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Self-Governance on Trial: A Public Sphere Analysis of News Website Forum Comments

Abstract

The online public sphere offers society an opportunity to pursue self-governance through rational-critical discourse of public issues. However, testing the effectiveness of the sphere involves studying the structure of the online forum (e.g. whether the forum allows for pseudonymous comments or not) and the quality of the content in the forum. This research studied online news forums on the topics of gun control and civil unions in Colorado to see what barriers to participating in the forum might exist in the structure of the forum and then what types of content was produced in the forum. The research showed that a forum allowing commenters to use a pseudonym led to comments with more exchange and critique of reasoned normative positions and use of supporting facts. However, neither the pseudonymous forum nor the identified forum had stronger levels of commitment to constructive dialogue in the forum. Also, commenters showed no reflexivity in their comments, meaning that participants were not assessing their own positions or changing their perspectives based on the arguments of others. While this shows that reducing barriers to accessing the forum helps to produce a public sphere environment, there is still work to be done in improving the level of constructive dialogue and stimulating negotiation and consensus building.

Keywords: Anonymity, online forums, Public sphere.

The Internet has changed the way that individuals communicate and has provided new opportunities for citizens to deliberate together in the pursuit of self-governance. This idealistic approach to public discourse in democracy, as postulated prior to the age of the Internet in the theory of the public sphere (Habermas, 1962), carries many assumptions about the ability of the individual to participate in the conversation, the nature of the conversation, the intent of the individuals participating in the conversation, and the ultimate outcome of the conversation. Whether an online conversation can approach the idealistic goals of the public sphere is as yet an untested assumption, but researchers have come closer to understanding the democratic potential of the Internet by looking at the ability of the individual to access public forums, the quality of the conversation in those forums, and the ultimate ability of the participants to reach consensus on public issues (Brundidge, 2010; Dahlberg, 2001; Dahlgren, 2005; Papacharissi, 2002). The purpose of this case study is to explore how news website forums facilitate conversations on public issues as compared with the ideal of the public sphere through the textual analysis of news website forum conversations about gun control and civil unions.

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The online public forum, when linked to a news story about an important public issue, has the potential to serve as a public sphere for participants seeking self-governance. Previous research shows that online forum participants, when presented with a highly-controversial topic, were more likely to offer reasons for their opinions, reference each other's ideas, and directly respond to each other (Freelon, et al., 2008). This research looks at structural attributes of how the forum is built in order to see if structure and access factors – such as the ability to speak with a pseudonym – influence the quality of the public conversation. This is studied through the hot-button issues of gun control and civil unions because of the contentious nature of the conversations, but also because of the necessity for a public conversation about these topics.

The Habermasian Public Sphere

Jürgen Habermas first postulated the theory of the public sphere in 1962 in order to tie the argument made by previous critical scholars that discourse could emancipate society from economic and political powers with his own assumption that the public could self-govern through discourse (Habermas, 1962; Marx, 1867; Hegel, 1812-1813; Kant, 1784). Habermas also relied on the argument of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno that each individual possesses the desire to pursue a rational society founded on reason (Horkheimer, 1937; Adorno, 1966). Habermas took this a step further in order to develop the public sphere concept by advocating that individuals pursuing self-governance could come together through rational-critical discourse in an attempt to liberate themselves from economic and political powers in society (Habermas, 1962).

The public sphere is advanced as an effective normative theory of deliberative democracy because, despite how ideal the values might be, it assumes three things: the presence of citizens who possess communicative competence, equal access for all potential participants, and separation from state and economic powers in the forum (Habermas, 1979; Habermas 1962; Hohendahl, 1979). The public sphere is often criticized for the same reasons – notably because it assumes that a forum can exist in which all citizens can actively access and participate equally (Hohendahl, 1979). Critics claim that the public sphere makes a broad assumption that certain minorities in society have an equal ability to access the sphere. This argument is often made in the historical case of the French Revolution, which lacked female participation, but was held out as a plausible case of the public sphere by Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Landes, 1988; Habermas, 1962).

