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# The Use of Expressives in Online Political Talk: Impeding or Facilitating the Normative Goals of Deliberation?

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**Abstract.** Net-based public sphere researchers have questioned whether the internet presents the public sphere with a new opportunity for the development of public spaces where free, equal and open deliberation among citizens can flourish. However, much of the research has operationalized a formal notion of deliberation thereby neglecting the expressive nature of everyday political talk. This study moved beyond a formal notion by also investigating the use of expressives within *The Guardian* (UK) political discussion forum. A content analysis was employed as the primary instrument for examination. Additional textual analyses were conducted on the use of expressives. The findings suggest that with the exception of humour expressives tended to impede political talk rather than facilitating it.

**Keywords:** Online Deliberation, Political Talk, Public Sphere, Discussion Forum

## 1 Introduction

There has been much debate concerning the internet's ability to extend the public sphere. Much of it has focused on the potential of the internet in cultivating a public sphere where free, equal and open communication, deliberation and exchange of information among citizens can flourish. As a result, there has been a rise in the number of net-based public sphere research projects, which utilize public sphere ideals as a means of evaluating online communicative spaces.

Net-based public sphere researchers have studied online deliberation in numerous ways within a variety of contexts from news media message boards and Usenet newsgroups to governmentally sponsored forums. However, most studies have operationalized a formal notion of deliberation e.g. rationality via argumentation. Given that much of the research here focuses on everyday political talk, privileging a formal notion neglects the expressive nature of such talk. Indeed, expressives are inherent to political talk. Moreover, political talk is not only about e.g. argumentation but it is also about everyday citizens talking to each other in ways that make sense to them. This discussion is not a new one; politics has always been emotional. However, political communication scholars and net-based public sphere researchers specifically still have tended neglect the role of expressives in political communication, particularly within deliberation. Neglecting

expressives is not an option if our aim is to provide a better understanding of how people talk politics or if it is to assess its democratic value.

The aim of this article then is to move beyond a formal notion of deliberation by also examining the role of expressive within political talk. The focus is on how participants talk politics in online informal discussion forums. By *informal*, I am referring to those spaces that are not bound to any formal predetermined agendas such as e-consultations, but rather to forums whose primary purpose is to provide simply a communicative space for talk. By political *talk*, I am referring to everyday, informal, political conversation conducted freely between participants in these spaces, which is often spontaneous and lacks any purpose outside the purpose of talk for talk sake, representing the practical communicative form of communicative action [1, p. 327]. It is through this type of talk whereby citizens achieve mutual understanding about the self and each other, and it represents the fundamental ingredient of the public sphere.

The purpose first is a normative one; it is to examine the democratic quality of the communicative practices of participants within an online political discussion forum in light of the public sphere. It is also to move beyond a formal notion of deliberation by providing a more accurate account of how people actually talk politics in those discussions, and how humour, emotional comments and acknowledgements interact and influence the more 'traditional' elements of deliberation. Consequently, I present the following two research questions: To what extent do the communicative practices of online political discussions satisfy the normative conditions of the process of deliberation of the public sphere; and what role do expressives play within online political talk and in relation to the normative conditions of deliberation? Together, the answers to these questions present a more comprehensive account of online political talk. They seek not only to offer insight into the *quality* of such talk, but also to provide a better understanding of its *expressive* nature.

## 2 The Normative Conditions of the Process of Deliberation

Assessing the democratic value of political talk requires normative criteria of the public sphere. Net-based public sphere researchers have been heavily influenced by the work of Habermas. Though some have constructed different aspects of his theory of communicative rationality and the public sphere, a thorough specification is required. Thus, I offer a set of public sphere criteria: the normative conditions of the process of deliberation.<sup>1</sup>

Through his pragmatic analysis of everyday conversation, Habermas argues that when participants take up communicative rationality, they refer to several idealizing presuppositions. Drawing from these [1, 3, 4], six conditions are distinguished.<sup>2</sup> Together they provide the necessary conditions for achieving understanding during the course of political talk by placing both structural and dispositional requirements on the communicative form, process and participant.

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed account, see Graham [2].

<sup>2</sup> There are 11; structural autonomy and equality, discursive equality and freedom, and sincerity have been omitted due to scope of this chapter.

