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You Say "Yes", I Say "No": Capturing and Measuring 'Public Opinion' through Citizens' Conversation Online (on the Russian-language LiveJornal Blogging Platform)

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Abstract: The paper presents the results of the empirical study devoted to mapping and measuring the aggregated political positions – viewed as a specific form of discursive public opinion – expressed by ordinary citizens on a discussion forum on the Russian internet. The study is considered as part of the broader inquiry into the field of online deliberations. New evidence is discussed in this regard by deepening the empirical side of claim making and validation through studying agreements and disagreements among online discussants using Jurgen Habermas' notion of validity claims to normative rightness. The claim-based approach has helped reveal, firstly, how participants problematize issues of public importance and what these issues are, and, secondly, which intersubjective solidarities (groups) participants form around these issues. The paper concludes by considering both the epistemic and pragmatic aspects of such results for better understanding the participatory value of public discussions online from a perspective of discursive sociology and public trust building.

*- You say "Yes", I say "No".
You say "Stop" and I say "Go, go, go".
Oh no.
You say "Goodbye" and I say "Hello, hello, hello".
I don't know why you say "Goodbye", I say "Hello, hello, hello".
I say "High", you say "Low".
You say "Why?" And I say "I don't know".
Oh no.
You say "Goodbye" and I say "Hello, hello, hello".
THE BEATLES - HELLO GOODBYE song
By LENNON/ MCCARTNEY*

1 Theoretical and analytical framework

The paper continues testing the practicability of Jurgen Habermas' notion of basic validity claims – as part of his broader theories of communicative action, discourse ethics and, of course, the public sphere –for studying online discourses from a partici-

patory democracy perspective. While the Habermasian conceptualization of the public sphere has been met with grounded criticism insisting, for example, that there are many public spheres for different social strata rather than just ‘bourgeois’ one and that the very concept is excessively idealized imposing the ‘ideal speech situation’ conditions that are impossible to meet in real world [for example, 27, 9, 4], still the democratic value of the public sphere remains as strong as ever, especially in the digital age, which has markedly redrawn the boundaries of the traditional offline publicness. The research that has emerged at the crossroads of new media and the public sphere concept appears to be strong and expanding [2, 10, 25, 28, 29, 30].

1.1 Reaffirming democratic value of the pluralistic public sphere

Habermas’ views on the public sphere have also evolved significantly since his original book *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society* was published decades ago. In his later work, he replaced a previous – impossible to implement – requirement for the total participatory equality and inclusiveness with a more realistic condition of non-exclusion [16]. In other words, a condition to engage all those capable of participating in public discourses was no longer necessary. However, the condition of equal participation was still valid; that is, those citizens who are willing to participate should not be excluded from participation, which in turn must be free, non-coerced and safe from intentional self-deception [3, 15].

While Habermas admits that the public sphere is pluralistic by nature, he also insists that disparate public spheres co-constitute each other and thus generate ‘emancipatory potential’ rather than simply co-exist independently. He demonstrated that using an example of ‘plebeian’ sphere, which existed in the 19th century alongside with that of the elitist bourgeois one. It was pluralistic in terms that the elitist public sphere could only exist – and distinguish itself – against the background of other public spheres attributed to the social groups excluded from the mainstream one [12, p. 426-7]. Thus Habermas makes a special call to recognise the importance of the public culture and its space created by the ordinary people.

1.2 The virtual public sphere as a space for democratic communication

The Internet as a virtual public sphere [6, 256] has attracted the endless numbers of ordinary people to express themselves on the similarly endless number of topics including those of public interest. It is a highly pluralistic public sphere. Many online communities, as well as sub- and counter-cultures that could not have proper place and role in the public communication realm dominated by the corporate mass media in the offline world have emerged and expanded on the Internet ignoring state and social boundaries [1, 7, 8, 10, 19, 20].

This research attempts to study the political culture of the common, ordinary people, of the laymen, who are not professional politicians but nonetheless are active in civic terms online and often offline too. It is essential to know whether the causal online conversations are deliberative in the Habermasian democratic, participatory

sense; whether they have an epistemic value and whether they can be studied, for example, sociologically, i.e. as discursively constructed expressed ‘opinions’ – or even public mood – and to which extent such ‘opinion’ is ‘public’. If so, how can it be mapped and measured?

