Getting Political on Social Network Sites:

Exploring Online Political Discourse on Facebook

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Abstract

This study explores use of the social network site Facebook for online political discussion. A computer-mediated discourse analysis is applied to examine discussion occurring within a Facebook group concentrated on the contentious issue of state-sanctioned torture. Online political discussion has been criticized for isolating disagreeing persons from engaging in discussion and for having an atmosphere of uncivil discussion behavior. The researchers examine the presence of discussion between disagreeing parties and the civil nature of political discussion within the Facebook group under study. Analysis reveals the participation of disagreeing parties within the discussion with the large majority of posters (73%) expressing support for the stated position of the Facebook group, and a minority of posters (17%) expressing opposition to the position of the group. These results demonstrate the presence of discussion among disagreeing parties within the group, indicating that Facebook functioned to some extent to enable interaction among those who disagree. Despite the presence of uncivil discussion posting within the Facebook group, the large majority of discussion participation (75%) is devoid of flaming. This represents a willingness on the part of participants to engage in a discussion even though uncivil or aggressive communication styles are present. Reference within the discussion to a participant's Facebook profile was present although uncommon. Results of this study provide important groundwork and raise new questions for study of online political discussion as it occurs in the emergent internet technologies of social network sites. The authors advocate that further exploration is needed into the potentials of social media in the civic process.

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The emergence of the Internet, not unlike other technologies before it, created a popular avenue for discussion of political and social issues (Holt, 2004; Puopolo, 2001). Many scholars have explored the role of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in political discussion (e.g., Brundidge, 2006; Davis, 1999; Holt, 2004). In recent years, new web technologies, popularly referred to as social media, have opened up possibilities for rich, online human-to-human interaction unprecedented in the history of Internet communication. Of these new web technologies, social network sites (SNS) in particular have created unique arenas for online discourse.

Sites such as Facebook.com are indicative of the phenomenal growth social network sites have seen in the past few years. The site was launched in 2004 and as of April, 2008 surpassed 70 million active users ("Facebook, Inc.," 2008b). With the rapid popularization of social network sites, the potential for individuals to engage in online discussion about social and political issues has grown exponentially in a few short years. Due to the explosive growth of social network sites, scholars have little understanding of the nature of online political discourse as it is occurring in these new social spaces. It is unclear what impact, if any, the factors that differentiate social network sites from traditional computer-mediated-communication have on online political discourse. With the continued expansion of online applications and networks, CMC studies must seek to unpack political discussion in new and emerging online arenas. This study applies computer-mediated discourse analysis (Herring, 2004) to explore the potential of social network sites to serve as locations for online political discussion.

This study has important implications for scholars of social network sites and social media scholars in that it provides support for a growing body of literature that demonstrates the

political utility of social network sites. This study is also significant for scholars of computer-mediated communication broadly, and online political discussion specifically, in that it investigates the potential for elements of social network site to impact civility and diversity in online political discussion. The study concludes that continued investigation is needed into the aspects of emerging internet technologies that may both enable and inhibit exposure to diverse viewpoints and civility among online discussion participants so as to continue to improve the potential for online political discussion to best serve a democratic function.

*Social Network Sites*

In recent years, social network sites have become some of the most popular destinations for online traffic (comScore, 2007a; comScore 2007b). Social network sites are:

> [W]eb-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) to view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p.211).

These sites have become the focus of a recent wave of scholarly research. Initial research into SNS has focused mostly on networks and their structures, privacy issues, and the management of friends and online impressions (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Facebook.com is one of the most popular SNS. According to Baron (2008), Facebook-related research began to emerge late in 2006 (e.g., Acquisti & Gross 2006; Ellison et al. 2007; Golder et al. 2007; and Vanden Boogart, 2006) and it continues to be studied across diverse disciplines (Baron 2008, boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Evidence pointing to the potential of social network sites to serve in the arena of political discussion is emerging, indicating a need for more robust exploration into the political aspects of social network sites such as Facebook. For example, a survey conducted  during Spring, 2008 by

the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that 10% of all Americans who use social

network sites use them "for some kind of political activity" (Smith & Raine, 2008, p. ii). The

report states that, of adults under 30 who have a social network profile, half use social network

sites "to get or share information about the candidates and the campaign" (Smith & Raine, 2008,

p. ii). A prior study by Pew conducted in December, 2007 found that 7% of all respondents and

27% of young adults reported using social network sites to get information about the 2008

Presidential election campaign (Kohut, 2008). Comparison of these studies demonstrates the

growing political use of social network sites over the course of a few months, especially in the

lives of young adults.