*Rational-critical debate* requires that participants provide reasoned claims, which are critically reflected upon. Such an exchange requires a sufficient level of *coherence* and *continuity*; participants should stay on the topic of discussion until understanding or some form of agreement is achieved as opposed to withdrawing. Such a process demands three dispositional requirements, three levels of achieving mutual understanding. *Reciprocity* represents the first level. It requires that participants listen and respond to each other's questions and arguments. However, reciprocity alone does not satisfy the process; *reflexivity* is required. Reflexivity is the internal process of reflecting another participant's position against one's own. *Empathy* represents the final level of understanding. The process of deliberation requires an empathic perspective taking in which we not only seek to understand intellectually the position of the other, but we also seek to conceptualize empathically, both cognitively and *affectively*,<sup>3</sup> how others would be affected by the issue under discussion.

### 3 Expressives and Deliberation

Some democratic theorists maintain that rational discourse needs to be broadened, allowing for communicative forms such as greeting, gossip, rhetoric and storytelling [5, 6]. Others have argued that emotions and humour are essential to any notion of good deliberation [7, 8]. Indeed, when people talk politics, they not only draw from their cognitive and rational capacities, but they also draw on their emotions. It would be hard to imagine people engaging in political talk if their emotions were not there to provoke them to do so. However, past studies have tended to neglect the role of expressives. Those that do address them only identify the type and frequency of their use [9], and do little in way of providing insight into the role they play in political talk. Thus, in the analysis that follows, the use of expressives is investigated with particular attention being paid to the role they play in relation to the normative conditions. By expressives, I am referring to humour, emotional comments and acknowledgements. Humour represents complex emotional speech acts that excite and amuse for instance jokes and wisecracks. Emotional comments are speech acts that express one's feelings or attitude, while acknowledgements represent speech acts that acknowledge the presence, departure or conversational action of another person, such as greeting, thanking and complementing.

### 4 Methods

The forum selected was hosted by the British newspaper *The Guardian*. The Guardian's political talkboard is one of the most popular and oldest online communicative spaces dedicated to political talk in the UK. It hosts a multitude of participants and discussions on a diverse range of national, European and international political topics. The data gathered consisted of the individual postings and the threads in which they were situated. The selection of the data was based on a one-month period and was taken from the sub-

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<sup>3</sup> Habermas focuses on the former, the cognitive process of 'ideal role taking' [4, pp. 228--230].

forum *Inside Britain*, which at the time was the most active forum.<sup>4</sup> The sample consisted of 30 threads containing 1215 postings.

The sample was subjected to three progressive phases of coding. Graham's [10] coding scheme, which was developed as a means of systematically describing and assessing political talk, was used. The scheme also moved beyond a formal notion of deliberation and coded for the use of expressives. During the first phase, the coding categories were divided into three groups, which consisted of various types of reasoned claims, non-reasoned claims and expressive and commissive speech acts. The unit of analysis during this phase was the individual message. Once all messages were coded, phase two of the scheme began; messages that provided reasoned claims were advanced. During this phase, the coding categories were divided into two groups: *evidence type* and *argument style*. Messages were first coded for the type of evidence used, after which, selected messages were coded again for argument style. The unit of analysis during this phase was the argument. During the final phase, all messages were coded *communicative empathy*. The unit of analysis here was the individual message. For all three phases, the context unit of analysis was the discussion thread; the relationships between the messages within a single thread were analyzed. For detailed account of the individual coding categories, the coding scheme and an operationalization of the normative conditions see Graham [10, pp. 23--32].

Regarding expressives, the aim was to see how they were used during political talk and whether they tended to *facilitate* or *impede* deliberation. The above analysis represented only the first step; additional textual analyses on the use of expressives were conducted. Specifically, several separate in-depth readings on the use of expressives for each were carried out with particular attention being paid to identifying the particular type, analyzing the social structure and examining their use in relation to the normative conditions. In each case, the selected material was read, re-read and worked through (see Graham [2, pp. 61--63] for a detailed account).

