

Online Political Discussion: A Comparison between Users' Comments in Newspapers and Blogs.

Mitchelstein Eugenia.

Cita:

Mitchelstein Eugenia (2010). *Online Political Discussion: A Comparison between Users' Comments in Newspapers and Blogs*. V Congreso Latinoamericano de Ciencia Política. Asociación Latinoamericana de Ciencia Política, Buenos Aires.

Dirección estable: <https://www.aacademica.org/000-036/127>

Running head: *ONLINE POLITICAL DISCUSSION*

Online Political Discussion: A Comparison between Users' Comments in Newspapers and Blogs

Eugenia Mitchelstein

Department of Communication Studies

Northwestern University

Frances Searle Building

2240 Campus Drive

Evanston, IL 60208 USA.

Electronic mail addresses: eugenia@northwestern.edu

.

To be presented at the 2010 Latin American Conference of Political Science

Date of this Version: 8 June 2010

Author's note: Research for this paper was supported by a grant from the Buffett Center for International and Comparative Studies at Northwestern University. I thank Pablo Boczkowski for his invaluable guidance throughout this project, and Jamie Druckman, Darren Gergle, Peter Miller, Daniel O'Keefe, Ignacio Siles and Martin Walter for helpful feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript. I also thank the bloggers and news workers who shared their experiences.

Abstract

This paper examines online talk and the role of moderation in different venues for debate. It draws from a mixed-method study of online political talk in two different types of venues (online newspapers and blogs) in Argentina. The findings from the content analysis of readers' comments suggest that messages posted on blogs are more likely to be civil and provide reasons for their assertions than those posted in newspapers. Results from interviews with bloggers and moderators at mainstream media sites show that, although bloggers value the possibility to engage in political discussion and view readers' comments as an intrinsic part of their online spaces, news workers perceive management of audience participation as a burden, do not find reader's comments valuable, and do not participate in the discussion. The paper concludes that online discussion should not be conceptualized as a homogeneous practice but rather as a heterogeneous one undertaken by diverse participants, who follow varying rules of engagement in different online spaces.

Keywords: user-generated content; online journalism; participatory journalism; blogs; Internet publics; online deliberation; Argentine newspapers

Online Political Discussion: A Comparison between Users' Comments in Newspapers and Blogs

That the Internet may facilitate participation in public discussion about public affairs has captured the attention of scholars who study political communication. Some argue that the Internet may foster a dialogic model of communication that encourages citizens to participate actively in the public sphere (Benkler, 2006; Etzioni, 2003; Witschge, 2004). However, others argue that public discourse on the Internet lacks rationality and civility (Davis, 1999; MacDougall, 2005; Schultz, 2000). Moreover, little is known about the factors that shape online political talk, such as the conditions within which it emerges, the influence of moderation practices, and the role that political discussion plays in different outlets.

This paper helps to fill this void by exploring how different online environments foster various types of political discussion. More precisely, it examines online talk and the role of moderation in different venues for debate. To this end, the paper presents the findings from a mixed-method study of online political talk in two different types of venues (comments by online newspaper readers and comments by blog readers) in Argentina. A content analysis indicates that comments posted on blogs are more likely to be civil and provide reasons for their assertions than comments posted in newspapers. Furthermore, interviews with bloggers and news workers in charge of moderating readers' comments in news sites show that, although bloggers value the possibility to engage in political discussion and view readers' comments as an intrinsic part of their online spaces, news workers consider moderation a burden, do not find reader's comments valuable, and do not participate in the discussions. Therefore, online discussion should not be conceptualized as a whole, but rather as a heterogeneous practice, undertaken by diverse participants, who follow (or subvert) varying rules of engagement in different online spaces. The analysis also demonstrates the value of combining methods to account for the links between media content and its conditions of production.

Online Political Discussion

Several political theorists have argued that political discussion among citizens is the cornerstone of democracy (Barber, 1984; Dewey, 1946 [1927]; Dryzek, 2000; Fishkin, 1991; Habermas, 1989 [1962]). They propose a deliberative model of democracy in which decisions are based on the “communicative presuppositions that allow the better arguments to come into play in various forms of deliberation” (Habermas, 1994, p. 4). Debate takes place within a public sphere, where people come together as a public and engage in debate over political issues through the use of reason (Habermas, 1989 [1962]). Discussion can be either unmediated and take place in coffee shops and other meeting places or mediated and happen through media, such as newspapers or the Internet (Butsch, 2008; Dahlgren, 1995; Habermas, 1996).

Building on the centrality of media for political discussion in the public sphere, research has also examined whether the Internet fosters political discussion and participation by serving as a virtual public sphere (Etzioni, 2003; Habermas, 2006; Papacharissi, 2002). Scholarship on this issue falls into two camps. One camp proposes that the Internet facilitates participation in the public sphere (Benkler, 2006; Bohman, 2004; Coleman & Gøtze, 2001; Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004). Wright and Street explain that the Internet is “a tool by which the theory of deliberative democracy can be made practical through asynchronous discussion forums” (2007, p. 850). Research has found that online political discussions lead to higher levels of political knowledge and political participation (Bucy & Gregson, 2001; Min, 2007; Nah, Veenstra, & Shah, 2006; Nisbet & Scheufele, 2004). A related strand of scholarship finds that political debate on the Internet allows the expression of different positions and rational argumentation (Papacharissi, 2004; Stromer-Galley, 2001; Tanner, 2001; Wright & Street, 2007). The opposite camp maintains that only a small proportion of the online public participates in online discussions (Boczkowski, in press; Goss, 2007; Schultz, 2000; Ye & Li, 2006) and that the

discussion lack rationality and civility (Al-Saggaf, 2006; Constantinescu & Tedesco, 2007; Singer, 2006; Wilhelm, 1999). Others argue that the increase in information sources and spaces for discussion online may lead to the fragmentation of the public sphere (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Barber, 2003; Dahlgren, 2005; MacDougall, 2005; Sunstein, 2001).