Normative Journalism Theory

Journalism might play a role in developing the kind of forum for public discourse that could come close to meeting the expectations of the public sphere. Connecting the public sphere to the role of the journalist requires normative journalism theory about the expected role of the journalist, which can be broken down into four roles: monitorial, facilitative, radical, and collaborative (Christians et al., 2009). Under the Facilitative Role, it is expected that the journalist will provide the individual with an outlet through which to express oneself with

the goal of collective understanding and improving one's community through democratic pluralism (2009, p. 158-159). This is an expression of a journalist's expectation of his or her own role within the creation and maintenance of the public sphere. However, Habermas' criticism of the commercial mass media and the creation of a mass culture in society would go against the belief that a corporate entity could create a true public sphere because of the corporation's economic influence on that sphere (Habermas, 1962, p. 188-189; Carey 1995).

Criticism of online democratic dialogue

Beyond the mere creation of the public sphere in society, there is also a dispute whether the public sphere can be realized through democratic discourse online (Papacharissi, 2002). The Internet may create new opportunities for citizens to communicate with others, access new information, and create niche conversations about public issues; but there is no guarantee that all members of the public will have equal access to the conversation, that the conversation will be diverse, or that the members will be willing to participate in rational-critical discourse (Papacharissi, 2002). Researchers found that those who are educated and affluent typically dominate online forums rather than those who are less educated and less wealthy – who often lack access to the Internet. Participants in online conversations also tend to be white, employed, and male (Baek, Wojcieszak, & Delli Carpini, 2011). This undermines the legitimacy of the Internet as a forum for inclusive and egalitarian deliberation.

Operationalizing the public sphere online

The Habermasian public sphere assumes that the public can seek self-governance through the creation of an inclusive, diverse, egalitarian forum that promotes rational-critical discourse (Habermas, 1962). The concept of the public sphere can be broken down into three dimensions: structures, representation, and interaction (Dahlgren, 2005). When applied to online forums, the structural dimension is defined as how the forum is built in terms of "legal, social, economic, cultural, technical, and even Web-architectural features." The representation dimension refers to the output of the media in terms of "fairness, accuracy, completeness, pluralism of views, agenda setting, ideological tendencies, modes of address, and so forth." A weak structure can have effects on the representation within the content. Finally, the interaction dimension consists of citizen interaction with the media and with each other (Dahlgren, 2005, p. 149).

An initial assessment of the content within a possible public sphere begins by categorizing the forum based on who can access the sphere, how individuals can express themselves, and whether a responsive relationship exists between the participants (Bennett, 2004; Ferree, 2002). One can assess both the structural issues and the content issues by evaluating four features of the sphere: Does the forum allow for mediated discourse? Does the forum allow for previously excluded, or new, discussants? Are issues political in nature? And are the ideas judged on their merit rather than by the individual source (Poor, 2005)? Dahlberg took this a step further by operationalizing six key concepts that allow for a more in-depth assessment of the content: "exchange and critique of reasoned moral-practical validity claims," "reflexivity," "ideal role

taking,” “sincerity,” “discursive inclusion and equality,” and “autonomy from state and economic power” (Dahlberg, 2001, p. 623). These concepts cover the important issues of developing a reasoned argument, showing a willingness to consider the views of another, participating in a constructive dialogue, stating relevant facts to back up one’s opinion, and providing opportunities for all members of the community to participate in the forum. This test has been amended by others to allow for a textual assessment of specific instances of the absence or presence of qualities expressed by Dahlberg (el-Nawawy & Khamis, 2011).

The Online Public Sphere

Researchers have attempted to compare the quality of online discussion to that of face-to-face conversation with mixed results. Sunstein (2001; 2007) argued that “group polarization” would cause like-minded individuals to gather online in order to engage in conversation only with those whom they agree with. This phenomenon, he states, will cause individuals to pursue even more extreme viewpoints because of confidence and corroboration within the group (Sunstein, 2007, p. 66). However, other researchers have found that online political discussion and online news use contribute to a more heterogeneous political discussion than face-to-face conversation (Brundidge, 2010). Brundidge (2010) also found that some partisan discussion members were constructing barriers for conversation with social boundaries that made “exposure to political difference less likely” (p. 695). Much like in face-to-face conversations, political discussions online often happen in places that are not inherently political. Individuals who entered non-political forums online reported engaging in political discussions with individuals with whom they disagreed (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009).