## 5 Talking Politics in the Guardian

*Rational-critical debate* requires that the discussions in part be guided by rationality and critical reflection. Regarding rationality, arguments are preferred over assertions. As Table 1 shows, there were 756 claims made by Guardian participants. Out of these claims, 84% were reasoned, which suggests that providing reasons with claims was the norm. In terms of postings, nearly half provided arguments, while only 10% contained assertions. As the results suggest, the exchange of claims (arguments and assertions), which represented approximately 59% of the postings, was the guiding communicative form. Table 1 also shows the level of disagreement and critical reflection. First, the level of disagreement was substantially higher than the level of agreement. Approximately 46% of the total claims represented some form of disagreement, while only 12% were in the form of agreement. However, disagreeing is not always accompanied by critical

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<sup>4</sup> The data was taken from all those threads originating in May 2006 and was retrieved in July 2006 at: <http://politicstalk.guardian.co.uk/WebX?14@@.ee80025>

reflection. The level of rebuttals and refutes, on the other hand, is an indication of this. Approximately 41% of all claims (25% of the postings) represented rebuttals and refutes.

*Coherence* requires that participants stick to the topic of discussion. The discussion threads were first analyzed and then categorized into lines of discussion. The level of coherence was established by determining the number of topic changes, and more importantly, the relevance of those changes. Overall, there were 110 lines of discussion within the Guardian's 30 threads. Participants did not diverge at all from the topic of discussion within six of these threads. That said, within the remaining 24, there were 39 lines of discussion, which consisted of only 159 postings, coded as off the topic of discussion. In other words, 87% of the postings were coherent.

*Continuity* requires that the discussions continue until understanding or some form of agreement is achieved as opposed to withdrawing. It was analyzed from two angles: the level of extended debate and convergence. The level of extended debate was measured via the presence of *strong-strings*. Ideally, extended debate should consist of counter-rebuttal-refute exchanges with rebuttals and refutes representing a substantial portion of those exchanges. There were 54 strong-strings. The average number was 13 with the largest totalling 42 claims. Moreover, 74% of all claims were involved in extended debate; this represented 44% of the postings. Furthermore, 89% of these claims were reasoned, and a majority came in the form of rebuttals and refutes, indicating the rational and critical nature of these exchanges.

The second indicator of continuity was convergence. Convergence represents the level of agreement achieved during the course of political talk. It was examined by coding the discussions for commissive speech acts. There were 48 commissives posted within the Guardian, representing four percent of the postings. Convergence was assessed by comparing the number of commissives with the number of lines of discussion. Ideally, a line of discussion should end in convergence. The Guardian sample consisted of 30 threads, which contained 66 coherent lines of discussion. The average number of commissives per line of discussion was 0.73. Moreover, 29% these lines (or 19 lines) contained at least one commissive. Finally, the analysis revealed that extended debate was an important ingredient in achieving convergence. In particular, 90% of commissives were a product of strong-strings exchanges.

*Reciprocity* requires that participants read and respond to each other's posts. In the past, this has often been assessed by determining the level of replies. However, this measurement is inadequate because it neglects the social structure of the discussions. Consequently, the level of reciprocity was assessed by determining and combining a reply percentage indicator with a degree of centralization measurement.<sup>5</sup> The data from both measurements for each of the 30 threads was plotted along a double axis matrix in order to assess the level of reciprocity. As Figure 1 shows, the level of replies was high. All but five threads had a reply percentage indicator of  $\geq 75\%$ . The percentage of replies for the whole sample was at 84%. In terms of the degree of centralization, the measurement is set on a scale of zero to one with zero representing the ideal decentralized thread and one the ideal centralized thread.

First, six of the threads were moderately to highly centralized (threads  $\geq .500$ ). These threads resembled more a one-to-many or many-to one type of discussion rather than a web of interactions. Second, 16 threads were moderately decentralized (threads between

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<sup>5</sup> The analysis is based on De Nooy et al. [11, p. 126] degree of centralization measurement.

**Table 1.** The Guardian’s Claim Type Usage Overview

		Claim type												Total
		Reasoned claims						Non-reasoned claims						
		Initial	Counter	Rebuttal	Refute	Affirmation	Total	Initial	Counter	Rebuttal	Refute	Affirmation	Total	
Claims <sup>a</sup>	Frequency	22	232	192	118	67	631	8	54	24	14	26	126	756
	% of claims	3	31	25	16	9	84	1	7	3	2	3	16	100
Postings <sup>b</sup>	Frequency	22	231	192	118	67	598	8	53	24	14	26	125	719
	% of postings	2	19	16	10	6	49	1	4	2	1	2	10	59

Note. A posting containing more than one of the same claim type were only counted once.

<sup>a</sup>n = 756 claims.

<sup>b</sup>n = 1215 postings.