At least two factors have contributed to the lack of conclusive findings about political discussion on the Internet. First, most research has been conducted in different online spaces, without accounting for the contextual conditions of, and procedural mechanisms established for, online discussion (Albrecht, 2006; Delli Carpini et al., 2004; Jankowski & Van Selm, 2000). Second, as Witschge (2004) argues, most of the conclusions are based on content analysis, which does not allow making definite statements regarding the participants' opinions and practices. To help overcome these shortcomings, this paper adopts a mixed-methods approach in an examination of whether differences in online discussion might be related to different contextual characteristics and procedural practices. The research design combines content analysis and interviews with bloggers, moderators, and journalists. Moreover, it looks at how online discussion unfolds in three contexts: stand-alone blogs, newspaper blogs, and comments on newspaper articles. It focuses on the role of moderation as a key practice.

Moderation is one of the procedural practices that influence the tone and outcomes of Internet discussion (Coleman & Gøtze, 2001; Davis, 1999; Gerodimos, 2004; Wright, 2006; Wright & Street, 2007). For instance, Jensen (2003) compares two political forums about Danish politics - one independent and the other run and moderated by the government - and finds that that the government-sponsored group contained more balanced, nuanced, and serious political discussion than the independent group. He concludes that "debating on the Internet seems to be more qualified when certain rules and paths for the conversation are set up" (p. 371).

Some authors contend that journalists may serve as facilitators of political discussion

(Bohman, 2004; Deuze, 2003; Deuze, Bruns, & Neuberger, 2007; Moe, 2008). However, mainstream media companies are not enthusiastic about allowing audience members to become co-authors of content (Boczkowski, 2004; Cohen, 2002; Ekstrand, 2002; Singer, 2006). Despite this reluctance, more and more news sites allow readers to comment on stories or participate in forums (Domingo et al., 2008; Singer, 2006; Thurman, 2008). However, the acceptance of audience participation may be caused by the perception that news companies should adapt to compete in the online environment, rather than the conviction that this is a worthy innovation (Carlson, 2007; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Lowrey, 2006; Robinson, 2006; Sousa, 2006). In contrast with mainstream media journalists, studies show that most bloggers welcome interaction with and among their readers (Froomkin, 2004; Lowrey & Latta, 2008; Wall, 2005).

Methodology

As stated above, this paper draws from a content analysis of political talk on online newspapers and blogs and interviews with journalists, moderators, and bloggers. This research design serves three related purposes. First, the content analysis permits the identification of differences in the tone and content of the interactions in both spaces. Second, the interviews enable the analysis to explain how the various actors “come to understand, account for, (and) take action on” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 7) online mediated discussion. Third, linking the results of the content analysis and the moderators’ and bloggers’ opinions and experiences allows an examination of the extent to which various types of political talk may be tied to particular spaces for online discussion with different moderation practices.

Argentina has a well-developed media system (Buckman, 1996; Ferreira, 2006; Fox & Waisbord, 2002). Internet access has diffused relatively rapidly: 36 % of Argentines over 13 years old maintain that they have accessed the Internet during the past week (San Martín, 2009). The country provides a fruitful setting for the examination of online news choices, because it

counters the dominant tendency to study participation in online media by focusing almost exclusively in developed countries with stable democracies (Dahlgren, 2005; Domingo, 2008a). Internet political discussions may have different characteristics in developing democracies. For instance, Constantinescu and Tedesco (2007) encountered a high prevalence of cynicism in online discussion posts in a Romanian newspaper and linked it to the dissatisfaction of readers' with the state of democracy in the country. Argentina has regained democracy relatively recently and experiences widespread institutional weakness (Levitsky & Murillo, 2006). By focusing on political blogs and online newspapers in Argentina, this study analyzes online political discussion in a relatively under-studied context.

Content analysis

Two main data sources were selected for coding: comments posted by readers on newspaper articles and comments posted by users on blog posts. These spaces were selected because of the centrality of media for political discussion in the public sphere. Moreover, readers' comments in online newspapers are an example of political discussion within a mainstream media setting and are moderated by news workers. On the other hand, readers' comments to blog entries represent political talk within user-generated spaces and are moderated by amateurs (bloggers) or are not moderated at all. Thus, the spaces selected permit a comparison of different instances of public affairs discussion. Although both spaces are equally accessible to politically interested consumers with an Internet connection, they could differ in their discussion and facilitation dynamics.

The newspapers were selected according to online readership as measured by *Alexa Rankings* and *Google Web Trends*. The most read print and online newspaper in Argentina – *clarin.com*- did not allow readers' comments on articles about politics, and, thus, it was excluded from the sample. Comments on articles from the four newspapers that followed *clarin.com* in

online readership – *lanacion.com*, *infobae.com*, *críticadigital.com*, and *perfil.com*- were included in the sample. Because there is no complete record of all blogs in Argentina, the weblog sample was constructed purposively. Two rankings of blogs in Spanish discriminate by country of origin and topic: *Alianzo* (www.alianzo.com), and *Bitácoras* (www.bitacoras.com), and those rankings were used to create a sampling frame of blogs whose main topics were politics or news. That process yielded forty-two blogs. Because the study was interested in active political discussion, the sampling frame was further reduced by excluding blogs that had more than two-thirds of posts about topics other than public affairs (technology, sports, etc.) and contained fewer than three comments on average per post. This yielded a sample of twenty-seven blogs that focused primarily on public affairs. A subcategory of blogs about public affairs produced by journalists on online newspapers (three blogs from *clarin.com*) was also included. The other newspapers maintained no public affairs blogs.

