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Abstract

Research examining online political forums has until now been overwhelmingly guided by two broad perspectives: (1) a deliberative conception of democratic communication and (2) a diverse collection of incommensurable multi-sphere approaches. While these literatures have contributed many insightful observations, their disadvantages have left many interesting communicative dynamics largely unexplored. This article seeks to introduce a new framework for evaluating online political forums (based on the work of Jürgen Habermas and Lincoln Dahlberg) that addresses the shortcomings of prior approaches by identifying three distinct, overlapping models of democracy that forums may manifest: the liberal, the communitarian and the deliberative democratic. For each model, a set of definitional variables drawn from the broader online forum literature is documented and discussed.

Keywords

communitarian, deliberation, democracy, internet forums, online discussion, public sphere

Over the past decade, the study of online political forums has fully materialized as a major research topic at the intersection of political communication and online communication scholarship. Sobered by the firmly established decline in most indicators of civic engagement from the mid-20th century up to the present (Putnam, 2000), scholars concerned with the future of democracy have turned their attention to the potential of internet-based social practices to help reverse this trend. Online political discussion, as one of the oldest manifestations of digital democracy, has been the focus of arguably the largest body of research in this vein. Most of these studies are grounded in one of the time-honored axioms of political theory: namely, that vigorous, engaged conversation on matters of public concern

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is an essential input for healthy democracy (Delli Carpini et al., 2004; Dewey, 1954; Fishkin, 1991; Levine, 2008). Much of the research on internet-based political discussion has focused on the medium's potential to provide a democracy-enriching communication platform unmoored by restrictions of time and space (Coleman and Götze, 2001; Dahlberg, 2001a; Dahlgren, 2005), though some worry that the net's overall impact on democracy may be normatively undesirable (Galston, 2003; Sunstein, 2007). Empirical findings have furnished support for both the optimists' hopes (Kelly et al., 2005; Papacharissi, 2004; Schneider, 1997) and the pessimists' fears (Adamic and Glance, 2005; Davis, 1999; Wilhelm, 1999), suggesting that at least some online spaces are in fact capable of hosting salutary democratic communication (for a more thorough exploration of this question, see Janssen and Kies, 2005).

Scholars studying the dynamics of online political discussion spaces have faced the challenge of selecting an appropriate theoretical framework within which their findings can be interpreted, and in so doing the vast majority have implemented one of two basic strategies. The first, and most popular, has been to straightforwardly derive operational frameworks from theories of deliberative democracy; studies employing this strategy have tended to focus narrowly on characteristics relevant to these theories at the expense of other equally compelling conversational phenomena. The second strategy acknowledges the existence of multiple types of discussion environments, but fails to formalize the characteristics of these divergent spaces in ways that are systematic, commensurable and tailored specifically to online discussion. The current article proposes a third path forward for research in this area that improves substantially upon these two approaches. Drawing heavily on original conceptual work by Jürgen Habermas (1996) and Lincoln Dahlberg (2001b), it introduces a new framework for the analysis of online political discussion spaces that incorporates operational methods from an interdisciplinary corpus of studies. This framework enhances the ability of researchers to contextualize disparate online discussion cultures with respect to one another, characterize particular cases in terms of distinct scholarly conceptions of democracy, and test existing theories of online political communication in new ways.

Online political discussion research: current approaches and their limitations

For the most part, researchers interested in exploring online political discussion spaces have recognized that contributing to an understanding of how said spaces influence politics, democratic practice and individual participants entails anchoring studies to existing theories. Among other things, failure to do so precludes comparisons between digitally mediated political discussions as well as questions addressing the democratic benefits (and drawbacks) of virtual forums devoted to politics. Early studies of these spaces overwhelmingly adopted deliberative democracy as an orienting framework, the components of which are also sometimes implemented under the term 'public sphere' (for detailed reviews of this literature, see Janssen and Kies [2005] and Trénel [2004]). As the scholar most responsible for introducing the concept of the public sphere into English-language scholarship, Habermas (1989) is almost universally referenced, either directly or indirectly. He stipulates that the public sphere should optimally possess three characteristics: (1) the

establishment of rational-critical argument (as opposed to social status) as the sole criterion by which public contributions should be judged; (2) circumscription of discussion topics to the 'domain of "common concern"' (Habermas, 1989: 36); and (3) openness to all members of the public. These criteria are implicit in such commonly accepted expositions of deliberation as Gastil's (2000: 22) 'discussion that involves judicious argument, critical listening, and earnest decision making' and Bohman's (1996: 27) 'a dialogical process of exchanging reasons for the purpose of resolving problematic situations that cannot be settled without interpersonal coordination and cooperation'.¹ Deliberation on this view is a thoroughly normative idea which is rarely discovered intact in the field, but which provides a useful yardstick with which to assess the democratic performance of virtual political discussion spaces.