.250 and .500).<sup>6</sup> Though there are still several core participants in these threads, the connections are more dispersed. Finally, eight threads were highly decentralized (threads  $\leq .250$ ). The connections between participants here were distributed more equally.

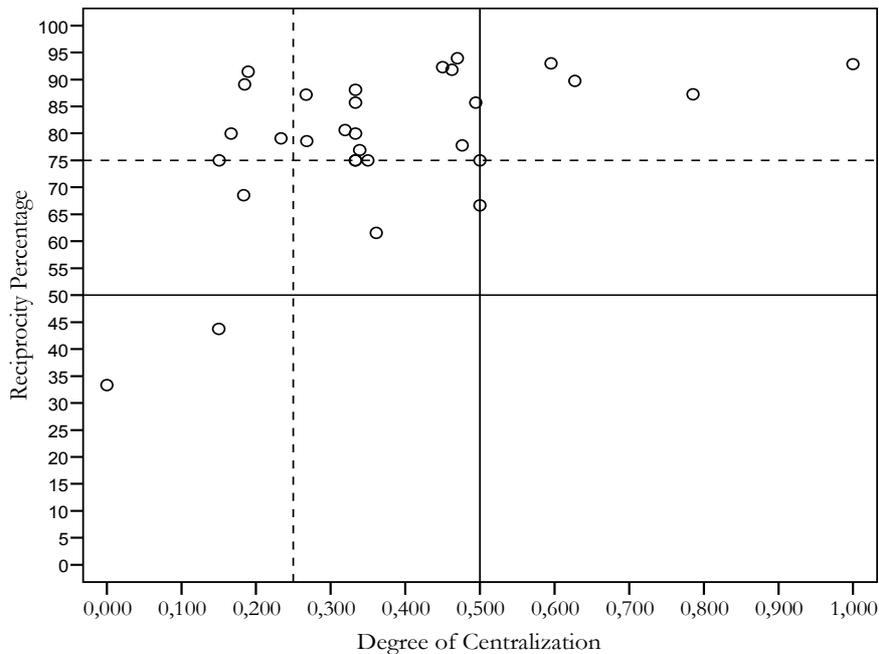


Figure 1. The Guardian's web of reciprocity matrix results.

Those threads that fell within the top left quadrant of Figure 1, the strong decentralized web quadrant, are considered to have a moderate to high level of reciprocity. Twenty-two of the 30 threads fell within this quadrant. In order to make a sharper distinction, a second set of criteria was added, represented by the dotted lines, as a means of distinguishing between those threads possessing moderate with those containing high levels of reciprocity. As is shown, there were five threads, which had a strong, highly decentralized web of interactions, in other words, an ideal level of reciprocity (threads  $\geq 75\%$  and  $\leq .250$ ). With the exception of two threads, the remaining 15 in this quadrant had a strong, moderately decentralized web of interactions, in other words, a moderately high level of reciprocity (threads  $\geq 75\%$  and between  $.250$  and  $.500$ ).

*Reflexivity* requires that participants reflect another participant's argument against their own. The first step in determining the level of reflexivity is to discover the type and level of evidence use because in order to relate evidence to one's own argument or an opposing argument a participant must know and to some extent understand the opposing position. There were four types of evidence identified, which were examples (43%),

<sup>6</sup> Two threads received identical scores (.333 and 75%). In the figure, they appear as one.

facts/sources (23%), comparisons (23%) and experiences (11%). Regarding the level of evidence, 43% of all reasoned claims contained supporting evidence. Rebuttals contained the highest level at half, while affirmations contained the lowest level with a third. The findings also revealed that when participants criticized opposing claims, they used supporting evidence more frequently than when they provided new, alternative or supporting arguments. However, determining the level of evidence represents only the first step in examining reflexivity. In order to determine the level of reflexivity, arguments were subject to the four criteria. When a posting or series of postings (1) provided a reasoned initial or counter claim; (2) used evidence to support that claim; (3) was responsive to challenges by providing rebuttals and refutes; (4) and provided evidence in support of that defence or challenge, they were coded as part of a reflexive argument.

