ANCHORS AWAY: EXPLORING THE BROADER, MORE COMPREHENSIVE ONLINE PUBLIC SPHERE

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Talk is the axis of a functioning democracy. Our representatives and officials are required to deliberate policy initiatives before acting on them, but citizens are also expected to talk. Talking to one another about issues facing our society, even when we disagree, can cement the civic bonds that are essential for us to hold our government accountable to its people. The critical role played by political conversations among individual citizens is underscored by the centrality of Jurgen Habermas' public sphere. However, the public sphere has arguably been in decline since the late 20th century. While social media sites would appear to offer the ideal platforms from which to revive the public sphere, research into the online public sphere has suggested that that Americans can't or won't or shouldn't talk about politics on social media.

However, existing research on the online public sphere may be incomplete, given its reliance on outdated theoretical conceptions, overly-formal definitions, and limited research contexts that do not correspond to the more complex realities of how and where people talk about politics. Many political conversations develop outside conventionally defined political contexts, and in the absence of most of the traditional indicators of politics, particularly in social media spaces whose tools empower people to autonomously pursue their own passions and interests. While some research has begun to move beyond the more traditional contexts for the public sphere, no one has yet explored the online public sphere as it might manifest in a minimally anchored context, one where neither the setting, nor the media content, nor the

communicative form are already linked to the formal expectations of the bourgeois public sphere.

This project seeks to challenge the notion that Americans are incapable of using social media to have productive conversations about the issues facing us as a nation and a society. First, I argue for the adoption of a broader model of the public sphere rooted in Habermas' (1984, 1996) own concept of communicative action. The inclusivity of this model facilitates a move away from what I call *political anchors,* which explicitly link research contexts to the formal political realm and acknowledges the autonomous and personalized route by which most people come to engage in online political conversation. In light of these ideas, I propose that non-political public Facebook pages offer a useful example of a minimally anchored context from which the public sphere can emerge.

Taking advantage of Facebook's indelibility and ubiquity, this project explores the casual political conversations that emerge from the comments beneath non-political posts on public Facebook pages not explicitly dedicated to politics. Case studies of four specific Facebook pages were performed: George Takei, Humans of New York, Diply, and Larry the Cable Guy. Utilizing qualitative content analysis, the conversations that emerged in the comments sections of posts for each page were evaluated. In addition, in-depth interviews with people who follow these pages were conducted. The combined results suggest that not only are the comments sections of these four minimally anchored Facebook pages fertile ground for the emergence of the broader public sphere, but so are other non-political spaces on Facebook. Results additionally point to a more personalized approach to political conversation, and politics in general. Altogether, this project begins to contest the belief that social media and reasonable political discourse don't mix, contributes to a broader understanding of the contemporary public sphere and hopes to direct future research similarly outward.

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I also dedicate this work to my daughter Grace, who arrived in our lives at the tail end of this project. Though you are too young to read it, I hope this dissertation stands as proof that you can do anything you put your mind to. I love you.

I thank my parents for being a source of perpetual love, encouragement and inspiration. I would not have pursued this degree if it were not for their example.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

"It is imperative not to lose sight of the classic idea that democracy
resides, ultimately, with citizens who engage in talk with each other"
(Peter Dahlgren, 2005, p. 149).

The strength and legitimacy of a democracy is determined by the degree to which its

citizens are engaged with the political. There are many ways to be politically active, but one

form that is fundamental to democracy today is political talk. At the level of formal decision-

making bodies, democracy expects solutions to problems to be negotiated through talk

(Schudson, 1997). But even before the formal policy decisions are made, political talk between

individual citizens is essential for a functioning democracy (Barber, 2003; Dahlgren, 2005;

Dryzek, 2000). As people share information and ideas, such conversations can increase their

political knowledge (Kim & Kim, 2008; Klofstad, 2011), help them make connections between

distant issues and their everyday lives (Kim, Wyatt & Katz, 1999), and help them refine and

develop their opinions (Gamson, 1996a; Kim & Kim, 2008; Zaller, 1992). In these ways, political

conversation provides the necessary foundation for more advanced political engagement

(Barber, 2003; Dahlgren, 2009; Gamson, 1996a; Klofstad, 2011). The importance of talk in

democratic politics is underscored by the centrality of the public sphere (Habermas, 1991a, b).

As the "realm of social life where the exchange of information and views on questions of

common concern can take place so that public opinion can be formed" (Dahlgren, 1995, p. 7),

the public sphere constitutes the public will that is at the core of what Abraham Lincoln

famously described as "government of the people, by the people, and for the people."

According to Habermas (1991a, b) himself, however, the public sphere has been in

decline since the advent of mass media. There was initially hope that the internet and social

media would reinvigorate the flagging public sphere (Papacharissi, 2002; Schäfer, 2015).

Although research has yielded mixed results (Schäfer, 2015), many have been disappointed by

findings that suggest the quality of online political conversations does not meet the high

standards for the public sphere (e.g., Choi, 2014; Himelboim, 2011; Kersting & Zimmerman,

2014; Papacharissi, 2004; Shulman, 2007; Wilhelm, 1998). An additional setback is the fact that,

while the structure of internet and social media technologies should equalize the political

playing field and make it easier for people to engage politically (Benkler, 2006; Shirky, 2011), this

vision has not quite been realized. Conversations in many online spaces have been found to be

dominated by a few, heavily active participants (e.g., Albrecht, 2006; Gerhards & Schäfer, 2010;

Graham & Wright, 2014; Himelboim, 2011), and tend to develop into echo chambers of partisan

agreement far too easily (e.g., Johnson, Zhang, & Bichard, 2011; Kersting & Zimmerman, 2014;

Smith, Zhu, Lerman, & Kozareva, 2013; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009).

In addition, the social distance enabled by an online environment also appears to have

emboldened those who would misbehave (e.g., Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Hmielowski, Hutchens &

Cicchirillo, 2014; Rowe, 2015; Santana, 2014). Further complicating the situation is the fact that

research has found that the *lack* of anonymity on social media can even discourage people from

engaging in political conversation at all (e.g., Liu, Rui, & Cui, 2017; Rainie & Smith, 2012;

Thorson, 2014). Moreover, the inherent potential of the technology far from guarantees greater

participation (boyd, 2008). In fact, some have suggested that the increased choice and control

offered by the new digital environment may have had the opposite effect, with most choosing

non-political activities and interests over new opportunities for political conversation and

related activities (boyd, 2008; Hindman, 2009; Pew Research Center, 2014a; Pariser, 2011; Prior,

2007b). If political conversation provides the foundation for subsequent political activity, the

declining levels of engagement and participation in politics overall (Hay, 2011) should therefore

not be surprising.

Despite past research arguing that the contributions of internet technologies to the public sphere have been lackluster, I believe that the matter cannot yet be considered settled. Taking a closer look at this work suggests an alternative conclusion, one that indicates that the public may not be entirely at fault. Rather, part of the problem may lie in the underlying assumptions of the research itself. Much of the evidence promoting this gloomy vision of the public sphere has been generated by research that, while systematic and thorough, has nevertheless been constrained by outdated theoretical conceptions, overly-formal definitions and limited research contexts that do not correspond to the broader, more complex realities of how and where people talk about politics. As a result, the disappointing online public sphere identified by past studies may represent only a fragment of a much larger phenomenon.

I am not the first to notice such a discrepancy between how researchers conceptualize people's relationship with politics and the ways in which it actually manifests. Dahlgren (2005) points out that, while the data suggest that people have become less interested in politics, this "may not necessarily signal a disinterest in politics per se. Rather, many citizens have refocused their political attention outside the parliamentary system, or they are in the process of redefining just what constitutes the political, often within the context of social movements" (p. 155). Hay (2011) makes a similar observation, arguing that what seems like large scale political disengagement is more likely dissatisfaction with the formal political system. Bennett (2008) takes this idea a step further, by explaining that we are witnessing a sizable shift in citizenship models rather than a complete abandonment of political engagement. The younger generations favor a more personalized, autonomous, and digitized relationship with politics, and have largely moved away from the more traditional conceptions of citizenship that focus on voting and other formal markers of politics. It should therefore not be surprising, according to Bennett, that institutionalized efforts to encourage youth political engagement continue to fall flat, as these

programs still operate under the assumptions and expectations of the traditional model. This all

has implications for the online public sphere, for if more people are moving away from the

traditional modes of politics and political action, then it is likely that many of the conversations

of the public sphere may also take place outside the contexts that we typically expect to find

them. Research that relies too heavily on the traditional definitions and assumptions associated

with formal politics can therefore only produce a limited and incomplete view of the public

sphere.

Further contributing to this problem is the reliance by much of existing research on a

model of the public sphere that is both restrictive and outmoded: the bourgeois public sphere.

The bourgeois public sphere is the most common conception of the public sphere, which

Habermas (1991a) originally laid out in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. This

model, however, has been the subject of much critique, in particular that it is overly restrictive

in terms of who may participate (Eley, 1992; Fraser, 1992; Young, 1996), how the conversation

may progress (Dahlberg, 2005; Dahlgren, 2005, 2009; Dryzek, 2000; Mansbridge, 1999; Young,

1996), and what it should be about (Calhoun, 1993; Dahlberg, 2005; Fraser, 1992). Accordingly,

several scholars have argued against the overly narrowed components of political conversation

evident in research inspired by the public sphere model (e.g., Bennett, 2008; Dahlgren, 2009;

Eveland, Morey & Hutchens, 2011; Graham, 2010a, 2015; Graham & Harju, 2011; Hay, 2011;

Kliger-Vilenchik, 2015). Habermas himself has since updated the concept of the public sphere so

that it reflects the broader range of valuable political conversation (Dahlberg, 2004, 2005; Lunt

& Livingstone, 2013).

Despite this, however, research exploring the public sphere and political conversation

continues to exhibit an overreliance on the restrictive components of Habermas' bourgeois

public sphere (Lunt & Livingstone, 2013). But because the bourgeois public sphere defines an

extremely narrow vision of political conversation of value in terms of its role, its scope, and the

procedures by which it operates, any public sphere research guided by this conception would be

obliged to similarly restrict and control its research contexts to align with this rigid formula.

Therefore, research that has anchored itself to the traditionally political contexts and modes of

communication demanded by the bourgeois public sphere model may only be observing a small

slice of a much broader and more complex phenomenon.

William Gamson (1996a) opens his book *Talking Politics* with an explanation of its

central themes regarding political talk:

a. People are not so passive,

b. People are not so dumb, and

c. People negotiate with media messages in complicated ways that vary from issue to

issue (p. 4).

He goes on to argue that the conventional picture of the American public found in research and

cultural commentary alike is actually a product of biased assumptions. The sentiment behind

these themes is similar to that which guides this project, but with one slight alteration: the

critical view of the online public sphere is not due to scholars' biased assumptions about the

public, so much as it is due to acceptance of an overly narrow conception of the public sphere

which guides the selection of research contexts. The overarching argument of this project is that

the public sphere exists in places we don't ordinary look for it, and manifests in ways we don't

typically expect. Studying the contexts we traditionally associate with the public sphere has

taught us much. But the myopic view of the contemporary public sphere that an overreliance

on an outdated model produces contradicts the broader, more flexible realities of the public

sphere and political conversation. The updated public sphere is one based on communicative

action, in which participants rationally negotiate ideas and opinions toward the goal of mutual

understanding. Because communicative action is quite commonplace, a public sphere

predicated upon it signals a need for us to similarly expand our outlook and venture beyond the comfort zones provided by formal political realms.

Some research has begun to move outside the contexts and communicative modes traditionally associated with politics and the public sphere, exploring political conversations emerging in non-political online spaces (Munson & Resnick, 2011; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009), political conversations sparked by non-political content (e.g., Hermes, 2000; Kliger-Vilenchik, 2015; Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2013), and casual political conversations instead of formal deliberation (e.g., Graham, 2012; Graham & Harju, 2011). However, no one has yet explored the online public sphere as it might manifest in what I call a "minimally anchored context", one where neither the setting, nor the media content, nor the communicative form are already expressly linked to the expectations of the bourgeois public sphere.

Many of the political conversations that constitute the public sphere develop outside the conventionally-defined political contexts, and in the absence of most of the traditional indicators of politics. These conversations are the product of a newer model of citizenship, Bennett's (2008) actualized citizenship, in which political interest is highly personalized, and one's political behaviors, including conversation, are under the individual's complete control. The inherent autonomy of citizens' new relationship with politics makes such conversations difficult, if not impossible, to predict. As a result, they are challenging to study, and therefore easily overlooked. Yet these conversations still constitute an important component of the public sphere. Since most people talk about politics in the course of casual conversations about other things (Eliasoph, 1998; Klofstad, 2011; Walsh, 2004), these conversations also represent the public sphere's most common manifestation. Thankfully, the unique affordances, and widespread use, of Facebook make the minimally anchored public sphere more concrete, and therefore more visible and accessible than ever before. This project plans to take advantage of

Facebook's indelibility and ubiquity to expand our understanding of the contemporary public

sphere. The goal is to broaden research of political conversation to contexts that are not so

tightly linked to the formal political realm in order to better understand how this changes what

we know about who participates, why they participate, and with what outcomes for the public

sphere.

To that end, I explored one such potential site of the online public sphere: the casual

political conversations that emerge from the comments beneath non-political posts on public

Facebook pages not explicitly dedicated to politics. I performed case studies of four such public

Facebook pages: George Takei, Humans of New York, Diply, and Larry the Cable Guy. I utilized

qualitative content analysis to evaluate the conversations that emerge in the comments sections

of posts to each page that are not explicitly political. However, since the conversations

structured by posted comments occurred asynchronously and remotely, important components

of the process were not evident, or simply not available, in the text. These included participants'

conversational and political motivations and objectives, as well as the role that their

personalized, autonomous relationship with the political plays in their conversational behavior.

To fill in these blanks, I also conducted in-depth interviews with Facebook users who follow at

least one of the four public pages that were the focus of the case studies.

Chapter 2 begins by reviewing Habermas' (1991a, b) original bourgeois public sphere,

tracing its criticisms, and explaining his reconceptualization of the public sphere based on

communicative action (Habermas, 1996). It goes on to situate the public sphere within two

organizational frameworks: Zizi Papacharissi's (2010) private sphere model, and Peter

Dahlgren's (2005) three dimensions of the public sphere. This chapter will also explain the

concept of the political anchor, the research factor(s) that attach one or more of the dimensions

of the public sphere context being observed to the formal political realm and explore the

consequences they can have on research. Particular attention will be paid to the potential for politically anchored contexts to attract political junkies: subjects who exhibit political interest levels significantly higher than the rest of the public. Finally, this chapter will address the challenge of casting off the majority of political anchors, which raises the question of how to locate the public sphere in light of a vast sea of new possibilities, and in the absence of any uniform mode of engagement. As an answer to this question, I combine several theoretical concepts, drawing heavily on Lance Bennett's (2008) actualized citizenship model, to develop what I call the actualized pathway to political conversation, which outlines the structure of the personalized route to political conversation in the social media realm for those who are not political junkies.

Chapter 3 justifies the public sphere situation under exploration in this project, first by addressing its dimensional components. Every instance of the public sphere can be broken down into three components, which correspond with Dahlgren's (2005) three dimensions of the public sphere: the setting in which it occurs (structural dimension), the trigger of the conversation (representational dimension), and the nature of the conversation taking place (interactional dimension). Likewise, the specific research situation for this project can be broken down in the same way: Facebook pages provide the setting (structural dimension), posts featuring non-political content comprise the trigger of the conversation, (representational dimension), and the form the conversation takes is everyday political talk (interactional dimension). Each of these components will be evaluated individually in order to justify the entire situation as a minimally anchored context capable of producing the public sphere. The chapter will conclude by further refining the context, first by justifying the retention of a single political anchor that fits with the overarching organic nature of the PSCA, and finally by explaining the potential value of public Facebook pages for safe encounters with difference.

Finally, in order to study everyday political talk, we must be able to identify it as something distinct from formal deliberation, which has largely been used as the standard for past research, yet still related to it. To this end, Chapter 4 draws on the characteristics of formal deliberation to define a set of criteria for identifying everyday political talk, grounded in Habermas' (1984, 1985) theory of communicative action.

Having set the conceptual and theoretical stage, Chapter 5 brings these ideas together as they relate to this specific project, by developing the research questions driving this study. It then discusses the methodologies used to address these questions. The next two chapters address the results of the qualitative content analysis (Chapter 6) and the semi-structured interviews (Chapter 7). The eighth and final chapter of this dissertation discusses how the combined results of both studies further support a broader conception of the public sphere and teases out how this can apply to future research.

Just as our relationship with politics continues to defy traditional boundaries, exploration of the contemporary public sphere can no longer remain so firmly tied to the conventional political realm. Research has increasingly begun to look beyond the typical scenarios expected to produce the online public sphere. However, much of this research still retains a lifeline to the formal political realm. I do not mean to suggest that such research is somehow valueless or problematic; on the contrary, they represent important first steps in developing a more comprehensive understanding of the broader public sphere predicated on communicative action. However, since they remain tethered to the formal political realm, they constitute only a few toes dipped into the vast ocean of uncharted contextual possibilities for the public sphere. By exploring this particular minimally anchored context, I hope to go even deeper into the unknown, and take the next step to broadening our understanding of the contemporary online public sphere.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL COMPONENTS

The Public Sphere

The first step to a more comprehensive understanding of the contemporary public sphere is moving on from its traditional manifestation. The most fundamental understanding of the public sphere is predicated on Habermas' original concept as laid out in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Dahlberg, 2004; Lunt & Livingstone, 2013). According to Habermas (1991a), the public sphere is a group of private citizens who have autonomously come together to rationally debate matters of political importance, ideally to come to some consensus. The public sphere is meant to be independent of state power, having been neither formed at the direction of government, nor its operations controlled by the government. The primary function of this autonomous public sphere is to produce public opinion, which, while not officially binding in any sense, would ideally influence public policy (Graham, 2015; Gripsrud, Moe, Molander & Murdock, 2010; Lunt & Livingstone, 2013).

The original Habermasian public sphere, however, has been the subject of extensive scholarly criticism. Generally speaking, the most prominent of these criticisms (and the ones most relevant for this project) can be grouped into two loose and overlapping categories: that the bourgeois public sphere is exclusionary, and that it assumes a singular, unified public sphere.

Bourgeois Public Sphere is Exclusionary

One of the defining characteristics that Habermas deems necessary for the public sphere is equality. However, as scholars have noted, the exclusionary outcomes of the bourgeois public sphere, in terms of groups of people, forms of communication, and topics of discussion, contradict this primary value.

Excludes groups of people. In theory, the public sphere must be open to any citizen who wishes to participate (Habermas, 1991b). However, this claim to inclusiveness was more of an

illusion. For Habermas (1991a), the bourgeois public sphere was open to all, but only "insofar as they were propertied and educated" (p. 37). As Nancy Fraser (1992) observes, the bourgeois public sphere that Habermas idealizes was, in reality, not accessible by everyone. Instead, Habermas' definition limited participation to a select group of elite, upper-class white men, making it contradictorily exclusionary of women, cultural and racial minorities, and other groups with less education and lower socio-economic standing (Eley, 1992; Fraser, 1992; Lunt & Livingstone, 2013).

Excludes forms of communication. The requirement for equality in the public sphere is not only meant in terms of access, but also in terms of participation, in the form of "the symmetrical distribution of opportunities for all participants to choose to carry out speech acts of all kinds" (Wenzel, 1981, p. 946). According to Habermas (1991a, b), participants in the public sphere would ignore each other's differences in status (for even within the circumscribed bourgeoisie, there existed status hierarchies), and instead only consider the rational force of their arguments[1]. Thus, the rational quality of formal deliberation in the public sphere was not only the means by which the public sphere manufactured its primary product (reasoned public opinion), but it also provided a common format and structure that would ostensibly situate participants on equal footing (Fraser, 1992).

The logic of this argument, however, is flawed, because it confers upon deliberation an impartiality that, as a communicative form, it cannot accurately claim. As Fraser (1992) points out, the bourgeois public sphere aims for equality by attempting to strip from itself all aspects of culture or difference. It "assumes [incorrectly] that a public sphere is or can be a space of zero degree culture, so utterly bereft of any specific ethos as to accommodate with perfect neutrality

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[1] There were behavioral protocols put in place to ensure this, suggesting the expectation that participants would not naturally be able to accept one another as equals (Fraser, 1992).

and equal ease interventions expressive of any and every cultural ethos" (p. 120). Expecting

rational deliberation to create these neutral conditions presumes that it is a natural form of

human communication, universally accessible to everyone (Young, 1996). However, deliberation

is far from natural. According to Young (1996), it actually "derives from specific institutional

contexts of the modern West – scientific debate, modern parliaments and courts" (p. 123).

The "institutional forms, rules, and rhetorical and cultural styles" that have spawned

deliberation have also come to define "the meaning of reason itself in the modern world"

(Young, 1996, p. 123). However, as deliberation is a communicative form based on formal rules

and particular to Western institutions of the upper classes, it is rather elitist to proclaim it to be

naturally equalizing or reasonably accessible to everyone. This is because rational deliberation

only facilitates equality for those familiar with its rules and intricacies. This familiarity is

dependent on the level (high), quality (equally high), and cultural disposition (Western) of one's

education, which is typically linked to one's cultural and socio-economic situation (Dahlgren,

2005; Mouffe, 1999; Young, 1996). Because less privileged groups rely on communicative forms

that are seen as less valuable in a deliberative setting, dominant groups can easily dismiss

otherwise valid arguments as a result of their presentation (Dahlberg, 2005; Mouffe, 1999;

Young, 1996). In essence, rational deliberation equalizes participation in the same way a car

equalizes travel: just like any other tool, only those with the necessary access and ability to use

it will enjoy its equalizing benefits.

Furthermore, a reliance on primarily formal deliberation excludes other modes of

communication, of which there are many that are valuable for democracy (Dahlberg, 2005;

Dahlgren, 2009; Mansbridge, 1999; Young, 1996). In her conception of "communicative

democracy" (as opposed to deliberative democracy), Young (1996) specifically highlights three

forms of communication that deliberation pointedly excludes: (a) greeting, (b) rhetoric, and (c)

storytelling. Rather than ignore difference, which is what she argues deliberation mistakenly aims to do, these forms enable participants to speak "across difference," allowing for "greater social objectivity" that facilitates the *consideration* of difference rather than discarding it altogether in the process of coming to "just solutions to collective problems" (p. 128). Young (1996) further criticizes deliberation for too heavy a focus on the speaker, while ignoring the listener. If coming to fair solutions requires participants to consider the perspectives of other members of the polity, then getting people to pay attention to those perspectives must be an equal part of the communicative format.

Excludes topics. Finally, Habermas firmly limited the appropriateness of topics for discussion in the bourgeois public sphere to matters of public concern, and determination of the common good (Fraser, 1992). Many have argued that this limitation is problematic, mainly because at its core is an overly rigid definition of public and private (Calhoun, 1993; Dahlberg, 2005; Fraser, 1992; Papacharissi, 2010). Public, for Habermas, exists in stark opposition to private: that which is not considered public is by definition private, and that which is considered private is wholly inappropriate for discussion in the public sphere. Therefore, the designation of something as "private" effectively eliminated it from consideration within the public sphere. But, as Fraser (1992) points out, issues can be, and have been, argued to be private in order to exclude them from consideration and renegotiation in the public sphere. Ultimately, we must recognize that the descriptors "public" and "private" are not classifications that can be objectively applied. Rather, they are (and have historically been) rhetorical devices used to "delegitimate some interests, views, and topics and to valorize others" (Fraser, 1992, p. 131), which further undermines the equality of the public sphere.

Furthermore, the problem with a rigid, external definition of what may or may not be discussed in the public sphere, according to Fraser, is that it falsely assumes that deliberation

(the primary act of the public sphere) must, and will, always result in the common good.

However, the existence of a uniform, common good that does not conflict with any other

equally valid interests is, in most cases, a utopian figment, and therefore cannot be assumed at

the outset of deliberation in the multifaceted public sphere. Since there is no way to predict

"whether the outcome of a deliberative process will be the discovery of a common good…,"

argues Fraser, "there is no warrant for putting any strictures on what sorts of topics, interest,

and views are admissible in deliberation" (1992, pp. 130-131).

Bourgeois Conception Proposes a Singular Public Sphere

A related criticism of the bourgeois public sphere is that it presupposes a singular public

sphere meant to represent the interests of the entire population (Fraser, 1992; Dahlgren, 2005).

Fraser (1992) points out that Habermas doesn't only assume the existence of a singular public

sphere; for him, a singular public sphere is clearly its preferred state, as evidenced by his

mourning of the intrusion of the masses into the public sphere. However, the notion of a

singular public sphere raises two problems: firstly, it intensifies the exclusion of minority groups,

issues and opinions, and secondly, it highlights the challenges presented by consensus.

Intensifies exclusion. A singular public sphere intensifies the issue of exclusion.

According to Fraser (1992), not only are minority groups and issues marginalized by the

exclusionary conditions within the bourgeois public sphere, but designating the bourgeois public

sphere as the *definitive* public sphere precludes minority groups from negotiating their own

issues in any meaningful way. Forced into a single, comprehensive public sphere, minority

groups would only be able to address issues relevant to them through the filters, frames and

values imposed by the dominant groups that would monopolize the public sphere. By

"absorbing the less powerful into a false 'we' that reflects the more powerful" (Mansbridge,

1980, cited in Fraser, 1992, p. 123), subordinate groups and their interests would be effectively marginalized.

   The challenges of consensus. The concept of a singular public sphere also raises an additional problem: that of consensus. Habermas (1991b) understands the public sphere to be a vehicle through which the public may collectively communicate their preferences to their elected officials in a representative democracy, which entails an expectation of consensus at the conclusion of the process. The challenge of this expectation when there is a singular public sphere is threefold. First, a singular public sphere would clearly result in the production of a singular consensus, which, due to the public sphere's reliance on an elitist form of communication, would yield public opinion that is not actually representative of the public at large (Fraser, 1992). As Mouffe (1999) points out, because deliberative democracy requires that the force of argument persuade others to consensus, one must be able to defend his/her argument according to the rules of deliberation. If one is unable to do so, procedure dictates that his/her position is not rational, and unworthy of consideration. However, the rules don't account for other reasons, unrelated to an argument's worthiness, why one might not be able to defend his/her opinion, such as unfamiliarity with, or lack of access to, the elite language requirements and conventions of rational deliberation. Being unable to participate in these terms, a person has only two options: participate using whatever communication conventions s/he is most familiar with or stay silent altogether. Both options deprive the debate of potentially valuable contributions to the discussion, and it is the reliance on the proper rules and procedures to govern deliberation which facilitates this exclusion. Thus, any consensus produced by an exclusionary public sphere should be considered suspect, since it can easily obscure the existence of positions that are equally valid, but simply were not given fair treatment in the discussion (Fraser, 1992; Mouffe, 1999).

Second is the question as to whether consensus is a reasonable objective for the public sphere in the first place. Consensus is wedded to deliberation, but it is also wedded to the size of the public sphere. A product of its time and its exclusivity, Habermas' bourgeois public sphere consisted of a significantly smaller number of people (Papacharissi, 2004). Small numbers and limited entry enabled the bourgeois public sphere to actually produce consensus. However, for the large, diverse population into which we have since grown, the act of forming public opinion through deliberation is difficult. The first reason for this is the plain fact of physical limitations (Dahlgren, 1995, 2005). It is simply not feasible to bring an entire population together to engage in deliberation. The second reason is that as the size and diversity of a group increases, so does the possibility for incompatible interests. As a result, the odds of actually achieving complete consensus are even smaller with a larger population, since the interests and objectives of the diverse groups within a large population are frequently in competition with one another (Dahlgren, 1995).

Finally, there is also the obstacle of whether a given political issue is definitively resolvable, even without immense numbers. As Mouffe (1999) points out, the underlying belief of rational discourse is that consensus can always be reached. Thus, when the outcome of deliberation is not consensus, then the problem is typically assumed to be in the nature of the discussion rather than in the equal validity of conflicting opinions. However, belief in the ability to achieve a singular, harmonious consensus implies that all issues are resolvable, reducible to a binary of "right" and "wrong," and that such a status is readily observable by everyone involved. The truth is that the goal of a singular consensus obscures the simple fact that many opposing positions are equally valid, yet also irreconcilable (Gripsrud, et al., 2010; Mouffe, 1999). In fact, conflict is a natural, prerequisite component of politics (Barber, 2003; Mouffe, 1999), and thus cannot be forcibly removed or reasoned away. Thus, the perception of conflict as an obstacle

that must be overcome or eliminated as a precondition for rational deliberation, as well as the consensus it is meant to produce, is a fallacy.

The PSCA: An Updated Concept

In light of these issues, the public sphere as originally defined appears to be a problematic concept. Habermas has since updated the idea of the public sphere in a way that allows for a much broader conceptualization. His updated public sphere relies primarily on the presence of a specific form of communication rather than spatial or temporal characteristics (Dahlberg, 2004). The specific form of communication Habermas (1996) lays out is "communicative action," where participants negotiate the validity of claims put forth by one another during the conversation, with the aim of reaching mutual understanding.

Communicative action. In *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas (1984) presents communicative action, where action is oriented to mutual understanding, in opposition to strategic action, where action is achieved through manipulation of others. As Johnson (1991) points out, Habermas does not argue that action oriented toward mutual understanding is altruistic. All types of social action, including communicative action, are undertaken in order to achieve a certain individual or personal goal. The difference is in the manner in which the goals are achieved. "What is crucial, in [Habermas'] view, is whether participants coordinate their individual goal-oriented action through consent or through influence" (Johnson, 1991, p. 185). This difference can be seen in the perspective of each type of action concerning the other members of society.

Both strategic and communicative actions are social actions, in the sense that they both occur within a societal context (requiring the presence of more than one person), and they both involve communication with others. However, each type of social action views these "others" differently, which affects the mode of communication used. Strategic action is about pursuing

goals relating to individual self-interest, and it sees others as "opponents" to be beaten (Cecez-

Kecmanovic and Janson, 1999). Thus, strategic action can be understood as social primarily in

the sense that it involves the presence of more than one person. However, the only person of

actual value in this process is the goal-seeking individual. Since other people are primarily seen

as obstacles to overcome in the process of advancing the individual goal, strategic reasoning

therefore justifies the use of the most expedient communicative means available, regardless of

how those means affect others involved (Johnson, 1991). This includes coercion, manipulation,

deception, and other less than savory practices.

Communicative action is also undertaken in a social context to achieve individual goals.

However, it understands other people in a fundamentally different way from strategic action: as

partners. Through communicative action, as Johnson (1991) explains, the goal of the individual

is obtained through a cooperative process that requires the active participation of others in the

formation of consensus, not just their presence and acquiescence. In communicative action, all

participants must rationally evaluate and consent to the fulfillment of individual goals (Cecez-

Kecmanovic & Janson, 1999; Johnson, 1991). The emphasis is on the group rather than the

individual, and thus attributes value to each member. The collective perspective of

communicative action drives individuals to consider the impact of their objective on others as

much as they consider its impact on themselves, and thus they must reject communicative

strategies that prevent others from properly evaluating their arguments.

When individuals engage in communicative action, rationally negotiating ideas and

opinions toward an end of mutual understanding, they are, in fact, constructing the public

sphere (Habermas, 1996). By assigning this form of communication a constitutive role,

Habermas conceptually alters the impetus of the public sphere from external conditions to

autonomous human activity. Instead of understanding the public sphere as a physical

manifestation reliant on a set of externally imposed norms and rules dictating its locations,

participant behaviors, and outcomes, the public sphere based on communicative action (PSCA)

can be understood as a constructive event that materializes organically out of a communicative

form. The mere act of people engaging in communicative action with one another generates the

PSCA, regardless of the surroundings context and parameters (Calhoun, 1993; Dahlberg, 2004;

Kim & Kim, 2008).

PSCA – a broader public sphere. Habermas's revised conception of a public sphere as

reliant on communicative action (PSCA) addresses many of the critiques levied on the original

bourgeois conception. Ultimately, a public sphere dependent on communicative action breaks

down the stiff boundaries built around the bourgeois public sphere that delineated the primary

objective, communication form, contexts, and topics. As reviewed below, this results in a much

broader, almost limitless field of possibilities for the PSCA's emergence.

A new objective: mutual understanding. First of all, a public sphere reliant on

communicative action alters the objective of the conversation, from actionable consensus to

mutual understanding. Aiming for mutual understanding refocuses the view of the interaction

from the binary winner/loser dynamic to the civic benefits obtained by all simply from

participation in the discussion.

Some might question the true value of conversation that does not produce any

actionable solutions or consensus. Others might consider political conversations which end with

participants "agreeing to disagree" to epitomize failure. As Mouffe (1999) points out, however,

this view follows from an understanding of democracy as navigating a world in which there is

one clear and obviously correct and legitimate solution to every problem, and a view of rational

political conversation as a process that can and should always produce that solution ("if only

others would just *listen!*"). In other words, the outcome of political debates in a democracy, in

this view, should ideally be a harmonious existence as those clearly in the wrong reject their previous thinking so that problems can be solved to the satisfaction of everyone. Political disagreement is an unfortunate obstacle that must be overcome, created by those who are guided by misunderstanding, misinterpretations, or ignorance.

However, this perception of politics and political conversations ignores the fact that, as mentioned previously, conflict is a prerequisite for politics. As both Barber (2003) and Mouffe (1999) pointed out, conflict is the foundation of politics. For if there were a clear, readily observable solution to a given problem, there would be no need for politics at all. In addition, most issues facing a diverse society such as the United States can rarely be broken down into a clear binary of "right" and "wrong". Rather they are more typically a matter of negotiating competing, irreconcilable, yet still equally valid interests (Mouffe, 1999). As a result, a democracy necessitates the negotiation of difference, which is done primarily through talk.

In fact, Dahlberg (2005) argues that, by shifting to a model of the public sphere based on communicative action, Habermas has actually rejected the notion of a consensus-producing public sphere altogether:

Participants, when undertaking discourse involving moral-practical claims, presuppose that reaching understanding or agreement could "in principle" be achieved. However, "the phrase 'in principle' expresses the idealizing proviso: if only the argumentation could be conducted openly enough and continued long enough." Rational consensus can only be non-coercively achieved if discourse is continued indefinitely. Thus, it is not such a problem that undistorted consensus can never be fully realized. In practice, public opinion is always in the *process* of formation… It is the *process* that counts. Agreement may ultimately motivate discourse, but the process is more important than the ends. (pp. 127-128)

The process of discussion and debate forces participants to evaluate and potentially revise their positions. As Chambers (1996) points out, "in short, by defending their opinions with reason their opinions become more reasoned" (cited in Dahlberg, 2005, p. 128). Thus, reorienting the objective toward mutual understanding facilitates higher quality arguments and opinions, which are important civic benefits for both the individual and society as a whole.

Broader range of communication forms. Wherever and whenever communicative action manifests, the public sphere can be constituted (Dahlberg, 2004; Dahlgren, 2005; Eliasoph, 1998; Habermas, 1996; Kim & Kim, 2008; Wyatt, Katz & Kim, 2000). Because communicative action is a relatively commonplace form of communication, this liberates the public sphere from the specific spaces or contexts to which the bourgeois model confined it.

Broader range of contexts. The elimination of formal spatial requirements destroys the notion of a singular, exclusive public sphere that is meant to determine and represent the entirety of public opinion. Rather, the PSCA can now be understood as groups of spontaneous discussions dispersed across various boundaries of geography, subjects, and situations. This new conceptualization, illustrated by Dahlgren's (2005) description of the public sphere that is a "constellation of communicative spaces" (p. 148), as well as Fraser's (1992) "multiplicity of publics" (p. 122), mitigates the issues of exclusivity inherent in a singular, deliberative public sphere. The ephemeral communicative instances that form the PSCA are fluid constructs with unfixed boundaries (Dahlgren, 2009; Fraser, 1992; Papacharissi, 2010). Thus, through both the manner of communication and the looser parameters of its formation, the PSCA offers a more egalitarian, inclusive context for subordinate groups that would be suppressed or ignored in the singular model of the bourgeois public sphere.

In addition, the absence of contextual constraints significantly expands the possibilities in which the PSCA can emerge. Situational contexts can be tied to physical spaces, such as town

hall meetings, voting locations, and political rallies, but they often are not. Primarily, they are

publicly-accessible contexts (events, activities, virtual spaces, etc.) that are centered around

public affairs and/or politics. Some examples would be school board meetings, political

discussion boards, and fundraisers or rallies for social and/or political causes. The reliance on

communicative action frees the public sphere from the formal constraints of situational contexts

and physical spaces traditionally associated with public affairs and politics. The PSCA accepts

what Dahlgren (2009) calls the "messiness and unpredictability" of social interaction, which

allows informal, everyday talk occurring in a variety of situations to veer unexpectedly into the

political realm.

A reliance on communicative action also frees the public sphere from being limited to

the media contexts traditionally expected to inform it. Warner (2002) argues that a public is

necessarily organized around texts. For Habermas (1991a, b), as well as many others, the only

media texts of importance for the public sphere are news and political texts. However, just as

communicative action can occur outside the situational contexts traditionally devoted to

politics, it can also occur outside media contexts traditionally associated with politics.

As the central component of the new public sphere, communicative action means that

news and formal political coverage are no longer the only contexts that can be seen to inspire

political talk. Additionally, supporting this claim is the fact that scholars have also begun to

explore entertainment as a viable context for the emergence of political conversation and the

public sphere (e.g., Hermes, 2000; Thrall, Lollio-Fakhreddine, Berent, Donnelly, Herrin, Paquette,

Wenglinski, & Wyatt, 2008). In addition, further research has argued that not only can

entertainment and/or non-political media inspire spontaneous political conversation, but that

the resulting conversations also can be more civil and offer greater exposure to diverse opinions

than conversations produced in and around media contexts dedicated to news and politics (e.g.,

Graham, 2012; Graham & Hajru, 2011; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009).

The new public sphere is polysituational and ephemeral (Lunt & Livingstone, 2013). It is

no longer confined to a particular set of concrete circumstances. Rather, it can be found in a

variety of contexts, both physical and intangible. These varied public spheres are not absolute;

they are permeable constructs that can and do connect, overlap, or feed into one another just

as easily as they can exist separately. The common thread that links them all together is

communicative action. Essentially, a reliance on communicative action acknowledges that just

because certain situational or media contexts are identifiably or traditionally "political" does not

mean that they are the sole contexts around which political conversations occur. In human

social practice, political discussion and thought are constantly weaving in and out of

conversations and contexts deemed unrelated by "official" classifications (Papacharissi, 2010;

Dahlgren, 2009). While the human tendency to intermix contexts might frustrate society's

impulse to firmly categorize, it actually has the effect of personalizing concepts and issues that

would be otherwise remote and therefore potentially inconsequential for most citizens

(Papacharissi, 2010).

Another implication of expanding the acceptable contexts for the public sphere is that

this allows us to turn to internet and social media contexts, the latter of which is the focus of

this project. The conversations of the original Habermasian public sphere were understood to be

face-to-face encounters. But the internet, and social media technologies in particular, have

fundamentally altered our social and communicative experiences. Therefore, it makes sense

that the potential of the internet for supporting the public sphere has attracted significant

thought and scholarship. Citing research-based evidence of the failure of online political

conversations to meet deliberative standards (e.g., Himelboim, 2011; Hindman, 2009; Kersting &

Zimmerman, 2014; Wilhelm, 1998), some scholars have argued that the dream of the internet-perfected public sphere remains unfulfilled (e.g., Dahlberg, 2001; Dean, 2003; Muhlberger, 2005; Papacharissi, 2002, 2010). The challenges are tangible. Yet, the online realm still offers a great deal of potential for the public sphere (Brundidge, 2010; Dahlgren, 2005; Friedland, Hove, & Rojas, 2006; Johannssen & Følstad, 2014; Shirky, 2011), by expanding our social and informational universes (Brundidge, 2010; Friedland et al., 2006; Gimmler, 2001), equalizing access (Gimmler, 2001) and reducing the cost of participation (Benkler, 2006).

Expanded range of topics. Finally, the broader formulation of the public sphere expands the realm of the topics that are considered acceptable for discussion. Thus, a reconsideration of the limits of the public sphere, by extension, challenges the very nature of what constitutes "the political". The most common understanding of the political as a category is as those topics, issues, and behaviors which have relevance for formal politics: essentially, anything having to do with government, laws, policy, and elections (Delli Carpini, 2012). This definition is often positioned in opposition to "social" or "cultural" politics (van Zoonen, 2005), or "civic" topics (Dahlgren, 2009; Papacharissi, 2010). Habermas (1991a, b) tightly linked the public sphere to this notion of "the political," specifying that the model he was laying out was specifically a "political public sphere…where public discussions concern objects connected with the practice of the state" (p. 398). However, rigidly limiting the political realm implies that it can both exist and function isolated from the rest of society. Reality, however, proves this to be untrue, by revealing the natural fluidity of the borders of what constitutes politics.

Historically, that which is considered politically relevant has shifted according to society's whims. The abolitionists did it in the 19th century, bringing slavery under political consideration. The women's movement did it at the turn of the 20th century with women's suffrage, and then again in the 1960s, arguing that so-called private matters, such as domestic

violence and women's equality, also belonged in the political realm (van Zoonen, 2005). The Civil

Rights movement similarly moved the cause of African American rights into the political

spotlight. More recently, traditionally private issues such as gay marriage and abortion have

become heavily politicized. But these issues, and others like them, all began outside the official

boundaries of the political and only through "discursive contestation" were brought in (Fraser,

1992). Ultimately, a restriction of the realm of politics to only those things related to

government, policy and elections overlooks the fact that such a definition is itself a social

construction, not a natural evolution (Fraser, 1992; van Zoonen, 2005). As such, the boundaries

of the political are never static, and the position of those boundaries at any given moment is

determined by society through conversation (Eliasoph, 1998). Therefore, social concerns and

civic issues that are traditionally not considered political will often become fodder for the casual

political conversation that characterizes the PSCA, and possibly even public policy deliberations,

thereby entering into the realm of formal politics. Thus, it is useful to recognize that, just as

every conversation has the potential to turn to politics (Dahlgren, 2009), every topic has the

potential to become politically relevant.

The Nebulous Online PSCA

Acceptance of the PSCA liberates the public sphere from the oppressive and

problematic constraints imposed by its original conception[2]. However, recognizing the broad

inclusiveness of the PSCA presents a different challenge: Namely, have we gone too far in the

other direction? Communicative action is widely-occurring, evident in many types of

communication, and it can potentially emerge out of virtually any conversation. The

interconnectivity and user autonomy of an online environment, of particular interest to this

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[2] Although this project focuses primarily on the *online* PSCA, it is important to point out that the PSCA model applies to the entirety of people's conversations, in both online and face-to-face contexts.

project, further complicates the situation. This almost unlimited potential for the emergence of

the online PSCA may make the concept a challenge to study effectively (Dahlgren, 2009).

Papacharissi's Private Sphere

One model that could be helpful is Zizi Papacharissi's (2010) Private Sphere, which also

accounts for the emergence of the public sphere in online spaces. Zizi Papacharissi's (2010)

private sphere model describes an individualized mode of engagement with the political.

Papacharissi describes the private sphere thusly:

> [The] private sphere of interaction [means] that the citizen engages and is enabled
>
> politically through a private media environment located within the individual's personal
>
> and private space. This private sphere is rhetorically established by the individual by
>
> utilizing existing and imagined geographies of place…Within this private sphere, the
>
> citizen is alone, but not lonely or isolated. The citizen is connected, and operates in a
>
> mode and with political language determined by him or her. Operating from a civically
>
> *privé* environment, the citizen enters the public spectrum by negotiating aspects of
>
> his/her privacy as necessary, depending on the urgency and relevance of particular
>
> situations. (pp. 131-132)

The private sphere acknowledges the overall fluidity of what constitutes political and civic

activity and interests, public and private realms, and human behavior, and reconfigures the

organizational lens through which to understand political activity in the digitally converged

environment. Papacharissi explains that the private sphere emerged out of the collapse of the

distinctions between private and public spaces, civic and consumer roles, and types of media

use, all of which have been affected by digital technologies. The convergence, mobility, and

autonomy provided by the new media environment empower the individual to control the

timing and amount of his/her political involvement, arranged around her private pursuits. This

concept explains political activity in the face of the overall fluidity of our political, technological, and social environments.

Papacharissi positions the private sphere model in opposition to the liberal model of Habermas' public sphere, arguing that the former offers a better fit for the current technological environment of online, digital connectivity. Both the public sphere and the private sphere models claim to be portals to political engagement through sociality in the online environment, but their underlying structures are fundamentally different. Papacharissi discusses the two concepts in great detail, and from her discussion, two structural points of difference between the two can be extracted: (a) the interactional context, and (b) the impetus of construction.

The interactional context is the point of interaction from which the individual accesses the public sphere. The identification of the interactional context for each model centers on a specific conceptualization of public and private. In Papacharissi's understanding of the liberal public sphere, the interactional context is the specifically public space that the individual must find and access in order to participate. Habermas' public sphere, according to Papacharissi, is mutually exclusive from the private realm: one must leave the private realm behind in order to enter public space. The private sphere, on the other hand, accepts the contemporary conceptions of public and private as fluid. Thus, its interactional context is the "private media environment located within the individual's personal and private space" (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 131). The converged nature of digital technologies enables the individual to occupy both public and private spaces simultaneously, connecting to the public realm without giving up the security and familiarity of private space.

The impetus of construction refers to the manner in which each construct is formed and supported. Papacharissi rejects Habermas' public sphere as inadequate for the contemporary digital environment because it depends on externally imposed rules and conditions for its

construction. The liberal public sphere is something that must be constructed and supported

externally, as something that must already exist prior to the individual's entrance to it. The

private sphere, on the other hand, is instigated, and supported, by the autonomous action of

the individual user. Its existence depends on the engagement of its participants. Papacharissi

further claims that the private sphere framework illuminates citizens' pursuit of control over

their democratic environment and civic roles, signaling their "skepticism about the impact of

conventional political process, and disillusionment with the public business of politics" (p. 22).

Ultimately, then, the impetus (and focus) of the private sphere is the autonomous and

personalized action of the individual.

   The private sphere versus the PSCA. Papacharissi doesn't simply compare the private

sphere with the public sphere; she presents the former as a replacement for the latter. It is

inappropriate, she argues, to apply the public sphere model to the internet because of the

logical disconnect between their respective assumptive structures. Whereas the internet relies

on diversified, atomized, autonomous individual activity, the model of the public sphere

requires an external, likely physical space of activity defined by the presence of a specific set of

conditions unrelated to the individual participants. However, describing the public sphere in this

way reveals that the public sphere Papacharissi is rejecting is, at its core, the *bourgeois* public

sphere.

   In a way, then, Papacharissi is correct when she argues to replace the liberal public

sphere with the private sphere model. As discussed previously, the bourgeois public sphere is

fundamentally (and practically) obsolete, even according to Habermas himself. The updated

public sphere model is based on the presence of communicative action, which is predicated on

the conversation produced by participants rather than external conditions. The features of

contextual fluidity and internal construction which Papacharissi attributes to her private sphere

model align quite well with the PSCA. However, the two models should not be seen as

interchangeable. The private sphere is not simply an updated term for an updated model of the

online public sphere based on communicative action. This is because the PSCA is defined by the

interaction itself. The presence of communicative action constructs the PSCA, regardless of the

time, place, context, or the individuals participating (Dahlberg, 2004; Dahlgren, 2005; Eliasoph,

1998; Kim & Kim, 2008; Wyatt, Katz & Kim, 2000). Papacharissi's private sphere model, however,

has a more global perspective, being concerned with the larger technological environment and

sociocultural conditions that support the individual's autonomous civic behavior and pursuits.

Thus, instead of choosing one over the other, the private sphere and the PSCA can be

better understood as related concepts. The private sphere can be utilized as an external

framework to describe the unique way individuals approach and connect to the public world in a

converged online environment. With the PSCA, the public sphere is no longer an external place

to which people must go, but rather is identified by the format of the conversations, regardless

of where they occur. As mentioned above, the PSCA relies on an ephemeral activity with

virtually no physical requirements limiting its occurrence. Limitless possibilities make the PSCA a

challenge to observe or predict in any meaningful way. The private sphere model addresses this

problem. The public sphere is no longer necessarily a physical space, and people no longer

expect or agree to abandon the private realm in order to enter the public realm. The private

sphere does not replace the public sphere; it illuminates a newer path *to* the public sphere that

has been forged through newly converged technologies. It describes the entry portal through

which atomized individuals autonomously construct and engage with a more nebulous PSCA.

Thus, the private sphere model illuminates the route of access, while the PSCA describes the

interaction itself, and therefore requires a different framework.

Dahlgren's Dimensional Framework

Many have proposed criteria and sets of norms for identifying the emergence of the

public sphere (e.g., Dahlberg, 2004; Graham, 2015). One such framework that provides order yet

remains flexible for application to a variety of different situations is Peter Dahlgren's (2005)

three[3] dimensions of the public sphere: (a) the structural, (b) the representational, and (c) the

interactional. Initially, Dahlgren (1995) presented these analytical dimensions as a way of

organizing the themes and questions surrounding the public sphere, with each one acting as an

"entry port to sets of issues about the public sphere, both theoretical and conceptual questions

as well as empirical and evaluative ones about its actual functioning" (p. 11). But he has since

additionally posited these dimensions as *constitutive* (Dahlgren, 2005, p. 148): as necessary

components in order to identify and understand instances of the public sphere. As we shall see,

these dimensions are not insulated categories; rather, they are inextricably intertwined with one

another.

The structural dimension of the public sphere refers to the way the space hosting the

public sphere is organized, and the ways in which this organization impacts the formation of the

public sphere. The important component of this dimension is whether the structure fosters

inclusivity in terms of who can contribute, because the public sphere should be open to all. To

this end, the design of the space should actively facilitate such inclusivity, and so the structural

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[3] Originally, Dahlgren (1995) posited *four* interrelated analytical dimensions: media institutions, media representation, social structure, and sociocultural interaction. "Media institutions" has become the structural dimension today, and "sociocultural interaction" has been renamed the interactional dimension, with "media representation" largely remaining the same. The final component of the original quartet, the dimension of social structure, refers to "the broader horizon of factors which constitute the historical conditions and institutional milieu of the public sphere" (p. 11). In other words, this area of analysis looks at the range of availability of access to and participation in the public sphere, as determined by the nature of contemporary society. Included in this dimension is the shrinking of distances between different cultures, raising questions about how solid national boundaries are or should remain when it comes to global policy matters. In addition, this area contemplates whether in a pluralistic, heterogeneous society, the public sphere should be structured as a singular entity, producing outcomes that will be meant to represent the common good as a whole, or if it should be conceptualized as a collection of many different public spheres, to reflect the complexity of contemporary society. Dahlgren (2005) appears to have dissolved the issues raised by the social structure dimension into the other three, eliminating it as a separate category.

dimension is also concerned with the architectural features of the surrounding technological environment through which the public sphere emerges (Dahlgren, 2005).

The representational dimension has to do with the "media output" (Dahlgren, 1995, p. 15). Essentially, this refers to the range of content offered through the media. Dahlgren (1995) explains that this dimension "has to do with both the informational and extra-informational aspects of media output, such as the symbolic and rhetorical" (p. 15). If, as Habermas (1991b) pointed out, media feeds the public sphere with information and discussion prompts, then we can understand the representational dimension to be concerned with the nature of the media content for the public sphere. This includes assessing the quality of the information presented, in terms of fairness, accuracy, and the range of perspectives presented, as well as the mode of address and presentation. Dahlgren (1995, 2005) understands this dimension to be most strongly linked to journalism contexts. This makes sense considering the very long tradition of association between journalism and a functioning democracy. But, as we have discussed, a public sphere based on communicative action acknowledges the relevance of contexts and content other than news and information in spurring our political discussions[4]. Therefore, the representational dimension also includes a consideration of entertainment media content, as well as topics that may not ostensibly be considered "political" in the traditional sense.

Finally, the interactional dimension is concerned with the realm of citizen activity. Dahlgren (2005) describes two aspects of this dimension: (a) Citizens interacting with media, which refers to citizens as audiences, receiving, understanding, and interpreting content, and (b) citizens interacting with other citizens. Dahlgren (2005) identifies this latter aspect of the interactional dimension as particularly essential in the formation of a democratic public,

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[4] Indeed, Dahlgren (1995) acknowledges this, though he doesn't explore much beyond the journalism product in this context.

because "[p]ublics, according to Habermas and Dewey, exist as discursive interactional

processes; atomized individuals, consuming media in their homes, do not comprise a public" (p.

149). Citizens talking to each other, whether it is in the context of formal deliberation or casual

interpersonal conversation, is at the heart of Dahlgren's interactional dimension, and the public

sphere in general.

Political Anchors

We can break down every instance of the online public sphere into three basic

components, which can be mapped onto Dahlgren's dimensional framework: (a) The setting in

which it occurs (the structural dimension), (b) the trigger of the discussion (the representational

dimension), and (c) the discussion taking place (the interactional dimension). The structural

dimension aligns with the setting in which the discussion is taking place. The setting can be

understood as the nature or purpose of the online space. Online spaces can be created for a

wide variety of purposes and objectives, and may focus on literally any interest, belief, or

concern under the sun. The representational dimension aligns with the inspirational media

source of the discussion. That is, what is the nature of the media that has sparked the

discussion? In this component, the concern is both the category of media content spurring

discussion (i.e., news vs. entertainment), and the topical focus of the media content itself (i.e.,

explicitly political topics vs. non-political topics). Finally, the interactional dimension addresses

the characteristics of the conversation occurring between participants.

Absent the restrictions imposed on it by the bourgeois model, the PSCA supports a

much larger and more diverse set of circumstances. However, by applying Dahlgren's

dimensional framework to previous online public sphere research, it becomes clear that much of

it is tied to the traditionally or formally political (and therefore the bourgeois public sphere) in at

least one of these dimensions through the imposition of external qualifications to these

components. In the structural dimension, research tends to focus primarily on settings that are

specifically dedicated to traditional conceptions of politics, including online spaces such as

newsgroups (e.g., Himelboim, 2011; Wilhelm, 1998), political discussion forums (e.g., Graham,

2010a; Papacharissi, 2004), online discussion inspired by news content (e.g., Manosevitch &

Walker, 2009; Velasquez, 2012) or official campaign e-communications (e.g., Robertson, Vatrapu

& Medina, 2010; Ross, Fountaine & Comrie, 2015; Shulman, 2007). In the representational

dimension, research tends to rely on news and politically-based media content as the primary

inspirational media sources for political discussion (e.g., Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013; Coe,

Kenski & Rains, 2014; Edgerly, Vraga, Fung, Moon, Yoo & Veenstra, 2009; Gerhards & Schäfer,

2010; Manosevitch & Walker, 2009; Shulman, 2007; Velasquez, 2012). Finally, in the

interactional dimension, research into the online public sphere tends to expect a very limited

conception of formal political deliberation as the key marker of the public sphere (e.g., Edgerly

et al., 2009; Graham, 2010b; Manosevitch & Walker, 2009; Munson & Resnick, 2011; Wilhelm,

1998).

As discussed above, the PSCA means that the public sphere is no longer defined by

external conditions, but rather by the internally-driven direction of the participants'

autonomous conversation. If the PSCA model determines that it is possible to locate instances of

the public sphere in which none of the three dimensions features an element of formal politics,

then a much broader range of possibilities becomes worthy of consideration. Yet despite this,

many scholars still tend to (perhaps unintentionally) limit the range of contexts by relying on the

presence of a traditionally political factor in one or more of these dimensions. I call this

traditionally political factor "the political anchor," because its presence ensures that research

into the online public sphere remains, in some way, linked to the official realm of traditional

politics.

Researchers' reliance on these links to formal political contexts is perfectly understandable: If one wants to study how people talk about politics, the simplest place to start is with contexts whose political nature is already established. In addition, utilizing a political anchor in at least one of these dimensions tacitly indicates that the settings, topics, and/or activities being explored are relevant to politics, and therefore, require no formal justification. But most importantly, the reliance on political anchors offers a measure of control to the researcher exploring what can be, in reality, a rather unpredictable event: human conversation. One of the challenges of utilizing natural observational methods to explore specific social phenomena is that there is no way to ensure that subjects will actually engage in the activity being researched. But if some of the conditions can be controlled, subjects can be directed to engage with specific stimuli, making the research more efficient[5] (Silverman, 2006). By clearly characterizing one or more of the three dimensions of the public sphere as "traditionally political," it becomes safe to expect that the discussion that is produced is likely to be about politics.

Fastening one or more of the components of the online public sphere to a political anchor may seem a logical choice to the researcher, but there is a flip side: doing so can also impact the outcomes and implications of research. While the PSCA rejects the notion that the public sphere should be imposed authoritatively, the public sphere *can* be forced to develop by controlling its constitutive dimensions externally. However, doing so essentially ignores the organic nature of the PSCA model. By restricting the boundaries of what can be considered the public sphere, an overreliance on political anchors narrows the range of acceptable research contexts. Studying an artificially constrained public sphere increases the likelihood that the

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[5] Of course, the downside of directed research is that the phenomena it studies are produced artificially; so, there are pros and cons.

majority of participants will be ones with an above-average, almost fervent interest in politics (Loader & Mercea, 2011; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009), the so-called "political junkie," which can impact research outcomes.

The Political Junkie

There are two key characteristics of political junkies that can impact our understanding of the public sphere. The first is simply their intense interest in politics. Essentially, political junkies are liable to be drawn to media content and online spaces expressly devoted to news and politics, just like sports junkies tend to be drawn to media options related to professional sports (Prior, 2007c). They are more likely to use their media options to pursue this passion. Indeed, political junkies are devoted news consumers, representing the majority of news and political information consumers in the U.S. (Patterson, 2000; Prior, 2007a, c), which also renders them more politically knowledgeable than other Americans (Prior, 2007a).

Internet technologies have provided even more opportunities for the political junkie. The utopian beliefs swirling around the internet in its earlier years, and later around social media, envisioned a new democratic age in which technology would disable the significant barriers standing between average people and political expression and participation. However, as boyd (2010) has pointed out, the fatal flaw of this vision is an overabundance of confidence in the technology, and an underestimation of human behavior. While the technological structure of the internet can determine the range of what users can and cannot do[6], it does not forcibly *direct* user behavior (boyd, 2008, 2010; Brundidge, 2010; Stromer-Galley & Wichowski, 2010).

Instead, research has suggested that the internet and social media technologies are more likely to facilitate existing user behaviors and interests (boyd, 2008, 2010; Prior, 2007a; Sunstein, 2007). Thus, while research has found that the vast majority of people simply aren't

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[6] Under normal circumstances, that is.

spending their online time engaging with dedicated political content (boyd, 2008; Dahlgren, 2005; Hindman, 2009; Papacharissi, 2002; Pew Research Center, 2014a; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009), the online behaviors of political junkies tend to focus on the political because their interest in politics is extant (Albrecht, 2006; boyd, 2008; Loader & Mercea, 2011; Prior, 2007a, c; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009).