Indeed, online deliberation researchers have amassed a sizable corpus of literature detailing the extent to which various online forums approximate deliberative ideals. These studies have generally proceeded by operationalizing foundational principles articulated by Habermas and other deliberative democratic theorists into sets of discrete criteria against which the discussion groups of interest are then evaluated. A typical example from one of the earliest such studies (Schneider, 1997) measures the following four variables derived from the original public sphere concept: argument quality, equality, reciprocity and diversity. Schneider's results indicated that his chosen research site, the Usenet newsgroup talk.abortion, ranked high on the diversity and reciprocity measures but low in equality and quality. Other scholars have utilized this same basic procedure to derive similar, but not identical, sets of deliberative criteria to analyze online discussion spaces (e.g. Coleman and Götze, 2001; Jankowski and Van Os, 2002; Poor, 2005; Stromer-Galley, 2007; Wilhelm, 1999). The key disadvantage to this approach is that by focusing solely on characteristics of relevance to deliberation, it ignores many other theoretically interesting features of online political conversation. Regardless of how highly some uphold the normative ideals of deliberative democracy, no one claims that they encompass all possible modes of political expression. The predominance of deliberation as an analytical framework has thus led to the relative neglect of online discussion characteristics not classified under its domain.

In response to this shortcoming, a second research approach ventures beyond basic deliberative metrics. Rather than simply analyzing online forums in terms of the extent to which they adhere to a singular set of deliberative standards, scholars bring to bear on their data an understanding that different kinds of public spheres exist (Cammaerts and Van Audenhove, 2005; Downey and Fenton, 2003; Jensen, 2003; Papacharissi, 2004). This family of perspectives owes a significant debt to the work of Fraser (1990), who in an influential critique of Habermas's unitary public sphere first pointed out the existence of 'counterpublic spheres' with distinct modes of discourse. Theorists who have applied Fraser's ideas to the internet agree that online discourse consists of 'several culturally fragmented cyberspheres that occupy a common virtual space' (Papacharissi, 2002: 22; see also Downey and Fenton, 2003; Gimmler, 2001) but rarely push this idea much further than illustrative exemplars. Empirical analyses of online discussion spaces that deviate significantly from deliberative ideals have to some extent characterized their findings according to contrasting conceptions of democratic communication, yet there is little thematic unity or breadth to be found in these efforts. For example, Jensen (2003) distinguishes between citizen discussion spaces that are government-sponsored or anarchic

and analyzes one forum of each type to compare and contrast their respective cultures of conversation. Papacharissi (2004) similarly employs Lyotard's notion of anarchic democracy but contends that all of cyberspace embodies it, contrasting the latter's supposed ethos of bluntness and confrontation with the forced politeness of face-to-face political conversation. Introducing yet another analytic scheme, Strandberg (2008) considers four ideal types of online discussions: truly deliberative, potentially deliberative, non-deliberative with wide audience discussion and non-deliberative with narrow audience discussion. Though he admits the possibility of multiple types of public spheres, all of his categories are inextricably yoked to deliberative ideals, resulting in the same limitations of scope that afflict studies conducted under the first strategy.

Theorists of online politics have in the last few years begun to integrate the insights of prior research into generalizable conceptual frameworks robust enough to sustain coherent research programs. Only a few have emerged thus far that are relevant in some way to online political discussion; a thorough literature review identified two, which are examined here. First, Dahlgren (2005) develops a simple typology of 'multisector online public spheres' that avoids unduly privileging deliberation above other forms of discourse. He divides online discussion spaces into five categories: e-government, advocacy/activist, civic, parapolitical and journalistic, with a primary view toward illustrating the point that 'the Internet facilitates an impressive communicative heterogeneity' (Dahlgren, 2005: 152). While the general move toward specifying the kinds of discursive environments available online is an important step toward ameliorating the issues described earlier in this article, the analytic divisions Dahlgren makes are less than ideal for measuring online political discussion. One key difficulty stems from the fact that these multi-sector spheres are not grounded in consistent analytical criteria – the e-government, advocacy and journalistic spheres are constructed based on who sponsors them (governments, advocacy groups, or news organizations), while the civic and parapolitical categories are apparently distinguished by the nature of the discussions held within them. Thus, even as a typology of the 'structural dimension' of online discussion (Dahlgren, 2005: 153), it falls short. More fundamentally, while institutional sponsorship may be an interesting predictor variable for characteristics of net-based political conversation (to the extent that there is any theory to that effect), it does not address the issue of how to measure conversation itself in a way that improves upon the approaches described earlier.