There were 32 reflexive arguments consisting of 192 postings (16% of postings). Twenty-three participants were responsible for these exchanges (16% of participants). The average number of a reflexive argument was six postings. Overall, 27% of all arguments (169 arguments) were coded as reflexive. Moreover, 93% of reflexive arguments were part of strong-string exchanges or 28% of strong-string claims were reflexive, suggesting the importance of extended critical debate regarding reflexivity. The results also suggest a relationship between reflexive arguments and convergence. It seems that reflexivity, in addition to extended debate, was another important ingredient in achieving convergence. In particular, 52% of all commissives were engaged in and posted by those participants who provided reflexive arguments. The results become more revealing when all commissives, not just those posted by one of the 23 participants, are included. This reveals that 81% of all commissives occurred during reflexive exchanges.

Since deliberation is a social process, it is important that participants convey their empathetic considerations. Consequently, postings were examined for *communicative empathy*. Guardian participants rarely engaged in empathetic exchanges. In particular, there were only eight postings coded as communicative empathy. However, all eight postings were a part or a product of reflexive exchanges.

## 6 The Use of Expressives

Expressive speech acts appeared in 34% of the postings. The most common expressive was humour. It accounted for 43% of expressives and appeared in 15% of the postings. Overall, the analysis revealed three notable aspects on the use of humour: (1) its social function, (2) its social structure and (3) its relationship with certain variables of deliberation. The first aspect of humour was the way in which it was used. For example, humour may be used for social bonding, to express frustration and anger towards authority, criticize another or to reinforce stereotypes [12, 13]. In the Guardian, participants used humour for multiple and a variety of functions. That said, the aim here was not to provide a detailed breakdown of all the different uses, but rather, it was to detect any persistent patterns/general trends in the use of humour. There were several trends identified: participants tended to use humour to entertain; to criticize, assess or provoke thought; and/or to express hostility, anger or offence.

The most common pattern in the use of humour was *to entertain*. Humour here usually came in the form of wisecracks, jokes, sarcasm and banter.<sup>7</sup> There were two focuses of humour under 'to entertain'. First, humour here often focused on making fun of politicians and the Labour government in general. It usually was accompanied by malicious delight. Moreover, it tended to be less constructive in relation to the issue under discussion and more oriented towards 'having a laugh' at the expense of the subject in question. Second, a substantial portion of humour under 'to entertain' focused on good-natured teasing and the exchange of witty remarks between and about participants in the form of banter. This sort of good-natured exchange was quite common representing 65 of the 186 humorous comments. Though banter tended to create an atmosphere of playfulness, it often led the discussions off the topic. Nearly 70% of these exchanges were off the topic.

The second most common pattern was *to criticize, assess or provoke thought*. Humour has a critical function in political talk, the function of questioning, criticizing and assessing politicians, government or society in general. The participants of the Guardian used humour to do just this. The use of humour here usually came in the form of satire via the use of irony, sarcasm, parody, comparison and analogy, as the postings below illustrate.<sup>8</sup>

**Henry:** All of you old enough to remember this classic Dire Straits 80s track will appreciate that it has lost nothing of its meaning over the two decades since its original release. Despite demotion, Prescott strangely keeps his salary and perks and his choice of parliamentary skirt.

**John:** That ain't working, that's the way you do it, Set your own pension when you're an MP, That ain't working, that's the way you screw it, When you get caught with the secretary

**Henry:** Not bad, but what we need is one of those dynamic 80s power and might tracks with some really pithy and topical lyrics showing the lack of difference between Thatcherism and NuLabourism. <...sits scratching head...>

**John:** Look at them NuLabs, that's the way they do it, Pretending that they're not really Tories, Look at those Blairites, pretending it's the third way, Privatising hospitals and tuition fees

**Richard:** Let's go further back - Genesis, Selling England by the Pound.

In this thread, participants used satire via parody to criticize and assess the Labour Government. Unlike above, humour here was usually supportive and constructive to both individual arguments and to the topic of discussion.

The final pattern in the use of humour was *to express hostility, anger or offence*. This use of humour here usually came in the form of wisecracks, jokes, repartee and sarcasm. Moreover, it tended to be vulgar, offensive and usually contributed little to the discussion constructively. Rather, it often led to degrading exchanges, as the postings below show:

**Charles:** If Tony Blair was blown apart by a suicide bomber, I'd be over the moon and pay for drinks all around.

**Elizabeth:** And no doubt you claim the moral high ground in anti-war debates. Charming.

**Charles:** There'd be no room on that moral high ground, [Elizabeth]. Not with Blair on top and you groupies licking his shitty arse.

