated a greater diversity of opinion. In other words, "contrary to the diversity that comes with a large number of small,

diverse, media competitors under true free enterprise, dominant giant firms that command the nature of the business produce an increasingly similar output" (Bagdikian 1990:243).

Such output will always, according to much critical (Gramsci; Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, etc.) and postmodern theory, reflect the conscious and unconscious values of media ownership class and the capitalist class on the whole, regardless of an individual outlet's perceived partisan tilt. Herbert Schiller (1989) feared for the increasing "privatization" of culture. The expansion of communications technology, from newspapers to radio to television has dramatically expanded the power of those who own the "commanding heights" of the information industry. Through these technologies, a dwindling number of media conglomerates are effectively able to shape the politics of the possible, constricting the flow of information and continually nudging popular discourse toward the interests of the powerful. The monopolization of media means, again, that control of information becomes a systemic rather than personal or idiosyncratic phenomenon,

> achieved ordinarily by a loose though effective institutional process. It utilizes the education of journalists and other media professionals, built-in penalties and rewards for doing what is expected, norms presented as objective rules, and the occasional but telling direct intrusion from above. The main lever is the internalization of values. (1989:8)

Notably, Schiller's fears reflect an era *before* the coming dominance of cable news and "infotainment," where the line between ideology and information has almost disappeared entirely.

Schiller notes that privatization of public discourse by "big media" began in earnest with the postwar "Red Scare" of the 1940s and 1950s. In stoking anti-communist and anti-Soviet fears to a fever pitch, the American corporate class was able to create a politics of the possible

centered on continual expansion of American businesses' global economic dominance. In promoting a political culture defined by "the muddled debate, the absence of public opinion and expression" and a "popular culture saturated with political propaganda" (1989:16-17) big media has worked to eliminate not only socialism but the entire concept of government intervention in the public interest. In linking socialism and social democracy to Soviet totalitarianism in the public consciousness, "the most minimal social reforms can be presented as dangerous" (1989:18). "Big business" becomes the only viable alternative to "big government," which is presented as so corrupt, inefficient, and power hungry that only "the market" and "free enterprise" is able to hold it in check. Government's expansion into the social domain, via social security, health care, and education, are portrayed as insidious threats to "freedom" and a slippery slope down into full state oppression. Big Government's "coercive" (the military, the FBI, and the CIA) rather than "social" aspects, conversely, are either mildly criticized as "too bureaucratic" or ignored completely in media narratives—unsurprising, Schiller observes, as these instruments are necessary for maintaining and expanding corporate power (1989:19).

Finally, big media's anti-Soviet, anticommunist project effectively hobbled the American labor movement. The Red Scare hysteria, and subsequent legislation such as the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act was used as a pretext to force organized labor to oust communist members lest they lose necessary government protection from their employers. The result was the complete acquiescence of American labor to U.S. foreign policy and military intervention, and thus to the overseas expansion of American corporate interests. Domesticated and defanged, American labor turned to increasingly narrow and parochial concerns and thus found itself isolated and without allies as the U.S. economy began to de-industrialize and outsource labor in the 1970s and 1980s.

Schiller described "big media" as an all-powerful, hegemonic force, capable of invading and colonizing public discourse so completely that Americans are not even aware that their political and civic horizons have been narrowed. Other scholars of media and civil society, while not denying the worrying trend of monopolization, have nonetheless pushed back against such extremely deterministic accounts. Drawing upon social constructionism (Berger and Luckmann 1966) generally and, in particular Goffman's (1974) concept of the "frame," such scholars (Tuchman 1978; Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Kellner 1990; Gamson and Stuart 1992; Gamson 1992) describe both a more nuanced relationship between media producers and consumers, as well as open up a space for resistance to hegemonic control.

In such accounts, meaning is structured—and, indeed, an actor's ability to shape narratives and frame issues is often proportionate with their material resources. However, frames are always open to contestation and reappropriation. Such accounts pay attention as well to how a message is received and interpreted in addition to how it is sent. Media production and consumption is thus described as a complex, multidirectional relationship between countless actors and organizations—"a series of arenas in which symbolic contests are carried out among competing sponsors of meaning" (Gamson and Stuart 1992). Gamson and Modigliani (1989), for example, examine how the popular discourse on nuclear power evolved over the course of the twentieth century. Prior to the 1970s nuclear power was framed optimistically, as a good and necessary technological achievement. However, this "progress" frame came to be challenged—notably *before* Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, and other high profile nuclear disasters—by a number of institutional and civil society organizations who sought to reframe nuclear power in terms of its environmental risks, its prohibitive costs, energy corporations' lack

of public accountability, and the possibility of nuclear material being repurposed for weapons. Media institutions, far from entrenching powerful hegemonic interests, often worked against them and amplified challengers' competing frames.

This phenomenon is due to the distinction between and interplay of the "parallel systems" of discourse and public opinion. Discourse framing and public opinion formation are part of the same process: "media discourse is part of the process by which individuals construct meaning, and public opinion is part of the process by which journalists and other cultural entrepreneurs develop and crystallize meaning in the public discourse" (Gamson and Modigliani 1989:2). There can never be a strict causal relationship, where discourse produces public opinion; rather discourse emerges only through shifting and incomplete processes of competing narratives. These frames, no matter how hegemonic, "ebb and flow in prominence and are constantly revised and updated to accommodate new events" (1989:2).

Stuart Hall's twin concepts of encoding and decoding describe this process well. In encoding messages, cultural producers draw upon a variety of technical practices and discursive formations—"topics, treatments, agendas, events, personnel, images of the audience, 'definitions of the situation'"—both from within their specific institutional context (television broadcasters, the press, etc.) as well as from the "wider socio-cultural and political structure of which they are a differentiated part" (Hall 1960:164-165). On the other end, the audience(s) decode the message according to their own cultural-historical contexts and interpretive frameworks (Hall 1960:165). While there is some correspondence between the encoding and decoding processes, it is not absolute; encoding and decoding are "differentiated moments within the totality formed by the social relations of the communicative process as a whole" (Hall 1960:165). Hall thus

problematizes the "linear" model of communication in which a sender, desiring to produce a specific effect, sends out a message, which is then passively received by an audience. Rather the successful production of mass culture consists of a chain of "moments" or stages—production, distribution/circulation, use, and reproduction—each of which is made up of a complex matrix of social relations and "conditions of existence," and none of which necessarily lead to the next moment in the chain (Hall 1960:164).

In this regard, dominant ideologies can never be wholly disseminated or absorbed by an audience in precisely the manner that the sender intends. This is not to say that there is an absolute polysemy of interpretations available to the audience—"[u]nless they are wildly aberrant, encoding will have the effect of constructing some of the limits and parameters within which decodings will operate" (Hall 1960:170)—but the encoding and decoding moments are never identical, and any correspondence between them is necessarily constructed.

> In speaking of dominant meanings, then, we are not talking about a one-sided process which governs how all events will be signified. It consists of the "work" required to enforce, win plausibility for and command as legitimate a decoding of the event within the limit of dominant definitions in which it has been connotatively signified. (Hall 1960:173)

Hall describes a process in which both media producers and consumers work to create meaning: producers might have enormous structural and material advantages in pushing their own frames, but there is no guarantee that the reading, listening, and watching public will respond in precisely the way they intend.

Technological transformations have played a significant role in this process as well. Compared to print media, the advent of television represented a profound shift in how messages were transmitted and received. In compressing time and space as never before (just as the

internet would accelerate this process even further), television created a newfound immediacy of experience (Gamson et al. 1992). Viewers would be able to watch events unfold in real time on television newscasts, and, most importantly, be forced to interpret and draw connections between a vast proliferation of images. Marshall McLuhan (1964) draws a distinction between "hot" media, such as print news, which feature high description and low audience involvement, and "cool," media, such as television news, which feature low description and place a heavier interpretive burden on the audience.

Technological innovations such as the television thus create two seemingly contradictory tendencies: TV draws an ever more unified, national, even global audience together, but the messages it transmits are ever more fragmentary, immediate, and incomplete (Gamson et al. 1992). The result, as McLuhan (1962, 1964) observed, is the creation of a "global village" whose primary mode of expression is oral and image-based rather than textual. Fellow media scholar and philosopher Brandon Taylor (1987:103) described the television media landscape as a "stitched-together collage of equi-important simultaneously existing phenomena largely divorced from geography and material history and transported to the living rooms and studies of the West in a more or less uninterrupted flow." The task of the viewer is to somehow arrange these images and fragments into a coherent pattern and worldview. They are (potentially) emancipated from oppressive and totalizing narratives, but are increasingly alienated from anchoring discourses of truth-telling (Giddens 1990) and increasingly unable to distinguish between news and entertainment, information and spectacle (Baudrillard 1994).

The news in the television (and internet) age, argues Bennett (2016), is centered almost exclusively on actors and events rather than narrative contexts. Such narrative as exists is more

dramatic than informative: news stories are presented as "self-contained, isolated happenings" (Bennett 2016:38) rather than representations of ongoing developments. This decontextualization and dehistoricization of the news means that citizens are forced to navigate a media landscape in which it is increasingly "difficult to see the connections across issues or even to follow the development of a particular issue over time" (Bennett 2016:39). The result is that citizens who rely exclusively on the news media for information are often left confused, decentered, and unable to apply a consistent and coherent frame of reference to ongoing events.

The result of this dislocation of news from context, according to scholars of mass media and democracy (Iyengar 1991; Gamson 1992), is a frustrated, cynical, and apathetic citizenry and a dysfunctional civil society. When citizens are unable to distinguish causes from consequences, cannot place the news in the context of broader social forces, and cannot imagine politics except as a form of game between power political actors, civic life suffers. The power of television news media in altering citizens' perception of politics is reflected in studies, such as Iyengar (1991), where newscasts edited to be "episodic" (focusing on the news item as a concrete instance) rather than "thematic" (contextualizing the item in terms of general outcomes and conditions) led viewers to attribute responsibility for social problems to victims rather than broader social forces. Imagining political and civic life as a series of isolated struggles and events makes arriving at a common conception of a public sphere all the more difficult.

Scholarship on the relationship between democracy and mass media reflects a trend toward the homogenization and concentration of corporate media power on the one hand and the fragmentation and dislocation of meaning on the other. As the audience grows and becomes less differentiated, the message becomes simpler, more immediate, and more visceral, and the

individual viewer shoulders more of the interpretive responsibility for separating the signal from the noise. Civic life subsequently suffers, as corporate media is able to blur the distinctions between news, entertainment, and advertising. However, while corporate media's power to encode messages is vast, the decoding of such messages is always open and incomplete, providing a potential avenue of resistance (Gamson et al. 1992). The next section considers the next great technological transformation in the relationship between mass media and democracy: the internet.

The Internet Age

The advent of the internet both accelerates and undercuts the transformation wrought by television. Images are even more immediate, events (streamed, photographed, tweeted) are experienced even more directly and viscerally. Audiences are globalized and massified more than ever, brought together by mammoth social media conglomerates. And yet this audience isn't so much a "global village" as a series of global fiefdoms, formed by the gradual accretion of communities around common interests but only made possible by an underlying technological revolution. These fiefdoms overlap in certain public "commons" but often in volatile and chaotic ways, where actors struggle to define and express a common public discourse. The flood of information is still vast, and the interpretive burden on individual users is still great, but the internet nonetheless provides countless virtual communities, both great and small.

This great contradiction between the homogenization of communication technologies and the homophilization of spheres of influence and activity echoes the commentary on previous technological ages. Habermas's (1983) account of the liberal public sphere, brought about by a

free press and a common "coffeehouse" civic culture, and subsequently devolving into fragmentary and partisan interest groups, explains this dynamic in a previous age. And yet the internet, unlike print or radio or television, has altered the media landscape in at least one crucial way. In previous technological ages the boundary between producers and consumers of media remained more or less distinct within the public sphere. The *relationship* between producers and consumers, and the interplay between public opinion and public discourse has always been complex and multidirectional, but the stages of production, dissemination, and interpretation of messages remained more or less discrete. The internet is medium, however, of instantaneous production, dissemination and interpretation. Communication technologies have never before allowed so many people to simultaneously act as both producers *and* consumers, never opened up the active participation by so many in discourse and public opinion formation so completely. In this media landscape the distinction between "hot" and "cool" media begins to make less sense—who is sending, who is receiving, who is framing, who is interpreting? Everyone, all the time. The "community of letters" is no longer limited to a small, elite body of educated correspondents.

Again, it is easy to imagine the emancipatory potential of online politics, as citizens, able to interact with each other on unimagined scales, and in new and unexpected ways, might be able to see past their parochial interests, confront issues of common concern, and organize *en masse* to enact change. The emancipatory potential remains, but as more and more adopt a new medium, and as we begin to perceive the internet as less a separate sphere of activity and more an extension of our everyday lives, the more obvious it becomes that the same social problems are merely replicated on a different platform. Geographical distances and local identities might

matter less in the internet age, but issues of boundaries, of inclusion and exclusion, of group styles and transgressions, of information bubbles and conspiracies, remain just as salient. Moreover, the fundamental challenges of political communication—the struggles to arrive at common meanings, or at least similar frames of reference, in deliberation and debate—cannot be overcome simply by moving to a virtual platform. Indeed, while online talk can overcome *some* of the challenges of face-to-face communication, it can also exacerbate others. Finally, looming over all other challenges of conducting public life online is just what constitutes a "public" space on a virtual platform, who truly owns these spaces, who bears responsibility for maintaining standards of fairness and accessibility, and how do power structures, both subtle and unsubtle, shape the way we interact with others online?

What follows is an overview of the scholarship of the earliest age of the internet, pre-Facebook, Twitter, and social media, when these challenges were just beginning to present themselves. Returning to a period in which the internet was still an undiscovered country helps us to consider anew the ways in which the internet has shaped the perception and practice of politics. This review begins with scholarship on the internet more generally, with the earliest accounts of networked communication and ethnographic studies of virtual communities. Subsequently, it covers social capital and the division of, and relationship between, "online" and "offline" civic life. Finally, it returns to the question of the internet as a virtual public sphere and the state of online politics just prior to the rise of social media, when the line between "online" and "offline" life began to crumble completely.

Networked Communication

The earliest scholarly work on digital interaction focused on the practical necessities of communication, and its attendant issues of information exchange, decision-making, identity management, and status hierarchies. These pre-internet studies on "computer-mediated-communication" (CMC) focused on network communication's potential for streamlining work and organizational efficiency. Rice et al., e.g., (1984:73) offer a "framework for identifying and analyzing possible roles of CMCs in facilitating innovation in organizations," concluding that a networked workplace allows for greater, more creative, and more egalitarian participation in cooperative decision-making.

Hiltz et al. (1986) compare the outcomes of small work group decision-making in both face-to-face and CMC (in this case an early chat system) contexts.They observe that CMC, even when used synchronously, often fails to provide a sense of "social presence"—"the feeling that a medium is personal, warm, and sociable rather than impersonal, cold, and unsociable" (1986:228)—as users lack the subtle visual and aural cues and gestures common in FtF interaction.They find that this lack of social presence bears out in both the process and outcome of group decision-making tasks. In face-to-contexts, actors communicated more, paid more attention to building solidarity and consensus through "tension releasing" gestures (making jokes and pausing for laughter), and adopt unconscious status hierarchies where some spoke more than others (1986:243-4). CMC contexts, conversely, were more egalitarian but also less likely to be consensus-oriented; to lead to higher quality decisions, but also to less overall agreement on those decisions (1986:243-4).

This theme of CMC being more efficient, and perhaps more effective for certain tasks, but also a harsher and shallower mode of communication predominates in early digital interaction studies. In a similar experimental comparison of face-to-face and computer-mediated-communication, Kiesler et al. (1984) find that the egalitarian structure of CMC is a double-edged sword: more users were willing to participate in computer-mediated discussion groups, but a lack of social cues also led to more "uninhibited verbal behavior" (1129). In perhaps the earliest academic discussion of "flaming"—expressing oneself in deliberately over-the-top and offensive manner in online settings—Kiesler et al. reveal that actors have been using networked communication for expressing petty gripes and grievances since its inception. They are reluctant, however, to attribute flaming to an emerging subculture of deliberate rudeness, to the deficiencies of CMC itself, or both (1984:1130).

Overall, research on the early days of networked communication conclude that digital interaction might produce higher quality ideas, but it is insufficient for providing a means of social coordination or building the type of solidarity on which a nascent civil society or digital democracy could be built. Early adopters of CMC turned to online spaces for discussions of more complex, cerebral, or socially sensitive topics (Daft and Lengel 1986, Rice 1987), or for straightforward tasks of problem solving and information gathering (Hiltz et al. 1986), but found meaningful consensus elusive. These early scholarly contributions have proved prescient in identifying the limitations of, and behaviors endemic to, online settings, but they were limited to small contexts and a small body of higher status, technologically savvy subjects. With the dawn of the world wide web, and as more and more people began logging on, we begin to see studies of "the net," not just as a mode of communication, but as a site for building lasting communities.

Virtual Communities

The emergence of "virtual communities" also marks the point at which the study of the internet shifted from the fields of communications, business management, and social psychology, and toward sociology and philosophy. Focused on newsgroups (Schneider 1996), listservs (Babbie 1996), and early role-playing games such as Multi-User Domains (or Dungeons) (MUDs) (Rheingold 1993; Turkle 1995), an ethnographic approach to virtual life began to emerge. Scholars increasingly noticed that, even as the "cold, impersonal" mode of communication would seem to be more suited for practical problem solving, users still turned to online spaces for deeper relationships and emotional support—and often the sorts of relationships and support that they could not find in face-to-face settings (Wellman et al. 1996; Etzioni and Etzioni 1997).

Scholars also noticed that, unencumbered as they were by the constraints of time and distance, these nascent online communities were defined less by propinquity and demographics and more by shared interest and passion (Wellman et al. 1996; DiMaggio et al. 2001). The internet's capacity to foster these sorts of issue publics, allowing users to transcend parochial concerns and discuss issues of common import continues to be its most emancipatory quality. Discussions of difference, and of race, class, and gender, are inevitable, however, in both virtual and face-to-face communities (Kendall 1998). Early internet ethnographers paid special attention to users' efforts to construct common norms and standards around managing conflict, as well as a common online culture for developing and establishing a mutual definition of the situation.

MUDs were of particular interest for this newly ethnographic approach. Sherry Turkle (1995, 1999; and Pappert 1990), developed a significant and insightful body of ethnographic research on how MUD users managed identities across a variety of platforms, both "real" and

virtual. MUDs provide users with a "psychosocial moratorium": a means of, through role-playing, exploring different aspects of their identities, confronting and working through personal and social dilemmas, and engaging in largely consequence-free experimentation. In this regard, Turkle speaks about online identity play in the same manner that earlier sociologists of the life course spoke about the adolescent and early adulthood development stages, with the crucial distinction that this form of identity play and self-reparation is available throughout users' lives. While perpetually in tension with *bad faith* identity play—weaponized anonymity: adopting personae in order to manipulate and antagonize—Turkle reveals the internet's potential for allowing actors to explore aspects of themselves that they were uncomfortable to express in offline settings, and to speaking openly and honestly when they might otherwise feel silenced and ostracized.

Howard Rheingold (1993), another early virtual ethnographer, points to the novelty of building social bonds exclusively through language and narrative. The "imagined community" of intellectual correspondence becomes much less abstract and much easier to imagine when users engage in mutual storytelling in a shared virtual space. The development of a common "MUDspeke," "disembodied body language" and other cultural constraints and signifiers allowed users a sophisticated means of constructing the world around them, and in the process developing a passionate attachment to the setting and to each other. Echoing Giddens, Anderson, and other modernity theorists, Rheingold argues that previous technological developments had primed early MUDers for such non-local communication and interaction.

> Literate people think differently from people in nonliterate or postliterate cultures, and they think of themselves differently. The telegraph, telephone, radio, and television...turned everywhere and every time into here and now….People who routinely accept such power as part of their reality think of themselves in a certain way. Like

> previous historical changes, such as the transformation from people who thought of themselves as subjects of royalty to people who thought of themselves as citizens of democracy, this one has started at the fringes and is working its way toward the center. (1993:151)

Rheingold concludes, however, that these virtual communities fall short of "real" communities in communicating authentic emotion and fostering lasting, rather than contingent social bonds: "(we) must pay for our access to each other by forever questioning the reality of our online culture" (Rheingold 1993:320).

Just as virtual communities allowed users to escape offline stresses, they also allowed users to elide online consequences and responsibilities. Actors know "intellectually, but more importantly, intuitively, that [they] can turn off the machine" (Dertouzos 1997:272). Thus, while the virtual ethnographers of the nineties in many ways departed from communication analysts of the eighties, they still tended to return to the structural and communicative limitations of a text-based medium. Again, as the rigid boundaries between online and offline activity have become increasingly permeable in the 21st century, and as the internet has expanded to include graphics, audio, and video-based media, these limitations have become less salient. But they have not disappeared entirely.

Virtual worlds might be more immersive than ever, and with the proliferation of social media and videoconferencing technology, more and more of our "authentic" selves are expressed online, but the reality remains that our primary point of interaction is with a screen rather than a person. And the phenomenological and sociological implications of CMC remain crucial. Navigating the innumerable cues and social performances of face-to-face interaction is dauntless enough—attempting to navigate them online is more difficult still. Online, a sense of co-presence must not only be felt, but enacted, cultivated; the self, disembodied and fragmented as it is across

multiple platforms and contexts, must be consciously assembled and reassembled. Just as in the "real" world, virtual public spaces must be built and maintained, not merely experienced and taken for granted.

Social Capital

With these implicit constraints in mind, many scholars of the mid-nineties and early aughts focused on the symbiotic and potentially complementary relationship between face-to-face and virtual communities. Of primary interest to early studies on the relationship between the internet and civil society (DiMaggio et al. 2001; Hargittai 2000a, 2000b; Sunstein 2008) was the notion of social capital: does the internet broaden our interpersonal horizons by bringing diverse Others to our virtual doorstep, or does it narrow our horizons by tempting us away from face-to-face interaction? Wellman et al. (1996:214), for example, ask "[i]s it possible to sustain productive or supportive relationships on-line with network members who may never meet-in-person?" Wellman et al., in coining the term "computer-supported social networks" (CSSNs) attempt to push back at a number of contemporary fears and misunderstandings about the internet: that there is a rigid distinction between "virtual" and "real" life, that networked communication was a recent invention of the mid-nineties, and that it is possible to make manichaean judgments about whether internet usage is "good" or "bad" for social life. While the medium shapes the mode of communication and interaction, social networks remain social networks, whether on or offline. Virtual networks are just as capable as in-person networks of fostering "strong, intermediate, and weak ties that provide information and social support in both specialized and broadly based relationships" (Wellman et al. 1996).

Other studies on this earlier internet age similarly reject the perception of online activity leading to a decline in social capital in the public discourse. Kraut et al. (1998) in a longitudinal study of Pittsburgh-area internet users, found that while initially internet usage led to a contraction of social circles and a general feeling of isolation and loneliness, those effects faded away as more and more close personal contacts joined users online. Survey studies from around the same time observe that online activity increases the size of social networks (Wellman 2000, Cole 2000), and that users tended to view online and offline activity as complementary rather than competitive.

Others, however, were less sanguine about the emancipatory potential of online interaction. Calhoun (1998:380), e.g., warns of exaggerating the internet's "novelty rather than [situating] within a continuing series of communication and transportation capacities" as well as failing to "take seriously the differences between the ways in which people are commonly linked on the electronic web and organization of face-to-face relationships." Calhoun (1998:380) is leery of labeling most online social networks as "virtual communities," describing, e.g., MUDs as oriented around "entertainment-expressive activity" where users fail to form deep interpersonal relationships. Of greater interest to Calhoun is the role technology and computer mediated communication plays *within* preexisting communities. He is hopeful, for instance, of CMC's capacity for building trust, solidarity, and organization in highly local contexts. Local social movement members might use CMC as a supplement to face-to-face coordination. Beyond the internet's limited capacity as an organizational tool, however, Calhoun is far more concerned with how it recreates power:

> Overall...it seems clear that the general tendency is not for the web to produce a radical democracy of constant citizen participation and instant referenda, nor to counter

> tendencies to urbanization, nor to empower the poor, weak, and dispersed against the rich, powerful, and well-positioned. Computer mediated communication does a little of each of these things, but it does a lot to enhance existing power structures. (Calhoun 1998:381)

In so doing, Calhoun provides a prescient understanding of how state and corporate actors use the internet as an implement of surveillance, data-minining, and social control.

Others (Fisher et al. 1996:23) call attention to the power of users *within* virtual communities: "we might liken civic life on the Internet to the interactions of the Greek citizenry with the behavior of their gods rather than to the actions of citizens in the agora." During the mid-nineties, when technological neophytes struggled for space and recognition with usenet veterans, there was great concern that these power-users would build up their own virtual fiefs, exploiting "newbies" for their lack of cultural capital and capriciously enforcing their own standards of behavior. As the internet has become less and less the province of an "affluent technological elite" (Fisher et al. 1996:24) and more a fixture of everyday life, these fears now seem overstated, but such observation provide an early insight to the tendency toward homophilization and the development of group styles and subcultures, even as the reach of the Internet expanded beyond private networks.

Even virtual spaces perceived as open and democratic "digital frontiers" were beginning to lose their luster by the mid-nineties. In an evaluation of the internet as a "conversational arena" Schneider (1996:375) finds that computer-mediated discussion can "contribute to democratic enhancement of the public sphere," but such spaces too often fail to reach the Habermasian ideal of equal participation and equal contribution. In an intriguing contrast to earlier studies on work group CMC, Schneider's study of discussions on abortion on USENET (an early discussion board platform) reveals that posting behavior was "extraordinarily

concentrated" to just a few users—"the top user was responsible for 11%" of posts and the "top 10 contributors wrote nearly 40%" of posts (Schneider 1996:381). Despite the fact that the internet offers low barriers to entry, and even though the internet (at the time) was largely free from state and commercial pressures, online political discussion groups nevertheless failed to provide an egalitarian and constructive mode of discourse. Schneider presciently concludes that merely providing the technological framework—a "Field of Dreams" mentality—is insufficient to building a virtual public sphere.

Virtual Politics and the Public Sphere

Such critiques are echoed in political theory, where commentary focuses on 1) the political dimensions of online interaction, 2) its implications both for the practical necessities of building social movements, as well as 3) the internet's potential for fostering solidarity and civic engagement "out there." As with the adoption of any potentially revolutionary new communication technology, the attitude toward virtual politics began with excitement over the novelty of the internet as a new digital town hall, trepidation over the possibility of the internet's capacity to replicate or create new forms of inequality and state domination, and eventual acceptance of the internet as a new normal, as the internet structures and is structured in turn by existing systems of power. Or, as Dimaggio et al. (2001: 319) describe the state of the literature on virtual politics in 2001: "unjustifiable euphoria" followed by "equally unjustifiable skepticism" followed by a "gradual realization that Web-based human interaction really does have unique and politically significant properties."

"Euphoric" scholars (Negroponte 1995; Browning 1996) embrace the revelatory and revolutionary potential of virtual politics. The internet is a vast frontier where digital homesteaders might gather to form their own polities free from state and sectional interests and experiment with radically different forms of discussion and decision-making. Skeptics (Rheingold 1993; Beniger 1996; Lessig 1999) see the same frontier, but imagine it as ripe for colonization by commercial interests and the surveillance state. The internet will inevitably become just another means of social control, another avenue for political elites to manipulate the discourse and the voting public. More nuanced understandings (Bimber 1998; Hurwitz 1999; Netanel 2000) of virtual politics, however, paint the relationship between online and offline politics as a two-way street: the lifeworld of the internet will be integrated into the existing political order, but it will also meaningfully alter the ways in which citizens engage with each other and with political elites.

Bimber (1998) identifies two potential means of understanding the potential influence the internet might exert on offline politics. The "populist" claim assumes that the democratization of information access and communication capacity will greatly enhance individuals' influence on government and erode organizations' and political elites' influence, as they would no longer be able to serve as middle-men between citizens and those in power (1998:138). The "community-building" claim assumes that the internet will restructure public life by encouraging "mutual understanding, greater appreciation for differences and the views of others, diminution of racial and gender boundaries, [and] the building of shared values" (1998:145).

Where the populists argue that change will be brought about by altering the way individuals interact with their government, the communitarian argument rests on altering the way

citizens interact with each other. Bimber has reasons to doubt whether populist or communitarian change will be as complete or as revolutionary as either argument's proponents claim. He offers, instead, a third alternative: "accelerated pluralism." Bimber argues that the fundamental role the internet will play in politics is neither the dramatic expansion of communication capacity—other technologies have already achieved this—nor the ability to build spaces where "thick" communities and consensus can flourish—offline differences can and will still persist online, and the tendency toward homophilization is too great. "At the level of social structure, the rich web of social connections that has structured Americans' public affairs since at least the time of Tocqueville's observations will not be wiped by the Net" (1998:155). Rather, Bimber asserts, the internet's influence will be felt in how and why Americans will choose to associate. The internet will accelerate a preexisting tendency toward pluralism, reorienting political communication around issues rather than interests and further eroding barriers to rapid mobilization and organization for small-scale groups.

Roger Hurwitz (1999) similarly rejects sweeping visions of digital democracy. "Cyberspace," Hurwitz argues, is inherently contradictory and contested. It is emancipatory in its potential but chaotic, fragmentary, and increasingly dominated by state and commercial interests in practice. The internet is certainly a site of political organization and communication, but as of the late nineties political participation is still "neither democratic nor secure," riven as it is by differences in race, class, and gender. "[T]he Internet's diffusion has increased the opportunities for political action among those who are already the most politically active and informed" (1999:656)—namely, white, male, professional elites. Nor is the internet, Hurwitz, argues, much of an open frontier or digital commons, where government influence can be resisted. Even

setting aside the internet's potential as a state propaganda outlet, the United States' and other liberal democracies' early efforts to both control online content and exploit architecture to allow "backdoors" for government surveillance is enough to give Hurwitz pause. After all, the early precursors of the internet (e.g., ARPANET) were government military projects, and early users expressed similar fears about monitoring their communications (1999:656).

If the internet is neither entirely open nor entirely free, has it had much of a measurable impact at all on political practices (Tufekzi 2017; Sobieraj 2011)? Hurwitz attempts to answer this question by examining which traditional models of democracy—deliberative, partisan, monitorial—"flourish or wither online" (1999:657). Online deliberative democracy, Hurwitz asserts, benefits from the availability of information and potential availability of public officials, but is hampered by the practical necessities of translating spoken political communication into a textual medium. Online political discussions suffer from a lack of focus or "break down in ugliness, often worse than that exhibited by the political pundits on television" (1999:658). The means of ensuring of productive discussion online—e.g., human or intelligent software moderation, or commonly accepted "rules of order"—must thread the needle of keeping the conversation on track without appearing arbitrary, unethical, exclusionary, or otherwise inimical to the ethos of openness in online political culture. Which is to say, online deliberative democracy shares the same communicative hurdles as offline deliberative democracy, but with an added layer of textual abstraction.

Online partisan democracy—that is, democracy as an arena of competing parties and interests—in the pre-social media days of the late nineties, was largely limited to the "virtual campaign brochures" (1999:659) of candidate websites. Such websites were primarily used for

conveying information about the candidate and secondarily used for soliciting campaign donations, recruiting volunteers, and testing messages. There were some limited efforts at virtual engagement, such as providing the opportunity to download logos and banners for display on one's personal website, and Hurwitz notices a small ecosystem of "unsolicited fan sites, attack sites, and spoof pages" (1999:659) beginning to emerge. Again, however, Hurwitz notes little difference in how candidates and parties approach offline and online politics. As in face-to-face campaigning, candidates' goals remain the same—to present a tightly controlled image of themselves to the public and encourage voters to remain "ideologically demobilized passive [consumers] of information" (1999:660). Hurwitz presciently understands the potential of the internet for "simulate a personalized relationship between the candidate and the site visitor," (1999:660) even as he falls short in predicting the internet's capacity for sophisticated voter information harvesting and targeting operations.