Readers' comments about the top two stories in the "politics" section of the four newspapers were retrieved, as well as comments posted about editorials in *lanacion.com*, which is the only site that allowed messages on editorial articles. Comments to the latest post in each blog were also retrieved. After seven days, the articles and posts were accessed again to collect any further comments. A systematic sampling strategy (Krippendorff, 2004) was used to select the comments. Only the first thirty comments in each thread were analyzed (N= 5083), but the mean number of comments posted in each venue is noted in the analysis. Data were retrieved in real time at 3 p.m. Argentine time on seven days of a constructed week from June 23 to August 10, 2008, using *Scrapbook*, which allows storing a stable version of the site, including links.

The unit of analysis is the comment. Each comment was coded on five variables:

1. *Author's identity*. This was established by whether the author was anonymous (0), provided a username (1), or a username and the URL of her blog or personal site (2).

2. *Moderator's participation.* This was determined by whether the author was the moderator or owner of the blog or the journalist who wrote the story (1), or a member of the audience (0).
3. *Civility.* This term is defined as “civil behaviors that enhance democratic conversation” (Papacharissi, 2004, p. 260). A comment was coded as “civil” (1), or “uncivil” (0). Presence of at least one of the following features meant a comment was coded as “uncivil”: use of threats to democracy; assignation of ethnic, social, or political stereotypes to other discussants, the author of the article or post; threats to the other discussants or to third persons; and use of all caps.
4. *Reciprocity.* This variable captures “the degree to which a conversation is a real ‘discussion’” (Janssen & Kies, 2005, p. 326), in which participants take in and respond to others’ claims or reasons. A comment was coded as on-topic if it related to a newspaper article or blog post or another comment (1), or off-topic if it did not (0).
5. *Argumentation.* This variable seeks to explore whether participants provided arguments or reasons for the validity of their position (Jensen, 2003; Wilhelm, 1999, 2000; Wright & Street, 2007). Janssen and Kies propose that justification is a fundamental criterion to measure the quality of discussion (2005). Thus, a comment was coded for the presence (1), or absence (0), of justification for its assertions.

The author and a trained coder analyzed 9.74% of the sample (N=496). Regular intercoder agreement levels averaged 94% (95% for *author's identity*, 99% for *moderator's participation*, 94% for *civility*, 94% for *reciprocity* and 90% for *justification*). Cohen's Kappa intercoder agreement levels averaged 79% (89% for *author's identity*, 91% for *moderator's participation*, 79% for *civility*, 58% for *reciprocity*, and 77% for *justification*).

Interviews

Media workers and bloggers who moderated political discussions in the venues included in the content analysis were contacted by email. Two news workers from *lanacion.com*, two from *criticadigital.com*, and two from *perfil.com* agreed to be interviewed. Twenty-two independent bloggers and one journalist blogger agreed to be interviewed personally, and one independent blogger answered questions via email. The author conducted twenty-nine face-to-face interviews and one email interview. Because some of the bloggers were co-owners of their blogs, nineteen independent blogs, one newspaper blog, and three newspapers from the content analysis sample were represented in the interviews. The open-ended interviews took place at a location chosen by the interviewee, lasted for an average of fifty-two minutes, and were transcribed in their entirety.

An analysis of the interviews was conducted to identify common topics in the respondents' experiences of discussion facilitation and recognize converging or diverging practices and interpretations. Data from interviews were examined in a grounded theory fashion (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Interviewing twenty-nine actors from different outlets permitted the examination of whether differences in behaviors and attitudes between the two groups of interviewees could be related to the institutional setting of moderation rather than to idiosyncratic characteristics. The validity of the analysis was ascertained by data source triangulation (Denzin, 1978) that was achieved by interviewing a relatively broad spectrum of bloggers and news sites moderators.

The Content and Participants of Online Discussions

This section examines the characteristics of the messages posted by users on newspapers and blogs, how the authors of the comments identified themselves, and the degree to which news workers and bloggers were involved in the discussion. The sample consisted of 5,095 messages, distributed across 260 threads (blog posts and news stories with no readers' comments were

dropped from the analysis). Newspaper stories had a mean of three hundred comments each, independent blog posts had twenty-four comments, and newspaper blogs had an average of fifty-four comments (Table 1). Analysis of readers' messages in newspapers and blogs revealed significant differences in the levels of civility, reciprocity, and argumentation: comments posted on blogs were more likely to be civil, reciprocal, and justified than comments posted on newspapers.

Messages

Most messages were civil, on topic, and provided justification for their assertions (Table 2). All messages posted on newspapers had already been moderated, either before or after publication, which meant that at least some uncivil and off-topic messages had not been approved or deleted after publication. In the two newspapers that practiced post-publication moderation, deleted comments made up 10.91% of the sample. In contrast, although eleven bloggers moderated comments, only 0.07% of comments posted in blogs were deleted by blog owners after they had been published. Even after moderation, comments posted on independent blogs and newspaper blogs were significantly ($p. < .001$) more likely to be civil (89.71% and 89.07%) than comments posted about newspaper articles (62.75%). Regarding reciprocity, most messages responded to the topic of the article or blog post, although comments about newspaper blogs and newspaper articles were more likely to be off-topic (12.07% and 14.57%) than comments about independent blog posts (7.61%). In the latter, participants were significantly ($p. < .001$) more likely to follow the subject of the post and respond to the arguments made there or to the arguments advanced by others. Comments on newspaper blogs had significantly ($p. < .001$) higher levels of argumentation (74.29%) than comments posted on independent blogs (61.37%). In turn, commentators in independent blogs were significantly more likely ($p. < .001$) to provide justification for their statements than people who posted comments about newspaper

articles (53.40%).