Social network sites such as Facebook are clearly becoming important in the political

lives of their members. Although scholars are beginning to examine the political potential of

social network sites (Gueorguieva, 2007; Williams & Gulati, 2007), as yet no study has explored

political discussion on Facebook. This study explores how Facebook is serving as an arena for

political debate among members.

*Political Discussion on Facebook*

An area of Facebook which has yet to receive scholarly study is the groups feature. Thus,

prior to reviewing the literature on online political discussion, we offer below a brief overview of

the Facebook groups feature. Citing a personal interview, Williams and Gulati (2007) state that

there are several thousand Facebook groups with a political focus. In our research we were

unable to find any source indicating just how many politically-centered Facebook groups exist.

Any Facebook account-holder can start a group of nearly any kind, so long as the group

does not attack a specific person or group ("Facebook, Inc.," 2008a). The group creator becomes

the administrator who selects the title, description, and settings of the group account. Settings

include designation of a group "type" which ranges from common interest to recreation and entertainment. These are then sub-divided into further classifications depending on the type. For example, common interest groups can be specifically labeled as political.

In addition to type, groups can be set as "open", "closed" or "secret". An "open" group allows anyone to join and to invite others to join. All group information, discussions, and posted items are available for viewing by persons with a Facebook account. A "closed" group requires approval from the group administrator(s) in order to join. Anyone can see the group information but all discussions, posted items, members, etc. remain private. A "secret" group does not appear in group search results or in members' profiles and requires an invitation from an administrator to join. Only members are able to view group information.

A group administrator has no binding responsibilities to the group they form. Administrators are not moderators of content per se and the group will continue to exist if an administrator abandons the group. Administrators can, and often do, partake in the discussions of the group and they can delete members or content, though it is not their sole responsibility as is found in some other online forums. Members of groups can, at any time, delete any comments they made to the group though they cannot delete information posted by others. We now shift focus to a review of research in online political discussion.

*Engaging Opposing Viewpoint*

Online discussion of political and social issues has occurred over many interactive channels, including of note Usenet (Davis, 1999), bulletin boards (Brundidge, 2006; Holt, 2004), email, and chat rooms (Brundidge, 2006). Within online discussion research, some scholars argue that Internet communication serves as an excellent portal for debate among persons of varied opinions and beliefs. Holt (2004) states:

The ability of the Internet to unite those of disparate backgrounds has great potential for fostering debate and discussion of issues in the civic arena. In many cases, differences of opinion about, for example, political issues arise from lack of familiarity with the perspectives of other people. (p. 14)

Research has shown that online political discussion does serve to expose participants to non likeminded partners (Brundidge, 2006). Yet, despite the potential of the Internet to bring opposing camps together in a common (cyber)space and provide exposure to different ideas, some evidence suggests that this may not necessarily be occurring.

The structure of the Internet has been found to offer conditions particularly conducive to selective exposure to media content (Bimber & Davis, 2003). Research into the type of news and information individuals self-expose to has supported selectivity in favor of news and information that aligns with their views (Best, Chmielewski & Krueger, 2005; Bimber & Davis, 2003; Mutz & Martin, 2001). Along this vein, some evidence indicates that selective exposure also occurs in online political discussion arenas which may lead to political polarization. For example, scholars have noted that virtual communities are fairly homogeneous in terms of values and viewpoints (Dahlberg, 2001), and that participants in an online discussion often hold comparable political perspectives (Wilhelm, 1999). Davis (1999) found from his seminal study of Usenet that persons engaging in online political newsgroup discussion tended to "gravitate to groups agreeing with their own views" (p. 162). Davis concluded that "Usenet discussion must be viewed for what it is – a means for reinforcing preexisting views rather than a virtual community where people can freely express their differing views with each other…" (1999, p. 162). Thus, online communities may serve to insulate groups of people from those with whom they disagree.

Despite evidence suggesting it is unlikely that online political discussion enhances exposure to divergent viewpoints, there is potential for online discussion to lead persons of contrasting viewpoints to engage in online discussion. For example, studying online political discussion and heterogeneity among participants' discussion networks, Brundidge (2006) concluded that individuals use the control the Internet affords them to "seek out likeminded partners for political discussion but to [sic] do not comparably avoid non-likeminded partners when they are inadvertently exposed to them" (p. 21).

Unique aspects of social network sites such as Facebook may serve to bring disagreeing parties together in online political discussion. Foremost, the Facebook community itself is enormous. The site reportedly reaches over 31 million people within the United States ("Quantcast," 2008), 85% of the 4-year college market and is growing most rapidly among those over 24 ("Facebook, Inc.," 2008b). The enormous reach of the site translates to a greater potential for interaction among disagreeing parties to occur on Facebook than was possible on previous online discussion networks. For example, the Usenet population that Davis (1999) studied was estimated in the ballpark of 180,000.