The area in which Hurwitz sees the internet exerting its greatest influence on politics is in "monitorial democracy." If nothing else, the internet is unique in its ability to rapidly disseminate and organize information and bring together ad hoc mini-publics. Even as, in Hurwitz eyes, the internet falls short of *proactively* structuring politics, it is nonetheless a potentially vastly powerful *reactive* tool, for processing, responding to, and organizing around political crises. A functioning civil society hinges open voters' ability to take collective action in response to crisis;

> [t]he Internet is an obvious and powerful tool for such democratic action, because it can help create communities of interest that transcend space, time, and the need for formal introductions. Alerts can be spread quickly through supporters' pre-existing mail and distribution lists. Web sites set up to coordinate actions can include small programs that route messages from the aroused citizens to their respective representatives. (Hurwitz 1999:660)

The internet, then, is not ideal for creating lasting and sustained political communities, but it functions remarkably well as a site for the accretion of issue publics, ephemeral and diffuse though they may ultimately prove to be.

From legal theory (see also: Perritt 1997; Trachtman 1998; Goldsmith 1999), Netanel (2000) provides the most purely theoretical view of virtual politics and civil society, arguing not only that "self-governing cyberspace" fails to live up liberal democratic ideals, it is inimical to them. "Cyberians" (Netanel's term for advocates of an unregulated internet) adopt a number of utopian claims: that, through "bottom-up private ordering" (2000:401), the internet will eventually come to supplant the state rather than merely act of a site of resistance to it. The Cyberian vision of the internet represents a revival of Jeffersonian politics; direct, decentralized, and flexible forms of decision-making will allow citizens to solve political dilemmas and allocate resources far more efficiently than a distant bureaucratic state.

Netanel rejects such claims, arguing that virtual communities enjoy no special advantages over offline communities, and will be forced to contend with all of the same dilemmas. Countering "cyberpopulism," Netanel argues that direct democracy, virtual or otherwise, too often fails to represent the popular will, as the "will" is liable to be influenced by elite information campaigns and endogenous to the political process of decision-making itself (2000:418). Moreover, as has long been argued, untrammeled majoritarian decision-making fails to protect the rights of the minority, undermines the liberal democratic notion of government by consent of the governed, and risks pushing dissenters out of the community altogether (2000:421). Moving politics online provides no special means of overcoming such hurdles (2000:423).

Countering "cybersyndicalism," Netanel echoes other critics in arguing that the transient, ad hoc nature of virtual communities prevents them from developing the sorts of normative frameworks that make productive deliberation and decision-making possible (2000:430). Ease of exit from (and entry to) such communities is a double-edged sword; any advantages gained in opening up participation tend to be wiped out by a lack of sufficient mechanisms for inducing mutual cooperation. When actors do not feel beholden to, and lack a genuine stake in, a given community, and when they face minimal consequences for failing to cooperate, they are induced to defect by actively undermining civility norms. By mere virtue of their permanency, territorially-bounded communities are better able to secure mutual cooperation than their virtual counterparts (2000:431).

Finally, countering "cyberanarchism" Netanel argues that a model of the internet as a "market of alternative rule regimes" overstates both individual autonomy and the availability of meaningful choices. Citizens too often lack the means of and desire to evaluate the suitability of competing rules regimes—the advantage of the internet is its immediacy in providing information; users generally lack the time and inclination to read the terms and conditions of each and every website they visit (2000:437). And therein lies the danger of equating politics with marketplaces; powerful actors are liable to emerge, monopolize virtual space, and render true consumer choice meaningless—"[j]ust as Microsoft's marketing and exercise of market power has led to the near-universal adoption of a computer system that many disparage as suboptimal, so may market power result in near-universal adherence to dominant rule regimes that do not reflect ongoing free and informed user choice" (2000:441). Yet again, a scholar of the early internet comes close to predicting the rise of social media and its attendant marketization

and monopolization of internet usage. How does one freely choose between different communities when one's entire network of friends, colleagues, and family is located in one specific area?

Netanel does not deny the revelatory or potentially emancipatory aspects of virtual politics—indeed, he predicts that "cyberspace seems poised to become the principal arena for public discourse, carrying a wealth of information and opinion and bringing rich opportunities for user interaction" (2000:482) and internet access would soon become a vital public good. Where he falls short is in embracing utopian visions of the internet as the backdrop for countless self-governing virtual polities—polities that will eventually supplant the functions of the liberal democratic state. Hopes for the internet as a digital frontier free from status difference and state power are a mirage concealing the gradual accumulation of commercial power. That the colonization of the internet by market forces seems inevitable is not to lose hope in its civic potential but to embrace the fact that the internet must be integrated and regulated like any other public utility.

Conclusions

New technological revolutions in communication cannot transcend differences, merely alter their bases. Print media helped to unify a nascent bourgeois class, but, in the process, provided a platform to those whose interests were antithetical to their own, and failed to create the educated, informed public that they envisioned. Likewise, television unified experience in an unprecedented manner and paved the way for mass expressions of grief and celebration, but its simpler, visual language could be manipulated and interpreted in any number of unanticipated

ways by any number of different actors. The internet blurred the boundary between media producers and consumers, and created an entirely separate sphere of activity that brought users together from across the world. But, again, for all the internet's potential to serve as a digital commons, it has just as often succeeded in amplifying division and disinformation: the dark side of bringing together isolated and heretofore voiceless people is that their shared interests will not necessarily be morally desirable or compatible with liberal democratic principles.

The great contemporary ethical debates surrounding the internet concern tech giants' responsibility in preserving neutral, public spaces and halting the spread of mis- and disinformation. These debates have merit, and there is a great danger in manipulated, commercial algorithm-driven virtual environments masquerading as public squares. And yet, it is mistaken as well to assume that these problems are endemic to the internet. Virtual spaces blur the line between "private" and "public" in a number of new ways, but that line is often fuzzy in "offline" spaces as well. There is no obvious means of ensuring that virtual communities remain egalitarian spaces free of intolerance and hate, but grappling over the degree to which liberal democracies should be tolerant of illiberal hatred is hardly new. Virtual communication is too often irrational, ambiguous, and fails to reach the ethical standards of political deliberation, but face-to-face communication hardly ever reaches those standards either. The internet does, indeed, have a unique impact on politics—as this dissertation explores—but the internet neither solves existing problems nor creates entirely new ones, just translates them into a new medium.

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CHAPTER 3: NEWSPAPER COMMENT SECTIONS AND THE DELIBERATIVE POTENTIAL OF ONLINE SPACES

Introduction

Is the internet good for civil society? From Rousseau (1982), Tocqueville (1998), and Dewey (2012) through Barber (1984), Bauman (1999), Benhabib (2004), Fraser (1992), Habermas (1982-3), and Young (2000), theorists of deliberative democracy have been concerned with how citizenship is cultivated in public spaces. Freely and openly discussing issues of common concern fosters democratic legitimacy, helps citizens develop nuanced viewpoints and reach reasonable conclusions, and fosters mutual understanding and respect (Dryzek 2002). And yet this deliberative ideal is difficult to reach—state intervention, parochial prejudices, and rationalized systems of coordination (Habermas 1982-3, 1989) each serve as significant obstacles for reasoned public discussion. The internet would seem to offer a means of overcoming these obstacles: collapsing time and space allows citizens to interact with each other in every configuration imaginable, to confront various "Others" and be exposed to new and unexpected viewpoints (Barber 1984). Online forums and commenting communities can be tantalizing prospects for deliberative democrats, achieving, in theory, the liberatory goal of universally accessible spaces where discussion can occur free from external intervention.

These ideals are reflected in how news media imagine their online commenting platforms. The *New York Times*[8], for example, welcomes reader responses to their articles in the form of "articulate, well-informed remarks" that reflect their readers' "unique insights." The *Minneapolis Star Tribune*[9] encourages "substantive, mutually respectful exchanges over news topics." And the *Washington Post*[10] explicitly envisages an online community of readers, with a stated goal that readers share "personal experiences" and how those experiences have "shaped [their] opinions." Imagining the comment context as "substantive, mutually respectful exchanges" is an attractive proposition, and yet these sorts of online spaces often seem to be little more than platforms for personal grievances or arenas for shallow and limited skirmishes. Why, despite their platforms' best intentions, do comment contexts so often fail to reach this deliberative ideal?

This chapter examines the deliberative potential of online spaces. Using the comments attached to a *Star Tribune* article from 2018 as a case study, I look at how participants imagine the "space" they inhabit, how their comments reflect their assumptions and attitudes for how to discuss politics online, and how the architecture of the medium itself shapes communication. In this process I observe that, a few notable exceptions aside, participants are reluctant to establish themselves as interested stakeholders and ground their perspectives in experience and biographical detail. This lack of self-accounting emerges both from the limitations of the mode of interaction as well as an uncertain sense of audience and co-presence with others.

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[8] "The Comments Section" (https://help.nytimes.com/hc/en-us/articles/115014792387-The-Comments-Section)
[9] "Website Comments" (https://help.startribune.com/hc/en-us/articles/360060667632-Website-Comments)
[10] "Digital Commenting Community" (https://helpcenter.washingtonpost.com/hc/en-us/articles/360009147771-How-to-comment-on-Washington-Post-articles)

The anonymous, pseudo-synchronous nature of online communication makes the sorts of nuanced, dynamic discussions grounded in personal experience and mutual understanding imagined by deliberative democrats exceedingly difficult. But these difficulties are present in face-to-face communication as well—the texture of online speech merely draws them in starker relief. Ad hoc "issue publics" attached to newspaper articles might not be ideal for deliberative speech, but comment platforms that serve a pre-existing community whose members already share a sufficient degree of understanding and familiarity still offer some deliberative potential. The crucial factor, in both online and offline contexts, is a shared democratic imagination and community of stakeholders.

Deliberative Democracy: An Overview

Unlike, e.g., participatory or republican models of democracy, which emphasize solidarity building, or liberal models which emphasize the protection of rights, deliberative models emphasize democracy's epistemic functions. That the best decisions tend to be the ones arrived at through reasoned deliberation between diverse stakeholders is an idea at least at old as John Dewey (2012), but contemporary deliberative democrats such as Benhabib (1996), Dryzek (2002), Habermas (2001), and Young (2000) see unique opportunities for discursive connection in the rise of globalization and proliferation of communication technologies. The contraction of distance and the myriad new avenues for finding and building associations have the liberatory potential for freeing public discourse from elite manipulation and state intervention (Habermas 2001; Benhabib 1996).

One of the key ideas from this point of view is that this deliberative process is itself democratized. Deliberative democracies derive their legitimacy not from a culturally homogenous and unified people or from aggregative political calculations, but from the form and content of the decision-making process itself. A decision-making process that ensures "free and unconstrained *public* deliberation of all matters of common concern" (Benhabib 1996:68, emphasis added) ensures the best possible results.The heart of deliberative democracy, then, is located neither in the affective bonds of loyalty between citizens nor in the formal legal apparatuses of the state, but in a robust, all-encompassing civil society. As Hannah Arendt (1958) observes, civil society is an event that must be accomplished and re-accomplished. This event is made possible only when people cultivate spaces appropriate for deliberation and public-political action:

> ...unlike the spaces which are the work of our hands, it does not survive the actuality of the movement which brought it into being, but disappears not only with the dispersal of men—as in the case of great catastrophes when the body politic of a people is destroyed—but with the disappearance or arrest of the activities themselves. Wherever people gather together, it is potentially there, but only potentially, not necessarily and not forever" (Arendt 1958:199).

Within the various publics that comprise civil society, diversity and difference become a feature rather than a bug—the more inputs that go into a decision the more legitimate it will be, both from a normative and from an epistemological standpoint (Dryzek 2002). Additionally, Benjamin Barber (2004:224) sees deliberation as an important site of building up social bonds and transmuting innumerable individual interests into a general sense of the common good.

> It is as a citizen that the individual confronts the Other and adjusts his own life plans to the dictates of a shared world. *I* am a creature of need and want; *we* are a moral body whose existence depends on the common order of individual needs and wants into a single vision of the future in which all can share.

Not all deliberative democrats (Young 2000; Oakeshott 1996) share Barber's consensus-oriented model of deliberative politics, but all advance an understanding that democratic legitimacy is rooted in active discussion and debate.

Thus, deliberative democrats' standards for how civil society ought to behave is both far-reaching and difficult to attain. Mere participation is not enough; citizens must adhere to common standards of speech and behavior. Numerous deliberative democrats offer criteria for what specific norms should govern political speech in order to maximize democratic legitimacy and achieve the deliberative ideal, with Habermas's (1982-3) theory of communicative rationality arguably being the most famous and well-known model of deliberative speech.

Criteria for Deliberative Speech

But can these lofty theoretical visions be realized in practice, and if so under what conditions? Thankfully, the theorists provide us with some tools for working this out. Viewing deliberative speech as "action oriented to understanding," Habermas argues that deliberation is not contingent upon transcendent speech norms or objective truths, but rather is grounded in the practical realities of everyday communication. When rational behavior is oriented toward understanding rather than the achievement of some transcendental end, one can evaluate speech acts not for the truthfulness of their content, but by how successfully the speaker anticipates the normative and cultural dimensions of her audience's lifeworld(s) through adopting common and meaningful appeals, whether the speaker sincerely works towards convincing rather than cajoling her opponents, and the degree to which she opens herself up to the possibility of critically reassessing her own viewpoints. "Thus a speaker owes the binding…force of his illocutionary act

not to the validity of what is said but to the coordinating effect of the warranty that he offers: namely to redeem, if necessary, the validity claim raised with his speech act" (1982:302, emphasis his). Successful communication relies upon intersubjectively adopting a coherent definition of the situation and system of meaning. Mounting a successful argument, moreover, even when one's motivations might be less than pure, requires an intuitive understanding of the relevant speech norms and means of satisfying the validity claims of a given culture or society.

However, while the means of satisfying validity claims might be context-dependent, the dimensions of validity remain applicable across any given speech situation. Habermas argues that any speech act oriented toward understanding leaves itself open to three types of validity claims: The speaker must be willing to demonstrate that her statements are normatively right, that she is not attempting to deceive or conceal any ulterior motives in engaging her audience, and that the underlying logic of her presuppositions is sound (1982:307). If she is making a genuine attempt to make herself understandable to her interlocutors, she must be prepared to justify her claims in any of these three bases at any time by appealing to good reasons. In acknowledging that any claim is contestable under these conditions, she must also demonstrate that her interlocutors' reasons might be superior to her own, and thus modify her viewpoints accordingly.

Drawing upon Habermas's understanding of ideal speech acts, Iris Marion Young outlines some of the more concrete conditions for building deliberative spaces. Young (2000) similarly outlines four governing norms of deliberative democracy: inclusion, equality, reasonableness, and publicity. Young stresses that democratic legitimacy requires that anyone affected by a decision be included in that decision-making process. Exclusion, whether it be

external (denying the public access to council meetings) or internal (dismissing participants' viewpoints because their behavior and manner of speech is perceived as unsophisticated) threatens this legitimacy, as it renders the decision-making process opaque and favors cultural and economic elites. A norm of equality follows a similar logic—"not only should all those affected be nominally included in decision-making, but they should be included on equal terms" (Young 2000:23).

The expression of this speech, however, should be governed by a norm of reasonableness, or an implicit understanding that all present have a right to be heard, that all are nominally seeking agreement even if such agreement can never be reached, and that nonetheless expressions of dissent should be recognized, tolerated, and not simply dismissed out of hand (Young 2000:24). Young offers numerous means of achieving this norm of reasonableness, including formally acknowledging and recognizing each other's presence—establishing rules of "greeting" (Young 2000:57)—respecting the "affirmative use of rhetoric" (2000:63) that takes into account the symbolic, affective, and performative aspects of communication rather than dispassionate argumentation, and employing narrative and storytelling techniques (2000:70) as means of promoting understanding between people of differing backgrounds and experiences. Polletta and Lee (2006) similarly emphasize the importance of narrative as a tool of political communication in their study of 9/11 online testimonials.

Finally, Young argues for a norm of publicity. Participants must recognize that when they are speaking publicly, they are engaging with "a plurality of different individual and collective experiences, histories, commitments, ideals, interests, and goals" (Young 2000:25). Public participation, then, requires great care in how one speaks and behaves, in making sure one's

individual experiences and viewpoints are understandable to others, and in asking for and providing clarification when such an understanding has yet to be met. This sense of accountability to others assures at least a baseline level of tolerance and respect, and that one's speech at least aims to be "understandable and acceptable" (2000:25). Participation in public events entails an equal opportunity to both be present and to speak; participants should have the ability to criticize others' opinions and express one's own, if they so choose. Arendt (1958:199) similarly stresses the importance of the "space of appearance" to the deliberative process, "where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things, but to make their appearance explicitly." Appearing to and for others necessarily imagines a limited, more intimate deliberative space, where one is capable of seeing and being seen, of hearing and being heard. In summation, then, deliberative spaces must:

1. Present no firm barrier for participation, either in terms of the right to be present or the right to speak. Any decision-making process must be both transparent and contestable.
2. Induce speakers to abide by certain standards of validity and understandability. Speakers must be prepared to express themselves in acceptable and comprehensible manner to those present, to back up any claims with appeals to good reasons, and open themselves up to any commentary and critique that follows those same standards.
3. Be explicitly public spaces, where speakers understand and anticipate the fact that they are co-present with people of diverse experiences and backgrounds.

> Participants should feel free to draw upon these experiences in making appeals to others.

The precise nature of these discourse-publics is not entirely clear in deliberative democratic theory, particularly as to whether, and to what extent deliberative norms are supposed to govern both opinion/will-formation spheres—what Nancy Fraser (1992) refers to as "weak" publics—and formal decision-making spheres of activity ("strong" publics).

How far-reaching must the deliberative model be in order to interpenetrate civil society? Legislatures should naturally be deliberative bodies, but should courts and other government institutions, labor unions, newsrooms, classrooms, and chatrooms be as well? Should small, face-to-face interactions be privileged (Barber 1984; Mansbridge 1983), or should deliberative democrats work toward understanding universal norms of reason, representation, and justice (Young 2000)? Seyla Benhabib (1996:75) envisions a deliberative civil society as an "interlocking net of….multiple forms of associations, networks, and organizations" comprising an "anonymous public conversation." Habermas (2001) similarly rejects the concept that deliberation should occur in some central governing body, but should rather occur across a variety of publics—a wide-ranging conversation that is nonetheless uniformly anonymous and "subject-less" in regard to a concrete and coherent *demos*.

Deliberative Potential in Online Spaces

Certainly, the internet would seem to offer the ability to boost the sorts of deliberative conversations that newspapers, television, and radio made possible. Is that so? How do online spaces fit within this constellation of overlapping discourse-publics? Online spaces, at least on

the surface, can be appealing to deliberative democrats—they are open, (nearly) universally accessible, and (nearly) free of external coercion. While rarely sites of explicit decision-making, online spaces offer a means for citizens to engage with each other on a variety of issues and topics of common concern. Collapsing communicative distances means that online participants have a unique opportunity to confront, interact with, and ultimately come to understand various "Others."

Moreover, online spaces potentially offer a means of canceling out extrinsic factors—e.g., racial prejudice—that might color how others receive each other's words. However, online interaction is often characterized as more id- than ego-driven—a collection of "trolls" taking advantage of their anonymity to belittle, harass, and otherwise provoke.
Most of the literature on political communication in online settings focuses on the internet as an avenue of political participation (Tolbert and McNeal 2003; Oser et al. 2013), as a source of exposure for political information (Garrett et al. 2013), and as a site of political polarization (Dahlgren 2005; Prior 2007; Sunstein 2007; Lawrence et al. 2010). The focus of such literature is generally on the push and pull between political participation and deliberation—the more active one is in politics, the less tolerant of opposing viewpoints one becomes, and vice versa (Lawrence et al. 2010). The internet, and particularly blog culture, is thus perceived as harmful to the type of open, pluralistic debate so valued by deliberative democrats as users are both able to choose their information sources a la carte (Prior 2007) and self-segregate into hermetically sealed enclaves (Hargittai et al. 2008).

Sunstein (2007), for example, argues that the "blogosphere" neither functions as an efficient, Hayekian marketplace of ideas nor as a coherent, Habermasian public sphere. Rather,

"what is offered instead is a stunningly diverse range of claims, perspectives, rants, insights, lies, facts, non-facts, sense, and nonsense" (Sunstein 2007:89). Moreover, as bloggers deliberate among themselves, they tend to only increase group polarization and arrive at ever more extreme political positions. Habermas (2006), himself, is less than sanguine on the internet as a site of rational deliberation, arguing that internet commentary primarily serves the parasitical function of critiquing elite discourses (or, in authoritarian regimes, undermining state attempts at censorship), without offering much in the way of free and open discourse on its own. Similar to Sunstein, Habermas fears the increasing homophilization of online spaces, leading to the fragmentation of "large but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics" (Habermas 2006:423).

I am not quite as pessimistic as Habermas about the deliberative potential of online spaces, but this case study demonstrates there are significant impediments, both external and internal, to reaching the deliberative ideal. Returning to the deliberative criteria discussed above, are online spaces open to participation, do they operate under widely acceptable and understandable speech norms, and are they explicitly public? Online spaces seem to most readily and obviously meet the first criterion: anyone with an internet connection can log on from anywhere and participate anywhere. However, not everyone still has the equal opportunity to participate. In the interest of limiting harassment and hate speech, most online spaces attempt to moderate behavior and maintain community standards. From a deliberative standpoint, there is nothing inherently wrong with moderation, and indeed it could be necessary for maintaining a healthy discussion. But where these practices risk running counter to the deliberative ideal is when discipline appears to be wielded arbitrarily and without justification. Members of an online

community might be banned and comments might be deleted suddenly and without explanation, moderators might wield their influence for petty and personal reasons, and A.I. or community-driven moderating techniques (tagging and flagging) might be manipulated to bar the participation of others.

Ensuring full and healthy participation in a discourse-public means that everyone must be aware of the house rules, and moderators must be accountable both to those rules and to the community they serve in explaining what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable speech and justifying their actions. Otherwise, community members might feel they are being held to arbitrary and opaque standards, and thus feel discouraged from participating. This presents a tall order for most online communities, particularly as they grow to such an extent that a handful of moderators become unequal to the task. Additionally, in many online spaces, such as the one for this case study, moderating is entirely invisible—comments are simply deleted without anyone the wiser. This violates the participation principle externally; any deliberative space in which it is unclear who is present and why calls into question the ethical and epistemological legitimacy of the whole discussion. In short, the deliberative ideal would seem to require A) (human) moderators willing to participate fully and actively in the discussion process, and/or B) speech norms that are so ingrained and universal that only minimal external or self-moderation is required.

The moderation dilemma touches upon the second criterion for deliberative spaces, that all present agree to abide by the same standards of speech and behavior—what, again, Young (2000) refers to as the norm of “reasonableness.” Young argues that reasonableness requires "people enter discussion to solve collective problems with the aim of reaching agreement"

(2000:24). While agreement will not necessarily be achieved, it should nonetheless be the aim of everyone present. The comment contexts I analyze impose no such implicit or explicit constraints—the reason for being of such interactions is always unclear. Actors will often adopt a reasonable rhetorical style and will ostensibly aim to persuade or influence others with appeals to evidence or experience, but the comment context is too protean to ever make resolution or catharsis possible. Engagements are fleeting—the motives of others can never be satisfactorily inferred, and presence of others can never even be confirmed.

Finally, the comment context often fails the standard of publicity. Initially online settings appear to be an open space where all are free to express their thoughts. But publicity, according to Young, must always carry with it an element of accountability. Before discussion begins, we need to acknowledge the presence of others and account for our own. This requires a concrete knowledge of co-presence, that there is an audience out there to which one is accountable and to whom one owes respect and certain standards of behavior.

> When members of such a public speak to one another, they know they are answerable to that plurality of others; this access that others have to their point of view makes them careful about expressing themselves...They must try to explain their particular background experiences, interests, or proposals in ways that others can understand, and they must express reasons for their claims in ways that others recognize could be accepted, even if in fact they disagree with the claims and reasons" (Young 2000:25)

Without a sense of engaging each other in public space, and without a level of self-accounting, online commenters too often rely upon argument-from-nowhere, where they deliberately conceal biographical detail and experience and present their arguments as inherently correct. This lack of self-accounting not only discourages civility and gestures of mutual respect, but it encourages a dry, debate-like and adversarial form of discussion.

Methodology

From within the sociology of political culture, the examination of deliberation has primarily been carried out via focus groups (Gamson 1992; Perrin 2005), ethnography (Eliasoph 1997, 1998, and Lichterman 2002; Lichterman 1996), or content analysis (Perrin and Vaisey 2008). However, political deliberation—or at least political talk—is occurring increasingly in virtual spaces rather than face-to-face settings. Those studies that do focus on online talk tend to address how polarization and homophilization online affects external actions and attitudes (Hargittai, et al. 2008; Lawrence et al. 2010), or on the impact of the internet on the dissemination of elite discourses (Garrett et al. 2013). The emphasis of this study is not on content producers or elite discourses, or on how the internet promotes or hinders partisanship or participation "out there," but rather how actors construct potentially deliberative spaces online. This form analysis requires a microsociological approach sensitive to how the architecture of online media shapes online speech.

Though they examine a physical medium, Perrin and Vaisey (2008) provide some key concepts for understanding how political discussions are carried out online. In mapping out the discursive landscape of the newspaper letters to the editor, Perrin and Vaisey identify two dimensions that have an impact on the level of civility in public speech: anonymity and asynchronicity. "Anonymity" in this case refers to the degree to which a letter writer is aware of his or her audience. Unlike in face-to-face interaction, where interlocutors are able to read facial/body cues and gauge audience reactions in real time, letter writers have no sense of co-presence. The larger the perceived distance between letter writer and audience, Perrin and Vaisey discover, the more likely the writer is to abandon common speech norms and use

inflammatory, anti-civil language. Similarly, letter writing is inherently asynchronous; where speakers in face-to-face interactions engage in "turn-taking,"—adapting their language and arguments as needed to suit their audience—the entirety of the information conveyed is contained in the text of the letter itself. Overall, Perrin and Vaisey argue that a sense of locality is the greatest factor in determining the deliberative potential of a letter—those that addressed issues of local significance were more "civil" whereas those that addressed national issues tended to be more "conflictual" in tone.

The discursive architecture of online commenting systems is similar. Commenting often offers a larger degree of anonymity—participating in online discussion entails an audience of practically anyone (with access to the Internet) or no one. And regarding synchonicity, commenting does offer something resembling face-to-face interaction (at least in comparison to letter writing)—a form of pseudo-synchonicity. A comment might generate an instant response, or one that comes hours, days, even years later. Nevertheless, interlocutors can carry on what looks like a conversation, if not quite in real time and without the attendant physical cues. This study is less interested in issues civility—i.e., tone and presentation—than in issues of deliberative potential—i.e., what sorts of spaces online participants are imagining and what roles they play within them. However, this study follows Perrin and Vaisey's in examining how the discursive architecture of a setting informs the speech norms and acts participants feel comfortable in adopting, and how the levels of anonymity and synchronicity shape how participants interact with each other. I find that the lack of a sense of co-presence with others in the same virtual space, and the inability to engage each other in real time, has an adverse effect on deliberation. Deliberative speech, rooted in personal experience, and motivated by a desire to

understand, becomes exceedingly difficult in online settings, where engagements are un-constrained by time and space and where actors are rarely expected to account for themselves or for others.

This chapter examines the comments attached to various newspaper articles published in the online edition of *The Star Tribune* between January 1st and 31st, 2018. In that I am concerned with how comment settings are perceived as public, deliberative forums and extensions of civil society, I selected articles concerning local politics, ranging in scope from Al Franken's resignation from the Senate to the controversy surrounding renaming the former Lake Calhoun. Within this one month period, the *Star Tribune* published 144 articles, 121 of which had at least one comment attached. Using, "web scraping" browser utility, I collected these comments, downloaded them to spreadsheets, and subsequently analyzed them using the RQDA qualitative data analysis package for R. The number of comments ranged from a low of one to a high of 531, with a median of 24 and an average of 70 comments attached to an article. I chose local political articles assuming that minimizing the sense of "distance" between the participants and their audience as well as the issue of discussion would make them more likely to pursue deliberative, rather than purely adversarial modes of conversation. As a case study, I focus on one specific article and its attendant comments. The article, "Mayor Jacob Frey promises action on economic inequality in north Minneapolis" was published on January 6th, 2018, and concerns Mayor Frey's efforts to address economic inequality in the city's racially diverse Northside area of Minneapolis. The article attracted 95 comments, with 60 unique participants, and inspired lively engagements over race, poverty, and the ethics of personal responsibility versus the ethics of structural change.

Following John Searle's (1969) speech act theory, I code comments according to illocutionary intent (the speaker's motivation by speaking something), locutionary content (what the speaker accomplishes in saying something), and perlocutionary effect (what are the consequences of saying something). Locutionary coding takes stock of a comment's tone and style—whether the speaker was neutral, adversarial, conciliatory, or (common, in online settings) ironically detached. Illocutionary coding aims at capturing how speakers imagine their audiences and the degree they attempt to engage others in conversation. I code topline comments as either proffers or gestures. Proffers tend to be what Searle calls "assertive" speech acts; they implicitly invite others to engage by offering one or more contestable claims. Gestures, conversely, tend to only imagine a general, rather than a specific audience; they offer limited opportunities to engage and are typically extremely basic assertives or "expressives." Gestures express frustration, concern, or other reflexive emotional responses and tend to be a commentary on the situation rather than an effort to examine specific propositions. While proffers are likely to attract replies, replies to gestures are rare, and are often just as simplistic. Finally, perlocutionary coding examines how participants respond to topline comments. Replies are coded as either volleys, where the replier keeps the conversation moving by critiquing one or more claims, and assists, where the replier offers a gesture of support or expands and reinforces another's claims. Altogether, of the 95 comments attached to the Northside article, there were 54 topline comments divided between 35 proffers and 19 gestures, and 41 replies, divided between 22 volleys and 19 assists.

This initial coding framework provides a foundation for a deeper, more inductive form of discourse analysis in the tradition of Alexander's (2006) research on the "binary oppositions"

embedded in everyday political speech, Fine's (2012) micro-ethnographic work on "tiny publics" and Polletta's (2006) study of the narrative forms of public online deliberation. Coding provides a means of addressing whether Habermasian deliberation occurs online while exploring the more intimate and complex questions of why people engage each other online in the first place, how they conduct online political discussions, and what steps they take to manage their audiences and perform identity. What follows is an examination of the deliberative potential of the online comment context, where participants and readers struggle to reconcile an imagined public political discussion with the realities of an inherently anonymous, pseudo-synchronous, and textual medium.

Findings

How does one introduce oneself in a comments section? Typically, not at all. Young (2000) and Taylor (1998) point to the importance or recognition in political discussions. Participants must acknowledge their co-presence and affirm norms of inclusion via gestures and speech acts. Young (2000:59) in particular speaks of the necessity of the "greeting," wherein a "speaker announces her presence as ready to listen and take responsibility for her relationship to her interlocutors" while acknowledging their "irreducible particularity." Communication without greetings and other rituals of recognition "would feel like the science fiction speech of an alien, some sort of heartless being for whom speech is only for getting things said" (Young 2000:59). It is jarring, then, that the context of online comment spaces encourages and even demands just this sort of speech. In online contexts, particularly ad hoc, anonymous spaces like news media

comment contexts, actors are expected to engage each other not as people, but as sets of opinions and arguments.

Gestures and Proffers

Topline comments in these spaces come in the form of gestures and proffers. Gestures are expressives that comment on the situation, whereas proffers are assertive speech acts that invite engagement. If one imagines comment contexts as little more than mini-letters to the editor, or as simple notes pinned to a bulletin board (how the earliest forms of online interaction were initially analogized), this sort of abrupt and anti-conversational mode of communication might make sense. But when one attempts to imagine comment contexts as a public forum for citizens coming together to discuss pressing issues—as a "place" that people inhabit and converse within—the rules governing comment speech appear to be bizarre and unsuited to the task.