Online deliberation participants are more likely to see their conversations as being diverse than those who have conversations face-to-face, and there are possibilities for increased inclusiveness in online conversation for those in communities with little diversity (Baek, Wojcieszak, & Delli Carpini, 2011). Researchers found that political moderates are just as likely as ideologues to participate in online deliberation – meaning that the potential for civic engagement could be high. However, participants also self-report lower levels of political engagement than those who deliberate in a face-to-face environment (Baek, Wojcieszak, & Delli Carpini, 2011). In an experiment looking at how individuals deliberate in conversations surrounding a highly controversial topic or a consensus topic, researchers found that individuals presented with a highly controversial topic were more likely to offer reasons for their opinions, reference the ideas of their peers in their own statements, directly respond to one another, and use insults (Freelon, et al., 2008). The experimental study also found no difference in the individual’s willingness to participate in online discourse depending on the individual’s stated political identity (Freelon, et al., 2008).

Structural Issues

Habermas (1962) placed great emphasis on the importance of the individual’s ability to access the public sphere in order to lend credibility to the sphere. From a historical perspective, he believed that a sphere could not exist if individuals were “*eo ipso* excluded” (Habermas, 1962,

p. 85). Dahlgren (2005) argues that access to the sphere is highly dependent on how spheres of deliberation are structured, which is a product of the democratic values of the society.

“A society where democratic tendencies are weak is not going to give rise to healthy institutional structures for the public sphere, which in turn means that the representational dimension will be inadequate.” (Dahlgren, 2005, p. 149)

Pseudonymous commenting. Many news websites allow visitors to interact with one another in a conversation related to the content by facilitating a public discussion board. These public forums have typically allowed participants to keep their identity secret to the other participants; however, many news organizations are now requiring participants to sign-in to a major social networking site (e.g. Facebook.com) in order to comment. These social network sites require users to use their real names, then pass that information on to the news website which then posts the comment with the participants’ real names. The growing trend of removing pseudonymous commenting options from news websites (e.g., *The Buffalo News* and *Voice of San Diego*) is supported under the belief that commenters will contribute higher quality content if they are required to use their real name, however, there is no research into whether using one’s real name does lead to higher-quality content (Reader, 2012; Sullivan, 2010).

Pseudonymity and the Internet. An individual’s full name gives social meaning to the others they interact with, and there are many ways in which individuals attempt to mask some part of that meaning by purposely not disclosing a certain aspect of their identity. There are multiple types of “identity knowledge” – as one can expose their legal name, their location, a pseudonym linked to their name or location, a pseudonym not linked to any identifying information, and/or a social categorization of one’s identity (Marx, 1999).

Research shows that the ability to speak anonymously or pseudonymously helps to break down power structures and, specifically, women are more likely to take advantage of reduced social cues in order to continue to not only mask their identity, but also their gender. Women were also more likely to attempt to represent themselves using traditional male social cues (Flanagin, et al., 2002). In another study, researchers found that individuals placed in an anonymous online brainstorming group were more likely to give criticism of others because there was no fear of retribution (Nunamaker, et al., 1996). Researchers found that despite allowing for a lower-threat environment, anonymity in online group communication also leads to an increase in dysfunctional behavior. However, this effect can be controlled to some extent by an active conversation facilitator who attempts to diminish the negative comments (Pinsonneault & Heppel, 1996). An analysis of online reader comments in response to a news organization’s decision to ban anonymous comments found that commenters appreciated speaking anonymously for three salient reasons: in order to allow the public to speak truth to powerful institutions, to protect individual privacy while allowing for free expression, and as a self-liberating and cathartic experience (Reader, 2012).

However, research has also shown some support for the discounting hypothesis – that anonymous speakers are perceived to be less credible and less trustworthy in online group communication. There was no significant difference in the credibility or trustworthiness of anonymous sources as compared to identified sources, however, when controlling for perceived anonymity (whether the participant perceives the individual to actually be anonymous) there was greater support for the discounting hypothesis (Rains, 2007a). This shows that when readers perceive the speaker to be anonymous and have great trouble identifying any charac-

teristics of who the speaker might be, the participant is more likely to see the speaker as being less credible and less trustworthy (Rains, 2007a). In another study by Rains (2007b), participants rated health information gathered from an anonymous source to be just as credible and influential as information gathered from an identified source. The researcher believed that this result may have occurred because participants may have believed that sources had no motivation to post false and harmful information, so the information presented – whether from an anonymous or identified source – must have been well-intentioned (Rains, 2007b).