Pickard (2008) constructs what he calls a 'praxis-based democratic theory of internet technology' that includes, but is not limited to, civic communication. Its purpose is to facilitate understanding of different forms of internet-based grassroots action through the use of established political theory, an approach similar in principle to the present article's. His typology consists of three categories: partisan public spheres, in which committed ideologues confer over politics in an atmosphere of fundamental political agreement; pluralist democratic spheres, which convert their members' democratic proclivities into democratic action; and radical participatory spheres, whose decentralized resistance politics are embodied in both the issues they espouse and their decision-making processes. In systematically distinguishing between the abstracted characteristics of different types of online democratic action (e.g. discussion, mobilization, news reporting), the framework functions at a fairly macro level of analysis and thus may not

be fine-grained enough to analyze citizen-to-citizen communication in adequate detail. The criteria Pickard (2008: 640) lists for each of his categories pertain to the general modes of political action each exemplifies: for example, we are to understand that conversation threads are characteristic of partisan spheres, but not what forms of discourse constitute those conversations. Moreover, he leaves no place in his framework for the normative conception of deliberation set forth in this article. None of his categories or exemplars foster truly cross-cutting civic communication – in each of his cases, without exception, left- or right-wingers talk overwhelmingly among themselves. But citizens of vastly divergent worldviews do encounter one another online – in the blogosphere (Hargittai et al., 2008), on newspaper websites and elsewhere – and any proposed model of online political discussion would need to account for these exchanges.

To briefly summarize the argument thus far, previous approaches to the study of online political conversation have overwhelmingly adopted research strategies that have either (1) narrowly focused on deliberative features or (2) applied ad hoc and difficult-to-generalize multiple-sphere conceptualizations. Further, none of the existing conceptual schemes pertaining to online civic communication is appropriate for comparatively analyzing divergent forms of political discourse. In the interests of advancing theoretical and methodological understandings of this cluster of phenomena, a new integrative framework is introduced and described in the following section.

Three models of democratic communication: a conceptual framework repurposed

The foregoing critiques are not intended to disparage the contributions of deliberation theory or its successors to our understanding of the democratic value of online political forums. Rather, they provide a rationale for improving upon the current theoretical-methodological status quo. In this section, I introduce and elaborate upon a framework that incorporates the strengths of prior approaches while avoiding the disadvantages described in the preceding section. This framework, which is based on original conceptual work by Habermas (1996) and Dahlberg (2001b), also extends the scope of online political forum research by situating components of deliberation with respect to other relevant concepts usually measured separately. Its constituent categories have been applied to online political forums in at least one empirical study (Vromen, 2008), but whereas that study adopted an inductive, micro-level approach, the current article's main contribution is to describe and catalog a multidisciplinary assortment of political conversation variables in the framework's terms.

Dahlberg (2001b), drawing heavily on Habermas's (1996) philosophy of law, partitions the domain of normative thinking about the internet's democratic potential into three types, each of which corresponds to a distinct model of democracy: the *liberal individualist*, the *communitarian* and the *deliberative*. As its name suggests, liberal individualism stresses the rational individual's potential for self-actualization and -expression, and thus privileges these priorities above those of the collective (Dahlberg, 2001b). Under this model, the main purpose of online political forums is to offer a platform and showcase for personal expression. Communication is primarily one-way, and participants peruse the views of others primarily to learn where they stand on the issues and, if

necessary, rebut them. The communitarian model, by contrast, emphasizes the power of technology to reinforce existing community ties as well as establish new ones. The communities thus strengthened can be premised upon indelible identity characteristics such as race, gender, nationality, etc. or upon shared interests and ideology. The communitarian impulse in online political forums thus entails high levels of ingroup interaction and collective identity construction and other forms of bonding alongside a commitment to strong ingroup/outgroup boundaries. Finally, Dahlberg's conception of deliberative democracy accords with the classical definitions cited earlier:

In free and open dialogue, participants put forward and challenge claims and arguments about common problems, not resting until satisfied that the best reasons have been given and fully defended. Participants attempt to come to an understanding of their interlocutors and to reflexively modify their prediscursive positions in response to better arguments. In the process, private individuals become public-oriented citizens. (Dahlberg, 2001b: 167)

The key features distinguishing forums based primarily around this concept include many of those that have been operationalized and measured in prior online deliberation research: rationality, equality, reciprocal listening, political topicality and cross-cutting debate, among others.