Beyond sheer reach, novel features of the social media structure of social network sites may be conducive to bringing together individuals of divergent perspectives. Unlike traditional arenas of political discourse where individuals often must seek out debate communities, Facebook is a push medium where people learn about the activities of others via feeds with embedded links to site content such as profile pages. These feeds provide the user updates of friends' changes to their profiles therefore enabling immediate access to an array of information upon logging into the site (Baron, 2008). The introduction of the feeds feature in September 2006 reportedly led to a 40% increase in page views from September to October (Baron, 2008)

indicating that people are reading and following the feeds to linked content within the Facebook network. Because Facebook is an online space where political expression occurs on profiles through friend associations with candidates and associations with groups and political applications (Williams & Gulati, 2007), there is great potential for users to receive political information about friends in their network, such as their political stances and affiliations as well as membership in political Facebook groups.

These unique push features of Facebook may lead to increased inadvertent exposure to dissimilar viewpoints and ultimately lead disagreeing parties to interact in a common discussion space. Such an occurrence may enhance the prospects for online political discussion to move beyond its described role of "reinforcing preexisting views" (Davis, 1999, p. 162).

Given the emerging role of Facebook as a political utility for its users and the unique format of the site, this study seeks to explore whether engagement in political discussion occurs between persons with opposing viewpoints in a Facebook group. Thus, the following research question is proposed:

> *RQ1: To what extent are participants who express opposing viewpoints engaging in political discussion in a Facebook group?*

*Civility in Online Discussion*

Beyond bringing disagreeing parties together in a common online space is the important issue of how individuals interact once they have coalesced in an online discussion forum. Past research into online political discourse has illuminated a theme of uncivil behavior by disagreeing participants. For example, Davis (1999) concluded that political discussion on Usenet favored brazen behavior, resulting in "vigorous attack and humiliation" (p. 163) on the less assertive. Davis found that the polite and respectful become discouraged from participation

and the discussion becomes controlled exclusively by the belligerent. Such acts of attack have become known as flaming, a term used to describe posts made in online discussion that personally attack another poster or the poster's ideas (Davis, 1999). The presence of flaming in online political discussion has been reported at varying levels by scholars, with some research pointing to pervasive and disruptive levels of flaming (Davis, 1999; Hill & Hughes, 1998) and other research attributing less prominence to flaming behavior (Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997).

One culprit of uncivil discussion is anonymity. Researchers have noted that anonymity affords users a level of freedom and power to act in an uncivil manner as well as avoid being held accountable for their statements (Barber, Mattson and Peterson, 1997; Davis, 1999; Streck, 1998). Facebook removes the level of anonymity previously enjoyed by online deliberators with its profile feature.

All Facebook members create distinct profiles which consist of an ever-growing array of features (boyd & Ellison, 2007) and which are personalized by displaying photos, personal descriptions and much more. Once a Facebook user joins a group, the affiliation is noted in their profile (unless the group is secret or unless the user chooses not to disclose that affiliation). In addition, their profile image appears in the "group members" section of the group profile. Depending on the level of privacy members have selected for their individual profiles, group members may then view other members' profiles. If an entry is made to the group discussion, the member's profile image along with full name and network affiliation are displayed. Network affiliation is most likely a high school or university, but since being opened up in 2006 to anyone with an email address (Baron, 2008), this can also feature employer, country or city. This is unlike other forms of asynchronous chat online where identifying information is often restricted to merely screen names or icons. Albeit, the names, images and networks displayed in Facebook

chat could be false or only partially realistic; however, this increased amount of information available about the people participating in discussions may impact the discourse in this unique space.

Knowing that participants in the group discussion can access at very least the name, photograph and network affiliation of the messenger may produce a sense of accountability on his or her behalf. Because exchange in group discussion incorporates profile information, and not simply an anonymous screen name, persons engaging in discussion may feel a greater sense of interpersonal interaction. On the other hand, identifying information may be used as a source for ad hominem attacks, particularly in instances in which the discussion has devolved to  uncivil argument. To explore civility within online political discussion on Facebook, the following research question is proposed:

> *RQ2: What are the discourse characteristics of political discussion between members of a political group on Facebook?*

Method

Due to limited scholarly research into Facebook discourse, a qualitative method is appropriate for in-depth exploration. This study is a computer-mediated discourse analysis (Herring, 2004) of political discussion within a Facebook group. The group is focused around the current debate over U.S. policies regarding torture and was formed in response and opposition to the United States Military Commission Act passed by Congress in October 2006. According to a White House press release, this Act "[w]ill allow the CIA to continue its program for questioning terrorists" ("The White House," 2006). The group's stated views are that the law is an attack on habeas corpus and essentially legalizes the United States government to use torture. The group opposes the use of torture to obtain information from suspected terrorists.

