The structural features and the deliberative quality of online discussions

Weiyu Zhang [a,*], Xiaoxia Cao [b], Minh Ngoc Tran [c]

[a] *Communications and New Media, National University of Singapore, Singapore*
[b] *Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, PA, USA*
[c] *Department of Statistics, National University of Singapore, Singapore*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the quality of online political discussions from the perspective of deliberative democracy. Reason-giving and mutual respect are two important principles of deliberative democracy and, therefore, deemed indicators of the deliberative quality of online discussions. A content analysis of discussion threads about the 2004 US presidential election randomly selected from eight online spaces during the last month of the election was conducted to assess the relationships between the structural features of the spaces—diversity and moderation—and the deliberative quality of the discussions. The results showed that the relationship between moderation and the discussion quality was conditioned on the diversity of the spaces. The finding indicates that the structural features of online spaces may shape the deliberative quality of political discussions and, thus, deserve further scholarly attention.

1. Introduction

Taking advantage of the Internet to discuss politics dates back to the formative days of cyberspace. Political discussions are now evident in Usenet groups (Pfaffenberger, 1996 and Hill and Hughes, 1997), chat rooms (e.g., Weger and Aakhus, 2003), Web-based message boards (e.g., Zhang, 2006), blogs (e.g., Trammell et al., 2006), social networking sites (Boyd, 2008), and many other online spaces. Different democratic theories have been applied to analyze the significance of these discussions. The radical model of democracy, for example, recognizes the value of online discussions in promoting antago-nistic pluralism (Mouffe, 1999). In line with this model, scholars found that online political discussions can contribute to the range of opinions and the intensity of debate even though the discussions involve severe opinion conflicts and do not always appear to be civil and polite (Howard, 2006, Papacharissi, 2008 and Chadwick, 2009).

This paper follows the deliberative model of democracy because it provides a possible solution to the dilemma between mass participation and elitist dominance. To be specific, as modern democracies continuously expand their scope, the fear of rule by the apathetic and uninformed mass becomes acute. However, relying on an elitist body to govern is not a good solu-tion either because it contradicts the ideal of political inclusiveness and the decisions made by elites sometimes fall short of public support. For these reasons, the deliberative model of democracy is considered a better choice, since it proposes to en-gage ordinary citizens extensively in the political procedure (e.g., policy making) and, at the same time, attempts to enhance the quality of mass participation via a process of deliberation (Fishkin, 1991). Political deliberation—that is, rational and civil discussions of politics—among the public is desirable because it may produce quality decisions that enjoy popular support.

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* Corresponding author. Communications and New Media, National University of Singapore, 11 Computing Drive, Singapore 117589.
E-mail address: cnmzw@nus.edu.sg (W. Zhang).

The rise of the Internet may herald new possibilities for the realization of the deliberative model of democracy. Unlike traditional media (e.g., print and broadcast media) that allow only unidirectional one-to-many communication, the Internet opens up the opportunities for low-cost point-to-point, point-to-multipoint and multipoint-to-multipoint interactive communication across time and geographic boundaries (Benkler, 2006; Di Gennaro and Dutton, 2006; Rheingold, 1995 and Simone, 2010). Although some have questioned whether electronic text-based online interactions are suitable for fruitful political deliberation (Fishkin, 2000 and Sunstein, 2001), studies have shown that people feel more comfortable to reveal their true opinions and discuss political disagreements over the Internet than face-to-face (Rains, 2005 and Stromer-Galley, 2003). Online discussions are also much more egalitarian than face-to-face encounters because they prevent individuals from dominating the discussions and increase contributions from low-status participants (Rice, 1993; Walther, 1995 and Hollingshead, 1996). In addition, online encounters may facilitate the formulation of thoughts by requiring discussants to convert their inchoate ideas into text (Price, 2006). All these suggest that the Internet has the potential to bring people with diverse backgrounds and viewpoints together and to foster rational political debates among them.