Dahlberg originally designed his three-model typology of techno-democratic rhetoric to describe the contrasting hopes of academic and popular thinkers for the internet. But as a framework for analyzing the communication characteristics of online political communities, it improves upon previous approaches in several ways. First, it broadens the scope of online political forum research from 'online deliberation' narrowly to 'online political discussion' more broadly, thus bringing online deliberation scholarship into conversation with other literatures with which it has previously had little or no contact. Second, the framework's categories are specified in terms of coherent clusters of communicative characteristics, thus avoiding the key drawback of Dahlgren's sponsorship-based typology. Third, it allows scholars to connect particular configurations of empirical results with distinct notions of democratic practice grounded in substantial traditions in political theory – liberalism (Berlin, 1990; Nozick, 1974; Rawls, 1993), communitarianism (Etzioni, 1993; Sandel, 1982; Selznick, 2002) and deliberation (Cohen, 1997; Dewey, 1954; Habermas, 1989). Thus, rather than unilaterally declaring a forum more or less 'deliberative' after analyzing its contents, the new framework permits more precise conclusions such as 'communitarian with some deliberative aspects' or 'solidly liberal individualist'. The contrasts between these divergent democratic visions will allow researchers to begin to disentangle some of the contradictions and tensions intrinsic to prevailing political communication patterns in internet-based conversation spaces.

Within this framework, online political discussion spaces can be categorized according to the democratic style each most closely embodies. Studies that employ the framework to test hypotheses derived from existing political communication theories could thus conclude that certain forums lean closest to one model or another (this general strategy is discussed in greater detail later in this article). For example, the hypothetical 'solidly liberal individualist' forum mentioned immediately above would be one abundant in liberal individualist features and low in features from the other two categories. What follows is

Table 1. The three models of online democratic communication and their indicative metrics

Model of democratic communication	Indicative metric
Liberal individualist	Monologue Personal revelation Personal showcase Flaming
Communitarian	Ideological fragmentation Mobilization Community language Intra-ideological questioning Intra-ideological reciprocity
Deliberative	Rational-critical argument Public issue focus Equality Discussion topic focus Inter-ideological questioning Inter-ideological reciprocity

an attempt to classify the metrics used in a diverse array of online political forum studies (and a few studies of offline political behavior) according to the three-model framework's categories. These studies span the disciplines of mass communication, information science, political science, critical-feminist studies, education and developmental psychology, among others. An interdisciplinary purview is nigh obligatory in research into internet communication, as the literature on any given subtopic thereof more often than not comprises a multitude of perspectives (Hunsinger, 2005). Even so, this list does not claim exhaustiveness; though it attempts to construct an empirically grounded core of measures within each model, more could doubtless be added. The particular behaviors described in the following were included for two reasons: (1) each has been successfully operationalized in previous research and (2) a compelling argument can be made that each fits conceptually within one of the three models. Table 1 summarizes the three-model framework along with its constituent characteristics.

The liberal individualist model

Liberal individualism encompasses all characteristics of online conversation involving personal expression and the pursuit of self-interest. From various literatures, four features can be placed into this category: monologue, personal revelation, personal showcase and flaming.

Monologue. In a study of the deliberative potential of several political Usenet newsgroups, Wilhelm (1999: 98) found that users' contributions generally lacked 'the listening, responsiveness, and dialogue that would promote communicative actions'. Similarly, Jensen (2003: 357) holds that 'one of the common complaints about net debates is that

monologues tend to be the rule: strident individuals who dominate each from their own “pulpit” without really exchanging arguments’ (see also Hill and Hughes, 1998; Shank and Cunningham, 1996). Monologue is anathema to deliberative democrats because it represents a triumph of the individual’s desire to make her or his voice heard over the basic deliberative imperative to listen and respond thoughtfully to others. But it is a hallmark of liberal individualist forums for precisely that reason – in this case, the rational homo economicus single-mindedly pursues his or her own interest (in opinion expression) at the expense of dialogue. And while it could be argued that everyone who participates in online political forums is acting out of self-interest on some level, a high degree of monologue bespeaks a distinctive, one-to-many ethos of communicative libertarianism.

Personal revelation. Somewhat less frequently studied in online political forum contexts than monologue is personal revelation, which is simply disclosure of information about oneself in a public forum. Fraser (1990) argues that Habermas’s exclusion of ‘personal’ subject matter from the public sphere serves to perpetuate existing power dynamics, and by implication suggests that such issues ought to be considered suitable grist for public deliberation. Stromer-Galley (2007) cites ‘personal narratives’ as a form of argument sourcing that lies outside the traditional conception of rational deliberative exchange. Whereas monologue is a formal characteristic of forum communication, personal revelation is a content-based criterion that embodies the liberal individualist proclivity to focus on oneself.