*Procedures*

The group under study was chosen at random from ten pre-selected groups that met the researchers' criteria: (1) public group type, (2) topic of interest being torture, (3) membership of more than 100, (4) active discussion postings within the past 30 days, and (5) total discussion postings exceeding 50. Only public Facebook groups were selected due to the availability for anyone with a Facebook account to join them and the ability for the researchers to access the information. The topic area of torture was selected due to the contentious nature of the issue. State sanctioned torture is a global issue that has garnered a great deal of media attention and therefore attracts a diverse population of communicators. The researchers wished to analyze discussion of a serious and timely global issue in which many people of varying backgrounds, education levels, classes, etc. would be potentially participating. A group with a membership of more than 100 increased the likelihood that there would be greater diversity among participants in the discussion. A lasting discussion with current activity was desired in order to successfully analyze the evolution of the arguments and the ongoing participation or lack thereof from the members.

*Sample*

At the time of data collection, the analysis group was made up of over 800 members from around the world. The data set comprised all posts present on the discussion board from its inception up until the date of data collection, April 15, 2008. This does not include any posts that were deleted by any member of the group and thus not available at the time of data collection. The data set consisted of 176 total discussion postings spanning an 18 month period. When printed, the data was 49 single-spaced pages of text at 12pt font. To ensure privacy, the names of group members were replaced with initials and the title of the group has been withheld.

In total, 66 individuals participated in the group discussion. This constituted 8% of the group population. Of the 66 participants, only 10 posted five or more times. Their posts combined totaled 103 and made up 59% of the entire discussion. The highest number of posts by an individual was 22. For the purpose of this study, we will focus primarily on the trends found within this group of frequent communicators. Though characteristics of these participants will be discussed throughout the analysis, an overview of Top 10 participants is provided in the appendix.

*Data Analysis*

A computer-mediated discourse analysis, applying the coding and counting approach (Herring, 2004) was used to analyze asynchronous discussion within a Facebook group. The process of analysis was derived from Galser and Strauss's (1967) constant comparison model, which entailed repeated analysis of the data to allow for coding categories to emerge from the analysis process. Analysis of participation, in which "phenomena of interest are number of messages and responses and message and thread length," (Herring, 2004, p. 358) was employed. The process of analysis was comprised of six steps. First, each researcher individually read the data set twice to establish familiarity with the data. We then individually examined and identified emergent trends based on the research questions through repeated analysis. Third, we compared our individual analysis to identify categories and classify operational definitions. Fourth, we individually coded the data based on the operational definitions. Fifth, we compared our individual analyses. For the purpose of validity and reliability, incongruous results were identified and discussed to reach a consensus on data coding. Sixth, we returned to the data to confirm our findings. As a result of analysis, we arrived at the following results.

Results

*Research Question 1*

*Presence of Opposing Viewpoints*

We assessed the content of each post to determine whether the views expressed in each were in support or opposition to those of the group. After categorizing each individual post, we used these initial categorizations to identify how many participants were in support, opposition or remained neutral to the group's stance. Through analysis we delineated three types of posters: Support, Opposition and Neutral.

An individual's posts were always clearly either in opposition or support, never mixed. That is, we experienced no members who flip-flopped in their stance on the issue. However, individuals' posts may have included a mixture of neutral posts. Where this occurred, they were categorized based on which stance was exhibited. For example, those who had both posts supporting the group stance along with some neutral posts were categorized under "Support" despite the number of neutral posts evident. Therefore, those categorized as "Neutral" never posted any discourse in support or opposition of the group stance. The categories are further explicated below.

"Support" posters were selected for their characteristic disagreement with the US Military Commissions Act of 2006. Commonly, these posters specifically communicated opposition to the use of torture to obtain information from detainees but they also broadly expressed opposition to torture in general for any purpose as well as opposition of government infringement on personal rights such as habeas corpus. An example of a post characteristic of a poster in "support" of the group's stated interest is clear in the following post:

> I don't give a damn if torture WAS useful to get information. It still goes against the Geneva Convention, and is a blatant assault on human rights. What is this world coming to? We're SUPPOSED to be the good guys, but the way I look at it we aren't doing a very good job of showing it. Torture is wrong. 100%. No justification.