In this example, a debate on the Iraq War turns into an exchange of degrading remarks when Charles, in several postings, begins to us vulgar wisecracks, sarcasm and jokes to

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<sup>7</sup> The analysis is based on Shibles [13] taxonomy of humour.

<sup>8</sup> Forum identities have been replaced with invented ones.

express his anger and hostility towards Tony Blair, the British public and finally towards his fellow participants. Eventually, Elizabeth and other participants begin to take offence to Charles comments and reply accordingly.

The second aspect of humour was its social structure. As illustrated above, humour invites more humour. When a participant posted a joke, for example, it usually ignited a string of humorous comments; it was contagious. Humour here tended to stir more humour fostering lengthy exchanges or what may be called *humour fests*. Out of the 186 postings coded as humour, 86% or 160 postings were involved in humour fests. There were 32 fests. The average number was five with the largest totalling 16 postings.

The final aspect of humour was its relationship with certain variables of deliberation. As mentioned earlier, humour was used to criticize and assess politicians, government and society in general. In particular, participants used humour deliberately as a means of expressing and supporting their arguments or what may be called *rational humour*, as the posting by Mary below demonstrates:

**Mary:** [Edward] that news about the need Lord Kinnock being drafted in to mediate between No. 10 & 11 is quite quite barmy. They are supposed to be leaders. Instead, it's like warring schoolchildren using intermediaries,

"Neil, tell Gordon I'm not talking to him."

"Neil, tell Tony he's not worth talking to, he's finished here, his name is mud."

"Neil, tell Gordon I'm not setting a date, ner ner ner ner ner."

In this thread, participants were discussing the turmoil within the Labour Party. In this posting, Mary uses humour to expose the childish behaviour taking place between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Her humorous skit, which is used deliberately to stress and support her argument, serves as supporting evidence (a supposed example) to her claim. Rational humour represented slightly more than a third of humorous comments (63 comments) and nearly 10% of all reasoned claims.

Humour, however, did not always contribute constructively to a discussion. First, as mentioned above, humour often led discussions off the topic; 38% of humorous comments were off the topic of discussion. A participant would post a joke and a humour fest would ensue, leading discussions off the topic. In these cases, humour acted more as a distraction. Second, though the number of degrading comments was low (85 postings), when they did occur, humour played a significant role in fostering them; nearly one third of all degrading comments were humorous or a response to humour. Humour used to express anger and hostility was the primary culprit here. As the above postings demonstrated, it often led to degrading.

The second most frequent expressive used was emotional comments, accounting for 29% of expressives and appearing in 11% of the postings. Overall, the analysis revealed three notable aspects on the use of emotions: (1) their type; (2) their social structure; and (3) their relationship with certain variables of deliberation. Expressing negative emotions was the norm. In particular, anger was the most frequent emotion expressed; 79% of emotional comments expressed some form of anger.<sup>9</sup> Anger here was conveyed mostly through statements of disgust, irritation, rage and exasperation.

The second aspect of emotional comments was their social structure. Similar to humour, but to a lesser degree, emotional comments fuelled more comments that were

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<sup>9</sup> It is based on Shaver's et al. [14] categorization of primary and secondary emotions.

emotional in what can be called *rant sessions*. These were lengthy exchanges where participants vented their anger towards politicians in particular and the Labour Government in general. These types of exchanges were often raw and vulgar. Moreover, they tended to be polarized; they ranted together not at each other. Out of the 129 postings coded as emotional comments, 54 were involved in rant sessions. There were six sessions. The average number was nine with the largest totalling 22 postings.

The final aspect of emotional comments was their relationship with certain variables of deliberation. First, when participants expressed emotions, they were usually used in conjunction with arguments; 65% of all emotional comments were expressed via a participant's argument, or put differently, 13% of all arguments were emotional. Though emotions were used in a variety of ways within arguments, given the intense anger expressed overall, there was a tendency for these types of arguments to be abrasive and crude at times. However, these types of arguments were not ignored. Only two were neglected by fellow participants; arguments that used emotions were reciprocated. Finally, emotional comments played an important role in relation to discursive equality. Thirty-one percent of all emotional comments were used in a degrading way or 48% of all degrading comments expressed emotions.