Habermas makes a clear link between the public sphere and the opinion within it, or rather many opinions. This is how he describes the public sphere sociologically:

‘The public sphere can best be described as a network for communicating information and points of view (i.e., opinions expressing affirmative or negative attitudes); the streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesized in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified *public* opinions. Like the lifeworld as a whole, so, too, the public sphere is reproduced through communicative action; it is tailored to the general comprehensibility of everyday communicative practice’ [14, p. 360).

He also notes, that while it is a basic (elementary) ‘social phenomenon such as action, actor, association, it does not carry a traditional sociological concept of “social order”. It is so because it is not a system, organization or institution and therefore does not have an underlying ‘framework of norms’ on which memberships, competencies, roles are based upon. The public sphere is a dynamic communicative structure, with the constantly shifting horizons. Otherwise speaking, the public sphere discourses can be described through the streams of circulating opinions.

In this light, the public sphere emerges as a linguistically constituted space of communication actors who generate intersubjective solidarities as a result of their ‘cooperatively negotiated interpretations’ by ‘taking positions on mutual speech act offers and assuming illocutionary obligations’ [14, pp. 361-2], i.e. through issuing affirmative or negative statements. Discourse participants mutually grant each other communicative freedom to say “Yes” and “No” and thus to claim certain “truths” as they see it according to their morals and ethics. Habermas believes that by doing so discourse participants grant mutual communicative freedom to each other. This space, for Habermas, must be open in principle ‘for potential partners who are present as bystanders or could come on the scene and join those present’ (14, p. 361). This observation well describes Internet discussions that are full of so called ‘lurkers’ who observe the discussion but contribute rather occasionally.

However, it is not entirely clear how the public sphere opinions can be revealed and understood, let alone reliably measured. One of the options is the use of so called basic validity claimed borrowed from Habermas’ ethics discourse theory. Validity claims are the discursive vehicles via which participants connect their personal real-world practices with broader worldview perspectives communicatively. The study is thus focused on collecting empirical evidence with regards to the ‘opinions’ generated in the virtual public sphere(s).

1.3 Analytical value of basic validity claims

Basic validity claims are reciprocal and discursive instruments to realise (a rational) communicative (speech) acts. While they are linguistically constructed, their main value semantic in conveying the indirect, intended meaning beyond language aimed at

reaching understanding with ‘someone with regard to something’ in Habermas’ terminology. The act of claim making is the articulation of a position, demonstration of certain reasons behind the speech act, transmission of an intentional meaning. Eventually, the speaker seeks the reciprocal validation of the proposed meaning by other discourse participations. From that perspective, claim validation is a rational (logical) exercise rather than linguistic; it is often a moral and ethical act as well to represent a certain worldview. The act of claim validation requires understanding the intentional meaning so as to reveal what is claimed and the reasons behind the claim. It is a subsequent communicative action undertaken by a respondent who is interested in the claim and is ready to respond. Claims are recognised when they validated by a response, but not necessarily agreement [21, 22].

According to Habermas, there are three main types of validity claims reflecting three respective communicative worlds, namely: (1) validity claims that claim propositional truth about the objective world, (2) validity claims that claim normative rightness of certain groups, and (3) validity claims that claim subjective truthfulness about personal intentions (see more on how validity claims can be classified in [22]).

This research focuses on the second type, i.e. the claims to normative rightness. This is the main vehicle of intersubjective communication through speech acts that helps coordinate social actions, seek mutual understanding (not necessarily consensus), and build solidarities among communicators. Such claims manifest public reasoning which emerges as an act of reciprocal recognition among individuals in an ordinary, everyday communicative practice, including on the Internet. As a result, participants construct intersubjective social solidarities, i.e. fluid groups based on shared values as a basis for claiming group-specific interests. This is effectively a reflection of more stable value-based shared social (and political) worlds that exist in a particular society.

The empirical framework of the study is designed to show how the validity claims to normative rightness are used to reveal and measure public opinion discursively.