"Opposition" posters were distinguished by discourse showing favor for the use of torture. Commonly these posters communicated beliefs that torture was justified against terrorists or suspected terrorists and that torture was an effective means of extracting information from suspects. A clear example of a post made by a poster in "opposition" to the group is found in this post:

> bunch of liberal pansies…do you really feel sympathy for the same people that blew up a part of our country? Do you think these "people" (and I used that term loosely) would stop to consider what they are (and did) to our prisoners?....I say whatever happens to them is much less than they deserve…

A category of "Neutral" posters was required due to the presence of posters who made no post indicating either clear support or opposition of the group's stance on the Military Commissions Act of 2006. These posters made posts that were usually either unrelated to other discourse taking place or posts in which no bias was communicated.

Of the Top 10 posters, seven members aligned with the group and three opposed. In total, of the 66 individual posters, 48 aligned with the group (73%), 11 were in opposition to the group (17%) and 7 were neutral (10%). This confirmed that the individual group members were diverse in their views concerning the topic despite the fact that the group itself had an established stance on the subject. Although expression of opposing viewpoints was present within the discussion

indicating a level of interaction among disagreeing parties, the large majority of posters expressed like-minded perspectives.

*Research Question 2*

Research question 2 sought to investigate the characteristics of discourse in a political Facebook group. After repeated analysis of the individual posts and the overall discussion, four types of posted content were identified and categorized: Informational, Productive Argument, Unproductive Argument and Miscellaneous. Each category is explicated below.

The first category is the "Informational" category and includes posts purely informational in nature. These were posts that shared links to external sources, dates of events or other items of interest, or referenced bodies of information pertaining to the topic of state-sanctioned torture. An example of an informative post is the initial group post which provides a link to a page within the Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress. The linked section is labeled "Military Commissions Act of 2006" and provides further links to files containing the actual language of the act at different stages of the process as it was introduced, debated, amended, approved and reported on by the House of Representatives, United States Senate and other committees involved. This post provides group members with the original documentation and information regarding legislature that the group opposes. The post itself does not contain any statement of stance or opinion regarding the Military Commissions Act of 2006. This post was followed by a series of informative posts. In fact, eight of the first ten posts to the discussion board included links to informative Internet sources. These included links to news articles from sources such as *The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Register*, and Yahoo News.

Also categorized as informative posts were those providing information on how members could take action or extend their Facebook group affiliations into real life events. Such posts

encouraged people to vote, attend protest marches or ask their congressional representatives to support certain legislature. One post in particular, made by member GK, urged group members to call their representatives and ask them to support the Restoring the Constitution Act. The call to action was followed by three links for further information. The first led to an overview piece at washingtonpost.com, the second to an article declaring support of the act on the Human Rights Watch website and the third to a government tracking site which provides an overview and summary as well as a tracking of all amendments and actions regarding the Restoring the Constitution Act. This site also informs viewers as to which representatives are co-sponsoring the bill, what committees it is assigned to and what other related legislature exists.

In a group where members' opinions and knowledge of torture issues vary greatly, the legitimacy of discussion taking place ranges from unjustified personal attacks and name-calling to well structured arguments complete with concessions and well supported facts. Overall, individuals' posts tended to display a favored style of argument. For example, those whose posts displayed profanity, name-calling and/or personal attacks tended to show a trend in these types of posts. Isolated events were uncommon, especially among the most active communicators.

Respectively, those members who posed opinions but were also seeking or willing to listen to other opinions tended to maintain this style throughout. These posts were placed in category two, "Productive Arguments." This category includes posts (regardless of stance on the issue) which pose an argument or respond to an argument but are devoid of any harsh judgment, personal attacks, flaming, etc. This type of discourse is strongly exemplified by group members MR and RP. These two members participated in a discussion consisting of nine posts directly engaging one another that are each categorized as "Productive." Of note in these exchanges are the willingness each member has in considering the other's opinions, posing genuine and

Table 1

*Post Type by Top 10 Participants*

| Participant | Post Type (%) | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Civil | Uncivil | Neutral |
| MW | 18 (82%) | 4 (18%) | 0 |
| KN | 11 (65%) | 6 (35%) | 0 |
| GK | 10 (91%) | 1 (9%) | 0 |
| NC | 7 (58%) | 3 (25%) | 2 (17%) |
| SJ | 3 (33%) | 6 (67%) | 0 |
| MR | 7 (78%) | 1 (11%) | 1 (11%) |
| RP | 5 (83%) | 1 (17%) | 0 |
| RW | 2 (29%) | 5 (71%) | 0 |
| MKW | 4 (80%) | 0 | 1 (20%) |
| ZB | 0 | 5 (100%) | 0 |
| Total | 68 (66%) | 31 (30%) | 4 (4%) |

provoking questions, and the ability to recognize their own misconceptions. For example, in one

post, MR makes such statements as, "…I would like to here [sic] a rational response to my