Admittedly, the fact that the Internet has the potential to engage ordinary citizens in political discussions does not necessarily mean that political deliberation will occur automatically. Of the numerous vigorous contestations about politics on the Internet (Kelly et al, 2005), not all meet the standards of deliberative democracy (e.g., Dahlberg, 2001 and Zhang, 2010). Hence, it is important to understand in what way the Internet may facilitate the realization of the deliberative model of democracy. Specifically, we are interested in why some online discussions meet those standards, while others fail to do so. According to Dahlberg (2001), the inconsistency can be attributed to either those who engage in the discussions or the ways in which discussions are organized. In line with this claim, Price and David (2004) found that personal characteristics of discussants are important sources of variance in both the activeness of online discussions and the deliberative degree of opinions. Similarly, Adamic et al (2005) observed that the political leaning of bloggers may influence how likely they were to expose themselves to opposing opinions.

While previous studies focused on the profiles of discussants, this paper explores how the ways in which online discussions are organized may influence the quality of online discussions. To be specific, this study examines the relationships between the structural features of online discussion spaces and the deliberative quality of discussions. Two criteria used to assess the deliberative quality of online discussions are the number of reasons provided by discussants and the degree of mutual respect shown in the discussions. Two types of structural features of interest are (1) diversity, defined as the design elements of online discussion groups that encourage people with different opinions to engage in political discussions, and (2) moderation, referred to as the design elements that permit the moderating activities to happen. Using eight cases, the present study investigates the relationships between these two types of structural features of online spaces and the deliberative quality of online political discussions. Specifically, we examine the relationships via content analyzing discussion posts about the 2004 US presidential election. The posts were randomly selected from eight online discussion spaces during the last month of the election. The findings suggest that diversity and moderation may have interacted with each other to shape discussion quality.

1.1. The principle of reason-giving

Most theorists of deliberative democracy agree that reason is central to deliberation. Gutmann and Thompson (1996, 3) specifies that the first and most important characteristics of deliberative democracy is "its 'reason-giving' requirement". The principle of reason-giving, therefore, means that political decisions have to be made through a process of exchanging reasonable arguments (Steenbergen et al., 2003). However, not all discourses are qualified to be deliberative due to lack of public reasoning. Emotional expressions and arguments made in a private setting, for example, are not considered to be deliberative. Consequently, researchers treated the amount of reasons provided during public discussions as a direct indicator of deliberation (e.g., Price et al., 2002). Habermas uses "validity claims" (1984, 39) to refer to the kind of reasons he envisions for deliberative democracy. In order to qualify to be validity claims, the reasons provided need to meet four criteria: (1) they are intelligible; (2) they are true; (3) they are culturally ad contextually appropriate; (4) they reflect genuine intentions of the speaker (Habermas, 1979, 58–59). This ideal concept of reason has been challenged as too restrictive (e.g., Fraser, 1992) and more scholars (e.g., Wales et al., 2010) become favorable towards an inclusive conceptualization of reason as providing any type of justifications, no matter whether they come from personal experience or abstract philosophies. This paper follows this more inclusive approach to define reason.

Online political discussions have been considered by theorists (e.g., Held, 2007, 253) as possible means to realize the deliberative model of democracy that emphasizes reaching social cooperation among free and equal participants through the process of rational discussions (Farrelly, 2004). This is because the Internet lowers the costs of involvement in political debates, creates new mechanisms of organizing discussions, and opens up new channels of interactive communication (Benkler, 2006; Di Gennaro and Dutton, 2006 and Rheingold, 1995). As a result, the Internet is described as having the potential to bring people with diverse backgrounds and viewpoints together and to foster rational political debates among them. Nonetheless, studies about whether online political discussions live up to the standards of deliberative democracy have not yet generated consistent findings. On the one hand, polarized opinions were found in Usenet groups (Wilhelm, 2000 and Davis, 1999), flaming in newsgroups (Mitra, 1997), and offensive verbal exchanges in online communities (Stivale, 1997). On the other hand, research has shown that incivility and impoliteness do not dominate online political discussions