Participants

Participants in both newspaper articles and newspapers blogs were significantly ($p < 0.001$) more likely to provide a user name (97.21% and 98.78%) than participants in independent blogs (89.92%) (Table 3). This difference could be explained by the fact that three of the four newspapers sampled required users to sign in with a username to post a comment. However, people who posted comments on independent blogs were more likely to associate their username to their personal blog or website (44.93%), compared to 8.70% of participants in newspaper blogs and 0.52% of participants in newspaper articles. Moreover, providing the URL of a personal blog was related to a 150.5% increase in the odds of the message being civil and a 97.8% increase in the odds of the message being on topic, controlling for the online venue where the message was posted (Table 4). Both independent and journalist bloggers were more likely to participate in the discussion than newspaper moderators and journalists: 9.63 % of messages on independent blogs were posted either by the author of the blog entry or one of his or her co-bloggers (Table 3). Independent bloggers participated in 61% of message threads. Among the three newspaper blogs sampled, only one of the journalist bloggers responded to comments posted by users. Journalists and moderators from online newspapers posted no comments at all.

In sum, the analysis of the comments in blogs and news stories reveals that messages posted in blogs are more likely to be on topic and civil and to provide reasons for their assertions than readers' comments to news stories. This disparity could be related to differences between the discussion practices of news and blog consumers. It could also be linked to different types of discussion facilitation. Whereas bloggers participated actively in the thread of comments posted below their entries, moderators and journalists never joined in the deliberations of their readers.

The Divergent Moderation Styles of Bloggers and News Workers

This section examines how bloggers and news workers see their moderation practices, the rationale for joining in the discussion, and the value of participation by members of the public.

Discussion facilitation

Bloggers followed different strategies for moderating the comments. Whereas eleven of the respondents decided to actively moderate comments, thirteen did not to moderate them at all. Bloggers who practiced active moderation explained that they felt responsible for the quality of the discussion. Mendieta, a staffer at a government agency, explained his decision to approve or reject comments thus:

You have a certain responsibility for what you introduce in the public sphere. It does not have to do with censorship practices; on the contrary, this responsibility has to do with enriching the debate, expanding the margins of democracy, consensus, and dissent (personal communication, July 25, 2008).

Bloggers who decided not to moderate comments cited two main reasons for their actions. For some, moderating was too much work. Rollo Tomassi, an economist, stated, “It implies an extra amount of energy, reading the comments, moderating them (...) My experience with total freedom did not lead to a complete mess, as you see in newspapers’ [readers’ comments]” (personal communication, June 26, 2008). Other respondents believed that participants autoregulated themselves through collective sanctions, such as ignoring disruptive interventions. Martín, a political scientist, explained, “There is a lot of self-moderation. Someone posts a highly informed comment, citing sources, whatever. If someone else will post bullshit, he refrains from doing it. Or, if he does, nobody will pay any attention. The invisible hand regulates it” (personal communication, July 10, 2008).

Two of the newspapers in the sample had moderators who approved or disapproved

comments before publication, whereas for the other two, moderators decided after publication.

Natalia Zuazo, editor and moderator at an online newspaper, noted that:

The goal of moderation is that there do not appear [on the newspaper site] any insults or discriminatory statements (...) [There is] no discrimination. If you want to say whatever you want, I could radically disagree with it, but if you say it without insulting anybody and you provide an argument, I won't censor that (personal communication, July 30 2008).

Most of her newspaper colleagues shared this view. However, some also recognized that not all cases were clear-cut. Although insults and bigoted statements were not difficult to identify, false allegations and offensive remarks were more complicated, as the coordinator for "Participation" in *lanacion.com* asserted:

Easy ones are easy - you see a swear word, or an anti-Semitic statement, you read two lines and that's it. The issue is when other figures appear, such as slander. When is a comment slander and when is it just an opinion? (personal communication, August 12, 2008)

The three newspapers organized moderation in a different ways. *Lanacion.com* had separate staff who were dedicated exclusively to moderating readers' comments; in *perfil.com* those in charge of moderating comments were editors; and, in *criticadigital.com*, junior journalists moderated comments. Thus, four of the interviewees worked in their respective online newspapers as journalists (moderating was one task among others they performed), whereas the other two were exclusively dedicated to users' participation. Three of the four who had joined the newspaper as journalists shared a somewhat negative view of the task. One said, "Nobody chooses this function. It is boring (...) sometimes we joke, 'So many years studying to end up moderating comments'" (personal communication, July 28, 2008). This attitude seems to echo

Domingo's (2008b) finding that moderation of forums in Spanish news sites was a routinized activity. However, the youngest newspaper moderator interviewed, Guillermina Ríos, a 21-year-old who was still in journalism school, said she enjoyed the task and "learned a lot" from readers' messages.