> **psproperty (1/6/18 — 1:15PM)**
> Good luck Frey.....You have no idea what your doing.

It is obvious that **psproperty** does not think they are directly addressing Mayor Frey, but to whom are they really speaking? Fellow readers and commenters? The author of the piece? No one and anyone in particular? The lack of greeting, of self-accounting, and of rituals of recognition underscore the deeply anti-conversational structure of these comment contexts. **psproperty** does not feel compelled to greet others because they do not have firm *concept* of others, of who is and who might be reading their words. I call these minimal expressions "gestures"—brief statements of thought that accomplish little more than calling oneself into

being in an online "space," of perfunctorily announcing one's own presence but ignoring the presence of others:

> **kkjer (9:08AM)**
> There is an old adage that applies to decades of Minneapolis Leadership, I believe it was Aesop who said this, "After all is said and done, more is said than done."

> **aqualungman (9:07AM)**
> Same old song and dance.

In the language of speech acts, gestures are almost always expressives or exceedingly simple assertives whose conclusions are so obvious that their meaning and intent do not need to be interrogated. Gestures do provide a momentary insight into the inner-world of the speaker. **psproperty** desires to express their contempt of Mayor Frey, to the extent they rhetorically imagine they are chiding Frey face-to-face. **kkjer** conveys a sense of ironic detachment in invoking Aesop to describe contemporary politics. **aqualungman** is merely frustrated at what they perceive to be Frey's use of empty rhetoric in the face of concrete problems. What is lacking in any of these gestures is an attempt to anticipate an audience; they are not intended, on their face, to initiate a conversation or provoke argument. They are almost reflexive, stray thoughts spoken in an empty room. Gestures tend to reveal how paradoxically isolating online interaction can be; that it is enough for some to merely say something, whether or not anyone is listening. In this regard, these gestures resemble a form of heckling, a commentary on the performance of various actors, but from the distance and relative safety and anonymity of a peanut gallery. Gesturers regard the state of affairs but decline to participate in them. That over a third of topline comments are such gestures is telling.

Gestures tend to be free floating and only rarely attract replies of their own—they invite only similarly brief expressions of commiseration or condemnation, and lack the specificity and

contestability to sustain more complex interactions. What I have come to refer to as proffers, however, are much more likely to draw responses. Where gestures merely announce a presence, proffers are directed outwardly, toward a concrete, imagined audience:

> **dewarf (8:24 AM)**
> I wish them well with this effort to clean up the Northside. Norman understands about 'measurement', but not sure the politicians do. So I hope this is not just another liberal addressing a pressing issue with a lot of talk and spending and then no results. Frey would just the the latest in a long line. Specific policies and actions with time-lines and measurements would be a start.

Proffers are more complex, and more deliberately assertive. Before establishing that they share Frey's desire to address economic inequality in Northside, **dewarf** makes a number of contestable claims. They draw a contrast between the rhetoric-based approaches of politicians such as Frey and the "measurement"-based approach of business leaders, such as CEO Ravi Norman. They argue that "liberals" in general are all talk and no action, and conclude with a call for accountability for those involved in the Northside and for laying concrete, data-driven solutions.

Like gestures, proffers rarely include the little nods to self-accounting that Young and other deliberative democrats desire. **dewarf** does not attempt to introduce themself to others, or establish their bona fides as a Minneapolis resident and stakeholder, thinking perhaps that their mere presence is enough to convey that information. This lack of formal greeting or introduction underscores the importance of self-accounting work in online contexts. If **dewarf** were speaking at a neighborhood or city council meeting, their presence *would* do much of the work of signaling to other participants that they have a vested interest in the matters under discussion; they would be unlikely to make the effort to travel to the meeting on a lark. However, proffers like **dewarf**'s are a good demonstration of the general sense of interactivity in online contexts.

The care **dewarf** takes in marshalling their thoughts and crafting their argument implies a certain degree of performativity and audience-awareness. That audience remains abstract and general, including the universe of fellow commenters the author of the article and any readers who might happen to drop by, but dewarf's proffer involves a clear invitation to engage.

These engagements, however, rarely amount to more than brief skirmishes, as the example below demonstrates:

> **YolandoSmith (10:41AM)**
> Liberals need to quit focusing on racism when placing blame on problems in the black community and instead work on things like rebuilding the black family, not having babies out of wedlock, staying out of trouble, getting educated, working hard, and moving up.
>> **nativesonzz (10:56AM)**
>> would you trade places forever with a black man?
>>> **YolandoSmith (11:09AM)**
>>> Can't think of anyone I would like to trade places with. I'm stuck with me and will make the best of it.
>>>> **qqq (11:12AM)**
>>>> A person in the majority WILL have an easier time of it. A native Frenchman will be more likely to have a good job than myself, were I to work in France.NOW tell me where better than the US, does the minority population have a better chance of meeting the success of the majority population??????"
>>>>> **moandaa (11:46AM)**
>>>>> Sure. Every door is open to people of color.

YolandoSmith opens with a proffer: liberals are too focused on playing the race card, and not enough on helping the moral development of black communities. Their abrupt, didactic tone is indicative of proffers in general, as is their tendency to discuss the general themes touched upon in the article (race, poverty, politics) rather than the specifics of its wording. In response to **YolandoSmith**'s claims, **nativesonzz** indirectly critiques their judgment of the black community, implying (via rhetorical question) that they lack empathy and awareness of the structural obstacles faced by black men.

Volleys and Assists

I call these engagements "volleys"—brief critiques that zero-in on one or more of the claims made by the initial speaker. **nativesonzz**'s comment attracts a number of volleys of its own. **YolandoSmith** responds philosophically, averring that they are only person they could or want to be. It is unclear if **YolandoSmith** is being sincere, or if they are merely deflecting and refusing to engage on **nativesonzz**'s terms, speaking abstractly on the nature of self-hood rather than concretely on the living conditions of the black community. Regardless, **nativesonzz** declined to respond on those terms. **qqq** and **moandaa**, meanwhile, volley back in a similar manner, with **qqq** arguing (somewhat bizarrely) that minorities will always be disadvantaged, but at least the U.S.'s minorities are treated the best, and **moandaa** implicitly arguing that black Minneapolitans are, indeed, held back only by personal moral failings, seeing as they have "every door open to them."

What has this skirmish accomplished? What drew **YolandoSmith**, **nativesonzz**, **qqq**, and **moandaa** into such an abrupt and perfunctory exchange before disengaging just as abruptly? These sorts of skirmishes reveal how the open-ended quality of the comment context denies participants that sort of catharsis and motive-to-understand that deliberative speech requires. Face-to-face interaction is governed by innumerable rules of when to begin and end engagements, and of how to present one's self and what emotions to convey. Stripped of the various gestures of recognition and self-accounting, and free from the constraints imposed by time and space, virtual conversations cease to resemble conversations at all. **YolandoSmith** could have stayed to elaborate further on why they felt that black families are in such a crisis; **nativesonzz** could have stayed and tried to press past Yolando's non-response and push them to

talk more about the links between economic inequality and personal responsibility. Neither felt compelled to stay, because, in an interactive medium where conversations spring into and out of existence at will, neither were truly present as people in the first place. The comment context fails to allow for the sort of connective tissue that sustains conversation and deliberation: the moments of interruption and reflection, the pauses for questions and clarifications, the opportunities to make one's self heard in the most comprehensive and comprehensible manner possible—these are rarely present in online communication.

The deliberative ideal is not impossible to reach in online settings, however, merely very difficult. Another commenter, **momoffabfour**, offers a glimpse of deliberative potential, where self-accounting and self-presentation provide a means of overcoming the medium's shortcomings.

> **momoffabfour (10:34AM)**
> From where I sit as a parent of four talented and well educated children of color, the answer is for parents of children of color to remove them from public education; homeschool, private school -- do whatever it takes to keep them out of the toxic environment. It doesn't matter if the schools are urban or suburban, the same pervasive worldview and label applies; they are disadvantaged. Being poor does not equal disadvantaged. I was fortunate to go to school nearly everyday and, certainly, every week when my children were in primary school and it was still a task akin to pushing them up the proverbial hill with an anvil around my neck and theirs. Preparation for professional school was lacking. There were no expectations that children would become doctors or lawyers and IT specialists or scientist and when the administration and faculty was questioned, they shrugged their shoulders and said that we wanted too much. Brown vs. the Board of Education did not yield the promise that was expected[….]Because Brown did not yield the hoped for opportunities, it's time for people of color to remove our children from toxic systems. When we take out kids out and all the money that goes with them, perhaps, the system will change because as we all know, money talks. No parent should ever have to offer up their child/children to a system that is hellbent on destroying them ""for their own good.

> **momoffabfour (10:59AM)**
> I would add that […] had I not been present with all that was lacking, I cannot imagine what would've happened if I had not been present. And what happens to the mothers and fathers who cannot come to school everyday or every week? Well, I know the answer to that. If it was as challenging as it was for us to get a quality education, the others are going to be left behind. Period. The children will never realize their god given potential because decisions

> are being made about their ability to succeed. I am everything Conservatives love: pull yourself up by your bootstraps, work oneself to the bone, and become a success story. But here's what I know, we were able to dodge every single misfortune that derails lives. And, that is the difference between our family and families of those whose children didn't succeed, who wound up in jail, or are dead. While we forced opportunities for them, we also caught some very luck breaks; we didn't get some godforsaken disease, we had fourteen years of fairly stable job security during their formative academic years that allowed us to pay for their education, we had grandparents who took an interest in the children and helped while we worked four jobs between the two of us[….]We didn't succeed because we were better than anyone else. We succeeded because our health held, we had work, we had extended family, the kids didn't experiment with drugs and all the other things most kids do -- the difference is that when poor kids make these kinds of mistakes, they very often pay with their lives[….]And yes, I was a Northsider. And yes, I also lived in Minnetonka. I didn't see a whole lot of difference in how the children were viewed. It was just as tough to get the children serious consideration as scholars -- and the teachers and administrators had the audacity to tell me when they scored in top 1% on college entrance exams. I couldn't rely on their idea of what was possible for my children. We had to cultivate in them the resilience to withstand the idea that they were less than -- and they were children. No child should have to push back against the worldview of adults. And yet, they did have to do just that.

These two comments, written one after the other, are remarkable in a number of ways. Beyond their length and complexity (each three times longer than the next longer comment by another author), **momoffabfour** offers something that only a handful of other commenters do: an introduction. She lets us know from the beginning who she is, why she has a stake in the matter, and how her experiences have shaped her opinions. We know that she is a mother of children of color, she has lived in both poorer (Northside) and richer (Minnetonka) areas and has faced similar levels of discrimination in both, and that she personally has struggled to gain a good education for her children. She outlines the sorts of "lucky breaks" she and her children enjoyed—good health, job security, extended family support, avoiding drugs—as well as the obstacles they faced—working four jobs between her and her partner, and a "toxic" public school system disinterested in preparing her children to succeed. She offers solutions—pulling children of color out of public schools, both for their own wellbeing and as a form of protest—rooted in her experiences.

In the process, **momofffabfour** doesn't just offer an argument, she builds a narrative; we know who she is and why she's speaking, and that makes her words all the more compelling. This form of self-accounting enables her to make claims in a uniquely convincing manner—e.g., **momoffabfour** asserts that her and her children's success story might represent "everything Conservatives love" only to challenge such a "bootstrap" narrative by detailing everything that could have gone, and all too often does go wrong, for people of color. In making things personal, in rooting her claims in narrative and biography, **momoffabfour** sets the stage for a more thoughtful and reflective form of discussion:

> **qqq (11:08)**
> Excellent point about the effects of a setback. Part of the divide is the cushion cash allows. For a health problem, hitting a deer, a broken water heater. That resilience comes from being able to lean on family, HAVING a good battery to avoid car trouble to avoid job pitfalls to avoid being unable to look for work beyond walking distance of the bus, and all the other ""slings and arrows of outrageous misfortune"".A single mom with no family in town, is not anybody's bet for success. Kudos to those who can make it
>
> > **momoffabfour (11:18)**
> > some like to think they succeeded because of all of their handwork and they earned it. Well, we worked hard -- AND, if we had not caught those breaks of health, employment, and familial support, we would not have survived. A friend of mine was widowed with two young children; not wanting to a be ""welfare queen,"" she worked. But here's now that looked; she had two early elementary aged children that she put to bed every night and then worked the nightshift. She couldn't afford childcare so she left them home alone. She didn't tell anyone because she knew she would be considered neglectful. So she risked losing custody of her children so she could work because the stigma of being a welfare queen was so strong. She also didn't ask anyone for help. For all those folks who think they know what poverty is and how lazy everyone is, they don't have a clue about the suffering. She's lucky her house didn't burn down or the children didn't get up looking for her and wander outside. That is the stigma of poverty; your penalized for being poor and judged, your penalized if you ask for help and your penalized if you don't.
> >
> > > **qqq (5:36 PM)**
> > > The very definition of RICH is that life is easier. I gained a LOT of sympathy for single moms when my wife and I had children.

Here, **qqq** offers what I call an "assist," rather than a volley; rather than critique a claim, they elaborate and amplify it. In this case, **qqq** offers more examples of how poverty limits

opportunities for success, and how family support is a necessity, and then provides a gesture of sympathy for working mothers. **momoffabfour** uses this interactive opening to underscore her point about responsibility versus structural constraints. She provides an anecdote about a friend of hers about how the stigma attached to being a "lazy welfare queen" impacted both her safety and emotional wellbeing. Again, this appeal to narrative provides an effective means of undermining misconceptions about poverty and those who face it. **qqq** responds with another assist, offering a second gesture of sympathy for single working mothers. Given qqq's participation in the exchange above with **nativesonzz**, and their points about the relative advantages for minorities in the U.S. and elsewhere, I suspect that they do not entirely agree with **momoffabfour**'s position, and yet they were still capable of finding some measure of comity in acknowledging the realities of poverty.

> **nativesonzz (2:32 PM)**
> thats awesome...the safety nets Americans used to take for granted are gone for all races now...and it feels unfair and new to many. Thanks for sharing
>
> > **momoffabfour (6:32 PM)**
> > That's the irony, isn't it. Whites are using opioids at alarming rates and death by heroin and fentanyl overdose has shot through the roof. Opioid addiction is also considered a public health emergency rather than a criminal activity as it was for crack cocaine.The refrain I hear is because poor and working class white are frustrated by the lack of upward mobility, they are turning to drugs. Well, poor and working class whites are now experiencing what blacks and Natives have been experiencing, well, for always. In Minnesota, a white convicted felon is more likely to be hired for a job than a college educated black. And black people continue to go to school, get admitted to college, and believe the system will work for them. We can point fingers at what blacks and Natives are not doing, we need to ask why these groups continue to strive and why are the vast majority resilient? We tell Natives and blacks to go to school when they are not being hired even after having pursued higher education. When will that fact be part of the discussion?"

nativesonzz provides another sort of assist, briefly praising the quality of **momoffabfour**'s comment before building off of her claims to make a broader claim about how the decline of the American welfare state is beginning to fail everyone, not just people of color. They conclude,

again, with another brief of acknowledgement for the time and care **momoffabfour** took in expressing herself. These "thank you gestures," or any gesture that acknowledges authorship and the shared humanity of the interlocutor, are exceedingly rare—**nativesonzz**'s comment acknowledges **momoffabfour**, herself, as much as it acknowledges her words. **momoffabfour**'s responds with perhaps a gentle challenge to **nativesonzz**'s drawing of the class line; she re-draws the race line in pointing out the differing response to white drug addiction (public health crisis) and black drug addiction (crime crisis), before discussing how whites' newfound class resentment has long been felt by black and native communities. She concludes with a rhetorical flourish: a series of probing questions about why people of color still try so hard to strive within a system that has repeatedly failed them. From the reader's perspective, **momoffabfour**'s willingness to build a narrative and to continually elaborate on her claims in rhetorically satisfying ways provides a sense of conclusion and catharsis that is often so lacking in these engagements.

Co-Presence and Self-Accounting

The goal of including more narrative and biographical detail in deliberation is not necessarily to make discussion more civil; just more genuine. When readers and participants know who the interlocutors are, they have a better sense of the stakes and motivations involved.

> **Dandelionhead (9:54AM)**
> I moved to North Minneapolis to be a part of the solution. I pumped a 100k to rehab my house. I painted my house, and it got graffiti tagged. I had scofflaws that ran the stop sign all the time in front of my house. I had bags of garbage tossed in my yard and alley. I had my landscaping bricks stolen. I had men knock on my door at 10:30. I had a neighbor that used drugs and became a problem for my family. I decided I could no longer be a sisyphus and push the boulder up hill. I sold and moved to the suburbs. It's one of my best decisions.
>
> > **momoffabfour (11:26 AM)**

> yeah, yeah, yeah...and meth is being made and sold in the suburbs and rural Minnesota. Outstate folks are dying of opiod overdoses in alarming numbers. Your point is? Where are you going to hide? We either care for our community -- and our community is all of us. As MLK, Jr. said, ""We will live together as brothers or we will perish together as fools."" You're not the only person who had their house tagged, crazy neighbors, and drug dealing. Some of us just sucked it up and dealt with it and worked with our neighbors and the police to make things safe.

Like **momoffabfour**, Dandelionhead provides numerous gestures of self-accounting; the readers know that they are a former resident of the Northside and thus they might be able to offer some unique insights on the topic. **momoffabfour**'s response is decidedly not civil. She begins by dismissing **Dandelionhead**'s efforts to invest in the community ("yeah, yeah, yeah…") before bringing up the rural/suburban opioid epidemic and how communities are in crisis everywhere, and arriving at an overarching claim about civic responsibility. She bookends her dismissive gesture with implicitly insulting **Dandelionhead**'s failure to "suck it up" and work more closely with their community. **momoffabfour**'s response is not civil, but as readers we know that she is not arguing from nowhere; that she has her own experiences as a Northside resident to draw from, and that she feels her outrage is justified. We know that **Dandelionhead**'s and **momoffabfour** engagement is one between two stakeholders, both with valid claims to speak on this topic.

Compare this engagement with another skirmish between **lauraea** and **YolandoSmith**:

> **lauraea (9:35AM)**
> Fact is, some of these folks do have an education and some work history--but also a criminal record. Would you personally hire someone who has a record? I know many businesses who won't, who discriminate against a job applicant who has a criminal record. What's your stance on this?"
>
> > **YolandoSmith (10:14AM)**
> > Don't commit crimes.

As part of a larger discussion on personal responsibility and economic opportunity for people of color, **lauraea** brings up the stigma that a criminal record carries, even when job candidates are otherwise qualified. They conclude their comment by addressing **YolandoSmith** directly, seemingly genuinely asking for **YolandoSmith's** opinion. **YolandoSmith's** response, like **momoffabfour**'s, is dismissive, even rude, but it is far easier to perceive **momoffabfour**'s comment as justified because we know who she is. **YolandoSmith**, despite being a frequent commenter, is never willing to provide a sense of *personal* insight or motivation, limiting their comments to a series of simple, narrative-free declaratives. This communicative style might be an effective debate tactic, but because of this lack of self-accounting, **YolandoSmith** is more likely than not to come across as callous, disinterested, or even insincere.

Argument from Nowhere

As anyone who has spent an appreciable amount of time in the comment context would know, the default emotional language in online political discussions tends to be callous, disinterested, and insincere. The level of anonymity contributes to this form of behavior; without formal sanctions for misbehavior, and without a firm sense of audience, participants feel free to eschew the self-accounting that becomes a necessity in face-to-face contexts. But this argument-from-nowhere style reveals much about how actors imagine "reasonable" discussion is supposed to take place—that is, that political discussions are inherently adversarial, with clearly demarcated partisan and ideological lines cross-cutting any given issue.

> **notsid2 (7:32AM)**
> Sounds good but has been said before as has been noted below. Those areas have to do much of that themselves nd with a strong commitment to do so otherwise it will just have been another round of promises and good intentions that will go unfilled...once again.
>> **gcriley1050 (8:12AM)**

> As a liberal I agree. No amount of programs will help until the people want to help themselves
>
> > **dewarf (8:27AM)**
> > What??? 'Individual responsibility' being touted a liberal? Maybe we should have elected you mayor!
> >
> > > **WaterBunker (8:28AM)**
> > > Give gcriley credit. If more liberals would see the light, progress could be achieved. Now, libs fight every attempt to rebuild the family wanting only to blame something/someone else and give away more money

Reframing the issue of discussion in ideological terms comes naturally to the participants. **notsid2** opens with an anodyne observation about well-meaning intentions running up against the lack of commitment from the communities themselves. **gcriley1050**, unprompted, directs the engagement toward a discussion of liberalism, with **dewarf** archly expressing surprise at a liberal touting "personal responsibility" and **WaterBunker** chiding them for not encouraging liberals to rebuild families and give up the blame game. This tendency to move from specific to general, and from facts to values—what should be done with Northside versus why liberals fail to embrace an ethic of personal responsibility—is a typical transition in online political discussions.

Platform Effects

The architecture of the medium itself encourages brevity, generalization, and confrontation. Comments longer than one hundred words become increasingly difficult to read, unless the participant takes care to format. Long, detailed, and nuanced comments such as **momoffabfour**'s run the risk of being ignored entirely, both because they represent a relatively large time investment on behalf of the reader and because they tend to defy easy ideological framing. Nested comment systems, while a sensible means of organizing information, favor topline comments and initial reactions over replies, which are increasingly shunted off to the side of the

screen, resulting in the sort of brief engagements discussed above, as any more complex conversations become simply too hard to follow. Participants are also discouraged from understanding-building activity—asking for points of clarification, providing additional explanations, and restating and elaborating upon key points—as this runs the risk of taking up valuable real estate. It is no surprise, then, that simple, general arguments tend to be favored over complex, specific narratives—particularly arguments that adhere to premade and easily comprehensible ideological frameworks. The work of self-presentation and self-accounting, of establishing bona fides, and of building narratives rooted in experience, is a greater task than the comment context requires or encourages.

Additionally, one's "presence" in the comment context is fundamentally different from one's presence in other settings. A participant does not exist as a person but as an assemblage of texts, as a part of the architecture itself rather than as a static entity. And that architecture is modular. Comments and comment chains can be sorted and rearranged according to date, preference, and various other criteria. From the perspective of the reader, participants are not so much "present" as occurring and reoccurring, flitting into and out of existence at random. It takes great care and attention, both on the part of the reader and of the participant to reconstitute these texts and fragments back into a person with recognizable motives.

Modularity makes composing an interpretable definition of the situation equally difficult—the order in which the reader encounters participant-texts affects how they construct context. For example, **momoffabfour**'s initial, biographically motivated comments helps to inform how the reader interprets her later encounters with fellow commenters. Because we know how her struggles in raising children on the Northside informed her experiences, we can

contextualize her outraged and dismissive tone toward Dandelionhead. But what if the reader had decided to sort comments by "most liked" or "most replied" (both options on the *Star Tribune*) rather than chronologically? Then **momoffabfour**'s important self-accounting work is unmade, and her words are denuded of their biographical color. If these sorts of comment contexts are to reach the deliberative ideal of diverse stakeholders coming together to discuss matters of common import and grounding their arguments in experience and empathy, participants must either: A) be willing to include greetings, introductions, and other gestures of self-accounting in each and every comment; or B) come to know their interlocutors so intimately that they can sufficiently contextualize each other's words. The former is tedious, unfeasible, and violates speech norms in the other direction—imagine someone who insists on introducing him or herself every time they open their mouth—the latter is all but impossible in the sorts of ad hoc comment contexts that spring up on the *Star Tribune*.

We tend to analogize online settings as "spaces" in which "people" come together to "speak," but this requires obscuring the textuality of these media. We do not encounter people online, we encounter words, and we do not move around in online spaces, we read texts—and the act of reading places considerably more interpretive weight on the observer than that acts of watching and listening. It is up to the reader to imagine the person, to impute motives that might or might not be sincerely held, to navigate mood and tone, and to reconstruct stable "offline" identities out of fragmentary evidence. Coming to understand another person is an act of collaboration; coming to understand a text is a solitary affair. The dimension of these "spaces" is defined only by the length and width of a webpage. Viewing comment settings as texts rather than conversations requires understanding that they are not only designed primarily to convey

information rather than communication but are often designed in such a way as to actively *impede* effective communication. At best, comment systems present debates rather than conversations—rigid, interactively limited exchanges that support only a few rounds of give-and-take between at most a handful of interlocutors. There are limited opportunities for asking others to "speak up" or to loop others into the discussion, limited opportunities to craft arguments in nuanced and narratively satisfying ways, and limited opportunities to collaboratively reach toward mutual understanding.

Conclusions

Returning once again to the deliberative criteria discussed earlier, the comment context might be accessible to new participants, but it too often fails to reach the standards of reasonableness and publicity. Successfully deliberating online requires knowing to whom one is speaking, or even *might* be speaking. Ad hoc issue-publics such as newspaper comments deny this sense of co-presence to participants and thus encourages a detached and argumentative mode of engagement. Participants shy away from self-accounting and other gestures of recognition because the work this requires becomes too taxing and too tedious when they and those with whom they interact exist only as assemblages of text rather than coherent identities. Maximizing the deliberative potential of an online space requires making it *feel* more like a space rather than a textual medium, a space whose existence is independent of the topic of discussion and where participants can distinguish between the speaker and what is spoken.

If newspapers like the *Times,* the *Post,* and the *Star Tribune* truly wish to imagine their readers as a community and as a public with its own identity and voice, then rather than

providing ad hoc comment contexts they should maintain and curate independent forums where participants are free to discuss the news of the day as well as any other topic they might imagine. Rather than offer "parasitical" issue publics attached to articles, news media could provide links to discussions of that article within one central forum. In these sorts of settings, participants might be able to develop and present static identities upon which they can ground their viewpoints and achieve the informed and collaborative mode of discussion that deliberative democrats desire. Issues of group-governance, of establishing productive speech norms, and of navigating the practicalities of information architecture would remain, and there is always a danger of such spaces succumbing to insularity and homophilization (Habermas 2006). The notoriety and often downright repugnance of such platforms as 4chan attest to this danger, and underscore the importance of mutual ethical commitments to tolerance and fair, open, and consistent standards of moderation. Any public must contend with navigating standards of inclusion and exclusion, of welcoming all while guarding against harmful and counterproductive speech and behavior (Benhabib 1996; Taylor 1998), but at least these sorts of independent forums have the potential of *being* publics, in the traditional sense.

But do ad hoc comment contexts, existing as they are, serve a purpose within civil society? At the very least, comment contexts provide participants with avenues of expression and a means of interacting with others, however shallow and limited these engagements may be. Comment contexts can serve as conversation simulators, if not conversations themselves. Scholars of agonistic theory, such as Mouffe (2006), Connolly (2000), and Honig (1996), would still find much value in the capacity to instantly and freely express one's reaction to the news of the day. Agonists recognize the importance of argument itself, not as a means to an end of

building consensus or achieving understanding, to the functioning of democracy. In confronting others, in encountering a diversity of opinions and outlooks, and in honing their own political sensibilities, participants and readers are still learning something new. As Rosenblum (2008) observes, there are advantages to be gained in intense skirmishing and the crystallization of viewpoints—such cleavages provide the epistemic function within democracy of organizing inchoate information and mobilizing political actors. And yet it is difficult to ignore the fact that pure arguments, divorced from narrative and biographical detail, do not make for compelling reading. A reader who encounters a slew of rhetorically empty gestures, proffers, and volleys might learn something new, but will rarely learn something interesting, and will rarely be inclined to take part in the discussion herself. Deliberative democratic theory offers not only a means of strengthening democratic legitimacy and civil society, but points towards a far more satisfying, more empathetic, and less isolating means of encountering others online. Seeking out means of building deliberative spaces that maximize self-accounting and encourage narrative and nuanced modes of expression carries ethical and aesthetic in addition to political value.

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CHAPTER 4: R/MINNEAPOLIS AND FRAMING ONLINE POLITICAL SPEECH

Introduction

The previous chapter on political talk in ad hoc comment spaces focused on the perlocutionary intent behind such talk: what are participants aiming to achieve when talking politics online? This chapter focuses less on the "why" and more on the "how": how do participants know how to talk with each other online? What sorts of interpretive schema must they adopt in successfully navigating political discussions? As such, this chapter is oriented around the mechanics of political speech, and the types of semantic frames typically applied to questions of the common good. Where the previous chapter was primarily in conversation with such deliberative democracy theorists as Jurgen Habermas and Iris Marion Young, this chapter is almost exclusively in conversation with Erving Goffman. I turn to Goffman because his *Frame Analysis* (1986) provides the most comprehensive means of analyzing and understanding communication, from the phenomenological to the performative level. In attempting to translate Goffman's frame analysis to virtual contexts, I map out both the primary frameworks (what are the conditions of saying?) and frames (what are the conditions of what is said?) of online political talk. The goal of this chapter, then, is twofold: 1) to reveal how both the medium and specific platform shapes the possibilities of online political speech; and 2) to establish how political speech is interpreted and organized in these virtual contexts. In the process, my research reveals how a sense of "locality" is vital, both for maintaining cohesive communities and for grounding political speech in the immediate, deliberative level.

In discussing newspaper commenters, I revealed how the architecture of online comment spaces encourages brevity, generalization, and confrontation. Here, I draw upon Goffman's frame analysis to explore these virtual "platform effects" more extensively. In any given communicative context, a series of frameworks provide the conditions of saying. Setting frameworks establish where we are: a tricky proposition in virtual contexts, where users must infer a cohesive "space" from a series of word boxes and text-chains. Similarly, virtual platform users must put extensive work into building common participation frameworks, inferring audiences and conversational partners from isolated texts. Combined, these two contexts of interaction shape how actors navigate virtual expression (how should I talk?) and discussion frameworks (how shall we talk together?) in a unique way: virtual discussions are analogized as face-to-face interactions, but actors lack, and must compensate for, a complete expressive repertoire. Discursive spaces are analogized as vast public town halls or amphitheaters, but in which audiences remain ghostly and unseen and even conversation patterns are liable to appear and disappear at will. Generally, then, virtual interactive frameworks would seem to encourage political discussion on the broadest, most strategic, and impersonal level—and I do, indeed, find this to be the case in the next chapter, "Twitter and Semantic Territorialization." But not all virtual platforms are created equal. As I reveal in this chapter, spaces like the r/Minneapolis subreddit provide users with more resources and incentives to behave as a *community* rather than the collection of isolated individuals I encountered in the previous study of newspaper commenters. Platform effects, then, play a vital role in shaping the possibilities of meaningful political speech: the more easily actors are able to imagine publicity, locality, and co-presence, the more grounded and deliberative political speech tends to be.

Having mapped out the overarching frameworks of online discussion, I shift focus to the specific frames deployed in online political speech. Through an analysis of online deliberation on Reddit, I come to define and discuss how political discourse tends to occur on three levels. At the "highest" or abstract level of moral politics, we attempt to define the common "good" and demonstrate why certain values must remain atop the political constellation. At the mid-range level of ethical politics, we accept that there are multiple potential "goods" available, but some must take precedence over others in certain contexts. At the "lowest" level of procedural politics we agree that a certain good must be achieved but we might not agree over a specific plan of action. Regardless of its level, political talk requires frame establishment, where we stake out the limits of discussion and how we should address it, frame expansion, where we elaborate upon the topic and introduce related questions and premises, and frame substitution, where we challenge others' interpretations of the situation and counter with our own.