Online disinhibition. Because of the physical and emotional distance that exists between individuals communicating online, there is a belief that individuals will feel less of a need to conform to social norms out of fear of disapproval and that there will be a perception of the absence of any authority figures. This perception leads to online disinhibition, in which individuals are more likely to openly express themselves, even when those expressions include hostilities or deviant statements. The online disinhibition effect is expected to be strongest when individuals perceive themselves to be anonymous to others (Suler, 2004). When researchers looked at discursive anonymity, which was defined as the non-disclosure of personal information which might identify the speaker, younger participants and women were more likely to disclose information when their actual identity was masked – which supports the online disinhibition effect (Hollenbaugh, 2013).

The structure of the news website public forum plays an integral part in the initial establishment of the public sphere. A researcher cannot determine whether a public forum is an instance of the public sphere by studying the quality of the content alone. The researcher must also look at the structural aspects of the forum – whether the forum is inclusive and egalitarian and whether the forum is free from political and economic elites that dictate the conversation. In order to study all these aspects of the forum, the researcher compared and contrasted the forums with the ideal of the public sphere while also identifying specific content characteristics that are representative of a conversation in the public sphere.

RQ1: How do the characteristics of the structure of news website public forums align with the values of the Habermasian public sphere?

RQ2a: How do conversations about gun control and civil unions on a news website public forum align with the values of the Habermasian public sphere?

RQ2b: How does the content of the public forum exhibit reasoned critique and exchange of normative positions on gun control and civil unions?

RQ2c: How do public forum participants use reflexivity and ideal role taking to adjust and advance their normative positions on gun control and civil unions?

Study design

This analysis is based on a case study of two daily newspaper websites and their public forums in order to explore the characteristics of news public forums that most align with the public sphere. A case study allows the researcher to study a contemporary phenomenon using real-world context and multiple sources of data to test a theoretical proposition through an in-depth, holistic analysis of selected cases (Yin, 2003). The researcher also conducted an analysis of the structure of the news forums and a textual analysis of the comments left in the forums.

The newspaper websites were chosen based on their status on a key structural component of the public sphere: access to the forum. Using the forum as a unit of analysis and gauging the websites on this one component allows the researcher to determine if there exists a best method for allowing effective access to a public forum. This is defined as “effective access” because no individuals are being denied access *ipso facto*, but social facts surrounding access may chill free expression. Access to the forum is determined by the website’s policy on whether members of the public can speak with a pseudonym or not. The following news websites were chosen for the study based on their anonymity policy:

- *The Denver Post* (participants may comment using a pseudonym)
- *The Colorado Springs Gazette* (participants must provide their full name)

The two websites are both daily newspapers in Colorado that frequently cover public policy issues in the state. By choosing two cases that are homogeneous on general location, publication type, and story type, the case study researcher can better explore the criterion that varies between the two cases.

For this study, the researcher defined pseudonymity as the individual’s ability to express himself without using his real name. Those websites that require an individual to use his real name did so by requiring the users to comment by using the identity linked to their Facebook account. The researcher’s role was to collect the data and interpret the comments using a previously established six-part test of the quality of a public sphere (Dahlberg, 2001).

The sample for the textual analysis is the textual data from the comments sections from the two news websites on any stories related to firearm regulation and civil unions. From each website, the researcher collected textual data from the comments section for March 3-9, 2013 on stories related to the proposed and existing regulation of firearms. This research does not include stories about gun culture or gun violence. The researcher also collected data from the comments section for January 22 – March 24, 2013 on stories related to civil unions. Gun control and civil unions were chosen as topics because they were expected to generate a large number of comments as the Colorado legislature was debating a number of related bills during the data collection period. Both original reporting and wire service stories were collected, but no duplicate stories were among those analyzed. Based on the number of comments, four to five stories were chosen to be studied from each website for each topic and among the seventeen stories there were 1,004 comments. A textual analysis was conducted using both the conversation and the individual comments as units of analysis. The two analyses were intended to give the researcher a better understanding of how pseudonymity might have an effect on the quality of a plausible public sphere.