The second basic characteristic of political junkies is their partisanship. An affinity for politics (and all its relevant behaviors described above) seems to also go hand in hand with an intense affiliation with a specific political party (Mutz, 2006; Prior, 2007a). Partisan identity has an emotional dimension, and the passion felt by strong partisans drives their engagement with all things political (Dahlgren, 2009; Pew, 2014a; Stroud, 2008; van Zoonen, 2004). Considering their passion for the political, then, it is perhaps unsurprising that political junkies also tend to be strong partisans. It is equally unsurprising that, like all strong partisans, political junkies are also far more likely to engage in political conversations on a weekly or even daily basis (Pew, 2014a). The volume and intensity of their participation makes them appear legion, yet political junkies only constitute a minority of the American population (Graham, 2008; Prior, 2007a, c; Zaller, 1992). Most Americans simply do not exhibit such a strong affinity for politics (Fiorina, 1999; Mutz, 2006; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). Similarly, strong partisans only comprise the fringes of the American political spectrum (Pew Research Center, 2014b).

In sum, political junkies are the few whose news consumption and political activities are far more frequent and passionate than that of the average American. As such, what they say and do when it comes to politics can be overrepresented in popular imagination and, of course, research. Just as researchers have logically concluded that online spaces dedicated to politics would yield political conversation, it would seem likely that political junkies have made the same deduction, seeking out these spaces in order to pursue their passion (Larsson, 2014). Research

has found that discussions in online political spaces are problematic in terms of suitability for

the public sphere because they (1) tend to be dominated by a few, heavily active participants,

rather than fostering an equal distribution of the conversation (Albrecht, 2006; Gerhards &

Schäfer, 2010; Graham & Wright, 2014; Himelboim, 2011), and (2) tend to be echo chambers of

partisan agreement, rather than spaces for exposure to difference (Johnson, Zhang, & Bichard,

2011; Kersting & Zimmerman, 2014; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009).

However, rather than the death knell for the online public sphere, it is very possible that

such discouraging outcomes are a product of these politically anchored contexts having been

colonized by political junkies. In addition to the standard measures of political activity, such as

voting, news consumption, and campaign contributions, political junkies' strong political

interests would also drive them to participate in discussions surrounding political topics and

spaces online (Prior, 2007a), and while there, to post and respond more frequently than the

majority of other participants (Mustafaraj, Finn, Whitlock, & Metaxas, 2011). Furthermore, their

intense partisanship makes political junkies less tolerant of differences of opinion and thus more

likely to seek out confirmation of their positions and react poorly to challenges (Huckfeldt,

Johnson & Sprague, 2004). In fact, Semaan, Robertson, Douglas, & Maruyama (2014) found that

many of these spaces were actively avoided, even by people with some interest in politics,

because of the negative atmosphere facilitated by the intense partisanship of their political

junkie participants. Finally, in line with their enthusiasm for all things political, political junkies

may also be the ones most likely to be eager volunteers self-selecting into any research study

that might be conducted about politically anchored contexts (Zaller, 1992).

Just as the typical, obvious contexts out of which we expect the public sphere to emerge

only comprise a fraction of the contexts that can (and do) facilitate the public sphere, the

activities of the political junkies certainly do not constitute the entirety of the online public

sphere. In this way, the outcomes of research reliant on one or more political anchors can be skewed (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). At best, this results in an incomplete understanding of the phenomenon; at worst, an overreliance on political anchors in research may lead to negative assessments of the state of American political discourse which may be unfairly inaccurate.

To be clear, none of the above means to argue that political junkies, or the politically anchored research that centers on them, is somehow not valuable. First of all, research into politically anchored contexts provides valuable data about a small yet influential segment of the American population. Identifying who the political junkies are, their behavioral habits, and where they congregate helps define a subset of the American population whose activities feature prominently in the political realm and the public consciousness. Through news coverage and their colonization of both online and offline political spaces, it is undeniable that their behaviors, opinions and preferences experience much wider recognition, and have a greater impact, than their numbers would suggest (Mustafaraj et al., 2011; Patterson, 2000; Prior, 2007a). As such, while political junkies may not represent the majority of Americans, exploring how they engage with politics provides valuable insights into American political culture.

The key here is perspective. That politically anchored contexts tend to be colonized by political junkies should not be considered an end point, but a pivotal one. Accepting this as fact does not suggest that research relying on political anchors is somehow flawed or should be discarded. Rather, it is an acknowledgement that the picture of the online public sphere is simply incomplete. It indicates that, on one side, political junkies produce a political discourse that is both common (in that it is more readily visible and available) yet singular (in that it is produced by a subset of the American population). Thus, they, and the politically anchored contexts they tend to inhabit, invite exploration and analysis from a perspective that is mindful of their unique qualities and contributions to American political culture. On the other side,

however, there must be acceptance of the broader, more diverse world inhabited by the

preponderance of Americans, and the distinct contexts and manners in which they too

contribute to the production of the online public sphere. The first step in this adjustment is

understanding how most Americans come to have these conversations in the first place. This

process hinges on a more individualized relationship with the political that generally avoids the

modes and spaces of traditional political engagement.

Actualized Pathway to Political Conversation

As discussed above, not only does the use of political anchors help ensure that research

contexts will produce the public sphere, they can also function as a beacon, attracting political

junkies while repelling those with less intense political interest. Eschewing explicit political

anchors, however, can leave the researcher feeling adrift, bobbing helplessly in an endless

ocean of online human behavior and interests. Without an extant political topic, setting, or plan

for formal deliberation, how are people drawn in to engage with one another politically and

construct the public sphere? The answer to this question requires an understanding of the

process through which most people have come to relate to politics.

Papacharissi's (2010) private sphere has been described above as the realm of

individualized activity through which most people connect to the political world in a digitally

converged environment. The mode of civic behavior enabled by the private sphere is one "in

which the self remains the point of reference" (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 137). Although the PSCA

can occur anywhere and between anyone, connecting to it via the private sphere indicates that

the journey to political conversation is, and remains, a heavily personalized one. This

personalized relationship with politics illuminates two key differences between political junkies

and the rest of Americans: the divergent ranges of their political interests, and their respective

political foci.

The first way most Americans deviate from the political junkie's political encounters is related to the range of interests motivating this engagement. As we've seen, political junkies exhibit unusually high levels of interest in anything having to do with politics, especially conventional politics (i.e., policy and elections). However, although research has found that when it comes to political *knowledge*, the majority of people tend to be generalists (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), when it comes to more active levels of engagement (including conversation), their interests become more specialized. According to the issue public hypothesis, individuals will converge around specific issues that are important to them, forming what Converse (1964/2006) termed "issue publics." Based on his survey and interview research, Converse paints a picture of an American mass population that is mostly fragmented, not by adherence to specific political ideology, but by their individual memberships in diverse, and often ideologically unrelated, issue publics. Krosnick's (1990) research concurs with Converse's description, concluding America to be "…an amalgamation of issue publics, groups of people with highly important attitudes toward specific policy options. Individuals tend to belong to only a few issue publics, and it seems that the majority of Americans probably fall into at least one" (p. 81).

Individual segmentation into these issue publics, and the associated political engagement, is primarily driven by individual interest in the few topics about which people feel strongly, on a personal level (Krosnick, 1990). This is mainly because most people simply don't have the time or energy to engage with every single political issue facing their country (Kim, 2009). As a result, as Kim (2009) explains, most citizens become "*specialists* who…do not necessarily care about issues beyond the ones that concern them" (p. 255). Furthermore, encountering any of one's specific issues is more likely to trigger people's engagement, whether it is simply paying greater attention (Popkin, 1994), seeking out information (Kim, 2009), or engaging in conversation about it (Gamson, 1996a). Most Americans, therefore, are not political

omnivores; rather they appear to devote their political efforts to only a few specific issues (Kim, 2009).

An additional point of difference between political junkies and most other Americans is the former's interest in the more traditional realm of politics, which the latter has been shown to increasingly avoid, in favor of a more personalized approach to politics (Bennett, 2008; Hay, 2011). There has been widespread concern that the majority of Americans have been turning away from traditional politics (e.g., Patterson, 2000; Putnam, 2000; Prior, 2007a, c), especially the younger generations (e.g., Mindich, 2005). Putnam (2000), for example, famously argued that, although there was no direct causal evidence, entertainment media (particularly in the form of television) played a major role in the destruction of social capital, and thus civic engagement, by isolating people from their communities and monopolizing leisure time that could have otherwise been devoted to social and civic activities. Further compounding the situation is the recent (and continued) growth of an impressive array of media options. It is believed that most people perceive news and politics to be boring, and are content to abandon their civic responsibilities in favor of the leisure and enjoyment provided by media content they find to be more engaging (Baurlein, 2009; Pariser, 2011; Prior, 2007a).

Yet this is a decidedly bitter way of conceptualizing the American public's relationship with politics. In fact, according to Colin Hay (2011), the dampening of Americans' overall political interest and civic participation may not be as severe as believed. Instead, he argues that Americans have actually been turning away from the *formal* political realm, whose focus is on issues that are conventionally political, as defined by political elites and journalists. In considering that the majority of Americans belong to only a few key issue publics to which they devote the bulk of their civic efforts, we must also consider how people come to select their chosen issue(s). The issues to which people are drawn are more likely to have particular

meaning for them, rather than the larger, more traditional political issues that are "remote and abstract" (Converse, 1964/2006, p. 11). It is possible that the issues being addressed by the arenas and communication outlets of formal politics may not be personally relevant to the majority of Americans, or at least, have not been successfully *made* personally relevant (Hay, 2011; Papacharissi, 2010).

An extension of this discrepancy is in the ways Americans have come to interact with politics. The linear and authoritative modes of address inherent in the traditional political contexts do not correlate with the engagement practices provided by the new online media environment (Bennett, 2008). The primary difference between new and old routes is the level of control afforded to the public. The focus of traditional political communication is typically driven by electoral campaigns, policy, and conventionally "political" current events. Together, different communication streams (news coverage, political advertising, and political actors) work to dictate the layout of the "official" American political agenda (Castells, 2007). The authoritative methods, and the reliance on linear media forms, limit the ability of the individual to relate to politics in a manner that is meaningful to them (Bennett, 2008). However, the highly connected, highly autonomous media environment which Americans now have at their disposal has put the citizen in the driver's seat of their relationship with politics, making for a much more individualized and autonomous experience (Bennett, 2008, 2012; Dahlgren, 2009; Loader & Mercea, 2011; Papacharissi, 2010). According to Papacharissi (2010), instead of passively accepting the strictures of "the political" as determined by elites in government, journalism, and academia, the new "liquid citizen" is the author of her own democratic destiny (p. 111). Not only does he/she choose when to engage, but also how, and under what circumstances.

Ultimately, many Americans have demonstrated that they are no longer content to allow political parties, elections, policymakers, and even the news (the traditional standard of

American politics) to define their relationship with politics, nor direct their political efforts

(Bennett, 2008, 2012; Dahlgren, 2009; Hay, 2011; Papacharissi, 2010). It is not simply that most

Americans are primarily concerned with only a few select issues, but also that the issues that

they have selected and the methods they utilize to engage with them, are far less linked to

conventional politics that establishment elites would expect or prefer (Bennett, 2008). This shift

also raises a dilemma for researchers studying the online public sphere, since, as Americans

move away from conventional definitions of politics and associated modes of engagement, they

may also be abandoning those dedicated political contexts online as well. Thus, to acknowledge

that the direction of American political engagement has become personalized is to also raise the

important question of how to begin *looking* for the PSCA. The best way to answer this question

is by exploring the new personalized route to political conversation what can be called the

actualized pathway to political conversation. This route can be described through the

combination of four theoretical components: actualized citizenship (Bennett, 2008), the issue

public hypothesis (Converse, 1964/2006), the private sphere (Papacharissi, 2010), and

inadvertent political encounters (a concept which will be discussed below).

Actualized Citizenship: The Underlying Framework

 Lance Bennett's (2008) actualized citizenship model provides the underlying framework

for this process. According to Bennett, the drop in formal political interest is likely the result of

an evolution of citizenship models. The nature of citizenship has evolved from the "dutiful

citizen," with its intense focus on voting and top-down-driven information acquisition and

action, to an "actualizing citizen" model[7], which discards the institutionalized structures and

expected behaviors in favor of a more autonomous and individualized pursuit of politics. For

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[7] Bennett applies the actualized citizenship model primarily to the younger generations, but this model can be easily extended to the adults inhabiting Facebook today as well, especially when we realize that the teenagers and college students of 2008 are the young adults and adults of 2018.

Bennett (2012), the primary activity of actualized citizenship is "*individualized collective action*

where large numbers of people join in loosely coordinated activities centered on more personal

emotional identifications and rationales (p. 26, emphasis in original). The extensive connectivity

offered by social media enables actualized citizens to organize collective political action

organically, without any formal hierarchies or leadership (Bennett, 2008, 2012).

Bennett's (2008) actualized citizenship model clearly provides the structural framework

for the actualized pathway to political conversation. What separates the two is Bennett's (2008,

2012) broader focus on collective action as the key outcome of value in the model, while the

focus here is specifically on the manner in which people come to engage in political

conversation. These two outcomes are sequentially dependent: any type of collective action is

ultimately the end result of a long process of talk (Gamson, 1996a). As two points of interest

along a single highway, the individualized processes of actualized citizenship that Bennett (2008)

outlines are applicable to both. But because such conversations also produce the PSCA, they are

of value to democracy in their own right, regardless of whether they culminate in any kind of

tangible collective action. Bennett's model (2008) doesn't deride or even ignore conversation;

the actualized citizenship model simply utilizes a big-picture perspective of the processes and

outcomes of citizenship. Thus, the term "actualized pathway to political conversation" identifies

a process that is strongly rooted in the actualized citizenship model, but concentrates on a

specific component of actualized citizenship: the political conversations that produce the PSCA.

As the underlying foundation for the actualized pathway to political conversation, the

actualized citizenship model plays the largest role in the process. The other theoretical

components (the issue public hypothesis, the private sphere, and inadvertent political

encounters) fit into this larger framework.

Issue Public Hypothesis: The Point of Origin

As explained above, the issue public hypothesis primarily describes the organization of

public opinion, not along a spectrum of partisanship, but according to personalized attraction to

specific topics. This organization, however, can also be applied here to describe how the average

American orients to politics: not through agendas that have been pre-defined by the political

and journalistic establishments, but through issues autonomously established through a

personal connection.

Although some have argued that individual opinions are a product of social negotiation

through discussion with others (e.g., Eliasoph, 1998; Gamson, 1996a), the issue public

hypothesis rests on a particular conception of opinions as "belief systems" which develop in the

isolation of people's minds[8] (Converse, 1964/2006). As such, it is not a model that much

considers the sociality of politics. Issue publics develop organically around issues that are of

importance to their individual members; yet, unlike joining a formal political action group, being

a member of an issue public doesn't necessarily entail a conscious desire for collective action or

indicate any social interaction or awareness of others. Because traditional political action groups

exist independently of any given individual members, the act of joining such a group or

organization is one that is consciously social. When deciding to become a member of one of

these groups, the individual is aware that they are joining a movement with a defined hierarchy

and a social component inherent in participation. Issue publics, on the other hand, develop from

a collection of initially dispersed individuals, whose corresponding interests develop

independently of one another. Thus, the issue public hypothesis alone does not sufficiently

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[8] This notion of opinions is also evident in the bourgeois public sphere model, in which Habermas expects them to have been established prior to the interaction, and "brought fully-formed into the public sphere" (Calhoun, 1992, p. 35).

explain the path by which most people are drawn into the PSCA. It does, however, provide the point of initiation: the atomized individual interests of the issue public members.

In addition to providing its structural foundation, the actualized citizenship model furnishes this process with the social component that is absent from the issue public stage. Actualized citizenship is not just about information gathering; it is also about the ways people come to engage with politics, and come together as citizens over common concerns (Bennett, 2008). Bennett acknowledges that most individuals typically begin their citizenship journey alone (as the issue public hypothesis suggests), but in the course of their activities, they become connected, through online social networks, to others who share their interests. Similarly, in the actualized pathway to political conversation, individuals are initially dispersed and isolated. Their individual motivations, backgrounds, and interests are diverse and may be otherwise unconnected. Through the channels of social media, however, encounters and connections with one another over their shared interests develop organically, as the paths that lead each person to this pivotal point are exponentially varied.

The Private Sphere: The Setting of Action

The private sphere model (described in more detail above) functions as the setting for this process. Reliant on a personalized, self-defined, autonomous approach to politics, the private sphere facilitates and supports the personalized, subjective, and autonomous approach to political conversation through new converged media technologies. In other words, the private sphere enables the actualized pathway to political conversation by providing the converged environment that supports civic autonomy.

Inadvertent Political Encounters (IPEs): The Trigger

The actualized pathway to political conversation is ultimately an autonomous experience. The individual is in control of every step in the process, from the selection of their

issues of importance, to the pursuit of said issues, to the transition from private to public, to the decision to engage in conversation and beyond (i.e., collective action). All that is missing is the spark; the trigger mechanism that puts the entire process into motion. This trigger is what I have termed the inadvertent political encounter (IPE). Explaining the role of the IPE begins by considering the following question: if Americans are no longer relying on the traditional definitions, contexts, and topics associated with politics, how, and where, *are* they engaging with politics, even in this personalized fashion? A familiar answer to this question has typically been that they are politically nowhere; that they have secluded themselves in a space devoid of politics altogether, a space of their own creation.

The idea that people can and do effectively avoid politics can be easily understood as an extended application of selective exposure. Selective exposure is related to concerns about political bias in a high-choice media environment. It suggests that, given the opportunities offered by cable TV and the internet, people will choose to only expose themselves to agreeable political opinions, and avoid ones that challenge their extant beliefs, increasing political polarization and creating echo chambers of political agreement (Sunstein, 2007). Extending this idea to political exposure in general, *selective non-exposure* would be when people choose to avoid politics altogether, through a utilization of the expanded media choices currently available.

Although he does not use the term "selective non-exposure," Prior (2007a) provides the best description of this process. In his book, *Post Broadcast Democracy*, Prior points out that, compared with Americans today, in the second half of the 20th century, Americans consumed more television news, and as a result, were more politically informed. However, Prior insists that this does not mean that Americans during that time simply exhibited higher levels of political interest. Instead, he argues that these increased levels were a matter of circumstance rather

than choice. The golden age of television was also a period of extremely limited channel options, and as a result, "interest in politics may never have been as high as audience shares for evening news led us to believe. There was simply nothing else to watch" (Prior, 2007a, p. 135). In this "low-choice" media environment, with networks competing for the same mass evening audience all broadcast the news at the same time, viewers' only option was often between watching news and watching nothing. Faced with such restricted options, yet still seeking entertainment, most people chose to watch television anyway, and acquired political information as a side effect, what Prior calls "by-product learning." However, he argues that the conditions which allowed for by-product learning have all but evaporated in the media environment of today. The exponential increase in media choice allows people to personalize their media experience in order to satisfy their preferences for entertainment, easily to the exclusion of any news whatsoever. Their "Daily Me," in Nicholas Negroponte's famous words, would be little more than bread and circuses.

This is precisely the concern of selective non-exposure. People who opt out of political engagement are likely to be those who are less politically intense, whose participation could have important moderating effects on an increasingly polarized political culture (Mutz, 2006; Patterson, 2000; Prior, 2007c). By selecting themselves out of any encounters with politics, these Americans would be abstaining from the political realm altogether, leaving control in the hands of a significantly smaller group of intensely partisan political junkies (Patterson, 2000; Prior, 2007c).

However, the concept of selective non-exposure is fundamentally flawed in two key ways. First of all, selective non-exposure rests on the overly simplistic notion that people either are interested in, and therefore engage with, politics as a whole, or that they abandon politics entirely, thus impoverishing the public sphere. However, the issue public hypothesis indicates

that the reality is actually far more complex. Rather than the binary, all-or-nothing

circumstances of selective non-exposure, the issue public hypothesis argues that people are

discriminating with their political interest and attention. Encountering content that relates to, or

reminds people of, their preferred issue(s) arouses their attention (Popkin, 1994). If this

encounter were to occur in a social setting, increased attention may lead issue public members

to initiate a discussion about it, or engage in an existing discussion, thereby contributing to the

public sphere.

        More importantly, however, is the fact that it may not even be entirely possible for

people to actively select themselves out of any encounters with politics. Research has been

unable to definitively prove that people actively attempt to avoid news and politics (Brundidge,

2010; Kobayashi, Hoshino & Suzuki, 2017). In addition, as Brundidge (2010) pointed out, online

technologies themselves are "imperfect" when it comes to avoiding certain political

perspectives (p. 683). Similarly, it would not be easy for one to use the internet to completely

avoid politics. Doing so would require that all encounters with the political were limited to

specific, predictable contexts, such as ones that are exclusively devoted to the political realm.

Prior's (2007a) concern over the disappearance of by-product learning is predicated on

traditional news media content as the only viable source of political information. The variables

for this by-product learning are simply timing and choice, the alteration of which can forcibly

drive people towards or away from traditional news media and the information sustenance it

offers. However, although there are plenty of places, spaces, and topics that are externally

devoted to politics, the political simply does not remain inside its own hermeneutically-sealed

domain that people must consciously choose to enter (Eliasoph, 1998; Huckfeldt, et al., 2004;

Mutz, 2006; Papacharissi, 2010). Because of the porous nature of life, as well as the online

world, encounters with politics, and political talk, can and do occur in a variety of contexts

unrelated to news and politics, including everyday life experiences, leisure media use and casual conversations. As one of the key benefits of the internet is that it renders our social experiences even more permeable than before (Brundidge, 2010), internet and social media use likewise increases the extent to which the political realm can blend into our everyday lives (Bennett, 2008; Papacharissi, 2010). These types of encounters, however, are typically inadvertent, a characteristic that has particularly attracted some scholarly attention.

In his economic theory of political action, Anthony Downs (1957)[9] argues that, if we consider time and energy as the currency of life (instead of money), political participation and even knowledge acquisition is expensive for most people. However, he also points out that there are myriad opportunities for citizens to obtain political information as an unintentional outcome of other pursuits. Downs considers these kinds of inadvertent political encounters "free," in the sense that the person does not expend any energy to procure them. This status leads him to disqualify such effortless information acquisitions as irrelevant to his calculations.

Samuel Popkin (1994) acknowledges the same economic logic as Downs, but arrives at a different conclusion. Popkin determines that, even though most people do not spend a lot of time acquiring political information, they still manage to glean information inadvertently from their surroundings. The way people obtain this information, according to Popkin, is best described by the "by-product theory of political information":

> [I]n general, voters do not devote much time or energy directly to their votes. This does *not* imply either that voters are uninformed about general conditions or that they have no knowledge of specific government programs. What it means is that most of the information voters use when they vote is acquired as a *by-product* of activities they

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[9] Prior (2007a) utilizes Downs' ideas to explain the concept of by-product learning.

pursue as part of their daily lives. In that sense, political uses of this information are

free. (pp. 22-23)

Thus, the "free" information that Downs so easily dismisses is for Popkin an important, accruing

source of information which people apply to their political decisions.

Extending the application of Popkin's by-product theory of information to soft news[10],

Baum (2002) posits what he terms the "incidental byproduct model of information

consumption." In their search for entertainment, politically inattentive Americans are likely to

encounter political information that has been packaged into infotainment, or media content

that blends aspects of informational media (i.e., news) and entertainment media (Delli Carpini &

Williams, 2001). Since politics is increasingly packaged with other types of non-political content

(Delli Carpini, 2012), at least some measure of infotainment consumption, and thus,

unintentional exposure to political information, is almost a certainty (Baum, 2002). The

inadvertent political encounter (IPE) can be understood as a broader extension of Baum's (2002)

concept, in the sense that, while Baum's model is specific to infotainment, the IPE can occur

even through media contexts that have no overt political relevance.

IPEs have particular relevance when it comes to social media. As Valeriani & Vaccari

(2016) point out, "political content travels across individuals' news feeds side by side with

entertainment updates, lifestyle news, and personal information about friends and

acquaintances…[because social media] bridge[s] public and private, political and non-political

domains" (p. 1861). And, because social media has become such a pervasive feature of day to

day life for the political junkie and the non-political junkie alike, exposure to political

information becomes a normal facet of the social media experience.

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[10] Baum specifically refers to soft news television programs, but the model is broadly applicable to all types of infotainment.

What is the value of encounters with the political that arise out of contexts not specifically designated as, nor intended to be, political? One answer to this question has to do with the benefits of sheer exposure to political content. Research has suggested that IPEs can increase the salience of political issues with people who may not consume much news (e.g., Baum, 2002; Baum & Jamison, 2006; Holbrook & Hill, 2005). Recent research also suggests that IPEs via the internet and social media can also increase people's political knowledge (e.g., Bode, 2016; Kobayashi et al., 2017; Lee & Kim, 2017) and participatory behavior (e.g., Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016). For people who do not actively seek political encounters, some exposure to political information and topics, even accidentally, and through social media contexts unrelated to news or politics, can provide more benefits than no exposure at all.

But information acquisition is only one potential benefit of IPEs. As a trigger of political conversation, IPEs play a pivotal role in the actualized pathway to political conversation. As discussed above, at the core of the actualized pathway to political conversation is autonomy. Inadvertent political learning relies on the passive learning ability of the audience and measurement of factual knowledge. The role of IPEs in triggering political conversation, on the other hand, is facilitating individuals' active and autonomous interpretation of otherwise non-political content.

There is a long history in media studies of considering the audience as active participants in the reception and interpretation of mediated communication. From Stuart Hall's (2005) encoding and decoding, to de Certeau's (2003) "guerilla warfare," to Stanley Fish's (1973/2004) "interpretive communities", as well as a large body of research concerning uses and gratifications theory (e.g., Blumler, 1979; Katz, Haas & Gurevitch, 1973; Rosengren, 1974; Ruggiero, 2000; Sundar & Limperos, 2013; Windahl, 1981), it has been well-established that passive consumption is not the individual's standard *modus operandi* when it comes to media

messages. When it comes to media contexts with no obvious link to politics, the connection to

politics must be forged autonomously by the individual. The frame guiding this interpretation is

issue public membership. Since issue public membership is typically driven by a personal or

experiential connection to that issue (Krosnick, 1990), non-political media contexts may,

intentionally or unintentionally, activate that personal connection for one or more individuals.

The current technological environment has rendered our varied and individualized

interpretations significantly more accessible and visible. Political conversations online occurring

in non-political contexts offer a physical manifestation of our otherwise internal interpretive

efforts. For online users, who are individually fragmented into any of a variety of personally

relevant issue publics, and who autonomously extrapolate meaning based on their

individualized experiences or beliefs, theoretically, any type of media content can trigger, and

support, spontaneous political discussion at any time. This is the case even if the content in

question exhibits no overt political components, and even if the initial conversation was not

originally intended to be political.

In addition, non-political contexts provide a variety of benefits for political conversation,

and these interactions may actually be the most common way people come to engage in

political conversation online. Research has found that, for most Americans, politics is not

something they have actively chosen to seek out, but rather, just "an unintended byproduct of

people going about their normal daily routine" (Klofstad, 2011, p. 11; Eliasoph, 1998;

Papacharissi, 2010; Trammel, 2004; Walsh, 2004; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). Non-political

contexts have been shown to help facilitate the connection between politics and everyday life,

which is one of the first steps for individuals to begin engaging in politics in any way (Clark and

Marchi, 2017; Gamson, 1999; Kliger-Vilenchik, 2015; van Zoonen, 2005). Likewise, the casual,

and specifically non-political, nature of contexts not explicitly devoted to politics may relieve

some of the anxiety inherent in political discussions (Graham, 2010b; Kliger-Vilenchik, 2015; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). It makes sense, then, that research has found political conversation to be rather prevalent in non-political online contexts (e.g., Graham, 2010b, 2012; Graham & Harju, 2011; Munson & Resnick, 2011; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009).

All of this together suggests that it may be the non-political contexts online that provide the majority of opportunities for political talk for many Americans, rather than the ones specifically dedicated to politics. Opportunities to create the public sphere online may not necessarily be pursued actively; rather they are more likely to emerge inadvertently, in the course of leisure pursuits and casual conversation. These conversations, triggered by IPEs, are the result of people drawing inferences and making connections to the political, and are valuable manifestations of the online public sphere. The concept of the inadvertent political encounter reflects the broad possibilities that can trigger political conversation, as well as the autonomy with which the political relevance of content is determined.

In the vast sea of human endeavors, where anything can technically be, or become, political, a firm link to any traditionally political context can act as a life preserver, preventing the research from going off track or drifting aimlessly. Yet such a link can also act as an anchor, limiting exploration beyond a specific set of criteria to seemingly "inconsequential" or "irrelevant" areas that are actually fertile spaces for political engagement. By extension, anchored research offers a very strong potential for the emergence of the public sphere, but it also has the potential to (unintentionally) overlook a significant portion of the population. Relying on the presence of traditionally political contexts to locate and confirm an instance of the public sphere can be like limiting the study of commuters to people who own cars, or limiting the study of swimmers to people who own pools.

For a broader understanding of the complete online public sphere, therefore, some

research might do well to consider letting go of that traditionally political anchor as much as

possible, and to embrace the organic nature of a public sphere based on communicative action.

We must be willing to explore the online public sphere anywhere it emerges, even if its

relevance for politics only becomes apparent in the course of the discussion.

Accepting that the online PSCA may frequently be the end result of participants'

actualized pathway to political conversation is the first step for research hoping to move beyond

political anchors. Since the emergence of the online PSCA is under the internal control of

autonomous participants, selecting research contexts solely on the basis of external indications

of political relevance excludes a majority of these conversations from consideration. Using

Dahlgren's dimensional framework as a guide, we can endeavor to be more inclusive of

minimally anchored contexts in our study of the public sphere. The next chapter will evaluate

the three dimensions (structural, representational and interactional) of the particular, minimally

anchored context selected for this project.

CHAPTER 3: THE MINIMALLY ANCHORED PUBLIC SPHERE

As the previous chapter explained, overreliance on politically anchored contexts artificially limits the scope of public sphere research, which can result in outcomes that are not representative of the full complexity and diversity of the PSCA. I have argued that research into the online public sphere should endeavor to be more inclusive of the public sphere contexts that form without political anchors. This project considers the organic emergence of the online public sphere in just such a context: the comments sections of posts on public Facebook pages not explicitly devoted to politics. The Dahlgrenian dimensions of this context are initially released from formal links to politics, with Facebook as the setting in which the discussion occurs (Structural Dimension), non-political media content providing the source of the conversation (Representational Dimension), and everyday political talk as the form of the conversation (Interactional Dimension). This chapter will go on to identify and challenge the most common political anchors from each of the three dimensions and outline how this particular research context avoids them, though without entirely abandoning a connection to the political realm.

The Structural Dimension: Facebook

The structural dimension of the public sphere refers to the way the space hosting the public sphere is organized, and the ways in which this organization impacts the formation of the public sphere. The important component of this dimension is whether the structure fosters inclusivity in terms of who can contribute, because the public sphere should be open to all. To this end, the design of the space should actively facilitate such inclusivity, and so the structural dimension is particularly concerned with the architectural features of the surrounding technological environment through which the public sphere emerges (Dahlgren, 2005).

The Structural Political Anchor

A politically anchored structural dimension, however, poses a major obstacle to inclusivity. The most common structural political anchor for online spaces is the descriptive and practical dedication of the space to traditional politics through both the dissemination of information and directing political conversation. Public sphere research reliant on the structural political anchor tends to focus on such settings, including online spaces such as newsgroups (e.g., Himelboim, 2011; Wilhelm, 1998), online discussion inspired by news content and blogs (e.g., Kaiser & Puschmann, 2017; Manosevitch and Walker, 2009; Velasquez, 2012) or official campaign e-communications (e.g., Robertson et al., 2010; Ross et al., 2015; Shulman, 2007). The structural political anchor remains a strong feature of research into the public sphere hosted in the social media realm as well, focusing on online political discussion communities (e.g., Cammaerts & Van Audenhove, 2005; Graham, 2010a; Johannessen & Følstad, 2014; Papacharissi, 2004), explicitly political spaces on Facebook and Twitter (e.g., Choi, 2014; Gromping, 2014; Robertson et al., 2010; Ross et al., 2015), and even political spaces externally constructed by Twitter hashtags (e.g., Larsson, 2014; Maireder & Schlögl, 2014).

The challenge of an overreliance on such structural political anchors is that it firmly defines the purpose of the space from the outset. The explicit association of these spaces with the formally political realm simultaneously attracts political junkies while repelling those with less political interest. Thus, the structural political anchor arguably poses a greater challenge to research than political anchors in the other two dimensions because it excludes potential participants before any content is consumed or conversations are initiated. Thus, the structural political anchor virtually eliminates the possibility of inadvertent political encounters, which are central to the actualized pathway to political conversation. As the majority of people participating in these spaces are those already invested in the political realm, all encounters in

politically-defined spaces are intentional rather than inadvertent. As a result, it should not be

surprising that conversations in such spaces have been found to be dominated by those who are

already intensely political (e.g., Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013; Larsson, 2014), since they are

the only ones present in the first place.

Without this political anchor, then, the structural dimension of the online PSCA should

be more likely to support inclusivity. Given the importance of agency in the actualized pathway

to political conversation, and therefore the creation of the PSCA, the architectural features of a

space must not simply allow for open participation but should actively assist it. In evaluating

Facebook for this purpose, it helps to remember that technological availability does not

determine use or social practice (boyd, 2010; Brundidge, 2010; Stromer-Galley & Wichowski,

2011). Rather, social practice develops organically as users implement those features relevant to

their existing daily practices (Benkler, 2006; Papacharissi, 2010). As we shall see, Facebook's

technological affordances support users' actualized pathway to political conversation, and in this

way facilitates the inclusivity necessary for the minimally anchored PSCA.

Facebook's Unique Structural Benefits

Many of the structural advantages offered by Facebook are equally available in all online

social networking sites (boyd, 2010), as well as the internet in general. However, Facebook as a

whole avoids the pitfalls of the structural political anchor through a unique combination of three

structural benefits that together facilitate the emergence of the online PSCA: (a) convergence,

(b) autonomy, and (c) connectivity.

Convergence. In media studies, convergence refers to the merging and overlapping of

economic, cultural, spatial and social praxes enabled by the digital and communicative nature of

new technologies (Papacharissi, 2010; Pavlik & McIntire, 2015). A converged social media

environment such as Facebook, where the pursuit of all of our interactions, roles and behaviors

can be easily accommodated, would naturally appeal to us, since we naturally engage with content and interests in ways that don't match external classifications, and regularly form associative links between information and fields that are not externally deemed to be connected (Bush, 1945). Facebook's convergent environment is facilitated through its pursuit of a generalized social objective. The site's stated operating mission is "to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected" (Facebook, n.d.). That Facebook offers no self-definition other than this eliminates the structural political anchor from the service[11].

Facebook's generalized social objective is executed through more than just its mission statement. This goal is practically achieved through convergence in three key areas which allows Facebook to provide users with a one-stop shop for all their social, content, and interest-based needs, and which also sets the site apart from other SNSs. First of all, like all SNSs, Facebook brings together people's diverse offline and online contacts and hosts them in a single space. But Facebook goes one step further: the site not only encourages the full variety of a user's actual social world, it also facilitates connection to one's *potential* social world, by making it as easy and simple as possible to connect with new people. This stands in contrast with some SNSs, such as Linkedin, which limit users to certain types of connections. Another key point of convergence is that Facebook provides a generalized platform from which users may autonomously pursue virtually any individual interest. Other SNSs, such as Couchsurfing.com, aim to build a community around a specific objective or purpose, and in so doing institute external restrictions on who should join and what activities they may pursue. Aside from the arguably minimal restrictions on content imposed by Facebook, on the other hand, the kind of content users can post, share and seek out, and thus the ways they can connect, are limited only

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[11] Although, as we shall see, the structural political anchor can be used in the construction of communicative spaces *within* Facebook.

by the range of interests of the site's users. The final site of convergence on Facebook is in its

broad range of possible user activities. Like many other SNSs, Facebook users can act as both

consumers and producers of content. An important point of distinction between Facebook and

other SNSs, however, is the absence of significant constraints on the actions and options

available to users, which makes Facebook more flexible than other SNSs that limit users' actions

to specific formats (e.g., Instagram) or volume of content (e.g., Twitter).

       Autonomy. Until fairly recently, the media environment available to us was linear and

authoritative. Information was largely produced by a powerful few and distributed to what were

generally seen as "passive, undifferentiated consumers" (Benkler, 2006, p. 29), with little, if any,

opportunity for audience response or contribution. The technologies of the internet age altered

the equation, initiating the transition to what Benkler (2006) calls a "networked information

economy," in which widely available digital technologies allowed people to produce and

distribute as well as consume. In addition, internet technologies, and SNSs in particular, have

transformed us from a passive, virtually powerless audience into a society of active users by

offering primarily "user-driven" (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013, p. 1159) and "autonomous"

(Papacharissi, 2010) experiences. There are limits as to what people can do, it's true, but these

are far fewer than the constraints in the controlled, linear media environment (Benkler, 2006).

       Accentuating the user-driven experience on Facebook is its egocentric organization. The

decentralized structure of the internet enables users to autonomously pursue their interests and

find one another (Benkler, 2006), but social networking sites like Facebook take this a step

further, making the user's interests paramount to the experience. The entire Facebook

experience is "egocentric" (boyd & Ellison, 2008), organized around the individual user, as

opposed to specific topics.

The challenge of personalization. Before moving on, it is important to address the

challenges to autonomy introduced by the Facebook's news feed feature, which is the

converged starting interface for all users when first logging into Facebook. By aggregating

content from across a user's connections, interests and memberships, the news feed is a visual

representation of a user's converged options for engagement within the site. The prominence of

the news feed in the Facebook user experience demands that it receive closer scrutiny, out of

which have developed two related issues concerning its structure. The first of these is that the

site fosters a passive experience. For many scholars, the democratic promise of the internet,

compared with more traditional media forms, rests in the technology's focus on the active user.

As Barber (2006) explains:

> [T]he web is a pull medium, not a push medium. Corporate advertising and corporate
>
> marketing are push media: they shove things at us, like it or not. The internet is a pull
>
> medium: it allows us to draw what we want from it. If you do not want it, you go
>
> somewhere else. You choose. (p. 6)

In this way, digital communication technologies could ostensibly transform the passive audience

(created by push technologies like television) into the participatory user in control of their own

media and informational experience (Barber, 2006; Pariser, 2011). In some ways, however, the

news feed utilizes a push structure: it provides a ready-made list of algorithmically-cultivated

options, and allows the user to passively scan through it, just as they would the channel guide of

a television.

Compounding the push format of the news feed is the personalized algorithms

Facebook uses to filter news feed content, which can limit users' exposure to new ideas. Relying

on a user's previous behavior and activity on the site, these algorithms create a news feed that

is broadly inclusive of content from a user's contacts and interests (as well as advertisers), while

at the same time making the sheer volume of content available on the site manageable for the user (Oremus, 2016). The aim of the news feed from Facebook's perspective, however, is to keep users engaged by ensuring that they see content that is more likely to be relevant and interesting to them (Oremus, 2016). However, in his book *The Filter Bubble*, Eli Pariser (2011) argues that these adaptive personalization filters eliminate the user's drive for active participation. Furthermore, he points out that, since personalization algorithms serve us precisely the content we want without any action on our part, we have no reason to actively participate in the construction of our experience, and therefore never encounter anything new, uncomfortable, or interesting.

Pariser certainly makes some valid points, as the news feed does appear to support a much more passive, externally controlled form of engagement. However, taking a closer look, we can see that the algorithmically-controlled push-style news feed does not necessarily constrain the user's autonomy. First of all, despite its push elements, Facebook's news feed offers the comforting familiarity of the channel-surfing experience, but none of the restrictions on user autonomy inherent in the controlled, synchronous broadcast environment of television. The content of the news feed is perpetually updating, and its scrolling capabilities are virtually endless, and in this way, users are never limited to the options the news feed initially presents to them. In addition, the news feed is not a walled garden, nor, indeed, is Facebook itself. Users can easily navigate from their news feed to other areas of Facebook, to the wider internet and back again without expending much effort. Together, the flexibility of Facebook's news feed and the internet-connected devices from which we access it offer users a virtually infinite set of options. We may still scan through pushed choices in the news feed, but the ways in which Facebook is different from the closed environment of television means that we never have to settle for the "least objectionable" option.

Second, the concern over autonomy lost by the personalized news feed only makes

sense if one believes that passive presentation can only yield passive consumption. However, as

discussed previously, unthinking consumption is not the standard outcome of the individual's

experience with media content. In the context of an SNS especially, where social connection and

interaction is paramount for users, consumption is never the endpoint. Therefore, we cannot

only consider how Facebook presents and organizes content, because such a perspective

assumes an equally passive consumer. Rather, because Facebook, like all Web 2.0 technologies,

is predicated on user interactivity, we must also evaluate the ways in which Facebook facilitates

user behavior *beyond* initial exposure and consumption.

Acknowledging this side of the equation brings us to the fact that the news feed is not a

list of content meant for passive consumption, but an interactive tool exhibiting both push and

pull attributes. An additional consideration is Facebook's attitude toward users, which is

reflected in its reluctance to actively constrain user behavior. Not only, as discussed above, does

Facebook impose the loosest restrictions on the content users can post or share, the site also

does not authoritatively moderate, control, or direct the interactions that develop in response

to news feed content. This makes sense from a practical perspective, as Facebook is not a

content producer, but a conduit for content produced by others. Because all content on the site

is ultimately user-generated, the day-to-day operation of Facebook *relies* on the autonomous

social and interpretive activity that occurs beyond consumption. Curtailing users' autonomy to

engage in these activities, therefore, is not in Facebook's own interest. Despite the face-value

passivity of the news feed, then, Facebook's platform, including the news feed, can be said to

generally support user autonomy.

Connectivity. Considering Facebook's generalized social objective, it seems a foregone

conclusion that the site is a model of connectivity. However, boyd (2008, 2010) argues that the

structure of SNSs (including Facebook) facilitates our attention-seeking performances more than genuine interpersonal exchange, and her discussion (boyd, 2010) of the four key features of SNSs highlights this position. It is true that Facebook is an expressive medium. One major element of the site's appeal is that it fulfills the human need for individual expression (Caers, De Feyter, De Couck, Stough, Vigna, & Du Bois, 2013). However, individual expression can also be seen as a social act when situated in a social media context, especially when we consider that everything we do with social media today is encompassed by the term "sharing". John (2012) points out that the original definitions of the word "sharing" fell under one of two distinct logics, distributive or communicative, but that they are combined in social media contexts due to such platforms' broad range of activities that constitute sharing. This make sense when we consider that all sharing behaviors on SNSs, whether they are distributive acts (sharing content) or communicative acts (expressing one's thoughts), are aimed at building and maintaining social relationships (John, 2012).

While acknowledging that Facebook can enhance the narcissistic tendencies of its users, we nevertheless cannot ignore the equal potential of the site to facilitate humanity's instinctual drive for social interaction. As such, it is useful to conceptualize Facebook's interactivity in terms of the actions users can take, which are, in turn, facilitated by certain technological features. Doing so points to three categories of actions: (1) sharing, (2) posting, and (3) reacting. These three categories encompass a variety of activities, but they are all linked by their fulfillment of the human need for social interaction, and as such are technologically-enabled extensions of naturally occurring human social behaviors (Benkler, 2006). We share because we are naturally predisposed to do so. Once again, technology affects the opportunities we have to engage in this behavior, not our underlying desire to do it in the first place. Moreover, all three actions all

have the propensity to inspire conversation, as every post, share, and reaction contains an

implicit invitation for others to respond.

Structural Benefits of Facebook in the Actualized Pathway to Political Conversation

Having reviewed the three unique structural benefits of Facebook, we now turn to how,

by supporting the actualized pathway to political conversation, Facebook's convergence,

autonomy and connectivity facilitate the emergence of the online PSCA.

Convergence: the private sphere and IPEs. Large-scale social and technological

convergence is the crucial factor of Papacharissi's (2010) private sphere model (which provides

the setting for the actualized pathway to political conversation). In the private sphere, space is

dissolved, multiple roles are held simultaneously, and engagement with the political is diffused

among other pursuits and interactions. Similarly, Facebook's convergent structure (as well as its

generalized social objective) supports *all* of a given user's roles, interests and networks in a

single platform, and in this way thoroughly accommodates the natural convergence of the

human experience. Therefore, as a technologically converged context, Facebook can be

considered a site of the private sphere: the technological setting that supports simultaneous

access to the political realm without abandoning the comfort of one's personal space.

As a generalized, user-oriented platform, Facebook has also created a natural

environment for the inadvertent political encounters that trigger political conversation to

develop. As discussed previously, in the actualized pathway to political conversation, people

don't typically access public matters directly through the traditional channels associated with

politics. Rather, users often engage in an active transition from otherwise non-political contexts,

having been triggered by IPEs. Although the majority of user activity on Facebook is related to

social interaction and entertainment pursuits rather than engagement with public issues (boyd,

2008), the site still provides a converged, generalized space in which the autonomous social user

may act and interact freely. This freedom is important for the mental associations upon which IPEs depend.

Autonomy: issue public response. While the private sphere provides the setting for the actualized pathway to political conversation, the experience itself must first be initiated by the autonomous pursuit of individual public interests, what can be termed *issue public response*. The convergent structure of Facebook creates opportunities for inadvertent encounters with politics, as in the course of non-political pursuits, content and personal experience may collide in unexpected ways, inspiring political interest and thought. The translation of this interest and thought into action (in the form of conversation) constitutes the issue public response.

Autonomy is an essential component of issue public response for the online PSCA. User activity in an online environment is autonomous, and generally unguided by anything other than personal motivations (Benkler, 2006). This is equally true of issue public responses triggered by IPEs. The starting point of the actualized pathway to political conversation is the individual issue public member. Unlike more formal political action, issue publics develop organically, as individuals autonomously converge around an issue of personal importance to them (Converse, 1964/2006). Similarly, on the actualized pathway to political conversation, issue public members autonomously respond, or are motivated to initiate conversation regarding their chosen issues, having been triggered by IPEs. In this process, issue public response is driven by personal motivation rather than formal organization. There is no authoritative group or organization formally inviting people together for the purpose of discussing a particular topic; the decision is made internally by each individual participant, independent of other influences. Interests are activated as connections are formed in the mind due to IPEs, and the motivation to initiate or join in a conversation is likewise an internal process and an individual decision.

Connectivity: actualized citizenship. Politics is a necessarily social endeavor (Eliasoph, 1998; Papacharissi, 2010), firstly because all actions undertaken as a citizen, even seemingly solitary behaviors, have a social objective, in the sense the individual is oriented to a collective mindset (Papacharissi, 2010). But more importantly, the main activity of politics, and the public sphere, is a discursive one, and therefore dependent on some form of social interaction. Thus, the final structural benefit of Facebook that facilitates the emergence of the PSCA is connectivity, which provides the means through which the conversation actually takes place.

As discussed above, issue publics are comprised of atomized individuals, who, even when responding to IPEs, do not automatically converge into collective action groups. As part of the actualized pathway to political conversation, these isolated pursuits must be understood as merely the starting point of the process. The final element of the actualized pathway to politics is the social component provided by the actualized citizenship model. According to the actualized citizenship model (Bennett, 2008), it is in the course of their individual issue-based pursuits that users encounter others who share their interests. Through these social links, conversation, the main activity of politics, will emerge. Such conversations both produce the PSCA and are the foundation of future collective action. For Bennett (2008), the actualized citizenship model depends on the channels of social media to facilitate the encounters and connections of individuals over their shared interests. Facebook provides the connectivity features requisite to form these links that brings otherwise atomized issue public members into contact with one another.

The Representational Dimension: Non-Political Media Content

Media content is a key ingredient of the public sphere, providing the fodder for public discussion (Habermas, 1991b). The representational dimension of the public sphere directs us to consider the nature of this content (Dahlgren, 1995). The main thrust of Dahlgren's (2005)

representational dimension was the examination of the informational content itself, particularly as it related to journalism. Others, however, have interpreted the representational dimension more broadly. For example, in her study of the Cuban blogosphere as the site of informal political interaction in a state-controlled media environment, Stefania Vicari (2015) understands the representational component as "the way in which different publics are more or less represented in public debates" (p. 1494). Similarly, in his study of the relevance of political blogs for mediated deliberation, Michael Xenos (2008) explains the representational dimension as involving "the completeness with which mediated discussions stand in for the range of all possible discussion points that may be of interest to members of the public" (p. 491). These interpretations speak more to the inclusive range of the types of media content that inform and trigger public sphere discussions. We can understand the representational dimension, then, to explore media content in terms of the scope of ideas, opinions, and information presented in the content, as well as the range of media types deemed appropriate for spawning the public sphere.

Adoption of the PSCA significantly broadens the range of media content that may produce the public sphere. However, through this expansion, the field of media content relevant for exploration also becomes "all media content ever," which makes finding the best starting point a challenge. We can whittle down these options by eliminating content categories hampered by the two political anchors that secure the representational dimension to news and political content: the categorical and thematic political anchors. Through the progressive elimination of first, news content, because of the categorical political anchor, and then, infotainment, because of the thematic political anchor, this section will zero in on media content least anchored to the political realm: entertainment- or lifestyle-based content without overt political relevance.

Representational Political Anchors

There are two components of media content that require consideration for the representational dimension of the online PSCA. First are the categorical elements of the content. These are macro-level characteristics, in that that they are descriptive identifiers that define the overarching genre or type of the content, which, in turn, communicate expectations prior to consumption. Second are the thematic elements of the content. These are micro-level characteristics referring to the subject matter presented within the content that triggers subsequent political discussion. In much politically anchored research into the public sphere, the media content that is explored is firmly linked to news and politics through either or both of these two representational components. The categorical elements are anchored to news and informational media, while the thematic elements are anchored to specifically "political" topics. This makes sense when we consider how, in Habermas' (1991b) original conception of the public sphere, news media, and specifically *political* news media, provided the context in which the public sphere emerged.

However, a revised understanding of the public sphere as being "constituted wherever and whenever any matter of living together with difference is debated" (Dahlberg, 2004, p. 6) expands the field of content out of which the public sphere can emerge. As Williams & Delli Carpini (2002) argue, "the extent to which any communication is politically relevant depends on what it does -- its potential use – rather than on who says it and how it is said" (p. 2). In other words, the political relevance of media should not be determined by its descriptive characteristics (e.g., genre or content), but by its utility. The representational dimension does not need to be formally linked to informational media categories or political content in order to spark the discussion that generates the PSCA. As we shall see, this dimension can exist without

categorical or thematic political anchors, in the form of entertainment genres and topics with no overt political relevance.

News and informational content and the categorical political anchor. A significant amount of theoretical and practical research into political talk relies on the political anchor by focusing on the study of informational types of media content, particularly news media (e.g., Dahlgren, 1995, 2005; Gerhards & Schäfer, 2010; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Himelboim, 2011; Kersting & Zimmerman, 2014; Manosevitch & Walker, 2009; Moy & Gastil, 2006; Velasquez, 2012; Weber, 2013; Xenos, 2008). The categorical political anchor links research to the political realm by assuming that the manner in which media content is categorized indicates whether or not it can produce the public sphere. The source of this assumption is the near-formal, yet wholly artificial, separation that exists between information and entertainment, assigning political legitimacy only to the former.

In *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere,* Habermas (1991a) solidified the crucial link between the news media and the bourgeois public sphere. A public is necessarily situated around texts (Warner, 2002), and for Habermas (1991a, b), the only texts of value are news media texts, with the health of the public sphere a direct corollary to the state of the news media. Thus, Habermas blames the decline of the bourgeois public sphere on the commercialization of the news media in the second half of the 19th century, when the range of content was broadened to attract a wider readership. But in doing so, according to Habermas, newspapers also cheapened their content, and in this way, ceased to fulfill their public function. By attacking the newspapers' abandonment of "serious political content," Habermas also implicitly indicts entertainment content, and related genres, as wholly inappropriate media contexts for the public sphere. This judgment, accepted in journalistic circles (e.g., Anderson, 2004; Dvorkin, 2016; Raasch, 2005), reflected in academic research (e.g., Nguyen, 2012;

Patterson, 2000; Prior, 2007a), and widely adopted by the general public (e.g., Merica, 2014;

Sullivan, 2013), is supported by a larger axiomatic cultural belief about entertainment and

information. This belief is best illustrated by the common, diet-based analogy which refers to

informational content as media "vegetables" and entertainment content as media "junk food"

(e.g., boyd, 2009; Mindich, 2005; Minnow, 2003; Pariser, 2011, Prior, 2007a; Thompson, 2014).

This analogy positions news and politics as domains of American life characterized by the

weighty significance of civic duty. On the other side of this coin is the assumptive belief that

entertainment and popular culture, embodying all things trivial, shallow and fun, cannot

possibly be important or of any value whatsoever, to American democracy. However, this

understanding of entertainment as an inappropriate entryway to the political realm is

fundamentally flawed because it rests on what is ultimately a false dichotomy: the assumption

that entertainment and information are not only opposites, but mutually exclusive categories.

Defining "news" and "entertainment" seems like it would be a simple task, because the

vegetable/junk food analogy is so embedded in our cultural consciousness. Yet an attempt to

apply concrete perimeters to entertainment and informational media content seems to result in

nothing but anomalies. Maintaining such a strict division proves to be extremely challenging,

especially when one considers that content labeled entertainment frequently features topics

and traits one would normally associate with informational media, and vice versa (Delli Carpini

& Williams, 2001). Furthermore, because "entertainment" is a subjective descriptor,

entertainment content tends to be identified in subtractive terms (how *unlike* informational

content it is). As a result, entertainment and news are automatically positioned as oppositional,

mutually exclusive categories, which facilitates an unfair value judgment, whereby if news

content is, by definition, serious and valuable, then entertainment content must therefore only

be frivolous and a distraction (Dahlgren, 2009).

Ultimately, properly applying strict and concrete boundaries of what constitutes each (and implicitly, what the other is *not*) is a challenge that Delli Carpini & Williams (2001) argue cannot be overcome. They point out that the difficulty in strictly defining or even naming these two categories points to "the artificiality of this distinction" (p. 162). History supports this point, as entertainment and politics have actually been heavily integrated for centuries. As Michael McGerr (1986) explains, American popular politics in the 19th century was neither pure entertainment nor pure seriousness, but instead was a blend of political gravitas and spectacular entertainment, "a rich unity of reason and passion that would be alien to Americans in the twentieth century" (McGerr, 1986, p. 41). McGerr goes on to document the removal of the entertainment and spectacle from the political process as part of a power campaign by political and social movements. By the start of the 20th century, the division between elite expertise and popular ignorance (with straight news and mass entertainment as their respective media forms) had been solidified as an appropriate one (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; Schudson, 1998). Thus, politics was forcibly divorced from entertainment, but not because of a natural contrariety between the two.

The truth of this can be seen in the fact that, despite popular and scholarly indictments, the American public does not always maintain the distinction in practice. Gamson's (1996a, b) research, for example, provides evidence that people use entertainment content as a resource in political discussion and developing opinions despite the fact that culture and academia maintain that politics and entertainment should remain separate. Indeed, there has been a significant amount of research suggesting that people continue to defy this fabricated distinction in their practical engagement with politics (e.g., Graham, 2012; Graham & Hajru, 2011; Hermes, 2000; Holbert, Shah & Kwak, 2003; Kliger-Vilenchik, 2015; Street, Inthorn & Scott, 2012; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009; van Zoonen, 2005).

News and informational media are eminently important components of a functioning democracy, as a large body of research has shown. However, this type of media, in any of its forms, does not hold a monopoly on politics, information, or democracy as a whole. Ultimately, even if one were able to successfully argue that the line separating entertainment and politics *ought* to exist, the reality of the situation seems to be that, both in the way people utilize various media texts and the porous nature of media texts themselves, it does not. The serious and the frivolous inextricably coexist and inevitably coincide, often unintentionally, because, as Eliasoph (1998) points out, "there is no exit from the political world" (p. 6). Thus, we can conclude that reliance on the categorical political anchor (news and informational media content) is not necessarily a requirement for research into the broader PSCA, because if the boundary between information and entertainment is artificial, then all types of media contexts can be considered valuable for democracy.

Politically relevant entertainment content and the thematic political anchor. Setting aside the categorical political anchor opens up the field of media content available for exploration to include genres focused on entertainment and human interest. One type of content in particular has received a significant amount of attention: infotainment. The term was originally used in a pejorative fashion to express concern over the pure waters of journalism being muddied by the profit-driven incorporation of entertainment elements (Thussu, 2007). However, infotainment can also be understood in more general terms, referring to both informational content that features components of entertainment, and entertainment content that addresses informational topics (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2005). As just demonstrated, informational media features a categorical political anchor from the start, and thus infotainment already grounded in news content would also exhibit this same political anchor. This leaves entertainment-based infotainment, or politically relevant entertainment.

"Politically relevant entertainment" refers to entertainment-based content that exhibits elements that are useful for subsequent democratic engagement (Delli Carpini, 2012). This type of infotainment mostly avoids the categorical political anchor, as it is conventionally understood to be entertainment[12] first. However, the nature of politically relevant entertainment makes it vulnerable to the second type of political anchor in the representational dimension: the thematic political anchor.

Research exploring politically relevant entertainment in its various combinations as a valuable context for American citizens' engagement with democracy and the political process has made significant progress in recent years (see Delli Carpini (2012) for a more thorough review). Scholars have also begun to evaluate this content as a viable context for the emergence of political conversation and the public sphere (e.g., Graham, 2012; Graham & Harju, 2011; Hermes, 2000; Kliger-Vilenchik, 2015; Tennenboim-Weinblatt, 2013; Thrall et al., 2008). The unique value of politically relevant entertainment comes from the political nature of elements couched *within* the content rather than the overarching category of the media content (Baum, 2002; Delli Carpini, 2012; Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001). Williams and Delli Carpini (2002) provide some basic examples of entertainment exhibiting political relevance:

> A Jay Leno monologue satirically pointing out the political ignorance of the general public, a scene from *Law & Order* exploring racial injustice in our legal system, an episode of *The Simpsons* lampooning modern campaign tactics, or an Internet joke about Bill Clinton that generates discussion about the line between public and private behavior can be as politically relevant as the nightly news, maybe more so. (p. 2)

These examples demonstrate that the political relevance of entertainment is communicated through *overt* references to topics that are traditionally or formally associated with politics.

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[12] That is, in the sense that it is *not* news, structurally speaking.

However, by explicitly referring to a specific political issue, politically relevant entertainment

also has agenda-setting properties (Holbrook & Hill, 2005), prompting people to think about

topics and issues that wouldn't otherwise be at the forefront of their minds. Thus, the very same

elements that make entertainment content politically relevant also function as thematic political

anchors.

   None of the above is meant to suggest that thematic political anchors set the "wrong"

agenda. Nor do I mean to challenge the validity of the public sphere that coheres in response to

politically relevant entertainment or the research focusing on them. Rather, the issue here is

with the confinement of this research to politically relevant entertainment with its thematic

political anchors, to the exclusion of entertainment without explicit political content. Much of

the research into politically relevant entertainment does precisely that: relies on the thematic

political anchor by conservatively drawing the line at elements with *overt* political relevance,

often (though perhaps unintentionally) to the exclusion of entertainment media that don't

contain explicit references. For example, some research considering the impact of

entertainment television programs on voting behaviors of less-engaged voters considered

programs such as daytime talk shows (Baum & Jamison, 2006) and late-night comedy television

programs (Moy et al., 2006; Parkin, 2010) primarily because both were entertainment programs

featuring appearances of political candidates. Other research into the political relevance of

entertainment focuses on content with similarly explicit political connotations, from jokes

referencing politics on comedy programs (e.g., Jones, 2010; Young, 2004), to celebrity figures'

overt political advocacy (e.g., Goodnight, 2005; Park, Lee, Ryu, & Hahn, 2015; Sweetser & Kaid,

2008; Thrall et al., 2008; Trammel, 2004), to fictional content dealing with specifically political

situations (e.g., Holbert, Tschida, Dixon, Cherry, Steuber, & Airne, 2005; Lichter, 2000; van

Zoonen, 2007) and specific political issues (e.g., Holbert et al., 2003; Holbrook & Hill, 2005;

Slater, Rouner, & Long, 2006; Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2009).