The focus of this subsequent analysis is primarily on a discussion of a guaranteed basic income pilot program in the "r/Minneapolis" community hosted on the Reddit platform. Reddit, a social media and content sharing platform with approximately 50 million active users[11], is subdivided into a number of communities, or "subreddits," each anchored to specific geographic location (r/Minneapolis, r/California, r/Brazil) devoted to a specific topic or interest (r/WorldNews, r/Politics, r/Disney). I chose r/Minneapolis as it captured a similar sense of locality to the *Star Tribune* comment space discussed prior, but provided a far more elaborate and well-defined setting and participation framework—r/Minneapolis could lay a greater claim to being an independent, enduring community with a recognizable membership than an ad hoc

[11] https://www.wsj.com/articles/reddit-claims-52-million-daily-users-revealing-a-key-figure-for-social-media-platforms-11606822200

comment section. I chose a discussion concerning UBI both because it was relevant to local politics and because it offered something of a novelty in political talk—a topic that resists easy ideological framing. The participants in this discussion deliberately asserted a sense of locality in 1) holding others accountable as stakeholders, 2) guiding talk toward specific issues of common concern rather than higher level talk of the moral good, and 3) approaching arguments with appeals to good reason and enforcing civility standards. I would stop short of arguing that such virtual settings are "ideal" for deliberative political speech, but such talk does lend evidence to the importance of establishing and reinforcing a clear sense of place as a means of anchoring talk.

Elements of Mediated and Unmediated Speech

This section and the subsequent section on primary frameworks serve as a "deep dive" into Erving Goffman's phenomenology of communication. Focusing as he does on face-to-face interaction, much of the commentary herein is not central to my discussion on *online* political speech, but Goffman's thinking provides a helpful foundation for translating face-to-face contexts into online contexts and vice versa. In establishing, through Goffman, the conditions that make speaking and speech acts possible, I can attempt to describe, in a section on online interactive frameworks, how these conditions play out in mediated, online settings. Finally, with these platform effects in play, I can shift from frameworks to frames and focus on the conditions of what is *being said* in online political discussion.

Goffman (1981) outlines three aspects of unmediated communication: ritualization, participation, and embedding. "Ritualization" (1981:2) refers to the "unintended by-products of

speaking and listening" that have nevertheless taken on a communicative role in themselves. The way we clear our throats, the way we direct our gaze at others and attention to new topics, and the way we insert pauses in conversation all become routinized over the course of our lives and signal to others how we are approaching the situation. In other words, the acts of perceiving and interpreting are themselves interpretable gestures. These gestural conventions signal our presence in the space and our approach to participation. Thus seeing and listening, though in many aspects pre-conscious, are in part learned behaviors: we learn *how* to be present in a space and signal our presence to others: to be "unthinkingly expressive" (Goffman 1981:3). As Collins (2004) further elaborates, these situation-dependent interaction ritual chains serve as the most basic, micro-level means of building solidarity and a common set of cultural symbols within and between groups.

The "participation framework" provides actors with further context on how/when to speak and to listen. "When a word is spoken, all those who happen to be in perceptual range of the event will have some sort of participation status relative to it (Goffman 1981:3). In any given situation innumerable participation rules and normative specifications of appropriate behavior apply. Who is the speaker, who is the listener? Who speaks first and who speaks last? What utterances and gestures must be acknowledged and what can safely be ignored? The act of speaking itself immediately calls an interactive performance, with its attendant roles, statuses, and scripts, into being.

Finally, "embedding" refers to the relationship between the speaker and what is spoken. It is generally clear who is speaking at any given time, but not necessarily in whose name they are speaking. Speakers can freely quote others, summarize sources of information, and recount

experiences in which they performed a completely different role from the situation at hand. Any number of voices—whether or not they imply a specific personality—can be performed. "Uttered words have utterers; utterances, however, have subjects (implicit or explicit), and although these may designate the utterer, there is nothing in the syntax of utterances to require this coincidence" (Goffman 1981:3). Here, Goffman addresses the general semiotic principle that language allows speakers to construct and reconstruct situations unrelated to the immediate context of interaction. That is, there is one concrete reality of speaker(s) and listener(s), and any number of implied realities, voices, subjects, and events enacted through speech. The embedding process is subject to further guidelines on how, when, and why to shift perspectives.

Paying close attention to the integration and interplay of ritualization, participation framework, and embedding of a given context, Goffman argues, provides a means of analyzing communication. Speech, gesture, participation rules, and embedding practices are all necessary for successful interaction, but all allow for an element of play— "[a]ll these markers we can openly mimic, mime, and reenact, allowing us dramatic liberties" (Goffman 1981:4) Thus, to Goffman, all communication is inherently performative.

Goffman's discussion of talk centers on immediate, face-to-face interaction, but how might Goffmanian conversation analysis be applied to *mediated* communication? Does "talk" remain recognizably "talk" on social media platforms? Murthy (2012), building upon a body of symbolic interactionist analysis of social media (Adkins and Nasarczyk 2009; Bryant and Miron 2004; Riva and Galimberti 1998; Spitzberg 2006; Walther 1996), argues that elements of ritualization, participation frameworks, and embedding remain relevant, albeit in altered forms. Ritualization and non-"speech" gestures remain detectable in, e.g., Twitter, but become far

subtler and more ambiguous, requiring more effort on the part of the reader to interpret. Visual signifiers, such as avatars and emojis, as well as other textual elements both unintentional (misspelling and misformatting) and intentional (sarcasm tags and ellipses) provide a form of virtual gesture—and sometimes barriers to understanding. However, as I have argued elsewhere in this dissertation, this gestural repertoire seems sparse indeed, requiring far greater efforts to "compensate textually" (Herring and Androutsopoulos 2015) in order for meaning to be properly conveyed.

Goffman's participation frameworks similarly undergo radical alterations in virtually mediated speech. Crucially, as I have discussed elsewhere, the interactional situations engendered by most social media outlets are no longer temporally bounded. There is no "end" to a Twitter, Facebook, or Reddit exchange so much as a cessation of activity, which might or might not be permanent. A face-to-face conversation ends when one or more people leave the room or explicitly close the topic. A telephone conversation ends when someone hangs up. Resolution is achieved through various rituals, gestures, and expressions of farewell. If the rare circumstance occurs that a conversation ends because a participant abruptly falls silent, participants must work to redefine the definition of the situation—they are compelled to provide explanations and to save face in such an abnormal occurrence. Virtual interactions, conversely, have no resolution rules. Virtual encounters cannot "end" because there is no "room" to "occupy" or "speakers" to "enter" or "exit": only text strings to be interpreted, responded to, or ignored at any point, with roughly equal consequences. At the same time these conversation traces remain more or less permanently available—or at least as long as the platform is in operation—to be (admittedly rarely) unearthed and revived by new participants at later times.

Thus virtual speakers necessarily operate within incomplete participation frameworks. One might have a general "perceptual range" (Murthy 2012) of potential conversational partners, but one's ability to predict others' behavior and anticipate others' responses is severely limited. Who speaks first? Anyone. Who speaks next? Again, anyone. What utterances demand response and what can safely be ignored? Anything at any time. Many social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook compensate by formally establishing who has standing to speak and respond, giving users the ability, in theory, to control who can see what information and who can reply. Participation status relative to an utterance can and must be assumed, but never confirmed. Social media outlets can attempt to compensate for this lack of conversational structure by translating time into space—i.e., threaded replies provide the illusion of a progressive conversation, and in this limited context the participation framework becomes quite rigid and unambiguous. In virtual encounters it is impossible to interrupt or interject; there can be no awkward silences or involuntary responses. However, the lack of resolution, or of the *anticipation* of a resolution means that these limited frameworks provide little more than a raft to cling to in an infinite sea. Threaded replies proceed downward indefinitely, no end in sight.

The transmutation of face-to-face speech into text chains, of conversations into conversation-traces further complicates Goffman's concept of embedding. A speaker can freely quote others, attribute sources of information, allude to prior experiences and events, both real and imaginary, and otherwise evoke an infinity of perceptual worlds. However, by virtue of *being* a speaker, present with others, the speaker anchors utterance to utterer, and steps must be taken to provide context for shifting perspectives and subjects. A virtual conversation-trace, however, is always of uncertain ownership. Traces can be copied, pasted, stolen, altered,

photoshopped, iterated, retweeted, memed—they have the capacity to be disembedded from their "situational present" (Goffman 1981:3) almost immediately, and re-embedded in new contexts with new participants and new audiences. The iterability of online speech contributes to the Internet's overall crisis of legitimacy.

Primary Frameworks

The conditions through which these processes of ritualization, participation, and embedding are carried out represent a group's primary frameworks. Frameworks are the means through which an actor answers the question "what is going on here?: that is, how they are expected to interpret events, organize experience, and interact with others. Frameworks, then, provide the broadest, intersubjectively generated context for understanding in any given situation.

> …the primary frameworks of a particular social group constitute a central element of its culture, especially insofar as understandings emerge concerning principal classes of schemata, the relations of these to one another, and the sum total of forces and agents that these interpretive designs acknowledge to be loose in the world (Goffman 1986:27)

Multiple frameworks can, and almost universally are, present at the same time. As discussed above, a conversation involves several frameworks operating simultaneously: participation frameworks (who is present, who can talk, and when can they talk?), talk frameworks (what type of talk? chit-chat? speech? debate?), speech frameworks (what is the expected content of speech? what topics are to be addressed and how are they to be interpreted?), natural frameworks (where are we in physical space? what time of day is it? how might we interact with our environment?), etc. Primary frameworks, then, establish the boundaries of the possible in a given interaction. In the context of political speech, the primary frameworks establish both the mode of discussion—stump speech, townhall, coffee talk—as well as the sorts of interpretive frames

speakers can bring to bear in that discussion. As I discuss in "From Frameworks to Frames" below, these political speech frames shift talk to the realm of the normative, and provide different means of answering the question, "what is the good?"

Goffman recognized that identifying a single "primary" framework is something of a necessary fiction; frameworks can nestle within other frameworks or interact with each other in various anticipated and unanticipated ways. There is an even larger, meta-structural, "framework of frameworks" or "cosmology" (1986:27)—akin to a lifeworld or collective conscience—operating as well. Despite the innumerability of potential frameworks and play, and because misinterpretation is always possible, Goffman points out that individuals are adept at adopting the correct framework—"and why not, since social life itself is often organized as something that individuals will be able to understand and deal with" (1986:26).

Navigating virtual everyday life, and attendant the loss of an entire realm of non-textual cues, rituals, and gestures, arguably complicates this picture. In a text-based medium, the risks of misapplying and misidentifying frameworks increases substantially: Was I supposed to interpret this at face value or were they speaking facetiously? Are they trolling or arguing in good faith? How could I possibly have offended them with what I said? Was I right to assume their gender? However, via strategies of textual compensation and the emergence of virtually-centered frameworks, virtual actors are more or less capable of maintaining a stable definition of the situation.

For the most part, navigating virtual everyday life requires broader willingness to accept absurdity and ambiguity as inherent to interaction: Virtual residents are resigned to the fact that certain utterances and gestures are uninterpretable, at least not without going through the effort

of asking for constant clarification—a general unwillingness to do so can be seen as a holdover from face-to-face interaction. While text can be made to mimic speech (bolded, capitalized, or italicized for emphasis), or be supplemented with sarcasm tags and emojis to denote tone, virtual residents accept as well that their words can and will often be misinterpreted, either genuinely or willfully. The Dada absurdism of meme humor—emerging as an in-joke in one sub-community only to be iterated into ever greater heights of illegibility—reflects an acquired playfulness toward lack of comprehension.

This assumed ambiguity is an unsurmountable aspect of *all* text-based interpretive frameworks: e.g., applying a "literary" framework to a text involves embracing, even celebrating, its openness and polysemy. But most text interpretation frameworks also assume a looser temporality. There is a greater distance between the writer, the reader, and what is written. Even if one does not fully embrace a postmodern "death of the author," there remains the implicit understanding that the text becomes a discrete object of interpretation, distinct if not divorced from the writer. The distinction between text and immediate speech means that the reader has any length of time to interpret the text, comfortable with the understanding that their interpretation, their horizon of meaning (Gadamer 1975), will not sync up perfectly with the writer's or fellow readers'.

Interactive textual frameworks, however, attempt to re-establish an equivalence between text and immediate speech. Indeed, the more text-like a virtual utterance becomes—the more the writer piles on detail and literary flourishes—the less likely it is to be read and responded to, at least as part of online discussion. "Too long; didn't read" (tl;dr) is a common means of sanctioning florid online speech. The writer must be "present" in the text to a far greater extent,

left on the hook for any potential embarrassing misinterpretations, even as they lack the complete expressive equipment necessary for explaining meaning or resolving conflict available to face-to-face speakers. Taking extensive time to marshal one's thoughts and interpret others' intents, and returning to a conversation days later is perceived as inappropriate or obsessive. An exception to this occurs in smaller, more tight-knit communities where both the individuals and setting have a more established presence and thus readers have more leeway in picking up and dropping conversations. As a sense of "privacy" increases readers are freer to experiment with form as well—longer comments become essays, epigrams, confessionals, diaries. The more fully realized the setting and readers, the more textual the mode of expression becomes.

However, in the sort of "public" spaces in which online political discussions tend to occur, such as Reddit and Twitter, interactions between strangers tend to be briefer. As mentioned earlier, the temporality of virtual conversations theoretically extends indefinitely, but in practice conversation traces have a shelf life of a few hours. Even if no formal "end" had been established, and even if the medium accommodates indefinite pauses, the conversation trace has long since expired after approximately 12-24 hours. By unspoken agreement, online discussions constitute an "event": albeit an event whose traces remain indefinitely.

> The amount of time covered by "current" (just as the amount of space covered by "here") obviously can vary greatly from one occasion to the next and from participant to another; and the fact that participants seem to have no trouble in quickly coming to the same apparent understanding in this matter does not deny the intellectual importance of our trying to find out what this apparent consensus consists of and how it is established (Goffman 1986:9)

Thus, interactive text frameworks, in their pseudo-synchronicity, often attempt to reconcile the immediacy and "closed" interpretability of conversational speech with the "open" interpretability of text.

Post-event, however, online discussions can, indeed, be reconstructed as texts. After passing their sell-by date, conversation traces cease to be points of interaction and become textual objects once more, to be shared and conversed over in new events; their literarity is restored. “Did you see that r/TIFU thread from a few days ago? I can’t believe what he was thinking! A lot of the top comments seem to agree with him too, which is wild? What did you think?”

Goffman (1986:21) describes how frameworks often “appear to have no apparent articulated shape, providing only a lore of understanding, an approach, a perspective” rather than a series of well-defined rules and postulates. An “online interaction” framework, if we were to begin to describe it, takes such amorphousness to the extreme, requiring not only the acceptance of impermanence and ambiguity but also a general unwillingness to explain the rules. Appearances are accepted as a matter of convention, but with the underlying caveat not everything is as it seems; Internet “lore” is continually shifting its referents, and, naturally, each online platform and community has its own lore keepers. Reference sites such as “Know Your Meme” and “Urban Dictionary,” as well as communities such as Reddit’s “r/OutoftheLoop” (2.9 million subscribers), provide a means of cataloging Internet trends, but exist in isolation. It should be noted as well that the consequences of misframing or misidentifying the situation are fairly mild, at least compared to face-to-face interaction. Typically, one might feel compelled to provide face-saving gestures or offer mea culpas only when one wishes to maintain a (semi-)permanent presence in an existing online community.

Naturally, it is hardly uncommon to be “out of the loop” in face-to-face interactions, and pausing conversations to constantly ask for clarification—at least in casual conversation—is

similarly rare. But where such pauses might be seen as disruptive and risk embarrassment in face-to-face communication, such impediments theoretically should not exist in virtual settings. Again, it is impossible to "interrupt" a "speaker" in most online contexts—and the effort required by other readers to ignore extraneous information is comparatively small.

However, another defining facet of the online interaction framework is that, for all its artificiality and all the cognitive effort required to evoke "natural" settings, online speech is held up to be strictly analogous to face-to-face speech. Breaking the flow of the conversation (trace) is often informally and formally sanctioned, as are other forms of digression, such as straying off topic. As mentioned earlier, if a reader "rambles" (writes too long a post/comment) they might feel compelled to provide a "tl;dr" to aid reader comprehension. In other words, actors experience much the same inducements to "go with the flow" in virtual settings as they do in face-to-face settings, despite the virtual semantic terrain being far more uncertain. The phenomenon I observed with the *Star Tribune* commenters in the previous chapter captures this tension well, where there was an implicit inducement to stick to the facts and rely upon "argument from nowhere" as a rhetorical mode, despite the fact that speakers lacked the physical and expressive repertoire necessary for grounding this sort of speech in everyday contexts.

Goffman establishes two overarching classes of primary framework: natural and social. "Natural frameworks" are associated with the physical environment; are perceived to be "unguided," with no human agency involved or inferred—the rising and the setting of the sun, the turning of seasons, changes in the weather, etc. (Goffman 1986:22). While natural phenomena can be explained and translated into knowledge frameworks—such as weather→meteorology—nature is generally perceived as a set of general conditions that apply to

all actors equally, delimiting their agency. (Our increased awareness of anthropogenic climate change and the arrival of increasingly severe, man-made, "extreme weather events" represent an intriguing complication of Goffman's schema).

In contrast, social frameworks are perceived as explicitly the products of agency. Knowledge of social frameworks allow the actor to navigate everyday interactions; they represent "guided doings" (Goffman 1986:22). Successful navigation, then, hinges upon one's ability to anticipate certain standards of behavior and submit to social appraisal of one's actions, based on their "honesty, efficiency, economy, safety, elegance, tactfulness, good taste, and so forth" (Goffman 1986:22). While no one is held to account for natural events, social frameworks always involve some mechanism for evaluating and apportioning responsibility and blame. Actors must then work to impute the motives and intentions of others in choosing which framework to apply in any given situation. These guided doings remain "continuously conditioned by natural constraints," to the extent that "any segment of a socially guided doing can be partly analyzed within a natural schema" (Goffman 1986:23).

Online mediated interaction further complicates Goffman's division of "natural" and "social" frameworks. At a certain phenomenological level, the "natural" is present only to the extent that readers are physically present in front of the screen, and physically manipulating how and what appears in front of their eyes. In Goffman's parlance, the medium of online communication is itself a social framework. Logging on is a guided doing: how the reader interacts with the virtual environment and other readers is a matter of conscious guidance and architectural design. And yet, virtual settings take on an assumed "naturality"; they become the backdrop for various interactional "events" rather than events in and of themselves.

The intentionality behind UX design and the artificiality of virtual settings only intrude on the reader when they encounter a limit or breach. When the site fails to load properly, when design elements are arranged in unexpected ways, when the reader inexplicably loses access to the setting or their comments are deleted, generally when the reader cannot accomplish what they intended to do: only in encountering the boundaries of the medium do readers tend to become aware of its constructedness. And only at the point of breach do readers become aware of architects themselves—moderators, designers, administrators, corporations—people with whom the reader had been indirectly interacting the entire time. The seamlessness of online participation can conceal the intentionality on the part of the readers as well. The individual reader might consider logging on as their own deliberate act, but others come to be perceived as strangers, bystanders, and passersby; those who are co-present, but whose entrances and exits necessarily remain a mystery.

Otherwise, the virtual architecture of a space, and any way it might influence communication—such as character limits, edit buttons, nested comments, and invisible moderation—fades into the background. This assumed naturality would seem to emerge from the same impulse to draw equivalences between speech and text. readers strive to "de-mediate" their virtual environments, and work together to ensure that the majority of online talk is as closely akin to face-to-face talk as possible. For the vast majority of online participants, the answer to the question of "what is going on here" is not "I am sitting in front of a screen and reading and interpreting various strings of text," but "I am talking with others online."

Online Interactive Frameworks

This overview of Goffman's elements of speech and primary frameworks complete, I can attempt to provide a comprehensive summary of the frameworks involved in online deliberation, at least as it commonly appears. The frameworks relevant to the actor in online settings are at least superficially similar to those applied in face-to-face interactions, although inevitably shaped by the medium.

Setting frameworks

"Where are we?" Settings are defined by the architecture and their organization of visual space within the screen. These elements are reasonably consistent from online setting to setting, but, as I discuss in the subsequent chapter, subtle differences in architecture and how users evoke "space," can have profound implications for how they approach discussion. Generally, however, users can expect a "participation portal" such as a text box or reply button, in which they are invited to engage with others. Text strings (typically comments) can be expected to be structured in a manner evoking sequential speech. I.e., nested comments both 1) serve to delineate between different conversations and 2) chronologically establish what was said when and to whom. As discussed in a previous chapter, however, this structure is simplistic and incapable of evoking anything but the most fragmentary of exchanges. Though constructed, online settings are often perceived with an assumed naturality.

Functionally, readers can expect some ability to sort text strings—often by level of engagement (comments receiving the most responses) by default, as well as by chronology, popularity (number of "upvotes"), and controversy (upvote/downvote ratio). readers might be

provided with some extra-textual gestures in the ability to either positively or negatively rate comments (likes, upvotes, downvotes, and the like). Finally, readers might or might not have the ability to edit their comments post hoc, either indefinitely or for a limited time (e.g., 15 minutes) after commenting.

Finally, online settings can be either "private" or "public" depending on either/both exogenous factors, such as limiting membership, and endogenous factors, such as the degree to which members are invested in building a separate sense of place. This "placeness" can also evoke a sense of locality. Online settings can either be deliberately tied to real-word geographical settings (neighborhoods, cities, countries), they can be tied to communities such as fandoms or hobby groups (the more niche the interest the more local the space tends to feel), or they can become local "hangout spots" simply by virtue of remaining in existence for a long period of time, populated by the same denizens.

Participation Frameworks

"Who am I talking to?"As most online and social media settings are meant to evoke public spaces with open access, users can typically expect to interact with "strangers." These others can be anonymous to varying degrees (either deliberately associated with one's "public" name and "public" appearance, or not) depending on the platform. Presence is perceived and expressed almost entirely textually, although markers of identity can be available such as avatars, and the ability to share photos and videos.

Evoking a *complete and permanent* identity with limited expressive equipment and a lack of interaction ritualization presents a significant hurdle, and requires consistent care in providing

biographical context. From the other end, readers must rely on a great deal of active rather than passive interpretation in piecing together coherent personalities from an assortment of text strings (see the previous chapter on the deliberative potential of online spaces). Biographical indexicality, the ability to access a reader's comment history or some other record of participation, can aid in this process, but delving too deeply in another's history, and letting slip that one has done so, is often perceived as an act of violation or obsessive "stalking" behavior. As such, most strangers remain strangers, and attempts at establishing long-lasting rapport and familiarity are rare in all but the most private of online spaces.

However, a space's locality can at least provide a limit for the *type* of stranger one is expected to encounter. As my subsequent analysis of r/Minneapolis indicates, a space's locality allows readers to suspend elements of interpretation and impute certain details about one's interlocutors, such as political values, lifestyles, and shared experiences. Locality also provides a standard of inclusion and exclusion when a community otherwise lacks the means of limiting membership. Those who reveal themselves to be "outsiders" and non-stakeholders open themselves up to numerous informal sanctions. Finally, a sense of locality guides the sorts of frames speakers can draw upon in discussion. In the context of political discussion in semi-permanent communities such as r/Minneapolis, speakers are freer to suspend higher order discussions of ultimate moral goods and engage in more grounded and deliberative talk.

One's presence, and one's sense of co-presence with others in online settings is defined by impermanence. As mentioned above, the participation frameworks of online interaction are necessarily incomplete. Entrances and exits cannot exist and thus participants lack a crucial means of mutually defining the situation. The "other" addressed by participants remains

generalized, apart from brief encounters—encounters that can typically only be maintained across a few volleys over the course of a few hours, at the maximum. The online world is a world of traces: traces of personalities, traces of settings, traces of conversations.

Expression Frameworks

"How should I talk?" As discussed above, online discussions are a textual medium deliberately interpreted as face-to-face interaction. As such, most textual online interaction is both a) pseudo-synchronous, and b) eventful. Temporally, online conversation traces have definite "beginnings"—the posting of an article, the starting of a thread—but extend indefinitely. The medium itself is able to accommodate any number of starts, stops, pauses, and resurrections. Nevertheless, participants act under an assumed simultaneity, just as they treat the medium with an assumed naturality. An online discussion is a social framework and event that everyone is experiencing in more or less real time. Interlocutors, ghostly and ill-defined as they are, are imagined to be co-present, with their own interpretive demands and limitations. Face-to-face speech rules—clarity, comprehensibility, and, above all, brevity—tend to apply. Readers are expected to write texts as speech-like as possible, albeit without the vast majority of gestures and interactive ritualizations typically available. Readers rely on textual compensation—altering emphasis, providing meta-textual cues "[sighs heavily]," or manipulating space " ... … … okaay"—to approximate speech in various inventive ways.

Textuality is not completely disregarded. Few readers are under the impression that their comment will receive an immediate response, or indeed any response at all. Temporality is stretched and transposed to accommodate longer response times, but it still has its limits. Online

interactive events do not "end," in the sense of the participants physically leaving the space, or of making some gesture of resolution: "that's a great point, but I really should be going…" But such events *do* tend to expire, with engagement falling sharply after the first few hours and gradually petering out after a matter of days. There are no rules for who can and will get in the "last word" and, indeed, no means for any individual to end the discussion. Rather, conversation traces are simply abandoned, one by one. Just as online participation frameworks are inadequate for creating and sustaining co-presence, online expression frameworks are inadequate for creating and sustaining resolutions, only open-ended endings. This is not to say that *face-to-face* political talk provides satisfying resolutions (if only!), but face-to-face speeches, debates, and casual conversations can at least *end*, with all speakers involved reasonably certain that an ending has occurred.

Likewise, ambiguities and interpretive missteps are frequently acknowledged, or at least nodded to: "Sorry! That was meant to be sarcastic, but I see how you could read it that way." However, as with face-to-face speech, the "flow" of the conversation takes precedence, and breaking flow is sanctioned in various subtle and unsubtle ways: "Here, let me google that for you…" "I can't be bothered to read that wall of text, so I'm just going to address your first point…" One of the primary advantages of logging onto the Internet, the capacity to satisfy curiosities and seek out disseminate new sources of information, is thus often mooted in online discussion. Interpretation is immediate and closed: requests for clarification and other efforts to fill in detail risk making the asker look ignorant, passive aggressive, or downright hostile.

Discussion Frameworks

"How shall we talk together?": Online discussion, at least as structured by site architecture, tends to be non-hierarchical and democratic. Aside from moderators, who may or may not be present and whose presence may or may not be implied, roles are undifferentiated. One reader might provide the impetus for the discussion by posting an article or by sharing a thought or question, but they are under no obligation to participate, nor are they typically given any formal pride of place in speaking. However, as with Reddit, this poster's status could be highlighted or tagged whenever they respond to others' comments, indicating that others might at least want to know when they are interacting with a poster.

Occasionally, a meta-discussion might arise in which other readers might attempt to challenge or impute the poster's motives in introducing the topic of discussion in the first place. "I don't understand why posting this article is relevant. Kinda just seems like you're trying to stir up controversy," one might say, or "I don't think that's what OP meant. I interpreted this differently." The poster might feel a greater incentive to remain and defend their thinking, but, again, no formal obligation is implied or required. In more educational or information-oriented spaces, such as Reddit's r/AskHistorians (1.5 million readers), the poster might choose to stick around, ask follow-up questions, and seek elaboration. In this regard, the discussion resembles an expert panel, with the poster serving (informally) as facilitator. For example, in December of 2017, Reddit poster **ajg1993** asked:

> Why are elementary-aged students in the US knowingly taught a version of US History that middle and high schools have to completely contradict and reexplain?"

When they received slight push-back from a self-identified social studies teacher, **ajg1993** remained in-thread to follow-up with their experiences being taught popular myths regarding Christopher Columbus.

Spaces like Reddit's r/Ask[…] subreddits (AskHistorians, AskScience, AskSocialScience, etc.) are atypical of general online discussions in that they tend to be rigorously moderated with rigorous standards of evidence and acceptability. Comments are frequently deleted for failing to reach these standards, and it might be hours before a definitive response to the poster's question is allowed to stand. These replies are lengthy, essay-like, with numerous citations, again belying common expectations of brevity and pithiness in online spaces. Speakers might display "flair" establishing their bona fides as, e.g., experts in pedagogical history, and as experts they are expected to adopt a didactic tone.

Far more typical in online discussion spaces is a looser, more conversational form of talk in which no one in particular is expected to lead or follow. Readers might establish themselves as "first speakers" in posting "parent" comments, and thus become OPs (original posters) within their own sub-discussions, but this is more an indication of architectural organization than hierarchy. As with the initial poster, these OPs might indicate a sense of responsibility over the direction of their own conversational spheres and how their thoughts are being interpreted, but their sustained presence is not required.

As discussed earlier, the nested, parent/child architecture of most online discussion spaces implies both vast and narrow levels of engagement. At the point of initial participation there exists a general sense of all addressing all. Anyone is capable of reading or replying to any comment, and thus OPs and their partners are required to pitch to as general an audience as

possible. A sense of locality can help limit this universe of potential conversational partners. At the level of practical speech, however, most discussions occur in a small number of circles with limited numbers of interlocutors. Anyone *can* show up but few people *do*. Architecturally, while participants might imagine an enormous amphitheater, online spaces are ill-equipped to convey the simultaneous presence of hundreds of speakers. The necessity of converting time into space means that large discussions are represented as a few discrete ongoing conversations.Thus online discussions can represent a handful of permeable "discussion families" surrounded by a potentially vast and ghostly audience. While speakers' attentions are potentially split between audience and conversation partners, the actual conversations occurring are comparatively intimate, with the attendant rewards (frank and engaging exchanges), and risks (devolving into ad hominem and personal slights) that intimacy implies.

Modes of Expression

These spaces are generally open in terms of the manner of expression. As discussed in a previous chapter, speakers might wish to convey an immediate emotional response, such as these representative examples, all from various discussions on r/Minneapolis:

> **martiangenes** (12/2021)
> This is exciting news! I look forward to the results. Glad to see Minneapolis is willing to join in on this experiment!!

> **dirtybeardo** (12/2021)
> Oof.

They might wish to provide some ironic observation of the situation:

> **RealCracko** (12/2021)
> Wait a second - I was told that Frey is a literal fascist?

> **Happyjarboy** (12/2021)
> That's one way to buy 200 votes for 2 years.

They might solicit further information from other readers regarding the situation:

> **Dependent-King-7712** (12/2021)
> Question: Do they get cut-off from this program if/when they earn a certain income? Wouldn't this incentivize staying at only low enough wages to earn this stipend? I'm just curious, no shade.

They might wish to elaborate on the information presented in the initial post:

> **elevatednarrative** (12/2021)
> Salient points: The money will come from the American Rescue Plan Act, which is federal money allocated for COVID-19 relief. Applicants must live within the nine zip codes listed on the website, including area code 55454, which is in Cedar-Riverside. Eligible residents must earn at or below 50% of the Area Median Income and have proof of negative financial impact due to the pandemic, such as losing a job.

Finally, they might wish to use the initial post as a jumping-off point for providing commentary on the topic:

> **MyLOLNameWasTaken** (12/2021)
> If we, as Americans, are choosing to “paywall” basic necessities, food, water, shelter, medicine, the bare minimum expectation should be a guarantee of at least enough to acquire the aforementioned. If we find a greater ‘socioeconomic reconfiguration’ undesirable, UBI is certainly a way to get closer to the ideal: leaving nobody behind in acquiring basic necessities.

All the above examples are taken from this chapter’s focus of analysis: a discussion regarding a pilot universal basic income (UBI) program conducted in Minneapolis. None of these modes of expression are required in online discussion settings, but at the same time speakers should be prepared for unexpected keyings and key changes.

Goffman (1986:43-44) describes keying as method of shifting frames “by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into

something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else." For instance, the example Goffman uses is how fighting behavior can be modulated into a form of play, so long as participants are sufficiently cued and forms and expectations are sufficiently altered. To the outside observer, one who lacks knowledge of these cues and transformations, fighting and play-fighting might appear indistinguishable, but to participants the proper frame has already been applied.