The researcher used textual analysis in order to assess the compare the content and conversation with the public sphere because the characteristics of the public sphere can be exhibited both through the specific comments, and through the conversation taken as a whole. Because both the holistic conversation and the individual pieces of content were assessed, it was necessary to use textual analysis rather than content analysis. A textual analysis involves a thorough dissection of the text for salient themes, theoretically relevant concepts, and emergent patterns (Creswell, 1998). For this specific project, the researcher conducted multiple readings of the stories using a six-part public sphere analysis that looked at “exchange and critique of reasoned moral-practical validity claims,” “reflexivity,” “ideal role taking,” “sincerity,” “discursive inclusion and equality,” and “autonomy from state and economic power” (Dahlberg, 2001, p. 623). “Exchange and critique of reasoned moral-practical validity claims” is defined as participants expressing normative positions that are expressed using reason (ex-

planations and justifications) rather than assertion (claims and allegations.) “Reflexivity” is defined as an instance in which a participant re-evaluates their cultural norms and/or the values of the society at large. This requires the individual to rethink their positions “when confronted with strong critique and powerful alternate positions (Dahlberg, 2001, p. 625). “Ideal role taking” is defined as the individual making a committed effort to a constructive dialogue through the expression of differences of opinions that are respectfully considered. This includes fostering empathy through respectful listening and a willingness to be exposed to different opinions. “Sincerity” is defined as the intent of the individual to make a sincere effort to provide relevant information about the issues being discussed. Dahlberg (2001) argues that in order to meet the needs of sincerity, participants should disclose their full name; however, for this research, sincerity will only focus on the participants’ willingness to disclose as much accurate information of pertinence to topic in the discussion. “Discursive inclusion and equality” is defined as the ability of each individual to be equally entitled to introduce and question assertions made in the forum. Finally, “autonomy from state and economic power” is defined as the requirement that the forum be driven by the concerns of the public rather than the concerns of the politically or economically powerful (Dahlberg, 2001). Because a public sphere analysis establishes an idealistic view of public discourse, any content that does not meet the idealistic goals does not serve the interest of the research. This could include ad hominem attacks, normative statements that lack reason or justification, and insincere remarks that attempt to change the subject of the conversation.

In order to assess the comments and the conversation for these statements, the researcher first went through the text using open coding in order to assess the conversation from a holistic approach noting the types of exchange that were taking place between participants and whether the conversation was inspired by the interests and concerns of the participants and not those of an economic or political power. Then axial coding was used to take a more thorough look at the specific comments for instances of reflexivity, ideal role taking, and sincerity.

The factors of discursive inclusion and equality and autonomy from state and economic power are more important issues from a structure perspective than a content perspective. For instance, the fact that a website requires individuals to use their real name could have an effect on the inclusiveness of the public forum or if a website chooses to use a paywall to limit access only to those able to pay a monthly fee, then the inclusiveness could decrease and the ability of elite individuals able to afford access to the forum could dominate the conversation. By studying forums that both do and do not allow pseudonyms, the researcher can come closer to understanding those qualities of a public forum that may stimulate rational-critical discourse and the pursuit of self-governance and those qualities that might inhibit deliberation and the pursuit of common goals in discourse.

Findings

For this research, two Colorado news websites were studied to see how public forum conversations about proposed and existing gun control regulations and civil unions matched up with the ideal speech situation of the public sphere. In order to study for the presence of the public sphere online, the researcher first had to contrast the qualities of the structure of the public forum with those of the traditional norms of the public sphere.

Comments were culled from public forums from *The Denver Post* and the Colorado Springs *Gazette* related to the topics of gun control and civil unions in January–March 2013. The Colorado legislature debated bills related to both issues and passed new laws in both cases. The gun control stories related to the legitimacy of background checks, whether gun control legislation worked to prevent gun crime, and whether those convicted of domestic violence should be allowed to possess guns. The civil union stories were related to whether Colorado should pass a law extending the right to enter into a civil union to same-sex couples. On both websites, the same commenters dominated the conversation by posting numerous statements on each story.

Contrary to the argument that a forum allowing pseudonymous identities would decrease the quality of the conversation, *The Denver Post* forum included a larger prevalence of original arguments from commenters, had a higher rate of exchange and critique of reasoned normative positions, and included far more arguments backed up with facts and other relevant information than did the Colorado Springs *Gazette*. The forum that required commenters to use their actual name included higher rates of criticism and retort rather than original arguments based on reasoned normative positions (See Table 1).

Table 1. Examples of comments.