argument. Cause maybe im [sic] wrong…" and "…k [sic] maybe im [sic] exaggerating the issue

a bit, but I dunno…" He also states, "… (of course there are the exceptions…" and even moves

to unify himself with group members by asking, "…what does [sic] everyday people like us have

to concern over matters of this nature?" MR maintains this style of discourse. He admits in one

post, "… (this is just my view of things btw, not saying it has to be right…" In direct response to

content in RP's posts MR makes other productive moves such as restating a point MR makes and

finishing it with, "…I can't agree…" and, "I see your point though…" RP's discourse is similar

and also considered productive. Much like MR, RP is willing to point out the good and bad in the

opposing argument. In one post RP states, "Also, you make a good point about…" and in the

following post, "…I still don't find your defense of torture persuasive."

Category three is the "Unproductive Argument" category and includes posts that contain

some elements of argument but feature prominent use of personal attacks and insults to the group

at large or individuals. These posts range from mildly antagonistic to downright offensive but all

of them contain some discussion of the topic and are therefore relevant to the overall discourse.

For example, group member MW posts this category three response:

> It is not anyone here's [sic] job to convince you that you're wrong, but if you're here to
>
> challenge the GROUP's opinions, back it up. Oh, and cut down on the language – AND
>
> learn how to spell. I guess what it comes down to is to THINK before you write, instead
>
> of writing out your ass. Maybe I'm asking for too much…

This is a mild personal attack but the emphasis is put on the attack rather than furthering valid

discussion or respecting opposing viewpoints as seen in our discussion of "Productive

Argument" posts above. Other examples of "Unproductive Argument" are much harsher. Two

members, SJ and ZB, exchange more than 10 messages of this type. Distinctive and qualifying

discussion elements in these posts include comments to individuals and the group such as,

"…you disagree, and your [sic] an ignorant FUCK." And "…you people make me want to vomit

and eat it." Following a synopsis of their viewpoint, ZB ends a post with, "In conclusion, go to

hell, you sadistic chickenhawk [sic] fuckwit [sic]." The profanity and personal attacks are numerous between the two members. Such posts are in stark contrast of those we categorized earlier as "Productive Argument."

The final category, the "Miscellaneous" category, encompasses posts which were unclear in their purpose, unintelligible, or completely non-pertinent or off-topic. These were often short, solitary posts from members not actively communicating. Examples include, "You do understand that we are all probably on a watch list by now?" and "Jack Bauer can torture you into giving up information you do not posses." These were not posted in direct response to any posts going on at the time and were the only posts by these members. Others included posts like this, "Thanks for the PDF John."

The discussion utilized in our study was missing some posts due to the member deleting them after the fact. A post by this member states some contentious material was deleted so some posts around that time are unclear and seemingly unrelated to the larger discussion. Examples of this kind that were categorized as "Miscellaneous" are, "FUCKED UP." And "Hitler was an atheist." Most likely these posts are in relation to the deleted posts and therefore we could not adequately evaluate them.

*Civility*

To analyze trends within the discourse and explore the level of civility displayed among participants, existing categories were further grouped according to the presence of either positive or negative styles of discourse. Posts falling in the informational and productive argument categories were labeled "Civil" content posts. Civil posts represent posts that focused on issues or argument and were executed in a generally respectful manner. Posts in the unproductive category were labeled "Uncivil" content posts. Uncivil posts were those that contained flaming

and thus were a potential threat to respectful discussion. Posts that fall into the "Miscellaneous" category are considered "Neutral" content posts.

Each member of the Top 10 was evaluated to see which style of communication they tended to utilize in their postings. Seven of the Top 10 (the majority) engaged in predominately civil posts and were categorized as "Civil" communicators. Only three of the Top 10 participants made predominately uncivil posts. These individuals, SJ, RW and ZB, were categorized as "Uncivil" communicators. 68 posts (66%) from the Top 10 participants were categorized as "Civil", 31 (30%) were categorized as "Uncivil" and four posts (4%) were categorized as "Neutral." Table 1 shows the number of posts in each category as well as the percentage it represented of each individual's posts.

Overall, despite small concentrations of negative or "uncivil" discourse, the discussion by all participants in the Facebook group consisted of 130 posts categorized as the "Civil" communication style. This is 75% of all posts and signals an overall constructive discussion. This analysis indicates that the majority of posts was informative in nature or expressed arguments in a civil manner. It also indicates however, that there was a significant presence of flaming or personal attacks which has been previously identified by scholars as a fundamental drawback of online political discussion (Barber, Mattson and Peterson, 1997; Davis, 1999; Hill & Hughes, 1998; Streck, 1998). The majority of uncivil posts (52%) were made by three participants during an argument that occurred between them.