In the online discussion framework, keyings provide an additional challenge, as the interpretation gap means that participants might lack complete awareness of the frames at play. An innocent remark—at least as intended by the speaker—might be responded to with opprobrium, suddenly transforming "talk" into "argument." A sarcastic remark might be interpreted as serious, or vice versa, as participants are forced to navigate various tone shifts, often multiple times within the same conversation. Again, none of these interpretation gaps are unheard of in face-to-face settings—many a domestic argument began with an "innocent" remark—but the risks multiply in online settings. **Dependent-King-7712's** comment, mentioned earlier, represents an attempt to manage expectations and reactions. "I'm just curious, no shade": "*I'm not necessarily criticizing the program, so please do not interpret my remarks as such. My question was innocent, so I would appreciate serious answers in response*.

From Frameworks to Frames

Mapping out the major frameworks at play in online discussion is an involved (and lengthy) process, but it allows us to observe how the conditions of speaking in online contexts shapes the content of that speech. How do online users create a "political" "discussion," and how do their

interpretation of the space, from locality, to publicity, to co-presence with others, affect their approach to speaking? With the implications of online interactive frameworks in mind, I can finally shift focus from frameworks to frames, and, in my subsequent analysis, to how users in the r/Minneapolis online community navigate political speech through various acts of introduction, expansion, and substitution.

Where frameworks concern the most general conditions for interaction, whereas frames concern more specific contexts, interpretations, and performances. Frames can be switched, aligned, shifted, extended, and broken, but a participants' primary frameworks will most likely remain in place, barring a major disruptive event. In limiting ourselves to the frameworks and frames governing discourse, we might say that frameworks involve the *conditions of saying*, whereas frames involve the *conditions of what is said*.

Political Discussion: A Master Frame

Master frames, such as "a political discussion," exist at a level between overarching frameworks, and specific framings. Participants can be said to be engaging in political discussion when they are engaging in talk oriented toward the public good, where it can be found, how it can be achieved, and who can achieve it. Or on a more practical level, political discussion concerns the realm of topics that a sufficient number of people deem to be "politics," as opposed to "sports," "culture," "lifestyle" or various other sections of our mental newspapers. Indeed, many actors prefer to bracket and quarantine political talk. Sports blogs might ban any discussion of religion and politics as an inappropriate distraction. Commenters might grow frustrated with a critic for evaluating a film according to moral rather than purely aesthetic standards, the implication being

that the critic has misframed their own analysis and *modus operandi*—"I don't care about the politics of the thing, just tell me if it was good!" The critic oversteps their bounds by keying what should be discussion of aesthetic virtues into a discussion of moral virtues.

The implication behind "no politics" bans is, of course, that political talk is inherently argumentative, or rather that such talk is always freighted with the risk of being keyed into an argument. Arguments are the mode of communication in which the nature of frames and frame switching are laid bare. Arguments are purposive—in intent if not outcome—in that they are oriented around whose framing of the situation is normatively superior according to mutually agreed upon—implicitly if not explicitly—criteria. "It's better to put all the dirty silverware in the sink because that's just where they'll end up when I do the dishes, and I hate seeing them scattered around the counter anyway;" versus: "it's better to leave the dirty silverware on the counter, because otherwise they make the *sink* dirtier and make it harder for me when I have to clean the sink." These claims represent frames of a very limited sort—several levels of organizing experience below the level Goffman typically discusses—but they still involve an implicit hierarchy of priorities, values, and interpretations. "Which mode of action is more efficient?" "Which potential sight is more unsightly?" In short, those participating in an argument should be prepared to navigate incongruous framings and work toward merging these frames—even if no one seriously thinks that goal will ever be achieved. Arguments represent a competitive form of frame switching.

As politics concerns divergent, potentially irresolvable interpretations of the good, it naturally invites a multitude of framings. In response, administrators, moderators, and communities often attempt to lay out explicit guidelines for acknowledging, evaluating, and

comparing competing political frames. The argument-form itself implicitly structures talk, inducing speakers to adhere to certain standards of validity—see the discussion of deliberative speech in the preceding chapter—but the risk of inappropriate hostility is enough that explicit rules of "civility" become necessary. As the r/Politics subreddit (8.2 million subscribers) asks of its participants in every comment thread:

> As a reminder, this subreddit is for civil discussion. In general, be courteous to others. Debate/discuss/argue the merits of ideas, don't attack people. Personal insults, shill or troll accusations, hate speech, any suggestion or support of harm, violence, or death, and other rule violations can result in a permanent ban. If you see comments in violation of our rules, please report them. For those who have questions regarding any media outlets being posted on this subreddit, please click here to review our details as to our approved domains list and outlet criteria.

There are numerous assumptions embedded in this frame: that political talk continually risks tipping over into incivility, where personal insults, threats of violence, and deception are common; that speakers should be judged by the merits of their ideas rather than their personal qualities; that participants are engaging in discussion in good faith, without any ulterior motives; and above all that *civil* political talk carries inherent value and is inherently productive. Whether participants *adhere* to these standards is another question, but settings such as r/Politics at least invite participants to imagine the comment space as public, and as an extension of civil society, and to imagine their relationship with others as potentially conflictual but never outright hostile. These assumptions tend to hold true for any virtual space at least perceived to be public. However, *invitations* to imagine spaces as open to constructive, deliberative talk do not always

make them so. As I subsequently discuss, building a sense of "placeness" *beyond* a simple statement of principles does much to shape the type and tenor of political talk. Locality grounds discussion, providing a sense of who the major stakeholders are, who has a right to speak, and how major problems should be addressed.

Frame Introductions, Expansions, and Substitutions

These various platform effects have a profound impact on how speakers manage speech. Semantic frames define the boundaries of a discourse. They involve assumptions regarding:

1. Which topics can be introduced: what constitutes "politics"?
2. How others' speech acts can and should be interpreted:can they be expected to argue in good faith?
3. Standards for appropriate tones and manners of expression: are they expressing themselves civilly and reasonably? and
4. Shared values and motivations—what is our shared "good," and how do we achieve that good?

Introducing a frame, particularly in online political talk, typically comes in the form of commentary, where the speaker stakes out the semantic terrain and, potentially, advances a claim.

> **MyLolNameWasTaken** (12/10/21) (10)
> If we, as Americans, are choosing to "paywall" basic necessities, food, water, shelter, medicine, the bare minimum expectation should be a guarantee of at least enough to acquire the aforementioned. If we find a greater 'socioeconomic reconfiguration' undesirable, UBI is certainly a way to get closer to the ideal: leaving nobody behind in acquiring basic necessities.

In the discussion of universal basic income programs analyzed in this chapter, **MyLolNameWasTaken** introduced and reinforces a frame regarding a UBI pilot program, its

benefits, and its role in advancing various public goods, such equity and opportunity. Responses to these introductions tend to be either frame expansions or frame substitutions. In expanding frames speakers broaden the rhetorical horizon by mapping out the implications of the initial speaker's claims, or by providing supplemental information and context. In substituting frames, speakers counter the initial speaker's claims by remapping terrain and seeking to reorient the initial speaker (and any audiences) toward alternative values and interpretations. **Flanspan's** response to **MyLOLName's** claim constitutes *both* a frame expansion and frame substitution—an elaboration and a rebuttal:

> **flanspan** (12/10/21) (11)
> I agree that we should provide bare minimums and at the same time I am highly skeptical of UBI… Universal healthcare and more investments in education and infrastructure would seem to have much better outcomes.

They establish agreement on common principles—the necessity of social welfare—but broaden the discussion to include policy alternatives such as improving education and healthcare. They appeal to a broader principle of efficacy in asserting that these programs would be better at achieving their and **MyLOLNameWasTaken's** stated goals. **MyLOLNameWasTaken** responds with another elaboration and frame expansion.

> **MyLOLNameWasTaken** (12/10/21) (5)
> I don't disagree. I would consider the removal of such a paywall superior to leaving a 'middle space' for choices, or scheming, to allow anyone to slip through the cracks and be absent basic necessities. I'd wager we're both of the opinion this type of approach is a meager bandage over a serious wound.

Yes, we can discuss this program in terms of overall efficacy, and more broadscale social change must be our ultimate goal, but achieving a little good right now is better than achieving nothing. This "capper" works to move both speakers' positions as close together as possible and achieve a

form of resolution. As such, flanspan evidently does not feel the need to continue the conversation further.

Analysis: Political Talk in r/Minneapolis

The prior discussion of the frameworks, frame *work*, and the master frames at play sets the stage for how participants approach online talk, and the modes in which they are induced to communicate. The following analysis centers on how community members of r/Minneapolis engage in political talk and, specifically, adopt and adapt common political frames. These frames straddle online and face-to-face modes of engagement, but virtual frameworks will necessarily structure virtual speech in various subtle and unsubtle ways. It is far easier to imagine a sense of locality, and thus suspend various assumptions regarding participants and their values, when discussion is being held in a public town hall rather than a virtual reconstruction. Nevertheless, this "local" element can still be evoked in virtual spaces, and I observed that a sense of locality was particularly strong in virtual communities such as r/Minneapolis, which benefits both from being a cohesive community in its own right and from directly corresponding to a physical community "out there." This dual-locality allows r/Minneapolitans to (for the most part) keep discussions grounded, framing disputants in ethical and procedural, rather than abstract and contentious moral terms. Another crucial factor in grounding politics is whether the topic of discussion itself eludes easy moral and/or ideological framing. I focus specifically on a discussion surrounding a universal basic income pilot program precisely because: a) it is so rare for the ideological terrain to be so open, and b) this openness allows for a freer and perhaps even more deliberative discussion of problems, players, and pitfalls.

Moral, Ethical, and Procedural Politics

When debate erupts, political arguments can occur at multiple different levels, depending on how many assumptions regarding one's audience/interlocutors can be suspended. All political talk concerns, in some way, discussion of the "good," but the more values one assumes one shares with others, the more guardrails appear and the more specific arguments become.

Moral Politics

Talk at the level of moral politics occurs when there are substantive underlying disagreements over 1) what constitutes the good, and/or 2) what good should absolutely take precedence over others. Debates over abortion represent moral politics of the highest order, where one party asserts a moral frame of the sanctity of life and the other a moral frame of bodily autonomy. In other contexts both parties might acknowledge both goods, but in this circumstance placing one above the other represents an extreme violation and insuperable disagreement. Moral political talk not only resists resolution but is carried out with the tacit agreement that no agreement can occur.

The aim of moral political talk is thus more self-consciously performative, pitched more to an inferred audience of the converted—and in online settings all audiences are inferred—than to one's immediate partners. As this brief r/Minneapolis exchange, in response to a CNN story on rising violent crime rates in the city, demonstrates:

> **ColeBSoul** (9/25/22) (612 points)
> The police got more money and quit en masse while defrauding the city. This is horse shit.
>
> > **TheRealSnuffleaYeah** (9/25/22) (58 points)
> > Weird I wonder why no officers want to work there? It makes no sense!
> >
> > > **RonaldoNazario** (9/25/22) (95 points)

> Because they’re whiny crybabies who don’t want to be held accountable even
> though they get paid a shitload of money for doing so little?
> Flip side - if you were a “good apple” why would you want to join such a terrible department? I think ours is uniquely shit.
>
> > **TheRealSnuffleaYeah** (9/25/22) (-30 points)
> > If they do so little why does anyone care there aren't quick response
> > times and more police? I mean we should just defund them, then abolish them as some city counsel folks have suggested.

None of these exchanges could be construed as an effort to persuade. ColeBSoul opens with some commentary on MPD corruption, implicitly invoking what we could call a moral of justice. **TheRealSnuffleaYeah** responds with snark, refusing to frame the discussion in moral terms—sidestepping whether or not the MPD are a just institution—and instead focusing tactics—whether the “defund the police” movement were foolish in their vilification of the police, given the consequences.**TheRealSnuffleaYeah’s** sarcasm betrays disdain for both the framers and the moral frame, but in a way the subtly invokes a different set of morals, such as a moral of bodily security and a moral of respect for authority. The police might or might not be just, but they are *necessary*. Insisting on justice and accountability, at least so stridently, risks anarchy and insecurity .Regardless, their comments are pitched more toward ironic commentary than “serious” discussion.

This level of political talk also opens itself up to accusations of bad faith and uncertain motives—why else would the other party take on such an objectively wrong position? Ironically, given the involvement of such deep-seated beliefs, the stakes of moral political talk tend to be quite low. Again, if such talk is not perceived to be productive—in the sense that agreement and policy compromises might be reached—why bother engaging in the first place, aside from some cathartic spleen venting? This is not to say that moral political talk is inherently bad or pointless;

merely to observe that it tends not to be *deliberative*. Rather, its virtues lie in simply revealing the political landscape to the speakers, in articulating (or discovering) one's deep convictions in the process of confronting others'.

Ethical Politics

Talk at the level of what I call ethical politics occurs when there *is* substantive agreement on goods, but uncertainty surrounding their preference and priority. This agreement is rarely explicit, and generally inferred from the type of audience and interlocutors one is encountering (or imagining encountering). Moral frames (what is good) are suspended and ethical frames (what goods should be prioritized in which situations?) are adopted. Agreement is inferred from the setting as well—if r/Minneapolis sufficiently corresponds to the city of Minneapolis, then one can assume that they are interacting with Minneapolitans, with similar perspectives, political ideologies, and level of investment in the conversation. As another exchange in the r/Minneapolis discussion of police abolition reveals:

> **obsidianop** (9/26/22) (34 points)
> I think they're [the MPD] mostly pricks and need serious reform but I do think the "defund" movement needs to realize that "we don't need cops" and "crime is going up because these asshole cops aren't working very hard" is an incoherent position.
>
> > **FistsoFiore** (9/26/22) (21 points)
> > Well, at surface level it could seem incoherent, but the people who are real serious about police abolition realize we still need security and safety for our communities. When someone takes both these stances, they're stuck at this frustrating place where they see our worst option, police, deliberately being even worse to punish us for speaking against them, and the zeitgeist still believing cops are the only option.
> > The whole thought together is: "crime is going up because these asshole cops aren't working very hard. Fuck them, we don't need cops. Let's pour all that money into things that will ACTUALLY help prevent crimes."
> >
> > > **obsidianop** (9/26/22) (9 points)
> > > I appreciate the explanation, and I do see the point. I guess I'm just too cynical to believe that the amount of money dedicated to police, redirected to attempt to create a nearly perfect world without want in the

> belief that in such a world there would be nearly no problematic people in need of policing, is a strategy that's likely to work, especially if it starts by defunding the police.
>
> > **FistsoFiore** (9/26/22) (3 points)
> > I absolutely understand being cynical about humanity. People kinda suck. The important part is that we have to try. I'm not even 100 about if we should immediately strip all the police budget, Change usually happens slower than that, but I do feel like at the bare minimum we need to stop giving additional funding to a department that has consistently been unaccountable for their wrongs.
> >
> > **Rosaluxlux** (9/26/22)(1 points)
> > You start with partial defunding. Like maybe we could take the encampment sweep money and put it into services.

Here we see evidence of substantive agreement on both a common problem—the MPD needs reform—and common values—Minneapolis needs both justice for the victims of police brutality and protection from bodily harm. This level of agreement was absent in the exchange above. In downshifting the disagreement to the level of ethical politics, the speakers are conceding that the course of action is uncertain, or at least that the speakers' beliefs are not self-evident and others are owed explanations. Both justice and security are necessary, but we need to find a way of balancing these competing priorities in an ethical way.

Ethical political talk also implies that agreement *is* possible, centered as it is on actively seeking compromise rather than staking out positions. Indeed, ethical political talk tends to flourish in the absence of clear-cut ideological positions; just a general sense of common values shared with fellow travelers. The solution is out there, and we might disagree in our approach, but the potential for resolution exists. Speakers are thus at least encouraged to make a good faith effort to persuade, and to assume similar motives in others. This commitment is reflected above in the frequent gestures of acknowledgment and co-presence: "*I think*"..."*I appreciate"*…"*I understand that*" etc. Speakers are induced to exist behind their words and adopt a perspective

rather than resorting to "argument from nowhere." Ethical political talk is a capable of reaching the deliberative, communicative rational ideal of Habermas, Young, and others, but the conditions of its existence in online settings are difficult to maintain, requiring significant investment in a sense of place, in embracing co-presence, and, crucially, in assuming that others share one's priorities (see preceding chapter). These are conditions that exist only fleetingly in online spaces—and indeed in face-to-face political talk.

Procedural Politics

The "ethical political" exchange between **obsidanop**, **FistsoFiore**, and **RosaLuxlux** also contains elements of a third level of political talk: procedural politics. Talk at the level of procedural or instrumental politics occurs when there is substantive agreement on both the goods and their relative priority: we share a common definition of goods, and a common understanding of how these goods should relate to each other, now we just need to decide on how these values should be translated into action. As **RosaLuxlux** proposes: "You start with partial defunding. Like maybe we could take the encampment sweep money and put it into services." In the process, she implicitly answers the question: "assuming we all agree that defunding the police is the proper course of action, where do we begin?" In this case, *both* moral and ethical frames can be suspended, and speakers can instead focus on the merits of specific actions (how do we *bring about* the good?)

Outside of more limited professional and academic circles (or candidate stump speeches), this level of political talk tends to be rare in everyday speech. Topics of discussion are rarely specific enough and the speakers' focus is rarely narrow enough that they feel compelled to abandon discussion of general values and principles. However, there are conditions when this

type of talk flourishes, such as when a specific policy eludes easy ideological framing, when the policy in question potentially has a direct material impact on the speaker or speaker's community, and when stakeholders are knowledgeable of any potential benefits or drawbacks. Minneapolitans' discussion of UBI reveals some of this fine-grained procedural talk:

> **ArmLegx218** (12/10/21) (19 points)
> It's one of the problems with cities and counties trying to do their own poverty reduction programs. There are so many moving and interlocking parts with other state and federal programs that there can easily be unanticipated consequences to ideas like this.I don't know how you solve macroeconomic problems like poverty and manage to stay within the imaginary lines of a municipal border. Most cities and counties also only have the regressive property tax as a revenue source.
>
> > **OperationMobocracy** (12/10/21) (3 points)
> > Really the minimum scale for poverty reduction is probably at the state level. Of course you run into the problem of anti-tax sentiments from Republicans at the state level. Plus I think rural areas are more tolerant of poverty to some degree, probably because there's little racial differentiation in rural poverty. You can saddle the rural poor as the source of their own poverty for the most part, and they accept it, because there's not other easynarratives.

This exchange captures common values (equity) and goals (reducing poverty), focusing instead on the practical necessities of bringing those goals about. In this case **ArmLegx218** focuses on the difficulties of balancing between the competing demands of local, county, state, and national, governments, while **OperationMobocracy** expands the initial frame slightly in incorporating party politics and the urban/rural divide. If there is a disagreement, here, it is in terms of focus and scope, not motivating principles.

Again, in order for such talk to occur, there needs to be substantive agreement on both the moral and ethical level, or at least a demonstrating willingness to adopt these frames enough to map out the practical implications: "*if* I valued equity, *and* I were committed to poverty reduction, what are some potential hurdles standing in the way of implementing the necessary programs?" As with ethical political talk, procedural politics involves both the assumption that a

solution is possible and a shared commitment to *finding* that solution. As such, it requires considerable willingness to engage in lengthy, concerted, often obscure topics, and to expect, require, and apply expertise from oneself and from others.

Setting of Analysis: A Discussion of UBI

The political talk I analyze in this chapter concerns a discussion of the moral, ethical, and instrumental dimensions of universal basic income programs. This instance of a comment space was created when Reddit user **AbeRego** posted a *Minnesota Daily* (the University of Minnesota student newspaper) online article titled "Low-income Minneapolis residents to receive $500 a month" to the r/Minneapolis subreddit on Friday, December 10th, 2021. Using a "web scraper" utility I collected all comments attached to this discussion, and subsequently coded them both for their perlocutionary intent and locutionary content. Illocutionarily, comments can be divided between attempts to express an opinion in reference to the article, to elaborate upon the article or another's response by providing new information, to rebut another's position by appealing to common argument norms, or to undermine another speaker by calling into question their status as a stakeholder and/or their willingness to discuss in good faith. Locutionarily, comments can be divided between what general principles to which the speakers are appealing and, implicitly, what political frames they are applying. Appeals to urbanism and sustainability are on the level of moral politics; appeals to equity, opportunity, prosperity, and autonomy are on the level of ethical politics; and appeals to efficacy and efficiency are on the level of procedural politics.

The article in question, written by Caleb Hensin, covers a Guaranteed Basic Income (GBI) pilot program wherein the city of Minneapolis will provide 200 residents from nine

low-income zip codes with a $500 monthly stipend. Funding for the program was to come from federal money allocated for COVID-19 relief, and to qualify residents would have to demonstrate that their income was at or below 50% of the area median income as well that they had suffered financially as a direct result of the pandemic. Stakeholders mentioned in the article include Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey, City Council Vice President Andrea Jenkins, and Cedar-Riverside Community Council Executive director AJ Awed. The stakes established in the article concern the feasibility of UBI programs as a tool for addressing and alleviating urban poverty. As such, stakeholders mentioned in the article primarily framed the program in *procedural* terms, as a means for gathering "valuable data" for the implementation of future, larger programs. Supplemental information includes mention of a similar pilot program conducted in Stockton, California, as well as quotes from a policy expert—Edward Goetz, of the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs at the University of Minnesota—addressing UBI programs' efficacy in improving living conditions, building stronger social networks, saving government money, and, potentially, increasing labor force participation.

In terms of the discussion in r/Minneapolis, the article serves as more of a background resource to be drawn upon than an object of discussion in itself. While the article and its framing potentially helps to guide the talk in question, speakers typically acted as if no one had read it. The initial post, titled "200 Low Income Minneapolis Families to Receive $500/month Guaranteed Income Payments in 2 Year Pilot Program," attracted 506 upvotes, 258 comments, and 78 unique speakers. There are 16 discussion families (parent comments with at least one child comment attached), the largest of which encompasses 66 comments. Overall, the discussion exemplifies online political talk, with most parent comments serving as either elaborations or

commentary that either would or would not be keyed into arguments by other speakers. Uncharacteristically for much online political talk in more open fora, talk remained mostly on the level of ethical and procedural rather than moral politics. I attribute this downshifting to three factors: first, the article referenced, itself adopting a more procedural frame, subtly set the stage for discussion. However, speakers' comments indicate only limited engagement with the original text, or at least the assumption they are addressing others who did not bother to read the article. More important is that the topic of discussion itself eludes rigid ideological framing. UBI is a form of welfare, and as such can be embraced by social democracy and other leftist ideologies; but at the same time UBI programs tend to be non-means-tested, and their "no strings attached" nature can lend themselves to libertarian frames emphasizing maximizing autonomy.

Among company that is assumed to be left or libertarian rather than right-leaning (such as fellow urbanites), UBI transcends the traditional battle lines drawn across other issues, such as police brutality. Relatedly, a space's locality can help narrow the focus of political talk, both in the sense that such a space constitutes a pre-existing community with its own interactive frameworks in place, and in the sense that the space represents a broader community "out there." Residents of r/Minneapolis are necessarily self-selecting: by virtue of subscribing they are demonstrating a willingness and commitment to discuss their city and local political issues with fellow Minneapolitans. These online residents thus work to establish a direct correspondence with the city itself. They attempt to weed out and sanction non-locals and non-stakeholders, and they operate under the assumption that their fellow speakers share similar values and outlooks—at least in certain areas. Thus certain moral and ideological frames can be held in suspension—few speakers in this discussion feel the need to justify the moral rectitude of

alleviating urban poverty or of advancing equity. Talk is far more focused on whether UBI actually helps bring about those public goods. In downshifting to ethical and procedural political talk—in keeping politics local—the discussion more closely resembles the deliberative ideal discussed in the previous chapter.

Talking UBI in r/Minneapolis: A Frame Map

Setting Frameworks	Nested commenting system: architecture mimics verbal speech by translating time into space. Comments are sortable by "best," top," "new," "old," and "controversial" (best by default.) High degree of locality and publicity: space is assumed to correspond to specific geographical location—Minneapolis—and access is unrestricted.
Participation Frameworks	Anonymous: speakers are free to enter the space under any guise, but are assumed to Minneapolis residents. Pseudo-synchronous: speakers "exist" as text strings, but are assumed to be present for the duration of discussion.
Expression Frameworks	Democratic and non-hierarchical: speakers are assumed to be of equal status. There is no center stage, and site architecture necessitates the division of talk into several discussion families. Mode of expression: expression is open, and can involve any range of tones or approaches, from commentary, to observation, to emotional expression, to explication. General talk is liable to be keyed into an argument at a moment's notice.
Master Frames	Political talk: assumed to concern the good, or the relationship between several goods—moral, ethical, and procedural politics. This form of talk carries an even greater risk of tipping over into argument, and there are several implicit and explicit speech rules in play, such as an inducement to be "civil" and avoid ad hominem. Speech forms include observations, commentaries, elaborations, rebuttals, supports, and expressives.
Frames	Morals of: urbanism, sustainability Ethics of: equity, opportunity, prosperity, autonomy Principle of: efficacy, efficiency

The discussion begins with a commentary and elaboration on the topic implicitly introduced:

> **elevatednarrative** (12/10/21) (62 points)
> Salient points: “The money will come from the American Rescue Plan Act, which is federal money allocated for COVID-19 relief. Applicants must live within the nine zip codes listed on the website, including area code 55454, which is in Cedar-Riverside. Eligible residents must earn at or below 50% of the Area Median Income and have proof of negative financial impact due to the pandemic, such as losing a job.”

In quoting the original article, **elevatednarrative** stakes out the semantic territory by reinforcing the frame the article itself establishes. They anticipate that not everyone has read the article, they provide what they consider to be the most relevant information, and they anticipate the direction of subsequent talk. “If we are to have a discussion about UBI, let’s align our priors and make sure we have our facts straight. The speaker adopts the role of author-surrogate and, potentially, referee.

In response, **Armlegx218** provides an elaboration and frame expansion, widening the semantic territory to include a discussion of a “rival” UBI scheme conducted by St. Paul and inter-city/county/country politics.

> **Armlegx218** (12/20/21) (62 points)
> If you are receiving public assistance in cash (MFIP, DWP) or SNAP this will impact the benefits received. This is not the case for St. Paul's UBI program because they bothered to get a waiver for counted income from the State and Feds.

Unlike the initial parent comment, **Armlegx218’s** elaboration keys the discussion into an argument. They make a claim in criticizing the Minneapolis city government’s hasty move to implement their plan, and they point to more effective alternatives. What follows is a number of branching arguments that further play upon this claim and its attendants.

The Principle of Efficacy

One such argument, already discussed above, tackles the comparatively limited scope of city politics.

> **Armegx218** (12/10/21) (19)
> It's one of the problems with cities and counties trying to do their own poverty reduction programs. There are so many moving and interlocking parts with other state and federal programs that there can easily be unanticipated consequences to ideas like this.
>
> > **lz-kan-reddit** (12/10/21) (1)
> > “There are so many moving and interlocking parts with other state and federal programs that there can easily be unanticipated consequences to ideas like this.” True, but at the same time, "getting other income affects your SNAP and other benefits" is an extremely basic concept
> >
> > > **Armlegx218** (12/10/21) (7)
> > > All Minneapolis had to do was seek a waiver to have this income not counted against the PA grants. St. Paul did it because this was eminently foreseeable and they worked with their county partners to make it work. Hennepin reached out to the city talk about how this would impact residents and never received a response. This is entirely on the city for lack of planning.
> > >
> > > > **lz-kan-reddit** (12/10/21) (1)
> > > > “Hennepin reached out to the city talk about how this would impact residents and never received a response.”They shouldn't have had to ask the city that. This isn't fine print in benefit conditions. They all screwed up something extremely basic here.
> > > >
> > > > > **Armlegx218** (12/10/21) (6)
> > > > > No, you misunderstand. The county said, hey we need to talk before you implement your half cocked idea. You are doing it wrong and you are going to fuck some people over. We'd like to talk about how to do this so that doesn't happen, there is some paperwork to fill out. The city doesn't do welfare. The county does, that is where the subject matter expertise lies. The city bumbled along with newfound riches and just thought they'd do something nice without thinking it through. Doing it right isn't hard,but it does require knowing what you do and don't know. To somewhat butcher Rumsfeld, this shouldn't have been an unknown unknown when the unit of government literally across the light rail tracks was saying Stop!

The stakes of the argument here are limited, and the discussion comparatively granular. “A crucial administrative error has been made here: who is to blame here—the city, the county,

or both?" **Iz-kan-reddit** and **Armlegx218** offer a series of counter-claims to each other, but the stakes of their disagreement concern the jurisdictional division between city and county government and whether good intentions should soften our judgment of bad policy decisions. In short, this form of talk adopts a procedural political frame. Both speakers implicitly share the city government's aim of reducing poverty, but are critical of the city's hastiness in failing to anticipate consequences. But in lowering the stakes of the argument and the temperature of the disagreement these speakers are able to engage in the sorts of "nuts-and-bolts" discussion crucial to the democratic decision-making process. If the goal of deliberative democracy is to produce the best possible decisions by the most informed populace, then much talk can and should be procedural in nature. But this sort of talk tends to only be possible in established communities, where the stakes are clear, the stakeholders are present, and speakers can trust each other to engage in good faith.

The Ethic of Prosperity versus the Ethic of Opportunity

Armlegx218's comment above also served as a springboard for an argument of an entirely different scope and tenor.

> **Armlegx218** (12/10/21) (19)
> It's one of the problems with cities and counties trying to do their own poverty reduction programs…
>
> > **VoiceAltruistic** (12/10/21) (-15)
> > The best thing a city can do is create jobs. Life changing jobs like construction and mining and energy and manufacturing and high end dining(big tips) etc. if they really want it to be progressive how about public works projects. Like in the Great Depression they had unemployed folks building paths and picnic tables in the woods for good salaries
> >
> > > **AbeRego** (OP) (12/10/21) (2)
> > > Ah yes, mining in the urban core of Minneapolis.
> > >
> > > > **VoiceAltrusitic** (12/10/21) (1)
> > > > The offices would be in Minneapolis, maybe a fully functional port and rail yard too. smelting plants along the river, More

> infrastructure for trucks, etc. the “warehouse district” should still be warehouses and light industrial, let those yuppies gentrify north Minneapolis
>
> > **AbeRego** (12/10/21) (2)
> > This doesn't make any sense. The reason why the Warehouse District/North Loop has become housing and commercial is because the industries that once operated there essentially no longer exist in the United States. It's not something that Minnesota actively pushed out, it's something that has moved overseas due to shifting economics, and what remained in the US takes far fewer workers because of automation.
> >
> > > **VoiceAltruistic** (12/10/21) (1)
> > > We hollowed out the middle class for this “evolution” and that has had serious consequences. In inequality, in an underclass of people without many prospects, and we saw it come home to roost many times, notably with the election of donald trump, which guys like Michael Moore had called and were warning about for a long time. You can’t push aside the working class the factory workers the miners the laborers and expect society to just go humming along.
> > >
> > > > **AbeRego** (12/10/21) (2)
> > > > This is precisely why UBI will be necessary. You used to need people to produce manufactured goods. Absolutely no education or training was necessary to get a well-paying job. That's not how it works, now. Increasingly, everything is automated. We shouldn't sacrifice inefficiency for the sake of keeping people employed. That's idiotic. We should redistribute the wealth that these increasingly automated companies produce, because the technology is taking those jobs away.

In this case, **AltruisticVoice** sees **Armlegx218’s** comment on the efficacy of city government to upshift the conversation into the realm of ethical politics. This requires not just a frame expansion, but a frame substitution: “why are we talking about targeted city welfare programs when we *should* be talking about the city’s *true* priority: expanding industry and supplying jobs. This warrants a somewhat flippant response from **AbeRego** (the original poster),

but what follows is an extended exchange pitting an "ethic of prosperity" against an "ethic of opportunity." Both **AltruisticVoice** and **AbeRego** agree that some form of equity needs to be restored and economic redistribution achieved, but where **AltruisticVoice** focuses on expanding prosperity for all, AbeRego focuses on maximizing individual opportunities. **VoiceAltruisitc** frequently invokes the language of class and class conflict, while **AbeRego** seeks to reset priors by drawing attention back to the economic and technological realities of today.