Types of discourse			
	Original Argument	Challenging Commenters	Supporting Commenters
Exchange & Critique	"Lawmakers need to ensure enforcement of laws already on the books instead of creating new laws which only effect law abiding citizens for the feel good feeling they desire from their (for some) meaningless jobs."	"You bring up some good points, but you clearly allow your own bias to dictate your scrutiny. It is indeed difficult to remain completely objective and unbiased."	"I agree with you on this point. A responsible gun owner would have no problem obtaining a liability insurance policy on the weapon."
Ideal Role Taking	"If you are a responsible gun owner, then you wouldn't have to worry, right?"	"Calling the sponsor names is hardly a convincing argument except when preaching to the already converted."	"I concur. While I think many of the gun control bills are mainly feel good items which will have little effect on gun crime, this is a narrowly tailored bill directed at a population that has a demonstrably higher risk of danger to others."
Sincerity	"Mark Kelly and Gabby Giffords are both gun owners and supporters of the second amendment. They also want stricter and more sane gun laws."	"We want sane gun laws too. Making it harder for law-abiding citizens to defend themselves is not sanity."	"Good post John. FBI Uniform Crime Report had firearms related murders at about 8500 in 2011. It's even a lot less than organizations such as the Brady Bunch

The second research question focused on how the conversations about gun control and civil unions in the public forums compared and contrasted with the values of the public sphere.

The ideal situation for the public sphere was where a commenter expressed a reasoned normative position, with supporting facts for his position, while committing himself to construc-

tive dialogue. This combination happened in only about one-fifth of the comments. Overall, the commenters were more willing to use reasoned normative arguments supported by additional information than they were to commit themselves to constructive dialogue. This missing commitment to constructive dialogue often led to vitriol and excessive criticism, meaning that commenters were coming very close to meeting the requirements of the public sphere, but falling short because they demonstrated a lack of respect for others in the forum. The expressions that demonstrated disrespect typically took an absolutist position that was not conducive to compromise, and the comment was often dismissive and/or belittling of other commenters.

For example, a *Gazette* commenter, in addressing whether background checks on gun purchases will reduce crime, resorted to name-calling by saying: “Exposing yourself as a complete fool does not accomplish anything either. We have background check in Colorado, these additional measures are unenforceable nonsense. And yes they are unconstitutional.” (Reginald H., 2013)

One *Denver Post* commenter made a rational argument supported by additional information, but also used absolutist language to dismiss the position of the opposition: “There is nothing any legislative body can do to prevent a person from obtaining a firearms and committing violence. You simply cannot legislate human behavior. Democrats – Again, stuck on stupid.” (rehafner, 2013)

While there were instances of well-reasoned arguments and the use of supporting facts, many of the commenters still resorted to using vitriolic language and attacks. This lack of respect for fellow commenters creates distance between the actual content of the forum and the ideal of the public sphere.

The third research question asked how the content of the public forum exhibited reasoned critique and exchange of normative positions. It is a critical assumption of the public sphere that individuals will express rational-critical discourse. This type of discourse is exemplified through the assessment of exchange and critique of reasoned normative positions in the comments.

More than one-third of all the comments included exchange and critique and almost one-third of those comments included original arguments beyond what was presented in the story. Other exchange and critique comments included critical comments about other commenters and the media and a small minority of commenters supported other commenters by building off of their original arguments.

One *Post* commenter challenged the proposed legislation in the story as redundant: “It states specifically that it would take guns away from people that are not allowed to have them under federal law... If they aren’t following the federal law, why would they follow the state law? Why have 2 of the same law?” (USMC2002, 2013)

One *Gazette* commenter challenged another’s support for “sane gun control laws”: “There are no such things as sane gun control laws. Could you provide information on any gun control law that would have prevent the incident that (Rep. Gabrielle Giffords) was wounded in?” (Reginald H., 2013)

Most of the exchange and critique was reasoned criticism, which met the standards of rational discourse for which Habermas advocated. Very few commenters built off of the arguments of other commenters in the forum and even fewer made criticisms of the media directly.

The final research question looked at how participants in the public forum used reflexivity and ideal role taking to adjust and advance their normative positions on gun control and civil unions. A large number of commenters used polite criticism to show that they were willing

to engage in dialogue, but believed the other individual was wrong. One *Post* commenter attacked what he saw as faulty logic from a liberal commenter. “I have come to the realization, that this is not a serious subject with you and you really have no interest in a *solution*. Just getting ‘your way’. Your problem is with the GOP, not guns but people.” (max-parrish, 2013)

There was a core group of commenters who showed a commitment to constructive dialogue, and about one-third of these commenters expressed their commitment through an interest in continuing a dialogue and even inviting others to comment on their statements. In one example from the *Gazette*, a commenter looked for clarification from a gun rights supporter as to how the proposed legislation would affect responsible gun owners: “Do these regulation infringe on any right of legal gun owners?” (Patrick F., 2013)

Even though many of the commenters expressed themselves numerous times, there was no reflexivity in the comments. Instead, the commenters chose to stick to their polarized positions. The lack of reflexivity means that commenters appear unwilling to consider changing their opinions on the issue – making it impossible to negotiate or achieve compromise.