The final expressive was acknowledgements. They accounted for 28% of expressives and appeared in 10% of the postings. There were five types of acknowledgements identified: complimenting (54%), greeting (24%), thanking (13%), apologizing (8%) and condoling (1%). Complimenting was the most common acknowledgement and tended to be directed towards another's argument or position in general. Participants commonly used statements such as, "nice post", "good point", "well said", "good analysis" and "good defence". However, participants rarely complimented a participant on an opposing side of an argument; complimenting was polarized. Most complements were given in-house, between those on the same side of an argument. Participants on opposing sides of a discussion simply avoided complementing the substances of opposing claims.

## 7 Assessing Political Talk: The Normative Analysis

To what extent did the Guardian satisfy the normative conditions of the process of deliberation of the public sphere? Overall, the Guardian did well in light of the normative conditions. In particular, the level of rationality, critical reflection, coherence, extended debate, reciprocity, and reflexivity were moderately high to high. However, the level of convergence and communicative empathy fell well short of the normative conditions.

The first condition, *rational-critical debate*, has been one of the most common conditions of deliberation employed by past studies. The research suggests high levels of rational-critical debate within a variety of forum types, structures and contexts [9, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20]. The results from the Guardian are consistent with these findings. The exchange of claims represented the guiding communicative form, which was overwhelmingly rational and regularly critical in nature, thus satisfying the normative condition.

Regarding *coherence*, research suggests directly or indirectly relatively coherent political talk [16, 18, 20] within online forums, particularly governmentally sponsored forums. The Guardian results are consistent with this, and more importantly, suggest that coherent discussions do not exclusively occur in governmentally sponsored and/or

strictly moderated forums. Overall, the level of coherence was high indicating that participants regularly stuck to the topic of discussion.

*Continuity* was assessed by determining both the level of extend debate and convergence. Regarding the former, the analysis revealed that extend-critical debate on the issues was the norm. However, this is inconsistent with past studies, which suggest that extended debate on a single topic is uncommon [19, 21]. One possible explanation is that these studies relied upon observations rather than any systematic operationalization of extended debate as the one conducted here. There does however seem to be a link with Beierle's [22] survey research, which suggests that participants develop a sense of responsibility to participate during the course of online discussion. It seems that to a certain extent this was the case in the Guardian. In terms of convergence, the few studies available all suggest directly or indirectly that online discussions rarely achieve acts of convergence [17, 18, 22, 23]. The results from the Guardian are consistent with these findings. In particular, less than a third of the lines of discussion ended in some form of agreement. Rather, Guardian participants typically withdrew from the discussions.

Regarding *reciprocity*, much of the literature reveals that for a variety of forum types, structures and contexts high levels of reciprocity [9, 16, 18, 20, 21, 22]. The results from the Guardian are consistent with these findings. In particular, the percentage of replies was high. However, such an approach neglects the social structure of the threads. Therefore, unlike these studies, the reply percentage indicator measurement was combined with a degree of centralization measurement as a means of providing a more comprehensive indicator. The combined analysis found that a substantial portion of threads maintain a high level of decentralized social interaction, indicating that a web of reciprocity was the norm.

*Reflexivity* was assessed by first determining the level of evidence use and then the level of reflexive exchanges. Overall, the level of evidence use within the Guardian was substantial with close to half of all arguments providing evidence in support of their claims. Regarding the latter, the results suggest that a substantial portion of arguments were involved in reflexive exchanges, which is inline with past studies [9, 16, 18, 24].

Regarding *empathy*, the results revealed that participants simply did not engage in empathetic exchange, falling well short of the condition. One possible explanation here may have something to do with the communicative atmosphere. The Guardian forum seemed to foster a competitive communicative environment. For example, when participants did degrade, curb and/or questioned another participant's sincerity, they tended to be personal, aggressive and even malicious at times. This along with the use of expressives, e.g. acknowledgements, seemed to foster a communicative environment where achieving deeper levels of understanding and/or acts of agreement were rare.

## **8 Beyond the Normative Conditions of Deliberation**

What role did expressives play within online political talk and in relation to the normative conditions of deliberation? Overall, the findings suggest that the use of expressives seemed to detract from the normative goals of deliberation.