Personal showcase. In addition to revealing details about themselves, participants may also use online forums as advertising platforms for content they have created apart from the forum itself (i.e. other than standard text posts), be it visual, aural or textual. Examples could include participants advertising their own political blogs or self-produced video journalism segments in popular discussion spaces. While the corpus of literature covering non-textual forms of citizen media is still relatively small (due to the relatively recent rise of inexpensive creative tools and Web 2.0), extant studies have extolled user-generated political images (Frank, 2004) and videos (Milliken et al., 2008; Weber and Mitchell, 2008) as substantial new forms of democratic communication. In an online forum context, publicly linking to one’s own media becomes a liberal individualist plea for attention. It invites the prospective audience to become an actual audience by opting to bear witness to the poster’s artistic and political acumen.

Flaming. Defined by Alonzo and Aiken (2004: 205) as ‘hostile intentions characterized by words of profanity, obscenity, and insults that inflict harm to a person or an organization resulting from uninhibited behavior’, flaming as an object of academic inquiry traces its origins to the pre-world wide web bulletin-board systems of the 1980s (Lea et al., 1992). Despite this long history, it has rarely been studied together with normatively preferable communicative behavior (two exceptions can be found in Hill and Hughes [1998] and Mitra [1997]). Subsuming flaming within the broader study of online political forums will allow researchers to characterize their data in terms of both democracy-enhancing and -detracting conversation. Flaming is classified as a liberal individualist feature due to its frequent association in the literature with motivational and affective

(i.e. egoistic) factors (Alonzo and Aiken, 2004; Jordan, 2001).² The assumption here is that posters engage in flaming to derive personal satisfaction by harassing political opponents, releasing the tension associated with suppressing their unpopular opinions in offline life, or simply antagonizing others for its own sake.

The communitarian model

Online public spaces that are predominantly communitarian uphold the cultivation of social cohesion and group identity above the fulfillment of individual desires. The five measures associated with this model – ideological fragmentation, mobilization, community identification, ingroup reciprocity and ingroup questioning – all reflect this overarching goal.

Ideological homophily. Perspectives on ideological homophily (which is sometimes referred to by the more pejorative term fragmentation), the proposition that citizens tend to assemble themselves into politically homogeneous collectives that rarely if ever engage with outsiders, range from the sanguine (Fraser, 1990) to the apprehensive (Sunstein, 2007). The phenomenon has been empirically documented online; studies of the bifurcated American political blogosphere have revealed low degrees of linking and cross-cutting debate between its densely intraconnected liberal and conservative networks (Adamic and Glance, 2005; Hargittai et al., 2008; Tremayne et al., 2006). Rather than disparaging homophily as a threat to democracy, communitarianism considers the absence of fundamental disagreement as a necessary condition for the construction of ingroup-specific strategies and narratives (Fraser, 1990). Indeed, it appears that lower levels of citizen exposure to diametrically opposed viewpoints are associated with higher levels of political participation (Mutz, 2006). This insight bears special emphasis because it illustrates the more general point that certain types of normative democratic goods (in this case deliberation and participation) can exist in a zero-sum relationship with respect to one another. Rather than expecting online political forums to conform to some objective, unitary democratic ideal, we should prepare ourselves to expect tradeoffs between incommensurable norms of political behavior.

Mobilization. A corollary of Mutz's (2006) findings concerning political insularity is that members of communitarian forums should be the most likely of all three types to mobilize for political action. The action thus mobilized can be offline, such as protesting or volunteering for a political campaign; or online, such as donating to candidates through a web form or emailing one's state or federal legislators. Unlike liberal individualism, which celebrates personal utility-maximization, and deliberation, in which the primary goal is cross-cutting debate, communitarian political spaces are thought to offer the most conducive atmosphere for the furtherance of collective political objectives. Preliminary findings to this effect have recently been reported by Farrell et al. (2008).

Community identification. Another measure of the degree of community integration in online political forums is the extent to which participants view themselves as members of a community. This feature carries the advantage of high face validity – online

communities exist nowhere if not in the minds of their constituents. Several studies unconnected with the online deliberation literature have used community language, particularly collective pronouns such as 'we', 'us' and 'our', as operational measures of identification with the online community in question (Birchmeier et al., 2005; Cassell et al., 2006). Alternatively, Quan-Haase et al. (2002) simply asked the users of the National Geographic Society website via a survey about the extent of their 'general sense of community'. And while their particular item assessed attitudes toward the entire internet as a medium conducive to the formation and maintenance of social ties, it could be adapted to apply to specific forums.