Excluding entertainment without a thematic political anchor seems to make sense in a

world where the political must necessarily be circumscribed so that some sense of structure is

maintained in the field. However, limiting research to entertainment with overt political

relevance overlooks the power of the audience to make connections between their personal

lives and experiences and political issues on their own. Restricting the power to determine

political relevance only to media producers and academic scholars reflects the hubris that

Gamson (1996a) claims is so common among political and cultural elites and social science

research, assuming that people are generally "victims of a consciousness industry that produces

and encourages a conveniently misleading and incomplete understanding of their world" (p. 5).

Confining our focus to infotainment (perhaps unintentionally) obscures the role of the active

audience making its own interpretations and negotiations, an essential component of the

actualized pathway to political conversation. As Holbert's (2005) typology of entertainment and

politics acknowledged, raw media content should not be treated as the sole component of value

in evaluating the political relevance of entertainment. Rather, the political nature of an

entertainment text can best be determined when the content is considered in conjunction with

the audience's experience and interpretation of it.

Media Content Without Overt Political Relevance

The political relevance of media content that has no thematic political anchor is not

readily observable. Instead, political meaning must be constructed by the audience, based on

the subjective experiences and understanding they bring to the interaction. The human mind

doesn't operate according to the organizational structures and distinctions we've artificially

imposed on knowledge and information. The associations we make are individualized,

influenced by individual psychology, personal experiences and learning objectives. Research into

the psychological underpinnings of agenda setting confirms this associative format of our

thought processes (Holbrook & Hill, 2005). Guided by this associational logic, our thoughts and

conversations are primed to roam, so that engagement with media texts, and any casual

conversations those texts inspire, rarely remains confined by their initial contexts or wedded to

a single topic (Dahlgren, 2009; Klofstad, 2011; Papacharissi, 2010).

It is in this way that the representational dimension supports the actualized pathway to

political conversation. Absent a thematic political anchor, entertainment or lifestyle content

without overt political relevance provides the most flexible foundation for us to draw our own

associative connections to politics that may go far beyond the text's originally delineated realm.

I would argue, in line with others (e.g., Dahlgren, 2009; Holbert, 2005), that entertainment

without a thematic political anchor has the *potential* to veer into the political, via the

autonomous construction of political meaning by the audience, and it is in this way that media

content without overt political relevance serves as the foundation for IPEs.

The Interactional Dimension: Everyday Political Talk

The previous two sections identified specific situational contexts which facilitate the

online PSCA without relying on any external political anchors. In the structural dimension,

Facebook's architecture supports the individualized approach to political conversation without

being formally anchored to the political realm. In the representational dimension, media

content without overt political relevance avoid both categorical and thematic political anchors

that might externally direct subsequent discussion. This section will consider the interactional

dimension, which Dahlgren (2005) understands as having two components: citizens interacting

with media content, and citizens interacting with one another.

"Citizens interacting with media content" generally refers to citizens as audiences, consuming, understanding, and interpreting content, while the second category, "citizens interacting with one another," considers, literally, citizens talking to one another. The first category relates to the inadvertent political encounters through media content without overt political relevance that are so essential for the actualized pathway to political conversation. However, it is interpersonal discussion that is at the heart of the interactional dimension, and the public sphere in general since, as Dahlgren (2005) points out, "democracy resides, ultimately, with citizens who engage in talk with each other" (p. 149). Therefore, this section will focus on the second category. I will first identify the most common political anchor found in the interactional dimension of the public sphere: formal deliberation. Then, I will posit everyday political talk as an additional communicative form that is less anchored to the formal political realm, yet still able to readily produce the PSCA.

The Interactional Political Anchor: Deliberation

In exploring the interactional dimension, we are primarily considering the ways people talk about politics. It is here we find the most common political anchor in the interactional dimension: an overreliance on deliberation. Deliberation is generally defined as formal discussion of public matters reaching some measure of consensus via the reasonable evaluation of all positions on an issue by participants (Stromer-Galley, 2007). The three most basic, requisite components of deliberation are (1) rational-critical debate on matters of public concern which is both (2) free and equal, and (3) produces consensus. The first question that must be addressed is why deliberation is such a common political anchor. The answer can be found by examining the strong theoretical links between deliberation and Habermas' (1996) concept of communicative rationality, which is a component of his theory of communicative action.

Communicative rationality. As discussed earlier, the PSCA emerges out of the presence

of a specific type of communication, rather than through the imposition of external conditions

(Dahlberg, 2004). For Habermas (1996), this type of communication is specifically

communicative rationality, which is a form of communicative action. Communicative action is a

communicative form oriented to mutual understanding (Habermas, 1984). Habermas posited

that everyday conversation is the default form of communicative action, since the basic

underlying purpose of casual conversation is to achieve and ensure mutual understanding

between participants (Barber, 2003; Johnson, 1991; Kim & Kim, 2008). We want to express what

we desire and what we think to others, talking so that they should understand us. And they talk

to us for the same purpose. In this way, everyday conversation constitutes communicative

action because implicit in conversation is "a process of reciprocal interpretation" (Johnson,

1991, p. 185).

Communicative action encompasses a wide variety of conversational modes, but since

casual conversation is naturally and implicitly oriented toward mutual understanding,

disagreement or difference need not be present for conversation to constitute communicative

action (Johnson, 1991). It is when disagreement does materialize that there is the potential for

communicative rationality to emerge. According to Johnson (1991), in the face of disagreement,

participants can respond in one of two ways. One response is to fall back on strategic action,

attempting to win others by force, influence, or manipulation. This response reorients their

behavior to individual success rather than mutual understanding. Alternatively, they can

negotiate the validity of the disputed claim through reasoned argumentation in order to reach a

mutually-agreed upon conclusion (Dahlberg, 2001; Johnson, 1998). In the latter case, the

dispute is resolved through communicative rationality, or reason produced through

communication oriented toward understanding. Through communicative rationality,

participants retain communicative action's orientation to mutual understanding, and come to a consensus based solely on the power of the most logical and best reasoned argument (Johnson, 1991).

Anchoring the public sphere to deliberation. Habermas (1996) emphasized the dependence of the public sphere on communicative rationality in particular. The importance of deliberation for the public sphere extends from this link (Dahlgren, 2009; Dryzek, 2000). As a result of the powerful connection of deliberation to the public sphere, research exploring the existence of the online public sphere tends to be focused on determining the extent to which online discussions meet the standards of formal deliberation (e.g., Choi, 2014; Dahlberg, 2001; Dahlgren, 2005; Edgerly et al., 2009; Johannessen & Følstad, 2014; Manosevitch, 2012; Misnikov, 2012; Papacharissi, 2002; Ruiz, Domingo, Micó, Díaz-Noci, Meso & Masip, 2011). In addition, the vast majority of research into online political discussion in general is concerned with the extent to which this behavior conforms to the standards of deliberation (Graham, 2015). However, anchoring the study of the online public sphere to formal deliberation creates a number of problems, reflected in the critiques of deliberation's preferential position.

As discussed previously, there are several scholars who object to the intense reliance on formal deliberation for the public sphere, citing its overly restrictive characteristics. This includes arguments that deliberation is an elite form of communication (Mouffe, 1999; Young, 1996), and as a result, using it as a formal standard excludes disadvantaged groups (Dahlberg, 2005; Mouffe, 1999; Young, 1996), as well as less formal, yet equally valid, modes of communication (Dahlberg, 2005; Dahlgren, 2009; Mansbridge, 1999; Young, 1996). An additional challenge has to do with deliberation's aim to produce consensus, to which critics object because, as deliberation is an exclusionary form of communication, any outcomes of the public sphere produced through deliberation wouldn't be representative (Fraser, 1992; Mouffe, 1999). They

also argue that the expectation of consensus presumes a single, objectively correct answer to a complex question with positions that may in fact, be irreconcilable (Barber, 2003; Fraser, 1992; Mouffe, 1999).

    Mismatch between deliberation and communicative action. An additional issue with positioning deliberation as the communicative standard for the PSCA is that it may not actually conform to the principles of communicative action in the strictest sense. As discussed previously, the public sphere has experienced a conceptual shift: from physical space requiring conformity to external physical standards to a constructive concept that materializes on its own out of a naturally occurring communicative form. According to Graham (2015), since all instances of the public sphere must be free from external influences, the communicative spaces of the public sphere cannot be constructed through formal organization, because attached to these types of spaces is the implicit influence and control of an external authority. Instead, Graham argues, the communicative spaces of the public sphere must be the everyday situations that bring people together autonomously, because the public sphere forms anywhere people converse autonomously about public matters. In other words, communicative action (and therefore the PSCA), requires an organic evolution. Even communicative rationality, the foundational concept of deliberation, was initially envisioned by Habermas as a form of communication that develops in the process of people conversing while oriented toward understanding one another (Johnson, 1991; Kim & Kim, 2008).

    The current conceptualizations of deliberation, however, describe a form of communication that, in practice, does not occur naturally (Kim & Kim, 2008; Young, 1996). Rather, it must be established through the implementation of structural rules and formal intent (Stromer-Galley, 2007; Wyatt, Katz & Kim, 2000), which are fully developed and accepted prior to the interaction (Graham, 2015; Kim & Kim, 2009). It is clear, then, as Graham (2015) argued,

that the externally imposed structure of contemporary deliberation conflicts with the organic

evolutionary process of communicative action. As a result, when the public sphere is so closely

tied to formal deliberation, a decidedly *unnatural* form of communication, the existence of the

former becomes dependent on the manifestation of the latter. In other words, the standards of

formal deliberation must be met first in order for talk to be elevated to the public sphere. With

deliberation as its communicative standard, the public sphere itself becomes dependent upon,

and controlled by, external conditions, which violates the core concepts of communicative

action and the PSCA.

As a result of these issues, research into the online public sphere that is restricted to

considering instances of formal deliberation may lead to potentially unfair or incomplete

assessments of online political discussion. In particular, relying on the overly strict standards of

formal deliberation may have played a role in the conclusions reached by previous research that

online discussion falls short of the requirements of the public sphere (e.g., Choi, 2014;

Himelboim, 2011; Kersting & Zimmerman, 2014; Papacharissi, 2004; Shulman, 2007; Wilhelm,

1998).

Rejecting the restrictions, not the form. Critiquing deliberation in this way would seem

to imply that the public sphere ought to reject this communicative form and instead consider an

alternative mode as a replacement. For example, after arguing the incongruity of the association

of deliberation with the public sphere, Graham (2015) suggests that everyday political talk,

which naturally emerges out of the more casual contexts of the PSCA, may be the more apt

focus for research into the online public sphere. However, rejecting deliberation completely is as

problematic as relying exclusively on it to serve the totality of democracy, because both

positions rest on the distinctiveness of deliberation from other modes of communication.

Accepting this presumption would lead to the same trap as those who would confine the public

sphere to journalistic media and official political contexts, to the exclusion of popular

entertainment: Although these contexts might appear to be mutually exclusive categories, in

reality, they are interdependent, and so one cannot hold a monopoly on the public sphere over

any of the others. Likewise, deliberation should not be seen as summarily distinct from other

communicative forms. This means that not only can we not confine the public sphere to

deliberation, but neither can we altogether reject deliberation in favor of another

communicative form. Thus, as before, the argument here is not against deliberation as a whole,

but rather against a public sphere *limited to* deliberation. The political anchor in the

interactional dimension is not deliberation itself, but the acceptance of deliberation as having an

exclusive claim to the public sphere.

Resolving the interactional political anchor involves broadening the field of acceptable

forms of communication to include, in particular, casual political conversation. This requires

ending deliberation's segregation and connecting it to other forms of communication. Such a

reformulation is possible by recognizing that communicative action is not so much distinct from

formal deliberation as it is a looser concept that *encompasses* deliberation, along with other

forms of communication in a democracy. Deliberation is thereby incorporated under the

umbrella of communicative action, a reorganization which the work of several scholars has

already developed.

Mansbridge's (1999) deliberative system, for instance, parallels the inclusivity of

communicative action, further deconstructing the impermeable boundaries around

deliberation. The contexts of talk in the deliberative system exist on a spectrum relative to the

force of their outcome. Formal deliberation in the "decision-making assembly" is positioned at

one end as purposive talk that directly results in concrete policy decisions. At the other end is

"everyday talk" among citizens, which, as an activity "not necessarily aimed at any action other

than talk itself" (p. 212), rarely produces tangible policy consequences. Thus, rather than everyday political talk being completely unrelated to and separate from deliberation, as some have argued (e.g., Schudson, 1997), Mansbridge considers the two existing along a single continuum.

Similarly, Kim & Kim (2008) argue that, as the more casual mode of conversation, everyday political talk is not distinct from deliberation, but actually an important precursor to it. They explain that formal deliberation has a set of prerequisites that must be present in order for deliberation to occur:

> The public good and the shared values of the community are clearly understood by every reasonable citizen; moral disagreements can be resolved through deliberation, even though disagreements may be rooted in sociocultural differences; and before starting deliberation, the people know what they want, what their interests are, what others want, what is reasonable, what is justifiable, and what fits the common good. (p. 52)

However, these requirements are also outcomes that deliberation is expected to produce, and therein lies what Kim & Kim call "the paradox of deliberative democracy" (p. 53). They respond to this inconsistency by dividing deliberation into two interdependent components: instrumental deliberation, which is formal deliberation designed to yield specific policy decisions, and dialogic deliberation, which is the spontaneous, open-ended everyday political talk that occurs between citizens. It is through the unstructured interaction of everyday political talk that, according to Kim & Kim, citizens may develop their own opinions, and hopefully come to understand the positions of others, both of which are necessary prerequisites for formal deliberation. In other words, the primary outcome of everyday political talk ultimately forms the foundation of deliberation, which ties the two together quite closely.

To sum up, the political anchor in the interactional dimension of the public sphere is not deliberation itself. Rather, it is the acceptance of deliberation as having an exclusive claim to the public sphere. It is specifically the *exclusivity* of this claim, predicated on deliberation being a unique and isolated category of communication, which is rejected here. Deliberation is not the *only*, nor is it the most important, communicative form that produces the PSCA. The objective here is not to create a new standard, but simply to broaden the field of acceptability. Therefore, in order to develop a more complete picture of the public sphere, research focusing on other communicative modes is equally necessary as research concerned with deliberation. The communicative form that will be the focus of this project, and to which we will turn now, is casual, everyday political talk between citizens.

Everyday Political Talk

A number of scholars have increasingly begun to consider informal political conversation to be of value, both for democracy, and, by extension, for the public sphere. Researchers exploring everyday political talk have contended that it offers an assortment of benefits for democracy, such as contributing to the formulation of opinions (Graham, 2015; Kim & Kim, 2008; Mansbridge, 1999, Shah, 2016), enhancing the quality of people's opinions (Wyatt, Kim & Katz, 2000), increasing political knowledge (Klofstad, 2011; Eveland, 2004), maintaining political engagement (Clark and Marchi, 2017; Graham, 2015; Klofstad, 2011), and even directly spurring political participation (Clark and Marchi, 2017; Kim, Wyatt & Katz, 1999; Klofstad, 2011).

Unlike deliberation, there is no singular word or phrase officially established to refer to everyday political talk. The terms used vary, including (but not limited to) Mansbridge's (1999) "everyday talk," as well as "everyday political talk" (Graham, 2015; Kim & Kim, 2008), "ordinary political conversation" (Wyatt, Katz & Kim, 2000), "casual political exchanges" (Shah, 2016, "everyday political discussion" (Conover, Searing & Crewe, 2002), "civic talk" (Dahlgren, 2009;

Klofstad, 2011), "political talk" (Kliger-Vilenchik, 2015; Mutz, 2006), "informal political conversation" (Eveland et al., 2011), "casual political conversation" (Walsh, 2004), and "public-spirited conversation" (Eliasoph, 1998). In general, everyday political talk (the term adopted here) and similar terms refer to casual, informal, spontaneous discussion on matters of public concern. For the purpose of this research, however, Kim & Kim's (2008) definition will be adopted, as it provides basic characteristics that can be applied across concepts. Kim & Kim (2008) define everyday political talk as "nonpurposive, informal, casual and spontaneous political conversation voluntarily carried out by free citizens, without being constrained by formal procedural rules and predetermined agenda" (p. 53).

As discussed previously, communicative action is a widely-occurring form of communication that encompasses deliberation as well as everyday political talk. However, Kim & Kim (2008) contend that the link between communicative action and everyday political talk is much stronger than just the application of a loose concept to one of many different behaviors. Rather, for them, everyday political talk is actually the *preeminent* expression of communicative action. This makes sense, when considering that Habermas' (1996) conception of communicative action highlights its basis in everyday interaction. Thus, if the public sphere is produced by communicative action, which is naturally found in everyday political talk, we can logically conclude that engaging in everyday political talk can readily produce the public sphere.

Locating the PSCA

Relying on the presence of traditionally political contexts to locate and confirm an instance of the public sphere can prevent the exploration of areas that are actually quite fertile spaces for political engagement, and in the process, overlook a potentially significant portion of the population. For a broader understanding of the complete online public sphere, therefore, I have argued that we should consider letting go of that traditional political anchor as much as

possible and embracing the organic nature of a public sphere based on communicative action. However, the willingness to explore the online public sphere anywhere it emerges, even if its relevance for politics only becomes apparent in the course of the discussion, must also acknowledge that attempting to do so presents its own set of challenges. In particular, where do we begin the search? How can we narrow down what is ostensibly a vast sea of possibilities where anything can technically be, or become, political, without relying on the political anchors described above?

This question is relevant both in terms of the PSCA in general, and in terms of Facebook (as a generalized social media platform) in particular. As such, this final section will explain how relying on a *minimally anchored* PSCA can help us identify the PSCA while still avoiding the pitfalls of the political anchors described above. Then, this section will explain how a specific research context, comments sections on posts from non-political, public Facebook pages, appropriately refines the potentially limitless expanse of entertainment and lifestyle content on Facebook to one that can hopefully maximize the possibility of users creating the PSCA.

"Minimally Anchored"

The above pages have systematically addressed the most common political anchors in each of the three dimensions of the public sphere. Since an overreliance on political anchors can negatively impact research conclusions, the logical conclusion would be to avoid or remove them as much as possible from the contexts under exploration, aiming for a completely unanchored public sphere. Attempting to do so, however, raises a different problem. As discussed previously, one of the reasons research into the online public sphere and political talk relies on political anchors in the first place is to ensure the manifestation of the phenomena being explored. If, however, in an effort to discover a completely anchorless public sphere, we scrub all aspects of politics from all three dimensions, we then run into the problem of

identification. How can we externally identify the public sphere if there is nothing observably

present in any dimension of the context (i.e., no political anchors) to indicate it to us?

The natural answer to this question is to focus on the topic of conversation. If the public sphere

is created organically whenever and wherever people talk about matters of public concern, then

research into the online public sphere must necessarily depend on identifying the topic of

conversation as a matter of public concern in order to identify the public sphere. Matters of

public concern, then, can also be seen as a political anchor, but one that is necessary. Therefore,

the absence of the political anchors outlined above does not mean that research contexts must

be completely devoid of *all* links to the political realm. Rather than completely "unanchored,"

the broader contexts supporting PSCA should be understood as "minimally anchored," to reflect

the political component of the conversation itself.

Accepting a politically relevant topic of conversation as a necessary political anchor,

however, requires an explanation. Why is only *this* political anchor important to retain, while

the others discussed above are not? The answer can be found in the external nature of the

other political anchors, and their impact on the direction of the conversation. The other political

anchors described thus far are all components that, intentionally or unintentionally, overtly or

implicitly, constitute an external control over the conversation. They not only prompt people to

discuss specific topics or issues, they also have a hand in defining the scope of those issues, as

well as the terms of "the political." An over-reliance on any of these political anchors accepts

discussants' autonomous participation, but does so only in terms of their reactions to the

political contexts presented to them by others, not their individual capacity to find political

relevance on their own. However, because the PSCA develops organically, and is the outcome of

a communicative form whose progression is equally organic, its conversations must ideally also

be directed from within, by its participants, rather than determined by external prompts. In fact,

discussions that are explicitly directed or prompted by outside influences violate the rights of

the people in a democracy to set the agenda as well as the terms of the discussion, a right which

Barber (2003) argues is essential in a strong democracy:

> Yet a people that does not set its own agenda, by means of talk and direct political
>
> exchange, not only relinquishes a vital power of government but also exposes its
>
> remaining powers of deliberation and decision to ongoing subversion. What counts as
>
> an 'issue' or a 'problem' and how such issues or problems are formulated may to a
>
> large extent predetermine what decisions are reached…Nor is it sufficient to offer a
>
> wide variety of options, for what constitutes an option—how a question is
>
> formulated—is as controversial as the range of choices offered. (p. 181)

Barber argues further that these determinations are made, not prior to the discussion, but

discursively. Therefore, limiting study of the public sphere to contexts contingent on these other

political anchors disrupts the natural development of communicative action and the PSCA.

It is true that the topic of the conversation can also be imposed externally, and in these

instances, it too is rendered an external political anchor, and like the others, becomes equally

restrictive for research outcomes. An externally imposed topic occurs whenever the focus of

conversation (and its classification as "political") has been determined prior to the conversation,

and/or by people other than the conversation's participants (e.g., researchers, content

producers, forum moderators, journalists, etc.). Its imposition can be a product of the other

political anchors discussed, such as in a Facebook group dedicated to a political candidate

(structural anchor), when an episode of an entertainment television program explicitly refers to

an already politicized topic, such as gay marriage or the war in Afghanistan (representational

anchor), or as part of the organized agenda for planned formal deliberation (interactional

anchor). But the topic of conversation can also be directed when researchers conducting a focus

group select the topic of conversation, or by a context with one of the other political anchors

discussed previously.

In undirected everyday political talk, participants can turn to political topics on their

own rather than being directed there by external forces. Habermas (1996) characterized the

public sphere constructed through communicative action as "episodic" and "occasional" and

"abstract" (p. 374). Communicative action, and therefore the public sphere, can and does occur

anywhere people are talking together, and often in informal and unexpected settings and

situations (Dahlberg, 2004; Eliasoph, 1998). As Eliasoph (1998) points out, "[t]he public sphere is

something that exists *only between* people, and comes into being when people speak public-

spiritedly" (p. 16). Being an ephemeral and spontaneous construct, rather than a physical and

deliberate one, the PSCA can therefore emerge and subside spontaneously with the flow of

casual conversation (Eliasoph, 1998; Wyatt, Katz & Kim, 2000). In addition, the determination

that a topic is political, or worthy of public concern, is a similarly organic process, initiated when

participants form connections that transform the personal to the collective (Barber, 2003;

Eliasoph, 1998). When none of the other political anchors are present, direction of the

conversation to matters of public concern is determined autonomously by the discussants, not

the forum that hosts it, nor the media content that inspires it, nor the researchers studying it. In

this way, although matters of public concern can still be argued to be a political anchor, its

presence can be as organic as the PSCA it helps identify.

Specifying the Research Context

As a generalized social media context, Facebook can obviously support political and non-

political uses, as evidenced by research that has focused on precisely these types of Facebook

spaces (e.g., Conroy, Feezell & Guerrero, 2012; Gromping, 2014; Harlow, 2011; Mascaro &

Goggins, 2011; Robertson et al., 2014; Ross et al., 2015). In order to avoid the structural and

representational political anchors, however, the focus of this research, of course, is on the non-political realm, specifically, entertainment or lifestyle content without overt political relevance. Yet this is also still too broad a category, especially on a platform that can accommodate virtually infinite permutations of contacts, interests and encounters. It was therefore necessary to narrow down a specific context within Facebook, one that would hopefully maximize the possibility of users creating the PSCA. The context that was selected was comments sections on posts from public Facebook pages devoted to entertainment or lifestyle content. This context not only maximizes the opportunity for the emergence of the PSCA because it is minimally anchored and supports the actualized pathway to political conversation, but it also facilitates an additional core component of democratic talk: encountering difference.

Political difference and contextual safety. Encountering difference is a cornerstone of a functional democracy, because politics is dependent on the presence of differing perspectives (Barber, 2003; Mouffe, 1999). As talk has become the primary act of democracy, exposure to difference during these conversations is essential (Mutz, 2006). The requirement of exposure to difference likewise extends to the PSCA, whose conversations aim for mutual understanding. The necessity of pursuing mutual understanding implies the existence of differences that can (or already do) divide us, because without the presence of alternative perspectives, mutual understanding begins as an extant condition, rather than a conversational objective.

Moreover, it is important to remember that, in the PSCA, exposure to difference must proceed hand in hand with the pursuit of mutual understanding. As discussed earlier, democracy requires that we negotiate with difference, this means we must actively *consider* it. Thus, we can say that for political conversation to be democratic, it must also include the pursuit of mutual understanding. Dismissing an opposing view (or the people who hold them) as "hateful," "ignorant," "wrong," or all of the above so that one may summarily ignore it should

be considered a far greater threat to democracy than an inability to achieve consensus on a given issue. Because it is when citizens stop talking to one another altogether that they are most easily manipulated by those in power.

If the presence of difference is essential for the PSCA, and democracy in general, then the area of focus on Facebook for this project must be one that encourages exposure to difference in the course of political conversation. In order for people to encounter political difference in conversation, they must be willing to speak about politics, and also candidly express their opinions. Yet it seems that Americans are less than enthusiastic when it comes to politics as a topic of conversation (Mutz, 2006). In addition, many people are particularly reluctant to share their candid opinions when they perceive their opinions to be contrary to the general consensus (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Moreover, research into political discussion on Facebook has revealed that many users are reluctant to post political content or opinions on their profile, or respond to political content or opinions posted by others in their network, in order to avoid conflict and subsequent social consequences (e.g., Rainie & Smith, 2012; Semaan et al., 2014; Sleeper, Balebako, Das, McConahy, Wiese, & Cranor, 2013). Similarly, political conversation on the site is seen to be risky behavior (e.g., Thorson, 2014; Vraga, Thorson, Kliger-Vilenchik, and Gee, 2015).

However, this research typically explores two types of contexts for political conversation on Facebook: political conversations in the context of political groups hosted on the site (e.g., Conroy et al., 2012; Kushin & Kitchener, 2009; Mascaro & Goggins, 2011), which rely on a structural political anchor, and political conversations within their friends network (e.g., Jang, Lee, & Park, 2014; Miller, Bobkowski, Maliniak & Rapoport, 2015; Rainie & Smith, 2012; Thorson, 2014), which, as we shall see, are constrained by social consequences. There is less scholarly exploration into the value of users' interactions with strangers, members on the site

with whom they have no personal connection at all. The consideration of interactions with this group, however, opens up an additional area where users might be exposed to political difference and opportunities to discuss them.

Indeed, research has found that people's reluctance to share their political opinions is context-specific: contexts that minimize the risks of social consequences are ones that are most likely to yield candid political expression. Social consequences are punishments for violating social norms (McLaughlin & Vitak, 2011), and they can have both short-term consequences (e.g., feelings of discomfort, embarrassment and shame) (Faulkner, 2010) and long-term consequences (e.g., extended social isolation). Ultimately, the lower the risk of both short- and long-term consequences, the more likely people will be to voice their candid political opinions. In other words, the risks of social consequences can be mitigated by contextual factors, most of which can be reduced to contextual safety: the extent to which the social context is perceived as safe for sincere political expression. Contextual safety can also be understood as the extent to which a person feels free to express their honest political opinions (e.g., Wyatt, Katz & Kim, 2000; Wyatt, Katz, Levinsohn & Al-Haj, 1996; Wyatt, Kim & Katz, 2000). When a context is perceived to be safe, the individual feels more comfortable violating the norms of conflict- and controversy-avoidance because some element of the context minimizes the potential for social consequences.

The safety of a context can be assessed by two factors: relationship strength and privacy. The relationship between individuals affects the contextual safety of, and thus a person's willingness to express their sincere political views in, a given conversation. The vast majority of one's social lifetime is spent engaging with the people who are known to an individual in some way. This known network can be organized based on the strength or weakness of the relationship, or "tie" (Granovetter, 1973). Outside of an individual's known

network is the rest of the world's population, or the unknown network. Essentially, this group is entirely composed of strangers, ties that Granovetter (1973) considers "absent" or "negligible" (p. 1361).

In the absence of (though sometimes alongside) relationship strength, the privacy of the context can determine the extent to which it is perceived to be safe. The value of privacy can be understood by turning to Erving Goffman (1959), who designated two forms of social behavior: "frontstage" and "backstage." Understood as a performance, Goffman explains that frontstage characterizes our behavior in the presence of others and comprises our primary social interactions. In the process of these frontstage interactions, some thoughts, behaviors, and actions are suppressed in order to conform to social expectations. Backstage behavior, on the other hand, is "where the[se] suppressed facts make an appearance" (Goffman, 1959, p. 69). Backstage behavior is what we do when we are without this social audience, or in other words, in private.

Research has suggested that most people prefer to talk about politics in more private, or "backstage" contexts (e.g., Conover et al., 2002; Eliasoph, 1998; Stromer-Galley, 2002; Wyatt et al., 1996) with strong ties (Wyatt, Katz & Kim, 2000; Wyatt et al, 1996), supporting the notion that both relationship strength and privacy are perceived to provide a shield from the potential social consequences of political conversation. Despite being the most common type of context, however, people do not strictly limit their political conversation to their close friends and family in private spaces. Rather, many of us are likely to encounter political difference the same way we are likely to encounter political media content: inadvertently (Brundidge, 2010). In general, weak ties provide an important source of inadvertent exposure to political difference, because they are a product of circumstance rather than selected (Mutz, 2006). However, weak ties

offline do not offer significant contextual safety, and are not effective at helping to overcome political difference.

Based on the logic underlying the value of weak ties, strangers can offer an important opportunity to encounter political difference, since encounters with strangers also tend to be a result of circumstance rather than choice (e.g., standing next to someone at a bus stop, or, in this case, following the same public page on Facebook). Thus, strangers typically have minimal (if any) direct or permanent links to the individual, which provides a measure of social difference greater than that provided by weak ties. Due to this anonymity, the risk of long-term social consequences for expressing an unpopular position in political encounters with strangers should be significantly curtailed. Since you will likely never see them again, it should be considered safer to candidly express your opinions when among strangers than when among weak ties (McKenna & Bargh, 2000).

In an online environment, the impact of anonymity is enhanced by the technological affordances of the medium. Research has suggested that the anonymity offered by online spaces enables us to be bolder in our opinions and actions, in part because it minimizes the possibility of social consequences (e.g., Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Moore, Nakano, Enomoto, & Suda, 2012; Rowe, 2015; Stromer-Galley, 2002). Further enhancing these effects is the increased perception of safety provided by the increased size of the user population in an online setting (compared with an offline setting). The vastness of the audience online lets one feel as if their comments might just blend into the cacophony of other voices, allowing them to escape the direct consequences of holding an unpopular or controversial opinion (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). As a result, encounters with strangers in an online environment, including Facebook, should offer a context that is more supportive of sincere political interactions, and therefore increase the likelihood of exposure to political difference.

The spaces on Facebook that should offer the most contextual safety while interacting with strangers are public pages.

Public pages on Facebook. Pages are similar to user profiles, but they are meant for businesses, organizations, brands, content aggregators, and public figures/celebrities for the purpose of communicating with self-selected users. Similar to traditional linear media, pages are primarily content producers, distributing to a larger, (somewhat) mass audience of self-selected followers. *Unlike* traditional linear media, however, the audience is not the passive end point of the communication chain. Users may share page content with their friends network, or choose to share their reactions on the page itself, in the comments section of the original post. In addition, the individual user is not isolated from the rest of the audience of a page. Because all Facebook users are free to contribute on pages in this way, doing so lets them engage with a larger, more diverse group of mostly strangers.

For exploring encounters with strangers on Facebook, public pages offer the best option. Because anyone can follow or interact with[13] a page, spaces created by a page's posts are very public, and provide the greatest amount of distance from one's personal social network. This distance makes the interactions that occur through pages as close to anonymous, and therefore private, as is possible on Facebook, and therefore offers a smaller risk of long-term repercussions. In addition, public pages tend to have very large numbers of followers, with the more popular ones boasting follower numbers in the millions. Thus, while it is true that the social distance of the anonymous, faceless internet is significantly reduced by a user's identifiability on Facebook (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Rowe, 2015), the audience for content on public pages is large enough to provide anonymity by blending in with the multitudes (McKenna

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[13] Users do not need to already follow a Page in order to interact with its posts. Many Groups, however, require that users must first be members in order to post, comment, share, or even see content posted by others in the Group.

& Bargh, 2000). The physical distance and affordances of online communication and the social distance from one's familiar network both remain intact, thereby minimizing the chances of long-term consequences. Although conversations with strangers on Facebook outside of one's own personal network may only represent a small portion of user activity on the site (boyd & Ellison, 2008; boyd, 2008), the perceived safety of these contexts may encourage people to speak more candidly about their political opinions, more so than they would when conversing with members of their own network. Thus, because people may feel more empowered to speak freely in encounters with strangers on public Facebook pages, the particular context of interest for this project is everyday political talk sparked by, and occurring in, the comments sections of posts from entertainment- or lifestyle- based pages.

As a context for exploring the PSCA, the comments sections of posts on public Facebook pages not explicitly devoted to politics poses a new direction for public sphere research. It manages to avoid the most common political anchors in its structural (Facebook), representational (entertainment content not explicitly devoted to politics) and interactional (everyday political talk) dimensions, while still retaining a connection to the public realm that, like the PSCA itself, is fundamentally organic. At the same time, this context highlights the autonomous and personalized motivations, interpretations, and actions of the user, providing a natural destination for the actualized pathway to political conversation.

CHAPTER 4: THE CRITERIA FOR EVERYDAY POLITICAL TALK

In order to study everyday political talk, we have to be able to identify it. This chapter

will attempt to do precisely that. First, we will address the relevance of the criteria of

deliberation for everyday political talk. Then, we will define a set of criteria extended from

formal deliberation and grounded in Habermas' (1984, 1985) theory of communicative action

that will help to identify everyday political talk that constructs the public sphere.

The Relevance of Deliberation Criteria

Before operationalizing everyday political talk, we must address the relevance of the

criteria for deliberation. One of the debates in the literature on everyday political talk is whether

or not to identify it based on the standards of formal deliberation. As mentioned previously, a

significant portion of research and theory concerning the value of everyday political talk holds

this communicative form to the standards of deliberation (e.g., Conover et al., 2002; Dryzek,

2000; Graham, 2008, 2015; Graham & Witschge, 2003; Mutz, 2006). This comparison makes

sense for two related reasons: First, as part of the larger deliberative system, formal

deliberation and everyday political talk are related communicative forms (Graham, 2015;

Mansbridge, 1999). Thus, it would make sense to apply similar criteria to both. Second, the link

between the public sphere and formal deliberation is so long-established as to appear natural.

Since everyday political talk as a relative newcomer (at least, in terms of scholarly acceptance),

it makes sense that its validity for the public sphere would therefore be argued through

comparison to the "original."

There are some, however, who argue against applying the standards of deliberation to

everyday political talk. Eveland et al. (2011), for example, maintain that such "deliberative

framing" is due to the fact that exploration of everyday political conversation is conducted

mainly by deliberative researchers. They go on to suggest that the deliberative bias is one of the

main limitations of research thus far, because it "can lead to unrealistic expectations about the function of political conversation in the lives of individuals" (p. 1086). Similarly, to Janssen & Kies (2005), the application of deliberative criteria to less purposive conversations in online forums "seems an unjust approach" (p. 332). However, any attempt to evaluate everyday political talk while ignoring deliberation entirely can also cause problems. First of all, doing so may create a research area that is too chaotic to effectively identify or study in any systematic way. In addition, eschewing all the standards of deliberation also overlooks the impact of the relationship between it and everyday political talk for the public sphere and democracy in general.

This dilemma is ultimately produced by a perspective that considers deliberation and everyday political talk to be completely distinct forms. Yet, as we have already discussed, scholars have advanced arguments against such a stark division (e.g., Barber, 2003; Kim & Kim, 2008; Mansbridge, 1999). In the process, these scholars describe communicative forms that are inextricably linked, which suggests that the question at the heart of the debate may be incorrect. We should not be asking *whether* the criteria of deliberation are appropriate for application to everyday political talk; instead, we should be asking *how* the criteria of deliberation can best be applied so that we acknowledge the unbreakable relationship between deliberation and everyday political talk, while also respecting their individual differences. In identifying the characteristics of everyday political talk, we can maintain this balance by first drawing on the more strident features of deliberation, but then loosening them "to accommodate the more informal character" of everyday political talk (Mansbridge, 1999).

Features of Everyday Political Talk

I will be identifying the features of everyday political talk in the context of how the features of deliberation can be applied. The factor linking everyday political talk and formal

deliberation both to each other and to the PSCA is communicative action. Though they are both forms of communicative action, deliberation and everyday political talk differ in terms of their main objectives. Deliberation is oriented toward Reasoned Decision-Making (Figure 1), while everyday political talk is oriented toward mutual understanding (Figure 2). The characteristics of both deliberation and everyday political talk are naturally designed to facilitate their respective objectives. Therefore, in adapting the characteristics of deliberation to everyday political talk, they must be reorganized to reflect everyday political talk's orientation to mutual understanding.

Figure 1: Deliberation Criteria	Figure 2: Everyday Political Talk Criteria
Oriented to Reasoned Decision-Making	*Oriented to Mutual Understanding*

- Rational-critical debate
  o Positions supported by reasons/evidence
  o On matters of public concern
  o Secondary Characteristics
    ■ Reciprocity
    ■ Disagreement
    ■ Dispassion
    ■ Civility
- Equality and Freedom
  o Secondary Characteristics
    ■ Diversity
- Consensus
  o "Common good" orientation/purposive
  o Force of the "better argument"
  o Sincerity
	- Direct Application
	  o Matters of Public Concern
	  o Reciprocity
	  o Diversity
	- Modified Application
	  o Providing Reasons (Rational-Critical Debate)
	  o Public Mindedness (Common Good)
	  o Civility
	- Eye of the Beholder
	  o Equality and Freedom
	  o Sincerity
	- Not Required
	  o Consensus
	  o Disagreement
	  o Dispassion
	  o Force of Better Argument

Criteria and operationalizations for identifying deliberation vary across research (Graham, 2015; Stromer-Galley, 2007). There are, however, three basic elements under which

most of the others can be grouped (Figure 1). We can summarily explain deliberation as consisting of (1) rational-critical debate on matters of public concern which is (2) both free and equal, and which (3) produces consensus. Each of these categories includes secondary elements which, while they do not produce deliberation on their own, can be seen to facilitate deliberation by ensuring the requirements of the overarching category are met.

When organized in the service of mutual understanding, the characteristics of deliberation do not seamlessly map onto everyday political talk (Box 2). This process can best be understood as a reorganization of the criteria into four categories: (1) those that can be directly applied to everyday political talk (Direct Application), (2) those that can be applied with modification (Modified Application), (3) those features that that are relevant to everyday political talk, but the extent of their presence, and therefore their impact, is determined subjectively by the participants themselves (Eye of the Beholder), and (4) those characteristics that are specific to deliberation, and therefore not required to identify everyday political talk (Not Required).

Not Required

This analysis will begin with those characteristics of deliberation that are not required to identify everyday political talk because they do not directly facilitate the objective of achieving mutual understanding. They are consensus, disagreement, the force of the better argument, and dispassion.

Consensus. Habermas (1991b) insists that the primary outcome of deliberation in the public sphere is meant to enable the public to collectively communicate their preferences to their elected officials in a representative democracy. Deliberation, therefore, is a purposive mode of communication. As a decision-making body, the primary outcome of deliberation is expected to be consensus on the solution to the issue(s) under discussion (Cohen, 1997;

Schudson, 1997; Stromer-Galley, 2007). Everyday political talk, however, is explicitly defined as "nonpurposive" (Kim & Kim, 2008). The outcome of everyday political talk is not meant to be actionable consensus, but rather mutual understanding. As a result, the characteristics of deliberation related to the production of rational consensus, such as disagreement, dispassion, and the force of the better argument, are equally inessential as requisite criteria for everyday political talk.

      Disagreement. Habermas (1984) argues that communicative rationality is dependent on argumentation. Deliberation cannot exist without some form of dispute or difference of opinion among participants (Stromer-Galley, 2007). "Disagreement" and "diversity" are related characteristics, but not quite the same. As discussed previously, diversity is an important component of the PSCA, and, as will be discussed below, a necessary component of everyday political talk. The focus on diversity over disagreement in everyday political talk does not mean that disagreement or argument cannot be present in everyday political talk. In fact, the presentation of diverse perspectives tends to increase the likelihood of argumentation. Disagreement, however, is only important for deliberation, in the service of producing consensus. By insisting that deliberation consider multiple perspectives, diversity seems inextricably linked to disagreement. However, it is the consensus objective of deliberation which positions those diverse perspectives in competition with one another, thus making disagreement and argument inevitable. Since there can only be one outcome to which all participants expect to be bound (Cohen, 1997), a public sphere utilizing deliberation tends to exhibit a high stakes, adversarial tone. Everyday political talk, on the other hand, does not pursue consensus, but simply mutual understanding. Without the pressure of actionable outcomes, the stakes of the encounter are lowered, and as a result, the presence of diversity does not always result in disagreement.

Force of the better argument. The primary objective of deliberation is reasoned decision-making, the outcome of which is expected to be consensus. This consensus will be produced by the acceptance of "reasons that are persuasive to all" (Cohen, 1997, p. 75). Thus, true deliberative consensus will be naturally achieved when the only agent of persuasion is the best argument, as determined through rational-critical debate (Cohen, 1997; Dryzek, 1990; Johnson, 1991). Ultimately, since consensus is not the objective of everyday political talk, the force of the better argument isn't really an essential component of everyday political talk.

Dispassion. Lack of emotion is considered an important element of the rational-critical debate of deliberation, because it serves to ensure that the argument, and therefore the outcome, remains reliant on the critical evaluation of reasons without distraction (Young, 1996). Like the previous two characteristics, the importance of dispassion for consensus renders it less important for everyday political talk.

Additionally, there are a number of scholars who have argued for the importance of emotion in political conversation. Because dispassion is characteristic of elite, western forms of communication, positioning it as the standard for political talk can be used to unfairly exclude minority groups and arguments from consideration (Dahlgren, 2005; Mouffe, 1999; Young, 1996). Thus, the acceptance of emotional forms of communication into the realm of political talk may increase the inclusiveness and diversity of the conversation (Dahlgren, 2009). In fact, not only can the presence of emotion be beneficial to political conversation, there is an argument to be made that it is *essential* for the manifestation of political conversation (and further political action) in the first place. For example, both Dahlgren (2009) and Papacharissi (2004) have argued that passion is the main force driving political action, and therefore is a necessary component of political conversation.

Direct Application

Features under the heading of Direct Application are ones that are common to both

deliberation and everyday political talk, even reoriented to mutual understanding. They are:

reciprocity, diversity, and matters of public concern.

Reciprocity. As Conover & Searing (2005) point out, of all the standards of deliberation,

reciprocity is "the most central to judging everyday [political] talk, and requires relatively little

'loosening'" in its application" (p. 276). In general, reciprocity entails a focus on listening, on

what Graham & Witschge (2003) call "mutual exchange" (p. 178) and identifies the give-and-

take of conversation occurring (Graham, 2015). Reciprocity is important for deliberation

because it ensures that the communicative requirement of communicative rationality is being

fulfilled, so that people aren't "simply engaging in monologues in the presence of an audience"

(Graham, 2015; Stromer-Galley, 2007, p. 7; Young, 1996). Conceptualized for everyday political

talk, reciprocity directs us to the importance of listening, which is an essential component of

achieving mutual understanding (Barber, 2003). As such, reciprocity must be a requirement for

everyday political talk.

Diversity. Diversity is important for the validity of the results of deliberation. As much

information, and as many perspectives as possible, must be presented and evaluated in order

for the outcome of deliberation to be considered appropriately reasoned (Burkhalter, Gastil, &

Kelshaw, 2002). As we have already discussed, diversity is strongly associated with

argumentation, because in deliberation, difference of opinion on the issue at hand must be

present in order for disagreement, which is the foundation of communicative rationality, to

develop.

The extent to which diversity is required for everyday political talk is itself the subject of

some debate. Dahlgren (2009), for instance, contends that encountering difference is not

necessary for everyday political talk, because one of the main features of civic talk is that

participants already agree with one another. Similarly, Wyatt, Katz & Kim (2000) argue that talk

between people who agree with each other, with whom the majority of political conversation

takes place, is still "a vital and often unappreciated component of political life" that can increase

"opinion quality and political participation" (p. 89). On the other hand, Mutz (2006) maintains

the unique importance of exposure to political difference in casual political conversation,

pointing out that it can improve the quality of people's opinions, and can encourage both

awareness of and tolerance for opposing viewpoints. In fact, the centrality of difference in a

democracy cannot be ignored. Because most issues facing society are complex, there typically

exists more than one valid perspective on how to address them (Barber, 2003; Mouffe, 1999).

Thus, even casual talk about these issues must also necessarily engage with difference.

Furthermore, as a form of communicative action, everyday political talk is oriented to mutual

understanding, which requires the consideration of difference. Attempting to understand a

position other than one's own requires the presentation of at least one different position or

perspective during the conversation.

Diversity is most easily recognized in the conflicting ideals and positions we typically

associate with politics (e.g., pro-choice vs. pro-life). Despite this, it is not necessary for diversity

to manifest this way in everyday political talk. Even exposure to small measures of difference

are of value to everyday political talk because it can facilitate the understanding of a perspective

other than one's own (Barber, 2003). Even if a conversation is characterized by general

agreement on policy or belief systems, diversity can still be found in the less prominent

differences exhibited in the expression or description of backgrounds, cultures, personal

experiences, and even emotions presented in support of one's positions.

Matters of public concern. "Matters of public concern" describes the political, or public,

relevance of the topic under discussion. The public sphere requires that the conversation be

about matters of public concern, the feature which, as discussed previously, identifies a

minimally anchored public sphere. But what constitutes a "matter of public concern"?

Answering this question for deliberation is simple. Habermas (1991b) originally defined matters

of public concern as politics in an official capacity. In the context of deliberation, matters of

public concern remain wedded to this formal definition of politics.

Everyday political talk must also focus on matters of public concern; yet, there is some

debate about how this concept is understood, with some definitions more limiting than others.

For example, Wyatt, Katz, & Kim (2000) identify political conversation when the discussion

concerns "national affairs, international affairs, state and local affairs, and the economy" (p. 89).

Similarly, Klofstad (2011) defines the focus of civic talk as "politics and current events" (p. 11).

Meanwhile, Conover et al. (2002) adopt Fraser's (1992) argument that an issue becomes

appropriate for public discussion in the context of the conversation itself. Thus, they consider

appropriate topics for political discussion to be any matter of common concern, which they

identify as "any issue being widely discussed" (p. 27). Dahlgren (2009) argues that topic is largely

irrelevant, since the "messiness and unpredictability" of social interaction allows virtually any

casual conversation to swerve unexpectedly into the political realm (p. 89). He suggests that,

since talk becomes civic when it "begins to take on political connotations," analyses of civic talk

should focus on topics that he identifies as "'proto-political' – that which is beginning to

percolate politically" (p. 90). Finally, Eliasoph's (1998) public-spirited conversation takes this

idea a step further, holding that the definition of what constitutes politics is part of the process

of the discussion itself, and thus virtually any topic can become political. For her, the most

important factor in identifying public spirited conversation is "whether or not speakers *ever*

draw out a topic's public implications, whether speakers ever assume that what they say

matters for someone other than themselves" (p. 15).

This transition from a personal to communal perspective is a primary function of

everyday political conversation (Barber, 2003; Dahlgren, 2009; Gamson, 1996a; Eliasoph, 1998;

Walsh, 2004). Rather than drawing boundaries around any particular set of topics, I am inclined

to agree with those scholars that focus on the act of linking the personal to the communal as

indicative of political (e.g., Barber, 2003; Eliasoph, 1998; Graham, 2008; Kliger-Vilenchik, 2015;

Papacharissi, 2010). The determination that some topic is or is not political cannot be

considered static, but rather a constantly evolving process that occurs through talk (Eliasoph,

1998).

Modified Application

The features in this category are important for deliberation but must be modified when

applied to everyday political talk in order to reflect the more informal nature of the

communicative form, as well as its orientation to mutual understanding. They are: providing

reasons, public mindedness, and civility.

Providing reasons (replaces rational-critical debate and evidence). Providing reasons is

a modification of the deliberative requirement for rational-critical debate. Although the criteria

of deliberation vary across research, pretty much everyone agrees that all participants must

justify their positions by providing reasons (e.g., Dryzek, 2000; Dahlgren, 2009; Graham &

Witschge, 2003; Stromer-Galley, 2007). Reasons must be accepted or rejected based on their

critical evaluation by other participants (Dahlberg, 2001). The idea that all claims and arguments

are open to challenge by others is central to communicative action, and thus must also be a part

of everyday political talk. At their most basic levels, then, both deliberation and everyday

political talk are similar in that they both require the provision of reasons. However, the two differ in the range of reasons that are acceptable.

Since deliberation is focused on achieving rational consensus, rational-critical debate imposes a strict set of rules to ensure the validity of this outcome, such as coherence (that participants stay focused on the issues at hand) and continuity (that participants must "continue deliberation until consensus can be achieved and the common good realized") (Graham & Witschge, 2003, p. 178). In addition, the rational-critical debate of deliberation limits the type of acceptable justifications to ones that reflect "reason" or "rationality" (Cohen, 1997; Habermas, 1984). Reasons given during deliberation must be based on logic and should particularly include the presentation of tangible, objective evidence that can both justify the claim and be critically evaluated by others (Graham & Witschge, 2003; Stromer-Galley, 2007). The imposed rules exclude other types of reasons that may be grounded in the subjective and the personal, as well as their associated communicative forms.

Because everyday political talk is less formal than, yet still related to, deliberation, formal justifications based on objective evidence are also accepted. However, because it aims to achieve mutual understanding, everyday political talk must accept the totality of an individual, which includes affect as well as logic (Barber, 2003). Thus, the types of reasons acceptable in everyday political talk are more inclusive of the subjective, such as feelings, cultural and religious beliefs, etc. (Barber, 2003; Young, 1996). Despite such broad inclusivity of reason types, everyday political talk is still a form of communicative action, and as such, all presented justifications are still open to challenge by other participants. Therefore, perhaps the only type of reasons that are unacceptable, even for everyday political talk, are ones that are groundless (e.g., "because I said so," or "because you're a jerk"), because they indicate a perspective resistant to challenge or critical examination.

Public mindedness (replaces the common good). In deliberation, all participants are expected to be oriented toward achieving outcomes that represent the "common good," or that which is considered best for society. A focus on the common good is considered a prerequisite for deliberation (Kim & Kim, 2008), as well as its defining purpose (Cohen, 1997). This orientation is, in part, meant to ensure objectivity and prevent individuals' personal emotions, motives and interests from affecting their rational judgment (Young, 1996). In addition, a sustained focus on the "common good" by all participants ensures that the actionable decisions produced by deliberation will be ones to which the entire community will adhere (Cohen, 1997). However, like consensus, a key challenge of focusing on the "common good" is that it is a subjective and singular concept which relies on the fallacious notion that there is only one valid solution to every problem which can and will be clearly recognizable as "the best" by all those concerned after enough thorough evaluation (Mouffe, 1999).

The main objective of everyday political talk, however, is mutual understanding, which means that finding common ground becomes far more important than finding the common good. Seeking common ground helps develop and maintain the bonds of community which Barber (2003) argues are so essential to strong democracy, because it allows participants to focus on what connects them to one another rather than what divides them. As a "medium of mutual exploration" (p. 182), undirected casual conversation is, for Barber (2003) the key component of strong democratic talk, allowing participants to transcend the individual perspective by "exploring the common context, traits, circumstances, or passions that make of two separate identities one single we" (p. 184). Despite not aiming to solve specific problems, everyday political talk addresses topics with an eye toward the bigger picture. This awareness of, and concern for, the world beyond one's own personal situation, is the public mindedness of everyday political talk. Through public-minded conversation, everyday political talk forges

disparate individuals into a community, not by eliminating or reconciling their differences in the

search of a single truth, but by helping them to understand one another (Barber, 2003).

The "common good" and "public mindedness" are related in the sense that they both

indicate an interest and orientation toward the communal. Where they differ, however, is the

manner in which they are applied, owing to differences in the structure and organization of their

respective communicative forms. Like the rest of the deliberation criteria discussed here,

orientation to the common good is an externally applied characteristic. Deliberation is tasked

with achieving specific goals, and the common good serves as a road sign, reinforcing

participants' commitment to finding an actionable solution to the problem at hand. On the

other hand, since everyday political talk "lacks any direct purpose outside the purpose of talk for

talk's sake" (Graham, 2015, p. 250), participants have no obligation (or intention) to achieve

consensus or any tangible outcomes, for the common good or otherwise. Absent the

organization and ambition of deliberation, everyday political talk doesn't really require the

intense focus an orientation toward the common good provides. While the common good is an

external mechanism directing the deliberative interaction, public mindedness derives from the

conversation itself. Rather than a rule controlling the interaction, public mindedness is a

descriptive characteristic whose presence develops in the course of the interaction, organically

transforming casual conversation into everyday political talk.

Civility (revised for everyday political talk). For deliberation, civility is most commonly

understood as the exhibition of courtesy and respect for other participants and their views,

even when one disagrees with those views (Brooks & Geer, 2007; Papacharissi, 2004; Sobieraj &

Berry, 2011). Since deliberation is expected to feature multiple perspectives on the same issue,

conflict is almost an inevitability in such encounters, which also means the possibility of flared

emotions and frustrated outbursts (Mutz, 2006). Yet, as discussed above, deliberation requires

that emotions are held in check, in order to ensure that the outcomes are based on reasoned

consideration of all ideas. Civility is one of the mechanisms implemented in deliberation to

facilitate this control, ensuring that difference is managed in a calmer, more ordered manner

(Conover & Searing, 2005). In addition, civility is meant to encourage participants to voice their

opinions, even if they perceive themselves to be in the minority (Graham, 2008, 2015).

Virtually all scholarly considerations of civility in any type of political discussion do so

from a deliberative perspective (e.g., Jamieson, 2011; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Stryker, Conway

and Danielson, 2014). When more casual conversation is considered, the standards of formal

deliberation, including civility, are still assumed to be relevant and applicable (e.g., Brooks &

Geer, 2007; Coe et al., 2014; Graham, 2008, 2015; Papacharissi, 2004; Rowe, 2015). However,

the application of the criteria for civility/incivility to everyday political talk must be different,

because of the inherent differences between the two communicative forms. For deliberation,

civility is externally applied prior to the interaction, as a rule by which all participants have

agreed to abide, which implies forethought. Everyday political talk, on the other hand, just

happens spontaneously, and typically in the context of conversations about other things (Kim &

Kim, 2008). As such, it does not necessarily deserve to be held to the stricter standards of civility

required for formal deliberation.

Though it has generally been accepted as a critical component of democratic talk, civility

is not easy to define, or even identify for research purposes (Brooks & Geer, 2007). Instead,

most research into the subject tends to focus more on the presence of *in*civility, which manifests

more tangibly (e.g., Brooks & Geer, 2007; Coe et al., 2014; Papacharissi, 2004; Rösner & Krämer,

2016; Seely, 2018; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). Even so, formal definitions and operationalizations of

incivility also suffer from a lack of consistency, depending on the type of incivility being

considered (e.g., Brooks & Geer, 2007; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011; Stryker et al., 2014), as well as

the site of the incivility, whether present in news sources (e.g**.,** Borah, 2012; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011), political communication (e.g., Brooks & Geer, 2007; Massaro & Stryker, 2012), or between individual citizens (e.g., Coe et al., 2014; Papacharissi, 2004; Rösner & Krämer, 2016; Rowe, 2015).

Despite the ambiguity around its edges, there is a general sense of incivility in deliberation as exhibiting disrespect for others. Through disrespect, incivility obstructs the ability of deliberators to communicate effectively (Rowe, 2015), which threatens the fulfillment of deliberation's primary objective of reaching decisions that best serve the common good (Stryker et al., 2014). Like deliberation, everyday political talk also requires exposure to difference, and therefore also presents the potential for incivility to manifest. With mutual understanding as its ultimate objective, civility would seem an important feature for everyday political talk, and incivility something requiring great care to avoid.

There are two challenges inherent in revising the application of civility/incivility to everyday political talk. The first has to do with emotion. Conceptualizations of civility for deliberation either explicitly or implicitly rule out the use of emotion and other alternative forms of communication that everyday political talk accepts. In response, Papacharissi (2004) separates out the emotional responses typically considered part of incivility, categorizing them as "impoliteness." She cautions against placing too great importance onto interpersonal politeness when considering civility in political discussion, arguing that passionate disagreement is an important and beneficial component of democracy. As Papacharissi points out, the norms of politeness can stifle the presentation of difference, thereby undermining political conversation. Although civility must "promote respect for the other, [and] enhance democracy," Papacharissi argues that it must also permit the "human uniqueness and unpredictability" demonstrated by impolite expressions in the course of a heated exchanges (p. 266). She goes on

to explain that it is the target of such behavior that renders it in violation of the standards of civility. Rudeness to a single individual is benign compared to language which "demonstrate[s] offensive behavior toward social groups" (p. 267). Manners are important to Papacharissi's definition of civility, but only to the extent that they are applied to the democratic collective[14].

Another challenge in understanding civility/incivility in the context of everyday political talk is that research identifies instances of incivility in online conversation according to (sometimes elaborate) coding schemes that recognize key words, phrases, or behaviors observed in the text of the exchange (e.g., Coe et al., 2014; Groshek & Cutino, 2016; Papacharissi, 2004; Rowe, 2015; Santana, 2014; Seely, 2018). The problem with this is twofold. First, the presence of uncivil language in an individual comment is often considered sufficiently indicative of the uncivil quality of the discourse. However, as Stryker et al. (2014) pointed out, a proper conceptualization of incivility cannot ignore the structure of actual conversation, which requires listening and responses between two or more individuals. Instead, incivility should be assessed in the context of the complete discursive exchange (which Stryker et al. (2014) do). Compounding this issue is the fact that incivility is a rather subjective concept, since "what strikes one person as uncivil might strike another person as perfectly appropriate" (Coe et al., 2014, p. 660). Overly relying on comprehensive coding schemes, even ones designed to test perceptions of incivility (e.g., Stryker et al., 2014), assumes that the instances in the code are, and perhaps always will be, objectively uncivil. Thus, even more valuable than the researcher's identification of what constitutes incivility may be the impact it has (or doesn't have) on the

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[14] Not everyone accepts Papacharissi's conceptualization, holding fast to the values of politeness as essential for civility (e.g., Coe et al, 2014; Soberiaj and Berry, 2011). Yet, even Papacharissi's pared down version of incivility can still be problematic when considering the critiques by Mouffe (1999) and Young (1996), who argue that formal deliberation reinforces and privileges the dominant elitist Western communicative form, typically to the exclusion of others minority viewpoints. Holding the conversation to standards that are not universal automatically privileges members of the dominant group, and enables them to dismiss any argument on the basis of its presentation alone (for example, the use of profanity or displays of emotion, or even showing disrespect towards entire groups), without rationally considering the ideas that people may be attempting to express (Mouffe, 1999; Young, 1996).

conversation, which can be assessed based on participants' identification of, and more importantly, *reaction to*, incivility exhibited by others.