Such an upshift into the ethical is possible because both speakers are able to trust each other enough to avoid adopting needlessly inflammatory interpretations of each other's motivations. This sort of ethical political talk represents the sort of "sweet spot" that deliberative democrats desire. Speakers are able to explore the broader ethical implications of an issue without getting bogged down in procedural minutiae or confronting the sorts of irresolvable disagreements that moral politics tend to engender. Ethical political talk—as agonistic theories are quick to point out—necessarily requires both common values and common frameworks of debate. Ethical political talk acknowledges that major disagreements are possible while still operating under the assumption that agreement is possible. As such, I would argue the conditions in which such talk can thrive are rare, both on- and offline.

The Moral of Opportunity versus the Moral of Sustainability

The majority of exchanges for this particular topic adopted either an ethical or procedural political frame. However, there were exceptions. The largest single comment family involved a series of arguments pitting a moral of opportunity against a moral of environmental sustainability. As is common in online political talk, these arguments erupted spontaneously and

unexpectedly. Redditor **sylvnal** begins with a piece of commentary, expanding the initial frame slightly by following its premises and directing talk toward issues of transport and individual opportunity.

> **sylvnal** (12/10/21) (70)
> One potential way this could absolutely change people's lives is through transportation. $500/month can easily cover the cost of a car, insurance, and gas. That means people's ability to work away from bus lines increases, opening up WAY more opportunities. AND they save time.
> That's just one way this money could be utilized by working people to make SIGNIFICANT improvements in quality of life.

This type of opening does not necessarily anticipate an argument, but does provide a degree of rhetorical traction in advancing a claim—access to regular transportation is a clear benefit to those in poverty—however anodyne the speaker intended such a claim to be. In response, another redditor, **hennepinfranklinlaw** both keyed the discussion into an argument and upshifted into a moral political debate.

> **hennepinfranklinlaw** (12/10/21) (6)
> Is it so simple? We are actively trying to get people out of personal vehicles because of the high cost to maintain infrastructure and environmental impact. We shouldn't be subsidizing wasteful, unsustainable lifestyles any more than we already do. $500/month in public money so someone can drive alone in their private car out to a suburb, while spending 20+ hours/month unproductively commuting or sitting in traffic, where property taxes and minimum wages are lower than Minneapolis, to make like $2200/month pre-tax doesn't seem very efficient. Wouldn't we be better off encouraging density by spending that $500/month/person building better transit and reducing cars on the road so people don't have to drop $500/month burden like a car?

Here, **hennepinfranklinlaw** redirects the discussion toward issues of environmental sustainability, reframing **sylvnal's** appeal to individual opportunity as selfish, irresponsible, and unsustainable. This rebuttal keeps well within the limits of civil debate—they keep the focus on ideas rather than personalities and avoid attempts at undermining the original speaker—but as factions emerge, the tenor shifts. In support of **hennepinfranklinlaw**, **_JohnMuir_** writes:

> **_JohnMuir_** (12/10/21) (7)
> I would be shocked if you can convince anyone. These people are literally arguing that welfare recipients should use the money to buy a fucking car to commute to the suburbs. As if buying a car actually makes you more money. It's absurd on its face.
> Finally get some extra free cash flow? Immediately spend it on a massive liability. Just awful financial advice.

They call into question the motives and reason of all other participants, and In the process they instigate a number of heated exchanges.

> **Armlegx218** (12/10/21) (10)
> If you can get a job in the suburbs but can't get there by public transportation because it's focused on getting people downtown I guess you're just fucked? Compete for what jobs you can walk or bus to with everyone else in the same boat. A better transportation network would be ideal, bit that's not in the table. If someone getting a UBI grant is able to get a job at one of the manufacturers going up along 610 in Brooklyn Park, then fantastic. If they are netting a positive amount after expenses then they are helping their family. Transportation (a car here) doesn't make you more money, it opens additional opportunities to make money by reducing the opportunity cost of getting to the job to something people are willing to pay.
>
> > **_JohnMuir_** (12/10/21) (-9)
> > Bro, do you even live in Minneapolis? Every single suburbanite here should stick to their own shit: I get you live in a car dependent wasteland, but stop advocating that garbage in a city you don't even live in.

Here, **_JohnMuir_** adopts a form of what one might call ideological urbanism in addition to environmentalism and in the process attempts to undermine **Armlegx218's** position by questioning their status as a true stakeholder. **_JohnMuir_** adopts similar tactics elsewhere in the thread:

> Buying a car you can't afford is a waste.
> Buying a car that's easily affordable that can broaden your horizons on the type of job you can reasonably get to is not a waste.
> I lived in south Minneapolis and worked at local places making 10/hr, met my wife who had a car and now make 32/hr.
> It's all about how you choose to spend money.
> Sadly people are terrible with money.
> Not to mention because of this income difference we own a home in a good area instead of renting in a worse area.
>
> > **TheeMalaka** (12/10/21) (17)
> > Reliable transportation is a big life changer.

> **_JohnMuir_** (12/10/21) (-14)
> I really don't want to go on a rant about how shitty cars are in general, because Most Americans can't even begin to comprehend that, so I won't. So I'll leave it at: cars are bad
>
> > **TheeMalaka** (12/10/21) (17)
> > Yeah the car that helped me find a job paying almost triple what I was making and ended up buying a house with.
> > bAd cAr
> > We paid 350 a month for insurance and payment and I went from making 280 a week to around 1000
> > But explain to me how cars are bad for poor people when we live in this god forsaken ice tundra where we can literally freeze to death and decent paying low skill jobs aren't accessible by transit. Please explain.
> >
> > > **_JohnMuir_** (12/10/21) (0)
> > > So you drive your shitty asthma machine in some unsustainable car dependent suburb, spending thousands annually on it, driving on roads that literally cannot sustain themselves, and you think "more of this is good"
> > > There are hundreds of thousands of jobs in the downtown area that are accessible from basically every part of the city by walking, biking, or public transport. You literally don't need a car here. And certainly buying one when you're getting extra welfare money is an absurd suggestion.

Again, TheeMalaka attempts to frame the issue around personal opportunity, and even incorporates some of their own biographical details to enhance their claim. Again, _JohnMuir_ appeals to a higher moral of sustainability in arguing that such a route to opportunity is unacceptable if it encourages environmentally irresponsible lifestyles and draws money away rather than toward the city.

Deliberative Talk

The tension between opportunity and responsibility is addressed in other conversations, but usually firmly within the ethical/procedural rather than moral realm.

> **flanspan** (12/10/21) (21)

> UBI sounds like a good way to get families out of poverty in theory. In practice, we are much better off investing in universal healthcare, education, free internet, etc… I used to tutor kids in low income families in Minneapolis. Incredible perspective going into these families homes. Many times it was single parents and/or poorly educated parents who lacked the ability to get out of poverty. If you gave these families $500/mo, I guarantee it would not be spent wisely. Many of the parents were heavy alcohol/cigs/drug users and UBI would be terrible for them. As for the other parents, yes many would benefit from UBI but they would also benefit even more from universal healthcare, job training, and other social programs. For example, Minneapolis public schools provided computers for the kids to have and they were learning well. I remember showing a kid how to use Google translate and she helped her dad translate a letter he got from work. Another example: Most families were in section 42 or section 8 housing. Most had food stamps. So I really struggle to understand how UBI is the best way to get poor families out of poverty. Investing in social programs would seem to have a much greater impact. I couldn't imagine the nightmare it would be for these families if they got a serious illness and attempting to navigate healthcare. $500/mo wouldn't help. Universal healthcare would. Overall I see UBI as well intended but not nearly as effective as investing in social programs.

Flanspan simultaneously makes an ethical claim (is broadening individual opportunity worth it if it fails to address irresponsible behavior?) and a procedural claim (wouldn't other, more targeted social programs be better at addressing poverty?). In alluding to their experiences tutoring children from low-income families, flanspan also gestures toward establishing co-presence and anchoring their claims to their perspective. Comments such as these perhaps come the closest to reaching the communicatively rational, deliberatively productive ideal; **flanspan** adopts a perspective in addition to a position, they ground their claims in appeals to good reasons, and they deliberately draw connections between broader ethical ideals and narrower policies and plans of action. Perhaps as a result, **flanspan** sets the rhetorical stage for further deliberative talk.

> **sprcow** (12/10/21) (8)
> This isn't really UBI though. It's neither universal, nor sufficient to meet needs. I'm not saying it's a bad idea, or that you're wrong; it's just annoying that these basically-welfare-payment systems are being touted as new or experimental or even really remotely similar to the concept behind UBI. It's just sensationalist language usage.

> **GemFrancis** (12/10/21) (3)
> I think UBI is supposed to be supplemented by the other things you mentioned. It's not enough on its own to get people out of poverty.
>
> **AbeRego** (OP)(12/10/21) (4)
> I certainly don't disagree with your overall sentiment. However, an ideal UBI program would be given to every citizen. That money would be for absolutely anything a person sees fit to spend it on. As a person climbs the pay ladder, the less of an impact that money has, but they still get it.
> The reason why I'm such an advocate for UBI is because the way that the economy, with increased automation and lower wages for workers, there's really no other way to ensure that the majority of people can live comfortable lives. For myself, I certainly don't need that $500 a month, but it would sure be nice to have. If I decided to leave a job to find a better paying one, I would have a cushion to fall back on. It also essentially injects money right back into the local economy.
> I don't see it as so much of a poverty prevention tool, although it certainly is. I see it as simply a way to increase everybody's quality of life, especially those at the bottom. There will still be plenty of rich people out there, and that money would essentially mean nothing to them, but $500 to somebody working at a fast food restaurant and trying to raise children can be a game changer, even if they're still poor.
>
> > **flanspan** (12/10/2021) (7)
> > Thanks for the thoughtful reply. I think you sentiment that "I don't need that $500/mo but it sure would be nice to have" is why UBI is so popular. Sure it would be nice to have but wouldn't tax dollars be better spent to provide universal healthcare? Or free internet? Also, with UBI I think people imagine how it would impact them or other rational people but in reality, many people don't spend rationally. So instead of just handing out free money, I have to think society is better off providing basic minimums like food, shelter, and healthcare. certainly the low income families and especially the kids I've tutored would be.
> >
> > > **AbeRego** (OP) (12/10/21) (3)
> > > I honestly don't think it's an either/or thing.

Two speakers, **sprcow** and **GemFrancis**, provide mild frame expansions in elaborating on **flanspan's** premises—a UBI pilot shouldn't be mistaken for a full-fledged UBI program, and whether UBI programs are intended to be supplemental social service or a comprehensive replacement for *all* social services should be taken into consideration. **AbeRego**—original poster and, unsurprisingly, resident UBI evangelist—provides a more definite rebuttal and frame substitution—yes, an ethic of opportunity should absolutely prevail. In the process, **AbeRego** elides **flanspan's** point on personal responsibility, substituting instead an ethic of autonomy.

Implicitly: who cares about whether the money is spent wisely, so long as the money is available? Opportunity, both individual and overall, in a "rising tide lifts all ships" sort of way, takes pride of place. **AbeRego** is careful to make gestures of acknowledgement—"I certainly don't disagree with your overall sentiment…"—and to adhere to standards of civility in making explicit appeals to reason—"the reason why I'm such an advocate for UBI…"

Flanspan responds in kind by thanking **AbeRego** for their commitment to the conversation but again attempts to appeal to an ethic of personal responsibility and downshift into a more procedural discussion of the proper allocation of finite government resources. Again, **AbeRego** sidesteps in rebuttal, asserting a "both/and" rather than "either/or" response. Though no resolution is reached—common in this form of non-decision-oriented talk—**flanspan** and **AbeRego** nonetheless explore the contours of a complicated issue. They adhere to the same or similar standards of civility and deliberation, they provide gestures of acknowledgement and co-presence, and they avoid inflammatory personal attacks. This sort of talk cannot occur without assumed, substantive, and substantial prior agreement on both the values at stake and the nature of one's interlocutors.

Conclusions

The architecture and visual organization of a Reddit discussion and the more ad hoc comment spaces discussed in the previous chapter are functionally identical. One might imagine a similar degree of assumed locality between an r/Minneapolis debate over universal basic income programs and a similar discussion occurring in, e.g., a *Star Tribune* comment section—speakers in both can reasonably assume that their audiences are fellow Minneapolitans or Minnesotans.

And yet redditors can more frequently achieve what newspaper commenters cannot: a palpable sense of shared community supporting common frameworks.

This is achieved through a number of acts and gestures intended to anchor the virtual r/Minneapolis space to a Minneapolis proper. Locality is consciously and deliberately evoked, and a frequent form of "play" in more informal contexts involves sharing and reinforcing local tropes. Following a rainy day **Nascent1** began a playful conversation (1413 upvotes) titled: WE SURE NEEDED THIS RAIN![12]

> Please tell everyone that you talk to today that WE SURE NEEDED THIS RAIN. That way everyone will know that WE SURE NEEDED THIS RAIN!

They humorously call attention to the tediousness and ubiquity of "weather talk." Though this talk is hardly limited to locals, what followed was friendly competition to "out-Minnesota" one's fellow speakers by cramming in as many local tropes and speech patterns as possible:

> **n_uo_on_u** (106) (8/6/2022)
> You better believe it
>> **baconbrand** (50) (8/6/2022)
>> Oh for sure!
>>> **kGibbs** (38) (8/6/2022)
>>> I hear they had lotsa rain this summer up in Brainerd. That's what they says anyway.
>> **Nelly81706194** (16) (8/6/2022)
>> You betcha!

> **sota767** (53) (8/6/2022)
> Ope, it's even got some thunder. Must be a pretty big one.

> **irish_mutt** (11) (8/6/2022)
> Dang it! Don't Don't'cha just know I ran the darn sprinkler just last night! Geez. Oh well, I shoulda checked the weather report; even though those things really never know what's gonna happen. But we did need the rain.

[12] https://www.reddit.com/r/Minneapolis/comments/whoy6t/we_sure_needed_this_rain/

This form of play—ironic and vaguely self-deprecatory—functions as a private joke, cluing fellow speakers in and reinforcing a shared repository of local referents, jokes, and viewpoints.

The fact that such play is *possible* in the virtual space also contributes to its "place-ness." r/Minneapolis is a space in which political and argumentative talk *can* occur, but it is not oriented *around* such talk. Current front-page posts (as of 18 October 2022) include media (Minneapolis skyline photos and Minnesota Viking Art), virtual flyers ("Lost White Shepard - Grant & 1st Ave"), conversation starters ("I just want to know how many of you identify as Norwegians/descendants of Norwegians?"), and requests, both general ("Where can I find Halloween Parties?") and specific ("What's the most authentic resemblance to an English pub in Minneapolis?") in addition to various political discussions on local municipal government scandals and the threat of white supremacy. In short, a diversity of forms of talk are embedded in the setting framework and not all versions of locality are created equally. If one is searching for a virtual "public square" it is best to evoke a sense of community that endures regardless of whatever instances of talk that tend to break out. The greater this sense, the more assumptions speakers can make regarding their audience and the more frames they can suspend, allowing them to downshift political talk and focus more directly on local problems and local solutions.

The other side of locality, however, is exclusion. r/Minneapolis is a "public" subreddit in that it does not preemptively restrict access, yet locals do frequently act to exclude or undermine non-locals, as **_JohnMuir_'s** comment, discussed earlier, demonstrates: "*Bro, do you even live in Minneapolis? Every single suburbanite here should stick to their own shit…"* This deliberate sanctioning tends to only appear when talk grows especially heated and when trust and a sense of locality breaks down. Upvotes and moderation provide more formal sanctions, as heavily

downvoted comments can be rendered invisible or deleted entirely. E.g., the context of this exchange, as part of a larger discussion of rising crime and the "Murderapolis" moniker[13], can only be inferred:

> [deleted]
>
> > **liebkartoffel** (20) (9/25/2022)
> > Please tell us more about how Minneapolis is a shithole, person who clearly lives here. Your informed opinion is much appreciated.
> >
> > > [deleted]
> > >
> > > > **liebkartoffel** (7) (9/25/2022)
> > > > When's the last time you've been downtown, person who clearly lives here?
> > > > What neighborhood do you live in, person who clearly lives here?
> > > > What's your rent, person who clearly lives here?
> > > > Who's your council member, person who clearly lives here?
> > > > When did you last vote in a municipal election, person who clearly lives here?
> > > > Weird how I've never seen you comment around here, person who clearly lives here.

Though the other speaker's comments have been deleted, they evidently left themselves open to **liebkartoffel's** exclusionary tactics. If a speaker fails to establish themself as a stakeholder and fellow traveler, they risk delegitimizing their arguments in the eyes of their audience. For the most part, however, outsiders (or perceived outsiders), are greeted with a virtual eye-roll and semi-good-natured teasing, in much the same way urbanites regard tourists. Noticeably, speakers tend to have to do less to proactively establish their local bona fides than in other more ad hoc virtual spaces, such as newspaper comments. This higher level of trust is perhaps due to identities being more fixed and more attached to the virtual community. Speakers might be anonymous, and their presence might only exist as textual traces, but their identities are

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13 (https://www.reddit.com/r/Minneapolis/comments/xnm77d/once_nicknamed_murderapolis_the_city_that_became/)

nonetheless indexical. Other speakers always have the option of reviewing comment histories and tracking activity.

Communities that over-emphasize exclusion can, naturally, run the risk of becoming dangerously insular and prejudiced, but the basis of exclusion matters. Communities such as r/Minneapolis operate under the assumption that members are stakeholders, that they have mutual interests and that they will all experience the same consequences of political action. Speakers are held accountable and must demonstrate, when required such as in the prior challenge, that they have "skin in the game." Excluding non-locals on this basis, though always open to discrimination and exploitation, nonetheless serves to keep political talk grounded in local concerns. Thus, acts of community-building and place-making play a crucial role in shaping political talk. A substantive sense of locality, firmly embedded in the context's participation and setting frameworks, will establish which sorts of frames can be in play and which can be suspended. In this case, speakers were able to avoid abstract, ideologically-motivated talk of right and wrong and focus more on the ethical and procedural dimensions of a shared problem.

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CHAPTER 5: TWITTER AND SEMANTIC TERRITORIALIZATION

Introduction

What seems like an innocuous—if not pedantic—quibble over definitions can conceal an important symbolic struggle over American identity and way of life. Media frame analysis tells us that the political media ecosystem is "a series of arenas in which symbolic contests are carried out among competing sponsors of meaning" (Gamson and Stuart 1992:55). Nowhere are these basic definitional struggles more common and more apparent than social media such as Twitter, whose unique architecture (Guggenheim et al. 2015) promotes punchy declarative and expressive statements and discourages deliberation and nuance. It should be noted that this chapter was written in 2022 concerning political discourse from 2020. Since then, Twitter (now X) has come under controversial new ownership, its reputation has declined among common users and major institutional actors alike, and the social media landscape has shifted to accommodate a number of new rivals, both independent (Mastodon) and corporate (Facebook's Threads). However, the "Twitter model" remains ubiquitous, and the platform itself still remains a powerful tool for information dissemination and public opinion formation.

In the previous two chapters, "The Deliberative Potential of Online Spaces," and "Framing Online Speech," I attempted to evaluate what "good faith" discussion looked like in online fora: how might online users come together to substantively and respectfully deliberate on the issues of the day? In this chapter I examine "bad faith" political talk: what happens (as is so

often the case) when users engage in political talk, but are not particularly interested in agreement, persuasion, or even argument? Rather, I observe that many Twitter users approach political talk as a form of strategic framing, designed to influence general opinion rather than engage in discussion with particular actors. Semantic territorialization represents an unfortunate inversion of what proponents of participatory and democracy might desire. Social media platforms do bring diverse audiences and interlocutors together, and they do engage in political talk, but rarely to deliberate or arrive at good decisions. This more instrumental form of political talk reflects the same broader trends of congregation and homophilization I observed in chapter 2, "Democracy, Technology, and Mediated Political Speech": as more and more people adopt a platform, the emptier political speech becomes, and the more a common civic culture becomes something to be exploited rather than embraced.

This chapter uses Twitter to explore how the most basic tactics and strategic frames of political communication are employed and adapted. In collecting over a thousand tweets over a two-week period and applying frame analysis I focus on the popular right-wing Twitter refrain of "republic, not a democracy!" as one such claim. Over the course of a two-week period 1,191 tweets and 1,026 unique users employed some version of this frame. This period, from September 18th to October 2nd, was in the midst of a heated presidential election, when political talk of all sorts was in high-pitch, and when even elected officials were publicly deploying anti-democratic frames. During the 2020 vice presidential debate, conservative Senator Mike Lee bluntly tweeted "[w]e're not a democracy," before elaborating:

> **@SenMikeLee** (10/8/2020)
> Democracy isn't the objective; liberty, peace, and prospefity [sic] are. We want the human
> condition to flourish. Rank democracy can thwart that.

As I discuss below, this sort of framing is not new in right-wing circles, but it was typically deployed in more technically limited debates surrounding efforts to expand mass democracy, such as abolishing the electoral college. For example, in a 2019 tweet Republican Congressmen Dan Crenshaw frames a national popular vote as unrepresentative and republics as anti-majoritarian.

> **@DanCrenshawTX** (8/24/2019)
> Abolishing the electoral college means that politicians will only campaign in (and listen to) urban areas. That is not a representative democracy.
>
> We live in a republic, which means 51% of the population doesn't get to boss around the other 49%.

The sort of political talk I discuss below is in the same spirit, but far more explicitly anti-democratic—i.e., not only is the United States not a democracy, but democracy itself is an evil to be avoided. Where one can argue that Lee and Crenshaw are drawing some careful distinctions between "representative" and "rank" (direct) democracy, many right-wing Twitter users (or faux-user bots) are not so nuanced in their anti-democratic rhetoric.

In this chapter I do not attempt to pinpoint when this more extreme antipathy toward democracy emerged; I focus instead on the mechanics of how this "republic-not-democracy" frame is deployed. However, for further context it should be pointed out that President Trump lost the popular vote in 2016, and that as early as April of 2020[14] Trump was already casting doubts on the legitimacy of the 2020 election. It is not surprising, then, that Trump's supporters might feel compelled to not only endorse anti-majoritarian politics but to cast doubt on the concept of electoral politics.

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[14] Inskeep, Steve. 2021. "Timeline: What Trump Told Supporters Months Before They Attacked." *NPR*, February 8. (https://www.npr.org/2021/02/08/965342252/timeline-what-trump-told-supporters-for-months-before-they-attacked)

Denying that the United States is a democracy represents a form of "semantic territorialization," wherein the lines of discourse are redrawn to give oneself a more advantageous position. In making this distinction, right-wing Twitter users (and the American Right in general) are able to open up a rhetorical space for anti-democratic views and counter-majoritarian policies. As such, this chapter demonstrates how often political communication comes down to basic struggles over definition rather than high-minded debate.

As the political philosopher Chantal Mouffe (2013) observes, most political talk occurs on the semantic level—locking down the meaning of terms in a way favorable to one's own view and unfavorable to others'—rather than the deliberative level of hammering out differences while acknowledging common goals and values. On social media platforms such as Twitter, this form of semantic territorialization is readily apparent.

> **@juanitamoutlaw** (10/1/2020)
> We are NOT a democracy
> WE ARE A CONSTITUTIONAL REPUBLIC
> STOP letting the Left get away with this blatant lie
> democracies are governed by mob rule
> Constitutional Republics are govern by the rule of law

Here, **juanitamoutlaw** draws some important definitional boundaries: that democracies represent mob rule, that republics represent the rule of law, and that the concept of American democracy is a lie spread by the Left.

In common parlance, democracies and republics are not mutually exclusive. In asserting a difference, however, **juanitamoutlaw** and others are waging a form symbolic warfare, undermining a powerful, culturally resonant symbol ("democracy") in the hopes of undermining the principles attached to it—such as voting rights and majority rule—all while still asserting a recognizable American identity, in an alternative appeal to republicanism.

> **@alib777** (9/30/2020)
> @GovInslee Once again~We live in a Republic NOT a democracy! Dont understand why the democrats don't get that strait!? And for the record you insult Republicans of this state when you insult the POTUS!

Semantic territorialization is a form of gerrymandering, where speakers establish "home bases" around their and their opponent's positions, subsequently expanding the territory around their base, and attempting to shrink the area around the other. In this case, "democracy" is reduced to mob rule, and "republic" is expanded to incorporate any form of representative government, and the only form of government compatible with minority rights.

A potential opponent's tack is to break apart the binary and assert a more nuanced relationship: "democracy" is a subset of "republic" and vice versa.

> **@1Andrew_J** (9/24/2020)
> @Dominic_Compoz @ResPublica1776 @PattyArquette @MittRomney "Dogs aren't animals, they're mammals""Democracy is from the greek for citizen (demos) and rule (kratos). A Republic is any form of democracy without a king, that's it.The US is both a republic and democracy. If you want citizen-rule you want democracy.

These sorts of struggles only occur in the first place, however, because "democracy" and "republic" are so hazily defined in political parlance—what Ernesto Laclau (2018) refers to as "floating signifiers." These terms are used so often that they are simultaneously meaningful and meaningless.

Thus, in addition to being equated to mob rule, democracy is capable of being transformed into authoritarian communism…

> **@iam1ke** (10/2/2020)
> a Democracy CONTROLS its ppl with fear & lies.. Communism = Democracy

…As well as a globalist cabal:

> **@adventurescribe** (10/2/2020)

> Whenever Dems say he's a threat to ""Our Democracy"" I hear ""threat to our secret globalist cabal""

This speaker is not the only one to cloak thinly veiled racism and antisemitism ("secret globalist cabal") in anti-democracy talk. Further complicating the issue is whether and the extent to which these users are real Americans or even real people. Both the 2016 and 2020 elections revealed concerted, state-level efforts to subvert American democracy, such as by the "Internet Research Agency," a notorious Russian bot farm.[15] These efforts extended across a number of U.S.-based social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. For the purpose of my analysis, I choose to accept these tweets at face value, in large part because I, like any other casual Twitter browser, have no means of definitively verifying users' identities, as I discuss in terms of "audience frameworks" below. But whether a given user is a bot or a real person has little impact on my overarching argument: bots are so prevalent on Twitter precisely because it so readily lends itself to "bad faith" political talk, (mis)information dissemination, and strategic frame deployment.

Undergirding much of the "republic not democracy" discourse is an effort to launder counter-majoritarian and nativist views through patriotic rhetoric. Democracy is sinister, alien, and corrupt—the avenue through which "true Americans" could have their country stolen from them—whereas, in contrast, a republic is of and by "the people." Thus, those seeking to find an argument or an attempt to debate in republic-not-democracy talk are missing the point. The republic-not-democracy claim, as deployed by the majority of speakers, does not anticipate an argument or even a specific audience. Rather, it exists to legitimate and soften the ground for

[15] Alba, Davey. 2020. "How Russia's Troll Farm Is Changing Tactics Before the Fall Election." *The New York Times*, March 29. (https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/29/technology/russia-troll-farm-election.html)

American authoritarianism—a form of authoritarianism that seeks to transform the concept of minority rights into the basis for minority rule.

Frame Analysis in the Age of Social Media

In the previous chapter, I outlined Goffman's introduction of, and approach to frame analysis. In this chapter, it is appropriate to explore how these concepts have been employed in subsequent research, particularly in the realm of political culture and media. Drawing upon both Goffman's frame analysis and the social constructionism of Berger and Luckmann (2011), media frame analysis (Tuchman 1974; Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Kellner 1990; Gamson and Stuart 1992) attempts to capture how meaning is created and adapted to reflect various events, agendas, and interpretations of reality.

Within sociology, Gamson and Modigliani's (1989) foundational study—discussed, in part, in a previous chapter—maps out the relationship between media discourse and public opinion formation. In practice, their own definition of a frame (1989:3)— "a central organizing idea…for making sense of relevant events, suggesting what is at issue"—is more specific and more limited. That is, in Goffman's conception there seem to be frames all the way down, from the highest order frameworks organizing experience to the lowest order frames motivating the pettiest of disagreements. To the contrary, Gamson and Modigliani (1989:4) assert that frames "should not be confused with positions for or against some policy measure" and that "[n]ot every disagreement is a frame disagreement." While this definition of a frame is helpful analytically, I would argue that implies a level of stability and organizational cohesion that does not exist.

What are "pro" and "con" positions if not competing frames—competing interpretations, value hierarchies, priorities—nested within another frame setting the topic, stakes, and values in play, which in turn is nested within another frame, and so on? For example, a gun control debate might imply a set of positions and overarching value system—such as the evil of senseless violence, or respect for the sanctity of human life—but while these positions might draw upon the same priors, they can represent radically different interpretations of social reality. "Pro-gun" activists might seek to frame the issue in terms of civil rights coming under threat and the value of freedom over security—to prevent violence the solution is to put more hands in the guns of the people who will use them to protect others. "Anti-gun" activists might attempt the reverse, and assert that a freedom involving the constant fear of death is no freedom worth having—the solution is no guns at all. Both activists might agree that something must be done about gun violence, but their priorities reflect incompatible interpretations of the relationship between liberty and security.

These positions might be *so* different that they rise to the level of "frame disagreement," but that still raises the question: at what point do "everyday" disagreements *become* frame disagreements, and vice versa? Moreover, asserting that frames are a sort of stable repository of arguments and attitudes can lead one to overlook the ways in which frames can be distorted, manipulated, only partially adopted, or outright broken. For instance, the hypothetical pro-gun activist might value freedom so much, or assert that their Second Amendment rights are under such a threat, that access to guns is worth the occasional mass shooting. At that point "gun control" as a motivating issue frame is resting on precarious common ground indeed, becoming less about "how can we limit gun violence?" and more "how can we reconcile incompatible

understandings of the role of violence in public life"? In short, this form of radical frame substitution serves to upshift the debate from the level of ethical to moral politics, to break "settled truths" out of suspension and scrutinize their moral fitness. This deliberate rejection of priors, either from the outset or during the communicative event,occurs frequently in the sorts of definitional struggles with which I will subsequently contend.

To be fair to Gamson and Modigliani, they are focusing on the organizational rather than individual level. The emphasis of their and other similar studies is on media organizations and their role in the production of "issue cultures," as well as the more abstract level of the media as a site upon which various actors struggle to shape public opinion. As such, their and others' use of the "frame" functions to demonstrate the influence of media organizations on their audiences and vice versa, rather than the fame as the means through which individuals navigate basic communicative events—the focus of much of this dissertation. Frames are embedded in "media packages" (Gamson and Modigliani 1989:4): overarching narratives or scenarios that are capable of lending meaning to both past and future events. E.g, the "progress" package helps to place nuclear accidents such as Chernobyl and Three Mile Island within a certain context emphasizing the continued necessity of renewable energy. These packages include both a single motivating frame and its attendant symbols, imagery, and implications, "making it possible to display the package as a whole with a deft metaphor, catchphrase, or other symbolic device" (1989:3).

The production of these media packages depends upon a "value-added process" involving "cultural resonances," "sponsor activities," and "media practices." Cultural resonances serve to make the package more appealing and/or familiar by invoking common themes, tropes, narratives, and symbols. Themes tend to imply "counterthemes": e.g., a "progress" theme

emphasizing ingenuity and the mastery of nature can be met with a countertheme emphasizing caution and living in harmony with nature. Both theme and countertheme can be drawn from a general American cultural heritage (1989:6). As such, as with the frame itself, culture is characterized as both stable and constant—an underlying reservoir of meaning that actors can strategically draw upon to lend legitimacy to their positions.

While culture functions as a background process, deliberate action emerges in the form of various sponsors (1989:6). Sponsors are typically professional and social movement organizations who have a vested interest in the "career" of a media package, and work to disseminate it as widely as possible. Sponsors cultivate relationships with journalists, tailoring their various agendas to meet news organizations' expectations and requirements.The role of sponsors in the public opinion formation process is thus deliberate and strategic, backed up by considerable resources, both physical and symbolic, and capable of pulling the proper levers to get their message across.