Intra-ideological response. Conversational response is one of the most frequently measured features in the online deliberation literature (Trénel, 2004), but it has usually been operationalized simply as messages which respond to other messages (Janssen and Kies, 2005). Strong norms of communicative response are essential components of both communitarianism and deliberation, but a crucial difference between the two concerns the relationship between respondent and addressee. In a communitarian setting, participants should communicate primarily with ideological similars (that is, ingroup members), whereas deliberative spaces would be expected to contain far more cross-cutting responses; liberal spaces would be characterized by significantly lower amounts of both types of responses. A reliable method for determining the dominant or preferred ideologies of both online communities and their members is suggested by Kelly et al. (2005).

Intra-ideological questioning. Stromer-Galley (2007) argues persuasively that question-asking signifies the questioner's intention to engage with certain other participants or the group in general. Questioning is a subset of reciprocity, as users must respond to each other in order to ask direct questions. Again, as with reciprocity, the distinction between questions addressed to ideological in- and outgroup members is considered to determine whether they should be interpreted as communitarian or deliberative, respectively. In identifying these instances, care should be taken to distinguish between inquiries directed to specific individuals and rhetorical questions not meant to be answered.

The deliberative model

In contrast with liberal individualist and communitarian forums, the deliberative model is marked by Habermas's conceptual trio of rational-critical argument, public issue focus and putative equality. A relatively high quantity of cross-cutting discussion is usually also considered an essential element (Delli Carpini et al., 2004). As mentioned previously, more thorough reviews of online deliberative metrics can be found elsewhere; here I briefly outline six of the most commonly utilized: rational-critical argument, public issue focus, equality, discussion topic focus, outgroup reciprocity and outgroup questioning.

Rational-critical argument. The willingness (to say nothing of the ability) to use logical, methodical appeals to the common good in arguing for one's position is arguably

the linchpin of the Habermasian public sphere. In his review of online deliberation metrics, Trénel (2004) lists nine studies that measure some operationalization of this concept. While the other framework categories may contain some degree of rational argument, its centrality to the original formulation of the public sphere attests to its status as a fundamentally deliberative feature.

Public issue focus. The conceptual counterpart of personal revelation in the liberal individualist model, a strong public issue focus requires that discussions primarily pertain to issues traditionally considered political (cf. Fraser's [1990] critique that Habermas's public sphere excludes domestic and personal issues). This measure may be consistently high in most forums nominally dedicated to the discussion of political or civic issues; however, such forums have been observed to contain a wide variety of content encompassing the political as well as the decidedly apolitical (Cammaerts and Van Audenhove, 2005; Freelon, 2008).

Equality. Equality between discussants is another criterion explicitly cited by Habermas as a crucial component of the public sphere. Schneider (1997) pioneered use of the Gini coefficient of inequality to measure participant equality in online forums, and subsequent studies have followed his example (Albrecht, 2006; Kelly et al., 2005). Under this method, equality is operationalized as the extent to which forum contributions are spread evenly among participants; a relatively unequal forum is one in which a small number of users contribute the vast majority of posts.

Discussion topic focus. As distinct from public issue focus, discussion topic focus assesses the extent to which posts within discussion threads address the initial thread topic (Herring, 2003; Stromer-Galley, 2007). It reveals the amount of digressive behavior in online forums, which our working definition of deliberation requires to be low. Topic focus is less characteristic of the liberal individualist and communitarian models, in which it is subordinate to individual and community imperatives, respectively.

Inter-ideological response. Just as the tendency to communicate primarily with ideological ingroup members is a communitarian feature, cross-cutting discussion is a hallmark of deliberation. It is not sufficient that all citizens be considered as potential participants in political deliberations, they must also actually communicate across lines of difference to fully realize the ideal. It is important to note that an inter-ideological response that fits the definition of flaming given earlier should be coded as such; this measure is reserved for messages that avoid insults and ad hominem attacks.

Inter-ideological questioning. The asking of honest questions (as defined by Stromer-Galley, 2007) between members of mutual outgroups should thus be considered deliberative as currently defined. More so than other types of responses, questioning someone of a different viewpoint indicates a willingness to listen to challenging ideas and an interest in conflict resolution. This characteristic can be measured using the techniques described under intra-ideological reciprocity in the communitarian section.