Eye of the Beholder

Finally, we come to the features categorized under "eye of the beholder": freedom, equality and sincerity. The only power that should have sway in the process of deliberation (grounded in communicative rationality) is the "force of the better argument" (Habermas, 1984, p. 25), and all of the features in this category are designed to safeguard this ideal for deliberation (Dryzek, 1990; Johnson, 1991).

Freedom and equality for deliberation. Equality and freedom are requirements that refer more to the governing rules of the discussion rather than the discussion itself, yet they are essential to the process of deliberation (Burkhalter et al., 2002; Graham & Witschge, 2003; Stromer-Galley, 2007). Equality and freedom work together to regulate the progression of the conversation. The former institutionalizes the balance of participation, while the latter removes obstacles that might interfere with that balance.

Equality. Graham & Witschge (2003) divide equality into two categories, structural equality and discursive equality. Structural equality refers to an inclusive forum for deliberation. This requirement, drawn directly from Habermas' conditions for the public sphere, determines that the forum must be open and accessible to everyone, regardless of their status outside the forum (Dahlberg, 2004). Discursive equality refers to the status of participants in the process of the discussion. It mandates that all participants receive equal opportunity to participate in the conversation so that all voices are heard, and all arguments are considered equally and respectfully, regardless of their external (e.g., social, economic, ethnic, cultural, educational, etc.) status (Graham, 2015; Graham & Witschge, 2003; Stromer-Galley, 2007).

Freedom. While equality governs the act of participation in deliberation, freedom

addresses the removal of restrictions that might negatively affect or hinder the process. Graham

& Witschge (2003) identify two types of freedom. First is the "freedom of expression people

enjoy within the process of deliberation itself" (p. 176). Since, in deliberation, all validity claims

must be open to critical challenge and negotiation (Dahlberg, 2001; Dryzek, 2000), no argument

or position that can be supported by reasons may be excluded (Dahlberg, 2004; Johnson, 1998).

The second type of freedom identified by Graham & Witschge (2003) is the freedom of the

forum itself, in the sense that it is free from any kind of control or restrictions from the

government or economic interests. This is a classic Habermasian requirement for both the public

sphere and communicative rationality, ensuring that the outcome of the discussion is based on

the consensus of the participants, rather than the external influence of institutions of power

(Dahlberg, 2004; Johnson, 1991).

Sincerity for deliberation. In order to best serve the common good, the outcome of

deliberation (the best argument) must only be a product of reason and logic (Johnson, 1991). As

a result, coercion or deception cannot be tolerated (Cohen, 1997; Dryzek, 2000; Dahlberg, 2004;

Misnikov, 2010). If participants knowingly put forth false claims or seek to deceive others,

deliberation will almost certainly fail to produce outcomes that serve the common good (Cohen,

1997; Dahlberg, 2004). To safeguard the integrity of the process and the validity of its outcomes,

deliberation includes a requirement for sincerity, whereby participants are expected to act

truthfully and without deception (Dahlberg, 2004; Dryzek, 1990; Graham & Witschge, 2003).

Freedom, equality and sincerity for everyday political talk. When applied to everyday

political talk, none of the definitions described above is altered. What *does* change is the

manner in which they are identified in everyday political talk. In everyday political talk, freedom,

equality and sincerity (and, to some extent, civility, as discussed above) will be best identified

and understood from the perspective of the participants.

Why conceptualize freedom, equality and sincerity in this way and not the other

features of everyday political talk? Freedom, equality and sincerity are both important

requirements for everyday political talk, as they are for deliberation. However, for both

communicative forms, these features are not as readily apparent as others. In online contexts,

the elements of both deliberation and everyday political talk (reciprocity, difference of opinion,

a focus on matters of public concern, etc.) can be readily observed in the text of the

conversation. Concrete evidence of sincerity, freedom and equality, however, is more difficult to

recognize in the conversation text alone.

In deliberation, freedom, equality and sincerity are expected to be designed and

adopted ahead of time, through the structure of the forum and procedural rules (Burkhalter, et

al., 2002; Mendelberg & Oleske, 2000; Stromer-Galley, 2007). Thus, part of the way research

into online deliberation can determine their presence is by examining the formalities imposed

prior to the start of the process (e.g., Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Stromer-Galley, 2007). However,

since everyday political talk manifests spontaneously, and organically, at the behest of

conversation participants, relying on the forum structure or formal rules for evidence of

freedom, equality or sincerity becomes problematic. This is because forum structure is only an

indication of the *potential* for freedom, equality and sincerity in the conversation, rather than a

guarantee.

Instead of formal rules, casual social interaction (and thus everyday political talk) is

loosely governed by social norms. In theory, social norms in everyday political talk can be

considered akin to the formal rules implemented in deliberation. However, social norms differ in

very important ways that make them somewhat unreliable indicators for the presence of

freedom, equality and sincerity in everyday political talk. First of all, social norms vary according to culture and context, and they are continuously evolving (Uski & Lampinen, 2016), especially in a context that attracts and inspires the spontaneous participation of diverse individuals, such as Facebook. In addition, participants engaging in everyday political talk do not formally agree to abide by the same rules prior to the encounter. Instead, social norms are enforced with the threat of isolation, and the power of this threat is directly correlated to the extent an individual wishes to be accepted by the group. If trolls, or internet users who seek to "cause disruption for their own amusement" (Binns, 2012, p. 548), are any indication, however, not everyone feels driven to achieve such social acceptance, especially in internet environments (Binns, 2012). Finally (and most importantly), as a set of rules, social norms are largely unwritten. Social norms are unofficial guidelines, typically learned in tandem with practice, through trial and error and observation (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; Uski & Lampinen, 2016). Thus, when it comes to social norms, there is always uncertainty as to whether participants will abide by the same norms, and objectively, there can only be speculation as to why they wouldn't (e.g., they may be ignorant of norms, choose to disobey them, or were socialized with a different set altogether).

Essentially, then, as criteria for everyday political talk, freedom, equality and sincerity are not objective rules that can be observed independently of the interaction. Rather, they are a set of expectations that exist, consciously or unconsciously, in the minds of participants as they engage in the conversation. Research has suggested that the extent to which participants predict an encounter will fulfill their expectations will impact their actions and behaviors within the interaction. Noelle-Neumann (1974) famously argued that, driven by a fear of social isolation, most people will first ascertain "the distribution of opinions" in a conversation before deciding to contribute their own, and are less likely to speak up if they find their opinion to be in the minority (p. 44). In addition, subsequent research has also found that people's perceptions

of the conversational environment, the situation, and other participants will impact their

likelihood of speaking up (e.g., Kwon, Moon, & Stefanone, 2015; Semaan et al., 2014; Velasquez,

2012; Wyatt, Katz & Kim, 2000), as well as what they say (e.g., Halpern & Gibbs, 2013;

Hmielowski et al., 2014; Mendelberg & Oleske, 2000; Rösner & Krämer, 2016).

In sum, while a forum can be constructed with intent to maximize freedom, equality and

sincerity for everyday political talk, and social norms can serve as an expectation for these

features, it is ultimately the internal perceptions and intentions of the participants that most

strongly affect their actions, behaviors, and willingness to participate. There are no rules

developed and adopted ahead of time, nor any formally structured contexts that can formally

institute freedom, equality or sincerity in everyday political talk. Rather, their presence is a

product of an internal determination: the extent to which participants in such conversations

perceive the context to be free and equal, and other participants to be sincere, will determine

the extent to which they are willing to express themselves fully.

Both deliberation and everyday political talk are forms of communicative action.

However, holding deliberation and everyday political talk to the same exact set of standards

excludes many instances of the latter from consideration while simultaneously dooming those

instances that *are* evaluated to inadequacy. Instead, this chapter has attempted to develop a

more appropriate set of identifying characteristics derived from a reformatting of the standards

for deliberation that acknowledges the nonpurposive and organic nature of everyday political

talk. The next chapter will develop the research questions guiding this research.

CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS

The previous pages have justified the consideration of the emergence of the public

sphere in contexts with minimal political anchors, including the specific context under

consideration for this project – everyday political talk in the comments sections of public

Facebook pages not devoted to politics – and has also laid out the unique characteristics that

will allow the identification of everyday political talk. This chapter will use the arguments

developed thus far to establish the research questions for this project and will then describe the

methods used to answer these questions.

Argument Summary

A public sphere dependent on communicative action (PSCA) expands the realm of

possible contexts out of which the public sphere can emerge. The majority of research into the

online public sphere focuses on contexts that exhibit at least one political anchor in at least one

of Dahlgren's (2005) three dimensions. This ignores the personalized and autonomous manner

in which most people approach political conversation (the actualized pathway to political

conversation), and has the effect of limiting the diversity of both the conversation and the

participants being studied. As a result, research into the online public sphere constrained by

political anchors often yields results that that may be similarly unrepresentative of the American

public.

Acceptance of a broader, organically formed public sphere, and the individual routes by

which people come to participate, requires future research to refocus on the minimally

anchored online PSCA. When combined with data gleaned from anchored research, exploration

of the minimally anchored online PSCA contributes to a more comprehensive picture of the

broader online public sphere. Thus, the particular communicative phenomenon at the heart of

this research project is located in the minimally anchored context derived from the three

dimensions of the public sphere: everyday political talk (interactional) sparked by non-political content (representational) posted by public pages on Facebook (structural).

Interactional Dimension: Everyday Political Talk

Everyday political talk stands apart from deliberation, which is the standard interactional political anchor used in research into the online public sphere. Unlike deliberation, which must be organized in advance, everyday political talk spontaneously emerges in the process of discussing other topics, providing a solid foundation for inadvertent political encounters. Because everyday political talk is both related to, but far less structured than, deliberation, a new set of criteria for identifying the former has been derived from the features of the latter.

Representational Dimension: Media Content Without Overt Political Relevance

Media content that does not explicitly focus on news or political topics attracts a larger, more diverse group of individuals whose initial motivations for consuming this content are not typically related to political pursuits. In addition, the lack of explicit treatments of political topics in the text ensures that the topics of the subsequent conversation are determined autonomously, by the participants themselves (rather than having been explicitly prompted by the text).

Structural Dimension: Public Pages on Facebook

Finally, unlike online spaces specifically dedicated to political conversation, Facebook is a general-purpose, minimally restrictive online social space that facilitates both autonomous user activity and social interaction. Its generalized structure supports and attracts a more diverse set of individuals. In addition, the site's user-directed, egocentric organization puts the user's interests and preferences at the center of his/her experience, while its interactive tools provide the technological and social connectivity that enable controlled transition from the

private sphere into the public sphere and back again. Finally, although most user activity occurs

between a user's known network, Facebook also provides avenues for interactions with

strangers through engagement with non-political interests. Public pages provide a measure of

contextual safety that may facilitate the expression of honest political opinions, even in the face

of a majority opinion, which increases the range of difference encountered by participants.

<div align="center">**Research Questions**</div>

Exploring this specific context yields three broad research questions that relate to (1)

the conversation, (2) the people, and (3) the process.

RQ1: The Conversation

The first broad research question will assess the nature of the conversation itself in this

unique context.

RQ1: What is the nature of these conversations?

This question is deliberately broad, because it accommodates two sub-questions related to (a)

the ways in which the criteria for everyday political talk manifest in these conversations, and (b)

the influence of the broader political environment on the emergence of everyday political talk.

The manifestation of everyday political talk. We have established that, regardless of

the time and place, people engaging in everyday political talk serves to construct the PSCA.

However, we have also established that everyday political talk does not occur in predictable

patterns of time or length. Rather, it emerges spontaneously in the course of conversations

about other things. In addition, the specific context of non-political posts on followed pages on

Facebook provides a set of affordances that can impact the conversation, both for better and for

worse. Thus:

RQ1a: How do the criteria of everyday political talk manifest in these particular

conversations?

Impact of the broader political environment. The previous pages have explained, at length, the value of everyday political conversation triggered inadvertently, in the course of consuming content without any explicit political references. The argument is that the connections between non-political content and political ideas would be made in the minds of the participants rather than explicitly prompted by the content. However, during a national election, the balance of media attention (and to some degree, due to agenda setting effects, the attention of the public as well) is shifted disproportionately to formal politics. This is especially the case during an election whose primary candidates inspired intense emotional responses in so many members of the electorate, as did the 2016 presidential election. As a result of the prominence of the election, it's possible that people may be more inclined to interpret non-political content from a political perspective than they would in a time of relative political quietude. Because this project was conceived in the lead up to the 2016 presidential election, a race that was particularly contentious, shifts in the broader political environment prompts another question:

> *RQ1b: To what extent might the broader political environment – and specifically whether a national election is occurring or not – play a role in the manifestation of everyday political talk?*

RQ2: The People

As explained previously, the challenge of politically anchored contexts is that their obvious political relevance can attract political junkies, whose interest in politics is far more intense than the average American, while simultaneously repelling those with less intense political interest. As a result, such spaces tend to produce conversations which disproportionately reflect the strong partisanship and intense political interest of their participants. Yet because political junkies only constitute a minority of the American population,

research that relies on such anchored contexts can mistakenly generalize the intensity and partisanship which characterizes the conversations of political junkies to Americans as a whole.

On the other hand, in a minimally anchored context, such as the one selected here, the primary focus of the content will not explicitly be on politics. Absent any overt political relevance, such spaces should attract people on the basis of non-political interests, which increases the likelihood that conversation participants will be more representative of the diversity of the American public. In addition, when conversations in these spaces turn to the political, it happens unexpectedly, which can inadvertently expose otherwise less politically interested individuals to political ideas, regardless of whether they choose to participate. Therefore, the next broad research question focuses on the people who engage with these spaces, mainly in terms of their attraction to and interest in these pages and the subsequent conversations that spawn there:

RQ2: Who is attracted to these pages and these conversations, and why?

RQ3: The Process

Finally, a minimally anchored context also means that a conversation that turns to politics does so at the behest of its participants, rather than having been directed there by external forces. Understanding the process by which this occurs is the focus of the third research question. However, as we have recognized that much of this process occurs in the mind of the participants, the third question must be oriented to *their* perspective:

RQ3: What is the experience like for participants?

This question is broadly worded, as it encompasses a host of sub-questions aimed at deciphering an experience whose mechanisms are largely internal. In general, the sub-questions can be organized as follows:

RQ3a: What triggers participants to comment?

A person's initial pursuit of the content posted may have had nothing to do with politics, yet they have been drawn into a public-spirited conversation. What makes them abandon their original plan and either start or join into the discussion?

RQ3b: Once engaged, what is their objective? What do they hope to gain from their participation?

Having been drawn into the conversation, what do participants hope to gain from commenting? Are they looking to understand the positions of others (achieving mutual understanding)? Are they trying to convince others, or change their minds? Do they wish to express themselves politically? And to what extent do they feel they are successful in their objectives?

RQ3c: How do participants perceive this context?

This third sub-question aims to get a sense of the individual's assessment of the forum, in an effort to more fully understand their experience. There are four basic areas that this question addresses: (a) Engagement, (b) Contextual Safety, (c) Eye of the Beholder Characteristics, and (d) Encounters with Difference.

Engagement. The asynchronous, enduring, text-based qualities of an online environment such as Facebook alter the dynamics of any conversation, but especially one about politics. As already discussed, most communication on Facebook is missing the standard social cues that characterize in-person conversation. In addition, communication on Facebook is asynchronous, which facilitates far more control for the individual over their participation in the conversation. Overall, then, these affordances offer a more comfortable, lower-risk experience for the user. An additional factor is the far more limited attention span that we have developed, facilitated by the internet and social media. This category, therefore, focuses on the extent of participants' engagement in the conversation in light of the technological affordances and low-

risk experience offered by the environment. After moving on to a different task, how often, and under what conditions, will users return and further contribute to the conversation?

Contextual safety. I have argued that political conversations with strangers on Facebook through comments on public page posts should encourage people to honestly express their opinions about politics, more so than in spaces linked to their personal network. The extent to which participants perceive this context to be safer for honest opinion expression must be assessed by determining their perception of the level of risk for social consequences.

Eye of the beholder characteristics. I have also argued that sincerity, freedom, equality, and to some degree civility, are all requirements for both deliberation and everyday political talk, yet they are qualities that reside in the mind of the individual. Thus, this question should determine the extent to which people aim to be sincere in their own comments, and the extent to which they perceive others to be sincere. It should also assess the extent to which participants view such conversations to be free and equal.

Encounters with difference. Finally, the perception of freedom and equality in the forum further relates to negative encounters with difference. As has been discussed earlier, the casual, spontaneous qualities of everyday political talk and the absence of social cues in text-based online spaces may increase the possibility for instances of impoliteness at best, and trolling at worst. Although user identifiability (as well as community standards and consequences) on Facebook help to mitigate these behaviors to some extent, they do not completely eliminate them. This raises questions of how participants react to encountering trolls, or expressions of impoliteness, or simply opinions that make them feel angry. Do they engage with them rationally, engage with them emotionally, or completely ignore them? Also, how do such encounters affect their overall judgments of the space, and future likelihood of participating?

This leads to the final sub-question of RQ3:

RQ3d: How do participants perceive their behavior? Do they believe it to be a political

act?

Like so much previous research, part of this project aims to determine whether these

conversations may constitute the PSCA, assessing the extent to which they meet the

requirements of everyday political talk by evaluating their resemblance to standard sets of

characteristics. However, we must recognize that this strategy relies on comparing the

conversation to a preexisting set of features, which is, above all, an *external* approach. As

discussed previously, the most accurate assessment of meaning is not imposed from the

outside, but rather originates from within. In order to produce the most comprehensive and

complete results, then, we must evaluate these conversations from both sides: both external

observations, as well as the internal interpretations of participants. Thus, this sub-question

addresses participants' perceptions of their own actions. Do they see their posts as a form of

political acts, or are they just speaking their mind?

The Methods

To answer these questions, I performed a case study of four specific Facebook pages,

utilizing a two-pronged qualitative approach that incorporated both qualitative content analysis

and in-depth interviews[15]. To address RQ1, I explored the conversations with everyday political

talk that emerged in the comments sections of four specific pages on Facebook (George Takei,

Larry the Cable Guy, Diply, and Humans of New York). Using qualitative content analysis, these

conversations were identified and evaluated to assess the character of the everyday political

talk that manifested in these unique spaces. In addition, the analysis considered the potential

impact of the 2016 presidential election on the emergence of everyday political talk. To address

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[15] This approach was approved for an exemption by the Rutgers University Institutional Review Board in July 2017.

RQ2 and RQ3, in-depth interviews were conducted with Facebook users who follow and may have commented on posts published on any of the four pages. For RQ2, interview questions assessed what attracted these users to the pages they follow and to the conversations in which they chose to participate. For RQ3, interviews further probed the overall experience of participating in these comment-based conversations, including what triggered users to comment, what their objectives were, and how they perceived both the context and their own behavior.

This section describes the content analysis and interview methods separately. First, the decision to focus on the pages of George Takei, HONY, Larry the Cable Guy and Diply will be explained. Then, for each method, the process will be defined, accompanied by the rationale for using it for this project. Next, the sampling processes and procedures will be described.

The Four Pages

As of August 2016, Facebook hosts over 74 million pages (Statistic Brain Research Institute, 2016) run by "organizations, businesses, and celebrities and brands" (Facebook, 2016a). As this set of possibilities is so huge as to make qualitative evaluation virtually impossible, selecting only a small number of pages for a case study makes sense. This project focused on the comments yielded by posts from four specific Facebook pages. In selecting these pages, two criteria were used. First, the pages chosen needed to have a high number of followers, at least 5 million. A large number of followers helps to maximize the possibility of encountering difference, since the larger the network, the greater the possibility of encountering difference (Brundidge, 2010; Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011; Stromer-Galley, 2002). In addition, to avoid the structural and representational political anchors, and the more homogeneous population of political junkies that tends to be attracted by them, the pages selected for this study were not specifically devoted to politics or political topics. Although there

are arguably many pages on Facebook that could meet these criteria, the four I chose to focus on were George Takei, Humans of New York, Diply and Larry the Cable Guy. All four pages have a high number of followers, and, although some of them may occasionally feature explicitly political content, none of them can be considered expressly political spaces.

George Takei (GT). George Takei's fame originated with his role as Hikaru Sulu on the 1966-1969 TV show, *Star Trek*, as well as in the subsequent films, series and video games related to the franchise. Until 2011, his celebrity status was mainly limited to his association with the *Star Trek* franchise, as was his fan base. Then he joined Facebook (Cabalona, 2012). Takei's Facebook page soon became "a central gathering spot—a 'node' if you will—for sharing some of the internet's funniest memes" (Takei, 2012, p. 25). Although his fan base on Facebook was initially limited to his *Star Trek* fans, it quickly grew into the millions (close to 10 million as of December 2019) as people of all different backgrounds and interests converged on his page (Takei, 2012).

Takei has acknowledged that he views his page on Facebook and his other social media spaces as platforms to talk about the issues that are particularly important to him (the two most important being Japanese internment camps during WWII, which is also the subject of his show *Allegiance* (which ran on Broadway from 2015 to 2016), and LGBTQ rights). However, he insightfully recognizes that it's not his causes that draw fans to his content. "I know," he admits, "that I can't talk about those things all the time. Even my staunchest supporters would start to tune me out. 'There goes Uncle George again, always spouting off about equality'" (Takei, 2013, p. 8). As a result, the majority of the posts he makes on his page are designed to attract and engage his fans through humor and entertainment, with the expectation that, by giving them what they wanted most of the time, he could speak on the issues that mattered to him some of the time (Takei, 2013).

Humans of New York (HONY). The page for Humans of New York (HONY) features the

work of photographer Brandon Stanton. Stanton's objective is "to photograph 10,000 New

Yorkers on the street and create an exhaustive catalogue of the city's inhabitants" (Humans of

New York, n.d.). Since 2010, his project has grown to encompass the stories of individuals from

other regions of the United States, as well as several other countries, told via photographs as

well as video[16]. But the HONY page on Facebook primarily remains focused on the people

Stanton encounters on the streets of New York City and their personal stories. While these

stories are sometimes related to larger political issues, they nearly always remain framed from

the individual perspective. Because HONY has such widespread popularity, with close to 17

million followers (as of December 2019), participants in the conversations that form beneath the

posts on Humans of New York's Page would also feature diversity, and, importantly, would not

be limited to residents of New York City.

Diply. Diply is an entertainment website devoted to creating "cheeky, useful and

informative content for millennials" (http://diply.com). It boasts accounts across many different

social media platforms, and several pages on Facebook. Some of these pages are focused on

specific types of content, such as Diply Tech (content about technology) and Diply Trending

(content that is trending online). However, its flagship Facebook page is just Diply, which

features a wider variety of content than its other more specialized pages. In fact, its range of

content, which includes "life hacks…DIYS, breathtaking photography, adorable animals, celebrity

news, food, trending, parenting, and more" (Diply, 2019), is far more diverse than the other

three pages selected for this project, and the least political. These qualities give the page the

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[16] In August 2017, Stanton added video posts to his project's repertoire. The videos follow the same structure as his photographs, but uses video of his subjects speaking in their own voice rather than photographs of them including text-based quotes from their interview. The videos were posted in the same space as HONY's regular photo posts, from August 2017 through the beginning of January 2018, and included the thirteen episodes of *Humans of New York: The Series* (August 2017 – November 2017).

potential to attract a truly expansive audience. With just under 8 million followers (as of

December 2019), Diply is comparable to the other three pages, making it a good choice for this

project.

Larry the Cable Guy (LTCG). Although Diply's content doesn't have a distinct political

bent (if it focuses on politics at all), both HONY's and George Takei's (GT) pages arguably lean

more to the left. In an attempt to make this analysis more inclusive, I sought out a non-political

page that would appeal more to the right side of the political spectrum. This was not an easy

task. A page devoted to sharing non-political entertainment or lifestyle content that primarily

appeals to conservatives was difficult, if not impossible to find, as the requirement that the

content appeal to conservatives directly conflicted with the requirement that the page's content

be "non-political." That is, a page sharing general content wouldn't necessarily appeal more to

one side of the political spectrum over the other, but a page sharing content clearly meant to

appeal to a politically right-leaning audience would likely be sharing obviously political content.

Fan pages for celebrities provided little help as well, since most right-leaning entertainers and

celebrities (indeed, most celebrities in general) used their Facebook pages primarily for self-

promotion rather than sharing content with fans, as George Takei does on his page. An

additional obstacle was that very few of these pages had follower numbers even close to those

of the other three pages.

Finally, I settled on Larry the Cable Guy's (LTCG) page, which had follower numbers

(nearly 5 million as of December 2019) at least approaching the other three pages' numbers.

Larry the Cable Guy (whose real name is Dan Whitney) is an American comedic personality

specializing in blue-collar comedy, which "relies on jokes and gags to which Everyman can relate,

bits about the shared struggle of manual laborers and minimum-wage workers alike" (Bromley,

2018). Although Larry the Cable Guy's comedy generally avoids explicitly political topics

(Morrison, 2015), his appeal to politically right-leaning Americans in particular is clear (Boone &

Ribecca, 2017). More importantly, while LTCG's Facebook page does feature some self-

promotion, it primarily shares funny pictures and occasionally links to entertaining stories. All

these reasons made LTCG the best choice for the fourth and final page.

Methods Overview

To address RQ1, which seeks to understand how everyday political talk manifests in

these spaces, I conducted a qualitative content analysis of the political conversations that

emerged in the comments sections of all four pages on Facebook. Content analysis is a

systematic method of textual evaluation. The standard mode of content analysis is its

quantitative form, in which "[r]esearchers establish a set of categories and then count the

number of instances that fall into each category" (Silverman, 2006, p. 159). As a result, this type

of analysis typically yields numerical data, similar to that which would ordinarily be produced by

standard quantitative research and can therefore be classified as quantitative content analysis

(Parker, Saundage, & Lee, 2011).

Quantitative content analysis has been commonly used to explore political conversation

in online communicative spaces (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Himelboim, 2011; Jackson, Scullion, &

Molesworth, 2013; Manosevitch & Walker, 2009; Munson & Resnick, 2011; Strandberg & Berg,

2013). However, much of this research is aimed at addressing questions such as (a) is everyday

political talk present in these spaces (e.g., Graham, 2010b; Manosevitch & Walker, 2009;

Munson & Resnik, 2011), (b) how much political talk is present (e.g., Jackson et al., 2013;

Munson & Resnik, 2011), and (c) what is the quality of the everyday political talk present here;

meaning, how similar is the everyday political talk exhibited here to deliberation (Graham, 2008,

2010a; Manosevitch & Walker, 2009; Strandberg & Berg, 2013)? These are all questions that can

be satisfied with binary and/or numerical results and can be best answered through the

deductive coding schemes and counting procedures inherent in quantitative content analysis.

However, RQ1 does not aim to determine *whether* or *how much* everyday political talk

is present in the comments on these Facebook pages. Sufficient evidence has already been

provided by other research that indicates that everyday political talk materializes in the course

of casual conversations about other things (Eliasoph, 1998; Klofstad, 2011), in response to non-

political content (Baum, 2002; Baum & Jamison, 2006; Delli Carpini, 2012; Jones, 2010; Kliger-

Vilenchik, 2015; Moy et al., 2005; van Zoonen, 2005), in non-political online spaces (Graham,

2012; Graham & Harju, 2011; Munson & Resnik, 2011; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009), and on

Facebook (Kushin & Kitchener, 2009).

Janssen & Kies (2005) argue that the deductive procedures of quantitative content

analysis are not well suited to questions that are concerned with the quality and nature of

online political conversations. Since the objective of *this* research question was to qualitatively

explore *how* everyday political talk manifests here, the precise coding and counting inherent in

quantitative content analysis was an inappropriate method for this project. Instead, this study

used qualitative content analysis, which relies on inductive categorization developed *during* the

analysis, as opposed to prior. The method calls for a more inductive and open-ended definition

of "themes, patterns, and categories which emerge from the content" (Parker et al., 2011, p. 3),

an approach which offered a better fit for this project.

To answer RQ2 and RQ3, both of which focus on the individuals engaged in these spaces

and conversations, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews. RQ2 asks who these

participants are, and particularly seeks to identify the sources of their attraction to these spaces

and conversations. RQ3 is focused on understanding the experience of participating in these

conversations. These questions seek to uncover information that mainly exists in the minds of

the individuals and are therefore not readily accessible through external observation or analysis of asynchronous online conversations. In addition, these questions are addressing attitudes, feelings, and beliefs that are not only complex, but may vary based on the individual. In-depth, semi-structured interviews should provide the most comprehensive answers, as they are particularly useful for getting at the inner perspectives and meanings that develop inside a person's head (Krathwohl, 1998).

Qualitative Content Analysis

Selection of posts. One of the sub-questions of RQ1 asks whether the extant political environment concurrent with the posts might play a role in the manifestation of everyday political talk in their subsequent comments. The media attention to and contentiousness of the 2016 presidential election might have predisposed people to view content through a political lens, more so than they might have after things had quieted down. Thus, two time periods of three non-consecutive weeks each were selected, one during the election ("Fall 2016") and one a year later ("Fall 2017"). In Fall 2016, Week 1 was September 18-24, Week 2 was October 9-15, and Week 3 was October 30-November 5[17], while in Fall 2017, Week 1 was October 22-28, Week 2 was November 13-19, and Week 3 was December 3-9[18]. All the posts from each page that were evaluated were posted during these six weeks.

In order to determine how to sample from these posts, I performed a full cataloguing of all posts on all pages from both three-week periods. Using a post scraping software called Bino Posts Scraper (http://postsscraper.com), I was able to obtain links to the original posts from

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[17] The 2016 election took place on November 8th.

[18] The dates from each time period do not precisely overlap due to an unexpected change from the original plan. Initially, the second time period was supposed to be only a few months after the election, with the expectation that the prominence of politics would have died down by then. However, the outcome of the election kept politics at the forefront of people's minds for much longer than in the past, so the second time period was pushed back to a year later. This decision was made well into October 2017, but also coincided with a malfunctioning of the scraping software that prevented me from accessing posts too far in the past. The second time period was therefore offset from the start date of the first.

each of the four pages from the specified time periods. Using these links, I was able to view each

original post, including its content and its comments. Using a spreadsheet, I catalogued 636

posts from Fall 2016[19] and 853 posts from Fall 2017[20], for a total of 1,489 posts. For each post, I

recorded a variety of information, including the date and time it was posted, a description of its

content, the number of comments, likes and reactions it inspired, and its URL. In addition, I

categorized each post as one of three types of content: (a) Explicitly Political, (b) Non-Political,

and (c) Ambiguous.

Explicitly political posts featured topics that were presented as matters of public

concern, and as such, could be considered to exhibit external political anchors. The most

obvious way these types of posts could be identified was by looking at the content of the post

itself. The posts that are most clearly in the Explicitly Political category feature content referring

to the words or actions of political figures, content that explicitly addressed issues related to

formal politics or issues that were already heavily politicized, and content that addressed topics

from a public perspective (as opposed to an individualized perspective). These types of posts

constituted topical political anchors likely to direct any subsequent conversation. In addition,

comments added by the page's author in the initial post could have also marked a post as

Explicitly Political. Since they precede any reactions by other users, these initial thoughts could

therefore function as conversational prompts. Whether the author making the post viewed the

content to be a matter of public concern could be revealed in these initial comments. When

these introductory comments reveal public-minded objectives or judgments, they can set the

tone for any ensuing discussion, and therefore they too must count as topical political anchors.

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[19] 366 from GT, 201 from Diply, 54 from LTCG and 15 from HONY.
[20] 447 from GT, 319 from Diply, 55 from LTCG and 32 from HONY.

As posts that fell into the Explicitly Political category contained an external political anchor and were thus outside of the scope of the present study, they were excluded from the analysis. The remaining posts fell into either the Non-Political or Ambiguous categories. Non-Political posts were those posts that had absolutely nothing to do with politics and had no external political anchor. Some examples of these were a link on GT to an article about the Smithsonian's Kickstarter campaign to preserve the ruby slippers from the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz* (October 31, 2016)[21], a video on Diply about a potential cure for hangovers (October 26, 2017)[22], a picture on LTCG of a person slicing through a pumpkin balanced on another person's head using a sword (November 13, 2017)[23], and a post on HONY that featured a couple both recounting the story of their romance (October 13, 2016) [24].

The final category of posts is the Ambiguous posts. Posts in this category did not explicitly refer to political issues, but the connection could have easily been made. These posts could have featured a story about a public issue, but presented from an individual perspective, such as an article about a police department that chose to train rescued pit bulls to be their police dogs (Diply, November 16, 2017)[25]. They could also have been about a topic that naturally lent itself to public consideration, yet the post did not explicitly address it, such as a video about Uber's investment into driverless cars (GT, November 1, 2016)[26]. Regardless of whether this content was presented from either an individualized or fact-driven perspective, both had the potential to tip into the public realm. The key in identifying Ambiguous posts was that the power to tip the balance rested in the hands of those users commenting on the post. The content

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[21] https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/posts/1738576526171793?match=Z2VvcmdlIHRha2VpLHNtaXRoc29uaWFu
[22] https://www.facebook.com/diply/videos/10155301827531028/

[23] https://www.facebook.com/LarryTheCableGuy/posts/10155922062823464
[24] https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735.4429.102099916530784/1401602266580536/?type=3.
[25] https://www.facebook.com/diply/posts/1635257019885987
[26] https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/videos/1143967165692058/

firmly grounded itself in the individualized or factual perspective, which allowed for observation

of the transition that could have occurred in the conversation itself. The resulting discussion

could have gone either way: remaining in the individual realm or transitioning to the public.

Analysis of comments. Once the posts had been catalogued and categorized, the

comments sections of all Non-Political and Ambiguous posts were examined for instances of

everyday political talk. Much of the previous research into political comments on Facebook has

mainly focused on content that featured external political anchors, such as comments on posts

made on a political candidate or institution's page or individual profile (e.g., Halpern & Gibbs,

2013; Robertson et al., 2010; Ross et al., 2015; Sweetser & Weaver Lariscy, 2008), or a political

group or page on Facebook (e.g., Harlow, 2012; Mascaro & Goggins, 2011; Mascaro, Novak, &

Goggins, 2012). External structural or representational political anchors serve to direct the

conversation, and as such, in these situations, one can be fairly confident that the majority of

the comments would be about a specific political issue related to the relevant political anchor.

However, in contexts without external political anchors, such as the ones explored here,

everyday political talk is not guaranteed, nor is it necessarily easy to discover. Because everyday

political talk is typically woven into conversation about other things (Eliasoph, 1998; Klofstad,

2011; Papacharissi, 2010; Walsh, 2004; Wyatt, Katz & Kim, 2000), comments had to be sifted to

identify instances when it emerged. As most of these posts yielded comments numbering into

the hundreds or even thousands, sifting through them in search of everyday political talk would

have been a challenge aptly described by Graham (2008) as similar to finding a needle in a

haystack.

Graham's (2008) solution to the problem was built into his two-stage approach for the

analysis of political conversation in nonpolitical online spaces. In the first stage, all posts in a

predetermined set of threads were reviewed to determine initially if they contained political

conversation. Graham used only two simple criteria for this determination: (1) that a post

exhibited public-mindedness (transforming "I" to "we"), and (2) that there was evidence that

this post has "stimulate(d) reflection and a response by at least one other participant" (p. 22),

or, in other words, reciprocity. Those posts that were deemed to be indicative of political

conversation advanced to the next stage, in which they were analyzed in the context of the

normative conditions of deliberation. This project adapted Graham's two-step process. The first

step reviewed the comments in order to identify relevant sets of comments that can be

considered political conversation based on Graham's criteria of public-mindedness and

reciprocity. Only those comment groups that met these two criteria advanced to the second

step of analysis, which is similar to Graham's second stage, but with one key difference: whereas

Graham's (2008) second stage evaluated online conversations against deliberation, the

conversations assessed here used the features of everyday political talk.

Step one: selecting comments. Graham's (2008) first stage identified political

conversation by applying only the two simple criteria of reciprocity and public-mindedness to

comments in a nonpolitical internet forum dedicated to a specific television show and hosted by

a local television channel's website in 2005. His application of these criteria involved evaluating

all the threads created over the course of an entire year. However, given that here, each post in

the current sample had anywhere from a few hundred to several thousand individual

comments, this made an evaluation of each comment, as Graham (2008) did, an impracticality.

For example, during the Fall 2016 period, HONY's 15 posts alone yielded close to 80,000

comments. Therefore, the field had to be narrowed further before attempting to execute the

first step. This was accomplished by making use of additional features available on Facebook

today, including top comments filtering and uniform display sets.

Facebook provides tools for users to filter the comments on any given post. There are currently three options for filtering comments: Most Relevant, Newest, and All Comments. Most Relevant is the default setting for viewing comments on all four pages, and prioritizes the comments the site's algorithms deem relevant to the individual user. Relevance is determined by a number of factors, but ultimately, the comments users are most likely to see first will be ones coming from their own friends, ones that come from verified pages and profiles (to minimize the prominence of spam comments), and comments that have earned the most likes and replies (Facebook, 2019a). Therefore, while different users wouldn't necessarily see the exact same comments first, they would all be likely to see the ones that had attracted the most engagement from other users. As a result, focusing on the first comments displayed for each post, rather than scrolling through the comments chronologically, ensured that the analysis addressed the comments that most users were likely to encounter, and thus the comments to which they were most likely to respond. While this plan of action probably did not yield every possible instance of everyday political talk, it should have provided access to the most likely sites.

An additionally relevant feature is the fact that Facebook displayed comments on all page posts in the same manner. The initial post was displayed with the first two comments visible, with an option for the user to "view more comments." From there, every subsequent decision by the user to view more comments resulted in the addition of a set of the next fifty comments. Replies to any given comment within the set were not part of this count, and were hidden when comment sets were first revealed. However, the layout of comments and replies was structured like a traditional internet forum thread: replies were grouped together with their respective comments. Although all replies were initially hidden, they were easily accessible to users via a link directly beneath each comment.

Research has shown that users have little patience for extended versions of content. For example, only 10% of Google users click past the first page of search results (Chitika, 2013). In addition, when it comes to attention to content across the web, as content extends further down a given webpage, fewer people are paying attention (Schwartz, 2013). Likewise, it was reasonable to assume that the same would be true for comments on Facebook[27]: the further down a comment was ranked, the less likely it was most people would come across it. Therefore, it made sense to limit comment analysis to the first 102 comments in any given page post. This number included the first two comments displayed beneath a given post, as well as the next two consecutive sets of fifty comments displayed. The decision to evaluate two sets of comments rather than one was made to accommodate the sporadic nature of everyday political talk. Together, these two features were used to further reduce the field of viable comments to a number that made evaluation manageable while still maximizing the likelihood of finding the needles of everyday political talk hidden in the haystack of comments.

The comments (and their respective replies) in this reduced field were evaluated in light of Graham's first stage criteria of public-mindedness and reciprocity in order to identify instances of political conversation for further analysis. First, public-mindedness was identified when "a participant [made] a connection from a particular experience, interest, issue, or topic in general to society" (Graham, 2008, p. 22). Second, reciprocity was identified when comments addressed the arguments and ideas of others, either directly or indirectly (Graham & Witschge, 2003), so that comments would be evaluated in sets that demonstrated the back-and-forth of conversation. Lone comments that exhibited public-mindedness, but which earned no

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[27] Indeed, since it is in Facebook's corporate interest to keep users engaged with the site as long as possible, this is likely the reason Facebook first instituted the "Most Relevant" feature in the first place: to keep users engaged by showing them the content that is most likely to spark their active interest.

responses, did not advance to the next stage of analysis. The results of the cataloguing and comment selection processes are described in more detail in Chapter 6.

Step two: qualitative content analysis of comments. In accordance with Graham's (2008) procedure, instances of political conversation identified in these comments during Step One moved on to Step Two of the analysis, where they would be assessed according to the features of everyday political talk. However, the second stage of Graham's (2008) original analysis was characteristic of quantitative content analysis. As explained above, the more flexible strategies of qualitative content analysis were more appropriate for this project. Thus, the broadly described features of everyday political talk (discussed in detail at the end of this chapter) were used as a loose framework to help focus a more inductive analysis.

Semi-Structured Interviews

In addition to a qualitative content analysis of the comments on these four pages, semi-structured interviews were conducted. While the content analysis explored the conversations themselves, the interviews aimed to develop a more thorough understanding of the experiences of people who participated in these conversations, including their motivations, behaviors, and interests.

Interviews were limited to Facebook users who followed at least one of the four public pages (George Takei, HONY, Larry the Cable Guy and Diply) who have at least observed, if not participated in, publicly-minded conversations taking place in the comments sections below non-political posts on any of the pages. Interview subjects included observers of as well as participants in the discussions on the four public pages, given that online everyday political talk has been argued to have benefits even for those who do not actively participate (e.g., Baum, 2002; Galarza Molina, 2017; Stromer-Galley & Wichowski, 2011). Indeed, individuals who tend to observe rather than participate in conversations can still share their perceptions and

interpretations of the nature of the forum, the content of the posts and the subsequent discussion. In addition, they can offer insight into why they choose *not* to participate in the conversation. Therefore, interviewees were identified as "Contributors" or "Observers," although it is likely that these behaviors are not mutually exclusive.

Recruitment survey and sampling. An online survey was used to recruit Facebook users to participate in the in-depth interviews. The primary role of the online survey was as a transactional activity. In-depth interviews require a significant investment of time and effort on the part of the subject, and as we have already seen, the online environment has altered our behavior so that the longer and more involved the activity appears from the outset, the less willing people will be to commit to it (Chitika, 2013; Schwartz, 2013). With its lower cost of engagement, the survey was intended to bridge the commitment gap in order to maximize the pool of potential interviewees. The expectation was that by inviting users to complete a simpler, less time-consuming survey first, and then inviting those subjects to be interviewed would recruit more subjects than only inviting them to be interviewed. An additional benefit of using a survey for the project is that it would streamline the collection of basic information, such as demographics and content interests, from interview subjects, thereby saving time during the actual interview.

I had initially hoped to recruit participants directly via the four public pages. To this end, I reached out to the authors of all four pages using private communication channels (both direct messages on Facebook and through their respective websites) to ask if they would post a call for participants on their pages. I briefly explained the project and my request, provided a link to the project's university web page and both my contact information and the contact information of my committee chair to answer any questions they might have. Unfortunately, I never heard back from LTCG, GT, or HONY, and Diply declined to help without specifying a reason.

Thus, as an alternative strategy, I recruited survey participants via a modified snowball sampling method. Snowball sampling utilizes the pathways of extant social networks to connect the researcher to more potential subjects of a given population (Baltar & Brunet, 2012). If the request is shared by a friend or acquaintance, it is less likely to be viewed with the suspicion with which one treats the same request coming from a stranger. Snowball sampling is a perfect strategy for recruiting subjects in situations where "a high degree of trust is required to initiate contact" (Baltar & Brunet, 2012, p. 60), such as contacting strangers on Facebook.[28] Essentially, this method expected to trade on existing levels of trust between Facebook users and their network of friends.

Traditional snowball sampling relies on study participants referring the researcher to other potential subjects in their own personal network. However, the phenomenon in question here is a particularly narrow one. It emerges in a very specific context not typically associated with political conversation, and in particular, one that is especially distant from one's own personal network and therefore more likely to be filled with strangers rather than known contacts. As a result, it is at least possible, if not likely, that subjects may not be able to identify potential subjects who follow one of the four public pages within their network of Facebook friends. Aside from the researcher, the one in the best position to judge whether an individual could meet the research criteria is the individual themselves. Therefore, instead of asking study participants to identify potential subjects and provide the researcher with their contact

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[28] Indeed, I also attempted to personally recruit people who had posted comments that were included in the content analysis by sending them a direct message on Facebook, but these messages went unanswered, likely because people were skeptical of a stranger contacting them on Facbeook. An additional obstacle to trust in this situation could have been the way Facebook structures its messaging application. Facebook currently holds back direct messages from people outside a user's network, and first sends the user a "connection request," which must be approved for the user to read the message (Facebook, 2019b). As connection requests are sent to a separate part of the messenger app (both on mobile devices and on Facebook's desktop site), users don't see them automatically, and may miss such message requests entirely. Thus, another reason these messages may have been ignored might have been because they were never seen in the first place.

information, I asked that study participants share the formal request with their Facebook

friends, which they could do by posting the request on their wall and/or sending it in a private

message to Facebook friends whom they knew to be followers of any of the pages. In addition, I

began by targeting people in my own personal Facebook network, posting the request on my

personal wall and asking my friends to share it. I also sent a private Facebook message to my

friends who follow any of these pages, asking them to share the request as well. However, in

order to prevent the possibility of personal relationships impacting the results, I instituted a

degree of social separation and purposefully did not interview anyone I knew personally.

It is important to note that both strategies described above relied primarily on self-

selection for recruitment, which could impact the results. However, they also both empower the

individual to decide whether to make the first move, and in doing so, resolves the challenges of

security and trust presented by unsolicited requests.

The survey went live on September 12, 2017 and remained open until September 12,

2018[29]. The basic request for participants that went out on Facebook was a brief note of several

sentences inviting users who follow any of the four pages on the site to participate in an

academic research survey for a chance to win a $25 Amazon gift card. The message ended by

inviting users to find out more and access the survey by clicking the link provided. The link sent

users to the project webpage hosted on Wix (http://wix.com), which provided more information

about the project and my professional background, as well as a link to the online survey, hosted

on Qualtrics (http://qualtrics.com).

The first questions of the survey determined subject eligibility. The survey relied on only

three eligibility criteria: respondents had to be 18 or over, live in the United States, and follow at

least one of the four pages. Subjects who did not meet all three requirements were sent to a

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[29] By this point, all interviews had been completed and there was no longer any activity on the survey link.

landing page that informed them of their ineligibility. Out of 124 survey respondents, 104 met

these requirements and were allowed to continue the rest of the survey, which asked a range of

simple questions about user demographics and background. Questions also focused on news

media consumption, social media behavior, and political interest and behaviors. They also asked

about subjects' level of engagement with any of the four pages they followed and assessed their

general interest in political and social topics, as well as their attitudes toward political

conversation.

At the end of the survey, respondents were asked whether they would like to further aid

this project, and be entered into another drawing for a $100 Amazon.com gift card, by agreeing

to a brief telephone interview with the researcher. Respondents who checked this box were

prompted to enter their email address. They were informed that by doing so, they agreed both

to be contacted by the researcher via this email address to arrange a telephone interview and to

link their email address with their completed survey[30].

Interview procedure. Participants who consented to an interview were contacted via

email to schedule the interview. Of 104 survey respondents, 55 checked the box consenting to

an interview, all of whom were contacted via the email they provided for scheduling. Only about

half of these emails received responses, and a total of 25 interviews were performed. All

interviews took place remotely (over the phone or Skype), between October 2017 and March

2018, and lasted between one and two hours, with the interview's audio recorded and later

transcribed for analysis. At the end of each interview, all subjects agreed to be contacted via

email at a later date if there were any additional or follow-up questions.

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[30] Since the survey data was to be used and analyzed in conjunction with the interviews, the email addresses of respondents who agreed to be interviewed needed to remain associated with their completed surveys. Respondents who did not wish to be interviewed but still wanted to be entered into the $25 gift card drawing were sent to a separate page to input their email address. This maintained the anonymity of their survey responses.

In order to facilitate the most comprehensive set of information, interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions. Allowing the conversation some freedom to roam, especially at the beginning, would help establish a rapport with the interviewer, making participants feel more at ease, and therefore more likely to be forthcoming with their opinions. In addition, encouraging participants to expand on their thoughts and ideas may also reveal relevant factors and patterns not originally considered by the researcher. Some broad structure was still necessary, of course, to ensure that the interview did not get derailed and that the research questions were addressed.

The description of the interview topics below was kept broad enough to facilitate as much elaboration as possible from the interviewee, while still zeroing in on the specific research questions. It should be noted, however, that since different people have different conversational styles, the order in which the interview topics are presented below was not necessarily the order every conversation took. The layout here is primarily organized in order to link interview topics with the research questions.

Actualized pathway to political conversation. Chapter 2 argued for greater diversity in potential research contexts when studying the public sphere, based on the fact that most people today approach political conversation in decidedly personal, firmly autonomous and uniquely intricate ways. It went on to describe the framework for this process: the actualized pathway to political conversation. Because the content analysis examines the text of past conversations, its ability to assess the actualized pathway to political conversation, which is an internal process, is severely limited. Interviews, however, specialize in drawing out a person's complex motivations, interests and beliefs (Krathwohl, 1998), making them an ideal tool to reveal subjects' actualized pathways.

Research questions thus focused on subjects' attractions to these particular spaces on

Facebook (RQ2), their conversational experiences within them (RQ3), as well as their

assessments of Facebook as a space for political conversation both now and in the past (RQ1b).

Open-ended interview questions addressing these broad research questions, along with

information from the surveys, helped to begin sketching out subjects' unique actualized

pathways.

RQ2: the people. Participants were first asked to briefly talk about themselves in an

open-ended manner ("Tell me a bit about yourself"). Using the information from their

completed survey as a guide, the aim was to confirm and/or clarify information from the survey,

as well as fill in some information that may have been initially overlooked or not shared. The

conversation was also meant to encourage participants to elaborate on their generalized

interests and activities, as well as their preferred forms of mediated entertainment.

In order to assess the diversity of the audience for these spaces, as minimally anchored

contexts, questions also assessed subjects' attraction to and interest in the pages they follow.

However, in order to develop a deeper understanding of this information, as well as to draw out

evidence of subjects' actualized pathway, it needed to be contextualized within the complex

totality of the individual. Thus, a broader range of questions were devised to draw out subjects'

unique relationship with politics and their conversational preferences, and how all these factors

affect their engagement with the pages they follow.

First, questions tried to draw out the level and composition of subjects' political

interest. Since what constitutes politics is ultimately a subjective matter that arises out of

conversation (Eliasoph, 1998), some questions also focused on subjects' individual definition

and understanding of politics. Based on this individual definition, questions then considered the

importance of politics to them individually, as reflected in personal beliefs, and engagement in

activities they defined as political. In addition, the role of news content in subjects' daily lives,

and the extent to which following or talking about politics is a source of enjoyment were also

addressed.

As discussed in Chapter 2, most people do not exhibit a strong overall interest in politics,

but instead are members of various "issue publics" to which the majority of their political energy

is devoted (Krosnick, 1990). In addition, the rise of alternative modes of political engagement

and a more individualized, *or "actualized,"* relationship with the political has drawn people

toward topics and issues that have not traditionally been considered political (Bennett, 2008).

Thus, the interview questions aimed to tease out the main issue publics to which subjects might

belong, and to help understand both the importance attributed to these issues and how these

issues fit in to subjects' personal definition of "political".

Finally, questions addressed subjects' political talk behavior. Questions assessed the

extent to which they talk about politics in general and/or their issues of importance with others,

as well as their interest in, or tolerance for, encountering opinions that differ from their own. In

addition, questions focused on who subjects' conversation partners typically were, as well as

where and how often such conversations occurred.

RQ3: the process. In order to assess whether participants have ever engaged in (or even

instigated) a political, or public-minded, conversation in the context of an otherwise non-

political post on any of the pages, subjects were asked general questions about their

engagement with the pages they say they follow, how often they see their posts in their news

feed, and their likes and dislikes about the experience. Then they were asked to think about if

they had ever commented on a post on these pages, and if they can remember ever

encountering a post about their personally relevant issues in the course of their engagement

with these pages. Finally, subjects were then asked if they ever came across or participated in

political conversations in the comments of the posts on these pages. They were also asked to consider whether these conversations resulted from political posts or non-political posts.

At this point, subjects were informed that it is the conversations that took place in the comments surrounding non-political posts that was of most interest to this project. To illustrate the point further, an example of a publicly-minded conversation inspired by non-political content[31] was verbally described to them. Subjects were then directly asked whether they have ever observed or contributed to such conversations in these specific contexts. In this way, subjects could be identified as Contributors, Observers, or both, which helped direct the remainder of the interview.

Once the Contributor and/or Observer status of a participant had been identified, the interviews then addressed the particulars of RQ3 through open-ended questions. This included:

- What triggered them to participate in/observe these conversations, and how long does this engagement typically last (RQ3a)?
- What did they hope to achieve from these encounters, and what were *actual* outcomes from previous encounters (RQ3b)?
- What were their perceptions of the context and the subsequent experience (RQ3c)? This considered the extent to which they were, and remained, engaged in the conversational interaction, the extent to which they perceived this to be a safe context for honest political expression, their perceptions of freedom, equality and sincerity within the forum, and how they responded to encounters with difference, and especially expressions of impolite (uncivil) behaviors by others.
- Did they understand these actions to be political, or were they simply speaking their mind (RQ2d)? Essentially, how did they understand and interpret their own behavior?

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[31] The same example was used for each subject. The example described was an instance where a video was posted of a mother and child singing while in the car, but in the comments, someone pointed out that the child wasn't in a booster seat, which started a conversation about whether such boosters seats are necessary and whether there should be laws requiring them.

RQ1: the conversation. RQ1 was split into two sub-questions. RQ1a focused on how the criteria of everyday political talk manifested in these spaces, the majority of which was addressed in the content analysis. As explained above, subjects were asked about their assessments of the Eye of the Beholder characteristics (which are part of RQ1) as part of addressing RQ3c.

RQ1b concentrated on the impact of the broader political environment, in light of the extraordinary impact of the 2016 election (and its outcome) on the country's political atmosphere and mentality. Although the content analysis was able to address RQ1b, the interviews provided an additional avenue of exploration. To this end, interviewees were asked how the election affected their personal interest in politics and their political behaviors, their perceptions of political conversations on Facebook, and their willingness to participate in such conversations.

The above pages have identified the research questions guiding this project, and have also laid out the procedures for the qualitative content and the semi-structured interviews. It is time now to turn to the outcomes of these analyses, which will be discussed in the next two chapters.

CHAPTER 6: QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

The purpose of this case study was to primarily address RQ1 by exploring everyday political talk in four minimally anchored contexts on Facebook: the public pages of George Takei (GT), Humans of New York (HONY), Larry the Cable Guy (LTCG), and Diply. The first part of RQ1 broadly aimed to assess the manifestation of everyday political talk in conversations found in these spaces, while the second part of RQ1 sought to address the impact of the broader political environment on these conversations. To that end, qualitative content analysis of the conversations from these four pages was performed during two distinct, three-week time periods, one of which, Fall 2016, captured conversations taking place during a United States presidential election, while the other, Fall 2017, focused on conversations occurring approximately one year later. This chapter describes the results of these analyses.

The analyses described below are organized according to the procedure laid out in the previous chapter. Before conversations could be analyzed, all posts from both time periods were evaluated to determine whether their content constituted a topical political anchor. Because this research focuses on conversations that were *not* anchored by Explicitly Political topics, only those posts that were Non-Political or Ambiguous were considered in the full analysis. The resulting data from the cataloging and categorization of the posts as Explicitly Political, Non-Political, or Ambiguous from all pages are discussed first.

Once Non-Political and Ambiguous posts were identified, I moved on to the two-step process of analysis based on Graham's (2008) strategy. Step One identified conversations for further analysis based on whether they met the criteria for public mindedness and reciprocity; the results of this process are the focus of the second section. The next part of the chapter describes the findings from Step Two, which involved the qualitative content analysis of the relevant conversations, evaluating them in the context of the remaining characteristics of

everyday political talk, including matters of public concern, freedom, equality, sincerity,

providing reasons and evidence, diversity and disagreement and civility/incivility. Following that

is an analysis of the impact of the broader political environment on these conversations. Finally,

a discussion of the implications of these results concludes this chapter.

Terminology

Before continuing, there is some terminology used throughout the rest of this chapter

that requires definition.

Participant

The common term used to refer to people who follow a page on Facebook is,

appropriately, *follower*. However, not all followers of a given page actively comment on that

page. Thus, when referring to the people who comment on these pages, I will use the term

participant.

Original Poster (OP)

All conversations on Facebook are organized the same way. Each conversation begins

with a single comment, posted by one participant. Facebook provides an option to reply directly

to an original post, and all subsequent replies are displayed indented beneath the original

comment. The common term used by participant to refer to the person who began the post is

"OP," which stands for original poster, and will be used here as well.

Categorization of Posts as Political, Non-Political, or Ambiguous

Posts from each page for both Fall 2016 and Fall 2017 were obtained using a post

scraping software (http://postsscraper.com), all of which were then catalogued in a spreadsheet

that logged information about each post, including the date and time it was posted, the number

of reactions (likes, shares and comments) it received, and a description of the content and its

type (link, text, picture or video), as well as a link to the post itself. All posts were also then

categorized as either Explicitly Political, Non-Political, or Ambiguous, as detailed in Chapter 5.

Types of Content

Table 1 (below) shows all the posts catalogued during both time periods, including how

many of each type of post was made, and how many posts yielded everyday political talk.

Explicitly Political posts featured content that was presented as matters of public concern (e.g.,

articles or videos about the 2016 presidential election, political figures, and/or issues associated

with formal politics), whereas the content of Non-Political posts had nothing to do with formal

politics, and did not even touch on politicized issues (e.g., cute cat pictures, videos about

waxing, or articles about celebrities). Ambiguous posts did not explicitly refer to formally

political topics or politicized issue, but the potential for transition into the public realm could

have been realized through the interpretation of the individual participant. The content in

question may have been related to political topics but was explored through an individualized or

factual lens. For example, in November of 2017, HONY posted a picture of a gay couple with

their son captioned with a story of how they met him for the first time:

> We had our son through a surrogate, so we didn't get to watch the pregnancy day-by-
>
> day. We didn't see the stomach getting bigger. We didn't have the same sort of
>
> emotional preparation as traditional parents. It's like one day we weren't parents, and
>
> then the next day we are. He was born two weeks early so we had to quickly jump on a
>
> flight. But we got to the hospital late. We actually met our son for the first time in an
>
> elevator. We were heading up to the room, and the nurses were bringing him up from

the nursery. They noticed two guys carrying luggage, and said: "I think this might be

your son!"[32]

The story is a personal one, and it isn't public-minded in any way. However, there are

components of it, such as that the couple is gay and that they used a surrogate to have a child,

that have the potential to spark political conversation in others.

Table 1 – Catalogued posts on all pages for both time periods

		George Takei	Diply	Larry the Cable Guy	Humans of New York
Fall 2016					
	Total Posts	366	201	54	15
	Explicitly Political	101 (27.6%)	6 (2.9%)	0	1 (6.7%)
	Non-Political	207 (56.6%)	150 (74.6%)	53 (98.1%)	8 (53.5%)
	Ambiguous	56 (15.3%)	45 (22.4%)	1 (1.9%)	6 (40.0%)
	Posts with everyday political talk[A]	143 (54.0%)	47 (30.5%)	17 (31.5%)	11 (78.6%)
Fall 2017					
	Total Posts	447	319	55	32
	Explicitly Political	92 (20.6%)	11 (3.4%)	0	3 (9.3%)
	Non-Political	233 (52.1%)	260 (81.5%)	54 (98.1%)	17 (53.1%)
	Ambiguous	114 (25.5%)	48 (15.0%)	1 (1.9%)	12 (37.5%)
	Posts with everyday political talk[A]	204 (57.5%)	52 (16.9%)	9 (16.4%)	24 (80.0%)

[A] Posts with everyday political talk indicate Non-Political and Ambiguous posts that sparked conversations that met the requirements of public-mindedness and reciprocity (see Step One below). As discussed earlier, Explicitly Political posts exhibit external political anchors, and were therefore excluded from the full analysis.