Participating in the discussion

Almost all the bloggers said they responded to the readers' comments. Some joined the discussion to clarify any misunderstood points or to continue the debate about a particular topic. Others did it out of courtesy, as Pablo Carnaghi, who said, "If I introduce an issue, and there are people who intervene and make the effort to comment, you have to provide feedback" (personal communication, June 25, 2008). In contrast, when newspaper moderators were asked if they participated in the discussion, they were surprised at the question. "No! No way! Why would I do it?" (Natalia Zuazo, personal communication, July 30, 2008). None of the newspaper workers had ever responded to any comments, and they all said that the organization did not allow them to post as "moderators." Vanessa Patrignani, who worked at *lanacion.com*, said, "I sometimes wish I could log in as a user and answer some of the comments, but I've never done it (...) I am not allowed to do it" (personal communication, August 12, 2008). Her editor stated, "We have a nonintervention policy (...) We are convinced that the space belongs to the readers" (personal communication, August 12, 2008).

Opinions about readers' comments

For bloggers, readers' comments were an intrinsic part of the blog, even "the most important part of the blog," as Diego Faure, a film editor and blogger said (personal communication, July 2 2008). Equating the blog genre with the existence of comments was a common notion across most of the interviews with bloggers. Sirinivasa, a political activist, explained "The medium [i]s a complete package, including comments (...) Without comments, it

would be missing something, it would not be a blog” (personal communication, July 26, 2008). Moreover, some said that readers’ comments were more interesting than their original blog posts. Many mentioned that comments gave them ideas for future posts. Lucas Arrimada, a law professor, asserted, “There is more substance in the discussion than in the posts. I think that is the norm, in our blog and in other blogs” (personal communication, July 18, 2008).

In contrast, five of the newspaper moderators felt the comments had a cathartic function and served as an outlet for anger and frustration against public figures and events, which was detrimental to the quality of the discussion. To Guillermina Ríos, who worked as a moderator in *criticadigital.com*,

There are issues that are annoying, and the [readers’] goal is to rant, let go of the anger. There are many comments by which you can tell the people’s anger (...) the feeling of impotence, they feel when they are speaking to the president, ‘[President] Cristina [Fernandez], I can’t believe what you are doing!’ (personal communication, July 31, 2008).

Some newspaper moderators said aggressive comments also affected them. One of the interviewees said moderating was a “thankless job” in which he had to “absorb feelings of bitterness and hatred” (personal communication, August 5, 2008). Another said she was “usually disappointed by comments” (personal communication, August 12 2008). Moreover, readers’ comments, particularly reports of government corruption, were only exceptionally used as a source of information for stories. In most cases, messages were not considered an integral part of the online newspaper medium. The coordinator at *lanacion.com* said, “There is a sort of divorce between [readers’] participation and the newsroom (...) I believe there is some resistance from the newsroom towards readers’ comments (...) [they] put the journalist’s trade in crisis” (personal communication, August 12, 2008). Daniel Fernández Canedo, a journalist blogger, also

referred to this resistance. “This may indicate inflexibility on my part (...) but I believe that there are people who have things to say and they say them, and ... state their points of view, and there are other people who read them” (personal communication, July 17, 2008).

Interviewees often referred to the dynamics of online political discussion by resorting to meeting-place metaphors. These metaphors provide a unique window into the divergent views of bloggers and journalists. Among the former, Alejandro equated aggressive comments with “a drunkard in a bar.” Pablo Carnaghi worried about whether expansion would turn his blog from a bar into a food court, in which conversation would be more difficult, and Manolo compared blogs to Illustration coffee houses. In contrast, a moderator who said that she saw no added value in comments on online newspapers also noted that it was important to keep them:

Because they have to be there, because it is like having restrooms in a bar. The context creates the need. If you are in a bar, you will want to use the restroom. If you are in a newspaper, you will want to comment. That’s why they are there. (Personal communication, July 30 2008).

In sum, the interviews revealed that bloggers and newspaper moderators had divergent strategies for dealing with users’ participation. Bloggers could decide whether to moderate or participate in the discussion, but media workers were bound by organizational practices and regulations. Approving or rejecting comments was part of the newspaper moderator’s job description, and joining in the discussion was not an appealing –or even possible– option for them. Both groups also had different views about the quality of users’ comments and the function they served in the online environment.

Discussion

This study of online political discussions in Argentina suggests that contextual dynamics strongly affect the character of online political discussion. Comments posted by users on blogs

were more likely to be civil, on topic, and to provide justification for their assertions than messages posted on online newspapers. Whereas bloggers participated in more than half of the debates initiated by their blog entries, moderators and journalists refrained from joining in the discussion, and considered moderation a routinized activity, aimed at removing inappropriate content. These findings make conceptual and methodological contributions to the study of the role of online media in democratic discussion. Conceptually, they indicate that online discussion should not be characterized as a single phenomenon, unequivocally positive or negative for democratic dialogue. On the contrary, it should be understood as a multifaceted practice that varies according to who participates, on the one hand, and contextual matters, such as the venues for interaction and the existence and style of moderation, on the other. Methodologically, this study suggests that combining different methods may help to better understand the link between the content of media users' interventions and its conditions of production. On the one side, had the study relied solely on content analysis it would have been unable to account for the differences between bloggers' and newswriters' engagement with readers' comments or to explore the reasons behind those differences. On the other side, had the study utilized interview data only, it would have been unable to analyze the relationship between various styles of moderation and the content of readers' comments in online newspapers and blogs.