Applying the three-model framework

Preceding sections having demonstrated how the three-model framework improves upon prior empirical approaches and cataloged its content, this section argues for its relevance to the broader field of online political communication studies. The framework does not in itself contain any theoretical predictions regarding the distribution of liberal individualist, communitarian and deliberative democratic characteristics among types of individuals or online spaces. Rather, it is designed to be used in conjunction with established theories of online politics from which testable hypotheses can be drawn. What the framework contributes is a suite of normative standards for conversation quality that advances the literatures to which it is applied by introducing new conceptual distinctions between divergent notions of democracy. These distinctions will help scholars shift from the old question of how (if at all) the internet can support democracy in the singular (Gimmler, 2001; Jordan, 2001; Rheingold, 1993; Wilhelm, 1999) to the emerging question of how internet-based social practices can support multiple forms of democratic communication and who participates in each (Bennett, 2008; Dahlgren, 2005). The following discussion explores how the three-model framework might be applied to three research literatures: the politics of technological design, internet use by distinct ideological actors and online youth civic engagement.

The politics of technology

The basic observation that technological design can produce political consequences underlies a considerable corpus of research (Latour, 1994; Lessig, 1999; Street, 1992; Winner, 1980). A key corollary of this idea is that particular design configurations can translate political intentions into strongly encouraging or compelling force. In Winner's (1980; see also Caro, 1974) evocative example, the prominent New York urban planner Robert Moses deliberately designed the road leading to Jones Beach, a public park on Long Island, so that buses could not go down them. The effect was to prevent low-income people and other undesirables who relied on public transit from being able to share the park with wealthier car-owners (Winner, 1980). More recent studies have applied this scholarly tradition to online political and discussion spaces, demonstrating that a space's design choices can powerfully influence the nature of its users' engagement (Coleman and Gøtze, 2001; Sack, 2005; Suler, 2004; Wright and Street, 2007).

Several authors have suggested hypothetical connections between specific design features and corresponding communicative outcomes that the three-model framework can place into new perspective. Endorsing asynchronicity in online text-based discussions, Coleman and Gøtze (2001: 17) argue that 'the best deliberative results are often achieved when messages are stored or archived and responded to after readers have had time to contemplate them'. Contrariwise, Fishkin et al. (2005: 8) contend that asynchronous forums tend to be relatively low in 'affective bonding and mutual understanding', two discussion characteristics for which the current framework offers operational criteria. Wright and Street (2007) associate several technical affordances of online forums, including prior review moderation and threaded messages, with increased deliberation (using the term in a sense similar to that employed here); however, they only evaluate a single forum empirically, leaving open the question of how

its conversational output compares to other forums with different design configurations. In a theoretical piece, Suler (2004) identifies anonymity and invisibility as key design features in the production of the 'online disinhibition effect', which is simply a tendency to speak and act with less restraint online than one would offline (i.e. in political contexts, to behave as a liberal individualist). A research program that drew its independent variables and hypotheses from these studies and applied the three-model framework as a set of dependent variables would not only test these authors' predictions, but also offer insight into how differently configured forums make certain democratic communication patterns more or less likely. Instead of discarding non-deliberative posts as conceptual detritus, the framework would allow them to be contextualized alongside deliberative content within a broader conceptualization of how design influences online political conversation.

Ideology-based communication patterns

Ideological labels have recently emerged as key variables in the study of online political communication. Divergent political worldviews, this research perspective holds, carry with them characteristic organizational and communicative forms. Many of these studies adopt a social network analysis approach, searching for distinct patterns of communicative traits in the densely networked communities identified in the data set. Much of the foundational work in this area has focused on the set of American weblogs that focuses primarily on politics, known informally as 'the blogosphere'. In addition to discovering that the separate liberal (or progressive) and conservative halves of the blogosphere attend to different news topics and sources, Adamic and Glance (2005) found the conservative network to be more densely linked than its liberal counterpart. Hargittai et al. (2008) found that conservatives were significantly more likely to link to blog posts from the opposing side, suggesting that they may have a comparatively greater interest in cross-cutting debate than liberals. In contrast, Kerbel (2009: 46) argues that the left and right blog networks are much more similar than different in the insularity of their communication habits, but also that 'the progressive blogosphere . . . is more horizontally organized [than its right-wing equivalent], depending on links among websites to amplify its messaging and multiply the effect of its activity' (see also Farrell et al. [2008] for a concurring analysis). Kerbel substantiates this position with in-depth blogger interviews and by noting that many A-list conservative blogs are corporate-funded, but notably without any comparative textual analysis.

Taken together, these studies seem to construct two conflicting impressions of the blogosphere's two domains: one holds that conservatives are more closely knit and inclined toward cross-cutting debate than liberals, while the other depicts the liberal side as a haven of horizontal collaboration and the conservative side as the middle rung of a vertical, top-down transmission channel for talking points developed by corporate and political elites. The three-model framework would help to disentangle these claims by revealing which conversation features typify each side. In particular, the emergence of differences in communitarian and deliberative indicators between sectors would furnish support for one position or the other. The framework could also serve a similar function in exploratory research of blog networks that have been partitioned via social network analysis but not yet heavily theorized, such as Iran's (Kelly and Etling, 2008).