*Profile*

Given the unique structure of discussion in Facebook groups, a final area of interest was whether identifying elements of a Facebook user's profile were the subject of discussion. Analysis of the data revealed that discussion posts were largely absent of elicitations to

identifying information provided by the Facebook group discussion format. Over the life of the discussion there were only 7 instances where personal attributes were brought up within the discussion. All but 1 of these instances involved group member SJ. One instance occurred within a post made by ZB in which ZB comments on SJ's profile image in order to insinuate that SJ is of low class and intelligence. Another such post occurs during the ongoing argument between ZB and SJ. The post comes from someone who claims to know SJ in real life though it is unclear in what capacity the two are acquainted. This member first states an acquaintance with SJ and insists on debating SJ's previously stated viewpoints. The member insinuates that since she knows SJ her argument will be more effective than the others who are also in disagreement with SJ. A third such post brings forth another unique aspect of Facebook group discourse. Within this post SJ states, "…not that you know anything about me." In certain online discussion forums this could be true but in Facebook ZB may actually have access to quite a bit of SJ's personal information depending on how SJ manages their profile.

Participants in Facebook group discourse may forget how much information is actually available to their fellow communicators. Towards the end of the argument, SJ starts to make attempts to repair the discourse and move toward constructive argument. During this time SJ requests that ZB stop making personal attacks and insists that the profile picture in question does not represent the kind of person SJ is. Although they were few, all of these cases highlight the impact of the unique structure of Facebook on the discussion.

## Discussion

This study expands upon previous research into the political utility of social network sites (i.e., Gueorguieva, 2007; Williams & Gulati, 2007) by demonstrating that Facebook is a legitimate location for discussion of political issues. The discussion under study consisted of

participants with opposing viewpoints. To some extent the discussion appears to have succeeded in overcoming polarization of online discussion that has pervaded online political discussion in the past (e.g., Davis, 1999). However, representation of viewpoints within the Facebook group was highly skewed in favor of discussion among likeminded participants with 73% of all posters aligning with the group stance on state-sanctioned torture. Only 17% of posters were in opposition to the group's stance. This indicates that the unique social media network structure of social network sites such as Facebook may play a minor role in facilitating participants' exposure to disagreeing parties and heterogeneity in online political discussion. However, because this study did not contain any interviews with discussion participants, conclusions cannot be drawn as to how or why disagreeing parties came to know about the group and what motivated them to join it.

Although it may facilitate diversity in political discussion, Facebook could enable individuals to insulate themselves from interaction with those they disagree with. In this study we explored discussion within one Facebook group about a specific issue, state-sanctioned torture. However, the fact that there are numerous torture-related groups means that Facebook users with an opinion about the issue of torture have the ability to seek out a group with likeminded members. Any member who does not find a group that conforms to their perspective has the ability to establish a new group to promote their view and recruit likeminded members.

Despite a few 'bad apples,' civil argument and information exchange characterized much of the discussion. Our findings confirm past research showing that online political discussion tends to contain a significant level of uncivil discussion (Davis, Hill & Hughes, 1998; Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997). However, our results contradict the conclusion drawn by some scholars (e.g., Davis, 1999) that online political discussion is dominated by belligerence that discourages

participation by the polite and respectful. That 30% of posts by the most active 10 participants were uncivil in nature means there is room for behavioral improvement in online political discussion. Yet, 7 of the 10 most frequent posters were predominately positive in their discourse styles. 130 of the 176 posts (75%) were civil and represent a willingness of participants to engage in a discussion group despite the presence of uncivil or even aggressive communication. On the whole, our results provide some support for Brundidge's (2006) conclusion that individuals use the control the Internet affords to "seek out likeminded partners for political discussion but to [sic] do not comparably avoid non-likeminded partners when they are inadvertently exposed to them" (p. 21).

By analyzing the discourse trends of the most frequent posters over the lifetime of the discussion, this study highlights unique patterns of behavior that offer an alternative explanation for trends of flaming in online political discussion. In all forms of discussion there will likely always be those who are brazen and boisterous and those who are civil and considerate. In all such cases the persons who yell the loudest would appear to draw the most attention. In an online forum, the loudest person is established by frequency or audacity of post rather than volume. Yet this study shows that the loudest persons are not necessarily the person drawing widespread attention from the group. Rather, the group discussion board served as a forum for argument for a concentrated type of poster with certain discourse characteristics whereas the majority enacted a predominately civil discourse style by engaging in constructive interaction through argument and exchange of information related to an issue of common concern, despite their stance on the issue.