Discussion

This research adds new information about how public forum access and the level of commenter anonymity plays a part in the development of a public sphere in online public discourse. Testing the quality of the public forum conversation with the ideal of the public sphere is important to this research because it allows the researcher to come closer to understanding those qualities of a forum that might inhibit the development of a public sphere, or that might help it develop. Understanding what qualities help the development of a public sphere helps us develop forums that are more conducive for public discussions of important issues with the goal of reaching self-governance.

The website that allowed pseudonymous comments appeared to develop a higher quality conversation from a public sphere perspective – fostering more exchange and critique of reasoned normative positions. However both public forums had a low amount of ideal role taking and reflexivity, making it difficult for the forums to meet the public sphere’s ideal position of fostering respect and consensus. And even the forum that did include a higher rate of exchange and critique of reasoned normative positions still only included that factor in only about one-half of the comments. While there might be promising possibilities for the development of exchange and critique in public forums, the dearth of reflexivity and the low levels of ideal role taking show that the public sphere is not present in the forums.

In order to compare online forums to the ideal of the public sphere, the researcher studied the structure of the news forums, the level of ideal role taking present from the participants, the type of exchange and critique of reasoned normative positions that took place, and whether participants were reflexive about their positions within the dialogue.

Structure

Prohibiting anonymous and pseudonymous comments might be thought of as a way to improve the quality of the comments, but it also chills the speech of individuals who might have something valuable to add to public discourse. By excluding individuals from the conversa-

tion, the forum does not meet the “inclusion and equality” requirements of the public sphere as stated by Dahlberg (2001). The pseudonymous forum also included more quality conversation with more exchange and critique of reasoned normative positions and an equal amount of ideal role taking as compared to the conversation with identified commenters. The researcher did not discover any issues with the autonomy of the conversation as employees of the news organization never entered the conversation and there was no visible way to tell if comments had been excluded from the conversation. The type of comments that were allowed to be posted – which were sometimes critical of the news organization – gave the researcher the impression that autonomy was quite high. Overall, structure of the public forum might be a critical factor in determining the quality of the overall conversation from a public sphere perspective because individuals might feel less secure in stating their opinions or arguing with strangers when their identity is made known.

Despite the differences structure might make in the creation of a public sphere, both forums had a lack of participants willing to commit themselves to constructive dialogue, which makes it difficult for either type of forum to reach the level of a public sphere.

Lack of ideal role taking

The public sphere requires that participants be committed to constructive dialogue and reflexive about their normative positions in order for the participants to find common ground and pursue solutions to public issues. Ideal role taking assesses the level of commitment the individual has to constructive dialogue in the forum (Dahlberg, 2001). This includes individuals making a positive attempt to invite further discussion or give polite criticism. There was a notable absence of these qualities in the conversation in either the *Post* or the *Gazette*. However, there was a high amount of absolutist positions and arguments dismissive of the positions of others. This was true in both the pseudonymous and the identified cases, making it more plausible that the development of a commitment to constructive dialogue might be more dependent on the content in the conversation than the structure of the forum. Dahlberg also found that online forums “fail to achieve a reasonable level of respectful listening or commitment to working with difference,” supporting the findings of this article (2001, p. 623).

A need for more exchange and critique

Even though exchange and critique of reasoned normative positions appeared to be more prevalent on the *Post* website, which allowed for pseudonymous comments, it still only made up about one-half of the comments on that site. That means that half of the comments lacked a reasoned argument. From a public sphere perspective, this is a troubling trend because it is difficult to develop a consensus when individuals are not even advancing a reasoned argument, but instead are relying on unfounded assertions and criticisms. It may be that commenters find it easier to craft an argument based on assertions because these arguments do not require locating facts to support one’s opinion or developing a logical argument. News organizations might look for ways to encourage reasoned arguments and discourage assertions in order to improve the quality of the conversation.