Online youth civic engagement

Putnam's (2000) landmark study of the decline of American civic engagement brought the general topic to the forefront of social science research. Young people, as the least-engaged age group across the vast majority of traditional civic indicators, quickly became the subjects of one of the most prolific branches of this literature (Bennett, 2008; Sherrod et al., forthcoming; Youniss et al., 2002; Zukin et al., 2006). Many studies focus on whether and how digital communication tools can support youth civic engagement, given that young people (at least in the West) use the internet in significantly greater numbers than their elders (Lenhart et al., 2005; Livingstone, 2003). Survey results indicate that some youth do in fact use internet-based tools for civic purposes, notably video, social networking and youth-targeted civic engagement websites (Raynes-Goldie and Walker, 2008; Smith and Rainie, 2008). One contingent of theorists suggest that these findings are evidence of a generational divide in civic attitudes between young and old, with the latter tending to engage through such traditional civic institutions as government, the news media and membership-based community organizations; and the former preferring consumer activism, expression through digital media and short-term network-based action campaigns (Bennett, 2008; Coleman, 2008; Inglehart, 1997; Zukin et al., 2006).

While the surveys just cited reveal much about the kinds of tools young people use to interact with civic life, very little if any research has investigated exactly how those tools are being used. If youth as a group have truly rejected their parents' politics, this should manifest not only in what technologies they use but also in the substance of their communications. It has been shown that people under 30 constitute a small minority of blog readers (Johnson and Kaye, 2004; De Zúñiga et al., 2007); one reason for this may be their distaste for the blogosphere's high level of ideological polarization. Harnessing the three-model framework to theories of the civic divide in empirical studies of youth-focused online spaces would help scholars understand how closely youth political communication resembles adult political communication. Specifically, it could measure how frequently young people advertise their own political media creations as well as the extent to which their conversations connote persistent community as opposed to transient, ad hoc action networks. The use of multiple models of democracy is especially important in this case because the freewheeling civic ethos youth are hypothesized to prefer has thus far proven rather difficult to operationalize (Freelon, 2008).

Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to explain (1) some of the shortcomings of the two dominant conceptual strategies guiding research of online political discussion; (2) how Dahlberg's (and Habermas's) three camps of electronic democracy can be adapted into a three-model empirical framework for online political discussion that improves upon that status quo; and (3) how this framework might contribute to various online political communication literatures. The goal throughout has been to incorporate the best of what the deliberative perspective has to offer into a larger research agenda that aims to construct more comprehensive impressions of online political communication. But like all frameworks, this one is not exhaustive, and a brief discussion of its methodological limitations is in order. First, all of the framework's component measures assume a single level of

analysis – the individual forum message. But some variables that do not inhere in individual messages, such as the discussion space's name, 'About' page, or mission statement (if applicable), may also hold relevance for the discussion model it tends toward. Further, to the extent that a forum's idiosyncratic 'culture' can be considered a level of analysis (Dahlgren, 2005), the deductive nature of the three-model approach precludes the serendipitous discovery of features not already included among its dimensions. This unavoidable sacrifice is made consciously in the name of generalizability. Finally, it is worth noting that not all discussion spaces should be expected to fit neatly into a single category. Some likely will, but others will contain features from multiple models, thus necessitating additional interpretive efforts on the part of the investigator to make sense of emergent patterns of politically relevant features in various types of discussion spaces. The role of the three-model framework in these cases will be to provide a conceptual context within which to situate these new observations.

One way to increase the framework's utility is customization: researchers should feel free to appropriate and/or develop additional conversational measures and add them to the relevant model. Accordingly, it may not always be necessary to measure all 15 features, as some will almost never be present in certain forums, and reducing the number of criteria sought per unit of analysis minimizes coder fatigue (in content analysis) and thereby increases data reliability. The enumeration of particular operational measures here serves primarily to illustrate how the three-model typology might be used to more inclusively analyze online political forums according to the idiosyncratic patterns of communicative behavior detected therein. The key claim animating this proposed scholarly enterprise is that deliberation is not the only democratically valuable type of online political discussion.

Notes

- 1 For additional concurrent definitions, see also Burkhalter et al. (2002), Cohen (1997) and Dryzek (2000).
- 2 Some scholars (e.g. Hill and Hughes, 1998) have observed that flaming can also occur in online communitarian settings, as when community members excoriate outsiders who express opinions offensive to local community standards. But flaming should be expected to account for only a small share of total discussion content in these cases, as most communication will tend to transpire between ingroup members.

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