2 Empirical framework

The main research question has been to test the hypothesis that the validity claims to normative rightness can be used to (a) map out and measure the prevailing opinions expressed by discussants, and (b) disclose issue-based solidarities formed by them and, as a result, reveal political preferences that emerge in the course of online deliberations. In addition, it was assumed (following the previous research in this field) that the articulation of disagreements is the main content of the validation act that drives the debate forward. Otherwise speaking, the assumption was that participants in online discourses prefer to communicate with those holding opposite positions.

2.1 Case study description and research approach

The case study was taken from the discussion happened on the Russian-speaking blogging platform LiveJournal (<http://nytimesinmoscow.livejournal.com/2245.html>)

following a publication on 22 February 2008 by the New York Times of an article criticizing President Putin (his first term in office) for curtailing democracy in Russia. Over 3,000 comments were posted within just a few days by the Russian readers. Some of them were translated into English and posted on the paper's own web site, where, too, a hot discussion unfolded (these were not included into the research analysis). The content of the first 189 out of 3,398 all posted messages was coded to (i) reveal validity claims to normative rightness and (ii) assess the discussion deliberative quality including such parameters as civility. The previous research revealed that a relatively small sample of minimum 70-100 posts is generally sufficient for meaningful discourse analysis. Of these 189 posts, the first 100 were analyzed to find out the dominant issues raised by the participants and the solidarity groups that are formed around such issues.

The following parameters were used to code the content: (1) unique three-digit identifier of the post; (2) openly uncivil posts; (3) validity claims manifested via (a) agreement and (b) disagreement with others' claims; (4) thematic orientation of validity claims. Each claim – both validated and not validated – was numbered in a chronological order. For example, the coding format “VC-55//3-3-1=*The article is untruthful (Статья неправдивая)*” means that “VC-55” is the validity claim number 55; a three-digit sequence “3-3-1” tells it is the 1st post (last digit) of the author number 3 (middle digit) and that it was the 3rd post in a row among all participants. The text “=*The article is untruthful*” is the post's intended meaning that the author does not agree with the article. The post also contains another claim made by the same author “VC-56//3-3-1=*America should better deal with its democracy (Америке лучше заниматься своей демократией)*”, which problematizes the issue of broader Russia-American relations. Its intended meaning is to dismiss the paper's opinion of the state of democracy in Russia as unimportant. Others can validate this claim by agreeing or disagreeing with it in a simplified form *For* and *Against*, in the spirit of Habermasian positive and negative attitudes.

All claims were coded in the order of their formulation by the authors, including those that were not validated later. Linguistically, there can be various options to formulate the problematized issue; however, as long as it does not affect significantly the intended meaning of the utterance and falls under the same thematic domain, such differences are acceptable. To choose the right wording usually helps the respondent's perspective; that is, how the claim is perceived at the validation step when the underlying meaning is accepted via agreement or rejected through disagreement.

2.2 Analysis

Thematic categorization was applied only to those claims that have been validated by others with the clearly visible affirmative or negative attitude. This also means that the overall number of validation acts is always smaller than the number of claims made. It is up to the participants to decide which claims to validate. Overall, 59 participants made 189 posts; 10% of all the posted messages were uncivil and explicitly rude (and often personal); 70% of the posts contained claims to normative rightness, which amounted to as many as 179 claims (unique and repeated), of which 147 claims

were validated (it can be said that the discussion was sufficiently dialogic and reciprocal); 76% (112) were the unique validation acts (the same claim can be validated more than once by a number of participants); 2/3 of claims were validated via disagreement; 10 of 189 posts were discounted on the grounds of either personal character or subjectless, few were deleted by their authors themselves later.

On average, there were 3 posts per participant, which is in line with other discussions analyzed by the author earlier. This means that more posts does not necessarily lead to the increase in deliberative quality. The debate was sufficiently civil, with 1 in 10 posts openly uncivil (usually personal ones), which is also in line with other Internet discussions of much larger size (the percentage of uncivil posts is typically within the range of 6-17 %). The discussion was dialogical, for 4 of 5 claims were validated. It should be noted that both claims and their subsequent validation are sometimes repeated; that is, different participants can pick up on the same claims, which is natural in such discussions. The share of unique validation acts was 76%. Also, 2/3 were validated by disagreement confirming my previous findings that discussants in an anonymous virtual talk prefer interacting with the differently minded people, not with the like minded as is often the case in the offline world.