[32] Humans of New York, November 13, 2017, 4:57PM.
https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/posts/2012965762110847

Explicitly Political content. Posts that were categorized as explicitly political were considered to have external political anchors and were therefore excluded from the rest of the subsequent analysis. However, it is nevertheless interesting to note that three of the four pages posted content that was expressly related to formal politics and political figures. George Takei's page stood out as featuring the most posts overall, but also the most explicitly political posts (between 20 and 27%)[33]. Diply had almost as many overall posts as George Takei during the two time periods, but only a tiny fraction of them were explicitly political (approximately 3%). HONY had the fewest overall posts of all the pages examined here, only 15 during Fall 2016 and 32 during Fall 2017[34]. Of these, less than 10% of them were explicitly political during each time period. Of the four pages, LTCG was the only page to avoid politics outright. None of the posts on LTCG's page during either period featured explicitly political content. This makes sense when considering that LTCG's comedy tends to avoid politics (Morrison, 2015), and that LTCG's participants appear to be rather hostile towards those who attempt to steer the conversation towards conventional politics, as will be described in more detail below.

As posts categorized as Explicitly Political were not examined for this project, the rest of this analysis will focus on Ambiguous and Non-Political posts and their subsequent conversations.

Ambiguous content. All four pages featured posts with Ambiguous content. LTCG's page featured the fewest posts with Ambiguous content, less than 2% of total posts during each time period. Diply and George Takei posted approximately the same amount of Ambiguous content,

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[33] Takei has become more political over the course of this project, to the point that his April Fool's joke in 2017 was posting that he was running for Congress, and many people believed him (Bailey, 2017).
[34] The significant increase in overall posts on HONY between Fall 2016 and Fall 2017 can be explained by the start of Brandon Stanton's video posts, which follow the same theme as his original project, but shares video of his subjects speaking in their own voice rather than photographs of them with text-based quotes from their interview. The videos were posted in the same space as HONY's regular photo posts, from August 2017 through the beginning of January 2018, and included the thirteen episodes of *Humans of New York: The Series* (August 2017 – November 2017).

ranging from around 15% to 25% of all posts during each time period. HONY's page featured the most posts with Ambiguous content, consisting of approximately 40% of posts during each time period. This makes sense when we consider that HONY's posts consist of images and stories of real people. Some of them touched on formal political issues, but most of these issues remained specific to the individual being interviewed, and thus firmly in the private realm, as in the surrogacy example described above. The participants in the resulting conversations were the ones who took these specific issues and steered the conversation toward more public-minded matters.

Non-Political content. LTCG's page was almost entirely Non-Political content (98.1% of all posts during each time period). Some of these posts were promos for Larry's tours and merchandise (13.2% during Fall 2016, and 9.3% during Fall 2017), but the vast majority of LTCG's Non-Political posts were picture jokes and funny articles. Diply had the next highest percentages of Non-Political content, with 74.6% during Fall 2016 and 81.5% during Fall 2017. For both George Takei and Humans of New York, the content of a little more than half of their overall posts for each time period was Non-Political.

Summary

Less than 30% of all content on each page during either time period could be categorized as Explicitly Political content. In addition, for all four pages, Non-Political content constituted the majority (at least 50%) of all posts during each time period. Thus, despite their differing content foci and audiences, we can safely determine that these four pages constitute minimally-anchored spaces; they are neither thematically nor categorically anchored to formal politics.

Step One: Identifying Everyday Political Talk

RQ1a asks how the criteria of everyday political talk manifest in these conversations. To answer this question, the two-step approach outlined in the previous chapter was used. During Step One, the conversations below each Non-Political and Ambiguous post were evaluated to identify conversations that constituted everyday political talk, based on their demonstration of reciprocity and public-mindedness, which would then be further analyzed in Step Two[35].

Reciprocity

In order to qualify as a conversation, the exchange needed to demonstrate reciprocity - individuals responding directly to one another.[36] This characteristic was the easiest to identify. Because some conversations were lengthy and involved a large number of individuals, it was common for participants to mention the person they were responding to by name, so as not to cause confusion. This action, along with referring to specific points made by others and asking pointed questions were all considered key indicators of reciprocity (Graham, 2008). Another indication of reciprocity here was the use of the "reply" function available for comments. Users could comment on a post directly, or they can reply to a comment posted by others. Because replies are organized directly beneath the comment to which they are responding, replying to an existing comment instead of posting one's own original comment suggests that a user is paying attention, or "listening" to what another user has said.

Of course, replying to a comment was no guarantee that the conversation would continue, as Facebook users are under no obligation to respond to direct or subsequent replies to their comments. However, once a user comments on a post somewhere on Facebook, the site's push notification system continues for a time to alert them when additional user activity in

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[35] Whereas the unit of analysis in the previous section was the post, moving forward, the unit of analysis will be the conversation.
[36] This was true even of conversations that did not make it to Step Two.

that same space occurs. These notifications are part of the continuous effort by Facebook to

keep users engaged with the site (D'Onfro, 2015; Luckerson, 2015), anticipating that, having

posted a comment once, users are likely to be interested in continuing that conversation. In

addition, the "mention" feature on Facebook allowed users to tag the individual to whose

comment they were replying, regardless of whether the replying participant is friends with that

person on Facebook. Thus, not only were participants able to reply directly to a specific

comment, the person who wrote the initial comment received a notification (as a result of the

mention) that someone responded to them directly, increasing the likelihood that they would

return to the conversation.

Public Mindedness

Identifying public mindedness required a bit more effort. The presence of public-

mindedness requires that "a participant makes a connection from a particular experience,

Figure 3 - Conversation that doesn't transition into public mindedness

interest, issue, or topic in general to society"

(Graham, 2008, p. 22). In other words, public

mindedness occurs when there is a

conversational shift from the personal to the

collective perspective.

There were, of course, conversations

that did not exhibit this shift at all. This was

even the case sometimes when the

conversation was expected to exhibit public-

mindedness, owing to its topic. For example,

on September 18, 2016, GT posted a picture of

a QT gas station sign with a listed price of $3.14

a gallon, with the humorous caption "Saw this cutie pie on the side of the highway this morning…"[37] I expected that a conversation would materialize which considered the reasons behind the rising price of gasoline, but it never did. Participants simply continued to share the price of gas in their own locations (Figure 3, above). This particular conversation definitely did not veer into the collective, and therefore was eliminated from further analysis.

Many conversations exhibited public-mindedness right from the start. In these, the OP was the one demonstrating public-mindedness by making the connection between the content of the post and broader society. For example, on December 4, 2017, HONY shared a picture of a man accompanied by some of the text of his interview, in which he tells the story of growing up on a Cherokee reservation and how his father tried to "make him a man" by forcing him to drink alcohol and smoke cigarettes at five years old[38]. The OP started out by saying how heartbreaking the story was because abuse like that is difficult to fix as an adult. She then went on to say: "It would be easy to be angry with his father, but you know he learned that behavior somewhere. The American government has oppressed, repressed, ignored, and obliterated Native American culture." Much of the subsequent conversation followed from this train of thought, centering on the quality of education and services on Native American reservations.

There were also some conversations that did not start out with public-mindedness. These conversations were particularly interesting, as in them we could sometimes observe the transition as it happened, and whether and how a train of thought was picked up by others. For example, in response to an article[39] about parents who bailed out their 23-year-old daughter after a dine and dash prank, the OP commented, "She did this at the age of 23. That's just

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[37] George Takei, September 18, 2016, 4:22PM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/posts/1688098364552943:0
[38] Humans of New York, December 4, 2017, 11:32AM. https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/posts/2046352982105458
[39] George Takei, October 10, 2016, 8:31PM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/posts/1713019968727449

Figure 4 – Transitioning mid-conversation
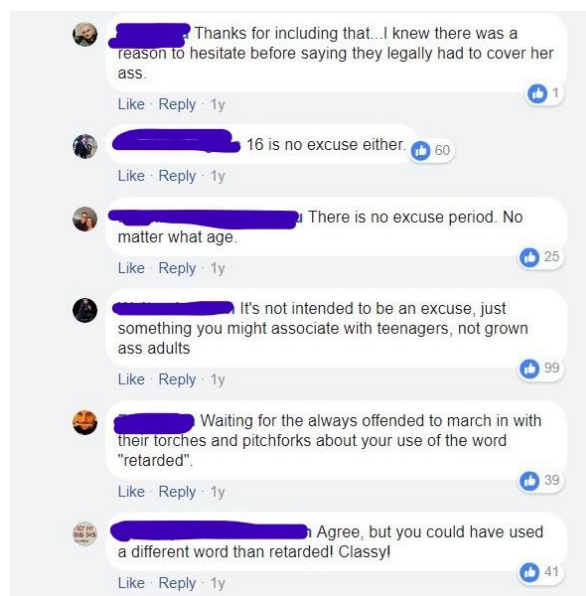
retarded. 16 years old, i [sic] could understand and forgive. But 23? that's f'ing pathetic." The subsequent comments began with participants agreeing with the OP, but the conversation shifted rather quickly to discussing the OP's use of the word "retarded" (Figure 4). The rest of the lengthy conversation was focused on the use of the word "retarded," its meaning and application, and whether it is, or still should be, offensive.[40]

As summarized in Table 1, posts on Humans of New York had the most instances of everyday political talk, with close to 80% of all posts for each time period sparking at least some public-minded conversation. On George Takei's page, just over half of all posts sparked at least one conversation that was public-minded. Posts on Diply and Larry the Cable Guy had the fewest instances of everyday political talk.

Step Two: Qualitative Content Analysis of Conversations

Most posts across all four pages sparked many comments and conversations. As a result, each post presented multiple opportunities for the discovery of everyday political talk. The Non-Political and Ambiguous posts from each page were evaluated, and many of them were found to host multiple instances of everyday political talk. After Step One was completed, a total of 1,102 conversations that constituted everyday political talk were identified across all four pages during both time periods. The breakdown can be seen in Table 2 (below). Once identified,

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[40] The only deviation from this topic in the rest of the conversation was the occasional tangent about the Clintons, as a participant posted early on a quote from Monica Lewinsky about her affair with President Clinton being consensual. But these comments were largely ignored, and the majority of the conversation was about the word "retarded".

these conversations were all then evaluated using qualitative content analysis, in order to
determine what everyday political talk in these spaces looks like. As described in greater detail
in the previous chapter, the specifics of the characteristics of everyday political talk were used
as flexible guidelines to allow for a more inductive analysis. The following section visits each of
these features in turn[41], and describes the ways they manifested in these conversations.

Table 2: Number of conversations with everyday political talk

	Fall 2016 Weeks	Fall 2017 Weeks
George Takei	330	506
Diply	48	114
Humans of New York	24	53
Larry the Cable Guy	16	11
Totals	**418**	**684**

Matters of Public Concern

Public-mindedness was used to identify conversations as containing everyday political
talk in Step One. However, it is important to acknowledge the difficulty in differentiating
between public-mindedness, which refers to the manner in which the topic is discussed, and
matters of public concern, which refers to the political or public relevance of a topic. These two
characteristics occupy two different positions on the list of criteria for everyday political talk,
suggesting that they are distinct concepts. Indeed, topics can be recognized to be matters of
public concern without being discussed in a publicly-minded manner, as in the price of gasoline
example described above (Figure 1). Yet these two components are, nevertheless, strongly
intertwined. In the context of everyday political talk, public mindedness and matters of public

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[41] Except, that is, for reciprocity and public-mindedness, which were discussed in Step One.

concern are so inextricably linked to the point that a number of scholars simply treat them

jointly (e.g., Eliasoph, 1998; Graham, 2008; Kliger-Vilenchik, 2015)[42].

What was of particular interest to the present research was the conversational

transition itself, one that occurs without any external prompting: when people engaging in

casual conversation shifted from the personal to the collective, moving from everyday

conversation into the everyday political talk that constructs the public sphere. Thus, public-

mindedness was a characteristic of greater importance here when it came to identifying

everyday political talk, reflected in the role it played in the selection process of Step One.

Because public-mindedness requires not only a communal perspective, but consideration of the

topic in more generalized terms, it is the presence of public-mindedness that determines that

the discussion is about matters of public concern (Graham, 2008). In other words, any topic

could be raised to the level of a matter of public concern by virtue of being discussed in a public-

minded manner. For the purposes of this analysis, then, it seemed wise to likewise accept this

conditional link between the concepts. If public-mindedness was present, then the conversation

could be assumed to be about matters of public concern. Since only those comments exhibiting

evidence of public-mindedness were selected for further analysis, all the comments that

proceeded to Step Two were automatically accepted to be about matters of public concern. But

what did people talk about?

An inductive analysis of the conversations yielded 52 different topics of conversation.

The five most popular topics during each time period made up more than half of the overall

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[42] This blending is a result of these scholars' adamant stance against any functional definition of topics as political or not, preferring instead to let the public value of topics be determined naturally by participants, through the process of conversation.

conversations containing everyday political talk (Figure 5). Conversation topics ranged from

formal politics and government to the norms of social interaction[43].

Figure 5 – Top five topics in popularity for Fall 2016 and Fall 2017
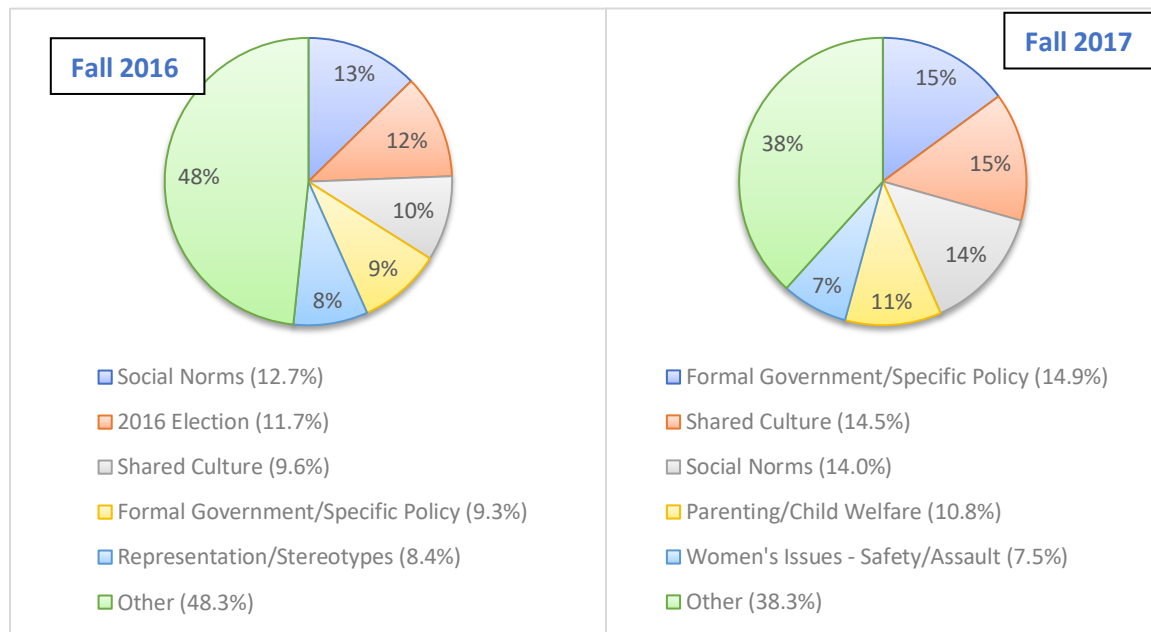
A helpful way to organize these conversations is with Williams' & Delli Carpini's (2011)

levels of political relevance. In their book *After Broadcast Media,* Williams & Delli Carpini (2011)

argue against overly limiting the definition of politics. They argue that to identify media texts

that are politically relevant, it is best to "categoriz[e them] by utility" (p. 122). In other words, it

is the *ability* of these texts and their content to contribute to public thought and discourse that

defines their relevance to politics, and not their organizational characteristics (e.g., genre,

content and/or source). Williams & Delli Carpini also lay out a framework for identifying the

---

[43] Conversations focusing on social norms address the identification and negotiation of norms in society, particularly (but not limited to) expected behavior, social interactions, and etiquette. In other words, judging the appropriateness of how people treat one another in society. Conversations about shared culture evaluate and critique the elements of "our" culture, namely American and Western culture. This includes evaluating and critiquing the beliefs and behaviors that are, or should be, included in or removed from our cultural consciousness, a common manifestation of which is the negotiation of whether something should be considered funny or offensive. Social norms and shared culture are related yet distinct topics of conversation. Whereas social norms primarily addresses concrete interactions between people, shared culture focuses more on a belief system.

political relevance of media texts that consists of three levels: institutions and processes, issues, and foundational. These three levels work very well for determining the political relevance of media texts and information using a broader understanding of the "political." The number of occurrences for each level is laid out in Table 3 (below).[44]

Institutions and processes. Williams & Delli Carpini define this group as "the formal channels of politics and government," which includes elections, political figures, courts and the law, and local, state and federal governments. They include the press in this level, as it is the formal source of information about these topics for the public (p. 123). For this research, conversations that featured discussions about the different political parties were also included in this group. During both time periods, this level constituted the fewest conversations across George Takei, Diply and HONY. Interestingly, this level featured far more prominently on Larry the Cable Guy, especially during the Fall 2016 time period.

Issues*.* This group is defined as "the debates and proposals for specific policies that are on the political agenda, that are becoming part of that agenda" (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011, p. 123). In other words, whether and how to address specific topics or problems that have become, or are becoming, regularly politicized. Williams & Delli Carpini suggest examples such as immigration and criminal rights, but we could also include issues that have only recently become politicized, such as transgender rights and the Me-Too movement. When looking at the number of conversations across all pages and for both time periods, issues conversations occupied the middle position - they didn't make up the majority of conversations, but nor were they the fewest in number. There were only two exceptions to this. One of these was Diply's

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[44] Some of the conversations exhibited more than one level of political relevance. In these cases, the conversation was split into several other directions. In other words, there were occasionally more than one conversation occurring within the same conversational space. As a result, there is some minor overlapping in the categorization of these conversations into their levels of political relevance.

page during the Fall 2016 period, where the majority of all conversations fell into the issues level. The other exception was Larry the Cable Guy's page during the Fall 2017 period, where the number of conversations categorized at the issues level was equal to the number of conversations categorized at the foundational level.

Table 3 – Number of conversations at each level of political relevance

Levels of Political Relevance	Institutions and Processes	Issues	Foundational	
			Conceptual	*Societal Values*
George Takei				
Fall 2016	72	111	99	73
Fall 2017	72	167	168	112
Diply				
Fall 2016	2	24	6	16
Fall 2017	9	37	48	26
Humans of New York				
Fall 2016	2	3	13	8
Fall 2017	10	23	30	15
Larry the Cable Guy				
Fall 2016	11	2	0	3
Fall 2017	3	4	2	2
Note: Categories were not mutually exclusive.				

Foundational. The foundational level refers to "the processes and concepts on which the very idea of government and society is based" (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011, p. 123). The

conversations in this level could be divided into two sub-levels. Neither of these sublevels is part of Williams' & Delli Carpini's original framework. However, upon analyzing the foundational conversations, they appeared to fall into one of two distinct types: conceptual and societal values. Both sublevels featured conversations that focus on the underlying components of government and society (upon which the first two levels are based) but did so in different ways. Conversations at the conceptual sublevel considered the more abstract and philosophical ideas underpinning our world, such as discrimination, democracy, and freedom. The societal values sublevel refers to conversations that focused on our society and the values we want it to reflect. In particular, this included the manner in which we treat one another in functioning society, and which actions and behaviors are considered appropriate and which are not.

While conversations in the conceptual sublevel fit more cleanly into Williams' & Delli Carpini's original framework, the societal values conversations wouldn't ordinarily be considered political conversation. However, the topics included in this sublevel were discussed in a public-minded manner. As a reminder, it was the presence of public-mindedness, the conversational shift from the personal to the collective perspective, which determined whether a conversation about any topic was about matters of public concern, and therefore qualified as everyday political talk. For example, in response to a Fall 2016 article in which children shared their frustration at their now-single parents dating again, the OP asserted that she would never be able to date if her husband was no longer with her, because "Once you are a parent, your needs no longer matter."[45] In the resulting conversation, participants debated whether this statement was correct. While they sometimes brought their own experiences to prove their

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[45] George Takei, September 20, 2016, 7:32AM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/posts/1689927054370074

point, their comments often reflected their opinions for the collective, as demonstrated in

comments[46] from the following conversation:

> *P1*[47]: The needs of someone else should never come before your own. It's the reason
>
> why you're supposed to put on your own oxygen mask before assisting someone else.
>
> This martyr mommy culture is seriously unhealthy.
>
> *P2*: My parents put their marriage equal to their children. One was not more important
>
> than the other. That's how it should be. Your own needs should be at the same level of
>
> importance as your children's needs. Letting kids dictate everything in your life teaches
>
> them to be self-centered.
>
> *P3*: [P2] that is soooo incorrect. The parent is the caregiver of the child. Not the other
>
> way around. The child cannot reach their own mask and due to a loss in cabin pressure
>
> passing out will happen in seconds. If the parent can get their mask on before passing
>
> out they can theoretically care for the child which is the chief goal. At any rate, this is a
>
> very poor comparison to a parent parading flavors of the month around their grieving
>
> children.

Because they referred to tangible social behaviors and expectations, these conversations

seemed to occupy a position distinct from the more abstractly-focused conversations that were

included in the conceptual sublevel. Yet, as these values are fundamental components of society

as a whole, their negotiation through public-minded conversation must be considered everyday

political talk.

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[46] The comments presented here are specific examples drawn from a single comment thread in order to illustrate the point. They are not in order of appearance in the thread, nor are they meant to represent the progression of the conversation.

[47] Numbering of participants is used when multiple comments are presented in a single example, in order to differentiate between them. The numbering will restart with each individual example.

Foundational conversations (both sublevels) generally had the highest occurrence on each page.[48] On Diply, HONY and GT, a significant portion of the foundational conversations were at the conceptual sublevel (whereas LTCG's foundational conversations during Fall 2017 were split evenly between the conceptual and societal values sublevels). Although the topics under discussion in these conversations may have been more abstract than specific policy initiatives or formal governmental processes, they were also far easier to link to one's own personal experiences and underlying personal values, making them more tangibly relevant to the individual. For example, in response to an article calling out a white YouTuber's tutorial for curling one's hair for cultural appropriation[49], the OP commented out of frustration at what she perceived to be a double standard. "Black girl hair??? Omfg really," she exclaims. "It's like us white people can't do any hairstyle besides straight or else suddenly we are offending other cultures, but its [sic] all fine and dandy to have ours copied. Fucking please." In the subsequent conversation, participants debated the issue of whether they believed hairstyles could constitute cultural appropriation, sometimes drawing on their own experiences to argue the point:

> *P1*: I'm Irish, English and German and have very curly hair…born with jet black ringlets as a matter of fact. My hair has changed colors naturally on its own and at its longest lengths it's been fairly straight looking. Now, I color it how I choose, straighten it if I choose because it is MY choice to do so. I would never throw a hissy over ANY woman for their choices in their particular look as long as it makes them feel good about themselves. Who gives a rat's ass where it comes from…why can't everyone share and

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[48] The exception being conversations on LTCG's and Diply's pages during Fall 2016.
[49] Diply, October 28, 2017, 8:31PM. https://www.facebook.com/diply/posts/1610684722343217

be proud of your contributions? Women need to stop ripping each other apart for petty

crap…because it makes you just that…PETTY!!

P2: Everyone, calm down. They post this crap to "Start" a Racial war. Don't believe this

mess! Black women don't feel this way. We are open to anyone rocking Any style they

want. Some African and like me African mixed ladies have naturally straight hair just like

some Caucasian ladies have naturally curly hair. Women of color get this and this lie

stating we are offended by the hairstyle is just that…A Lie! #AllWomenAllTypesOfHair

The ease of making these connections might help explain why participants were drawn into so

many conversations of this type.

It appeared that conversations at the societal values sublevel were also ones in which

many participants felt very comfortable engaging. While conversations at this level were never

the majority for any page, they were still proportionally quite common across all four pages.

Rather than specific policy initiatives or formal governmental matters, conversations at the

societal values level are typically about our values as a society, especially regarding the norms of

social interaction. Thus, like conversations at the conceptual level, it was likely easier for

participants to see the relevance of these topics to their own personal lives and experiences,

inspiring them to jump into the conversation. In addition, participating in societal values

conversations would have generally been far easier than at any of the other levels, because valid

arguments didn't always require the presentation of outside knowledge or formal education.

Rather, individual experiences and one's personal sense of morality were presented (and

accepted) as legitimate reasons to support an argument. For example, on November 2, 2016, GT

posted a link to an article in which parents shared their stories of walking in on their child having

sex[50]. The OP reacted with surprise:

> Gee, are today's parents so desperate to be friends with their kids they are okay with
>
> them screwing in their own house? I don't expect kids to abstain until after college or
>
> marriage, but if I walk in on some guy on my daughter one day that kid is gonna
>
> understand the word fear.

In the resulting conversation, participants debated whether it is acceptable for parents to allow

children to have sex in their homes. Nearly all comments discussed the issue as a hypothetical,

with some participants exhibiting an acutely personal approach, explaining their opinion as it

related to their own families:

> *P1*: My husband has the same philosophy. REGARDLESS of age, this is HIS house and the
>
> respect card needs to be in place. Get your own house and have all the sex you want,
>
> with that he promises we won't visit and have sex in their house either.

> *P2*: Depends on the family. In mine, if done discretely and when everyone having sex is
>
> over 18, no one else thinks it's their business.

Others addressed the issue in more general terms, relying on their extant knowledge of

teens and/or their personal sense of morality:

> *P3*: So, I'm guessing a bunch of you are the same parents who are "cool" with your kids
>
> having parties and drinking at your house because "at least I know they're doing it
>
> safely"? Be a parent, not a peer.

> *P4*: [P3], the world is not black and white. Each of us have to make the decisions you
>
> refer to for our kids, but your statement implies that you think kids just won't have sex if

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[50] George Takei, November 2, 2016, 4:02PM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/posts/1740084562687656

they can't do it in our homes… Which is just plain ludicrous. Being a parent means educating our children the best we can, teaching them how to make good decisions on their own, AND ensuring they are safe when they make less than ideal decisions so they can learn from those mistakes. You don't "learn" your way out of a public indecency charge and being labeled a sex offender. If you honestly think your child having sex ANYWHERE other than your own home is SAFER than in your home, you are nuts. And if you think your kids are going to abstain from sex and sexual exploration until they are out of your house, you are deluding yourself.

P5: I get [P3]'s point. There needs to be a compromise. I get that their house is safer but there could/should be a few rules in places. I like to think of sex like shitting. It's ok to do it and enjoy it but there's a difference between a bathroom with the door closed and shitting on the carpet in plain view. (And don't tell me that doesn't happen.)

It is also important to point out that the topics alone did not determine into which level a conversation fell. The same topic could have been discussed in different ways. For example, on December 17, 2017, HONY posted a video of a man telling the story of how he avenged his sister's rape by beating the perpetrator to the point of brain damage.[51] This post sparked a number of conversations about crime and punishment. Most of these were about whether we, as a society, should be celebrating violence, even in the form of vigilante justice, which is categorized at the foundational level (conceptual sublevel). One conversation, however, approached the topic of crime and punishment from a different angle, focusing instead on the shortcoming of the justice system in rape cases, which clearly put it at the institutions/processes level.

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[51] Humans of New York, December 17, 2017, 8:13PM.
https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/videos/2051765944897495/

Discursive Contestation. Finally, there were some common patterns evident in the way

participants approached these topics of conversation. Many conversations were straightforward

in the way they addressed a topic. That is, the topic of conversation flowed directly from the

subject matter of the post. For example, in response to an article which argued that Hollywood

should be casting transgender actors, rather than cisgender actors, to play transgender roles[52],

nearly all of the subsequent conversations engaged directly with the argument. However, there

were also instances when a conversation took a step back from the components of a specific

issue and addressed whether it should be a topic of public discussion at all. For example, on

October 15, 2016, GT posted an article about a woman who, upon discovering that her husband

was bisexual and sleeping with other men, decided to make their marriage open rather than

Figure 6 – Snippet of conversation reflecting discursive contestation

divorce him[53]. Many of the subsequent conversations directly addressed specific components of the story, such as the importance of commitment in marriage, and the unfair stereotype of the "promiscuous bisexual." A number of the conversations, however, took a slightly different approach: debating whether this story, and its related issues, are topics that the public has a right to discuss (Figure

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[52] George Takei, November 3, 2016, 9:32AM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/posts/1744170735612372
[53] George Takei, October 15, 2016, 3:16PM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/posts/1718825628146883

6). Such examples are indicative of the natural fluidity of the borders of the political realm, discussed in Chapter 2. They also serve as tangible demonstrations of both Fraser's (1992) "discursive contestation," in which "participants themselves…decide what is and is not of common concern to them" (p. 129), as well as Eliasoph's (1998) argument that the definition of something as political is a feature of the discussion process itself. Essentially, participants in these conversations were constructing the PSCA through their everyday political talk while simultaneously negotiating whether these topics belonged in the public sphere in the first place.

Freedom, Equality and Sincerity

Freedom, equality and sincerity are both characteristics which are anticipated prior to deliberation. Thus, these features become difficult to identify in everyday political talk, which is spontaneous and informal. This difficulty is compounded when the instances being evaluated are in the form of written text, as they were in this project. The structure of the forum can, to some extent, help assess freedom and equality, but while Facebook's structure offers the conditions that allow them to manifest, it only provides the *potential* for freedom and equality, not a guarantee. Similarly, the social norms of interaction dictate the expectation of sincerity from others in conversation (Faulkner, 2010), but such norms are typically unwritten, variable, and not compulsory in any tangible way.

Thus, as requirements for everyday political talk, freedom, equality and sincerity could not be objectively observed independent of the everyday political talk interaction. Rather, the extent to which participants in such conversations perceived the context to be free and equal, and others' comments to be sincere, would therefore have determined the extent to which they expressed themselves fully, or held themselves back. Therefore, identifying the presence of these features was dependent on the perceptions of individual participants, and as such was mainly evaluated through the interviews. Despite this, analysis of the conversations provides

some insight as to the possible presence of these characteristics. Therefore, while the next

chapter, which focuses on interviews with participants, will feature a more in-depth discussion

of these characteristics, it is worthwhile to describe some relevant observations that came out

of this analysis.

Equality*.* As described in previous chapters, the Facebook platform offers structural

equality, and these pages were no different. Because the four pages and their posts are all

public, virtually any Facebook user was able to contribute to any of the conversations taking

place in these spaces.

The discursive equality of these pages begins strong. Initially, every participant had

equal opportunity to participate in the conversations. Each participant sees the "write a

comment" space displayed under every post on these pages, and the "reply" link under each

comment, encouraging them to contribute their own thoughts and opinions. However, the

default for displaying comments on all four pages is Most Relevant, which adjusts the order in

which comments are displayed to users to prioritize the ones that are the most germane to each

individual user (including comments from a user's own friends), but also the ones which have

received the most likes and replies (Facebook, 2019a). This ranking algorithm is based on a

comment's popularity, rather than the social, economic, or educational status of the individual.

In theory, anyone's comment has the potential to rise to the top if it receives enough likes

and/or comments from other participants. Thus, a comment's ranking is a democratic process,

determined by the number of people who are inspired to engage with it in some way.

However, because such comment ranking puts the most popular comments at the top,

later comments are at a disadvantage. The first comments on a post have the best chance of

being read and inspiring reactions, because they aren't competing with many other comments.

The longer a conversation goes on, the greater the disadvantage to the latecomer. A participant

might post a comment featuring insightful or interesting ideas, but if they post it after the

conversation has been going on for a while, it becomes relegated to the bottom of the comment

list, giving it only a slim chance of it ever being seen. Ultimately, although participants might

begin the conversation on an equal playing field, over time, comment ranking effectively

magnifies the voices of some over others. Therefore, while this algorithm eliminates most status

inequalities, it nevertheless still impacts the discursive equality of these spaces.

Freedom. These spaces appeared to offer some conversational freedom to participants.

There were no requirements for participation in a given conversation. Participants were free to

say whatever they wanted (within Facebook's code of conduct), and they could participate in

the conversation in any manner they saw fit. Conversations on the four pages never seemed to

face the interference of a moderator over the course of the conversation[54]. As a result,

conversations often exhibited a variety of comment types, from logically reasoned arguments to

jokes to personal attacks.

In addition, participants joined these text-based, asynchronous conversations at

different times, yet they were still able to see[55], and respond to, everything that had been said

before they arrived. It was very easy to ignore comments that were not relevant to one's

argument, or comments that one found to be offensive or boring. As a result, conversations

could be sprawling and occasionally repetitious. Furthermore, conversations did not always

remain focused on a single topic. Instead, a single conversation sometimes would touch upon

multiple issues. There were even a number of conversations where multiple topics were being

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[54] Except, perhaps, after the fact. Many of the conversations were analyzed at least several months after the original post, and long after the conversations had ceased to be active. There was evidence that comments had been removed after the fact: Participants responding to a specific individual whose comments were no longer visible. This removal of comments could have been done by the participant who initially posted them, or they could have been removed by the moderator of the page; it was impossible to tell which. What is key, however, is that at the time the conversation was active, these comments were still visible to other participants, who responded to them directly.
[55] In theory. See above discussion of comment ranking.

discussed simultaneously within a single thread. Because of this, sometimes conversations were difficult to follow, requiring the reader to keep track of multiple conversational strands at a time. However, it appeared as if most participants simply responded to specific strands of the conversation, rather than attempt to address the different topics all at once. These variations in the conversations were facilitated by the level of freedom available in these spaces. As a result, the manifestation of any of the other characteristics of everyday political talk was not always uniform across a given conversation.

Sincerity. Unlike freedom and equality, there were no existing rules or structures in these conversational spaces that serve to encourage or promote sincerity in conversations. Facebook has been working to address fake accounts and likes for years (Burnham, 2014; KFVS12.com, 2012; Marquez, 2019; Moon, 2019; Parsons, 2015; Sass, 2017), suggesting that it's important to the site that users are interacting with real people. However, there aren't any measures in place to ensure that participants are sincere in their conversations. Indeed, it's quite unlikely that conversational sincerity could even be determined on Facebook, let alone enforced, as this is a characteristic that is entirely up to the individual.

Nevertheless, there was the occasional glimpse of the *expectation* of sincerity as a norm in these conversations. While it's impossible to determine if participants were being sincere in their comments, there were a few instances where they challenged the truthfulness of others' claims. For example, on a post from GT's page featuring doctors' stories about patients who believed they were smarter than the doctor, one participant started a conversation by arguing that the medical profession prefers to treat disease rather than cure it because treatments are more lucrative.[56] This began a conversation about whether the OP was correct or if this is a conspiracy theory.

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[56] George Takei, October 26, 2017, 9:31AM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/posts/2245173335512107.

In the course of the conversation, another participant claimed that "Cancer is big business" for pharmaceutical companies, and a cure would "cost them billions." Many other participants disputed (and/or ridiculed) her claim. Her response to this criticism was to post a story about how someone she knows had found a cure for cancer, but that he had been threatened and sued by the drug companies until he went out of business. Immediately, a number of participants questioned the veracity of her story. "Wow, will you look at that 'this happened to someone I know but not me personally" anecdote," one participant sarcastically commented. Another participant posed a set of detailed questions about the story, such as what types of cancer were cured by this supposed remedy, and which companies participated in the alleged lawsuit and threats. He concluded this lengthy list of questions by saying, "Frankly, I'll be flabbergasted if you can answer even one of these questions."[57] In instances like this, accusations of untruthfulness revealed a tacit expectation of sincerity. By accusing these individuals of being untruthful, participants could have been attempting to reinforce a social norm of sincerity in these conversations.

Providing Reasons and Evidence

One of the tenets of communicative action is that participants negotiate the validity of claims put forth by one another (Habermas, 1996). Thus, all claims in everyday political talk must be open to critique from others, and in the face of such scrutiny, it's essential that participants support their positions by providing reasons. In evaluating these conversations, it was often easier to initially identify those comments that did *not* offer reasons to justify their positions. Simple, declarative statements such as "I like this," or "this is wrong," without any accompanying explanation were considered indicative of reasons *not* being provided. As a result, the length of a comment was taken as an initial indication that it contained reasons, as

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[57] She never responded to these questions.

the more extensive a comment was, the more likely it was to feature a reason justifying its

position. That reasons were being provided in these conversations was also identified through

keywords, such as "because," and "so," but the entire comment was also evaluated more deeply

to determine whether reasons were present, and the nature of those reasons.

Logic-based reasoning. For the vast majority of the conversations evaluated,

participants were observed providing a number of types of reasons to support their arguments.

Many comments justified their position using reasons which exhibited the qualities of rational-

critical debate expected in formal deliberation. In particular, the reasons given reflected

"reason" or "rationality," in the sense that they were based on logic (Cohen, 1997). One

Figure 7 - Example of participants using logical reasoning
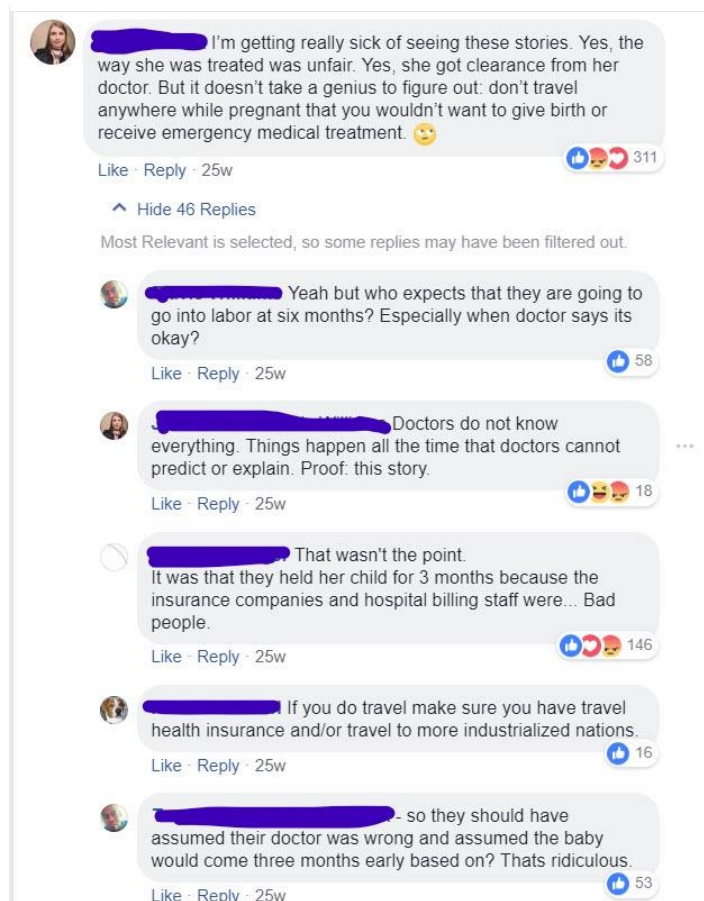
example can be seen in this snippet of conversation responding to an article posted on GT about a woman who went into labor unexpectedly while on vacation and had her baby held hostage by a Turkish hospital until she paid the bill (Figure 7[58]). Here, as was common in almost all conversations evaluated, participants' arguments and conclusions appear to rely exclusively on logical reasoning

applied to the information provided in the article, rather than on any additional evidence.

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[58] George Takei, December 5, 2017, 5:49PM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/posts/2303276906368416

Evidence-based reasoning. While logical reasoning was a common feature of most comments, many participants also used evidence to support their positions. In addition to being grounded in logic, reasons given during deliberation should also include the presentation of tangible, objective evidence that can both justify the claim and be evaluated by others (Graham & Witschge, 2003; Stromer-Galley, 2007). Such objective evidence can also be a feature of everyday political talk. Factual information, such as information about specific laws, policies or procedures, or historical facts, was commonly presented as evidence in a number of conversations, many of which were made tangible by attaching a link or an image to one's comment, depending on the type of reasons the participant was using. When relying on factual information, participants often included links to outside sources, such as news media sites, informational sites (e.g., encyclopedia Britannica) or nonprofit organizations related to the topic under discussion. Occasionally, instead of a link, participants would share an image as a form of tangible evidence. Often, the images provided would be in the form of charts or graphs that supported their arguments, as was common in the many discussions that took place (mostly on GT and Diply) during Fall 2017 over whether it was fair to fire someone over allegations of sexual misconduct before they have been convicted of anything. One image commonly shared in this context was a graphic from called "The Truth About False Accusation" (Figure 8, http://theenlivenproject.com), meant to respond to those who argued that assuming a person is guilty makes false accusations. The fact that these

Figure 8 - Graphic shared in conversation as evidence

conversations took place in an online environment may have increased the likelihood of the provision of tangible evidence, since internet-enabled devices and applications facilitate multitasking (users can smoothly switch applications in order to locate information quickly without abandoning the conversation), and hypertext enables the quick sharing of links to information located outside Facebook.

Other times, the images being shared would be one or more screenshots of the relevant information from the source itself. This was most commonly done when providing the definition of words under discussion. For example, after one article posted by GT called a multitasking mom a "shero,"[59] one OP argues that "shero" isn't a real word, because the correct word is "heroine." The first participant who responded posted a screenshot of the definition of the word from Merriam-Webster's website, accompanying her comment of "But it's not a word?"

Factual information was not always made tangible through accompanying links or images. Often, facts were stated as assumed truths. For example, in response to an article about singer Adele's stance on shaving her legs[60], the OP argued that shaving one's legs is a relatively recent "beauty trend," implying that it shouldn't be considered a requirement for women today. Many of the participants in the conversation that followed also presented historical facts to argue for or against the enforceability of leg shaving as a beauty trend:

P1: Um, actually, hair removal has been dated back to ancient Egypt.

P2: Mostly hygiene control, which we no longer need. That's how the dirty association [with unshaven legs] comes about. It no longer impacts hygiene at all as we have modern ways to shower and what not. We aren't waiting a week or two to bathe.

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[59] George Takei, September 19, 2016, 9:29AM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/posts/1688759057820207
[60] George Takei, November 5, 2016, 6:59PM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/posts/1744711985558247

P3: Manipulation of the appearance of the human body parts is as ancient as it is

cultural. From foot binding to infant skull wrapping to high heels is all a reflection of

what the culture of the time believed was attractive. They didn't have Vogue or TV

dictating what they believed to be beautiful yet they did it. This is not new. It's human.

P4: Making women shave their body hair was a clever marketing ploy by Gillette in the

early 1900s.

Although these particular facts may or may not be accurate, what is of importance here is that

they were presented as facts used to support participants' arguments. Since they were mostly

posted without any accompanying documentation, the implication was that these facts were

drawn from participants' extant knowledge.

Subjective reasoning. In addition to objective factual information, participants also

relied on more subjective reasons to support their arguments. As mentioned earlier, everyday

political talk accepts the more subjective reasons that formal deliberation would ordinarily

reject. In a significant portion of the conversations evaluated in Step Two, many participants

relied on these less formal reasons, such as personal experiences and individual emotions,

beliefs and morals.

Personal experience was a common justification for participants' arguments, as a

practical source of evidence that proved their point. For example, on October 23, 2017, LTCG

posted a picture of a sign in a store that informed customers that they will be assessed a $100

surcharge for mentioning that they could find cheaper parts online.[61] The OP shared price

comparisons with different automotive parts between online and in store, concluding that

"Brick and mortar stores need to get their act together." In the conversation that resulted,

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[61] Larry the Cable Guy, October 23, 2017, 9:09AM.
https://www.facebook.com/LarryTheCableGuy/posts/10155864521858464

participants debated the reality of the OP's statement, and the value of brick and mortar stores in local communities. Some participants shared their personal experiences as a customer for parts or as a seller of parts to support their arguments:

P1: [P] a good parts house is hard to find. I have used them when I do find them. However I am not going to pay double for something so someone can have a job. Just doesn't make sense. Also I find the return process for Amazon to be pretty easy. Rockauto not much harder. Lastly, the big box stores are killing the real parts stores. Low paid people with low service low skill and low quality parts. Makes online retailers all the more desirable. These are the reasons, and price, that I have switched. When I know more than the counter guy it's an issue.

P2: I own a motorcycle shop and hear all the time about finding cheaper parts online. So we don't make the money on the parts which is half of what our business is. The other half is labor. So if you stop buying parts from me, I am forced to up my labor rate to make up for the loss of business. Then those same people bitch about my labor rate. So you want me to lose out on parts money, then want me to discount my labor rate so you can save money. Sure. I don't have a staff to support. A family to feed. And overhead to take care of. But you expect me to answer my phone and come get you when that discount part you decided to install yourself failed and left your ass stranded on the side of the road. Sure my tow fee just went up too because I lost money on labor now. And we wonder why quality customer service is becoming a thing of the past. It's only free if you paid for my service to begin with!

In addition to their practical experiences, participants often drew upon their personal beliefs, emotions, and morals in explaining their argument. Whether a participant personally believed something was right or wrong was clearly expressed in many of their comments. For

example, in response to an article in which teachers shared their stories about strange notes that they confiscated from their students[62], the OP reacted to teachers' habit of reading those notes aloud to the entire class, calling the practice "cruel and unnecessary." In the resulting conversation, participants debated whether doing this was an acceptable policy in schools. For many participants, a major component of their reasoning appeared to rely on their emotions and extant sense of morality:

> *P1*: I agree, and the one who was so disappointed it [the note] was blank, because they didn't get to shame a child. What is wrong with these people?

> *P2*: Agreed. It is one thing to intercept them and tell them it is not permitted in class, but to read it aloud and embarrass the kids is just wrong.

> *P3*: We need to stop raising a generation of victims. The notes aren't allowed in class. Reading notes aloud when they are discovered in class has been going on for longer than I've been alive. Don't want the teacher to read your note in class? Don't write it.

Sometimes, as in the examples presented above, these more personal justifications were presented as the sole reason for a participant's argument, suggesting that participants believed these types of reasons were sufficient in their own right.

Other times, tangible evidence was used to support subjective reasons, in the form of personal photos. For example, in response to a video that focused on a former dancer who, after an injury that left her temporarily in a wheelchair, founded a company that teaches wheelchair dancing[63], the OP took issue with the video's description of the dancer's "miraculous recovery," pointing out that "[s]pinal injuries don't miraculously recover, it takes hard work and

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[62] George Takei, September 24, 2016, 11:08AM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/posts/1694228017273311
[63] George Takei, October 30, 2016, 12:11PM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/videos/1207980639292058/

talent of entire teams of medical professionals. Please don't discount the hard work of these people." The subsequent conversation developed into a debate about whether it is fair, or even accurate, to describe the results of medical science as miraculous, a word which has religious connotations. Many participants shared personal stories and experiences of their own health-related challenges (or that of someone they know) as part of their argument for or against using the term. In addition to sharing his story, one participant also shared his x-rays as well as pictures of him during his coma and subsequent recovery, writing that "Living through this is a Miracle."

Critical evaluation of reasons. As mentioned above, a key component of this characteristic for the PSCA is that all reasons presented must be open to critical evaluation by other participants. In many cases, the critical evaluation of participants' reasons was the focus of the entire conversation. There were some conversations from which this critical evaluation was entirely absent, but most of these were simply conversations that devolved into pure acrimony without substance. Most of the time, refusal to critically consider another participant's argument was expressed by individual participants in the conversation, but was mixed in with the comments of other participants who *were* willing to engage with the content of the argument. When individual participants refused to critically engage critically with others' arguments, they often appeared to be reacting out of anger to some component of the argument they disliked or found offensive.

One example of this occurred in response to an article about an actor dropping his agent after he was accused of sexual assault.[64] The OP said that he was "uncomfortable with the current trend of people getting fired based on accusations only. How easy is it now to ruin somebody's life when mob mentality rules over due process?" Many participants shared their

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[64] George Takei, October 22, 2017, 5:05PM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/posts/2238090336220407

opinions about the OP's statement, mostly disagreeing with his perspective on the situation.

While quite a number of the responses were infused with anger, most of them still argued with

the OP using logic and providing reasons. Some comments, however, simply dismissed or

personally attacked the OP, indicating that the participant was entirely unwilling to engage with

the OP's position:

> *P1*: [OP] bet you didn't even read the article you illiterate.

> *P2*: Hey there, you outed yourself. You're worried your next victim will say something
>
> and we'll believe them. We're onto you, pervy pedo.

> *P3*: Look at his profile. It explains everything. Trump is his god.

While there is a lot of anger in this conversation, the majority of participants did pursue the

discussion, using logic and providing reasons for their position. They largely ignored the

comments of those participants whose reactions showed they had chosen to dismiss arguments

they disliked or found offensive out of hand.

Another obstacle to critical evaluation came in the form of a common tool used across

Figure 9 - Example of meme that encapsulates argument

Facebook: the "meme". It was common for user participants to utilize visual communications, in the form of memes (pictures with captions, originally known as image macros and GIF files (brief snippets of silent, typically captioned, video that repeats)[65]. These images, along with emojis, were most commonly used to communicate feelings,

exclamations and jokes. The reliance on these tools makes sense, as they provide participants

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[65] GIFs became an available feature on Facebook in the time between Fall 2016 weeks and Fall 2017 weeks.

with the ability to communicate nonverbal cues that are ordinarily unavailable in asynchronous

textual communication. Memes also provided participants with an additional, simple way of

communicating both their positions and reasons, thus eliminating the need for them to write

out their arguments in full. For example, in response to a video of a person feeding a very

cautious raccoon[66], the OP posted a meme that stated her argument very succinctly (Figure 9,

above).

However, by succinctly encapsulating participants' entire position, such memes also

Figure 10 - Oversimplified, unsourced argument communicated via meme
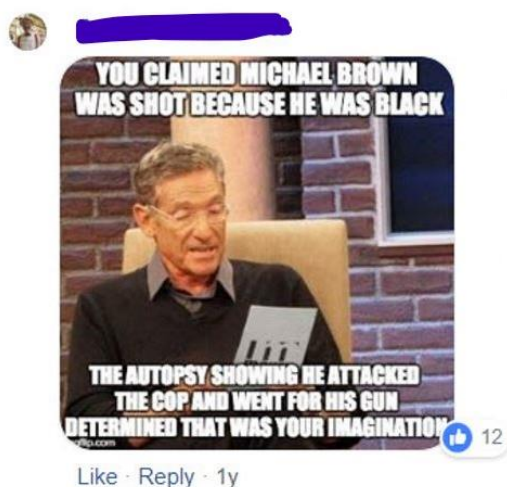
presented an obstacle to critical evaluation. While memes made participants' positions easier to understand by condensing a complex argument into a single set of image and text, they also made such positions quite challenging to oppose. In addition, sometimes these images could oversimplify an issue to the point of misrepresentation. Memes usually do not come with sources attached, and so they present

information as factual without providing the opportunity for verification (Figure 10[67]). In

addition, most people using these memes have not actually created them. Instead, most user

participants just copy and paste them after seeing them elsewhere. Thus, few people sharing

these memes have actually done the research necessary to verify their claims, which makes

further logical debate an even greater challenge.

[66] Diply, September 23, 2016, 8:00AM. https://www.facebook.com/diply/videos/1116032848475076/
[67] George Takei, September 18, 2016, 8:32PM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/posts/1688189064543873

Absence of reasons. As the above discussion suggests, participants typically supported

their positions with some type of reason and/or evidence. However, there were also instances

where participants would make a definitive statement about the topic under discussion or other

participants' arguments without providing a valid reason to support it, such as simply replying

"Wrong!" Similar to comments dismissing or attacking individuals with whom the participant

fundamentally disagreed, these types of comments were also commonly ignored by participants

whose comments were more substantive, perhaps because such comments are so brief and

finite, they do not provide any opening for further discussion. Instead, it's likely that most

participants chose to focus their energies on those with whom they felt they could more

meaningfully engage.

Diversity

One of the core components of everyday political talk is diversity, because achieving

mutual understanding is redundant in conversations where only a single perspective is present.

However, a central argument of this project is that politically anchored contexts

disproportionately attract political junkies, whose overwhelming participation tends to limit the

diversity of conversations in these spaces. Political junkies tend to be heavily knowledgeable

about and strongly interested in politics (Prior, 2007a) as well as passionately partisan

(Dahlgren, 2009; van Zoonen, 2004). As a result, they tend to be more frequent posters in online

conversations (Mustafaraj et al., 2011) and also tend to react poorly (i.e., negatively) to

challenges (Huckfeldt et al., 2004). These behaviors may also be responsible for scholarly

observations that many online political spaces are echo chambers of partisan agreement (e.g.,

Johnson et al., 2011; Kersting & Zimmerman, 2014; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009).

Moreover, spaces where political junkies have taken over (or are perceived to be

common) tend to be avoided by other users, even those who are generally interested in the

topic of conversation (Duggan & Smith, 2016; Semaan et al., 2014). Their comments suggest

levels of expertise with which it is difficult, if not impossible, for most people to engage

effectively. But additionally, political junkies can use their expertise combatively: as a tool to

silence or dismiss the opinions of others. Thus, conversations monopolized by political junkies

are likely to intimidate and alienate other participants, perhaps considerably reducing the

diversity of such conversations.

It was impossible to determine whether any given participant was a political junkie

solely from their contributions to these conversations, and therefore difficult to assess whether

conversations had been completely taken over by them. However, by examining the

conversations on each page, it was possible to evaluate the presence of diversity, both in terms

of the perspectives presented in the conversations, as well as the diversity of participants

themselves.

Diversity of perspectives. Across all pages, conversations attracted a variety of

participants sharing their ideas and engaging with one another. While most of these

conversations did feature a set of participants who were more active than the others in a

thread, in most cases, the heavily active commenters did not exclude others by only responding

to one another. Rather, they typically appeared willing to engage with almost anyone who chose

to contribute to the conversation. In addition, most conversations were not dominated by

clinical expertise. In most cases, people with a variety of perspectives and experiences were

contributing to these conversations. For example, in response to an image of a racist chart in a

nursing textbook[68], while some of the participants who engaged in the many conversations

surrounding the post professed to be nurses themselves, there were many others who were

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[68] George Takei, October 23, 2017, 8:29PM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/posts/2239722796057161

not. Some based their responses on their experiences in other professions, or on their being

minorities themselves, while others simply based their comments on their own internal beliefs.

This remained true when it came to conversations about formal government laws and

policies as well. Conversations included participants ranging from those who appeared

knowledgeable about the specifics of an issue, to those whose opinions were most informed by

their personal experiences, to those without experience and whose opinions were primarily

based upon their beliefs. For example, in response to an article in which teachers shared stories

about the most outrageous encounters they had with parents[69], the OP argued that the

teachers' unions had ruined our education system by allowing bad teachers to remain

employed. In the conversation that followed, participants debated the underlying causes of

poor-quality public schools in the United States with quite a bit of diversity. Some arguments

relied on first-hand experiences as teachers or parents, while others presented opinions based

on largely unsourced information about the educational system, the political process, and the

cultural role of teachers in the United States compared with other countries. It's difficult to say

whether any of this information was accurate or where participants obtained it, as most simply

presented it as fact without justification. In addition, while some participants attempted to

dismiss the OP's argument on the grounds that he was not an expert in education, he was not

deterred from the discussion, nor were others who agreed with him. In general, however, most

participants (including the OP) engaged with one another's positions, regardless of who they

appeared (or professed) to be.

The majority of participants in these conversations did not appear (or claim) to be

policy-makers, nor experts in their given fields. In fact, no participant ever claimed to work in a

position of power regarding policymaking, particularly when it came to conversations about

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[69] George Takei, November 1, 2016, 3:14PM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/posts/1738989759463803

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formal government and policy issues. Participants would occasionally claim to work in a

government office or as part of a government system, but it was nearly always with the

implication that they operated as a powerless cog. So, a conversation about the flaws in the

foster care system[70], for example, might have included participants sharing specific numbers

and statistics without saying how they knew this information, or claiming to work in the system

in only the vaguest of terms, such as "work[ing] with children in care."

In the end, most of the conversations evaluated here did not exhibit the negative

characteristics of ones that were dominated by political junkies. While there were some who

professed to be experts or claimed to have professional experience, and others who appeared

extremely knowledgeable about the topic at hand, most participants' comments suggested that

they were regular people, simply contributing their own experiences, beliefs and opinions to the

conversation. More importantly, those individuals who did use their professional experiences or

high levels of knowledge in their comments did not appear to wield it so as to beat down

opposition or as a way to take over the conversation, nor did their expertise appear to

intimidate others from participating.

Participant diversity. In addition to a variety of perspectives and expertise, diversity

here was also observable through more subtle means. As Barber (2003) pointed out, even

exposure to small measures of difference are of value to everyday political talk, since it can

facilitate the understanding of perspectives other than one's own. Thus, diversity was also

exhibited in participants' differences in terms of their backgrounds, cultures, personal

experiences or, of particular relevance to this project, political leaning. Based on the

conversations observed on these pages, we can draw some inferences about the variety of

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[70] Humans of New York, December 8, 2017, 6:17PM.
https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/videos/2053247508082672/

people who participate in everyday political talk on each page. Actual demographic data on the

followers of each page does exist, but it is not available to the general public; only the owner of

the page can access it. Thus, the assessment of each page's participants performed here can

only be speculative and in general terms.

George Takei (GT). Participants of GT's page appeared to span a range of ages, from as

young as 18 to well over 65. As their comments revealed, participants were attracted to GT for a

variety of reasons. Some enjoyed his humorous posts on social media, while others were fans of

Takei from his days on *Star Trek*. There were also those who followed him for his political

opinions and his advocacy of certain issues (e.g., LGBTQ rights). Participants appeared to mostly

be Americans, though not exclusively. Occasionally, participants hailing from Canada, Australia

and the UK shared their perspectives. Politically, opinions expressed on GT trended more liberal,

but there were still instances where participants presented with more moderate and even

conservative viewpoints. One example of this was a conversation on a post from Fall 2016 that

shared a trailer for George Takei's Broadway show *Allegiance*.[71] In this instance, the OP

expressed a position traditionally associated with Republicans[72], pointing out the dissonance of

Takei highlighting Japanese internment camps during World War II while being in favor of gun

control laws that restrict people's rights:

> Odd that you say this and recognized the issues your family faced being seen as
>
> dangerous, yet you now push for lists [sic] that restrict people's rights without due
>
> process. You push for less power in the hands of the people and push for more power
>
> for the government? That same government put your family on a list and in a camp with
>
> no due process. I stood up for marriage equality for the LGBT community and the right

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[71] George Takei, November 4, 2016, 4:19PM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/videos/10154654887052866/
[72] Libertarian Republican, but Republican nonetheless.

for women to choose what to do with their own bodies. I will stand with anyone who

supports more rights and power to the people. Your stance on gun control is contrary to

this.