A need for more reflexivity

The absolute lack of reflexivity on both websites showed that the public sphere ideal is far from being met. If individuals are either unwilling or unable to free themselves from their set positions, then there can be no consensus. It is expected that there would be more reflexivity on the issue of civil unions, since polls have shown a recent trend of public opinion shifting on that issue in the U.S. (C.B.S., 2013). However, the issue of gun control tends to highlight a significant philosophical difference in society that is not apt to change (Pew research Center, 2013). Not only did participants refrain from expressing a changed opinion on the issues, they did not even express a changed perspective on the values of society at large. This type of absolutist positionality makes the public sphere incredibly difficult. One would expect that increased exchange and critique of reasoned normative positions might lead to an increase in reflexivity as participants are exposed to beliefs and values that are different from their own, but this does not appear to be happening. This might mean that participants choose to engage in public debate in order to express their polarized position without the intent to be persuaded. There should be great concern for the legitimacy of the public sphere if individuals enter the public forum without the willingness to participate in reasoned debate. This finding supports Dahlberg's conclusion that "reflexivity is often a very minimal part" of on-line discourse (2001, p. 623).

Sunstein (2001; 2007) argued that online discourse would cause group polarization and that individuals would coalesce around others with similar views for public discourse. This research found much more criticism than agreement, despite the fact that many of the commenters held similar beliefs and should have been able to agree with each other. It appears that the commenters were more concerned with challenging the views of those they disagree with than building upon the arguments of those with whom they might agree. This research might differ from the expectations of Sunstein because individuals participate in forums on *The Denver Post* and the Colorado Springs *Gazette* because they have a shared interest in the issues of their community, not because the individuals necessarily share a political ideology. This research also could offer support for the online disinhibition effect, that individuals will be more likely to disclose personal information online because there is a physical and emotional distance between themselves and the other individuals they are engaging with online. However, because this study looked at the types of reasoned arguments made online and not the type of personal information disclosed, this research can only state that pseudonymous individuals are only slightly more likely to make reasoned normative arguments and enter discussions of controversial topics with strangers online.

This research appears to confirm the findings of Freelon, et al (2008) that when individuals participate in a public discussion of a controversial topic, participants are more likely to offer reasons for their opinions, reference the ideas of others in their own statements, directly respond to one another, and use insults. The strange combination of reasoned normative arguments and insults appears to be a common trend that should be studied in further research.

Insight for the Public Sphere

Overall, the higher quality conversation came in the forum that allowed pseudonymous commenters to participate. This meets the public sphere's need for an egalitarian forum that includes rational-critical discourse. However, there was no consensus building in the pursuit

of self-governance. There is also a vexing issue as to how to increase the amount of reflexivity in the conversation in order to improve the participants' ability to self-govern through discourse, however, without instances of reflexivity in the set of comments examined, it is difficult to offer solutions as to how to accomplish this task with the current research.

From the perspective of the news organization, based on the data presented here, building a public forum that allows for the highest quality conversation requires allowing anonymous and/or pseudonymous comments. In order to improve online conversations, some news organizations have disallowed commenting on certain types of stories or have allowed journalists to actively moderate conversations as a journalist-participant. While these attempts might improve the quality of the conversation, they also have an effect on the autonomy of the public to control the conversation.

Limitations and Future Research

This research looked at just two news organizations covering two public issues over a short time period. This offers a cursory glance at the state of the public discourse that could be taking place on controversial public issues at one point in time. Despite having only two case studies, the researcher made many observations across numerous public forums in order to increase the total of observations. King, Keohane, and Verba (1994) argue that increasing the number of observations can offer valuable findings in small-*n* studies. The differences that existed in this small time frame give the researcher a reason to believe that there are real contrasts that exist based on the structure of the forum and whether the story is related to a narrow policy issue. The researcher also was limited in studying the motives of the commenters and assessing whether the forum was absent of state and economic powers driving the conversation.

Future studies could look at a longer period of time for multiple news sources in order to corroborate the stated findings. Because public discourse can differ based on the social norms of the public involved in the conversation, future studies could look at online comments in another area of the United States or in another country.

Another study could also look more closely at the differences in discourse that might exist between broad stories as compared to detailed policy stories. This research appeared to show differences in the quality of the conversation based on whether the article was written from a broad perspective or whether it focused on a detailed policy issue. A cursory glance at the conversations showed a much more quality conversation emerging from detailed policy stories as compared to those stories written about a broad topic – such as gun control or same-sex civil unions in general. Because the research question is concerned with the development of arguments in public discourse and not necessarily with the content of the arguments or the political viewpoints presented, a future study could also look at multiple public issues over a longer period of time.

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