Thematically categorized were only validated claims via agreement or disagreement. The construction of claim development chain was as follows: if the author "A" in the claim number 1 "VC-1" expressed disagreement, for example, with the paper's stance in relation to the state of democracy in Russia, this author was included into an intersubjective solidarity *Against* the newspaper. If another author "B" in her claim number "VC-10" supported the paper's view, then she became a virtual member of another solidarity that was *For* the paper. Otherwise speaking, even without direct communication these participants disagree on a certain issue. Anyone else who disagreed with the author "A" was automatically in agreement with the author "B" (unless other claims were made). Figure 1 below illustrates the dialogical process using a real example. The generalized logic of claim development is schematically presented in Figure 2.

Agreements and disagreements are mutually intertwined and even interdependent. They have little sense viewed in isolation from the preceding interactions and claims already made. For example, a participant number 18 claims via VC-38 that there will be no Black Tuesday in Russia any more, and thus supports the government's economic policies – i.e. being *For* authorities, while another participant number 40 disagrees claiming that the Black Tuesday will certainly arrive again (claim VC-39) and that Putin leads the country towards a catastrophe (claim VC-40); he is then *Against* the government's economic policies. In response, the participant 18 defends the previous position in favour of the authorities by providing an argument that until now Putin did not commit serious errors and therefore deserves support (claim VC-41), noting that the tragedies of Beslan and Kursk submarine are not significant in comparison with the end of the Chechen war (claim VC-42). The latter claim is fiercely disputed by a participant number 42 (claim VC-42) who joins the group of those who are against the government.

As a consequence, agreeing and disagreeing leads to the formation of issue-based intersubjective solidarities; that is, the groups that unite participants around acceptance or rejection of something. If, for example, a participant 1 claims disagree-

ment with the article regarding democracy in Russia – then he finds a group of those who are *Against* (rejection) the paper’s policy. If another participant 3 claims disagreement with participant 1 in his criticism, then he belongs to another group which members are united in their solidarity that is *For* (support) the paper’s view point. If then participants 5 claims disagreement with participant 3, and participant 6 agrees with participant 1, while participant 8 also agrees with participant 5, they all are part of the same group *Against* that unites the critics of the newspaper, and in some case America in general. Thus joining this solidarity is possible not only via direct agreement with these critics but also via indirect disagreement with those who reject article; the participants don’t need to interact directly to be part of the same issue-based solidarity. In other words, it is possible reveal a bigger picture behind agreements and disagreement.