On the whole, GT's participants seemed eager to talk with one another. This page

produced the greatest number of conversations with everyday political talk out of all four pages,

and conversations spanned a diverse range of topics. Based on their comments, GT's

participants appeared to be, on the whole, more politically interested than those on the other

three pages. Yet many expressed a preference for the page's comedy posts, usually in the

context of stating their distaste for the page's increasing political posts in the weeks leading up

to the 2016 presidential election. For example, on October 11[73], GT posted an article about a 31-

year-old cat that "might be immortal." The OP described this choice of content as "George,

taking a break from his political B.S. (we're all afflicted with it, unfortunately) to bring us the

things that we actually follow him for." Judging this move away from more political content to

be a positive one, the OP concluded with a message of gratitude to Takei, adding "I was just

about to unfollow you." The subsequent conversation debated whether people believed it to be

appropriate for Takei to use his Facebook page to share his political opinions, including some

individuals who concurred with the OP's sentiments (e.g., "I've been feeling the same way lately.

I liked this page for smiles, not politically driven stress. Plenty of news outlets do a good enough

job of that") and others who defended GT's political content (e.g., "And who's the collective

"we"? I'm pretty sure many – including myself – follow him not just for his memes but also for

his politics"). Although there were plenty of complaints over the increasing presence of politics

on GT's page, as we shall see this became a common sentiment expressed across all four pages

during both time periods.

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[73] George Takei, October 11, 2016, 10:22AM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/posts/1713389258690520

Humans of New York (HONY). HONY has a wide fan base that is not limited to New York or even the United States. Participants would often identify their location if it was relevant to the conversation, and their comments indicated that HONY's participants are geographically diverse. Participants were from a number of English-speaking locations, including Australia, Canada and the UK, but there were also participants based in many non-English speaking countries, such as China, Italy, Mexico, Egypt, and parts of Africa[74]. As a result, conversations on HONY's posts offered a particularly high potential for international exposure, and therefore more political diversity.

HONY's participants also appeared to enjoy interacting with one another. Although the page's posts were rather infrequent, its conversations were typically quite lengthy. There was some evidence of interest in formal politics among HONY's participants. In many cases, however, HONY's participants' motivations to engage appeared to be rooted in an interest in humanity rather than formal politics. As one participant put it, "I think some people come to hony [sic] to get an idea of how others view the world. It creates connections and opens people's minds."[75] Other times, participants engaged to share their sympathy and support for the subject of the original post or even one another. It was common for conversations on a HONY post to feature a string of comments simply expressing such feelings. For example, during Fall 2017, HONY posted

Figure 11 – HONY participants expressing sympathy

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[74] Participants would often simply state they were "from Africa" without identifying the specific country.
[75] Humans of New York, November 13, 2017, 4:57PM.
https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/posts/2012965762110847

a video of a man describing how his unstable childhood led him to rob the drug dealers and

hustlers in his neighborhood.[76] One of the subsequent conversations focused on whether the

systems in place fail children or if the parents are primarily to blame. However, the thread

began mainly with expressions of sympathy from participants (Figure 11, above).

These motivations, however, did not preclude politics from entering into the discussion.

For example, another conversation from the same post used this story to argue that not

everyone has the same opportunities in the United States. As the OP argued:

These are the stories that make me roll my eyes when you hear someone say that in

America you can be anything you want, and all you have to do is "pull yourself up by

your bootstraps." This guy never even had boots, so he had no chance to pull himself up

by his bootstraps. It's not America's fault, but to think that everyone has a chance is

naïve. Even an obviously bright guy like this is hard pressed to overcome circumstances

as dire as the those he was born into.

When politics was discussed on HONY, most participants expressed views that leaned

more toward the political left. Yet HONY was far from an echo chamber. One example of the

political diversity here can be seen in a conversation on a post from Fall 2017, which featured a

video of a man talking about wanting to go to law school but struggling to pay off his student

loans from his undergraduate education, and his temptation to turn to crime.[77] The OP argued

that America needs affordable higher education and expressed concern for the future of our

country if we aren't able to ensure our citizens are educated. She blamed Republicans for

wanting to keep people "uneducated and desperate." Part of the conversation turned to whose

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[76] Humans of New York, December 8, 2017, 6:17PM.
https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/videos/2053247508082672/
[77] Humans of New York, December 5, 2017, 8:24PM.
https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/videos/2048525875221502/

responsibility is it to pay for higher education, and one person responded directly to the OP

hanging the blame on Republicans:

> [Y]ou mean the voter base that you constantly decry as 'deplorables' and uneducated?
> Seems to me the only unintelligent ones here are the people who would ask the
> government to control their lives even more. Libertarianism is great if you aren't fond of
> the nanny state and echo chambers.

Diply. Similar to HONY, Diply's conversations also had a high potential for international exposure. Because Diply is based in the UK, some of its content concerns events occurring outside the United States. Thus, it makes sense that a portion of its participants would reside in other countries. However, the majority of its content has more widespread appeal, attracting participants from other parts of the world, including the United States.

Figure 12a – Diply participant using textspeak and slang

Figure 12b – Diply participants using textspeak
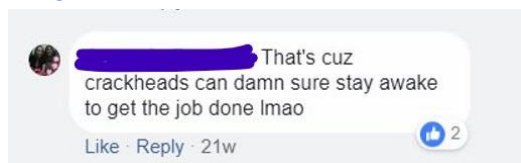
Based on their comments, Diply's participants appeared to be a bit on the younger side. The page's content is clearly aimed at a younger demographic, evidenced by their use of slang terms and heavy focus on popular culture (Broadcasting & Cable, 2018). Similarly, comments on Diply in many cases (though not all) were shorter and used text speak and slang (see Figures 12a[78] and 12b[79]) more frequently than comments on the other three pages, which could indicate a higher proportion of younger participants. In addition, participants on Diply did not appear to have a very strong interest in formal politics, but they did demonstrate an interest in public-minded

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[78] Diply, December 4, 2017, 8:31AM. https://www.facebook.com/diply/videos/1654244254653930/
[79] Diply, November 4, 2016, 5:32PM. https://www.facebook.com/diply/posts/1160116254066735

social issues, such as parenting and cultural appropriation, and politicized social justice issues such as the #MeToo movement. They also did not seem to heavily favor one political side over the other. Political leanings presented as rather varied, with no single position heavily dominating the conversations overall.

   Larry the Cable Guy (LTCG). Participants on LTCG were mostly American (though some Canadian) fans of Larry. Based on their comments, most (though not all) participants appeared to be living in more rural or suburban parts of the United States and working in blue collar jobs or industries. This is not surprising, given Larry's presentation and appeal (Bromley, 2018). When looking at their conversations, participants on LTCG's page appeared to be quite interested in formal politics. Most of their conversations were brief, but they commonly addressed topics such as government efficiency, privacy, and the 2016 election/partisan politics. Everyday political talk on LTCG appeared on the same proportion of the page's posts as on Diply[80]. Unlike Diply, however, there was a greater proportional frequency of comments related to formal politics on LTCG (Trump, the 2016 election, Congress, etc.) rather than concern over specific social issues.

   This stronger interest in formal politics among participants was particularly interesting, given that Larry the Cable Guy's comedy (as well as his page's content) mostly avoids explicit references to formal politics (Morrison, 2015). However, this interest was balanced out with an extant sense among LTCG's participants that the conversational spaces of the page were simply not the place for politics. Participants who attempted to insert partisan politics into the conversation were nearly always berated by others for doing so. For example, a few days before the 2016 presidential election, LTCG posted a picture of someone's yearbook in which a student

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[80] As discussed in more detail previously, the number posts on Diply during both time periods far exceeded the number of posts on LTCG.

(correctly) predicted that the Chicago Cubs would win the World Series in 2016.[81] The OP

immediately started with a joke about Hillary Clinton. Although the resulting conversation was

brief, two of the four subsequent comments reacted to the mere introduction of politics.

Expressing annoyance, one participant complained "Give it a rest…I was wondering when some

turkey would bring up politics…" The other participant humorously pointed out that politics

doesn't belong in this space, naming the OP as "our Inappropriate Political Post winner!"

On those occasions that the conversation did move into the political realm, it should not

come as a surprise that participants on LTCG tended to exhibit more conservative/Republican

views (Boone & Ribecca, 2017). However, it would be inaccurate to describe the page as a

complete echo chamber of conservatism (or Trump supporters). When conventional politics was

mentioned at all, there was still evidence of some political diversity. For example, on a picture of

a car using a sunshade on the outside of the windshield rather than the inside, the OP joked that

she would "bet there is an Obama sticker on the back bumper."[82] The participants who

responded either continued the joke (saying which candidate the (supposedly dumb) owner of

the car would likely support), or argued with each other over the candidates. In both cases,

there were participants from both camps. Some, predictably, attacked Clinton and her

followers:

> *P1*: Lies…? [A]s in "If you like your doctor, you can keep your doctor". How about "The
>
> Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) will save families $2,500.00 a year". The costs has [sic]
>
> skyrocketed and so have fines for not being able to afford the Affordable Care act. – CBS

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[81] Larry the Cable Guy, November 3, 2016, 9:31AM.
https://www.facebook.com/LarryTheCableGuy/posts/10154707880103464:0
[82] Larry the Cable Guy, October 14, 1:44PM.
https://www.facebook.com/LarryTheCableGuy/posts/10154639181873464:0

news. How about "It was a video that got those 4 Americans killed in Benghazi" etc…

etc... etc…

P2: Libtards think they have a monopoly on intelligence, lol!

P3: Killery sticker on the back [of the car in the picture]

But there were also those attacking Trump and his supporters:

P4: …if many of you were smart enough, you would know what a "fact checker" is, and

you would realize that you are supporting someone who continuously lies. However,

Trump does not care about that, because he knows none of his supporters are smart

enough to fact check...

P5: Sorry, but that's [the owner of the car] definitely a Trump voter.

Overall, across all four of these pages, participants exhibited a range of levels of political

interest. While some pages seemed to attract participants with a higher interest in politics than

others, there was evidence of at least some political interest on all pages. Most importantly,

however, was that each page attracted participants of differing political perspectives.

Civility and Incivility

As the above section demonstrated, diversity was widespread in conversations across all

four pages. However, encountering opinions different from one's own can also easily lead to

disagreement. Indeed, in most of these conversations, diversity commonly *did* result in

disagreement. The frequency of disagreements found here leads us directly to the discussion of

the presence of civility and incivility in these conversations.

Passion and emotion. Any discussion of incivility and impoliteness in these

conversations requires mentioning the impact of passion and emotional response, which are

strongly related to the contentiousness of the topic and its personal importance to participants.

Deliberation demands that disagreements are addressed without emotion. However, it is generally known that discussions of political topics have the very real potential to inflame emotions (Mutz, 2006) and, while deliberation abjures the use of affect, everyday political talk accepts emotional behaviors (Mansbridge, 1999). In addition, emotion and passion can be key components of the personal connection that positions an individual within a specific issue public, as well as the driving force behind one's decision to engage with a given topic, including through conversation (Dahlgren, 2009; Papacharissi, 2004). Thus, it plays a key role in the actualized pathway to political conversation. At the same time, however, passion, specifically anger, was almost always a preexisting condition for the manifestation of impoliteness and incivility. The more emotional participants were, the more likely it was that those conversations would veer into impoliteness and incivility.

Although not all of the conversations evaluated here elicited passionate responses, many of them did. Often, this was because the topic itself was one about which people typically have strong feelings. In general, the intensity of passion in a conversation varied, usually depending on the topic. Topics that had already been politicized and were more heavily contentious, such as gun control, religion, or transgender rights, typically produced more heated arguments. Conversations surrounding lower-stakes topics, such as artificial intelligence/automation or social norms, tended to remain more sedate, as did conversations about certain, ostensibly more boring issues related to formal government procedures[83] and policies, such as taxes and right to work laws.

Like diversity, emotional response was another area where conversations on some of the four pages were distinctive. While conversations on GT and LTCG each exhibited their fair

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[83] A notable exception, however, was anything having to do with the 2016 presidential election or Donald Trump.

share of emotional responses, HONY's and Diply's conversations were particularly distinctive with respect to emotion.

Diply. Diply's participants particularly stood out for their emotional volatility. They were much more agitable than participants on any of the other pages. While certain topics, like the 2016 election and President Trump, were likely to provoke participants across all pages, almost any topic could upset Diply's followers. For example, in response to a video of a girl going

Figure 13 - Diply participants on the attack
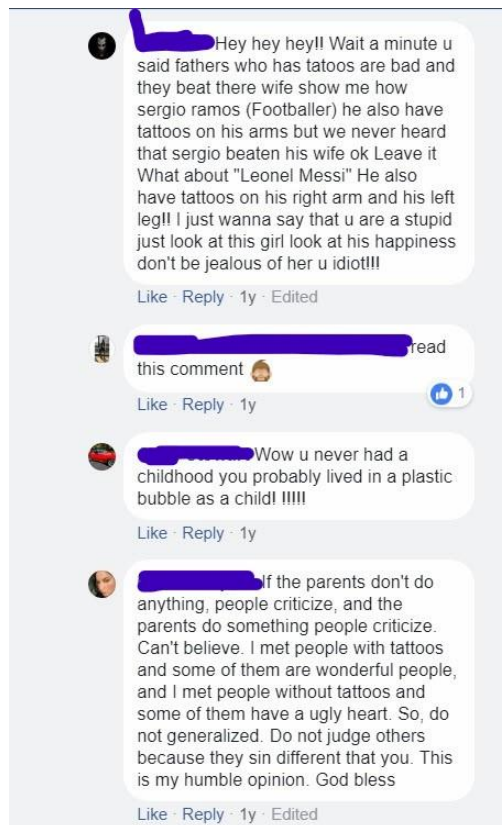
through a homemade *American Ninja Warrior* course[84], the OP tried to make a joke, mimicking a common, judgmental response which regularly occurs on Diply:

This is absolutely irresponsible, dangerous, absurd and the parents of this poor child need to be in jail. I bet the father has tattoos, fights, is a felon and beats his wife. "said the overconcerned, douchy bitch mom." [sic] This is awesome.

Unfortunately for the OP, however, many participants read her comment as if she were being serious and proceeded to attack her (Figure 13).

HONY. HONY's conversations also exhibited high levels of emotion. However, while anger was the most common feature of Diply's conversations, HONY's participants' primary mode of emotional expression was sympathy. This was not surprising, as many of Stanton's subjects often tell rather emotional stories about themselves that were likely to trigger such responses from the page's followers. As a result, instances of impoliteness and incivility were

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[84] Diply, October 10, 2016, 3:31PM. https://www.facebook.com/diply/videos/1137256719686022/

not as common on HONY as on other pages. In addition, unlike the other three pages, none of the conversations on HONY exhibited incivility so strong that it forced the conversation to devolve into participants trading insults (see below). Part of the reason for this difference could be in the strong sense of community that appeared to exist among HONY followers.

It was very common for participants to lend emotional support to one another. In addition, participants sometimes actively tried to help Stanton's subjects. For example, a previous example described a video of a man who wants to go to law school but fights against the strong temptation to do illegal things to get the money to pay off his existing student loans first[85]. In response to this video, the OP encouraged the subject to pursue his dream and offered advice, as well as some tangible help:

> DO IT. You don't have to pay off your undergraduate loans first. Plus there are scholarships (not a ton) out there. As a lawyer, contact me if you need help figuring out the process. LSAT exam, etc. I have extra LSAT study books too and can help with your resume/essays. Seriously, we need more people like you in the legal field! Don't make excuses if you truly want to do it.

Some of the resulting conversation was also about policies of loan forgiveness, but most of the comments were from participants sharing messages of support for the subject and praising the OP for her efforts to help:

> *P1*: I hope HONY will pass on your information to this guy!! It's not everyday you meet someone willing to help you for no other reason than genuine kindness…

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[85] HONY, December 5, 2017, 8:24PM. https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/videos/2048525875221502/

P2: Yes, yes, YES!! Thank you so much for encouraging him and offering to help in such tangible ways!! I hope he takes you up on it and you become his mentor and friend. You and he both just restored my faith in the human race.

Participants regularly recognized in their comments that HONY's followers were a special group of people, and in this way, the space is unique on Facebook. For example, in response to a story about a man who is trying to turn his life around after a year in prison[86], the OP expressed her love for the positive energy in the comments on HONY:

I still can't wrap my head around how positive and compassionate the responses are on HONY's threads. It's like an unreal space on the internet, magical even. The other day I very kindly asked someone to put up a disclaimer on their posts if it's a photo of a giant spider, and I got attacked most viciously; belittled and humiliated just for being arachnophobic. This kid would be torn apart on other pages, but damn, the love on here is amazing.

Many of the responses echoed the OP's sentiment:

P1: I've said that to myself many times. The people who frequent this page are some of the kindest, empathetic, and encouraging people I've ever encountered.

P2: I think it is because we are all drowning. Most of us here know what it's like to slip under the water. So…we see these people that just need to float for a while. Come sit on my raft with me. Rest. I will tread the water for you.

P3: I know! That's why whenever I got upset or from reading too much hate on the internet (unfortunately my job requires me to swim the internet world for research

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purpose), I'll always switch back to HONY. It really is a magical place where people

actually have empathy and love.

Thus, HONY's community did not appear to be based on politics or fandom, but on participants'

connection to one another as human beings.

Civility and Incivility. As discussed in Chapter 4, civility has been notoriously difficult to

define or even identify when it comes to everyday political talk (Brooks & Geer, 2007). In

deliberation, civility is generally understood as having respect for others, but applying this

definition directly to everyday political talk inappropriately holds the latter to the strict

standards of the former. Thus, the concept needed to be approached in such a way that accepts

the more casual and inclusive nature of everyday political talk.

Because incivility is generally easier to identify than civility, empirical research typically

focuses on the former. Yet what constitutes incivility has also been subject to debate between

those who believe incivility should be considered distinct from general impoliteness (e.g.,

Papacharissi, 2004), and those who believe that incivility includes the violation of social graces

(e.g., Sobieraj & Berry, 2011).

Owing to the uncertainties surrounding civility and incivility in existing research, the

application of standards for these characteristics to the conversations evaluated here was kept

intentionally broad. The absence of incivility was generally determined to indicate the presence

of civility. For incivility, Papacharissi's (2004) conceptual distinction between impoliteness and

incivility was adopted in light of the more casual nature of everyday political talk, and in an

effort to be inclusive of emotional reactions and communicative forms. Incivility, then, was

generally understood as a lack of respect, particularly when it was aimed at social groups.

General rudeness toward individuals and passionate outbursts of temper were considered

impolite, but not necessarily uncivil. Based on these definitions, incivility and impoliteness were

both present in these conversations. Out of all 1,102 conversations only about 10% of them were found to exhibit any expressions of incivility, compared with impoliteness, which was far more common. Conversations prompting passionate responses, particularly anger, almost always exhibited impoliteness, and were also far more likely to lead to incivility.

In the course of analysis, however, these specific definitions of incivility and impoliteness described above came to be somewhat less useful. Given the casual atmosphere, the "faceless" characteristic of such online spaces, and the fact that disagreement was a prominent feature of these conversations, it was fully *expected* that incivility and impoliteness would materialize in these spaces (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). Moreover, as discussed in Chapter 4, contrary to previous research which identified "objective" instances of incivility (e.g., Coe et al., 2014; Groshek & Cutino, 2016; Papacharissi, 2004; Rowe, 2014; Santana, 2014; Seely, 2018), interpreting another's words or tone as uncivil is ultimately a subjective judgment. This has implications for objective development and applications of quantitative coding schemes, but also suggests that for determining the value of everyday political talk in these spaces, the *amounts* of incivility or impoliteness present are less important than the ways in which these behaviors affected (or didn't affect) the conversations. This reality made such specific definitions of impoliteness and incivility much less helpful, but also refocused the analysis on these behaviors' impact on the conversation, which was observable, in part, by observing reactions to them in the text of the conversations[87].

In these conversations, reactions to incivility and impoliteness varied. Coe et al. (2014) speculated that, because such behaviors are a common feature of online conversations, most people wouldn't bother to talk about it in a meaningful way (p. 674). In most of these

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[87] Additional data concerning the impact of such behavior on conversations was obtained through the interviews, and discussed in the next chapter.

conversations, this appeared to be the case. Indeed, there seemed to be an expectation that

impoliteness and incivility would be present in these conversations, especially when the topic

under discussion was particularly contentious. This was most clearly shown by the fact that its

absence was viewed as something remarkable. For example, in response to an article in which

women shared the innocent behaviors men misinterpret as romantic invitations[88], the OP

presented her theory on the issue, suggesting that unlike women, men are not taught to have

emotional relationships with other men, which leads them to understand that kind of

friendliness as something that occurs only with a romantic partner. "So think about it," she

concludes:

> [G]irls are raised to form a support network within their friend group. Guys are raised to
>
> expect all that from a female partner. Think about what that says about how they might
>
> interact. A woman thinks she's being friendly, but the guy she's talking to processes that
>
> as she's acting like a romantic partner. By caring. We really need to work on this. It's not
>
> fair to anyone.

This post came at the end of 2017, the year when the #MeToo movement rose to prominence,

and the male/female dynamic had become a rather contentious topic during this time. Most

conversations about this issue tended to yield conversations that were heated, some bitterly so.

However, the resulting conversation in this instance was uncharacteristically civil, to the point

that the OP made a note of it at the end of the thread, by saying "I'm really amazed at most of

the comments and discussion here. I don't think I've ever seen people come together and be

civil on a thread like this."

Occasionally, incivility and impoliteness became a significant component of the

conversation. In such cases, participants' responses to incivility ranged from attacks on those

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[88] George Takei, October 24, 2017, 9:31AM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/posts/2240516059311168

who utilized incivility and impoliteness, infused with equal expressions of impoliteness and incivility, to calmer admonishments, pointing out the person's misbehavior as a reason why they weren't being, or shouldn't be, taken seriously. As we shall see, however, in many cases, expressions of incivility and impoliteness were simply ignored by those who were more interested in engaging with the meat of the discussion or debate.

A *spectrum of incivility impact.* Because the objective here was to understand how these behaviors affected the conversation, it therefore made the most sense to organize observations of incivility in terms of its impact, following Papacharissi's (2004) understanding of uncivil behavior as that which threatens or actively impedes democracy. Papacharissi only assigns this obstructive capacity to incivility, considering impoliteness to be a comparatively benign misbehavior in the larger context of a democracy. Thus, conversations containing incivility (which also contained impoliteness[89]) were primarily assessed based on the obstructive impact the incivility had on the ability of the conversation to construct the PSCA. However, as we shall see, both incivility (attacks against social groups) and impoliteness (attacks against individuals) had the potential to impede democracy, if allowed. Based on this understanding, conversations exhibiting incivility and impoliteness can be organized on a three-point spectrum of impact, from high to low intensity.

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[89] Although, as noted earlier, impoliteness was a precursor to incivility.

High Intensity. In high intensity conversations, incivility and impoliteness completely derailed the discussion, which devolved into sniping and personal attacks. This process was

Figure 14 - Snippet of a partisan brawl

typically driven by a troll, or someone heavily, and passionately, invested in their point of view. For example, in response to an article about all the things Megan Markle had to do to join the Church of England and become a British citizen before marrying Prince Harry,[90] the OP asked why "liberals" are okay with Markle having to follow UK immigration laws, but don't want any laws in place restricting people from coming into the United States. The resulting

conversation ultimately devolved into a partisan brawl (Figure 14).

Although conversations about any topic could have been derailed if a determined troll took an interest, high intensity conversations most commonly occurred when the conversation was focused on topics about which passions were already inflamed, such as party politics (i.e., conservatives vs liberals), political figures (Trump and others), or the 2016 election. The anger in the comments was fierce, sometimes driven by one participant appearing to intentionally fan the flames, while other times multiple participants contributed equally to the tone. Incivility and impoliteness could both ultimately overtake the conversation by distracting participants from the topic at hand and drawing them into a textual exchange of belligerence and ad hominem attacks. As a result, the conversation would spiral out of control and devolve into rampant

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[90] George Takei, December 5, 2017, 2:51PM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/posts/2303101483052625

acrimony. When incivility and impoliteness derailed a conversation in this way, the democratic value of everyday political talk was obstructed. Participants hurled comments at each other rather than engaging in any meaningful back and forth, indicating that neither reciprocity nor public mindedness was present any longer. In such instances, the intense hostility and the absence of reciprocity and public mindedness suggested that any pursuit of mutual understanding had been abandoned. Thus, high intensity conversations were the most problematic for democracy, because they could no longer construct the PSCA.

Medium Intensity. Like high intensity conversations, incivility and impoliteness in medium intensity conversations was typically driven by anger. These conversations occurred when discussing any topic about which people have strong feelings, but they most commonly arose out of particularly contentious topics. As a result, most comments in the thread featured incivility and impoliteness of varying degrees. Some participants' responses consisted of misbehavior without any reasons or explanatory argument, such as "what a moron." They essentially dismissed the individual with whom they disagreed by attacking them rather than their position (regardless of whether this position was right or wrong, or how it was presented). Most, however, attempted to engage with positions with which they disagreed using logical reasoning. Despite having more reasoned arguments, their communications of them were not always calm nor were they polite, but it is the perseverance of logical reasoning that separates medium intensity from high intensity conversations.

Figure 15 - Snippet of medium intensity conversation

For example, in a video in which a woman humorously[91] explains how to treat (and how not to treat) a pregnant woman, one of the points she makes is that you should never ask a woman if she is pregnant, nor should you ever touch a pregnant woman's belly.[92] The OP responded to this point, arguing that, while he agreed that one shouldn't touch a pregnant woman's belly without permission, "the rest just sounds like bitching and moaning. You have a right to say or ask whatever you feel like." The subsequent conversation consisted of participants arguing with one another (including the OP) about the limits of free speech, the importance of manners, and the extent to which men have a right to an opinion on the issue, since they don't have firsthand experience with pregnancy. While some of the comments were without substance (other than impolite dismissals of those with whom they disagreed), a significant portion of them contained claims based on reasons. These too, however, were permeated with anger and impoliteness (Figure 15).

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[91] At least, it's supposed to be humorous. A number of comments suggest that not everyone finds her to be funny.
[92] George Takei, November 14, 2017, 7:31AM.
https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/videos/2264727553556685/.

Low Intensity. As with the previous levels, low intensity conversations exhibited passionate exchanges, often driven by anger, and could have arisen out of discussions over any topic that inspired strong feelings. Similar to medium intensity conversations, low intensity conversations featured instances of incivility and impoliteness which did not redirect or alter the direction of the conversation, and therefore retained public mindedness and reciprocity. What made low intensity conversations distinct from medium intensity conversations, however, was that these misbehaviors did not have such a powerful impact on the former as they did on the latter. That is, while participants in low intensity conversations became agitated to the point that they resorted to outrage-driven impoliteness and incivility, such behavior did not significantly influence the conversation.

Expressions of incivility and impoliteness in low intensity conversations tended to be either presented without reasons (as dismissive comments), or subsumed within a larger, more reasoned comment. Regardless of how they were presented, however, in low intensity conversations, instances of incivility and impoliteness were commonly ignored as participants primarily engaged with the substance of the claims rather than the misbehavior. An example of this can be seen by revisiting the conversations spawned by a video mentioned earlier[93] of a man telling the story of how he severely beat with a baseball bat the man who raped his sister.[94] Many of the resulting conversations focused on whether vigilante violence committed in the name of justice is or should be acceptable in our society. As participants debated the issue from a number of perspectives, many of them expressed themselves passionately, and there were occasional expressions of impoliteness and incivility, both as dismissive comments and folded

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[93] Page 22
[94] Humans of New York, December 7, 2017, 8:13PM.
https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/videos/2051765944897495/

into larger arguments. For the most part, however, such behavior was largely ignored by other participants, who focused their energies instead on the discussion.

On the whole, about 90% of all the conversations evaluated here did not exhibit incivility at all and could therefore be considered civil. Of the 10% of conversations that *did* contain incivility, the majority of them still avoided devolving into bitter, pointless shouting matches. All told, of the 1,102 conversations evaluated, only 38 were high intensity conversations (about 3.4%). Even when a topic or comment incited participants' anger to the point that they utilized expressions of incivility and impoliteness, the resulting conversations remained examples of everyday political talk. Conversations were reciprocal, exhibited diversity and public-mindedness, and reasons and evidence were commonly provided. Ultimately, most of these conversations were simply absent the overwhelming incivility that redirected the entire conversation, making them civil overall.

Trolls. Trolls must be a natural component of any discussion of incivility in online conversations. Indeed, trolls have been a common component of research that focuses on incivility in online conversations (e.g., Lampe, Zube, Lee, Park, & Johnston, 2014; Seely, 2018). Part of the concern about conversations in public spaces on Facebook (as well as online spaces in general) is that the freedom of access and ability to remain at least partially anonymous[95] attracts trolls attempting to hijack conversations and throw them into turmoil. While more recent research has begun to take more of a contextual look at trolls and their behavior (e.g., McCosker, 2014; Phillips, 2016), most research specifically dedicated to online trolls primarily considers them for the purposes of developing defensive strategies against them (e.g., Binns, 2012; Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler & Barab, 2002; Sanfilippo, Yang & Finchman, 2017; Turner, 2010).

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[95] Especially to the extent that people have been able to create fake, alternative profiles for themselves.

As with incivility, it is not the presence of trolls that is important for our purposes, but rather the way trolls impact the subsequent conversation. To explore this, we need to understand precisely what a troll is. Trolls are a special category of participant in online discourse. They are primarily identified by their objective, which is to "cause disruption for their own amusement" (Binns, 2012, p. 548). They do this often by posting comments designed to distract and inflame members of the community. This includes directing impoliteness and incivility against other participants and posting arguments and statements that would be predictably offensive to the community.

Unfortunately, as discussed previously, determining the internal motivations of participants solely from their posted comments is difficult, if not impossible. In addition, it is important to remember that being impolite or uncivil while disagreeing with someone does not necessarily mean that the participant is a troll. While incivility and impoliteness are often used by trolls, they can also be used by legitimate participants whose emotions have become inflamed by the conversation. As a result, it is difficult to determine from the text of a past conversation if a participant's expressions of impoliteness or incivility was intentional or a genuine emotional reaction.

What *could* be observed in these conversations, however, was how other participants reacted to people they perceive to be trolls, which was primarily exhibited when participants accuse others of being a troll. Accusations of trolling appeared in quite a number of conversations, especially ones where the argument became heated. Participants would sometimes identify others as trolls based on characteristics of their profile, such as if their name was obviously not a real name, or if their profile picture wasn't of themselves but rather a meme or graphic design, both of which suggested that the individual in question wanted to retain anonymity from which they could troll with relative safety.

In addition, the term "troll" was commonly used to refer to anyone seen to be misbehaving in conversations. Incivility and impoliteness in a comment was often considered to

Figure 16 – Dismissing participant as troll

be inappropriate behavior, and frequently led to offending participants being dismissed as "trolls" (Figure 16[96]). Even posting (and then defending) an opinion that was either unpopular or found to be offensive could earn a participant the "troll" moniker, even if they remained polite throughout the entire exchange. For example, in response to a story about a gold medal Paralympian who was adopted from a Russian orphanage[97], the OP asked how it was fair that the girl got to compete against kids who have to run, since wheels are faster than legs. Despite later clarifying that she was genuinely curious, and had not meant to be judgmental, many participants still attacked her as if she was a troll, as pointed out by one participant at the end:

> Super disappointed in the responses to [OP] here. Like, wow, seriously. She wasn't being
>
> the troll you think she was being…It was a sincere question that came from a curious
>
> mind and way too many of you became the ugly people you thought she was being…

Not only was this participant defending the OP, she was essentially accusing the participants who were attacking the OP of being trolls themselves.

When participants believed they were encountering a troll, their responses varied. Some immediately called out the offending individual as a troll, which allowed them to dismiss the perceived troll's argument or opinion. They would also warn the rest of the participants not to "feed the troll," which means they should not engage with them, because that is what a troll

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[96] George Takei, September 24, 2016, 5:27PM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/posts/1694591677236945
[97] George Takei, November 18, 2017, 12:31AM.
https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/videos/1684703588286425/

wants most. Others, however, responded to the perceived troll's comments, addressing their

argument or points. Some of these interactions were angry, as the individual's ire was incited by

the alleged troll's impolite and uncivil attacks and would often respond in kind. A number of

these reactions, however, remained calm and thoughtful, with the participant responding to the

alleged troll as if they expected to change the person's mind. For example, in response to an

article about Rita Ora complaining that she was turned away from Gordon Ramsay's restaurant

for not wearing the proper clothing[98], the OP asked why women have such difficulty with dress

codes, citing multiple instances of women and girls being sent home from school or prevented

from being somewhere because of their clothing choices. Most participants took issue that he

singled out women when men are often just as guilty of the same offense. In the course of the

subsequent conversation, the OP often responded to his detractors with comments whose tone

it appeared was intending to incite and offend:

> *OP1*: Lmao here come the feminazis and men who haven't decided their gender yet..
> Moving on.

> *OP2*: …I'm just on a post with illogical irrational thinkers that think the world should
> revolve around them and their inability to use common sense.

> *OP3*: Lmao.. Feminist trying to take down a big bad man by trying to make him feel less
> masculine by calling him a female…Good tactic. No wonder your movement is failing
> miserably.

> *OP4*: Sorry your feelings have been hurt by honesty. Tell your rubber duckies about it
> when you take your bath.

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[98] George Takei, October 24, 2017, 2:09PM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/posts/2240882762607831

While not all of the OP's comments in this thread were insulting, they all exhibited a decidedly hostile tone (perhaps in reaction to those participants who had attacked him).

The majority of participants in this exchange disagreed with the OP, and he was soon accused of being a (misogynistic) troll. While many participants reacted with anger and personal attacks, a number of them responded to the OP calmly and rationally:

P1: We have 15 different dress codes to remember, they're often impractical, depending on the body type it can be near impossible to find clothes that fit them, nuances vary depending on the place and person enforcing it, and even when technically within code we can get grief about how we're dressed. Nope, not a reason to complain, it should be totally easy.

P2: I think you are choosing to only see those stories, [OP]. Ask any fine dining restaurant employee for a breakdown. I would guess it breaks down fairly equally. Your exposure may have shown you one side, but I am sure that is incorrect.

There were even some participants who attempted to explain to the OP why people were attacking him for being sexist by pointing out the flaws in the way he expressed his arguments:

P3: Again, why single out women in your original post then? Your stance is very confusing mate. People are people, when it comes to dress codes, gender really ain't the issue. A bloke with a tracksuit wouldn't get into a Ramsey restaurant either, so why make it about gender?...

The challenges that incivility and impoliteness mainly present to online everyday political talk is twofold. First is that they have the potential to destroy the PSCA by derailing the conversation. As the above discussion demonstrates, all participants in these conversations, including trolls, can express incivility or impoliteness that could lead to high intensity conversations, and as such all have the potential to obstruct the PSCA. What separates trolls

from other participants, however, is that for trolls, the destruction of the conversation is their

ultimate goal,[99] and so their misbehavior is both intentional and fervent. An additional outcome

of trolls' misbehaviors (combined with the passion-driven misbehaviors of other participants) is

that they have the power to transform these conversations into hostile experiences. Because

many people avoid encounters with political difference as "a means of avoiding interpersonal

conflict and controversy" (Mutz, 2006, p. 118), the belligerence introduced by the incivility and

impoliteness of trolls and others may lead people to avoid them entirely. Indeed, research has

found evidence of precisely such avoidance (e.g., Dalisay, Kushin & Yamamoto, 2016; Semaan et

al., 2014; Vraga et al., 2015).

As more people avoid or abandon these conversations in the face of such acrimony, the

number of participants in the conversation reduces until only the loudest, most fervent

participants dominate the thread, which, of course, would deter most others from participating,

in the process endangering the diversity of the conversation (Mutz, 2006) and the PSCA itself.

Although analysis of text-based conversations cannot reveal the actions of those who did *not*

participate, nor their motivations[100], the examples described above demonstrate that incivility

and impoliteness did not prevent everyone from sharing their thoughts or opinions. Participants

commonly ignored incivility and impoliteness or dismissed such comments from those they

perceived to be trolls. That others chose to engage with behavior from suspected trolls supports

McCosker's (2014) argument that that in certain contexts, trolling behavior, though vile and

abusive, can still be "generative of a plurality of acts of citizenship" by provoking exchanges that

"intensify and sustain [political] engagement" (pp. 214-215). If the individual truly had been a

troll, of course, then it is unlikely participants would have been successful in changing their

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[99] For their own amusement, of course, not necessarily because of a wish to disrupt democratic conversation.
[100] The interviews, however, were able to address this issue, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

opinions in any case. However, participants' engagement, however fruitless, still had democratic

value, as doing so required participants to articulate then defend their own opinions, and

perhaps refine them in the process (Shah, 2016). In addition, their comments would have

provided additional benefits for the lurkers who would have read them, even if they had chosen

not to participate (Baum, 2002; Stromer-Galley & Wichowski, 2011).

Mutual Understanding?

As discussed previously, the fundamental objective of the PSCA is the pursuit of mutual

understanding. Mutual understanding in everyday political talk replaces the consensus objective

of formal deliberation. Participants in everyday political talk are not required, or even

necessarily expected to come to an agreement, and indeed, none of the conversations

evaluated here concluded with any kind of formal consensus. Rather, these conversations were

simply, in Graham's (2015) words, "talk for talk's sake."

As such, the benefits of everyday political talk were all applicable here. It's likely that

participants refined their opinions because they had to articulate them in such a way that others

would understand (Kim & Kim, 2008, Shah, 2016). Likewise, through exposure to positional

differences, some participants may have increased their political knowledge (Klofstad, 2011) and

may have developed a greater appreciation of alternative perspectives (Mutz, 2006). Lastly, all

of these benefits would have also been applicable to the many lurkers who likely comprise the

majority of these spaces (Seely, 2018)[101] and could have inspired them to comment. In fact,

there is evidence that some of the conversations did precisely that: inspired some users to

become participants, even when they wouldn't have ordinarily engaged. This mostly came in the

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[101] As we shall see in the next chapter, many respondents admitted to reading the conversations in these spaces without actually contributing to them.

form of participants specifically admitting that this was their first time contributing to these conversations, as one participant did:

> Like I said before, my guilty pleasure is to read through the comments of articles & videos that intrigue me, and although I have had many opinions so some people's responses in past, I personally, have never commented on Facebook. Until now.[102]

When talking about mutual understanding, it is important to point out that, in most cases, it is impossible to determine whether mutual understanding was actually achieved in these conversations. However, we can certainly determine that the potential for it was present, and that it was pursued, based on the presence of the other characteristics of everyday political talk described above.

Identifying mutual understanding. Like civility, it was much easier to identify mutual understanding by its absence. One of the most visible ways to tell that mutual understanding was not being pursued was when participants gave up on the conversation entirely. In conversations with high intensity incivility, for instance, the absence of mutual understanding was palpable. Participants' behavior visibly indicated that they had given up on understanding each other (or even listening to one another).

There were other indications that a participant was no longer interested in mutual understanding, one of which was demonstrably leaving the conversation. Though this action is not usually visible to observers or other participants, some participants were quite vocal about their decision to leave. Brief comments to that effect commonly appeared at some point during a particularly contentious conversation and were usually posted by one participant whose comments had become more and more heated over the course of the exchange. For example, in a conversation responding to an article about why Hollywood should be casting trans actors to

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[102] George Takei, December 9, 2017, 6:31AM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/videos/1620707767975189/

play transgender roles,[103] one participant's comments became progressively angrier, until finally she posted "Anyhoo. I'm outie. U guys can argue amongst yourselves." While the conversation remained active after that and other participants continued to direct their comments at her, she did not post anything further.

Another indication that a participant had ceased to pursue mutual understanding was when they used excuses to dismiss another participant's opinion, particularly when those excuses had nothing to do with the merits of that opinion. One common tactic was to jump on a participant's incorrect use of grammar or spelling, demonstrated in Figure 17[104]. Another strategy was to disqualify others' arguments based on behavior the participant deemed to be inappropriate, such as being too emotional, attacking others, or using overly aggressive language (Figure 18[105]). Finally, participants seeking to dismiss individuals rather than engage with their arguments would also brand those participants as a member of a problematic group (e.g., troll, sexist, racist, Trump/Hillary supporter, liberal/conservative, generally terrible person, etc.). In these cases, because the individual in question was deemed to be a _____ (insert offending group here), their opinion ceased to be of any importance (Figure 19[106], below). This type of labeling

Figure 17 – Dismissing participant for poor language skills

When considering I used perfectly acceptable and proper English grammar, punctuation and spelling; I would say I just proved it to be true. Also if many of you were smart enough, you would know what a "fact checker" is, and you would realize that you're supporting someone who continuously lies. However, Trump does not care about that, because he knows none of his supporters are smart enough to fact check.
Another point in my favour is that you typed your comment with poor punctuation, spelling and grammar. As well, you used no facts or logic to back whatever argument you may have had.

Like · Reply · 1y

Figure 18 – Dismissing participant for inappropriate behavior

Wow, Marc, nice ad hominem there. That completely invalidates any argument you have in any comment you have made on this thread. Anyone who resorts to that petty childishness had no more arguments left and knows that they are wrong. Have a nice day.

Like · Reply · 1y · Edited

[103] George Takei, November 5, 2016, 9:32AM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/posts/1744170735612372
[104] Larry the Cable Guy, October 14, 2016, 1:44PM.
https://www.facebook.com/LarryTheCableGuy/posts/10154639181873464:0
[105] George Takei, September 19, 2016, 9:29AM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/posts/1688759057820207
[106] George Takei, October 23, 2017, 8:29PM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/posts/2239722796057161

allowed participants to completely dismiss an opinion or argument, regardless of its content.

Figure 19 – Dismissing participant for being a member of problematic group

Guys, he's another one of those assholes that believes Vegas was an anti-gun protest, that Sandy Hook was staged, and that President Obama was Kenyan.

Like · Reply · 28w   👍 11

Of course you're a Trump supporter from New Jersey. Who else would say something like that? You're all so predictably racist and stupid. I hope your state finally finishes rotting away and we can dump a bunch of penicillin into the water and forget about your stank.

Like · Reply · 28w   👍 5

However, like incivility and impoliteness, one or several individuals giving up on mutual understanding didn't necessarily affect the willingness of other participants to pursue it. Thus, in many cases, including the examples described above, participants' dismissing others or abandoning the exchange entirely didn't necessarily affect the mutual understanding objective of the larger thread. Thus, as a strategy, the identification of mutual understanding by its absence is far from definitive.

There were a number of conversations where the presence of certain phrases (e.g., "I understand what you're saying," or "that's very interesting") suggested a participant's interest in mutual understanding. There were even some conversations where participants' comments

Figure 20 – Mutual understanding achieved

A good argument, You've distinguished between compelled speech by an artist, and refusing to serve someone because of who they are (not what they are saying).

I still see the tattoo artist as little more than a stenographer taking a statement, but that's just my opinion.

Thank you for making a rational argument without spewing hate as angry liberals are prone to do.

Like · Reply · 1y   👍 3

No prob. If someone isn't being an outright jerk or an obvious troll, I see zero reason to call people names or insult them. 😊 Glad we could find a bit of common ground.

Like · Reply · 1y   👍 5

suggested that not only was mutual understanding being pursued, but it was actually achieved, as in the exchange depicted in Figure 20, which was part of an argument about whether bakers refusing to bake a wedding cake for a homosexual wedding was the same as tattoo artists refusing to tattoo a customer with a message they found offensive.[107] In most cases, however, an interest in mutual understanding was implied by the overall tone and language of the conversation whereby participants would ask each other questions or attempt to clarify

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[107] George Takei, November 5, 2016, 10:22AM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/posts/1744171282278984

previous statements. Both these behaviors suggested that participants truly were interested in

understanding what others were saying. In addition, most participants were truly engaged in

the discussion, and directly responded to what others said in meaningful ways meant to

advance the discussion. These features were not only indicative of reciprocity, but also

suggested that participants were pursuing mutual understanding.

Finally, the use of a calmer tone in their comments was also a signal that participants intended to really hear what others had to say, not just promote their own ideas in the discussion. There were a number of conversations in which participants maintained a dispassionate demeanor, even when discussing potentially explosive topics. For example, for an article about the first transgender playmate in Playboy magazine,[108] one of the conversations was conducted with complete composure (Figure 21). The conversation was brief, and only consisted of two participants,

Figure 21 - Mutual understanding achieved through dispassion

but by its conclusion, it was clear that both of them had come to appreciate the other's

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[108] George Takei, October 23, 2017, 10:31PM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/posts/2239864712709636

perspective. That this conversation remained calm was particularly remarkable, as many of the

other conversations spawned by this article were about this same topic, yet their tone was quite

turbulent. Equally remarkable was that this was not the only conversation on this post, and

about this same topic, that was characterized by calmness.

Dispassion and mutual understanding. It would appear that conversations conducted

with dispassion can offer particular value for everyday political talk, in that it may help

participants remain focused on achieving mutual understanding. However, not all conversations

demonstrated this level of calmness, especially those whose subjects were more contentious. As

discussed in Chapter 4, everyday political talk doesn't require that people remain calm in order

for the conversation to be valuable. Indeed, as discussed above, passion is often necessary to

instigate participation in the conversation in the first place (Dahlgren, 2009; Papacharissi, 2004).

In these more combative conversations, it's difficult to say whether mutual understanding was

achieved, since participants appeared to be working to win an argument rather than understand

one another. In fact, most of these conversations did not end with participants' acknowledging

one another's positions. Rather, they simply petered out as participants grew weary of arguing

with one another. However, in the face of anger, impoliteness and even incivility, arguments

and positions based on logic were still advanced, reasons and evidence were provided, and

participants still responded to one another directly. In the process, then, we can safely say that

participants in these conversations certainly had to work to articulate their arguments in a way

that would allow others to understand them, and had to understand the positions of others in

order to counter them in their own responses. Thus, even though these more emotional

conversations didn't quite end with the argument resolved, there was still evidence of at least

some pursuit of mutual understanding. Ultimately, although dispassion may be necessary for

mutual understanding to actually be *achieved*, ultimately, we can assume that nearly all the

conversations evaluated here (excluding high intensity conversations) pursued mutual

understanding to some degree.

<div align="center">

Impact of the Broader Political Environment

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This study was conceived prior to the 2016 presidential election. As such, it was

expected that conversations online during the election would be slightly different in content and

tone than conversations occurring afterwards, owing to the high level of media attention given

to this important political event, as well as the unusually widespread contentiousness provoked

by the candidates. It seemed therefore likely that people would be more inclined to bring formal

politics into non-political conversations during the election than they would have done during a

time of relative political quietude. This difference was expected to be significant enough to

spawn a research sub-question as to the impact of the broader political environment on the

manifestation of everyday political talk (RQ1b). To address this question, the conversations

analyzed for this project were selected from two distinct time periods: the first set taken from

the months leading up to the 2016 election ("Fall 2016"), and the second set taken from around

the same time a year after the election ("Fall 2017"). The objective of comparing conversations

from a politically charged period to ones occurring during a time when politics were less salient

was to assess the extent to which the intense political atmosphere of the weeks leading up to

the 2016 presidential election might impact the conversations.

Conversations About the Election/Trump

Table 4 (below) shows the number of conversations about the election, Donald Trump

and other political figures[109] across all four pages. As expected, the election was clearly on

people's minds during Fall 2016. Participants were far more likely to refer to the election and/or

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[109] Conversations about Donald Trump were distinguished from conversations about other political figures, because of the conversations that were about political figures during both time periods, most of them focused on Trump.

its candidates in response to unrelated posts during this period. In fact, the election was one of the most popular topics of conversation during the Fall 2016 period (see Figure 5 above). Also as expected, conversations specifically about the election had virtually disappeared by Fall 2017. Donald Trump, however, remained a relatively popular topic of conversation for both time periods, and conversations about him even increased during Fall 2017[110].

Table 4 - Conversations about the election, political figures, and Donald Trump from both time periods

Fall 2016		George Takei	Diply	Humans of New York	Larry the Cable Guy	Totals
	Election	37	0	1	9	**47**
	Other Political Figures	27	0	0	4	**31**
	Trump-Focused	36	0	0	4	**40**
	Trump Mentions[A, B]	26	1	1	0	**28**
Fall 2017						
	Election	2	0	0	0	**2**
	Other Political Figures	9	0	1	1	**11**
	Trump-Focused	33	6	2	2	**42**
	Trump Mentions[A, B]	18	5	0	1	**27**

[A] Trump Mentions is a category distinct from Trump-Focused conversations. The latter refers to conversations whose focus was on Trump, while the former refers to conversations in which one or more participants made mention of Trump, but it was largely ignored by the rest of participants, and the focus of the conversation remained on its original topic.
[B] Categories other than Trump Mentions were not mutually exclusive

When looking at the conversations about the election during Fall 2016, there was significant overlap between conversations talking about the election and conversations focused on Trump or other political figures. This, of course, makes sense. The focal point of a presidential election is its candidates; so, it is virtually impossible to talk about one without talking about the other. However, conversations about political figures other than Trump typically also ended up being about Trump. In other words, in these conversations, which were

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[110] It should be noted, however, that, as a topic of conversation, Trump still did not make it into the top five most popular topics of conversation during Fall 2017 (see Figure 5).

most often about Hillary Clinton, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, there was nearly always someone talking about Trump as well.[111] Viewed in this way, we can say that, for the most part, when participants were talking about the election, they were mainly, for the most part, talking about Trump.

There were two ways Trump figured into a conversation. The first was when the conversation was *about* him (Trump-Focused), and the second (Trump Mentions) was when participant comments mentioned him without any participants responding or any part of the conversation switching its focus. Thus, the two categories were mutually exclusive. Looking at the numbers in Table 4, we can see that conversations about Trump *increased* from Fall 2016 to Fall 2017. By Fall 2017, the electoral race had been completed and Trump had already been settled into office for almost a year. Virtually no one was talking about the presidential election then because it was no longer imminent. Yet participants across all four pages were still talking about Trump.

This unexpected, sustained interest in Trump can be explained through the lens of agenda setting effects of news coverage. When the media focus on a specific issue, that issue becomes more readily accessible in people's minds (Holbrook & Hill, 2005); thus, increased news coverage during an election period should lead to an increased prevalence of conversations focused on the election and its candidates. Typically, once the election is over, news coverage would return to its normal, less acute focus on presidential politics, and the public's attention would follow. However, in this case, news coverage of the presidency did *not* decrease after the election. According to Patterson (2017), during Trump's first 100 days in office, Trump received three times the amount of press coverage given to previous presidents: 41% of all news stories.

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[111] This was also the case during Fall 2017. In fact, virtually no references to other political figures were made during Fall 2017 without someone talking about Trump first.

News of Russia's interference in the presidential election and the subsequent investigation into

the Trump campaign's complicity was an unusual event in American politics on its own, and

therefore meritorious of news coverage. In addition to this, Trump's constant and seemingly

unedited stream of tweets continued well after the election, captivating the press' attention

through much of 2017 (Herbert, McCrisken & Wroe, 2019; Jacobson, 2017). Given the continued

media attention to presidential politics and Trump himself throughout his first year in office

(and beyond), it should perhaps not be surprising that Trump endured as a popular topic of

conversation during Fall 2017.

Conversations about Trump: Fall 2016. The vast majority of conversations about Trump

during Fall 2016 proceeded in the same way: one participant (usually the OP) would refer to the

election or one of the candidates, after which the rest of the conversation would almost

Figure 221 – Typical Election Conversation During Fall 2016

immediately devolve into mean-spirited or sarcastic comments, jokes and memes attacking either or both candidates. The instigating comment could be a joke or meant to be taken seriously, but the results were nearly always the same, though the intensity of the resulting animosity varied, with some participants simply volleying jokes back and forth while other conversations devolved into full-blown meltdowns. See Figure 22[112] for a typical example.

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[112] George Takei, October 31, 2016, 10:21AM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/posts/1738311722864940

No Mutual Understanding*.* Unlike most of the other conversations evaluated for this project, participants in conversations about Trump did not appear that interested in achieving mutual understanding. Comments were nearly always biased against one candidate,[113] and there appeared to be far less reciprocity as participants mainly talked (or shouted) *at* each other rather than *with* one another. There were exceptions, of course (see Figure 23[114]), but in general, there appeared to be an inability, or unwillingness, of most participants to discuss the election or its candidates analytically and impartially.

Figure 23 – Election conversation with mutual understanding

The hairdresser that sued him for sexual assault in 1997 says he did exactly that. His first wife said in an affidavit that he raped her, before he made a gag order part of the divorce settlement. He's also set to go to court in December, accused of raping a woman in the 1990's who was 13 years old at the time.

So yes, he has done these things.

Like · Reply · 1y   10

Sweet Meteor O'Death
—— FOR PRESIDENT ——

Like · Reply · 1y   5

it isn't about Bill, it is about what Hillary DID TO Bill's victims.

You keep ignoring that!

Like · Reply · 1y

I get what you're trying to say,   Maybe if we can come to a common ground we can work from there.

I will state now that what Bill and Hillary have done is indefensible and disgusting. Can you agree that what Trump said is equally so?

Like · Reply · 1y   4

Top Comments is selected, so some replies may have been filtered out.

Off-topic*.* Another common feature of these conversations was the common "off-topic" reaction. In nearly all conversations about Trump during Fall 2016, at least one participant would post a comment pointing out that this topic is completely unrelated to the topic of the post or the conversation and doesn't belong in this space. As the election got closer, the number of participants complaining about those attempting to turn the conversation to politics increased across all pages, as did the sense that participants were becoming fatigued with the election, its candidates, and formal politics in general. Thus, ironically, during a presidential election, a time when people arguably *should* be talking about politics, rather than increasing everyday political talk, the intense focus on politics during Fall 2016 may have ultimately impeded it.

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[113] Except, of course when participants expressed an equal dislike for both candidates.
[114] George Takei, October 11, 2016, 11:11AM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/posts/1713389712023808

Conversations about Trump: Fall 2017. Many conversations about Trump during Fall 2017 proceeded in much the same manner as those that took place during Fall 2016, with one participant's Trump-focused comment setting the tone for the rest of the conversation to be about Trump, and some of them generating high-intensity incivility devoid of mutual understanding. However, not all conversations about Trump followed this pattern.

Less anger, more reasoning*.* A number of conversations during this time period provided evidence suggesting that emotional vitriol over the election had somewhat subsided and that participants may have been able to approach the topic of the president with more emotional detachment than in the previous year. For example, in response to an article about how the parents of a teen who committed suicide over being bullied also became targets of bullying themselves[115], the OP's comment angrily implied that Trump was to blame:

America…Thanks to the people who voted for Trump, because heaven for-fucking-bid… Her emails!!! Every one of you who voted for this man should be ashamed – no family should have to go through this.

As participants subsequently debated whether online bullying could be blamed on Trump being president, most of their comments engaged with the argument itself from a logical perspective, rather than being driven by their emotional reactions to Trump:

P1: Don't act clueless. Ever since Trump took office, bullying, racism and hate have become "accepted."

P2: [OP] with all due respect, as much as I loathe Trump, let's stay focused here. I was bullied to the point of attempted suicide back in the mid 90s waaaaaaay before Trump's

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[115] George Takei, December 8, 2017, 8:31AM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/posts/2306767439352696

time (and ironically, guess who was president then?) This has been an ongoing problem

that youths (and even many adults) have faced for many decades.

P3: Cyber bullying or any bullying has existed long before trump [sic], sure, but a man

was put in the White House that made his living and his campaign off of bullying. He's

made it so people think that's how you get somewhere in life. By stepping on people

and bullying your way into anything. He didn't create the problem but he's definitely

made it worse.

Still off-topic*.* The frustration at off-topic political comments remained a common

component of Fall 2017 conversations about Trump. Accompanying the complaints about off-

topic political comments was a sense of escalating frustration with those participants who

would attempt to bring up Trump in conversations about other things. Some participants lashed

out angrily at these intrusions:

P1: I swear to God does everything always have to correlate with trump!? I'm starting to

really believe the dems are secretly infatuated with him. He is our president like it or

not. Ffs [for fuck's sake] sick of election night groundhog day fuck![116]

P2: Why the hell can't we get through one normal post without someone spewing an

irrelevant political comment??[117]

Despite being a year out from the election, media coverage of Trump was still intense; so, there

hadn't really been much of an opportunity for people to recover from the stress and animosity

the contentiousness of the election had inflicted on the American people. Thus, as Trump

remained a popular topic of conversation during Fall 2017, participants continued to regularly

scold those who would inappropriately bring partisan politics into conversations. One comment

[116] George Takei, December 6, 2017, 8:29PM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/posts/2304778582884915
[117] George Takei, December 3, 2017, 8:31AM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/posts/2299847063378067

perfectly expressed the weariness felt by many participants across the four pages. At the end of

an argument about Trump posted in response to a completely benign article about a couple's

engagement photo accidentally revealing the woman was also pregnant,[118] one participant

groaned, "oh my god, we're all exhausted, let us laugh sometimes in between calling our

senators."

Impact of Trump on Other Everyday Political Talk

While it is interesting to see how participants talked about Trump both before and after

the election, what is particularly important here is how this event affected participants'

willingness to engage in everyday political talk in more general terms. That is, since everyday

political talk is not solely defined as conversation about electoral politics, were there any

significant changes in the other conversations that took place during these time periods?

On the surface, it is difficult to determine whether the election had much of an impact.

It was not uncommon for conversations about partisan politics and Trump to occur in response

to otherwise unrelated topics. Since this occurred during both time periods, it is difficult to know

for certain whether participants introducing formal politics in response to non-political topics

was the normal state of affairs or if the continued media prominence of such divisive events

(Trump running for and then being president) made people more likely to do it. The only clue

that suggests this is not the norm for these pages was the continued objections voiced by

participants at the intrusion of these topics into their conversations.

Despite the media prominence of Trump, however, participants did not appear to be

turned off from engaging in conversations about other public-minded topics, whether they were

at the institutions and processes level, the issues level, or the foundational level. Although

Trump was a popular topic of conversation during both time periods, he was not the most

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[118] George Takei, December 3, 2017, 2:51PM. https://www.facebook.com/georgehtakei/posts/2300278993334874

popular topic for either time period. In fact, when compared to the total number of

conversations about other things, Trump-focused conversations only made up a small

percentage of the whole (11.7% during Fall 2016 and 14.5% during Fall 2017[119]). In other words,

most participants were not entirely consumed by Trump, either as a candidate or as president.

Looking a little closer, we can see that, overall, conversations containing everyday

political talk increased from Fall 2016 to Fall 2017 by over 250 conversations (see Table 2), a

rather significant change. The only exception to this was on LTCG. While everyday political talk

conversations increased on Diply, GT and HONY from 2016 to 2017, the number of

conversations with everyday political talk actually *decreased* slightly from 2016 to 2017 on LTCG.

However, while conversations may have decreased from Fall 2016 to Fall 2017, the variety of

conversation topics increased. That is, the election comprised a significant portion of

conversations during Fall 2016, while conversation topics during Fall 2017 were much more

diverse.

One explanation for the overall increase in everyday political talk between 2016 and

2017 might be that, in Fall 2016, people had simply grown weary from what had been a vicious,

and unavoidable election cycle, weariness from which, a year later, they had mostly recovered.

During the months leading up to the election, it became quite difficult, if not impossible, to

escape the constant electoral vitriol, which often infected most of our interactions, both online

and off, both political and nonpolitical. Interactions on social media were particularly affected. A

Pew Research study from the months leading up to the election found that more than a third of

social media users were "worn out" by the political discussions, while nearly two-thirds of them

found political disagreements to be "stressful and frustrating" (Duggan & Smith, 2016).