The positive relationship between the participative facilitation enacted by bloggers and a higher level of civility and reciprocity indicates that moderation practices can influence the quality of online discussion. This is consistent with Jensen's (2003) findings on Danish online forums. However, the sole existence of moderation does not seem to lead to more civil and on-topic comments, because both some newspapers and some blogs were moderated. Likewise, the absence of moderation in other blogs did not result in less civil or more off-topic interventions. Different types of readers' messages could be explained by the fact that online news stories

received, on average, more than ten times the number of comments posted on blog posts, which could be detrimental for reasoned debate. Whereas blogs and online newspapers are equally available to anybody with an Internet connection, it could be argued that blogs are a niche medium that attracts a more specialized audience, compared to the online editions of newspapers. This specialized audience could be more educated or politically interested and thus more likely to heed norms of appropriate online discourse.

Bloggers and newspaper moderators' views of readers' comments were markedly different. Bloggers saw audience messages as an intrinsic part of the blog genre and found readers' comments interesting, but most of the moderators had not chosen to facilitate political discussion and deplored the quality of readers' comments and the time moderating took away from journalistic endeavors. In the only two cases in which newspaper moderators did not work as news producers, they believed that the newsroom paid little or no attention to readers' messages. However, in spite of journalists' reluctance to accept user participation as an integral component of the online medium, readers' messages have become a widespread feature in online newspapers. This ambivalence could be related to traditional media companies' perception that they need to adapt in order to survive. Yet, as one of the interviewees explained, readers' participation challenges the boundaries of the journalistic profession.

The quality of readers' comments and facilitators' opinions about users' messages and moderation practices could be mutually reinforcing. Readers' comments both reproduce and alter the structures within which they are carried out, which in turn adapt to support and promote new patterns of behavior. As bloggers participate in the discussion, they provide an incentive for readers to maintain civility and reasonableness, which in turn fosters a more active role for the blogger. In the case of online newspapers, the existence of moderators who do not participate in the discussion and whose main role is to enforce sanctions could discourage higher quality

participation. In turn, aggressive and off-topic messages could be related to less enthusiastic discussion facilitation and even the marginalization of readers' contributions within online mainstream media.

The findings about the differences in the quality of users' contributions and the diverse strategies and perceptions of discussion facilitation in blogs and online newspapers in Argentina echo analyses conducted in other countries. Moreover, the observations about Internet political talk in Argentina are comparable to studies conducted in other emerging democracies and may resonate across national borders. The degree of skepticism and anger towards political figures found in newspaper comments echoes the work by Constantinescu and Tedesco (2007) about newspaper readers' comments in another emergent democracy, Romania. It also confirms Boczkowski's (in press) and Peruzzotti and Smulovitz's (2006) findings about the skepticism of mainstream media consumers toward government figures and actions in Latin America. However, the difference between newspaper and blog comments suggests that skepticism may not be equally distributed across the Argentine citizenry, or that it may not be equally expressed across different venues. Both the broader national context and the varying rules of engagement in different settings appear to influence the tone and content of political discussion online.

Although readers' participation in blogs may help build public dialogue, users' comments in newspapers appear to serve primarily as an outlet for frustration with political figures and events. As Warner (2002) and Young (1996) argue, rational discourse is not necessarily the sole valid form of expression in the public sphere. However, online newspapers receive more Internet traffic and exert more influence over the political agenda than blogs. The absence of reasonable and civil debate among readers of online newspapers and the lack of dialogue between news workers and news consumers, with political discussion relegated to less popular outlets, do not bode well for the future of democratic participation in mainstream media.

References

- Adamic, L. A., & Glance, N. (2005). The Political Blogosphere and the 2004 US Election: Divided they Blog. Paper presented at the Proceedings of the 3rd international workshop on Link discovery, Chicago, IL, August 21 2005, pp 36-43.
- Al-Saggaf, Y. (2006). The Online Public Sphere in the Arab World: The War in Iraq on the Al Arabiya Website. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12(1). Retrieved March 2009 from <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol12/issue1/al-saggaf.html>.
- Albrecht, S. (2006). Whose voice is heard in online deliberation?: A study of participation and representation in political debates on the internet. *Information, Communication and Society*, 9(1), 62 - 82.
- Barber, B. (1984). *Strong Democracy*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Barber, B. (2003). Which technology for which democracy? In H. Jenkins & D. Thorburn (Eds.), *Democracy and New Media* (pp. 33-47). Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Benkler, Y. (2006). *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Boczkowski, P. J. (2004). *Digitizing the News: Innovation in Online Newspapers*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Boczkowski, P. J. (in press). *News at work: Imitation in an age of information abundance*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Bohman, J. (2004). Expanding dialogue: the Internet, the public sphere and prospects for global democracy. *The Sociological Review*, 52(1), 131-155.
- Buckman, R. (1996). Current status of the mass media in Latin America. In R. Cole (Ed.), *Communication in Latin America: Journalism, mass media, and society* (pp. 3-35). Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources.

- Bucy, E. P., & Gregson, K. S. (2001). Media Participation: A Legitimizing Mechanism of Mass Democracy. *New Media & Society*, 3(3), 357-380.
- Butsch, R. (2008). *The Citizen Audience: Crowds, Publics and Individuals*. New York: Routledge.
- Carlson, M. (2007). Blogs and Journalistic Authority. *Journalism Studies*, 8(2), 264 - 279.
- Cohen, E. L. (2002). Online journalism as market-driven journalism. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 46(4), 532-548.
- Coleman, S., & Gøtze, J. (2001). *Bowling Together: Online Public Engagement in Policy Deliberation*. London: Hansard Society.
- Constantinescu, A. R., & Tedesco, J. C. (2007). Framing a Kidnapping. *Journalism Studies*, 8(3), 444 - 464.
- Dahlgren, P. (1995). *Television and the public sphere: citizenship, democracy and the media*. London: Sage.
- Dahlgren, P. (2005). The Internet, public spheres, and political communication: Dispersion and deliberation. *Political Communication*, 22(2), 147-162.
- Davis, R. (1999). *The Web of Politics: The Internet's Impact on the American Political System*. New York: Oxford University Press, USA.
- Delli Carpini, M. X., Cook, F. L., & Jacobs, L. R. (2004). Public Deliberation, Discursive Participation, and Citizen Engagement: A Review of the Empirical Literature. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 7(1), 315-344.
- Denzin, N. K. (1978). *The research act: A theoretical introduction to sociological methods*. New York: McGraw-Hill Companies.
- Deuze, M. (2003). The web and its journalism: considering the consequences of different types of newsmedia online. *New Media & Society*, 5(2), 203-230.