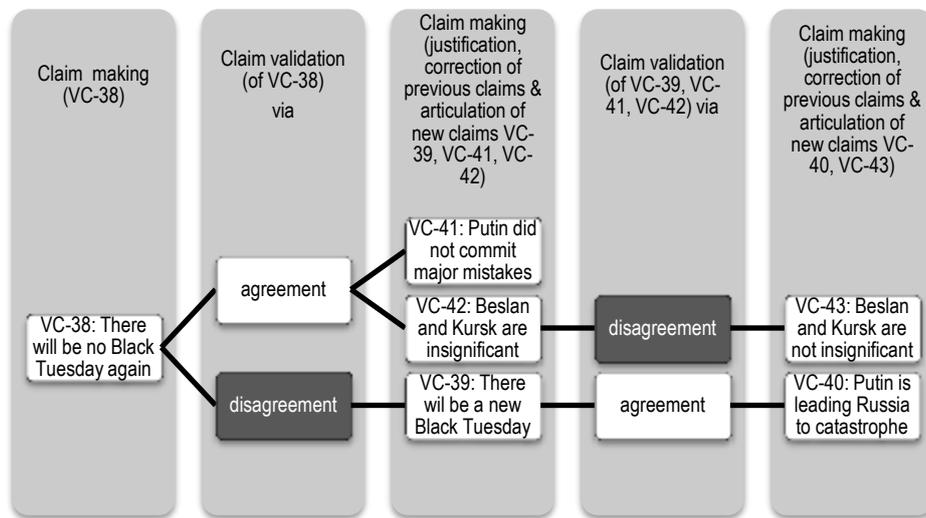


Fig. 1. Example of claim making and validation

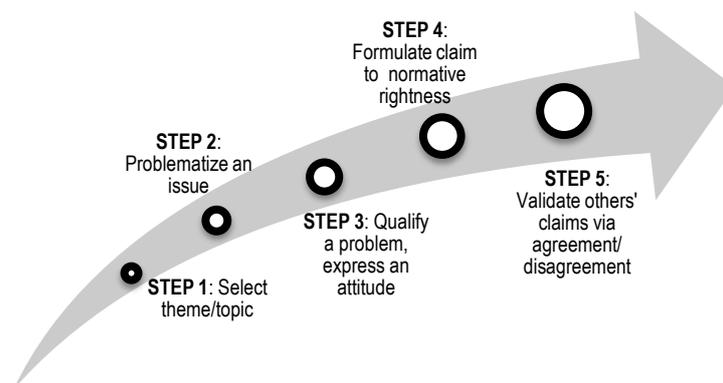


Fig. 2. Claim development logic

A range of issues and related inter-subjective solidarities has been revealed as a result of the online discussion. As a result, it's been possible to identify not only the range of issues that they were interested in, but also their attitudes towards these issues. There were six such issues: (1) Putin's policies, (2) Russian government's policies, (3) role of Russian democrats in general and human rights defenders in particular, (4) the *New York Times* newspaper that published the article, (5) politics and the state of democracy in America and (6) Russia's military policy.

Using this approach, it has been possible not only reveal the issues that the participants problematize themselves during the debate, but – more importantly – to measure the extent of their support or the lack of it. For example, the least support has been demonstrated in relation to the oppositionally (and by default in the participants' eyes) democratically minded human right activists – just 6%. Also, little support was expressed for the *New York Times* paper, which criticized Putin. However, against this background, 24% of support given to America and its democracy was rather paradoxical (see Figure 3).

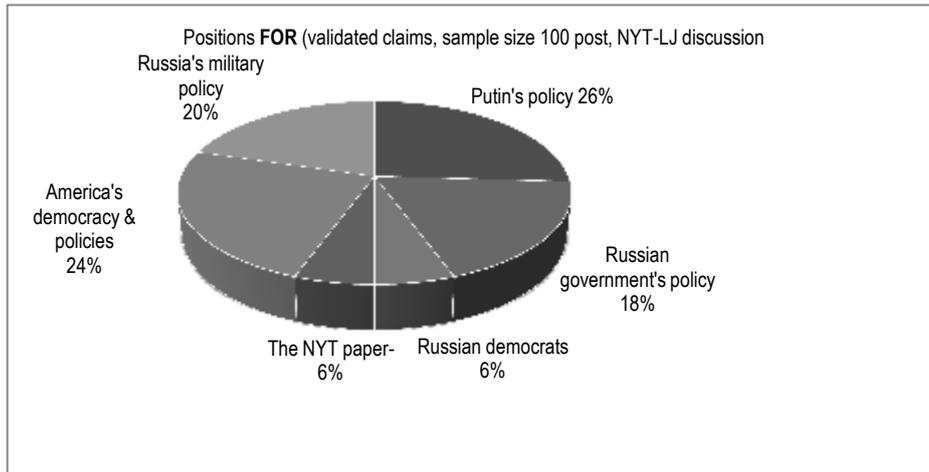


Fig. 3. Distribution of discursively articulated Yes (For) positions by discussion themes

Positions “Against” produce naturally similar outcomes, especially regarding Putin's policies – he is the least criticized political actor, while the attitude towards the government was much more negative, as well in relation to Russia's military policies (roughly 20% of all positions). America was criticized most of all – almost 40%. While the participants found positive features of American democracy, the negative assessment prevails (see Figure 4).