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[119] See Figure 5 (p. 161)

Thus, although we would ordinarily expect an election to raise the general levels of political awareness, the 2016 election in particular may have had the opposite effect. The high levels of political interest typically inspired by a national election quickly soured as the hostility intensified and spread on Facebook (Fottrell, 2016). Politics, and the fierce rancor that came with it, became both unavoidable and intolerable (Markowicz, 2016). In response, many people took steps to avoid any political encounters, including blocking friends and even avoiding Facebook altogether (Rudavsky & Bartner, 2016). It is possible, then, that people who would have ordinarily participated in everyday political talk on these public pages may have also taken a step back from such conversations. Given these additional factors, one possible explanation for the increase in conversations featuring everyday political talk Fall 2017 is that people who may have been more likely to avoid interactions on Facebook in the weeks leading up to the election, had, by Fall 2017 begun to return to the site.

Another possible explanation for the increase is that there may have been a political awakening among some participants in 2017. Trump's election has been argued to be a driving force behind increased political interest among many Americans. By the summer after Trump's election, Pew Research found that 52% of Americans reported paying more attention to politics (Pew Research Center, 2017), and some have argued that Trump's election has resulted in significant increases in political participation on both sides of the aisle (Liu, 2017; Sydell, 2017). Add to this the overall increased attention to and interest in social justice issues in 2017, such as the #MeToo movement[120], and it seems likely that participants on these pages may have also been more inspired to engage in everyday political talk than they might have been previously. Their increased interest may have enabled them to make the transition from non-political to political more readily. Ultimately, however, it is difficult to be certain one way or the other, as

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[120] A topic whose participants were made *Time Magazine's* Person of the Year in 2017

neither Fall 2016 nor Fall 2017 were exactly time periods representative of the traditional

political landscape.

<div align="center">**Conclusion – The Big Takeaways**</div>

The purpose of this case study was to use qualitative content analysis to evaluate the

conversations that emerged in the comments of four popular non-political Facebook pages in

order to assess the character of everyday political talk as it manifests in these spaces. So, what

can we conclude based on this analysis?

Everyday Political Talk Is A Regular Occurrence in These Spaces

Over the two three-week periods, over 1000 conversations were found across all four

pages that featured both public-mindedness and reciprocity, demonstrating that everyday

political talk is a regular component of the conversations in these spaces. The conversations

were similar in that they all constituted everyday political talk, yet they were not uniform in

volume, structure or tone across all four pages. Each page exhibited differences in terms of

objectives, featured content, and participants, and thus the conversations that transpired on

each were similarly marked by their own unique character.

Overall, posts on GT and HONY produced the highest percentages of conversations with

everyday political talk. Conversations on GT were diverse. Participants were interested in a wide

range of topics, and conversations were alternately lengthy or brief, passionate or calm. HONY

participants viewed themselves as part of a distinct community; so, it should not be surprising

that participants commented often, and typically at great length, despite the fact that HONY's

posts were rather infrequent. Altogether, this suggests that participants on GT and HONY were

eager to talk with one another and may have frequented these pages as much for the

opportunities for conversation they provided as for their respective content.

Although participants on Diply and LTCG did engage in everyday political talk, it was simply not as common on these pages as it was on GT and HONY. Diply's participants were emotionally volatile, far more than participants on any other page, and were far more likely to react with anger to a post or a comment. Despite the frequency of Diply's posts, everyday political talk was not as prevalent in conversations. Similarly, LTCG's posts yielded limited everyday political talk, and those conversations that did produce everyday political talk were comparatively brief. Perhaps participants on LTCG and Diply were more interested in the respective pages' content rather than in participating in its community. Yet in the conversations on these pages that *did* lead to everyday political talk, participants nevertheless demonstrated an active and often thoughtful engagement with the topics about which they did converse.

These differences reflect a wide range of conversation types and modes of engagement that can constitute everyday political talk, which confirms the broader approach of the PSCA. They also serve to demonstrate the concept of the inadvertent political encounter. Even leisure pursuits present the potential for encounters with the political, opportunities for everyday political talk and participation in the public sphere, which illustrates the inability of people to fully insulate themselves from political exposure of any kind.

In addition, however, the distinctive features of the conversations produced by each page suggest an important direction for future research. We have already established that political spaces online tend to attract people who are already interested in politics and are likely to be heavily partisan, which can impact the intensity and tone of the conversations. However, non-political online spaces appeal to people for reasons outside of politics, and the nature of the everyday political talk in those spaces will be similarly affected by other features of the participating community, including culture, interests, and perceived norms of the space and surrounding community.

When we think about the social media contexts with which people choose to engage and the ensuing political conversations, we most frequently concentrate on the content of both. Yet we rarely address the fact that different people follow different social media pages or accounts, and with that comes different communities and different types of conversations. This raises questions about the different types of everyday political talk developing in these spaces, and furthermore how exposure to these differences impacts both participants and observers. Though it is not likely that these conversations would be community members' sole exposure to everyday political talk, the conversations taking place in these spaces can act as a model for how to have (and how not to have) a political conversation. It therefore becomes important to understand how exposure to the particular tone, quality and norms of conversations in these distinctive spaces contributes to people's overall conceptual map of political conversation, as well as how exposure to these conversations might impact their future engagement in democratic life and their willingness to participate.

Manifestation of Everyday Political Talk

Step One identified conversations from all four pages that constituted everyday political talk by assessing the presence of reciprocity and public-mindedness. Step Two explored the manifestation of the other characteristics of everyday political talk in these exchanges.

Matters of public concern. Conversations covered a wide range of topics, suggesting that participants have a diverse array of interests. Many conversations were focused on more abstract concepts, such as discrimination and freedom, as well as topics less strongly associated with formal politics, such as parenting and social norms, as these topics were likely easier to connect to participants' underlying personal values, beliefs and experiences. Yet participants didn't shy away from topics that were more concrete or formally political either. Formal

government and specific policies, such as the foster care system, gun control laws, and

economic policies, were among the most popular conversation topics for both time periods.

Equality, freedom and sincerity. The structure of these spaces was found to facilitate

equality and freedom in principle, although the potential for equality appeared to diminish the

longer a conversation continued. Despite the absence of structural supports for sincerity,

evidence from these conversations suggests that it may be an expected behavioral norm.

Providing reasons. It was standard for participants on all pages to provide reasons

based on logic and supported by evidence to justify their opinions. Objective evidence, in the

form of facts, logic, and external documentation (e.g., links to articles, images of charts/tables),

was just as common as subjective evidence, such as personal experiences, belief systems and

emotional reactions.

Diversity. Diversity was generally present in the conversations on all four pages. This

included both diversity of perspectives as well as diversity among the participants themselves in

terms of knowledge, experience, and, most importantly, political leaning.

Civility and Incivility. Most conversations led to disagreements, and many of these

evoked passionate responses from participants, which were more likely to lead to impoliteness

and incivility. Although both impoliteness and incivility were found in many of these

conversations, the impact of incivility and impoliteness on the conversation was determined to

be of greater importance than their sheer presence. What is important to note is that, despite

their presence, the impact of these misbehaviors was far less damaging to the democratic

nature of the conversations than popular belief would expect.

Mutual understanding. Lastly, most conversations were comprised of participants who

appeared to be interested in pursuing mutual understanding. It is true that in most cases we

cannot definitively determine that mutual understanding has been achieved, since it is an

outcome that primarily occurs in the minds of participants and must therefore be verbally

acknowledged in order to be observed.

In the few conversations in which it appeared that some participants had in fact

achieved mutual understanding, this outcome seemed to be dependent on participants' ability

to remain calm and dispassionate in their encounter. Yet even in those conversations that

became heated, and where participants were primarily interested in convincing others of the

rectitude of their argument, the presence of the other characteristics of everyday political talk in

these conversations suggested the potential for, and the pursuit of, mutual understanding. In

the face of anger, and even impoliteness, participants still utilized logic, reasons and evidence in

their arguments, which were constructed in direct response to the arguments posited by others

and articulated so that they may be understood by others. Thus, even though these more

heated conversations usually did not resolve the argument at the end, in most cases, mutual

understanding was being pursued to some degree.

Ultimately, although conversations on each page had their own unique differences, they

all shared the basic features of everyday political talk. It is true that for each page, not all posts

produced conversations with everyday political talk, and that on the posts that did, everyday

political talk was not the only type of conversation taking place. These pages aren't intentionally

dedicated to politics or the public sphere, yet the PSCA was being created with some regularity

on all of them.

Obstacles to the PSCA: Impact, Not Presence

There are a number of features of internet conversation that have been identified as

problematic for the public sphere, but the dangers of echo chambers (via takeover by political

junkies) and overwhelming incivility (via trolls) have featured prominently in this study. The

former speaks to the essential role of diversity for communicative action, while the latter gains

particular prominence given the casual nature of everyday political talk. However, simply identifying whether these elements were present in these conversations was determined to be beside the point. Rather, what was important for the PSCA was not their presence, but their impact (or lack thereof) on participants and the remainder of the conversation.

At the core of the problematic impact of each of these dangers is their effect on the overall diversity of the conversation. Both incivility and the tactics of belligerent partisanship and expertise that create echo chambers facilitate an atmosphere of intolerance, exclusion and derision, and infect the conversations with intense, palpable conflict. Such an environment discourages those with alternative opinions, less comprehensive knowledge, and/or who are averse to confrontation from participating in, but also from even observing, political conversations. In this scenario these groups abandon the conversation entirely, thoroughly eliminating diversity in the process. This can have devastating consequences for the public sphere, as diversity is essential for the pursuit of mutual understanding. Therefore, these conversations were evaluated for the potential for each of these dangers.

Incivility. Incivility and impoliteness were assessed according to their impact on the ability of the conversation to construct the PSCA. The most destructive impact of incivility and impoliteness was when they completely derailed the discussion and obstructed the democratic value of the conversation. As these conversations devolved into pure acrimony without substance, they moved away from the pursuit of mutual understanding, and thereby ceased to operate as the PSCA. However, only about 0.3% of all conversations were found to be of this type. In general, when incivility or impoliteness became prominent features of a conversation, participants would either respond in kind, or berate those who would use it. In most cases, however, participants typically expected conversations to feature impoliteness and incivility, and usually ignored its presence.

The comments of (suspected) trolls contributed to, and occasionally drove, a conversation's overly hostile tone. However, similar to incivility, participants often ignored or dismissed comments from those they perceived to be trolls. Sometimes, however, they would respond to these individuals. Often these interactions were in the form of trading insults, but sometimes the comments characteristic of trolls motivated participants to engage more thoughtfully, which required them to articulate and defend their own opinions. This suggests that in some cases, incivility may even encourage political engagement.

Echo chambers. Although many conversations featured a smaller set of participants who were more heavily active than the others on the thread, these individuals didn't attempt to shut out others by limiting their interactions with one another. Rather, they were willing to engage with anyone who took the time to comment on the thread. In addition, the comments in these conversations came from participants with diverse perspectives, backgrounds, and knowledge sets, regardless of the topic. When it came to attempts to dismiss a dissenting argument, justification on the basis of being an expert in the topic under discussion was infrequent and justification on the basis of working in a position of political power was nonexistent. The overall diversity of knowledge and experience in these conversations suggests that lack of formal expertise was not ridiculed by those with more experience, nor did it appear to deter otherwise less-knowledgeable participants from engaging.

Impact of Broader Political Environment

Fall 2017 was intended to provide conversations occurring during "normal" levels of political interest and engagement that could be compared with conversations observed during a major national election, when attention to formal politics would be higher than usual. However, neither the 2016 election cycle nor the period afterwards could be characterized as "business as usual." Media attention to presidential politics was high in the months leading up to the election

and remained high throughout 2017. As a result, the it was difficult to determine the impact of the broader political environment on these conversations. Despite this, there were some interesting observations:

Talking about Trump. Donald Trump was a popular topic of conversation during both time periods. While conversations during both time periods were comprised mainly of mean-spirited jokes, acute animosity, and a general inability to discuss Trump in any way that might construct the PSCA, the intensity of these features had decreased somewhat by Fall 2017. Another regular feature of these conversations was the exasperation participants felt at the intrusion of electoral politics into their conversational spaces. Unlike participants' underlying anger, this feature remained a constant part of conversations about Trump during both time periods.

Talking about other things. Despite the media prominence of Trump, however, participants did not appear to be turned off from engaging in conversations about other public-minded topics. When compared to the total number of conversations about other things, Trump-focused conversations only made up a small percentage of the whole. In addition, the number of conversations with everyday political talk increased significantly from Fall 2016 to Fall 2017.

Fatigue with electoral politics. One of the most pervasive features of both time periods was a general sense of fatigue with formal politics. Participants on all pages expressed exasperation with what they saw to be an intrusion of electoral politics into their respective conversational spaces. Frustration with politics was not limited to conversations about the election or Donald Trump, however. The introduction of any political theme or topic could receive complaints if the transition from nonpolitical to political was perceived to be too big of a stretch.

This trend remained constant during both time periods, which suggests several things. First, that politics may not have been a common component of these conversational spaces in the past. Second, that even as many participants may have been trying to avoid formal politics as a topic of conversation, other participants were paying attention to politics (perhaps at an increase from the past), and continued to find it important (or appropriate) to introduce such topics into these conversations. Finally, it also highlights a potential challenge to everyday political talk in non-political spaces. Despite the vibrancy of everyday political talk in these non-political spaces documented above, there still existed some resistance to these types of discussions among other participants. This behavior raises questions about the potential for the development of norms in these Facebook spaces (and others) which might eventually dictate what can and cannot be discussed, and how such norms might impact the manifestation of everyday political talk.

Conclusion

One of the arguments directing this study has been that the public sphere exists in places we wouldn't typically expect it to, and that by exploring these broader contexts, research can obtain a more comprehensive picture of the online public sphere that is more representative of how people talk about politics. The results of the qualitative content analysis described above have demonstrated that the comments sections of non-political Facebook pages can support the construction of the public sphere. Everyday political talk was found to be a common occurrence in these spaces. Because it emerged spontaneously, and was initiated by participants, everyday political talk in these spaces may not be expected. This unpredictability renders these spaces as a natural facilitator for IPEs, which trigger the actualized pathway to political conversation. In addition, these pages' ability to attract followers on the basis of interest in entertainment, rather than politics, increases the diversity of the pool of potential

participants. Thus, the comments sections of non-political Facebook pages may be a good place to begin sketching a more representative picture of the broader online public sphere.

Unanswered questions. The results of this case study leave us with a few unanswered questions. The first of these is that, due to the unusual nature of the political environment during these two time periods, it is difficult to know the extent to which the conversations observed here constitute the normal state of affairs on these pages when it comes to political conversations. In addition, it is equally challenging to know for certain what is actually going on in participants' minds. As discussed previously, there is a limit to what we can tell about individuals' motivations and objectives from comments posted in a public online space. Some of this will be hopefully addressed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 7: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

This chapter reports the results from semi-structured, in-depth interviews with individuals who followed, and in some cases contributed to conversations on, at least one of the four Facebook pages selected for this study: George Takei (GT), Humans of New York (HONY), Diply, and Larry the Cable Guy (LTCG). Interviewees were recruited from the survey through the modified snowball sampling method and survey described in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5 also posed three broad research questions aimed at exploring the public sphere based on communicative action as it manifests through everyday political talk in non-political spaces on Facebook. The first question focused on the nature of the conversation within the parameters of the characteristics of everyday political talk. Most of RQ1 was addressed in the previous chapter. There were, however, characteristics of everyday political talk that needed to be explored from the perspective of individuals participating in the conversations themselves. The so-called "eye of the beholder" characteristics – including sincerity, equality and freedom – were explored through these interviews, attached to RQ3.

RQ2 focused on the participants themselves, seeking to better understand the types of people who were attracted to these minimally anchored contexts on Facebook, and the reasons they were drawn to these spaces.

RQ3 was the most comprehensive question, concentrating on the different components of the conversational process from the perspective of participants. RQ3a focused on the particular elements that drive people to join a conversation. RQ3b was concerned with identifying participants' underlying conversational objectives. RQ3c considered participants' perception of these spaces when it comes to everyday political talk. This question addressed four broad areas: (1) engagement – the extent of participants' engagement in the conversation in light of the technological affordances and low-risk experience offered by the Facebook

environment, (2) contextual safety - the extent to which participants assess the safety of these

contexts for honest opinion expression, (3) encounters with difference – the manner in which

participants react to encountering differences of opinion, as well as impolite and uncivil

behavior, and (4) eye of the beholder characteristics – the perception of specific features of

everyday political talk (i.e., sincerity, equality and freedom) that can best be understood from

the perspectives of the individuals participating in the conversations. And finally, RQ3d explored

the extent to which participants consider these kinds of conversations to be a political act.

Motivations in the Context of Everyday Political Talk

Ultimately, RQ2 and RQ3 explore interviewees' motivations and objectives surrounding

their interactions on non-political Facebook spaces. Therefore, it makes sense to analyze the

results addressing RQ2 and RQ3 from a perspective that situates interviewees' motivations at

the center.

The concept of motivation has long been a key concern of research on mediated

communication processes, and this is perhaps most visible in the uses and gratifications

approach. The overarching principle of the uses and gratifications approach is that audiences

pursue different media activities to satisfy certain needs and achieve specific purposes (Katz,

Haas & Gurevitch, 1973; Sundar & Limperos, 2013). As such, media consumption is understood

as an interactive process between media (channels, devices and content) and active,

individualized audiences. With the widespread availability of the internet and social media

technologies, the conceptualization of audiences as interactive users has become commonplace

(Sundar & Limperos, 2013, pp. 504-505).

When it comes to everyday political talk, the role of motivation is similarly important. As

discussed in great detail in Chapter 4, everyday political talk is not the same as deliberation in

many ways, and this includes its motivation. Deliberation is purposeful talk, undertaken to

address a civic problem. The civic and political motivations of those participating, then, are clear

from the outset. Everyday political talk, on the other hand, is specifically defined as

nonpurposive (Kim & Kim, 2008), and is generally considered "talk for talk's sake" (Graham,

2015, p. 250). Although everyday political talk has been shown to provide a range of civic

benefits, as there is no observable or tangible product of everyday political talk, it is important

to understand why individuals choose to engage in or avoid such conversations (Eveland et al.,

2011). Furthermore, since, as Muhlburger (2005) pointed out, participation in online spaces

such as Facebook is governed by individual motivations, understanding what drives people to

participate in these conversations is essential.

Motivations also figure into the consideration of non-political spaces on Facebook as

valuable sites of the public sphere based on communicative action. It is important to remember

that the objective of PSCA is mutual understanding. Though it is difficult to definitively

determine whether interviewees have *achieved* mutual understanding, understanding their

motivations for entering into the conversation might illuminate the extent to which their

intentions are indeed *oriented* toward mutual understanding, which is precisely the kind of

conversation necessary to produce the PSCA.

Lastly, motivations come into play when considering the actualized pathway to political

conversation, which refers to the personalized route to political conversation in the social media

realm. As a largely autonomous process, individuals are in control of the entire pathway,

particularly whether or not they decide to engage in such conversations. When considering

unexpected encounters with politics that lead to everyday political talk in non-political spaces

on Facebook, the individual's decision to engage (or to avoid engaging) will be strongly linked to

their motivations and expectations, both for the conversation, as well as for the space itself.

Understanding the factors involved in these decisions will be particularly important to

evaluating the role of such spaces in each interviewee's actualized pathway to political

conversation.

With the concept of motivation as a guide, the chapter now turns to a description of the

interviewees, in terms of their demographics, political interest, use of Facebook, and, most

importantly, their reasons for following the four public Facebook pages that are the focus of this

study. The next section will discuss interviewees' motivations for engaging in everyday political

talk on Facebook and the nature of their engagement. Lastly, the final section will integrate

findings from the previous sections to address the extent to which interviewees appear to follow

the actualized pathway to political conversation.

Who are the Interviewees?

RQ2 concentrates on identifying the people engaging in these conversations and in

particular, their attraction to these public pages. As described in Chapter 5, interview subjects

were recruited through the online survey. Out of the 104 survey respondents, 25 people were

interviewed.

Mostly Observers

The first characteristic of the interviewees that must be addressed is that a majority of

interview subjects did not regularly participate in conversations on any of the pages. As

discussed in Chapter 5, the recruitment process aimed to enlist the participation of Facebook

users who followed at least one of the four public Facebook pages who had at least observed, if

not participated in, publicly-minded conversations taking place in the comments sections of

non-political posts on any of the pages. Because the eligibility requirement for taking the survey

was simply that respondents were *followers* of a page, the expectation was that interview

subjects would be a mix of individuals who had engaged in public-minded conversations on

these Facebook pages ("Contributors"), and ones who had encountered and observed such

conversations on these pages, even if they had not actively participated in them ("Observers").

In the end, however, *most* interviewees turned out to be observers, with the vast majority of

their conversations occurring in rather different spaces on Facebook.

However, as explained previously, since everyday political talk can have benefits even

for those who do not actively participate (e.g., Baum, 2002; Galarza Molina, 2017; Stromer-

Galley & Wichowski, 2011), observers' perspectives and opinions are still important for this

project. As we shall see, interviews with observers did provide useful information, particularly

the reasons they chose not to participate in conversations on these pages, and, more

interestingly, where they *did* choose to engage. Yet, it should also be acknowledged (and will be

below) that being unable to interview many contributors on these pages is a significant

limitation of this study.

Demographics

Interviewees ranged in age from 26 to 58, with an average age of 37. Nineteen

interviewees were women, and nearly all interviewees were white; one was African American,

and one identified as both white and black. Interviewees were mostly well-educated, with 17

having a Master's degree or higher, and 7 having graduated college with a Bachelors or an

Associate's degree. Only one interviewee had just a high school diploma. Interviewees came

from a number of different states, including Oklahoma, California, Minnesota, Illinois and

Maryland, but most came from either New York (6) or Texas (4). They all lived either in urban or

suburban areas. Most interviewees identified their political orientation to be somewhat liberal

(10) or very liberal (10). Four were moderate and only one was somewhat conservative. Most

interviewees identified as Democrats (20), two as Republicans, two were unaffiliated, and one

was a member of the Green Party.

Political Interest and Engagement

Interviewees were asked about their interest in formal politics, their levels of political participation, both online and offline, and their news consumption habits. Based on their responses, just under half of interviewees exhibited characteristics that would qualify them as political junkies, including high levels of interest in formal politics, evidence of practical engagement in the political process both offline (protesting, communicating with legislators, membership in organizations devoted to formal politics) and online (participating in political discussion groups, following political figures on social media, posting political opinions on social media), high levels of news/politics consumption, and of course, talking about politics regularly.

Only a slight majority of interviewees did not qualify as political junkies. Of these, some said they were not interested in any kind of politics at all. Others acknowledged the importance of being informed and engaged, but primarily as a matter of responsibility rather than affinity. There were also interviewees who didn't express a particular interest in formal politics, yet their conversations and activities tended to become political because the issues they cared the most about were either inextricably intertwined with formal politics or had recently become politicized. For example, Sienna[121] didn't consider herself to be a political person. However, upon realizing that she regularly engaged in many of the traditional and digital behaviors commonly associated with high interest in formal politics, she began to laugh. "I'm laughing because it just doesn't make any sense with the way I identify myself," she explained. She attempted to clarify that even though she followed, and engaged with, politics quite regularly, it was only in service to her strong interest in social justice:

> I follow politics pretty closely because I follow these issues closely and they're very
>
> interwoven. But I'm not someone who has ever campaigned for anyone or has had any

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[121] To maintain the privacy of interviewees' identities, they have all been assigned pseudonyms.

interest in pursuing a political career. I guess I've interacted with plenty of political

people through advocacy work, but I think it of as I'm more on the community side of

things. I'm a citizen who's interested in making change. Which I guess, like, I don't think

of myself as a political person, but I guess I am pretty political.

Although she saw a clear difference between social justice issues and formal politics, as she

attempted to explain this difference, Sienna quickly realized the practical overlap.

Facebook Page Following

All interviewees used Facebook, with 7 claiming it was the only form of social media

they used regularly. The median time spent on Facebook among interviewees was between 5-10

hours per week.

One of the eligibility requirements for the survey was that interviewees followed at least

one of the four Facebook pages, but more than half of interviewees followed more than one.

Most interviewees followed GT and/or HONY. Only two followed Diply, and none followed LTCG.

As explained in Chapter 5, the specific focus of RQ2 was on what attracted interviewees to these

particular minimally anchored contexts. These four Facebook pages were selected for this

project because they all were not explicitly devoted to politics. Absent the structural political

anchor, these spaces should have attracted followers on the basis of a variety of non-political

interests, which would increase both the representativeness of their conversations and the

potential for inadvertent political encounters (IPEs). Although most interviewees were not

regularly having conversations in these spaces, they continued to engage with the pages'

content and did admit to reading the comments in these spaces, at least to some extent.

Therefore, understanding what attracted interviewees to these spaces was important to support

the evaluation of these spaces as non-political contexts. As no interviewee followed LTCG's

page, the following analysis can only address Diply, GT and HONY.

Diply. Only two interviewees followed Diply. One pointed to the human-interest content that the page occasionally posted. The other said she was particularly interested in the page's content about social issues that were important to her. Both of them followed Diply in addition to George Takei and Humans of New York, and also pointed out that they don't see content from Diply in their newsfeed very often.

Humans of New York. 19 interviewees followed HONY. Their interests in the page were sometimes emotional and sometimes intellectual, but all were fundamentally linked to an interest in the realism of humanity and our society as a whole.

Most interviewees who followed HONY said they enjoyed reading about real people. Many of them pointed to the relatability of the stories in each post; that the stories highlighted the ways we are all similar, despite our external differences. Several of them also expressed coming away from the posts feeling more upbeat that there are good people in the world. As Daphne explained,

> …the [posts on HONY] that I prefer are the ones that show the humanity of the people. The caring of people for each other and that there are people like that out there, because there is so much bad stuff out there. and there are a lot of people out there who are trying to change their lives and make the world a better place.

A number of interviewees explained that they were particularly interested in the way HONY exposed them to perspectives and experiences that are completely different from their own, which helped them stay in touch with reality. "What I like about Humans of New York," said Kira,

> is that you see perspectives of so many different types of people, I think especially people from lower socio/economic backgrounds which I don't have as much personal exposure to, so I think, for me that's like a good kind of reality check.

Several interviewees were specifically interested in the contributions that HONY makes to addressing important social issues. To them, the posts raised awareness and humanized those affected by societal problems. As Julia explains:

> I liked him [Brandon Stanton] portraying people as human, literally. Like, putting a face to a problem. We can be so quick to condemn an inner-city single mom whose kids aren't behaving or aren't in school. But then when he posts a photo of someone who's working 2.5 jobs and barely able to keep it together, I like to think it makes a difference in how people perceive these things.

George Takei. Twenty-one interviewees followed GT's page. Conversations with interviewees revealed several reasons as to why they follow the page, and these reasons were not mutually exclusive; several interviewees listed more than one reason for their interest in the page.

A few interviewees initially chose to follow Takei because they were *Star Trek* fans, but their continued attention to his page, like the rest of the interviewees who follow him, had to do with the content of his posts. Others expressed an interest in Takei's unique perspective, due to his background, and were curious to see his take on the world and what ideas he might introduce them to. Like HONY and Diply, some interviewees were also drawn to GT's page because Takei regularly engages with the issues that are important to them.

Most expressed a particular attraction to the content posted on GT. Some interviewees said they specifically were interested in the humorous content on GT's page, while an equal number said they were specifically interested in the page's political content. However, a larger group said their interest in GT's page had to do with the *variety* of its content. That is, they were attracted by the balanced mix of both political *and* humorous content on the page. Maria explained:

George Takei, he provides a multitude of different things. Sometimes it's real news

stories and his opinion so to speak. And then there were times where he posts like you

know I think something I saw yesterday was celebrity doppelgängers. You know,

sometimes it's just, like, funny. Like just random whatever. You get the real stuff where

you more so might be getting his opinion on something political and then there's the

regular stupid stuff that like just makes you laugh and whatever.

The expressed interest in the political content of GT's page is not unexpected, as the

page's content has become increasingly political over the last few years. However, this does not

invalidate GT as a non-political context, primarily because, as so many interviewees noted, the

page offers a variety of content, some explicitly political, some humorous, some human interest.

As a result of its content diversity, GT's followers, and conversations on the page, are going to

be equally diverse, providing even more opportunities for inadvertent political encounters for

those who are attracted to the page more for its entertainment content.

Though it will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, it should be

acknowledged that the demographic and political diversity of this sample is more limited than I

would have preferred. In addition, the absence of followers of LTCG's page from the interviews

will further limit the generalizability of these results.

The Conversational Process

Overall, although all interviewees were followers of at least one of the four Facebook

pages, the majority of interview subjects did NOT commonly participate in conversations on any

of these pages. Instead, most interviewees remained primarily observers on these public pages,

limiting their interactions to reading the conversations that were taking place in the comments.

In the end, however, it was also discovered that, while most interviewees didn't engage in

public-minded conversation on these public pages, most of them *did,* however, engage in such

conversations in *other* non-political social media contexts, most often in moderated Facebook groups and/or on posts made by Facebook friends. Thus, the exploration of these interviewees' behaviors and perspectives was not limited to their role as observers of conversations on the public pages, but also as contributors to public-minded conversations in other non-political spaces on Facebook.

This section will primarily address RQ3, which concentrates on the conversational experience. Having established the central role of motivation in these results, the first subsection will focus on establishing interviewees' conversational objectives. The next few subsections will address the role these objectives play in directing interviewees' selection of conversational contexts, their decisions to initiate and maintain engagement in a conversation, and their behaviors within the conversation. The final subsection will explore interviewees' perceptions of these spaces and conversations, as well as their own activities within them.

Conversational Objectives

At the core of understanding interviewees' perspectives and actions is understanding their motivations for participation or avoidance. We must determine interviewees' conversational objectives, what they hope to get out of these conversations, and what makes them decide to participate (or avoid participating).

Interviewees identified three key objectives they had in mind when choosing to engage in conversations on Facebook: self-expression, dialogue, and influencing opinions. These objectives were not mutually exclusive; many interviewees pointed to more than one conversational objective.

Self-expression. A number of interviewees wanted to express their opinions. For this objective, simply being able to post a comment was rarely sufficient. Interviewees wanted their opinions to be *heard*. As Maria explained:

I want to express my feelings and let them be known. Which is why I try not to get

heated because I always feel that when you start yelling or when you start getting upset

about something, nobody hears you anymore. They just know you're upset, so they

have stopped listening to your message. So I'd like to engage in conversation where it is

something that is a hotbed topic but I want them to hear what I have to say.

Mutual Understanding. Affecting others' opinions was the most prominent response

when interviewees were asked about their conversational objectives. However, many also

expressed a desire to have a dialogue in which they understand others' perspectives and have

their own perspectives heard. For example, Sienna described her objective as "trying to refine

my perspective a little more. To share what I think at the time and see what other people's

responses and through that to kind of learn." Essentially, these interviewees were looking to

have a conversation oriented toward mutual understanding.

Affect Opinions. Most interviewees said they were aiming to affect people's opinions in

some way. A few of these specifically indicated that changing people's minds was their primary

objective. Most, however, described these objectives in less direct terms, often approaching the

encounter from an educational perspective. When asked about her objective in these

conversations, for example, Gabriella explained:

I won't speak on something that I know nothing about. I'm not going to be an idiot. But

if you're saying something that doesn't make sense and you're not seeing the big

picture, like I said, I kind of want to educate that person in a way that is like, 'Hey we're

not doing anything wrong.' Like I don't know how to explain it. Just, I guess [it's] more

so [about] education rather than just verbalizing my opinions. Because, you know,

everyone has an opinion. But when you educate someone and then they go away

thinking oh, okay, I didn't think of it that way, I didn't know…, that to me is more

fulfilling than me just putting my information out there.

These interviewees sought to share their knowledge about a topic to raise awareness, illuminate

the truth and/or correct misinformation. The ultimate, though often implied, goal of these

educational efforts, of course, was to impact other people's opinions.

A couple of these interviewees also demonstrated an awareness of the invisible readers,

the lurkers. As Gwen explained:

I mean, if I'm just reading the comments and never participate in a conversation, I know

that there are, depending how big the platform is, sometimes thousands of people also

doing that. And so I feel like I can, in those rare times where I will comment, even if I

know it won't change somebody's opinion in the comment stream, like maybe

somebody else reading it will read what I wrote and agree.

These interviewees understood that even if they couldn't convince the person they were

speaking to directly, their contributions to the conversation might still have an impact on those

who might just be watching.

Ultimately, interviewees' objectives were mainly about significance. Whether it was

expressing their opinion in a mutual exchange of ideas, changing someone else's opinion, or

educating people, they wanted their participation in any conversation to be meaningful. When

they were successful at achieving these objectives, interviewees considered the conversation to

be productive.

Productive conversations. During the interviews, interviewees were asked about their

ideal political conversation. In particular, they were asked what, in their minds, constitutes a

"productive" conversation. Their answers revealed that interviewees tended to associate their

own conversational objectives with their conception of productive political conversations.

Interviewees who explicitly wanted to change people's minds, for example, typically felt that the ideal political conversation resulted in minds being changed. Similarly, those whose objectives were more broadly focused on achieving mutual understanding described their ideal political conversation as ones in which people truly listened to one another and considered alternative perspectives, even if they ultimately disagreed. In the end, interviewees wanted to engage in productive conversations. What constituted a productive conversation varied slightly from person to person, but most interviewees' definitions were heavily related to the achievement of their conversational objectives. In short, a given conversation was (or was likely to be) productive if it fulfilled (or had the potential to fulfill) interviewees' conversational objectives.

The next few sections evaluate interviewees' behaviors in, and perspectives of, these spaces and their conversations through the lens of their conversational objectives. In doing so, the focus here must be twofold:

(1) Why have most interviewees eschewed participation in conversations on the public Facebook pages? Why have they chosen these other spaces over the public spaces?

(2) And what is their experience like in the conversations in which they have chosen to participate (wherever they may be)?

Public Pages Versus Private Spaces

We first turn to interviewees' selection of their preferred conversational space. As we shall see below, interviewees' conversational objectives play a role in their justification for the selection of their preferred conversational contexts.

Public pages. In understanding interviewees' conversational behavior, it is important to discern why most of them shunned conversations on the public pages. Despite interviewees' avoidance of these spaces for everyday political talk, the public pages must still be considered viable sites for constructing the PSCA, since, as the previous chapter has shown, everyday

political talk does indeed occur in the conversations on the public pages. Therefore, the experiences and motivations of the two interviewees who *do* regularly engage in the public spaces are particularly relevant. Only two interviewees admitted to regularly engaging in conversations on at least one of the four public pages: Jackie and Daphne.

Jackie. In many ways, Jackie represented the ideal subject – an individual who regularly participated in conversations on at least one of the four public pages. Although she followed, and occasionally commented on, Humans of New York, Jackie's preferred page was GT. Initially attracted to GT as a result of her *Star Trek* fandom, Jackie found that Takei also thinks the same way she does about many different issues, which strengthened her interest in the page.

A person with a strong interest in politics, Jackie's participation on GT was directly related to her conversational objectives of educating and raising awareness:

> I feel like people are ignorant and need to be made aware of the types of things their parroting and saying. I don't think it's their fault. I think we're a brainwashed society and I feel like I'm awake. I try to bring awareness to others…I'm encouraging people to investigate and question everything.

In addition, Jackie saw contributing to the comments on GT as her primary form of political activity. "[I'm not getting involved in politics] formally," she said. "I've decided to use my voice in a different way…By getting into those comments and trying to change people's perspectives. Or at least get them to think about what they think." In pursuit of her objectives, Jackie tried to make sure her opinions reached as many people as possible, which was precisely why she chose to engage in conversations on GT. "I want people to see what I'm posting," she said. "I don't want to be screaming into the void. One of the reasons I got into the comments on Takei's page is because there's thousands of people on it."

Admitting that most of her time on Facebook is spent "down in those comments [on GT]" in the hopes of having an impact, Jackie also recognized the difficulty of achieving these objectives, noting that more often than not, "[e]veryone is more concerned about being right than learning." As a result, she explained she was rather selective about the conversations she would participate in, preferring only to engage in conversations that she believed would be productive.

Daphne. Similar to Jackie, Daphne also appreciated GT's politics because they were consistent with her own opinions. Unlike Jackie, however, Daphne didn't see GT's page (or any public page) as a means to a political end. In fact, where Jackie purposefully chose GT's page as a vehicle to disseminate her political opinions, Daphne didn't demonstrate much of a preference between the public pages or more private spaces. Rather, Daphne's conversational efforts span both private groups and public pages. Seeing something that sparked her interest made her likely to comment, regardless of the space.

When asked about her objectives in these conversations, Daphne said that she primarily wanted to express herself. She specifically said that she wasn't interested in having her comments kick off "a huge controversy." This response seemed to imply that, as a matter of course, she just posted her comments and quickly left the conversation, behavior which one might expect of someone who wants to express themselves but doesn't want to deal with the conflict that may arise out of doing so. Yet, when she described her typical mode of participation, her involvement in these conversations proved to be far more extensive, remaining engaged in a given conversation anywhere from a few days to a week. "As long as [the conversation is] interesting and new to me, then I stick with it," she explained.

In fact, Daphne claimed to purposefully seek out these types of conversations. But her method for doing so revealed a selectivity similar to Jackie's. When a topic

piqued her interest, regardless of where it was taking place, she would "give it a try" in

the hopes that the subsequent conversation would be productive. If, however, she

found the conversation to be otherwise, she quickly abandoned it. In this way, she

ensured that she was only participating in the types of conversations she wanted to

have. Examining her description of a productive conversation gives us a sense of the

kind of conversations Daphne truly appreciated:

> If I'm having a conversation with someone who's being rational and who's willing to
>
> listen to me and I'm willing to listen to them, and you know they haven't resorted to
>
> name calling or they haven't resorted to just shutting you out because they're open to
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> what you have to say, to me, that's a productive conversation.

Thus, it was not simply that she wanted to express herself, but that she wanted to

express herself while engaging with others, in the pursuit of mutual understanding.

Considering her conversational objectives and her purposeful pursuit of these types of

conversations, Daphne' lack of contextual preference makes more sense. She was open to the

possibility that any of these spaces on Facebook could conceivably offer her an opportunity for a

productive conversation, and therefore was willing to make the attempt. The nature of the

space, however, generally did not figure in to her decision. The only exception to this for her

was spaces that her family and/or local community could see her comments, both of whom

were on the opposing side of the political spectrum. Daphne found political conversations with

members of these groups to be far more "combative," and, since she had a strong aversion to

confrontation, she tailored her conversational contexts on Facebook, which included public

pages of GT and HONY,[122] as well as more private spaces, so as to protect her from the potential scrutiny of these specific populations.

Avoiding Public Pages. Discussions with the rest of the interviewees revealed that, for most of them, their reasons for *not* engaging in conversations on the public pages were mainly linked to their desire to have conversations that are productive. Therefore, just like Daphne and Jackie, the remaining interviewees were selective about the conversations in which they choose to participate, and their participation decisions were governed by the likelihood of having a productive conversation. The main difference between these two groups was in their willingness to make the attempt. Whereas Daphne and Jackie were inclined to give conversations on the public pages a chance, the rest of the interviewees had given up on these spaces entirely.

Based on their past experiences with the public pages (whether as contributor or observer), these interviewees had concluded that these spaces were unlikely to provide opportunities for productive conversations. Most of them noted that conversations on the public pages almost always got out of hand, because people in these spaces were less open-minded, and quicker to resort to anger and rudeness. Some specifically pointed to a personal desire to avoid the drama and conflict they saw as inevitable in these spaces. Heather, for instance, explained that she wasn't interested in participating in the comments on GT's page because "the majority of the time the comments devolve into kind of a he-said-she-said, let's argue, let's dig at each other about things, and I just don't feel the need to be any part of that." However, most interviewees generally agreed that these types of negative behaviors particularly interfered with their having productive conversations.

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[122] Although GT and HONY are public pages, her family and community, being significantly more conservative, don't follow them.

Another factor that interviewees felt prevented conversations from being productive on the public pages was the sheer size of the audience. Many interviewees believed that the immense volume of comments on the public pages significantly lessens the consequence of their own contributions. Or, as Nicole put it, "usually [comments on public pages] are like spitting into the ocean. I don't know that they make any impact." Similarly, another interviewee felt that his contributions on public Facebook pages would simply get lost in the shuffle, but his concern extended to the larger online realm. "I have no problem disrupting conversation to put my two cents in or to have my own opinion heard," said Clark. "[But] I feel like in the virtual space it's neither heard nor, even though someone will like the comment, I don't think that's really a genuine understanding of what the person's trying to say."

Overall, then, interviewees chose to avoid the public pages because they felt these spaces were not conducive to accomplishing their objectives.

Private Spaces. Instead of any of the public pages, interviewees preferred to engage with more private contexts on Facebook, such as closed groups and friends' posts. The use of the term "private" here is meant specifically to contrast with the unrestricted accessibility of public pages on Facebook. In the interest of having their content draw in as many users as possible, Facebook pages are structured with minimal (if any) privacy. Public pages encourage users to follow them, so that users will see the page's content in their news feed. But a user doesn't need to follow a page in order to interact with it. Content on Facebook pages "are visible to everyone on the internet by default," and anyone with a Facebook account can interact with the page and its content, which includes commenting on posts (Facebook, 2019c). Groups and friends' pages, on the other hand, are slightly more controlled. Both groups and friends' posts can be similar to more public spaces, in the sense that anyone can engage with their content. Only group members can contribute to groups, but public groups allow anyone to

add themselves as a member. Friends can set the privacy settings of their posts to public, which

means anyone on Facebook can see and interact with them.

However, both of these spaces also offer privacy settings that let them control who can

see and engage with their content. Groups can be set to either "closed" or "secret," both of

which prevent non-members from seeing or engaging with group content. In addition, such

groups can regulate membership by requiring new members to either be approved by

administrators or invited by current members. Facebook users can also use the site's privacy

settings to restrict who can see their posts. Thus, describing the spaces many interviewees

prefer as "private" refers to the privacy settings such spaces use to control who sees their

content and participates in their conversations.

Preference for Private Contexts. Interviewees' preference for more private spaces was

primarily due to their interest in having productive conversations and avoiding the discomfort of

acrimonious conflict. For most, these objectives were strongly interrelated. As mentioned

above, productive conversations are stymied when participants' anger and/or political obstinacy

take over. Mainly, what made interviewees feel more comfortable expressing themselves in

more private spaces was the fact that, unlike public pages such as GT and HONY, closed groups

and friends' pages were controlled in some way that facilitated the pursuit of these objectives.

Specifically, interviewees' preferences for private spaces cohered around three attributes:

moderation, privacy, and trust.

Moderation. Some interviewees were more comfortable in these spaces because they

featured some type of moderation, which prevented the conversations from getting out of

hand, and in doing so, ensured that conversations would be more productive. A group's

moderators make sure conversations don't devolve by actively policing the space and enforcing

codes of conduct. Conversations in moderated spaces are not likely to allow bullying or trolls,

which most interviewees are looking to avoid. On friends' posts, interviewees expected that the social consequences of misbehaving in the presence of people you know offline would perform the same function. As Alexis pointed out, on friends' posts, "social norms tend to dictate that folks take into consideration [who they're interacting with]," which makes them think twice before acting "rude, abrasive or hateful."

Privacy. In Chapter 3, I argued for the value of public spaces on Facebook in shielding users specifically from the *social* consequences of sharing their political opinions, and a number of interviewees' responses did support this assertion. For example, Daphne explained that she felt more comfortable talking with strangers in public spaces because she could be "a little bit more open" with them, because "they don't have a judgement of you to begin with…So if you say something to them, they're just looking at what you have to say at face value…So it's almost like a fresh perspective speaking to somebody." When talking to people she knew, she acknowledged she would want to be "maybe a little bit diplomatic [because] you don't want to ruffle feathers so much." Similarly, Gabriella pointed to the refreshing lack of social accountability when conversing with strangers online. Even though the unpredictability of their reaction made her a bit apprehensive to speak to strangers online, she definitely appreciated the anonymity that commenting in more public spaces with strangers affords, which offered "a chance to be transparent with the opportunity to 'walk away' when you need to without feeling obligated."

However, many interviewees particularly highlighted the importance of private spaces to protect them from the potential consequences of engaging in a public space, such as losing one's job, having an angry stranger show up at your house, or just upsetting existing relationships. For example, for Victoria, closed groups offered her the opportunity to "be free with sarcasm, humor, bemoaning idiocy, because I don't think I'll be misunderstood or [have]

my words twisted." She felt the same safety in conversations on her friends' posts because

"most of my friends are good about security." The knowledge that what they posted in a group

would only be visible to members of that group or would be protected by a friend's privacy

settings were features which they felt insulated them from having their online actions impact

their offline lives.

Trust. Lastly, interviewees expressed a feeling of trust in the people that were

contributing to these spaces. Many of them trusted that group members, who all ostensibly

came to the group for the same reason, were more open-minded, and less likely to misbehave,

which cleared the way for achieving their conversational objectives. For instance, Leah said she

spent more time with the comments in her closed groups because in those spaces, "I think I

have a different trust in the types of people that are posting or I have more of an investment in

the conversation that's happening." This was the case regardless of whether groups were made

up of mostly people they knew or strangers. When talking about their friends' posts,

interviewees also pointed to feelings of trust that facilitated productive conversations. As Rosie

explained:

> I will say, I think in that context [of conversing on friends' posts], I think because I sort of
>
> know them I have a little bit more patience, you know what I mean? As opposed to
>
> going to a Facebook group, or like the George Takei page where, especially on that page
>
> I just kind of assume that people are trying to be assholes. I don't know, it's something
>
> about if they know somebody that I know, and I know that my friend is a rational human
>
> being, so maybe their friend is a rational human being as well.

Thus, even though some of the people who would be participating in the conversation were

strangers to themselves, interviewees were generally confident that, if those people were

friends of *their* friends, then they were less likely to be irrational.

These components of more private spaces also helped to mitigate the obstacles to productive conversation that may have arisen when conversing with strangers. Moderation by friends and group admins enforced appropriate conduct. The private structure of groups meant that membership was carefully monitored. Similarly, participation on friends' posts were expected to be[123] limited to members of that person's individual network. In both cases, the barriers to participation protected the conversations from people who just want to make trouble. And finally, interviewees trusted that people in these spaces were more likely to have shared interests, common experiences, and/or similar motivations, all of which would further support productive conversations in these spaces.

The majority preference for private spaces contrasted with Jackie's specific focus on public spaces, described above. This makes sense, however, considering that Jackie's objective was not simply to have an impact, but to have one on a considerably larger scale. Like many of the other interviewees, Daphne also expressed a desire to avoid conflict with political opposites in her network, and her choice of conversational contexts was designed to prevent such occurrences. Unlike these interviewees, however, Daphne felt that, under certain conditions, public pages could also perform this function. In all cases, then, the selection of conversational spaces was undertaken as part of each interviewee's unique pursuit of conversational objectives.

Initiating Contact

Having selected their preferred context, interviewees still had to take the first step and jump into a conversation. Driving this process were components that triggered their interest and

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[123] Though not always. Several interviewees made a point to say that they checked their friends' posts' privacy before deciding to comment.

desire to share their opinion, but, as we shall see, their conversational objectives factored into their ultimate decision to engage.

The trigger. One of the common themes that emerged from the interviews is that interviewees were selective with the conversations in which they chose to engage. The next question then must be under what conditions would they participate in these conversations. What initiated the transition from observing to contributing? The interviews revealed two main triggers: conversations about issues of personal importance and encountering claims that ran counter to their own.

Issues of importance. When asked to name the key issues (irrespective of politics) that were of particular importance to them, interviewees provided a wide range of issues, from traditionally political issues (e.g., healthcare and immigration) to heavily politicized social issues (e.g., women's rights and LGBTQ issues), to highly personalized issues (e.g., sports scandals, grief space, and native marketing). Most interviewees had taken offline action related to their issues of importance, including donating to specific organizations, organizing or participating in advocacy activities and/or writing about these issues. All interviewees said they were more likely to pay attention to content and conversations that focus on issues about which they feel strongly. They also identified their issues of importance as likely triggers of their participation in a conversation.

Although interviewees were not specifically asked, it was common for a personal connection to many of these issues to be revealed in the rest of the interview. For example, many (though not all) who pointed to healthcare issues as key topics of importance to them either worked in the healthcare field or were dealing with health issues affecting people in their lives. Those interviewees with a stronger interest in formal politics were far more likely to identify specifically political topics as issues of key importance to them without any observable

personal connection to those topics emerging in the rest of the interview. However, even many interviewees who appeared to be political junkies exhibited at least one issue of importance that was related to some element specific to their lives.

   Contradiction. In addition to individual interest in the topic, an additional provocation for interviewees' participation was encountering ideas or claims that ran severely counter to their own opinions on the matter. Half of interviewees said they were particularly likely to engage in a conversation if they came across something that blatantly contradicts their beliefs or knowledge of a given topic. Contradictions that inspire participation range from a statement they believe requires correction, to a position they disagree with, to an argument/comment they find to be "outrageous" or particularly offensive. A number of interviewees explained that in such instances, they felt an obligation to say something, whether it was to correct misinformation or to call out hateful speech. "If you don't push back on these people, they will keep going," said Eric. He went on to point out that the consequences of ignoring comments like that could be dire:

   Like if they make an insane comment and everyone's like that's a good point, then that

   just reaffirms their position. And next time the comments are even worse. The

   comments aren't isolated. They result in actions whether in the way you treat

   employees, the way they vote. Or the way they treat somebody on the bus or whatever

   it is…[So] when people just post stuff that is untrue, and they post it as fact that sets

   [me off]… I feel like, you know what, I didn't realize how gullible or stupid or whatever,

   people could be, and unquestioning of a source. If it's in meme form it must be true for

   some reason. So now I make it a point, like if somebody says something straight like

   that, then I feel that it needs to be refuted because if it's not then someone's like not

   only did somebody say it but no one else that it wasn't true. So, it's like, just affirmation

for somebody reading it. It's like oh, he said it, and people piled on like, good point. So, I guess it's true then. And that seems to have terrible consequences in the last year.

Conditional Engagement. Despite the power of the initial hooks of interest and contradiction to draw interviewees into conversations, their presence alone did not guarantee participation. Rather, interviewees expressed a reluctance to jump into a conversation without assessing the situation first.

About half of interviewees explained that, even if they encountered something that made them want to engage, they would do so only if they felt that the conversation was likely to remain calm and there was a chance that participants would actually listen to one another. Amelia described her strategy for gauging such conversations:

> I would skim [the conversation] and I'd see what the vibe was. Is it a welcoming and open, intelligent conversation or someone on a soap box with a big ol' stack of propaganda trying to get their point across? [I will jump in] when people use language like "I think" or "I feel" or "I observe" versus "this is how it is." When they own their own comments and don't just repeat what someone else has said to them.

Interviewees were completely uninterested in pointless arguments and screaming matches, mainly because they felt it would be a waste of their time.

In addition, a number of interviewees also pointed out that they would only contribute to a conversation if they felt they had some perspective that would improve the conversation, such as answering a question that has been asked, or presenting a different or unique perspective. As Mia explained, "if I'm posting something somewhere it's because I think it has some sort of value, whether it's for comedy or educational purposes or whatever. I try not to spend too much time distributing the sound of my own voice for myself." What interviewees

were trying to determine, then, is whether their participation in this conversation would be

meaningful.

Engagement in the Conversation

Having identified the point of initiation, it is equally important to understand the extent

to which interviewees continued to contribute to the conversation. What kept them engaged,

and for how long? What led them to finally leave a conversation?

When asked about their frequency of engagement in an average conversation, only a

couple of interviewees said they usually just posted their comment and never returned to the

conversation. They cited a few reasons for this, from a lack of curiosity to a lack of patience for

reading through comments to having a limited amount of time to engage. Most interviewees,

however, admitted to returning the conversation at least once or twice. Some said they tended

to follow conversations very closely. Others, however, preferred to move on to other activities

after posting, relying mainly on Facebook notifications to draw them back in.

About half of interviewees admitted that, under the right conditions, they would remain

engaged in a conversation until its logical conclusion. For these interviewees, "the right

conditions" depended on a number of factors, including time, powerful feelings, responses

directed to them, continued interest, and positive tone.

Time. Many interviewees cited available time as a key factor in how long they engage in

a conversation. For instance, when Sienna came across conversations about issues that

mattered to her, she was genuinely interested in reading through them. "I usually end up

reading them pretty seriously," she admitted.

I'll go back to the beginning of the thread and just read them all the way through. And

I'll click on the replies to see what people are replying...I usually tend to do it in a

strangely systematic and thorough way, because I'm interested in the way the

conversation goes.

However, she also pointed out that her schedule was regularly packed, and free time typically

presented in finite stretches. As a result, her participation lasted "for whatever set period of

time I have. Like if I'm waiting for the doctor for an hour, I'll do it and when my appointment

starts, I'm done."

Passionate reaction. Interviewees also pointed to the strength of their reaction to a

comment or post as a factor that was more likely to keep them interested in a conversation. For

example, in most cases, Rosie didn't follow conversations all that closely. "I tend to skim through

a lot of different types of material and a lot of different conversations and kind of go on." But

sometimes, she admitted "there are provocations that I feel demand a response, that I want to

be more involved in and so I do tend to really follow closely and check multiple times a day and

really keep up." Thus, comments and content which inspired powerful feelings were more likely

to keep interviewees engaged.

Directed responses. A directed response was another factor that interviewees said was

likely to draw them back into a conversation. Any time someone responds or reacts directly to a

user's comments, Facebook sends that user notifications. These notifications were often the

primary way most interviewees remained connected to the conversation, and interviewees said

they were more likely to continue contributing to a conversation if they were notified that

others had responded directly to their comments. Part of what drove this behavior was the

feeling of social obligation when someone specifically mentioned or tagged them in their

comment. In those situations, Leah said, "I feel like, okay you're calling me out in a way and I

feel more obligated to continue engaging with you." She also pointed out that direct responses

to one's comments also signaled to her that someone took the time and energy to specifically

engage with her comment, which she felt was deserving of at least her attention, if not reciprocation.

Continued interest. A number of interviewees also explained that if others are making interesting points, they would continue to remain engaged in a conversation. "I'll go back and forth for a pretty long time if there's new relevant information or new coherent arguments coming back," said Avery. In other words, as long as the conversation remains interesting, many interviewees said they would stay involved.

Positive tone. Lastly, most interviewees pointed to a positive conversational tone as indicative of their likelihood to remain engaged. Conversations that remained calm and focused were more likely to keep interviewees engaged. Heather explained her approach to these types of conversations:

> If it seems like they are open to having reasonable discourse, talking about a difference of opinion, being respectful of everyone involved, I am more than willing to spend hours pleasantly disagreeing, sharing ideas, and listening to different viewpoints. If it's gonna degrade into name-calling and ugliness, they have now closed themselves off, you know, they are not actually interested in hearing about different viewpoints at all, and I am gonna just say, ok, that's fine, I don't really want to be a part of that, let's talk about something else, you're obviously not ok with, you are uncomfortable with this topic and have made it very very clear that it is frightening to you to hear something different.

Interestingly, one interviewee, Haley, was uniquely drawn in by negative conversational elements. While she claimed she didn't typically want to get deeply involved in a fight, "sometimes if I feel like it's a personal attack then I can get really involved," remaining engaged for at least a few days. However, she had to be in the right mood for that to happen. "Sometimes if I'm in an antsy mood, I'm angry," she explained. "So if I can get it out through

Facebook arguing, I might do it for longer." Essentially, Haley used these interactions as a way of venting existing frustrations or anger.

Leaving the Conversation

Considering what interviewees said would keep them engaged, it's reasonable to assume that the opposite would lead them to abandon a given conversation. These assumptions were supported when interviewees were asked specifically what makes them abandon a given conversation. Although some interviewees indicated that they would stay in a conversation until it petered out on its own, or until they feel it is taking up too much of their time, most interviewees desertion of the conversation depended on its content and its tone.

Content. Interviewees claimed to lose interest in a conversation once it began to get repetitive. For instance, Daphne claimed to stick with a conversation

> as long as I feel it's relevant and as long as I feel it's not being redundant…I guess so as long as it's interesting and new to me, then I stick with it. Once it starts repeating itself or nothing else is really being said, or they're beating the horse down, so to speak, then I'm like, ok, this is enough.

Tone. Interviewees also said that they generally abandoned conversations at the point when the other participants refused to listen or employ reason, or the conversation devolved into angry chaos. As Victoria pointed out, "People who are just like, well you're stupid and that data is stupid, why would I reply to that person?"

Essentially, most interviewees would continue to participate in a conversation only so long as they perceived it to be capable of fulfilling their objectives for participating in the first place: having a meaningful, potentially significant conversation. Therefore, when a conversation devolved into a shouting match, or became pointless and/or repetitive, it had ceased functioning as a space that interviewees felt could be conducive to their objectives. Overall,

then, interviewees' responses demonstrated that their conversational objectives played a key

role in their decision to engage, as well as for how long.

Perceptions of the Context

RQ3c sought to understand interviewees' perceptions of discussion spaces on Facebook,

including both the public pages and the more private contexts. These perceptions addressed

four key components: encounters with difference, contextual safety, eye of the beholder

characteristics, and whether interviewees perceived these conversations to be a political act. As

we shall see, these perceptions were also relevant to interviewees' conversational objectives,

helping them to predict whether a given conversation will be productive.

Encounters with difference and incivility. An important component of political

conversation is exposure to opposing political viewpoints (Mutz, 2006). Difference is also

essential to the PSCA, as the goal of achieving mutual understanding implies the presence of

differences that demand engagement. Differences, however, can lead to conflict, a possibility

that leads many to avoid political conversation outright (e.g., Mutz, 2006; Schudson, 1997;

Thorson, 2014; Vraga et al., 2015). Despite this, conversations where people address their

political differences can and do take place, as evidenced by past research (e.g., Graham, 2012;

Kim, Wyatt & Katz, 1999; Stromer-Galley, 2002), as well as by the results of the previous

chapter. Interview questions sought to address these two conflicting realities in order to tease

out the nuances of interviewees' behaviors.

Interviewees were asked how often they encountered opinions different from their own

in these spaces. In both the conversations in which they participated and the comments they

observed, nearly all interviewees admitted to encountering opinions different from their own at

least some of the time. Thus, it was somewhat common for most interviewees to come across

differences of opinion. In addition, all interviewees said they encountered at least some

measure of incivility in these spaces[124]. A number of them noted that they found this type of behavior to be far more common in the comments on the public pages than in their groups or on friends' posts. The next sections describe how interviewees reacted when they encountered both difference and incivility.

Reactions to difference. For most interviewees, whether they engaged with difference depended on the situation. "If the [other] person is too vague or the tone is not constructive I tend to just ignore them," explained Rosie. "But, if I feel like there's the potential for common ground, then I'll engage." Generally, the decision to engage with difference hinged on the likelihood that the ensuing conversation would be productive.

Some interviewees said they usually ignored opinions different from their own on Facebook. This was because they believed that there was no point to such conversations. "I avoid conversations with people who think differently because I find that people are often cemented in their thoughts," said Julia. "I don't like to waste my time - if someone wants to converse and hear my thoughts, I'm fine doing that, but often conversations become circular and a waste of time." Similarly, Max asked "what's the point in picking a fight and going back and forth on it?" Through their responses, these interviewees revealed clearly negative expectations. They anticipated that conversations with people holding opinions different from theirs would nearly always result in a battle for supremacy without a winner. Interviewees who said they outright ignored opinions different from their own were therefore also influenced by the perceived potential for productive conversation. Their conclusion, however, was that there was none.