- Deuze, M., Bruns, A., & Neuberger, C. (2007). Preparing for an Age of Participatory News
Journalism Practice, 1(3), 322 - 338.
- Dewey, J. (1946 [1927]). *The public and its problems*. Chicago: Gateway books.
- Domingo, D. (2008a). Inventing online journalism: a constructivist approach to the development of online news In C. A. Paterson & D. Domingo (Eds.), *Making Online News: The Ethnography of New Media Production* (pp. 15-28). New York: Peter Lang
- Domingo, D. (2008b). When immediacy rules: online journalism models in four Catalan online newsrooms. In C. A. Paterson & D. Domingo (Eds.), *Making Online News: The Ethnography of New Media Production* (pp. 113-126). New York: Peter Lang.
- Domingo, D., Quandt, T., Heinonen, A., Paulussen, S., Singer, J. B., & Vujnovic, M. (2008). Participatory journalism practices in the media and beyond: An international comparative study of initiatives in online newspapers. *Journalism Practice*, 2(3), 326-342.
- Dryzek, J. S. (2000). *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond: Liberals, Critics, Contestations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ekstrand, V. S. (2002). Online news: User agreements and implications for readers. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 79(3), 602-618.
- Etzioni, A. (2003). Are Virtual and Democratic Communities Feasible. In H. Jenkins & D. Thorburn (Eds.), *Democracy and New Media* (pp. 85-100). Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Ferreira, L. (2006). *Centuries of silence: The story of Latin American journalism*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Fishkin, J. S. (1991). *Democracy and Deliberation: New Directions for Democratic Reform*: Yale University Press.
- Fox, E., & Waisbord, S. (2002). Latin politics, global media. In E. Fox & S. Waisbord (Eds.),

- Latin politics, global media (pp. 1-21). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Froomkin, A. M. (2004). Technologies for Democracy. In P. M. Shane (Ed.), *Democracy Online: The Prospects for Political Renewal Through the Internet* (pp. 3-20). New York: Routledge.
- Gerodimos, R. (2004). *Democracy and the internet: Access, engagement and deliberation*. Paper presented at the International Conference on Politics and Information Systems.
- Goss, B. M. (2007). Online "Looney Tunes". *Journalism Studies*, 8, 365-381.
- Habermas, J. (1989 [1962]). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Habermas, J. (1994). Three normative models of democracy. *Constellations*, 1(1), 1-10.
- Habermas, J. (1996). *Between facts and norms: Contributions to a discourse theory of law and democracy*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.
- Habermas, J. (2006). Political communication in media society: Does democracy still enjoy an epistemic dimension? The impact of normative theory on empirical research. *Communication Theory*, 16(4), 411-426.
- Hermida, A., & Thurman, N. (2008). A clash of cultures. *Journalism Practice*, 2(3), 343 - 356.
- Jankowski, N. W., & Van Selm, M. (2000). The Promise and Practice of Public Debate in Cyberspace. In K. L. Hacker & J. van Dijk (Eds.), *Digital Democracy: Issues of Theory and Practice* (pp. 149-165). London: Sage.
- Janssen, D., & Kies, R. (2005). Online forums and deliberative democracy. *Acta Politica*, 40(3), 317-335.
- Jensen, J. L. (2003). Public spheres on the Internet: Anarchic or government-sponsored - A comparison. *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 26(4), 349-374.
- Krippendorff, K. (2004). *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*. Thousand Oaks,

- California: Sage.
- Levitsky, S., & Murillo, M. V. (2006). *Building Castles in the Sand? The Politics of Institutional Weakness in Argentina*. University Park, Pennsylvania: Penn State Press.
- Lowrey, W. (2006). Mapping the journalism-blogging relationship. *Journalism* 7(4), 477-500.
- Lowrey, W., & Latta, J. (2008). The Routines of Blogging. In C. A. Paterson & D. Domingo (Eds.), *Making Online News: the Ethnography of Online News Production* (pp. 185-197). New York: Peter Lang.
- MacDougall, R. (2005). Identity, electronic ethos and blogs - A technologic analysis of symbolic exchange on the new news medium. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 49(4), 575-599.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Min, S. J. (2007). Online vs. face-to-face deliberation: Effects on civic engagement. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12(4), 20.
- Moe, H. (2008). Dissemination and dialogue in the public sphere: a case for public service media online. *Media Culture & Society*, 30(3), 319-336.
- Nah, S., Veenstra, A. S., & Shah, D. V. (2006). The Internet and anti-war activism: A case study of information, expression, and action. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12(1).
- Nisbet, M. C., & Scheufele, D. A. (2004). Political talk as a catalyst for online citizenship. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 81(4), 877-896.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2002). The virtual sphere: the internet as a public sphere. *New Media & Society*, 4(1), 9-27.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2004). Democracy online: civility, politeness, and the democratic potential of online political discussion groups. *New Media & Society*, 6(2), 259-283.