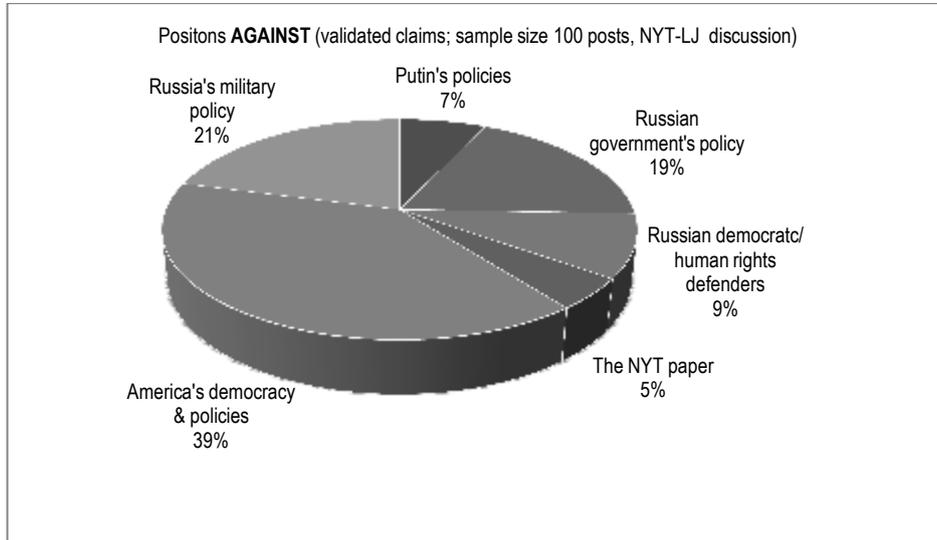


Fig. 4. Distribution of discursively articulated No (Against) positions by discussion themes

The claim-based method allows also measuring the discursively expressed ‘opinion’ about the problematized issues by the size of supportive solidarities. Overall, the distribution of position-based intersubjective solidarities formed by participants mirror the distribution of the positions themselves (see Figures 5 and 6).

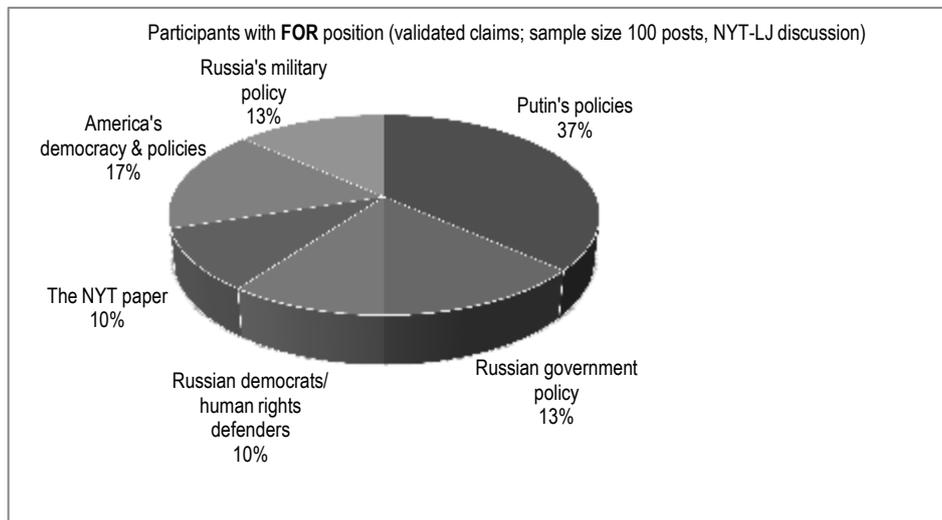


Fig. 5. Distribution of holders of discursively articulated Yes (For) positions by discussion themes

The most numerous was the group supporting Putin (37% of all participants), and the least represented was that in support of the Russian human rights defenders (10%). In the same vein, a group with a negative attitude towards America was the largest (37%), while the group that did not like Putin's policies was among the smallest comprising 11% of all participants. Again, paradoxically, the percentage of those who criticized the *New York Times* was even smaller.