Finally, media practices help determine how and on what terms packages are presented to the public. An aversion to "controversy" (1989:7) on the part of news organizations and journalists means that "official" packages produced by the government and other serious institutional actors are left unscrutinized, and their assumptions consciously and unconsciously adopted. At the same time, a "balance" norm ensures that *some* though by no means *all* competing packages are given air time and column inches. These competing packages tend to be produced by sponsors of the same level of influence and legitimacy: e.g., major political parties or advocacy groups (1989:8). "Challenger" packages and sponsors with less media clout, meanwhile, play only an indirect role. Overall, as the public-facing institution, newsmakers

"straddle the boundary between producers and consumers of meaning" (1989:9). Journalists observe the same events and receive the same packages as their audience, but they play a decisive part in interpreting, translating, selecting, and excising public issue frames.

I focus on Gamson and Modigliani's approach to frame analysis to such an extent because it is both highly influential and because it provides a comprehensive overview of how frames were produced and disseminated in the pre-Internet age. Their media landscape involves a clear division between content producers and content consumers, broadcasters and audiences, public discourses and private discourses. In the social media era, these lines have all blurred, if not disappeared entirely. Where previously issue frames ostensibly arrived in carefully constructed "packages," now they are publicly expressed, manipulated, transformed, and substituted in countless iterations near instantaneously and across vast swathes of virtual territory. If various sponsors want to get their messages across they have to contend with an unpredictable, algorithmically influenced system of information dissemination.

Likewise, with the decline of print media and broadcast news, journalists no longer play as prominent a role in selecting, evaluating, and broadcasting issue frames, and their audiences are less likely to be mollified by adherence to journalistic ethics. Bypassing traditional institutional actors, information now reaches individual consumers in myriad ways, and they themselves are participating far more actively in discourse development. As discussed in the chapter concerning mass media and democracy, this "democratization" of information dissemination would seem to offer some attractive benefits, particularly in limiting the influence of media conglomerates in shaping public opinion. But the simultaneous homogenization and homophilization of virtual spaces means that individuals are both thrust into arenas of countless

competing narratives and drawn toward echo chambers where mis- and disinformation are free to proliferate. As a result, the shared cultural heritage underlying political discourse no longer seems like such a universal constant—the themes, values, tropes, and shibboleths less like a shared cultural repository and more like a strategic stockpile to be raided as needed.

Additionally, I address Gamson and Modigliani's style of frame analysis in order to provide a contrast to my own. This chapter, and this dissertation on the whole, is less concerned with discourse and public opinion formation than on how individuals evoke and deploy frames in everyday political speech. My own understanding and analytical usage of the frame concept, then, is much more flexible and contingent. I see frames as less a "central organizing" idea, neatly wrapped within a package by institutional sponsors, and more a practical means of ordering speech and navigating speech events employed by everyone everywhere. As my analysis of frameworks, master frames, and frames in the previous chapter demonstrates, at any given moment there can be a multitude of frames in play. In the process of political talk, speakers introduce, suspend, expand, contract, and reorient semantic frames as the situation requires. Where my and other approaches to frame analysis agree, however, is that the semantic framing of issues requires a certain level of strategy in how, when, and why culturally resonant elements are employed. The fragmentary media landscape of online settings and a shrinking cultural reservoir makes successful framing all the more difficult, and the emergence of radical and unpredictable framing all the more likely.

A number of studies have applied frame analysis to online (Prior 2007; Hargittai et al. 2008) and social media (Neuman et al. 2014; Guggenheim et al. 2015) settings. Such studies capture the ambiguous nature of the internet as both a communicative medium and as an

imagined space and public commons. The interplay between public opinion and public discourse has always been complex and multidirectional, but the stages of production, dissemination, and interpretation of messages remained more or less discrete prior to the internet age. The internet is a medium, however, of instantaneous production, dissemination, and interpretation. Communication technologies have never before allowed so many people to simultaneously act as both producers and consumers, never opened up the active participation by so many in discourse and public opinion formation so completely.

Guggenheim et al. (2015) demonstrate, e.g., how neither traditional (online news) and social (Twitter) media have a monopoly over agenda setting in the public discourse. Both realms have their own conventions and limitations and both influence and interpenetrate each other. Capturing the dynamics of the online media ecosystem has been a fruitful avenue of research, as has similar work on the internet as a public sphere, such as its relationship with political participation (Oser et al. 2013), polarization (Dalhgren 2005), and deliberation (Lawrence et al. 2010). There has been little analysis, however, on the most granular level of online political communication. If social media is a potential site of "symbolic contests" between various "sponsors of meaning," then we must also ask what those contests look like, what symbolic resources actors rely upon, and how these contests are resolved? This study is a micro-level frame analysis aimed neither at the interplay of traditional media institutions and the "lay" public, nor at how online political communication translates to behavior "out there," but rather at the dynamics of online political talk itself.

Specifically, this chapter hopes to capture some of the spontaneous contests that erupt over even the least controversial and most "settled" aspects of our political discourse. In

answering such a basic and anodyne question as "is the United States a democracy or a republic?" actors are able to draw upon a common symbolic vocabulary to paint vividly different pictures of American society. To many right-wing Twitter users, "democracy" is reframed as, among other sinister-sounding terms, "mob rule," "communism," and a "secret globalist cabal." Democratic government, far from something to be cherished and defended, becomes something distinctly alien and un-American.

This "semantic territorialization," rather than reasoned, good faith debate, represents the front line of political struggle. What looks like pedantic quibbling over terms becomes a means of normalizing radical, authoritarian viewpoints in the political discourse. In divorcing "democracy" from "republic," one can begin justifying the elimination of voting rights, the de-legitimation of electoral results, and the solidification of minority rule. Social media outlets'—and, specifically, Twitter's—unique architecture and emphasis of expressive and assertive statements has proven to be an ideal ground for this form of struggle, allowing for the distillation of complex arguments into a series of simple frames.

Method of Analysis

This study is a micro-level frame analysis of online political talk on the Twitter social media platform. Using a browser utility, I scraped all tweets from a two-week period (Friday, September 18th to Friday, October 2nd, 2020) containing a handful of keywords. Noticing that the upcoming election was driving renewed discussion over voting rights with increasing references to the "democracy versus republic" debate among right-wing Twitter users, I elected to focus on this emerging controversy as a site of definitional struggle. In total, I scraped 1,393

unique tweets containing the keywords “democracy is/democracies are” “republic is/republics are” and “republic not a democracy.”

Subsequently, I coded tweets according to general tone and style—whether the speaker appears neutral, adversarial, or conciliatory—as well as specific appeals. E.g., a speaker discussing the “Founding Fathers” and their intent is coded as an appeal to “tradition,” a speaker referring to democracy as “mob rule” is coded as an appeal to “stability.” My aim in studying these definitional struggles is to capture the fundamental mechanics of online political speech. As such, this initial coding framework provides a foundation for a deeper, more inductive form of frame analysis in the of Alexander’s (2006) investigation of deep-seated “civil codes”, Fine’s (2012) reconstruction of “tiny publics” and Polletta’s (2006) study of how narrative is employed in public deliberation.

Platform Effects

I focus on Twitter in this chapter to provide a contrast to the types of political talk I discuss in the previous two chapters. Online news comment sections and Reddit threads are social media platforms specifically designed to facilitate discussion. Twitter, conversely, is, or at least was initially designed to be a “micro-blogging” medium arguably more suited for opinion expression and dissemination (Bruns et al. 2013). Users are free to converse with one another, but the emphasis for most users is on “listening” rather than speaking. Public figures might take to Twitter to spread their message, but back and forth with constituents is minimal (Mergel 2012). Users immediately apprehend the medium as a scrollable news feed (Murthy 2012), with discussion and argument generally occurring as a second-order form of communication,

subordinate to “likes,” “retweets,” and “quote tweets.” Reddit similarly adopts a “news feed” model, but the subreddit system represents more of an effort to create stable “issue publics” and virtual discussion-centered spaces within broader “coffee house” communities. Twitter, conversely, presents itself an opportunity to experience public opinion and opinion formation in the “raw” (Faris et al. 2017): what communities emerge are user and network-centered rather than “place”-centered. The issue publics found on Twitter are more emergent and ad hoc (Bruns et al. 2013): conversational topics are anchored to hashtags and trending topics rather than siloed virtual spaces.

Setting Frameworks

In terms of setting frameworks, Twitter is most notable for imposing character limits on each speech instance. Character limits—initially 120 characters, eventually doubled to 240—encourage (the appearance of) pithy, off-the-cuff remarks that are immediately apprehended and digested by audiences. Users can and do communicate in a longer, essay-style format, but in the form of a series of self-replies to one’s initial tweet. These threads are cumbersome and often difficult for others to parse, and require some careful signposting in order to maintain coherence (“tweet 1 of X…”). Similarly, While the platform accommodates a nested reply system, users are initially greeted with a feed of others’ top-level tweets. Discussion is only accessed once one clicks on a specific tweet, and even then only a few top-level replies are displayed, with the rest hidden behind a “show replies” button. While there exists the potential for engaging and involved discussion, the emphasis of engagement is more on propagation and dissemination—”re-tweeting” (sharing to one’s followers) another’s tweets, either with or without added commentary. In a marked contrast to the virtual spaces discussed in previous

chapters, Twitter represents a very high degree of publicity but a low degree of locality. There are no differentiated spaces, nor are the means or efforts to associate spaces with geographical locations or specific topics of discussion. Rather, like other platforms such as Facebook, Twitter is meant to evoke the "public square" model of communication. Sub-communities are built through follower networks.

Audience Frameworks

The audience one encounters is a hybrid of anonymous users and those expressing their "true" identities. At the time of this analysis (October 2020), public officials and those deemed to be sufficiently influential were granted "verified" status and a blue checkmark serving as a visual indication. This verification system both creates a certain status hierarchy of "high powered" users and aids passive readers in evaluating information sources. Discussion is largely carried out under the assumption that all are who they say they are, but with the constant underlying risk that one is engaging with bots, trolls, or other bad faith actors. One is assumed to be primarily speaking to one's followers, but anyone can follow anyone, and there are numerous means through which one's feed can be populated by other's tweets. As a result, a sense of enhanced publicity and a feeling of "all speaking to all" emerges. Again, this is a marked contrast to more grounded virtual communities, in which speakers have more means of suspending frames and making assumptions about one's interlocutors.

Expression Frameworks

As a "public" platform, Twitter encourages a democratic and non-hierarchical mode of expression, without a center stage or first speaker. As a result of both character limits and the

general sense of remarks being personal and off-the-cuff, remarks can either be proactive or reactive—instantaneous responses to events both internal and external that are generally left uncontextualized. For this reason, users are subtly induced to maintain a constant presence on the platform in order to remain "in the know" and capable of following the latest memes and topics of discussion. Similarly, there is a greater sense of pseudo-synchronicity as users continually update their feed or scroll through content. As a micro-blogging platform, the manner of expression can incorporate a vast array of tones and approaches, from confessional, to informative, to snarky and all points between. As with other virtual spaces, remarks are interpretively "open," and there remains the constant risk of speech being keyed into an argument, or something resembling an argument.

Overall, the architecture and modes of engagement Twitter encourages not so much broadscale discussion *of* current events as a collective reaction *to* events. Discussion can and does emerge, but limitations, such as an inability to establish a sense of locality, tends to produce more surface-level engagements. Rather, with its to link networks of followers, Twitter functions best as a platform for information dissemination and frame amplification. Where spaces such as r/minneapolis encourage more deliberative and argumentative forms of talk by giving users a means of imagining stakeholders and linking talk to community, Twitter, particularly outside and between follower networks, lends itself to iteration, propagation, and argument-games.

Argument-Games

Wittgenstein (2010:5) introduces the concept of language-game to describe the ways in which language and action are interwoven. The meaning of a word, or concept is dependent on the

context of their usage, on the "rules" of a particular communicative event. Language-games are related to other language-games by certain "family resemblances"—rules, forms, and other elements might overlap enough that speakers can shift between contexts while still maintaining a coherent sense of meaning, even though no such overarching system of meaning truly exists (2010:32). I mention this concept because it helps me describe what I would call a common form of online speech: the argument-game.

In the previous chapter I described arguments as an activity in which multiple speakers attempt to demonstrate to each other that their framing of the situation is normatively superior. Key to an argument is the intent to persuade: one might not succeed in persuading but everyone behaves as if they are persuad*able*; one might not (and often will not) win an argument, but everyone behaves as if they are winnable. Key as well is that an argument implies a partner; that one anticipates an immediate audience, either real or imagined.

And yet much online speech, particularly on Twitter, resembles argument in certain aspects and something else entirely in others. A tweet, for example, might appear to advance a claim, but toward no one in particular. A speaker might adopt an argumentative or didactic tone, but in such a way that does not anticipate an argument. A declarative statement might simply appear, out of the blue, in response to some phantom partner or as a complete non sequitur. These argument-games thus take on the appearance of traditional arguments but seem to follow a different set of rules and are employed for different purposes.

> **@BarackObama** (verified) (9/30/2020)
> Joe knows this isn't about him—it's about us. Make your plan to vote right now. We've got to vote like our democracy depends on it. Because it does.
>
> > **@thevegasrat** (10/1/2020)
> > @BarackObama You are the former president of this country and still dont know that we are a republic not a democracy.

We can assume that **thevegasrat** is not genuinely attempting to persuade Barack Obama or to instruct him on the differences between democracies and republics. We can assume as well that **thevegasrat** does not anticipate a response or any form of meaningful engagement with the former president. Public figures' tweets attract thousands of responses, and the likelihood of them reading, much less responding to, any single response is very low. What then, is this speaker attempting to accomplish? Such a response can be interpreted, in part, as an expressive outburst—a semi-spontaneous expression of contempt of Obama's ignorance; the virtual equivalent of a protest sign held up at a political rival's rally. I would argue, however, that the overall purpose of these argument-games is to disseminate and amplify an existing frame.

Points of Contention

Those pushing back against republic-not-democracy, either in good faith or in an attempt at counter-territorialization, rarely get drawn into an exchange:

> **@John_F_Donnelly** (9/18/2020)
> @JerryHendrixII What are some practical differences between a democracy and a republic?
>
> > **@Byron230** (9/19/2020)
> > In a pure democracy, the mob can deny rights to the minority
> >
> > > **@Aubie13** (9/19/2020)
> > > "Pure democracy" is a straw man used conveniently in arguments, and as silly as arguing a democratic republic is a republic but not a democracy.
>
> **@TrueBlueSC1**
> @Shaun1111 @NSLforBiden False dichotomy. A "Republic" is when power lies in a body of citizens who are entitled to vote for officers and representatives responsible to them. A "Democracy" is government by the people, exercised either directly or through elected representatives" — we are both. #Civics

Back-and-forth over these claims is rare, in part, because exchanges in "open" spaces—replies attached to public figures' tweets, with minimal assumed familiarity between interlocutors—are rare to begin with. But beyond structural limitations, direct argument over republic-not-democracy is rare because neither party anticipates one. In the case of the argument-game-playing anti-democracy advocate, true engagement is beside the point; in the case of the pro-democracy advocate, they find themselves forced into demonstrating that a heretofore self-evident truth is true. Counter-framing over republic-not-democracy occurs more commonly as ironic commentary over how tedious the claim is, or in ironic exchanges with perceived political allies.

> **@fmanjoo** (10/1/2020)
> One-line arguments that make you want to gouge out your eyes:
> "We're a republic, not a democracy!"
> "Correlation is not causation!"
> Reply with others:
>
> **@ConanOBrien** (verified) (9/29/2020)
> I recorded a series of PSAs about the swing states. I hope they make you laugh, and I hope they encourage you to hit the polls on November 3rd. First up, Florida…
> > **@therealwcb5** (9/29/2020)
> > What about the other states. Don't be hating.
> > > **@jackster994** (9/29/2020)
> > > The electoral college is the one hating
> > > > **@therealwcb5** (9/29/2020)
> > > > What does that even mean.
> > > > > **@TheFirstUn5een** (9/29/2020)
> > > > > It mean that the electoral college and the winner take all the rule that all but two states have causes people with less popular votes to win. BuT tHiS iS a RePuBlIc, NoT a DeMoCrACy
>
> **@CarrieNBCNews** (verified) (9/29/2020)
> New NBC|SurveyMonkey online poll — two-thirds of US adults do NOT want to see Roe overturned, just 29% do. (Even Republicans are about evenly split)
> Story by
> @bkamisar
> @mel_holzberg
> > **@TheStefanSmith** (verified) (9/29/2020)

> Yeah, but we live under minority rule and the people's will doesn't matter. And if you think it should, an angry bro will pop up to remind you that this is a rEpUbLiC not a dEmOcRaCy

The use of mixed caps indicates both a mocking tone and that the speaker considers republic-not-democracy to be less a fully-fledged, good faith argument and more a semantic cudgel employed by political opponents. There is little indication, on either side of the "debate," of a motive to persuade and inform. Rather, republic-not-democracy and its counterclaims appear as a different type of struggle.

Semantic Territorialization

The significance of "republic, not a democracy" lies not so much in its content as its effects and implications. Republic-not-democracy functions as an invocation, a part pointing toward a greater ideological whole. Speakers deploy this theme not to invite an argument over the virtues over democratic versus republican forms of government, but to reframe democracy as something dangerous and subversive, to soften the ground for legitimating authoritarian framings of American government, and to justify minoritarian policies and the limiting of democratic rights. In short, this is a form of argument-game wherein the speaker attempts to remap the political landscape—not through traditional forms of engagement, but through repetition, propagation, and reorientation. Thus, the rules governing the argument-game and the invocation of republic-not-democracy are considerably looser. Whenever, anyone—but particularly public figures—frames democracy as a civic virtue or an unquestioned good, the speaker is free to swoop in to "correct" their "error," even when doing so appears off-topic or as a pure non sequitur.

> **@TulsiGabbard** (verified) 9/28/2020
> -Congress needs to pass our bipartisan bill to ban ballot harvesting so no one can exploit our sacred right to vote.
>
> > **@LaVellePeter** (9/28/2020)
> > *-I agree with the main premise. Just a couple things*
> > *1. The US is a republic, not a democracy.*
> > *2. We don't have a right to vote. It's a privilege.*

Reframing voting as a "privilege" rather than a "right" is a deliberate act of semantic territorialization. The United States is explicitly *not* a democracy, and thus once the frame is reoriented it logically follows that voting was never a right to begin with.

Republic-not-democracy often appears piggy-backing on more traditional, only vaguely related arguments. Jonathan Turley, a law professor and frequent defender of Donald Trump's legal activities, took to Twitter to discuss the constitutional implications of Trump's then-recent COVID-19 infection.

> **@JonathanTurley** (10/2/2020)
> As with Mark Twain's death, the rising hysteria over a constitutional crisis due to President Trump illness has been "greatly exaggerated." We have a system that is hard wired precisely for this eventuality and has been used repeatedly for illnesses and operations[...]
> ...However, the greatest health threat evident from this news is the spontaneous hyperventilation of dozens of pundits and politicians. Remember our Constitution was made for bad times, not good times. That why it is the most successful constitutional system in history.
>
> > **@GenuineLiberal** (10/2/2020)
> > Thank you professor. It may seem obvious, but you need to remind people frequently that we're a constitutional republic, not a 'democracy'. Electoral college, popular vote . . .

In the context of an argument or discussion, **GenuineLiberal's** response is a non sequitur. In his thread Turley did not address the virtues of republicanism and the electoral college. However, Turley did provide a general theme of "constitutionality," and **GenuineLiberal** saw the opportunity to piggyback off a perceived political ally's message to establish an inherent

opposition between “constitutional republics” on one end and (unconstitutional) democracies on the other. Again, as a response to argumentative claim—either in opposition or support—**GenuineLiberal’s** remakes make little sense. They do make sense, however, as an effort to disseminate a particular frame.

In these acts of semantic territorialization, “democracy” and “republic”—practically synonymous in American political discourse—are pushed toward opposite poles. “Democracy” comes to reside with “mob rule,” fraud, vice, and corruption. Republicanism, meanwhile, still resides comfortably with order, constitutionality, and the rule of law. As Chrstian Lamar, an Arizona politician tweets:

> **@christianlamar** (verified) (9/24/2020)
> We are not a democracy.
> I do not believe in democracy.
> The United States is a Republic.
> The United States is a Republic.
> The United States is a Republic.
> The United States is a Republic.
> The United States is a Republic.
> The United States is a Republic.
>
> > **@WBlake2019** (9/24/2020)
> > The Constitution is a
> > “Republic Constitution”...rule of law
> > Electing people into office is termed a Democracy (rule of majority)...ye who gets more votes numerically than the other
> > compared to: Parliamentary or aristocracy or oligarchy, or dictatorship or simple panel-resume
> >
> > > **@christianlamar** (verified) (9/24/2020)
> > > Democracy is by mob rule.
> > > Democracy allows voter fraud.
> > > Democracy allows aliens to vote.
> > > Democracy allows delay of counting.
> > > Democracy allows ballot harvesting.
> > > Democracy allows forging signatures.
> > > Democracy corrupts.
> > > Republic is Representative of the people & by the people!
> > >
> > > > **@WBlake2019** (9/24/2020)
> > > > All that is true for many (for me too), but others see it as a numbers (winner take all and don’t care). I live just outside Seattle.

> I hear and see it daily. They don't care. They have power thru numbers/mob.

Lamar and his interlocutor are not conversing so much as taking turns reframing and re-territorializing "democracy" and "republic." Democracy becomes "mob rule" becomes "voter fraud" deployed by a nebulous "they" to cling to power. Republic becomes "republic constitution" becomes "rule of law." While **WBlake2019** provides a fragment of a definition for "democracy"—"electing people into office"—much of what democracy *is*, beyond its attendant vices, is deliberately left unsaid. Thus, democracy can be "mob rule" but *not* "representative of the people & by the people," which defines a republic. This rhetorical sleight of hand is functionally meaningless in terms of defining, comparing, and contrasting opposing philosophies of government, but helpful in assuring that democratic principles are recast as dangerous, illegal, and un-American. Democracy is reframed as incompatible with representative government.

Implicit in the re-framing of democracy is in substituting the species (*direct* democracy) for the genus (democracy-writ-large). In deploying narrower definitions, in drawing smaller and smaller circles around what democracy *is*, the vast territory of what democracy *is not* becomes free for the taking. Thus concepts such as "representative democracy" become oxymorons and minority protections under democracies become impossible. The justification in invoking "mob rule democracy" hinges on an appeal to authority: the intent of the "Founding Fathers" and, by extension, the Constitution. Here, there is some rhetorical ground to be exploited. James Madison for example, speaks about the differences between democracies and republics in terms of form and scope:

> In a democracy, the people meet and exercise the government in person; in a republic, they assemble and administer it by their representatives and agents. A democracy,

> consequently, will be confined to a small spot. A republic may be extended over a large region.[16]

Elsewhere in the Federalist Papers, Madison appends the "pure" qualifier to his discussion of democracies.

> From this view of the subject it may be concluded that a pure democracy, by which I mean a society consisting of a small number of citizens, who assemble and administer the government in person, can admit of no cure for the mischiefs of faction.[17]

Regardless, this narrow, "classical" definition of democracy does not reflect how the term has been used in the intervening two centuries, nor does Madison's definition of a republic reject the concept of majority rule or define voting as a "privilege." Nor, finally, do Madison's distinctions necessarily imply that other "Founding Fathers" believed "representative democracy" was a contradiction in terms. Alexander Hamilton's definition of democracy seems perfectly compatible with how the concept is used today:

> A representative democracy, where the right of election is well secured and regulated & the exercise of the legislative, executive and judiciary authorities, is vested in select persons, chosen really and not nominally by the people, will in my opinion be most likely to be happy, regular and durable.[18]

Again, however, the motivation behind invoking republic-not-democracy is not to revive a two-hundred-year-old debate or discuss the merits of representative government. Rather, republic-not-democracy serves as a keystone for a larger frame legitimizing and justifying minority rule.

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[16] Federalist No. 14
[17] Federalist No. 10
[18] Alexander Hamilton, "Letter to Governeur Morris, 19 May 1777"

The parable of the wolves and sheep demonstrates this legitimation work:

> **@ShaneZampire** (9/17/2020)
> -@Liquid_Lobotomy @MRSpinkston85 @thehill A democracy is two wolves and a sheep voting on what's for dinner; a republic is when the sheep has a gun.

> **@Madnessauto69** (9/17/2020)
> -@hunter_penn_h @AOC A democracy is 2 wolves and a sheep voting on what's for dinner, A constitutional Republic is a well armed sheep!
> #liberalismIsAVirtualLobotomy
> #Deadpeoplevotedemocrat
> #MAGA2020Landslide—

> **@ChrisBrown1791** (10/2/2020)
> -@Stubbornpoem @CeceBarbour @Breaking911 @AmerMilNews "Majority rules" does not work because you would have 5 wolves and 3 sheep deciding what's for dinner. Hence the reason for the electoral college. We live in a republic not a democracy for that reason. Btw...you can not legislate morality.

The sheep analogy and its variations is a popular meme, appearing twenty-two times within the time period. It appears as a pithy epigraph or parable, seemingly lifted from *Poor Richard's Almanac* or some other collection of wise sayings. Indeed, it is often attributed to Benjamin Franklin, and if not Franklin then fellow witticist Winston Churchill. (In point of fact, the earliest instance of the analogy I could find was from a 1990 *Los Angeles Times* op-ed on "political correctness" on college campuses.)[19]

> **@EverybodyUme** (9/26/2020)
> -"A democracy is like 2 wolves and a lamb, deciding what's for dinner ...
> A republic is a well armed lamb, contesting the vote..."
> ....someone apparently sayd...

[19] "Democracy has been described as four wolves and a lamb voting on what to have for lunch. Unmoderated majority rule means that the mistakes, the ignorance and the prejudices of the majority will become law. Minorities will be devoured, and the resulting society will be one of enforced and fearful homogeneity."

Flatt, Charles and Sheila Allen. 1990. "'Mainstream Values' Vs. Campus Pluralism : Campus Correspondence : The Privileged Classes Must Yield in the Name of Equality." *The Los Angeles Times*, November 25. (https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-11-25-op-7188-story.html)

> That someone was Benjamin Franklin... so I hope that certain parts of history don't necessarily have to repeat themself

> **@CajunTrapper** (9/24/2020)
> -@PolitiBunny @Scaramucci A republic is a representative government, Anthony. A democracy is simply a government by majority rule. Democracy has also been called "Mobocracy". Winston Churchill described democracy as "two wolves and one lamb taking a vote on what they're having for lunch".

Occasionally, the sheep is rendered even more helpless, becoming a "lamb" or a "little lamb." Occasionally, the wolves increase in number from two to five. Occasionally, only the first part of the analogy is referenced, with the speaker merely alluding to the dangers of majority rule. The sheep may be protected by an elected representative, or by the legal proscription that sheep may not be served for dinner: tying the analogy to common civic virtues such as fair elections and the rule of law.

> **@Plummers791** (9/22/2020)
> *-@seanhannity We live in a a Democratic REPUBLIC, not a democracy. A democracy is 2 wolves and a sheep deciding what's for lunch. A republic is when the sheep has a representative to stand for him*

> **@wgrice03** (9/23/2020)-@PeteButtigieg We're not a democracy, we're a republic democracy is two wolves a d one sheep voting on what's for dinner. A republic is they can vote on what's for dinner, but it can't be the sheep. Democracy is just a nice way of saying mob rule...and the states rejected that

The analogy grows beyond the mere protection of minority rights, however, when the sheep manages to arm himself.

> **@mlf1070** (9/20/2020)
> America has a generation that has forgotten the founding principles of a Republic form of government. They have been taught America is democracy. Wrong! A Democracy is two Wolves and a Sheep voting on what to have for dinner. A Republic is a well-armed Sheep defending his Rights.

At this point, protection from the tyranny of the majority takes on extra-legal and extra-institutional dimensions. The implicit threat of the hungry wolves is met with the explicit threat of a well-armed sheep minority, here taking on shadings of debates surrounding the Second Amendment.

The analogy grows more distressing still when the sheep grows dissatisfied with the voting process itself. It is not enough that the sheep minority has legal protections or representatives to speak up for their interests; rather they are free to use their firepower to "contest the vote" or "contest the results."

> **@NoMoreWhoresDC** (9/20/2020)
> -@AOC We are a REPUBLIC NOT A DEMOCRACY! A democracy is two wolves and a sheep voting what's for dinner. A republic is a well armed sheep contesting the vote!

Thus, through various memetic permutations, a warning against majoritarianism becomes an explicit endorsement of minority rule and the use of violence to protect and entrench that rule.

Throughout, speakers frame themselves as the aggrieved and oppressed minority who, paradoxically, have the right to mete out political violence whenever confronted with electoral results they do not like. It is not difficult to see this form of rationale underlying the January 6 2021 insurrection. In semantically distancing the concept from democracy, "republic" undergoes a transformation as well. Frequently republicanism is framed as an expression, via representation, of popular will, as well as a check on majority excesses. Just as frequently, however, as our well-armed sheep demonstrate, it is framed as the guarantor of minority rule.

It is never clear—and indeed it is deliberately left unclear—precisely *how* a republican form of government grants political minorities the ability to arbitrarily delegitimize elections. Rather, it is enough to merely state repeatedly that the United States is *not* a democracy, and that democratic principles such as the right to vote and the mutual agreement to abide by the result of

elections are neither correct nor good. As the semantic territory around "democracy" shrinks, the territory around "republic" necessarily grows. A "republic" means "government of the people"...so long as they are the right sorts of people. It also means the "rule of law"...but only when the armed minority chooses to abide by those laws. A republic is opposed to "mob rule"...but not armed mobs who storm the capitol in the wake of a political loss. A "republic" thus becomes an empty signifier, to be defined freely and contingently; republic-not-democracy provides the semantic basis for claiming a connection to *some* traditional American civic virtues and symbols while openly excising others.

Moral Politics

This conceptual maneuvering falls squarely in the realm of moral politics, where speakers struggle to define the public good and assert the superiority of their vision of goodness. Semantic territorialization also represents a form of frame substitution—replacing another's moral hierarchy with one's own—but as it only superficially resembles a form of argument, it lacks the more subtle efforts to inform and persuade found in other political discussions. Again, the intent behind republic-not-democracy appears not to be to engage with others on the comparative merits of majority rule versus minority rights; rather, the claim is deployed to amplify and disseminate an emergent authoritarian framing of American politics. As such, speakers give little indication that they anticipate responses—there are few gestures of co-presence and recognition—preferring bold declaratives with little effort to establish a common discursive terrain. Most tweets deploying republic-not-democracy resemble mini-speeches or lectures delivered to a vast and undifferentiated audience.

> **@JasonSh65174045 (**10/3/2020)
> Notice it says "to the Republic" ladies and gentlemen we have always been and still are a republic, not a democracy. I can explain but would be better if you look at my bio and follow simple instructions. I know it's a lot of homework but it's very enlightening.

JasonSh65174045's tone is didactic and their contempt for their audience is palpable. They are uncertain if their interlocutors are capable of following "simple instructions," but they are happy to educate them off-stage. This didacticism is common in semantic territorialization and in moral politics in general. Speakers must work to establish their framing as the obvious, logical, and natural interpretation of affairs. Only the morally (and mentally) deficient could possibly interpret them in any other way. **JasonSh65174045's** tweet is also a complete non sequitur. They are not responding to or engaging with anyone else. They do not even provide context for the "it" (presumably the pledge of allegiance) that says "to the Republic." Their claim is so self-evident that filling in the gaps for their audience is unnecessary.

The Moral of Tradition

As mentioned earlier, establishing this sense of obviousness is frequently aided by appeals to authority. Invoking a "moral of tradition" and holding up the constitution and "Founding Fathers" and their intent as the ultimate authority is hardly new in American political rhetoric, but speakers of republic-not-democracy are particularly reliant on such appeals to establish an ideal state of affairs that has been distorted in the intervening centuries.

> **@RexRiley10** (9/20/2020)
> @IngrahamAngle Hey, @RepAOC, this country is NOT a democracy it's a republic! Ever read Article 4, Section 4 of the Constitution? A democracy is mob rule and a republic is equally applied laws, but people like you have undermined it.