- Peruzzotti, E., & Smulovitz, C. (2006). Social Accountability: An Introduction. In E. Peruzzotti & C. Smulovitz (Eds.), *Enforcing the Rule of Law: Social Accountability in the New Latin American Democracies*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Robinson, S. (2006). The mission of the j-blog: Recapturing journalistic authority online. *Journalism*, 7(1), 65-83.
- San Martín, R. (2009) Consultar e-mails, la principal tarea de los internautas argentinos, in *lanacion.com*. (January 5) Retrieved on January 12th 2009 from http://www.lanacion.com.ar/nota.asp?nota_id=1086992
- Schultz, T. (2000). Mass media and the concept of interactivity: an exploratory study of online forums and reader email. *Media Culture & Society*, 22(2), 205-221.
- Singer, J. B. (2006). Stepping back from the gate: Online newspaper editors and the co-production of content in campaign 2004. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 83(2), 265-280.
- Sousa, H. (2006). Information Technologies, Social Change and the Future: The Case of Online Journalism in Portugal. *European Journal of Communication*, 21(3), 373-387.
- Stromer-Galley, J. (2001, Sep). *New voices in the public sphere: A comparative analysis of interpersonal and online political talk*. Paper presented at the European Institute of Communication and Culture Colloquium (Euricom), Piran, Slovenia.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Sunstein, C. R. (2001). *Republic.com*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Tanner, E. (2001). Chilean conversations: Internet forum participants debate Augusto Pinochet's detention. *Journal of Communication*, 51(2), 383-403.
- Thurman, N. (2008). Forums for citizen journalists? Adoption of user generated content initiatives by online news media. *New Media & Society*, 10(1), 139-157.

- Wall, M. (2005). 'Blogs of war': Weblogs as news. *Journalism*, 6(2), 153-172.
- Warner, M. (2002). *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone Books.
- Wilhelm, A. G. (1999). Virtual sounding boards: how deliberative is on-line political discussion. In B. N. Hague & B. N. Loader (Eds.), *Digital Democracy: Discourse and Decision Making in the Information Age* (Vol. 1, pp. 313-338). New York: Routledge.
- Witschge, T. (2004). Online Deliberation: Possibilities of the Internet for Deliberative Democracy. In P. M. Shane (Ed.), *Democracy Online: The Prospects for Political Renewal Through the Internet*. New York: Routledge.
- Wright, S. (2006). Government-run Online Discussion Fora: Moderation, Censorship and the Shadow of Control. *British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, 8(4), 550-568.
- Wright, S., & Street, J. (2007). Democracy, deliberation and design: The case of online discussion forums. *New Media & Society*, 9(5), 849-869.
- Ye, X., & Li, X. (2006). Internet Newspapers' Public Forum and User Involvement. In X. Li (Ed.), *Internet Newspapers: The Making of a mainstream medium* (pp. 243-259). Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Young, I. M. (1996). Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy. In S. Benhabib (Ed.), *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political* (pp. 120-135). Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Table 1

Number of comments analyzed and mean number of messages posted in newspaper articles and blogs

	N	Mean
Newspaper blogs	494	54.05 (9.41)
Independent blogs	2878	24.49 (2.08)
Newspaper articles	1723	299.88 (59.61)

Table 2

Characteristics of messages posted about independent blog posts, newspapers blog posts, and online newspaper articles

Media	Civility		Reciprocity		Argumentation	
	Civil	Uncivil	On topic	Off topic	Provides justification	Does not provide justification
Independent blogs	89.71% (N=2571)	10.29% (N=295)	92.39%** (N=2648)	7.61%** (N=218)	61.37%** (N=1759)	38.63%** (N=1107)
Newspaper blogs	89.07% (N=440)	10.93% (N=54)	85.43% (N=422)	14.57% (N=72)	74.29%** (N=367)	25.71%** (N=127)
Newspaper articles	62.75% ** (N=1014)	37.25%** (N=602)	87.93% (N=1421)	12.07% (N=195)	53.40%** (N=863)	46.40%** (N=753)

** $p < .001$ (within columns)

Table 3

Characteristics of authors of comments posted about independent blog posts, newspapers blog posts, and online newspaper articles

Media	Identification			Participation		
	Anonymous	User name	Username and blog	Comments posted by users	Comments posted by post or story author	Comments posted by co-bloggers
Independent blogs	10.08%** (N=290)	45%** (N=1295)	44.93%** (N=1293)	90.37%** (N=2601)	8.34%** (N=240)	1.29%** (N=37)
Newspaper blogs	1.21%** (N=6)	90.08%** (N=445)	8.70%** (N=43)	95.55%** (N=472)	4.45%** (N=22)	0%** (N=0)
Newspaper articles	2.79%** (N=48)	96.69%** (N=1666)	0.52%** (N=9)	100%** (N=1723)	0%** (N=0)	0%** (N=0)

** $p < .001$ (within columns)

(Total N for comments in each type of outlet varies from table 2 to table 3 because comments that had been deleted, but whose authors were visible, were not coded for civility, reciprocity and justification).

Table 4

Percentage change in the odds of civility, reciprocity, and argumentation of comments, by association of the author with a personal blog (base case: does not provide URL of personal blog) and online venue (base case: newspaper article) (3 logit regressions)

	Civility	Reciprocity	Argumentation
Provides URL of personal blog	150.5%**	97.8%**	-0.20%
Newspaper blogs	358.5%**	-23.10%	152.2%**
Independent blogs	272.2%**	29%**	38.5%**

** $p < .001$