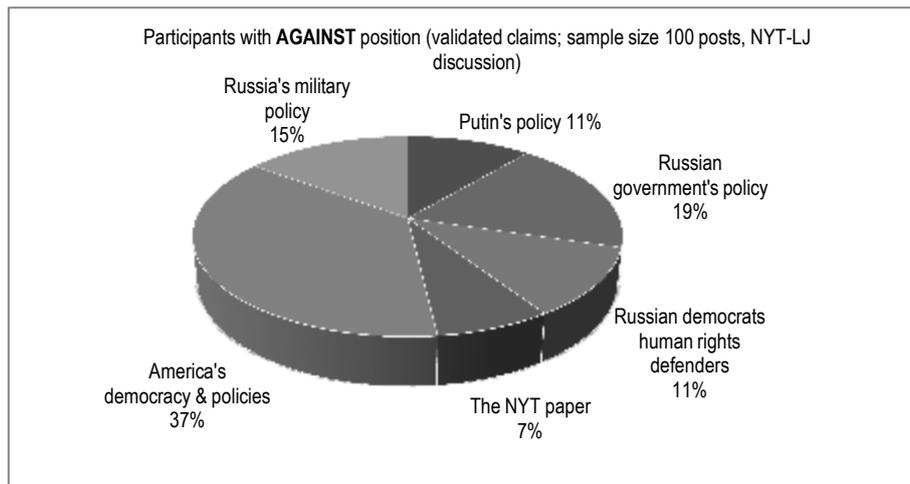


Fig. 6. Distribution of holders of discursively articulated No (Against) positions by discussion themes

3 Conclusions

It can be concluded that the validity claims to normative rightness are useful to (a) capture an intended meaning of utterances, (b) assess how deliberative are online debates, (c) measure the scope of public opinion discursively, (d) reveal issue-based intersubjective solidarities. It has been confirmed that disagreements are indeed the discourse drivers.

Overall, the research, regardless of its limitations (e.g. the small sample), has demonstrated not only the analytical efficacy of claims to normative rightness in underpinning the deliberative quality of online debates, but also its practical usefulness in measuring the discursively articulated public opinion. Yet it still needs to be seen how public such opinion is and even more importantly whether it is an opinion in the first place.

The questions for future research could include:

- How different is this discursive form of 'public opinion' from the traditional opinions measured by more traditional sociological polls based on representative samples or random focus groups; can it be part of the emerging sociology of cyberspace (Hi05) or of a discursive sociology? Karen Sanders [4], for example, distinguishes the discursive (consensual) definition of public opinion, which is

formed via communicative practices that split society into communities (referring to Susan Herbst) as one of the four models of public opinion (three others are based on (1) majoritarian principles; (2) rejection of the existence of the public opinion as such; and (3) aggregation and measurement of data from sociological polls/public opinion surveys).

- Can the conversational form of online discussions be (a) recognized and (b) mainstreamed both into formal politics and decision-making, including into policy modeling?
- What else can be learned by studying such discussions? Can it be used, not abused, for agenda setting and policy making? (We know from history that mass participation can be controversial). How to move from political mobilization toward democratic socialization and collaboration across communities and civic cultures? Can that help to overcome the “majoritarian tyranny”?

From the Habermasian perspective, the traditional mass media are too influenced by the power forces and thus reflect only a mediated “quasi public opinion”. They are not able to engage in earnest the masses of informal, non-organized citizens and their fundamentally “non-public” views and opinions that have emerged in a specific cultural context [12, p. 440]. Therefore, discussing politics is essential not only to ensure and expand democratic pluralism, but also to soften the growing polarization of a modern society via a multi-level and multi-purpose system of the public dialogue. Public communications in the Internet’s anonymous virtual environment can be an enabling factor to build trust between the strangers, which is critically important for democratic socialization and public trust – the very basis of democracy [5, 24].

The jury is still out whether such a conversational form of online discussions has legitimate democratic (socialization) value. These they do not necessarily always rational in the strict Habermasian sense, but the very act of participation is a conscious rational choice. It is clear, however, that the extremely large scale of such debates and the seriousness on the part of their participants cannot be ignored if a society continues to remain democratic and maintain public trust by demonstrating the respect to the Other, to the unknown Stranger.

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