This study also explored how unique aspects of Facebook, namely the presence of identifying information via the profile, may influence political discussion. Given that personal

attacks were relatively few and civil behavior was fairly prominent, we can infer that the presence of identity attributes within the Facebook discussion may have a positive impact on the nature of online political discussion. It may be that these attributes of Facebook engender a more personalized, human-to-human feel that promotes civil interaction in online discussion. Further research is needed to explore this possibility and the potential role identity attributes may play in fostering more civility in online discussion. On the other hand, elements of the Facebook profile can become fuel for those types of communicators who engage in vitriolic online discussion. This unique aspect of Facebook may make engaging in online political discussion via Facebook particularly troublesome for those who become targets of aggression. Persons engaging in political discussion on Facebook should take caution and be proactive in establishing a comfortable level of access to their profile information by adjusting their privacy settings.

*Limitations of Study*

Due to the focused nature of our study on one Facebook group, our results cannot be generalized to other Facebook groups or to political discussion on social network sites in general. Despite this drawback, this study opens new questions and avenues for computer-mediated communication scholars and social media scholars alike. The results of this study may be skewed towards lesser diversity of opinion given that the group had a stated position about the issue. This may have caused the group to be comprised of a high proportion of persons who support the group's stated position resulting in over representation of persons in support of the group's position within the group discussion. Keep in mind one must be a member of the group in order to post messages. Had the group under study not taken a polemic stance about the issue, it is possible that a greater representation of diverse viewpoints would have been present.

*Suggestions for Future Research*

Future study should seek to expand upon the results suggested in this study that the unique structure of social network sites may serve to help bring together disagreeing persons into a common online discussion space. The alternative possibility, that Facebook may serve to perpetuate isolation, must also be explored. Interviews should be conducted with discussion participants to examine the courses traveled by discussion participants that led them to enter a particular Facebook group discussion so as to explore what motivates and facilitates exposure to disagreeing parties in online discussion spaces.

The presence of identifying attributes within Facebook online political discourse is an issue that is in need of further investigation. Future scholarship should explore in-depth the role of social network site identity within online political discussion, and online discussion broadly. Future research could survey or interview Facebook users who utilize group discussion to see how access to profile information may or may not influence participation in group discourse.

Lastly, beyond text-based discussion, even richer forms of interaction are becoming possible through inexpensive media production equipment such as personal video cameras, editing software, and free online hosting. There is a rich, unexplored space of political discussion occurring through multimedia on sites such as YouTube.com. Scholars interested in online political discussion should begin investigating this emerging arena in order to understand the rich mediums that people are playing with now to express themselves and engage others.

Conclusion

The results of this study are significant in that they demonstrate the capability of social networks to afford persons of different perspectives the ability to coalesce and engage in political debate. Furthermore, they demonstrate that people are seeking beyond recreational use of these

social media and are harnessing the capabilities of these technologies to engage in political discussion and express their views about issues they care about. Although online political discussion was around well before the advent of social network sites, the richness and popularity of these technologies, along with the decreasing cost of Internet access may be bringing larger populations and new participants into the foray of online political discussion. Furthermore, as this study indicates, these sites may promote civility in discussion and interaction among disagreeing parties. We are in the midst of a rapidly expanding population of citizens who are using social media as a political utility. New, creative political uses of social media will continue to emerge, yet the fundamental need for citizens to discuss issues will remain. Despite the drawbacks of online political discussion, use of the Internet remains a popular medium for people to connect and debate issues they care about.

This study also inserts some optimism into discussion of online political discussion. Although flaming remains a problem in the Facebook discourse analyzed, it does not dominate nor does it drive out those who seek to interact in a civil manner. With that said, the internet is by no means a fully democratic medium where the people come together to politely and rationally discuss viewpoints and arrive at the best possible conclusion, a la technological utopianism. Be that as it may, the Internet may be the best hope we have. Scholars and practitioners alike shoulder the duty to study and critique emerging internet technologies, not so as to condemn them but, rather, to create opportunities to continuously improve their democratic potential. It is the hope that this study provided a launching pad for research into the potential of social media in the civic process.

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Appendix: Characteristics of Top 10 Participants

| Participant | Posts | Viewpoint | Civility |
|---|---|---|---|
| GK* | 11 | Support | Civil |
| RW | 7 | Opposition | Uncivil |
| NC | 12 | Support | Civil |
| MW | 22 | Support | Civil |
| KN | 17 | Support | Civil |
| MWK | 5 | Support | Civil |
| SJ | 9 | Opposition | Uncivil |
| ZB | 5 | Support | Uncivil |
| MR | 9 | Opposition | Civil |
| RP | 6 | Support | Civil |

*Notes*. Participants are listed in the order in which they joined the discussion. *Administrator.