Such appeals rely on 1) imputing beliefs that the framers might or might not have held, 2) applying a "letter of the law" standard to legal texts in, e.g., pointing out that the word "democracy" does not appear in the constitution, and 3) ignoring how the meaning of "democracy" has shifted over time. Thus, "democracy" is a lie and has always been a lie, pushed by various nefarious actors in opposing acts of territorialization.

> **@SqishyF** (9/21/2020)
> @Kerry_White2 @TrumperSeaney @LizLiz_Di @realDonaldTrump Thank you. Them just saying "our democracy" is a lie. Democracy is two wolves and a lamb voting on what's for dinner tonight. Our republic is worth saving from the communists and democrats, but I repeat myself.

> **@accardi1921** (9/29/2020)
> The US is a Republic not a Democracy. In fact the founding fathers deliberately made sure the word "Democracy" was not in the Constitution or Bill of Rights. As far as taxes go,the founding fathers viewed taxation as theft! I can see that to a degree.

Couching these claims in appeals to "constitutionality" allows speakers to link seemingly unrelated concepts. These linkages represent a form of frame expansion, but as the typical argumentative standards do not apply, the juxtaposition can be jarring. Anodyne pro-democratic appeals can be equated to communism, the founders' supposed views on republicanism can be linked to their supposed views on taxation. Winning more votes in a popular election can be tantamount to crowning oneself monarch:

> **@LoyaltyLies2** (9/30/2020)
> @HillaryClinton @JoeBiden Constitutional Republic, not a democracy. That is why you are NOT supreme overlord of the waifs and deplorables. In our system the majority has checks and balances to protect the minority from being trampled. That is why your 3 million more votes did not win you the crown.

Republic-not-democracy allows speakers to move beyond discussions about demagoguery and the protection of minority rights to justifying the preservation of a permanent minority overclass. The "system" is designed, specifically, to insulate the "waifs and deplorables" (i.e., 2016 Trump

voters) from the results of popular elections. **LoyaltyLies2's** justification is more sophisticated than most, but the aim remains to denude "democracy" of meaning so that it can be freely associated with any number of fears. Thus democracy = mob rule = communism = monarchy.

There remains, however, some discomfort in adopting a purely minoritarian stance. To be outside the majority implies that one's positions might be extreme and unpopular. Speakers might be members of an oppressed minority, but they might also be members of a silent majority whose status is being distorted by the media.

> **@MsMagnolia8** (9/24/2020)
> @ShellyBradbury We R a Republic, not a democracy. A Republic is a nation of laws created to protect the individual whereas democracy is "mob rule". In this case, the mob is in the minority but the media wants us to think they R the majority. What we have now by the minority is a communist coup.

The minority is really the majority. The majority is really the minority masquerading as the majority which is *really* a communist coup. **MsMagnolia8** is attempting to manage a form of frame dissonance. They want to claim membership in a popular majority, but a majority neither confirmed nor legitimated by democracy. The "mob" can thus be of any size, so long as it represents a threat to their interests. It does not matter if these linkages make little sense or fail to withstand logical scrutiny. What matters is laying down boundaries such that the speaker and their interests reside upon the moral high ground. Frames can be freely stretched to incorporate contradictory elements as such frames need only be deployed momentarily and contingently.

The Moral of Purity

Linkages such as democracy-as-communism allow speakers to reorient the moral universe. Democracy is dangerous, subversive, corrupt, crime-ridden, foreign:

> **@ReeCee22** (9/30/2020)
> -@jwfathereeDC @TrumpWarRoom @MattWolking We are a constitutional republic not a democracy. Democracy is mob rule that you see happening in Marxist Communists leftist globalist open borders lawless lying Democrat cities that are rioting and being burned down and beating people to death in the streets destroying everythin

More extreme deployments of republic-not-democracy go to greater lengths to frame democracy and majority rule as an existential threat. As proof **ReeCee22** points to the urban/rural divide—cities are inherently violent, lawless, and both "Democrat" and democratic. This speaker is tossing as many negative (and anti-Semitic) signifiers together as possible, but the underlying message is that American cities are not just chaotic but un-American. Non-urban dwellers, by implication, respect order, the rule of law, and proper boundaries. In pointing to the importance of borders, both symbolic and literal, **ReeCee22** is adopting a similar tactic to **MsMagnolia**, mentioned earlier.

When only the right sorts of people can claim "peoplehood," questions of majorities and minorities, individual goods and common goods, no longer matter.

> **@luismen1991** (9/29/2020)
> Democracy is an existential threat to human civilization. It leads to mob rule, especially when massive parts of the population are uninformed and misguided by big tech algorithms, biased mainstream media. A republic is the best form of government.

> **@ClaudetteFrech1** (9/29/2020)
> -@MariaBonanno9 It's unconstitutional! There are no statements anywhere in our constitution that say"for the greater good of all" your rights are individual! The greater good is what Communist put in there to control its people! We are a Sovereign REPUBLIC! Not a Democracy!

Implicit, here, again, is that "true" Americans are rational and informed, but the greater population is too easily swayed by bad actors. Narratives surrounding the "greater good" are designed to secure compliance and undermine individual rights. It is common to frame anti-communist claims around fears over subversion and the loss of individuality, but turning

around and equating democracy with Marxism is an innovation. Thus speakers attempt to turn "liberal" "democracy" against itself: democracy as something inherently incompatible with individual rights and freedoms. Democracy, and the actors endorsing it, are transposed into an Other that must be excised in order to preserve "American" values.

The Moral of Godliness

If "democracy" is linked with mob rule, communism, monarchy, and dictatorship and various other negative signifiers, "republic" can be conveniently linked to other territories within the far-right discursive sphere, such as Christian nationalism. The United States is thus not only a republic but a "Christian Republic":

> **@michael_juzwick (**10/2/2020)
> -@HLAurora63 The Media spins everything for the antichrist satanic agendas that seek to overthrow the land which was founded by Christians to be an American Christian Republic, not a democracy. Read my eBook - The Differences Between a Christian Republic verses a Humanist Democracy. RT

> **@Trump1Reagan** (9/30/2020)
> -@vanya42nd @realChristohper @Jason77864660 @Amy_Siskind @GOP Wrong!
> 1.America is a Republic NOT a Democracy.
> 2. America Was founded on Judeo Christian ✝️ beliefs, Not Athistic as you would have us. I dont Trust a man that thinks he has to answer to no one.
> 3. The constitution was meant to limit the federal government, not churches!

Democracy is secular and humanist, and thus a threat to the Christian republican values upon which the country is founded.

> **@LLady57** (9/30/2020)
> -@HillaryClinton @JoeBiden WE remember Benghazi @HillaryClinton. We will never forget what happened. It matters. And we are a Republic, not a democracy. You still don't get it, do you. Let the heavens open and bring judgement swiftly to you and accessories in crimes against humanity. We know!!

Underlying republic-not-democracy is an attempt to establish a pre-political sense of solidarity and identity. Speakers point to order, but an order that transcends the political process. They point to the rule of law, but a natural law that neither necessarily expresses nor reflects the popular will. The concept of the "republic" is thus appropriated and divorced from democracy in order to establish a natural hierarchy with a privileged (Christian) minority taking pride of place. In forcing "democracy" and "republic" into an inherent dichotomy, right-wing actors are also able to mock others' concerns for the erosion of voting rights and undermine the concept of free and fair elections.

> **@ThoughtbyJer** (10/1/2020)
> -@guaro_20 @KayMcEnanyFans @PressSec @johnrobertsFox The USA is a Constitutional Republic. Not a democracy. Trump cannot be a threat to something that is USA had never been.

Recolonizing "republic" and repeatedly pushing against pro-democratic claims allows for the propagation of a right-wing, ultimately authoritarian vision of American identity.

Conclusions

Twitter can be an invaluable tool, as a means of building wide-ranging networks of like-minded individuals (Bruns et al. 2013), of movement building and protest coordination (Tufekci 2017), and of information aggregation and dissemination (Faris et al. 2017). However, its potential as a deliberative space, particularly one that encourages good faith partisan debate (Bail et al. 2018), is sorely lacking. Platform effects play a role. Character limits encourage brunt declaratives and expressives. The timeline model of information presentation encourages users to scroll past

rather than stop and stay. Limited threading and nesting means that more complex long-form expressions and arguments are difficult to follow.

Overall, however, I would argue that Twitter discourages public deliberation because it presents itself a "town square" (open, diverse, individual-driven) form of public rather than a "town hall" (enclosed, agenda-driven) form of public. One might discover friends and fellow travelers in a town square. One might overhear numerous diverse and informative opinions. One might even encounter boisterous public debate between notable figures. One is less likely, however, to escape the din long enough to have an engaging discussion. These sorts of discussions *can* certainly occur, particularly within follower networks and momentary issue publics. But the context of interaction a given user is likely to encounter—such as the replies attached to major political figure's tweets—lends itself more to posturing and sign-waving than productive argument.

The sorts of argument-games found in these "all speaking to all" virtual spaces rarely anticipate interaction or a conversational partner. Rather, these speech instances represent a form of blunt and pre-emptive narrative framing. Speakers take advantage of the publicity of the space and the openness of the discursive terrain to redraw the political map. Claims such as republic-not-democracy are advanced nominally to engage, correct, and inform, but primarily to substitute one frame for another. Semantic territorialization involves reorienting the moral constellations guiding political talk, shrinking the terrain around certain signifiers and expanding the terrain around others. Thus, a vast gulf can open up around previously related concepts. Democracy, knocked off the top of the moral political hierarchy, can now be freely associated with lawlessness, corruption, communism, dictatorship, or whichever negative signifier the

speaker prefers. The point is not to advance a persuasive or even logically consistent argument—how can one, in 240 characters?—but to do one's part in pushing a specific frame.

Republic-not-democracy is an important insight into the state of the American Right and how it sees itself. In abandoning "democracy," both as a way of life and as a rhetorical touchstone, many of these right-wing Twitter users are implicitly abandoning the pretense that theirs is the default, majority perspective. As the subsequent 2020 presidential election, the former president's attempts to undermine its outcome, and the violent insurrection at the national Capitol demonstrate, the Right's faith in liberal democracy is being replaced by creeping authoritarianism, conspiratorialism, and persecution politics.

If democracy can no longer deliver desired electoral outcomes, and if it can no longer serve as a bulwark to shore up white, Christian identity politics, then democracy must be cast aside. Turning to a hazily defined, dubiously historically justified "republicanism" provides the rhetorical justification for doing so, while still being able to lay claim to putatively American traditions and values. Liberal concepts such as minority rights and representative government can be turned to decidedly anti-liberal ends. This semantic territorialization demonstrates how even the most basic terms and principles in our political vocabulary can be contested and inverted.

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CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS

Political talk can take on many different forms and occur in many different contexts. Throughout this dissertation, I have examined how and why political talk occurs in specific online settings. In the process, my investigations can shed light on the nature of political talk in general. As I discuss in Chapter 2, the relationship between talk and the medium of expression is complex. The advent of new mass media technology, whether it be the printing press, television, or web browser, provides a new means of sharing experiences, encountering differences, and imagining communities. But technological progress tends to outstrip ethical progress. New communication technologies do not in themselves provide ethical guidelines for their usage. While early adopters might embrace the emancipatory potential of, e.g., literary circles and online chatgroups, this initial consensus is subject to constant erosion. The emergence of a truly mass audience paves the way for homophilization and fragmentation. Thus, while audiences, viewers, readers, and participants grow and new relationships form, new media technology can never in itself rise to the task of forging a new ethical consensus from a diversity of voices. Politics can be transformed, but never transcended.

Distance and Locality in Virtual Community Building

This principle, I argue, is something discovered and re-discovered with each new technological turn: mass audiences are conflated with mass communities, consensus fails to emerge, private interests re-emerge and corporate actors seek new means of dividing and manipulating viewers. History repeats itself, from Tocqueville's (2003) lauding of the public press as "maintaining

civilization" to Lippman's (2013) dismissal of the press as complicit in exacerbating partisanship and spreading disinformation; from Marcuse's (1964) fears of mass communication leading to mass culture to contemporary fears that the balkanization of civil culture has made agreement on anything impossible. This dialectical push and pull is endemic to democracy itself—on what, and to what extent, must citizens agree before they can peacefully and productively disagree? Is an ideally democratic society a community of interests (Rawls 1971), feelings (Etzioni 1996), or experiences (Bauman 1999)?

So often, new technological innovations are lauded as a means of bridging gaps and squaring circles—surely *this* new means of bringing people together will provide the basis for a truly democratic community. But communities are built, maintained, and enriched by people rather than platforms. The potential for transformation is not enough; an open, egalitarian, and emancipatory ethical consensus must be forged by those with the desire and will to do so. This dissertation was motivated, in part, by finding the means through which actors imagine community and build consensus (or dissensus) through mediated talk. Throughout my investigation of online platforms I have discovered that a sense of distance remains key. The internet might bring people together in new configurations and it might entail reimagining what a space *is*, but online users still maintained a boundary between "near" and "far," and still attached different modes of politics to these dimensions.

This drawing of distances is a feature of all forms of political discourse. Eliasoph (1997; 1998; and Lichterman 2002), observes that the dominant moral languages of American politics, "self interest" and "civic obligation," actually converge at the local level (1997:608). When speaking of issues that they imagine affecting themselves and those around them, actors cease to

see such issues as "political" at all. Rather, tackling issues "close to home" allowed actors to feel both empowered and efficacious within their more limited publics—if they appear to disengage politically, it is because they define the "political" realm as distant, alien, and overwhelming. Such observations resonate with a broader literature on the importance of face-to-face interaction and purposeful activity in promoting political engagement and civic feeling (Perrin 2006; Putnam 2000; Robinson and Godbey 1999). Local public forums provide a means of anchoring politics in the here-and-now, allowing citizens to imagine the concrete consequences of political actions and encounter opposing viewpoints anchored in an environment of trust. Communitarian and civic republican thinkers (MacIntyre 1981; Sandel 1982; Bauman 1999) argue that the thin bonds of rational self-interest and the liberal language of rights are never enough to sustain a political community; rather, citizens crave a broader sense of solidarity. If the external boundaries of the nation prove insufficient, citizens must instead hope to salvage "local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained" (MacIntyre 1981:263).

In short, regardless of platform, there will always be "local" and "universal" dimensions to political talk, and consensus is more likely to emerge at the local level. In Chapters 3 and 4 I examine two different senses of online "locality." Newspaper comment sections function more as a platform than a virtual community in itself. As such, interaction is limited, with speech primarily taking the form of mini letters to the editor. Much of the audience, as well as the local community comment sections are ostensibly meant to evoke, is left inferred and unaddressed. A few speakers might attempt to establish their bonafides, incorporate biographical detail, and engage in good faith, but this sort of work is often unrecognized and unremarked upon in ad hoc

spaces. By contrast, more enduring virtual communities such as r/Minneapolis provide a form of dual-locality—they both stand in for communities "out there" and provide a stable sense of "place" on their own. As a metonym for Minneapolis proper r/Minneapolis points to overarching values and identities, allowing speakers to suspend certain moral frames and engage in more limited, ethically and procedurally-oriented talk. As a virtual community in itself r/Minneapolis allows speakers to better anticipate an audience and better enforce community guidelines.

Another crucial distinction between ad hoc comment spaces and more durable virtual communities is how users approach "politics." Building a sense of locality entails building spaces in which political talk *can* occur but not necessarily *must* occur. In r/Minneapolis, political talk is a common—perhaps dominant—mode of discussion, but it is certainly not the exclusive mode. Establishing metonymy between Minneapolis and r/Minneapolis means that members are free to modulate between high-stakes political debates and low-stakes breeze-shooting, between intense arguments over police abolition and light-hearted jokery over the weather and gossip over local celebrities. The architecture of virtual forums does, naturally, influence which topic(s) speakers might address, which audiences speakers might anticipate, and which modes of talk speakers might adopt in a given discussion thread, but establishing a persistent sense of place *within and between* threads is necessary for building solidarity and a common civil culture. In short, apolitical talk over lost cats and restaurant recommendations is what can potentially set the stage for meaningful political talk. Again, this observation is hardly new—as mentioned earlier, communitarians and civic republicans have been emphasizing the importance of local ties in building a common civil language since the 1980s. However, it is a point worth re-emphasizing when discussing virtual communities, where simply *imagining* those

local ties requires considerably more effort, on a phenomenological level, than in physical spaces.

The Virtual Frameworks of Online Political Talk

These sorts of imaginings are the emphasis of Chapters 4 and 5 in this dissertation, where I pay considerable attention to the types of frameworks involved in mediated political talk. Virtual communities are a primarily textual medium designed to be interpreted as a physical space—either as its own independent entity as corresponding to an already existing space "out there." Regardless of the precise nature of the space, speakers must spend much effort in compensating for a limited expressive repertoire, translating text into speech and handles into people, and, over all, reconciling the inherent openness and ambiguity of online talk with the structure and closure that good-faith discussion requires. Thus, the setting, participation, and expression frameworks involved in online speech necessarily require a series of compromises and metonymies: Nested comment systems mimic face-to-face conversations by translating time into space; participants have equal access to the discussion space but the presence of others can only be inferred via text-strings and audiences are faceless and potentially infinite; expression is pseudo-synchronous and carefully modulated to strike a balance between the immediacy of speech and the literariness of text. Combined, and in the absence of further efforts to establish locality and co-presence, these frameworks tend to produce speech that is fragmentary and polysemous and engagement that is abstract and limited.

Virtual frameworks tend to encourage political talk at the moral rather than ethical or procedural level, and on abstract rather than personal terms. Why assume a shared value system

when your audience could be anyone or no one at all? Why trust others to take what you say seriously when comments can be so easily misinterpreted and "good faith" back-and-forth can so easily devolve into personal attacks? Why go through the effort of grounding one's speech in personal detail when it is still impossible to satisfactorily establish one's bona fides as a stakeholder? Why go through the effort of addressing a debate partner point-by-point when they are liable to "disappear" at any moment and when the architecture of the space itself precludes any sort of discursive resolution? It is for these reasons that I dismissed ad hoc comment spaces in particular as sites for potential deliberation and democratic will-formation.

Rather, I argue that deliberation hinges on political talk in an ethical, rather than moral mode. Ethical political talk requires a high degree of trust in one's conversational partners—that they share one's overarching values, that they, too, are stakeholders and invested in addressing the problems at hand, and that they embrace a similar vision of the common good even if they might disagree on how to *reach* that common good. This high level of trust required is why I point to the overriding importance of locality and co-presence: ethical political talk can only flourish when speakers recognize each other as stakeholders and embrace a common means of at least *potentially* reaching consensus. Virtual spaces that are deliberately set up as more intimate and communal—coffee houses rather than vast public squares—are vital in encouraging this local sense of politics.

My discussion of (the former) Twitter and semantic gerrymandering in Chapter 5 reveals what happens when trust and our assumptions regarding common democratic values break down. Without this ethical grounding, political talk can become contingent and instrumental. Bad faith actors can exploit semantic ambiguities in order to undermine the very concepts of democracy

and civil society. These actors can exploit the nature of social media as well—Twitter is as much a platform for mass communication and (mis)information dissemination as it is for person-to-person engagement. The internet practically eradicates the distinction between media producers and consumers: where previously organizations and institutions were concerned with messaging and strategic framing, now any individual actor (human or otherwise) can participate in the process.

Forging Civil Solidarity Offline and Online

This returns us to an important lesson: simply building the platform (the town hall, the public square, the coffee house) is not enough to encourage civic engagement and political will formation. The internet is a triumph for democracy in terms of significantly reducing the barrier for entry in the political arena, bringing diverse audiences together in conversation, and undermining the influence of the state and other powerful institutions as gatekeepers. But these are necessary rather than sufficient conditions for realizing the deliberative ideal and nurturing civil solidarity. In this regard, of course, the internet is no different than any other form of public space.

As cultural sociologist Jeffrey Alexander (2006) writes, nourishing an independent civil sphere in society writ large requires a shared access to cultural repertoires and a shared means of articulating the terms of public participation. Actors must be able to adjudicate between desirable and undesirable political speech and exclude others participating in bad faith. Mutual adherence to a civil/uncivil binary—one of the "deep codes" Alexander argues structures political speech—means that bad faith actors should be excluded not because they are of a different

religious, ethnic, or cultural background, but because they are recognized as "uncivil." That is, they are judged to be irrational rather than rational, deceitful rather than truthful, and self-interested rather than honorable and therefore unable to take on the rights and responsibilities of living in a democracy. While there is certainly a dark side to the politics of exclusion, Alexander sees civil—lawful, neutral, and disinterested—solidarity as vital to the functioning of democracy, guarding its moral center from the incursion of coexisting non-civil spheres such as the family, religious groups, and economic institutions which produce and impose their own "ideals and constraints" (2006:404). It is the task of social movements to carry out "civil repair" in spreading the values and practices of civil society into non-civil spheres and institutions.

The particulars of this civil/uncivil binary and how it is applied are contingent and culturally specific, but what remains is a need and desire for a community to both embrace a common conception of public life and a common normative framework for excluding bad faith actors. Alexander's vision of the symbolic construction of the civil as the source of solidarity for, and the moral center of, society dovetails with the concept of a "civil religion" that integrates and legitimates political practices found in *The Habits of the Heart* (Bellah et al 1985) and *The Good Society* (Bellah et al 1991). Bellah and other communitarian thinkers conclude that, much to the detriment of American democracy, the American political vocabulary places too much emphasis on individuality and self-autonomy and not enough on community and public commitment, thereby hampering American's abilities to derive meaning and enjoyment from political engagement. Robert Putnam's (2000) *Bowling Alone* similarly emphasizes the need for public participation and civic engagement as a means of shoring up democracy.

This communitarian approach to public life is consensus-based: there is both a pre-consensens in terms of how a community imagines itself and emergent consensus in terms of how a community reconciles differences and tackles its problems. Thinkers of the "agonistic" school, such as Chantal Mouffe (2009) reject consensus as either a pre-condition or goal of democratic activity. For deliberative democrats argument is a means to an end (civic unity), while for agonists argument is both the means and the end. For agonists, then, the content of political activity does not matter so much as the form. Politics is a game with, inevitably, winners and losers, but everyone nominally follows the same set of rules, everyone abides by the outcome, everyone recognizes each other's right to play, and everyone recognizes the value of playing over not playing—for the time being, at least. Agonistic politics is thus based on a form of agreement in that the public recognizes the necessity of a certain set of guidelines for political discourse and activity, as well as the importance of overarching principles, such as liberty and equality (Mouffe 2009), but there is never, and can never be, a fundamental agreement on what, e.g., "liberty" and "equality" mean.

And yet even this radically anti-consensus vision of civil society still requires a contingent form of consensus. Politics might be a form of integrative play and democracy might merely be a game, but at least everyone in the community can agree that democracy is a game worth playing. What happens when actors cease to see the point of the game and, indeed, begin to view democracy itself as dangerous and subversive? How can civil society step in again to reassert a democratic imaginary and rebuild bonds of trust and recognition? How, indeed, can a democratic community cohere when the concept of democracy is itself undermined?

Deliberative Democracy, Political Talk and Political Practice

Mouffe's anti-deliberative vision of politics allows us to expand further on the nature of the "political." Throughout this dissertation I have repeatedly addressed the dimensions of "political talk"—that is, talk *about* politics and mutually identified political topics—but I have avoided addressing the larger dimensions of "politics" writ large—that is, the expression of power in and through interaction. I have avoided a broader discussion of politics for two reasons: First, I have limited myself to political *talk* as a matter of scope. I view this project as a means of empirically elaborating upon a series of claims advanced in deliberative democratic theory—that productive political talk should be grounded in reason, recognition, and, ultimately, in mutual understanding. As I have argued, participants in online discussion spaces generally attempt to adhere, as well, to these deliberative speech norms. Paying attention to talk that is explicitly, unequivocally *about* political topics provides the clearest picture of how these participants put these norms to use and how they, themselves, navigate issues of common concern. Second, I focus on this more conventional vision of politics because I agree with deliberative theorists that these sorts of discussions are vital to the democratic process. People somehow, somewhere, on some platform *should* be addressing common problems, recognizing and reconciling differences, and hammering out a mutual understanding of the common good, however contingently or temporarily. With this normative goal in mind, assessing various virtual spaces for their deliberative potential is, I believe, a worthwhile endeavor.

But political activity goes far beyond the limited scope of political talk, and if the internet has failed to bring about visions of "digital democracy" it has, undeniably, revolutionized politics. Various models of virtual publics might be more or less suitable for reasonable political

discussion, but practically all aspects of virtual interaction allow for the potentially radical expansion of political *expression*. As I discussed in Chapter 3, while not all participants in political forums embraced a meaningful exchange of ideas they nonetheless appeared to revel in the role of a peanut gallery or Greek chorus. The mere act of talking and being heard, and of (at least potentially) speaking truth to power is itself a form of political action and activity. There is power in seeing and being seen; there is power as well in censorship and denying access to those forms of expression.

This citizen-as-spectator role fits in with more radical conceptions of the public sphere, such as the one advanced in Ari Adut's (2018) *Reign of Appearances*. The public sphere, Adut argues, is far from a rarefied "realm of thought and activity in which a people come to recognize themselves as a people"—the definition I provide in Chapter 1. Rather, Adut argues that the public sphere is a realm of spectacle, performance, and giving and receiving attention. People rarely participate in the public sphere out of some ephemeral "public spiritedness" or a desire to enact change, rather:

> One can obviously attend a local meeting not only to reflect on public matters, but also to socialize, to meet prospective mates, to project a reputation for being smart, to signal a righteous concern to neighbors, to deny housing to immigrants, to prepare for a lynching, to kill time. (2018:5)

Such deliberation that does occur in public, Adut argues, is dominated by various conversational elites who hog attention by dint of status and background. This "ineradicable asymmetry between the few who act and the multitude who watch" is what truly characterizes the public sphere rather than an overarching egalitarian ethos (2018:x).

Adut's argument is compelling, and one that I agree with, in that I do not equate deliberation with the whole of the public sphere, much less the whole of politics. The public

sphere is fractious and multisegmented and filled with participants engaging each other for reasons both prosaic and sublime. But the public sphere is still, I would argue, where reasonable deliberation on the common good can and does occur, and where ordinary citizens—however small a number—do *want* to build spaces in which deliberative democracy can flourish. Here, I think Adut's conception of "deliberation" is too narrow: he rightly observes that practically any conversation involving more than two people is inherently asymmetric, but does that necessarily undermine deliberative democrats' egalitarian ethos? Deliberative speech is "egalitarian," I would argue, not because there is an expectation that everyone will or should participate in the conversation—only that they have a right to be present and can enjoy the *opportunity* to speak if they so desire. The key to emancipated speech, in the Habermasian (1984) model, is ensuring that there is no significant barrier to entry—something that virtually mediated communication achieves quite well—and that the reasons for who can claim the floor and why are reasonable and just—something I will readily concede is difficult to achieve regardless of the platform.

Similarly, I would argue that "spectators" still have a civic role to play, both outside and inside of deliberative speech. An audience—real or imagined, present or implied—is crucial for the public speaker in framing arguments and crafting appeals. This principle applies in the most self-serving and demagogic as well as the most rationally enlightened speech. Indeed, as I argue throughout this dissertation, the capacity to anticipate and imagine co-presence with others is crucial to the deliberative moment—something that is more or less achievable depending on the (virtual) public constructed. The spectators' motivations are somewhat immaterial; so long as they are present and visible the public speaker is induced to speak in certain ways and not in others.

And from their own perspective, spectators conceivably benefit from deliberatively-oriented speech. Lasting consensus and agreement on the common good is asymptotic—and I think beside the point—but even just watching back-and-forth over issues of common concern still satisfies an epistemic function, as I discuss in Chapter 3. Participants and observers alike in deliberative spaces can at least begin to organize information, crystallize viewpoints, and reconcile differences. If too-small numbers *want* to participate in these sorts of conversations the answer is not to toss up one's hands and admit that deliberation in the public sphere is impossible but rather to find some means of making participation more meaningful and desirable. In this regard, building a sense of locality and establishing both what the stakes are and who stakeholders are is crucial for at least encouraging more empathetic and deliberative engagement.

To reiterate, however, the public sphere extends far beyond the realm of the deliberative and public participants approach politics in numerous different ways. In Chapter 5 we saw actors enthusiastically breaking past deliberative speech norms to strategically manipulate public opinion. Indeed, an emphasis on opinion rather than value formation provides, perhaps, a better means of understanding the public sphere's practical function in civil society. I address the relationship between mass media and public opinion formation in Chapter 2 with Stuart Hall's (1960) encoding/decoding framework and Chapter 5 with Gamson and Modigliani's (1989) approach to strategic frame analysis. The politics of public opinion formation reveal some of the limitations of more rationalist deliberative approaches to politics. Our political vocabulary has always been polysemous, and the openness of virtual platforms allows for innumerable "sponsors of meaning" (individual and organizational) to step into the fray and attempt to

manipulate public discourse. How, in such a fractured cultural landscape, can norms of mutual recognition and understanding prevail? Only contingently and temporarily, perhaps, but I think these norms are still worth embracing.

Finally, the political dimensions of representation of the internet cannot be ignored. Regardless of the overarching political and economic context, social media platforms such as Twitter/X provide a means of not only bringing people together but of making communities *visible*, both to outsiders and to potential members. The emergence and flourishment of "Black Twitter" (Carney 2016; Booten 2019; Thompson 2020) reveals the political power of networked communication in anchoring identities, expressions, and experiences, as well as opening up possibilities for coordinating messaging and building organizations. The dark side of this phenomenon, of course, is that social media platforms provide just as powerful tools for bringing together white supremacists, QAnon conspiracists, domestic terrorists, and other communities antithetical to liberal democracy. Indeed, the outsized role virtual communication plays in the practice of politics, in disseminating (mis-)information, in giving voice to both the marginalized and the reactionary right, in forging new communities and organizations, is precisely why I think deliberative politics are something worth preserving, however difficult that might be. Building independent, public, and open spaces where deliberative talk can flourish provides communities with a way to articulate and challenge guiding principles, productively manage disagreement, establish fair and just criteria for drawing political boundaries, and ultimately, ideally, hopefully, build bonds of solidarity that transcend sectarian attachments.

Public Engagement in Virtual Spaces

Again, when attempting to understand online public engagement the key word here is "community." Regardless of the sorts or amounts of ties, democracy is rooted in community and the ability to articulate an independent and egalitarian *demos*. It was once common, going back to the MUD and BBS era, to imagine the internet as *a* community with a common culture, terminology, and way of life—a frontier upon which digital homesteaders could build new *demos* that cross-cut status divisions and national ties. But the social media era, in particular, has revealed the degree to which the internet has become integrated into daily life: another mode of interaction, with its own opportunities and constraints, rather than a wholly separate sphere of activity. Communities can be built in and through the internet, but the concept of a unified "cyberculture" now seems silly and antiquated.

It is a mistake as well to imagine the internet as particularly conducive for democracy and virtual interaction as the next great leap forward in public engagement. The internet has had a profound impact on politics, in terms of organization, resource mobilization and information dissemination. But the hopes, circa 1995, for the emergence of new "digital democracies" and the erosion of moribund interests and parochial attachments have yet to materialize. Again, varied publics can and do emerge, and political deliberation can and does occur on the internet. However, as I have demonstrated, merely bringing new agglomerations of people together in new configurations is not sufficient in itself to revitalize civic life on deliberative democratic terms.

Indeed, the affordances of virtual spaces do as much to hamper as nurture productive political speech and community building. The foundations of civic life rest upon a robust

democratic imaginary: a diverse community of stakeholders willing and able to reconcile their private interests with some conception of the public good. Fostering strong public engagement, whether in virtual or physical spaces, requires both an overarching sense of community and shared purpose and an individual commitment to self-accounting and the recognition of others' right to participate. The nature of the forum, the medium of communication, and the mode of interaction can either encourage or discourage various forms of public engagement, but civil society remains an event that must be accomplished and reaccomplished by people.

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