Humour was the most common expressive used, appearing in 15% of the postings. This finding is consistent with past net-based public sphere research [9]. Humour was

frequently used to entertain. Though humour, for the most part, created a friendly and playful atmosphere among participants, particularly across argumentative lines, it often contributed little to the political discussions. In particular, humour usually invited more humour, igniting humour fests. These fests often took control of the discussion at the expense of the political topic. In other words, it acted as an impediment to coherence. The second most common pattern in the use of humour was to criticize, assess or provoke thought. Humour here was mostly constructive to the political discussions in question. In particular, rational humour was used to enhance and support rational-critical debate. Consequently, it tended to benefit political talk. The final pattern in the use of humour was to express hostility, anger or offence. The use of humour here was typically vulgar, crude and offensive and usually contributed little to the discussion constructively, but rather, it acted at times as a vehicle of discursive inequality. Consequently, humour here functioned more as an obstacle to political talk.

The level of emotions expressed was consistent with past net-based public sphere research [9]. Unlike humour, emotional comments contributed little constructively to political talk. The primary reason for this was due to the type and intensity of the emotions expressed. Nearly 80% of emotional comments expressed some form of anger. Moreover, anger was usually raw and intense.

First, though emotional comments were often expressed via rational-critical debate, given the intense anger that was prevalent, these types of arguments tended to be abrasive, vulgar and crude. As a result, they often contributed little beneficially to the discussions. Second, often these types of arguments ignited rant sessions. Here participants engaged less in reciprocal-critical exchange and more in relieving their anger by joining in on a rant with fellow participants. Though these types of rants may have provided some form of therapeutic relief, they usually added little value, in way of understanding, to the topic under discussion. Finally, as was the case with humour, emotional comments were a vehicle of discursive inequality. Nearly a third of emotional comments were used in a degrading way. On the whole, emotional comments did more to impede deliberation than advance it.

The final expressive was acknowledgements. The most common acknowledgement was compliments. Overall, acknowledgements tended to foster a friendly communicative atmosphere. In particular, participants regularly complimented and praised each other's arguments and positions. However, there was one catch to complimenting. Participants on different sides of argumentative lines simply did not compliment one another. Complimenting was polarized. In short, unlike Barnes' et al. [25] research on political talk via offline settings, which found that the use of greeting fostered a communicative space that enabled participants to express disagreement more productively, acknowledgements here, compliments in particular, tended to create an atmosphere that was counterproductive to deliberation.

## **9 Conclusion**

Overall, expressives were a common ingredient of political talk within the Guardian. The findings suggest that the use of expressives tended detract from the normative goals of deliberation. These findings should caution those deliberative scholars who advocate the

importance of expressives for deliberation. It seems that if one is interested in achieving normative goals, particularly within more semi-formal settings such as e-consolations, the use of expressives needs to be moderated in some fashion. However, I am not suggesting that we write expressives off as irrational or unimportant to deliberation. Humour for example played an integral role, making a distinct contribution to the use of reasoning. Moreover, the focus here was on everyday political talk, which is not bound to *politically* oriented forums as recent research suggests [26, 27, 28]. Consequently, different communicative environments may offer different insight into the use of expressives in relation to deliberation. For example, the findings suggest that the Guardian was a competitive environment, which seem to foster the use of expressives in a more impeding fashion. That said, this may not be the case elsewhere in the online communicative landscape where the discussions are less about ‘battles and victories’.

Normatively speaking, one of the difficulties with the literature on the public sphere and deliberation is that there lacks concrete benchmarks as to what satisfies the normative conditions (at the level of the forum as opposed to the individual post or thread). For example, does a forum where 50% of the claims are reasoned satisfy the normative condition of rationality? Much of the literature is vague when it comes to defining what is meant by e.g. high and low quality at the level of the forum, and yet we read about this forum maintaining a high level or that forum being deliberative. There have been few attempts, by scholars to define specific benchmarks. The analysis above represents an initial step. First, for reciprocity and convergence, specific benchmarks have been provided. Second, the criteria for establishing such benchmarks were given. Finally, though explicit benchmarks were not specified, normative judgments were made, which provides a basis for future research to build upon.

Finally, given the textual focus of this study, there are limitations as to what can be said about certain conditions of deliberation and on the role of expressives. Certain conditions of deliberation require more than an analysis of the text. Though the indicators created and utilized in this study proved useful, conditions such as reflexivity ideally require a mixed method approach. They require a combination of an analysis of the text alongside methods that gauge participants’ experiences, perceptions and feelings such as questionnaires and interviews. It is this mixed approach that represents the way forward for creating comprehensive indicators of deliberation for future research.

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