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[124] As the understanding of incivility used in this study is very nuanced, I relied on the more common understanding of incivility (personal attacks, profanity, trolling, etc.) for the interviews so as not to confuse interviewees.

Reactions to incivility*.* For some interviewees, the presence of incivility was offensive to

them; yet, they also found it could draw them into the conversation, though mainly as

Observers. Alexis explained that incivility usually drove home the futility of her efforts, so

instead she would "sit on the sidelines and just watch the dumpster fire go." Though she

wouldn't engage herself, Maria found catharsis from reading conversations where such

misbehavior was forcefully crushed by others braver than herself:

> There are people with which I give such props to that they're willing to challenge and
>
> call out people who are obviously bigoted or racist or homophobic or whatever it is, and
>
> challenge them and tell them you know what? Just get off. This conversation is one that
>
> started out as a nice conversation, and here you are expanding things. So definitely I
>
> read those and I'm like, go you! Right on! Keep going! That kind of thing. But, I would, I
>
> don't post. I just read.

For others, the appearance of incivility in their conversations inspired them to be

Contributors, owing to the obligation they felt to diffuse the tension in order to save the

conversation. Amelia, for instance, claimed to actively work to engage someone who got upset,

explaining that

> you can't give up. It's one more obstacle to overcome, it's one more challenge to face.
>
> To acknowledge someone's emotional response helps them hear you. It's almost an
>
> acceptance, like I hear you're upset, I'm sorry you're upset, let's talk about why.

Most interviewees, however, generally ignored incivility. As Mia explained:

> It's sort of like wandering into an alley and seeing all the trash. You usually don't think
>
> about the alley. You know it's there, because you know, that's where the trash goes. But
>
> you try not to think about it. So I try not to think about it.

For many, the introduction of incivility to a conversation ultimately caused them to abandon the space. "It's not fun, it's not relaxing, it's not helpful," complained Rosie. "It's like a fist fight in the grocery store. I'm not going to stand and watch it. I'll go do something else…I don't want to watch the train wreck."

Conflict avoidance and conversational objectives. These results are better understood when situated in the context of interviewees' interest in conflict avoidance. Mutz (2006) argued that many people avoid encounters with political difference as a method of avoiding the interpersonal conflict that typically accompanies such interactions. However, this behavior may be more nuanced. In their study of college students' behaviors and attitudes regarding political expression on Facebook, Vraga, Thorson, Kliger-Vilenchik & Gee (2015) found that people are not afraid of the possibility of others disagreeing with them so much as they are afraid of the potential for that disagreement to be characterized by severe acrimony. In other words, avoiding conflict is not the same as avoiding difference.

Similar to what Vraga et al. (2015) found, the above results suggest that, for most interviewees, conflict is also not the same as difference. Sophie explained the distinction between difference and conflict in these conversations:

I think conversation should really be enjoyable and challenging. Enjoyable doesn't necessarily mean let's go to Candyland or whatever. I think challenging is really great, and people who push you to expand your mind are what makes the conversation enjoyable. But when it stops being that, when it changes how I think about them as a person, when it's someone I care about, then I don't want that to happen, because I think we're so much more than what we necessarily have most recently read.

Considering that for most interviewees, impacting other people's opinions was a major component of their conversational objectives, difference had to be present for their

conversations to be productive. Indeed, although there were a few who admitted to avoiding interacting with those whose opinions were different from their own, many more claimed to have a strong interest in engaging with difference, provided those exchanges remained open-minded and calm. Severe conflict, on the other hand, in the form of "screaming matches[125]" and other types of uncivil misbehavior, was identified as a major obstacle to productive conversations.

Contextual safety. Contextual safety refers to the extent to which a given social context facilitates sincere political expression. When a context is perceived to be safe, people feel more comfortable sharing their true political opinions because some feature(s) of the space minimize the potential for social consequences. Two key factors are at play when considering the safety of a context: relationship strength and the privacy of the context, both of which can impact a person's willingness to express sincere political opinions. Although research has suggested that the most common context for political conversation is one that is both private and with people one already knows, in Chapter 3 I argued that contextual safety can be provided by strangers in more public online spaces, such as public Facebook pages. Such spaces provide the opportunity for one's comments to blend in with the multitudes of people participating (McKenna & Bargh, 2000), as well as an audience comprised mainly of strangers who are far removed from one's social network. Both of these factors help to reduce the risks of long-term social consequences that might lead users to censor themselves when it comes to political expression.

I investigated interviewees' assessments of these spaces' contextual safety by exploring their understanding of, and comfort level with, different types of spaces for engaging in everyday political talk. This included their perceptions of the differences between online spaces and offline spaces and conversations with strangers compared with people they knew.

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[125] Multiple interviewees used this descriptor.

Online versus offline spaces. Interviewees were well aware of the differences between online spaces and offline spaces for political conversations. Many interviewees said that online spaces embolden people to behave in ways which they never would in person, such as attacking others and name calling, whereas in offline spaces people are more likely to moderate themselves because of the potential social consequences. As Jackie quipped, "people behind a keyboard are braver than people sitting across the room from you." Others, like Sophie, identified contextual cues (e.g., tone of voice, facial expression) as important components of offline space that were absent in online space:

I think the virtual nature of [online conversations] is such that people are not in a

conversation the same way that you are when you're sitting across from someone and

dedicated, paying attention to that one thing. So when you're in a conversation with

somebody on Facebook, you're also watching TV or scrolling through other things, or

you get a notification so you stop the work that you're doing to go and engage with

something. But very rarely is it like, you have my full attention and so let's talk about

something. There's some study about how much of what you mean, some percentage of

how your message comes across is the actual words that you say, and a bigger

percentage is your body language and your affect, like how you're saying it. I think you

lose some of the biggest things in productive communication when you go online. You

lose body language and tone, and so you're kind of left with something else.

However, interviewees also noted some positive elements of online spaces, such as the fact that online spaces may make people feel more confident in expressing their political opinions. As Amelia explained:

I think a lot of times in person, people try to represent a specific train of thought, and

they like to appear a certain way even though they might not actually feel that way. I

feel people can be more themselves online than they can in person. Unless it's a friend group and you know them and they can be themselves. But a lot of people put up fronts when they're in person, they have a certain image they want to project, that may not be true to how they really think and feel.

Several interviewees also pointed to the positive technological affordances of online spaces, such as being able to research your opinion and take your time composing your thoughts before sharing them. Others argued that online spaces give you access to a larger audience, a greater range of opinions, and more opportunities for conversation with people outside your physical community. Nicole recognized all of these benefits for online conversations:

You can kind of consume [online conversations] at your leisure so you can also really put a lot in there. You can do your research and link to something relevant in the comments in a way where it's like if I'm just talking to you and trying to tell you why I think this thing is important … I can't be like stop let me go to the library and look this thing up. Whereas if I'm doing it online, I might be able to actually bring in useful sources. And also, you might see a bunch of people chiming in that you wouldn't have realized know something about this or have experience with the issue or whatever it is and that can be really effective.

Although all interviewees demonstrated an understanding of the differences between online and offline spaces for these types of conversations, most of them didn't express a preference for one over the other. For those who did demonstrate a preference, however, their choice ultimately came down to, again, in which space they felt a productive conversation would be more likely to occur. Some interviewees, like Victoria, claimed to prefer the opportunities presented by online spaces, which they felt enabled their contributions to be more thoughtful

and have a greater impact. "Online, I have more time to sort of collect my thoughts and come up with something rational," she explained. "I mean, I think face to face I'm more likely to appear to be a troll."

Others, on the other hand, preferred offline spaces, because the presence of contextual cues and potential social consequences kept the conversation rational and more likely to be productive. As Derek explained:

> I think that the best political conversations are the ones held in person, because social media leaves a lot left to be desired and intonation and body language and really being able to read meaning. I think it's very difficult to divine meaning just by reading someone's text who is not particularly adept in writing emotionally or reading emotionally or writing logically or reading logically.

Strangers versus known. When asked about the differences between political conversations with strangers versus people they know, some interviewees referred precisely to the sense of freedom to express oneself more candidly with strangers as opposed to people they know. "Talking with people you know, you're worried about how is this going to affect my relationship," explained Nicole. "With strangers it's like I really don't really care what this person I've never met before thinks about me." Alexis particularly valued conversing with strangers because it helps her practice staying calm and keeping an open mind. "Over the years it's really taught me to put myself in someone else's shoes to understand their perspective," she explained. "So, I really try hard to have level conversations with folks…that I don't know intimately…It teaches me to stretch those muscles a little more."

Most interviewees, however, expressed a preference for interacting with people they knew when it came to political conversations. Sometimes this preference was about feelings of safety and comfort, because they wanted to avoid the acrimonious conflict they felt was

inherent in conversations with strangers, as well as the potential for real-world consequences (e.g., losing one's job, doxing[126]). For others, however, this preference was entirely goal-oriented, because they felt conversations with people they already knew were more likely be productive. "It's not necessarily that I'm more comfortable with the conversation itself," Leah explained. "I also feel pretty comfortable being able to talk about these things with strangers. It's that I feel more comfortable that my message will be received and it's worthwhile to do so." In other words, these interviewees claimed to feel perfectly *comfortable* talking to strangers; their preference was due to the fact that they didn't feel conversations with strangers were likely to be productive.

Indeed, a majority of interviewees pointed out that for the productive conversations they would like to have, strangers presented more of a challenge than people they knew when it came to achieving their conversational objectives. Part of this challenge was blamed on the difficulty of finding common frames of reference with strangers. According to Heather:

Communicating effectively, you know, you have to give and take, you have to be able to listen as much to find the right words to say what you want to say. And you are more likely to be able to communicate effectively with someone that you know and have a better understanding of than with a stranger.

Additionally, interviewees found it equally challenging to predict whether something they said to a stranger would be correctly understood, as misunderstandings commonly led to inflamed tempers and a devolving conversation. Gabriella explained:

The people that I do know, I feel that I know them and that whatever I say that they are not going to take it in the wrong way. Whereas a stranger, like the women with the shoes, the doggy shoes, she doesn't know me from Adam, and she thought I was be

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[126] A stranger seeking out another user's personal information with the intent to do physical harm.

facetious, which I wasn't…When you text somebody, they are internalizing it. They are reading it on their level. So, [I] try to make it as passive or whatever as possible because any little inflection or any whatever that they can consider oh, this is aggressive. You see what I am saying?

Eye of the Beholder Characteristics. As explained in Chapter 5, some characteristics of everyday political talk are best explored from the perspectives of those engaging in the conversation. To this end, interviewees were asked about their perceptions of the sincerity, freedom and equality of these spaces.

Sincerity. When asked whether they felt they could be sincere in their own posts on Facebook, interviewees generally agreed that they could express themselves honestly. However, they also admitted that they usually felt it necessary to control the manner of their expression, so as not to set others off. Attention to proper communication would prevent their comments from being misunderstood or starting a fight, both of which would be detrimental to the productive conversations which interviewees sought. Jackie, for instance, saw editing herself as a way of ensuring that her message had the best possible chance of being effective. "I'm careful to try to present my views in a non-threatening way, and sometimes even in a humorous way," she admitted. "I don't always succeed at it, but I'm aware that my message is going to be heard a lot better if I'm not coming out swinging."

It should not be surprising then, that when asked whether they believed *other* Facebook users were being sincere, a majority of interviewees said they believed most other people were generally sincere in what they said online. The remaining interviewees believed that, like themselves, other people's comments were sincere, but carefully constructed.[127]

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[127] Even though interviewees believed Facebook users are generally sincere, several of them did acknowledge that some people might be making things up to get a rise out of others (e.g., trolls).

Freedom and equality. As described previously, freedom and equality are complex

characteristics. Freedom refers to both the freedom to express oneself without censorship, as

well as the freedom of the space itself from external control that would actively suppress

disagreeing ideas. Equality also has two categories: structural and discursive. Structural equality

refers to the inclusive nature of the conversational space, that permits anyone to contribute.

Discursive equality mandates that all participants receive equal consideration of their ideas,

regardless of their external status. Interviewees were asked whether they felt that the

conversational spaces on Facebook that we were discussing[128] could be considered free and

equal in terms of access to the space, freedom of expression, and opportunities to participate in

the conversation and be heard.

About half of the interviewees said that they would consider these spaces on Facebook

to be, at least in some way, free and equal. Interestingly, however, most interviewees, including

some of those who answered the question in the affirmative, acknowledged obstacles that

could prevent these spaces from being completely free and equal.

A number of interviewees pointed to issues with access to Facebook altogether, based

on their ability to afford internet access. As Heather explained:

> This is kind of hard to say, because in order to converse on Facebook, you have to be
>
> able to afford internet. You have to be able to afford a device that can access the
>
> internet. Unfortunately, I think that there is a huge inequality on that basis in the United
>
> States. Some people can afford this internet connectivity and other people can't. I think
>
> that this is a huge, huge inequality in fact. So, I guess that honestly, I would say that no, I
>
> do not think that there is free and equal access to the conversations and the type of

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[128] This included both the public pages they followed as well as private groups and/or conversations on friends' posts – spaces where they admitted to contributing to and/or observing conversations among Facebook users.

communication on Facebook. I think that it is a small percentage of the population that

is making the loudest noise and those who don't have access are simply not heard.

While most interviewees believed that these spaces did allow for freedom of expression,

some argued that they may not, either because people were intimidated from participating, or

because people had to be careful what they said because it could affect their offline lives. In

addition, some interviewees also pointed out that Facebook spaces don't necessarily provide

equal opportunities for participation because the amount of free time people have varies. "I

mean like if you work twelve hour shifts at Walmart, you probably don't have the time in the

same way that somebody who's going to school part time and parenting part time does," argued

Rosie. Others acknowledged that people may not all have an equal opportunity to be heard

because of Facebook's heavy reliance on algorithms to promote popular content or to highlight

comments to individual users based on their personal preferences. Lastly, some interviewees

argued that these spaces may not offer perfect discursive equality because of varying writing

ability among users or a language barrier.

Perhaps because of the way the interview questions about freedom and equality were

asked, interviewees tended to discuss their perceptions of the broader implications of freedom

and equality for Facebook, rather than addressing these characteristics in the context of their

own conversational experiences. It is therefore difficult to determine the impact of

interviewees' conversational objectives on their perceptions of these characteristics.

A political act. There is a significant body of research that points to the value of everyday

political talk in its own right. Such conversations increase people's political knowledge (Eveland,

2004; Kim & Kim, 2008; Klofstad, 2011) and help them shape and refine their opinions (Gamson,

1996; Graham, 2015; Kim & Kim, 2008; Mansbridge, 1999; Wyatt, Kim & Katz, 2000; Zaller,

1992), and in this way, lay the foundation for more advanced political engagement (Barber,

2003; Dahlgren, 2009; Gamson, 1996; Klofstad, 2011). However, as explained previously, it is not fair for us to externally expect these benefits to materialize. Rather, we must explore the internal perceptions of participants in order to get the most complete picture. RQ3d therefore asked to what extent interviewees understood their engagement in these conversations as a political act.

The results of this inquiry depended on how interviewees personally understood the concept of "political action." Some considered these conversations as a political act only insofar as they could result in real-world action or change. For those partial to this understanding, the answer was split. About half of them felt like Iris, who said that conversation "would only be a form of political action if somebody else is reading and doing that can effect change, and I'm not necessarily sure that anyone around anybody in those groups is in a position to affect change." The other half believed that conversation *can* result in tangible action. As Daphne explained:

> Because if you're having a positive conversation, you are sharing ideas and you're
>
> perhaps motivating, if not people you're having the conversation with but even the
>
> people that are maybe just following along and not chiming in, so to speak, but they're
>
> maybe following the thread or whatever. Maybe you're pushing them to some type of
>
> action, whether it be something as simple as writing their congressman or just going to
>
> vote in the next election, or something as simple as deciding to read up on a certain
>
> subject, or whatever it is that you're talking about. To me, it can lead to political action,
>
> certainly, because every little bit, to me, political action is not just one movement, one
>
> thing for a person to do, it could be many, many, small things.

For Daphne, tangible political action didn't only mean major policy outcomes; rather, she understood it as the buildup of smaller political behaviors which could be influenced by political talk.

A majority of interviewees' responses, however, agreed with the scholars who argue that such conversation can be a political act in itself. Some interviewees pointed out that these types of conversations could help people learn something new, which can lead to changing minds. Others highlighted the ability of these conversations to help us find common ground, which is the only way problems actually get solved. Still other interviewees argued that such conversations make political issues more salient to the public, thereby raising awareness. Essentially, for these interviewees, the impact of political conversation may be largely abstract and localized to individuals' minds. However, these effects must be understood as small, yet important, steps which not only have inherent value, but also gradually contribute to external change. As Leah explained:

> I think that part of the ways that oppression continues, or issues get worse or continue is because we aren't talking about it. So, the more we talk about it the more people will have an understanding of the way the system functions and the way humans interact with each other. Like we'll get somewhere that at least moves the needle politically in some way.

Actualized Pathway to Political Conversation

Addressing RQ2 and RQ3 through the lens of interviewees' motivations and objectives helps to reveal interviewees' actualized pathway to political conversation, explained in Chapter 2. Couched in Bennett's (2008) actualized citizenship model and drawing on Papacharissi's (2010) private sphere model, the issue public hypothesis (Converse, 1964/2004), and the concept of inadvertent political encounters, the actualized pathway to political conversation describes the personalized route to political conversation in the social media realm, mainly for those who are not political junkies. In brief, although non-political junkies don't exhibit the intense levels of interest in all things political, they all do have issues that are of personal

importance to them. These issues may be inherently associated with formal politics or have simply become a matter of public concern (i.e., politicized). Interest in their chosen issues makes these individuals more likely to want to engage with them in a more tangible way, which includes talking about them with others. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, provide individuals with the opportunities for such interactions, but also the autonomy to decide whether and when to make the transition from private to public. Spaces on Facebook that are not explicitly devoted to politics provide the best opportunity for inadvertent political encounters, which set the entire interaction in motion. Essentially, in the course of pursuing other interests, individuals may come across a post or a comment that, in their mind, links to their particular issue(s) of import in such a way that motivates them to engage.

Although most interviewees did not engage in conversations on the public pages evaluated for this project, they did still engage in these kind of conversations in *other* spaces on Facebook that were not explicitly devoted to politics, whether it was groups dedicated to hobbies, interests or professional concerns, or even in the comments beneath a friend's post on Facebook. Therefore, assessing how their political interests and issue importance interfaced with their participation in conversations helps illuminate the actualized pathway to political conversation. Indeed, the results reviewed above can be mapped onto the four components of the actualized pathway to political conversation: actualized citizenship, issue publics, the private sphere, and inadvertent political encounters.

Actualized Citizenship

Lance Bennett's (2008) actualized citizenship model provides the underlying framework for the actualized pathway to political conversation. Bennett explains the drop in formal political interest by suggesting that young people have discarded institutionalized structures, behaviors and overall trappings of formal politics in favor of a more autonomous and individualized

citizenship. Actualized citizens have complete control over their civic activities. They alone decide the conditions under which they will participate, and fully control its manifestation.

Interviewee responses demonstrated that their participation in everyday political talk on Facebook was, in fact, a heavily self-directed process. Interviewees admitted that their extant interest in certain issues motivated their participation in these conversations. Yet, although they all admitted to having an interest in talking to others about these topics, interviewees also had specific objectives in mind that they hoped to achieve with their conversations. Guided mostly by these objectives, and an awareness of the conditions necessary to achieve them, interviewees were incredibly selective when it came to opportunities for everyday political talk.

Issue Publics

The issue public hypothesis describes the organization of public opinion according to personalized attraction to specific topics. When it comes to political interest and engagement, most people tend to focus on a few specific issues that are typically of personal importance to them (Krosnick, 1990). Individuals converged around a given issue constitute an "issue public" (Converse, 1964/2006). The issue public hypothesis describes the point of initiation of the actualized pathway to political conversation.

Interest in a given issue is the compass directing autonomous civic engagement, while social media facilitate encounters with others who share those interests. As scholars have argued that individuals' political engagement is triggered when they encounter issues of personal importance to them (e.g., Gamson, 1996a; Kim, 2009; Popkin, 1994), it should be unsurprising that interviewees' participation in (or observation of) these conversations was initially sparked by their extant interest in the topic at hand.

The Private Sphere

Papacharissi's (2010) private sphere model describes the way individuals now approach

and connect to the public realm. As described in detail in Chapter 2, in the context of the PSCA,

which depends upon the format of the conversation rather than the existence of a dedicated

physical space, the private sphere model outlines the route of access to these conversations

through the converged online environment. According to the private sphere model, this route is

both private and autonomous. It is private in the sense that the converged online environment

facilitates public engagement while allowing the citizen to remain physically situated in private

space. It is autonomous because all components of an individual's public engagement in these

online spaces (instigation and continued interaction) is controlled and directed by the individual.

The private sphere model provides the setting for the actualized pathway to political

conversation, in this case, Facebook as a converged digital environment that supports civic

autonomy. As the above results show, Facebook provided interviewees with complete control

over their experiences. They selected the spaces and content with which they wanted to

interact based on their interests and social connections and determined the nature and intensity

of those interactions. When it came to civic participation, interviewees utilized Facebook's

affordances according to the direction and depth of their individual interests, with some joining

groups or following pages dedicated to activism, while others actively avoided such overtly civic

contexts. Yet all encountered opportunities on Facebook for everyday political talk, retaining

complete control over when, where, and under what circumstances they would participate.

Inadvertent Political Encounters

The trigger of the actualized pathway to political conversation is the inadvertent

political encounter (IPE), in which opportunities for everyday political talk arises in the course of

otherwise non-political pursuits. IPEs are the product of people drawing inferences and making

connections to the political in otherwise non-political contexts, which can then trigger conversation. In this way, as discussed in detail in Chapter 2, non-political contexts may provide many Americans with the majority of their opportunities for everyday political talk.

Although the majority of interviewees did not participate in conversations on the public pages, many of them admitted to, at least occasionally, reading through the comments posted by others in these spaces. As described above, interviewees were drawn to the specific public Facebook pages for a variety of reasons often having nothing to do with political interest. In the case of GT, although some interviewees were drawn to GT's page specifically because of his political opinions and content, many more were attracted to the page for other reasons. Thus, in terms of their interest in the page, GT's followers exhibit a diversity which suggests it would have offered even more opportunities for IPEs for those who are attracted to it for its entertainment content.

As discussed above, most interviewees preferred to participate in conversations in more private contexts on Facebook, such as closed or private groups, or on friends' posts. The value of non-political private groups for interviewees was the ability to connect with others over shared interests and/or experiences. Groups were aimed at connecting with the local community, professional networking or industry communication, lifestyle support groups (e.g., parenting groups, LGBTQ groups, Jewish groups), and or the pursuit of personal interests and hobbies (e.g., doll collecting, recipe groups, dog training, etc.). Interviewees were connected to their Facebook friends through the different areas of their lives (family, professional, local, etc.), usually having nothing whatsoever to do with politics. Because interviewees were connected to these spaces as a result of non-political interests and affiliations, non-political groups and friends' posts also presented the potential for IPEs, but with the added benefit of being contexts in which interviewees felt more comfortable pursuing a conversation.

A key component of IPEs is the spontaneity of the encounter, as well as the subsequent decision to engage. Participants wouldn't necessarily be turning to these spaces with the intention of pursuing opportunities for such conversations. Rather, in an IPE, they would come across these opportunities unexpectedly, in the course of pursuing other interests.[129] Some interviewees' responses suggested that they were actively pursuing these types of conversations. For example, although Jackie ultimately claimed that she did not actively seek out these conversations, her actions suggested otherwise. Most of her time on Facebook was spent on GT's page engaging in exactly these types of conversations, and she described her own behavior as a form of political activism. In most cases, however, interviewees indicated that they were not purposefully searching Facebook for opportunities to engage in these conversations. Instead, interviewees primarily came across these opportunities in the course of scrolling through their Facebook newsfeed. Jackie succinctly summed up this approach: "I definitely don't seek them [these conversations] out," she explained. "If they come my way, then I'll engage if it is something I feel is important to engage in." In most cases, then, interviewees' participation in these conversations fit into the model of the IPE: Largely spontaneous exposure in non-political contexts to content or comments that connect to their issues of importance and trigger the desire to respond.[130]

Political junkies and IPEs. The actualized pathway to political conversation was developed to explain how non-political junkies might encounter (and engage in) everyday political talk in the course of pursuing other activities on social media. Political junkies were expected to follow a slightly different path, one in which their political conversations were a

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[129] Acknowledging general user awareness of the personalizing algorithms of Facebook, they nevertheless operate silently, and mostly outside users' control. Therefore, the appearance of specific content in one's newsfeed is still largely unexpected.

[130] Whether interviewees actually *do* respond, again, is dependent on a number of factors, discussed in greater detail above.

product of a more active pursuit of specifically political spaces. In other words, while the other

three components of the actualized pathway to political conversation were still relevant for

political junkies, it was assumed that IPEs would not play as strong of a role. To some extent,

this expectation was confirmed. Close to half of the interviewees could be considered political

junkies, and part of this determination was the fact that they actively pursued political content

and opportunities for political conversation on Facebook. To this end, in addition to following

public pages dedicated to news and specific political figures, some interviewees belonged to,

and actively participated in, groups specifically dedicated to formal politics, such as political

activism groups and groups devoted to encouraging political conversation.

However, an additional point suggested by the results of the interviews is that political

junkies are *also* likely to be triggered by IPEs in non-political spaces. Nearly all interviewees who

were political junkies also engaged in spaces on Facebook related to interests that were devoted

to topics unrelated to formal politics, such as cooking, doll collecting, parenting, pets, and local

community groups, and most of them admitted to engaging in everyday political talk in response

to an IPE on Facebook, either in non-political groups or on friends' posts. For example, Eric, an

almost classic political junkie, described his experience participating in local restaurant and

recipe groups, in which his primary activity revolved around answering people's cooking

questions and sharing his personal experiences at local restaurants. However, in the midst of

this otherwise innocuous activity, "some of those groups get wildly contentious quickly

somehow" as the conversation "veers off to something" more public-minded, from the

appropriate amount to tip (Foundational, Societal Values sublevel[131]) or the ethical, moral and

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[131] From Delli Carpini and Williams' (2011) levels of political relevance. See Chapter 6, pages 161-165

social implications of using homophobic and/or racist language (Foundational, Conceptual

sublevel[132]).

For Eric, instances like these were quite common in his non-political groups. They also

demonstrate the classic IPE in which conversations about one thing suddenly turn political.

Indeed, these interviewee responses serve as a reminder that many political junkies are not

necessarily monolithic beings whose energies are completely devoted to, and focused on,

formal politics. Their lives and interests are as equally varied as everyone else's, making IPEs an

equally relevant component of political junkies' actualized pathway to political conversation as

well.

An Orientation Toward Mutual Understanding

An important goal for this chapter was to gain an understanding of interviewees'

motivations for entering and participating in these conversations. As discussed above, their

motivations played a key role in directing their actualized pathway to political conversation.

However, their motivations, specifically the extent to which their intentions were oriented to

mutual understanding, also had implications for assessing the value of the non-political spaces

on Facebook in which these conversations took place for the PSCA. Simply put, if the primary

constitutive action of the PSCA is everyday political talk which pursues mutual understanding,

then understanding the extent to which interviewees' intentions and subsequent actions in

these spaces were oriented toward mutual understanding could further validate the ability of

these non-political Facebook spaces to support the PSCA.

An orientation toward mutual understanding turned out to be a common theme

running through interviewees' responses. As described above, mutual understanding proved to

be one of the conversational objectives pursued by interviewees. For example, Jackie expressed

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[132] Ibid.

a compelling desire "to hear what others have to say, even if I don't agree with it. I try to find

out why they think the way they do." Similarly, mutual understanding was clearly at the core of

Alexis' description of her ideal political conversation:

> If I could speak to someone who has a completely opposite opinion of something I'm
>
> really passionate about, that's amazing and I love that. I don't necessarily want them to
>
> convince me, but I want them to convince me of their perspective so that I can
>
> understand where they're coming from.

However, mutual understanding was not always demonstrated in such a direct fashion.

Rather, the pursuit of mutual understanding was reflected in the prominence of its underlying

components in interviewee responses across different areas of inquiry. For instance, pursuit of

mutual understanding appeared to play a key role in Heather's decision to engage in a

conversation:

> Generally, the way that I approach situations like that is...if it seems like they are open
>
> to having reasonable discourse, talking about a difference of opinion, being respectful of
>
> everyone involved, I am more than willing to spend hours pleasantly disagreeing,
>
> sharing ideas, and listening to different viewpoints.

Essentially, her decision was based on the likelihood that the conversation would feature

exposure to difference, respectful listening, and critical evaluation, all essential components of

mutual understanding. These same characteristics were also present in Daphne's description of

her ideal political conversation:

> That you're actually listening to what they have to say, and they're listening to what you
>
> have to say. And you're sharing ideas back and forth. Even though you may not 100%
>
> agree, you're willing to listen to the other side. That to me is an ideal.

The features of mutual understanding also filtered into interviewees' explanations of their willingness to engage with difference. "As long as somebody has an open mind, I'm willing to engage with them," Iris claimed. "I do so knowing that I won't change their mind probably, but at least I get a sense of why and how they believe." Similarly, Derek argued the importance of exposure to difference, saying "it's good to encounter the other side and see what they're thinking because the way you understand it might not actually represent what they're thinking."

Chapter 6 presented a thorough analysis of the ability of conversations on non-political Facebook pages to construct the PSCA. The presence of the underlying characteristics of mutual understanding permeating interviewees' conversational behaviors in these spaces provides additional support to that analysis. Furthermore, since most interviewees were found to engage in everyday political talk in *other* non-political spaces on Facebook, the demonstrable evidence of interviewees' orientation to mutual understanding serves to broaden the range of non-political Facebook contexts that can support the PSCA.

Conclusions

The purpose of the in-depth interviews was to explore the perspectives and experiences of people who engage in everyday political talk in non-political spaces on Facebook. This section will reflect on the larger themes that have emerged.

The Central Role of Conversational Objectives

One of the main trends in these results was the central role played by interviewees' conversational objectives in their everyday political talk behaviors on Facebook. Regardless of the space in which they chose to engage, interviewees' participation was mainly guided by their conversational objectives. Interviewees had very specific objectives, and they wanted their conversations to facilitate the achievement of those goals (thereby making them "productive"). As such, they would only engage in conversations they believed would do so. Objectives ranged

from personal expression to changing people's minds to participating in a meaningful dialogue. What linked these motivations together was an overall desire for their conversations to be meaningful. All interviewees' conversational decisions were guided by these underlying motivations. This includes whether they would participate, where, and for how long. These results highlight the value of these objectives for understanding online political conversation. If people's conversational actions, modes of expression, and engagement/disengagement decisions for everyday political talk are all directed by their individual conversational objectives, then identifying these objectives is essential to developing a more comprehensive understanding of participation in these conversations. Therefore, a focus on conversational motivations is an important direction for future research.

Avoidance of Public Contexts

As the results of the previous chapter show, people engage in everyday political talk on the four public Facebook pages chosen for this study: George Takei, Humans of New York, Diply and Larry the Cable Guy. In an unexpected development, however, the people who agreed to be interviewed for this project were mostly not the same people found to be engaging on these public pages. Though there were two interviewees who did participate on the public pages, most interviewees preferred more private contexts, such as closed groups and friends' posts, for their everyday political talk.

Interviewees pointed to a number of reasons for their avoidance of the public pages, but for most, the hesitancy to post on public pages was strongly linked to the expectation that these spaces would not be able to fulfill their conversational objectives. For one, it was important to interviewees that their opinions would have an impact, or at the very least, were heard or considered by others. Although one interviewee believed that the large number of followers on GT's page allowed her to get her opinions out to as many people as possible, others

noted that the sheer size of the audience and number of people participating in the comments on the public pages severely limited the impact of their comments.

In addition, most interviewees felt that, because public pages were open to anyone, they were far more likely to encourage misbehavior, including trolling and mean-spirited political shouting matches. As discussed below, interviewees perceived such severe conflict to be a major obstacle to having productive conversations. Most interviewees felt that trying to participate in conversations on these pages were just a waste of their time. The underlying factor guiding their rejection of public contexts therefore was an avoidance of this type of behavior.

Conflict Avoidance

The focus of the PSCA is achieving mutual understanding, which implies that differences already exist between conversation participants. Previous research into political discussion on Facebook has generally confirmed Mutz's (2006) argument that people tend to refrain from engaging with politics mainly because they have an aversion to the conflict such conversations tend to incite (e.g., Rainie and Smith, 2012; Semaan et al. 2014; Sleeper et al., 2013; Thorson, 2014; Vraga et al., 2015). In earlier chapters, I suggested that the specific contexts such research had focused on might have contributed to these outcomes. Political Facebook groups could be problematic because, having been formed for the purpose of political discussion, they exhibit an obvious political anchor.

Political conversations within one's network of friends echoed similar trends in offline conversation: that people most often talk about politics with people they already know and with whom they have formed strong ties. I speculated that there might be other contexts on Facebook where perhaps people would be more willing to engage in political conversations in spite of the potential for conflict: namely conversations with strangers on public Facebook

pages. I argued that non-political contexts full of strangers offered increased opportunities for

exposure to difference, as well as a measure of contextual safety that could effectively shield

people from the potential social consequences of sharing their political opinions among friends.

When asked directly, many interviewees did indeed acknowledge such benefits offered

by conversations with strangers in public spaces. However, most interviewees' responses

supported the findings of previous research. The majority of interviewees were most

comfortable having these types of conversations with people they already knew (e.g., Miller et

al., 2015), and/or in spaces on Facebook that were more intimate and controlled (e.g., Thorson,

2014). The deciding factor for most interviewees when it came to where and with whom they

would interact proved to be avoiding severe conflict. Interviewees believed that to engage in

political conversations with strangers was to risk encountering conflict, because the absence of

both shared frames of reference and offline social consequences made strangers more likely to

misbehave. Similarly, most interviewees preferred private contexts on Facebook because the

oversight and exclusivity inherent in such contexts served to limit the potential for explosive

conflict. Interestingly, despite their concerns over strangers, many interviewees did still

converse with them regularly in these private contexts, which suggests that the perceived safety

of private contexts mitigated the potential risk of conflict inherent in interacting with strangers

online.

In explaining their feelings about conflict in political conversations, most interviewees

expressed a strong aversion to severe conflict. However, going deeper into interviewees'

feelings once again revealed the impact of conversational objectives. Though some interviewees

claimed to genuinely dislike conflict in general, most interviewees avoided severe conflict on the

basis that its presence was an obstacle to achieving their conversational objectives.

Avoiding conflict, not difference. Given the value of exposure to difference in political conversation (Mutz, 2006) and the current climate in which people are increasingly using social media to limit their interactions with those whose politics differ from their own (Duggan and Smith, 2016; Ewans, 2015; Ovenden, 2016), one important finding was that, most interviewees made a clear distinction between political difference and conflict.

Mutz (2006) argued that people will summarily avoid political difference as a strategy to avoid "interpersonal conflict and controversy" (p. 118). However, interviewee responses reveal that there may be some nuance to this point. Far from avoiding difference, encountering difference was a common occurrence for most interviewees. Indeed, half of them identified difference as something that would trigger their participation in a conversation, saying they were particularly likely to engage if they came across something that strongly contradicts their beliefs or knowledge about a given topic. In addition, many interviewees claimed to have no problem conversing with people who hold different opinions from themselves, and even expressed an interest in engaging with those holding alternative perspectives concerning their issues of importance.

What led interviewees to withdraw or refuse to engage in the first place was when they saw interactions devolve, or believed that they were very likely to devolve, into vicious, angry arguments. Similar to Vraga et al.'s (2015) results, it all came down to the tone of the conversation. Interviewees weren't averse to disagreements in general. Rather, they hoped to avoid the severe acrimony into which they have seen everyday political talk on Facebook descend in the past.

Rather than avoid disagreements out of hand, interviewees first evaluated the tone of a conversation and the context in which it took place before deciding whether to participate. This is because interviewees recognized that not all such interactions have to devolve into rampant

animosity. A number of them acknowledged that, although they might ultimately hope to change minds, a productive conversation with someone they disagree with doesn't necessarily end with one person "winning." Although most of them admitted that these ideal conversations were not as common as they would prefer, interviewees knew that they were possible. As a result, rather than avoiding political conversations outright, interviewees were intensely selective over the contexts and conversations on Facebook in which they were willing to participate.

Actualized Pathway to Political Conversation

Finally, an important product of these interviews is that they revealed the initial outline of each interviewee's actualized pathway to political conversation, or their personalized route to political conversation in the social media realm. Interview data demonstrates interviewees' autonomous control of their participation in everyday political talk on Facebook, an online space accessed while physically situated in the private realm (private sphere model). They determined the specific conditions under which they will engage, evaluated each opportunity for the presence of those conditions and made the final decision on whether to participate and for how long (actualized citizenship model). Opportunities for conversation were often, though not exclusively, unexpected occurrences, encountered in the course of pursuing other things (IPE), and interviewees' attention to these opportunities was governed by their personal interest in specific issues (issue public hypothesis).

Limitations

Finally, we must consider these results in the context of some limitations in the data. The most obvious of these is the inability to generalize these results. The small sample size alone is enough to constrain generalizability. The opinions and beliefs of 25 Americans can hardly be considered representative of a country whose population numbers in the hundreds of millions.

The lack of demographic and political diversity further compounds this issue. The United States boasts a richly diverse population, yet the majority of the interviewees were white, educated women. In addition, a strong majority of interviewees described their political orientation as either very liberal or somewhat liberal[133], and most of them identified as Democrats. Therefore, perspectives from the middle and to the right of the political spectrum were underrepresented[134]. That interviewees self-selected into the study poses a third challenge, as it is possible that people who are already comfortable talking to an unknown interviewer about their political conversations may also be more comfortable than other people having political conversations in general.

Another limitation stems from the narrow political diversity of the sample. Interviewees only represented followers of three of the four pages. Few followers of Larry the Cable Guy's page even attempted to participate in the recruitment survey, and none of them agreed to be interviewed. As discussed in Chapter 5, LTCG's page was selected in the hopes of being inclusive of conservative perspectives. While this move helped accomplish this goal in the content analysis, it failed to do so for the interviews. The absence of interviewees who followed LTCG reflects a major gap in these results, but also points to an additional path for future study.

In addition, the fact that most interviewees did not regularly participate in conversations on the public pages is indeed a limitation. Despite the important insights into additional non-political contexts revealed by interviews with observers, the fact remains that the interview portion of the project was intended to complement the content analysis of the conversations on the four public pages. The absence of these perspectives exposes yet another

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[133] This was an unexpected development. Because many interviewees lived in traditionally conservative states such as Texas and Oklahoma, I had anticipated that I would be speaking to more conservatives.
[134] This is a common challenge facing researchers, as many conservatives are leery of participating in academic research that explores anything related to politics.

gap, but, similar to the dearth of LTCG followers, poses yet another avenue for subsequent research.

Despite these limitations, however, the results of these interviews show that people do engage in spontaneous everyday political talk in non-political spaces on Facebook, thereby creating the PSCA. Far from avoiding difference, they are willing, and in some cases even eager, to engage meaningfully with others who hold alternative positions in pursuit of mutual understanding, if not effecting opinion change. Mindful of the obstacles to these goals inherent in the Facebook platform as well as the political climate, they are highly selective of the conversations in which they choose to participate, and will only do so when the specific conditions, which they expect to facilitate their conversational objectives, are met. While the previous chapter showed that these conversations are taking place on the public pages, the interviews revealed an additional, unexpected set of non-political, *private* contexts which can foster everyday political talk. The next and final chapter will evaluate the combined results of both chapters in the context of the overall objectives of this project.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

This project endeavored to begin developing a more comprehensive understanding of the broader, minimally anchored, and more personalized online public sphere, one that more accurately reflects the greater diversity of Americans' modes of political participation and conversational practice. To achieve this, I performed a case study of four specific Facebook pages not devoted to politics: George Takei, Humans of New York, Diply and Larry the Cable Guy. The first part of this project consisted of a qualitative content analysis of the conversations that emerged in the comments sections of these pages, while the second part relied on in-depth interviews of Facebook users who follow these pages.

The aim of the content analysis was to evaluate the presence and character of everyday political talk in these spaces, the ultimate objective being to explore the viability of these non-political spaces for the manifestation of the PSCA. During two time periods in 2016 and 2017, over 1,000 of these conversations were found across all four pages, focusing on a wide range of topics, from formal politics to social norms. Conversations on all four pages exhibited at least some political diversity, which is a key component of everyday political talk, but which also often led to passionate disagreement. Indeed, not only were the problematic features of the online public sphere (e.g., incivility, trolls, and political junkies) found in these conversations, they were expected. The important factor, however, was determined not to be the presence of these features, but rather their impact (or lack thereof) on the overall conversation. Despite the presence of these more problematic components, most conversations in these spaces did not devolve into pointless screaming matches. Rather, participants engaged in conversations that were calmer and more diverse, both politically and experientially, than might typically be expected from a public Facebook conversation. Even in the face of anger, impoliteness and incivility, participants still mostly relied on logic, reasons and evidence in their comments.

Participants ultimately wished to understand, and be understood by, others, suggesting the pursuit of mutual understanding. In the end, then, these pages weren't intentionally dedicated to being a public sphere; yet, the PSCA was being created with some regularity on all of them.

While the content analysis showed that people are engaging in everyday political talk on the four public pages, the interviews initially hoped to provide insight into the perspectives of participants in these conversations. However, it turned out that most of the people who agreed to be interviewed were not participating in conversations on the public pages. Despite this unexpected development, interviewees indicated that they did indeed participate in everyday political talk on Facebook, but just in other non-political spaces, such as closed groups and on their friends' posts. In other words, the interviews revealed other potential non-political sites for the PSCA on Facebook.

Another important result was that interviewees' selection of conversational contexts and participation in conversations were both primarily guided by their specific conversational objectives. Interviewees wanted their conversations to be impactful in some way, whether it was having their opinions considered, having a meaningful dialogue, or changing people's minds. All their conversational decisions, therefore, served these objectives. One of the underlying factors in these conversational decisions was the avoidance of severe conflict. Regardless of the space, interviewees regularly evaluated the conversations for acrimonious conflict, both before and during their participation. The presence of this type of conflict usually led interviewees to abandon a given conversation, or to refuse to engage in the first place.

Considering the value of encountering difference for the PSCA (and democracy in general), it is important to point out that, despite the significance of avoiding conflict for their conversational decisions, interviewees also clearly distinguished between this type of conflict and political difference in general. That is, interviewees were not avoiding all differences of

opinion. In fact, most interviewees expressed a willingness to engage with those who held

opinions different from their own, and half of them identified such differences as something

that would trigger them to jump into a conversation. Therefore, interviewees weren't averse to

difference in general, or even disagreements. Rather, they specifically sought to avoid the

acrimoniousness they found to be characteristic of political conversations on Facebook,

specifically because they felt such conflict was an obstacle to achieving their conversational

objectives.

<div align="center">**Contextualizing the Results: What Have We Learned?**</div>

Mutual Understanding, Ergo the PSCA

The first important conclusion drawn from the results of this study is that Facebook

users were creating the PSCA in a variety of non-political contexts on the site, via their

participation in everyday political talk. Although the results revealed many of the characteristics

of everyday political talk, the crucial feature here was the pursuit of mutual understanding.

Whether a conversation constitutes communicative action is determined by participants'

orientation towards mutual understanding (Habermas, 1996), rather than its achievement. In

other words, that participants pursue mutual understanding is sufficient for a conversation to be

deemed communicative action. The results of both studies show that the pursuit of mutual

understanding, and therefore the construction of the PSCA, was prevalent in both the

conversations on the four public pages and interviewees' conversational intentions.

For the content analysis, evaluating conversations without input from their participants

prevented any definitive conclusion as to whether mutual understanding was actually achieved.

However, the presence of the other characteristics of everyday political talk, as well as, in many

cases, comments indicative of participants' interest in understanding others' point of view (e.g.,

"I understand what you're saying," etc.), suggested that the potential for mutual understanding

was present, and that it was actively pursued. As with the content analysis data, it was difficult

to determine whether interviewees actually achieved mutual understanding. However,

interviewee responses indicated that mutual understanding was indeed one of their primary

conversational objectives, regardless of the context.

Additional Sites for the Online Public Sphere

One of the main arguments of this project was that past studies whose research

contexts were heavily tied to formal politics should not be considered representative of the

online public sphere as a whole, because the online PSCA takes place in spaces we don't

ordinarily look for it, and manifests in ways we don't typically expect. To demonstrate this point,

this project sought to evaluate the conversations of a specific, minimally anchored, non-political

context on Facebook for everyday political talk. The results doubly support this argument. The

content analysis revealed that everyday political talk clearly was clearly present in the non-

political contexts originally selected for this study. These results were supported by the

responses of the two interviewees who actively participated in everyday political talk in these

spaces.

Beyond this important outcome, however, the interviews yielded an additional,

unexpected result which pointed to additional sites of the PSCA on Facebook. Interviewees

expressed a strong willingness to engage in everyday political talk on Facebook. Although most

of them avoided conversing on the public pages, they did not give up on the public sphere

entirely. Instead, they chose to turn to alternative, also non-political spaces on the site where

they felt their conversations could be more productive. Thus, the results of this project further

confirm that just because people aren't engaging in the spaces one is studying doesn't mean

they aren't engaging at all. If recruitment for the interviews had restricted participation to only

those who actively contributed to the public pages, this additional point would never have been

discovered.

Fear of Conflict Versus Passionate Interest - The Key Role of Conflict in Everyday Political Talk

on Facebook

The importance of cross-cutting exposure for everyday political talk has already been

established. In order to pursue mutual understanding, differences must be present in the

conversation. However, it has already been noted, both by others, as well as the results of this

study, that the presence of difference can quickly lead to disagreement and, all too often,

severe, heated, passionate conflict. As many people seek to avoid this type of conflict, they

often will avoid situations and topics of conversation they believe are likely to lead to it (e.g.,

Mutz, 2006; Schudson, 1997; Thorson, 2014; Vraga et al, 2015). In the extreme, the fear is that

people will simply choose not to talk about these issues at all, thus impoverishing the public

sphere by depriving it of valuable voices and useful opinions. To some degree, the results of this

study have supported these fears. Interviewees admitted to avoiding talking about political

issues on Facebook in situations where they felt the conversation would be likely to devolve into

acrimony. This was the case even when they had strong feelings about the topic in question.

However, these results also revealed that such fears do not always rule people's

conversational decisions. The content analysis showed that there were many people who did

participate in everyday political talk on the posts from the four public pages, in some cases even

persevering in the face of impoliteness and some incivility from others. As participants used

Facebook's tools to select which comments to respond to, inappropriate comments and trolls

were easily dismissed or outright ignored. Despite the strong likelihood of failure, some

participants even tried to respond to those who were misbehaving, attempting to reason with

them. Similarly, while most interviewees refused to participate in conversations on the public

pages, this refusal was not simply due to a fear of conflict so much as it was a frustration with the futility that acrimonious conflict represented. That is, interviewees were avoiding intense conflict mostly because they felt that such conflict prevented the conversation from being productive and was therefore a waste of their time and energy.

Perceptions Confirmed but Also Contradicted

The combined results of the content analysis and the interviews reveal a discrepancy in the perception of conversations on the public pages compared to the reality. Interviewees avoided participating in the conversations on the public pages due to conflict avoidance. They believed that political conversations in these spaces would always fall apart, devolving into "shouting matches" as people began to yell at each other. As such, most interviewees felt that the public pages could not support the productive conversations they sought, ones characterized by reasoning and mutual understanding.

The content analysis did provide evidence that supported this characterization of conversations on the public pages. In fact, it's important to note that on all four pages such threads were indeed found, though these were not specifically evaluated for this study.[135] In addition, it is also true that, as most interviewees believed, there were some conversations that *were* evaluated that, despite beginning reasonably, did ultimately devolve into shouting matches. However, the content analysis also demonstrated that not only are conversations oriented to mutual understanding possible on the public pages, they are actually quite common. Although impoliteness and incivility were clearly present in many of the conversations on the public pages, for the vast majority of the over 1,000 conversations evaluated by the content

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[135] It was not uncommon for posts on the public pages to produce comments numbering in the thousands. The sheer volume of these comments made evaluating them all a near impossibility for the purposes of this project. In addition to the steps taken to limit the number of comments evaluated to only those that were most likely to be seen by users, only the conversations that met the reciprocity requirements of Step One of the analysis were evaluated for this project. As such "shouting match" threads consisted primarily of people yelling *at* each other (as opposed to talking *to* one another), many of these threads simply didn't meet the Step One requirement of reciprocity.

analysis, the presence of such behavior typically failed to completely derail the conversation. Instead, many participants commonly ignored the disruptive or antagonistic behaviors. Yet even in conversations colored by the intense passion of participants, discussions remained characterized by logical reasoning. The discrepancy reflected in the results mirrors the larger inconsistencies between our expectations for the online public sphere, both scholarly and popular, and the realities of how people actually talk about politics.

The Role of Personalization

All of the above points feed into what may be the most important takeaway from these results: the central role of personalization in this process, via the actualized pathway to political conversation. As explained in previous chapters, the actualized pathway to political conversation describes a personalized route leading to participation in an online political conversation.

The interviews provided an elemental demonstration of the actualized pathway to political conversation in action, outlined in Chapter 1. Consistent with the actualized citizenship model, interviewees' responses demonstrated autonomous control of their participation in everyday political talk on Facebook. Interviewees were quite willing, in some cases even eager, to engage in everyday political talk on Facebook, but only under their preferred circumstances. These circumstances largely related to their interest in the topic of the discussion and their particular objectives for such exchanges. Guided mostly by these personal factors, interviewees were acutely discriminating when it came to opportunities for everyday political talk, exercising complete authority over when, where, and under what conditions they would participate.

The importance of the conversational topic in these decisions further confirm the value of issue importance for everyday political talk. When it came to formal politics, interviewees' interest and practical engagement ranged from strongly interested to almost apathetic. Yet all interviewees pointed to specific topics about which they felt strongly as commonly triggering

their participation in a given conversation on Facebook. While many of these issues were strongly linked to formal politics or had recently become politicized, others were not explicitly political. In all cases, however, it was common for interviewees to exhibit personal connections to at least one of their issues of importance. Thus, consistent with the issue public hypothesis, interviewees' individual interest in and personal connections to a few specific topics drove their participation in everyday political talk.

In addition, interviewees each pointed to specific non-political contexts on Facebook as the site of many of these conversations. These spaces provided opportunities for inadvertent political encounters because interviewees were connected to them as a result of non-political interests and affiliations. Scrolling through their respective newsfeeds, interviewees spontaneously encountered content and comments from these spaces which connected to their issues of importance and triggered their desire to respond. Finally, as the setting for these encounters (private sphere), Facebook itself played a key role in this process, providing the spaces and tools which facilitated interviewees' absolute control over their participation in the public realm from the comfort and safety of private physical space.

Of additional significance is the fact that interviewees who were political junkies also followed this same pathway. This contradicts the argument made in earlier chapters that the actualized pathway to political conversation, particularly the reliance on inadvertent political encounters (IPEs), primarily referred to the conversational experience of those who were not political junkies. Political junkies, on the other hand, were expected to actively seek out explicitly political content and spaces on Facebook (or elsewhere) to satisfy their desire for political conversations. In fact, however, the interviews revealed that, although political junkies did actively pursue explicitly political spaces for the purpose of conversation, they were also just as likely to be triggered by IPEs in non-political contexts on Facebook.

Because it evaluated the text of past conversations, and not the motivations behind

participants' behaviors, the content analysis couldn't really address the actualized pathway to

political conversation. However, given Facebook's structural features (e.g., user composition,

generalized social objective, user-driven experience and range of connectivity tools), both the

autonomy of participants and the likelihood of IPEs can certainly be assumed. In addition, a

number of the conversations demonstrated how participants could transition the thread into

everyday political talk by introducing a more public-minded focus. Furthermore, considering

past scholarship into the role of issue importance in political engagement (Bennet, 2008; Kim,

2009), knowledge acquisition (Feldman, Wojcieszak, Stroud and Bimber, 2018; Kim, 2008) and

political conversation (Gamson, 1996a), it is reasonable to suggest that, similar to interviewees,

participants in the conversations evaluated here may have also been motivated to contribute by

personal issue importance. Given these results, it is reasonable to suggest that the path via

which many people approach online political conversation is both highly personalized and

carefully controlled by the individual participant (facilitated by online technologies and tools,

such as those available on Facebook).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

One of the most obvious limitations of this project is an inability to widely generalize the

results of both the content analysis and the interviews. Although qualitative research methods

allow for a more detailed and in-depth analysis, the trade-off is that the sample size often needs

to remain comparatively small so as to be able to obtain meaningful results in a timely and

efficient manner. The two methods used for this project, however, were quite labor intensive

and time consuming, which ended up limiting the range of data available for analysis.

The content analysis only evaluated conversations containing everyday political talk

from four, non-political public pages during two specific time periods. Due to the overwhelming

number of comments garnered by many of the posts, expediency required that the screening of

comments for everyday political talk be limited to only those comments most likely to be seen

by the majority of users. Thus, it is certainly possible that certain posts yielded more

conversations with everyday political talk than were evaluated. Interview data was similarly

limited, in part because recruiting interview subjects was a difficult process. Even though the

recruitment survey was active for a full year, and interview subjects all agreed to share the call

for participants on their respective Facebook feeds and in their groups, only 25 interviews were

completed. In addition to the small size of this sample, the diversity of this group was also

limited, as mentioned in the previous chapter, which further restricts the generalizability of the

results. The concepts illuminated by this research, namely the role of motivations in people's

conversational decisions and the actualized pathway to political conversation, could be used to

inform future research that seeks generalizability through larger-scale surveys.

      Another important limitation of this project was the absence of certain perspectives.

The initial objective of the interviews was to speak to people who participate in the

conversations evaluated by the content analysis, so as to gain a more comprehensive

understanding of the conversations taking place in these spaces. As discussed in the previous

chapter, this did not quite work out as planned. Although the interviews revealed new avenues

of exploration for everyday political talk on Facebook, the fact remains that the perspectives of

those who engage frequently in conversations on the public Facebook pages remain largely

unknown.

      In addition, conservative perspectives were only present in limited numbers in both

studies. The intent of choosing Larry the Cable Guy's (LTCG) page for study was to examine a

page whose conversations might be more likely to exhibit a politically conservative majority, as

at least two of the other pages (George Takei and Humans of New York) appeared to trend more

politically liberal (Diply appeared the most neutral). There was initially difficulty identifying a

page for entertainment that might attract these perspectives. LTCG was the only page that

shared general entertainment content and attracted a more politically conservative following.

Despite selecting this page, however, both studies experienced some difficulties

accessing the conservative perspective. In the content analysis, LTCG's posts generated the

lowest number of comments of all the pages, and therefore the fewest instances of everyday

political talk. In addition, although everyday political talk did regularly appear in the

conversations on LTCG, the content analysis revealed that, unlike followers of the other three

pages, LTCG's followers were largely averse to conversations about traditional politics. Similarly

problematic, if not more so, was the fact that, of the 25 people interviewed, none of them

followed LTCG. Indeed, whereas most interviewees identified themselves as liberal, only one of

them identified as "somewhat conservative." As a result, it's fair to say that the conservative

perspective didn't receive equal representation in either study. Future research should

endeavor to fill the gaps in the results of this project, so that our understanding of this

phenomenon can be as inclusive as possible and also perhaps identify differences in the

manifestation of everyday political talk in spaces that are oriented toward conservative versus

liberal perspectives.

Reconceptualizing the Public Sphere for Research

Finally, the impetus for this project was the recognition of a discrepancy between how

research conceptualizes Americans' online conversations about politics and the ways in which

they actually manifest. While the results of past research into the public sphere remains

valuable, moving forward, we should work to resolve this discrepancy so as to build a more

comprehensive picture of this phenomenon. A continued reliance on outdated theoretical

conceptions and limited research contexts will continue to yield results that do not accurately

correspond to the broader, more complex realities of how people talk about politics. Future research exploring the online public sphere should therefore endeavor to move past these obstacles.

The first step is to accept an updated public sphere model based on communicative action. This requires an acceptance of a broader range of contexts, modes of communication, and topics, and should apply to both online and offline manifestations of the public sphere. But most of accepting the PSCA demands an understanding of the public sphere as an internally-driven process, constructed through conversations, regardless of where and when they occur, in which the pursuit of mutual understanding is paramount as people negotiate matters of public concern through everyday political talk.

In addition, researchers should try to limit their reliance on political anchors to define research contexts. While political anchors have been used out of necessity to hone in on political conversation in an online context which arguably presents an excessively broad field of possibilities, an overreliance on them in research often puts artificial, and overly formal, constraints on what is actually a casual, organically-developed phenomenon. Developing a more comprehensive understanding of the PSCA requires that we explore even those minimally anchored research contexts in which we would not ordinarily expect to find everyday political talk.

Finally, accepting the PSCA model and moving beyond politically anchored contexts further requires that we adapt to the new realities of Americans' relationship with, and approach to, the political realm. Included in this new relationship is the actualized pathway to political conversation, which describes the new personalized route to political conversation in the social media realm. Future research should acknowledge that the process by which many

people engage in political conversation in the digital world is exceedingly personalized and uncompromisingly autonomous.

Concluding Thoughts

There was initially great optimism in the promise of the internet and social media for reviving the declining public interest and engagement in politics. Yet, scholars have been disappointed by research findings that frustrate these aspirations. I have argued, echoing the arguments of others (e.g., Bennett, 2008; Dahlgren, 2005; Hay, 2011), that the findings of past research, though systematic, thorough and valuable in their own right, have been constrained by outdated theoretical conceptions, overly-formal definitions and limited research contexts that do not accurately correspond to the broader, more complex realities of how and where people talk about politics.

Everyone can agree that talk is fundamental to democracy. We expect our elected representatives to negotiate the solutions to our country's problems through deliberation. We also expect our citizenry to be politically engaged, and political conversations are essential to this engagement. Often, the first step is simply participating in conversations about the issues that are important to us.

The results of politically anchored research are still of great value to our understanding of the contemporary public sphere. However, we cannot deem them representative of the entire phenomenon. An image of the online public sphere solely characterized by anchored research is ultimately an incomplete one. Rather, we must resituate the conclusions of previous, anchored research by understanding them as only a part of the larger, more complex online public sphere.

The contemporary public sphere must be one that is constructed by communicative action. As such, it manifests in any situation where two or more people are engaging in

conversation about matters of public concern with the aim of achieving mutual understanding. This includes both online and offline settings, and both explicitly political and non-political contexts. Past research has shown that there is some real concern about the ability of the internet and social media to facilitate the kind of conversations that are valuable to democracy. However, a more comprehensive understanding of the contemporary public sphere demands that we significantly expand the range of acceptable contexts and conversational forms. Achieving such an understanding of the PSCA also means acknowledging that people now approach political conversations, and politics in general, via processes that are increasingly personalized, highly autonomous, and facilitated by digital technology, and are therefore difficult to predict.

It is quite possible that future research will validate previous concerns, and/or perhaps even reveal new challenges to the PSCA. But it is also just as likely that Americans will surprise us. Perhaps we will also discover that, as this project suggests, people haven't completely abandoned the public sphere, but are, in fact, actively constructing it through their everyday conversations.

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