

Facts and feelings in comment threads: An exploration of grass-roots writers' norms for online political discussion

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Abstract

This article surveys a "real world" ideal of online discussions using a bottom-up perspective to study current norms of independent debaters online. It contributes to the field with a qualitative and grounded analysis of solo grass-roots writers' own debate norms – their ideas of the good and bad debates. Thus, the article does not ask, "Is their discussion democratic, and does it contribute to revitalizing democracy?" Instead, it asks, "What makes for a good online debate as described from a grass-roots perspective?" The results indicate that objectivity, respect and politeness are main themes in their descriptions, while the theme of emotion constitutes a contrast from the others. Concurrently, there are studies that discuss a more open understanding of online political participation that is moving away from strict Habermasian evaluations of online discussions. This can be considered a positive development for marginalized voices that are not writing in a purely rational argumentative manner. However, this article argues that the, in many aspects, counter-hegemonic writers in this study who could benefit from a broader approach, nevertheless, still value many traditional ideals.

Keywords: online discussions, public sphere, agonistic democracy, participation, citizen journalism, alternative media

Introduction

The Internet's potential to revitalize democracy or to form a public sphere has been explored for many years, and various studies have tried to assess the democratic potential of website discussion spaces (Hagemann, 2002; Zhou, Chan, & Peng, 2008; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009; Loveland & Popescu, 2011; Ruiz et al., 2011; Mummery & Rodan, 2013).

Thus, there have been numerous research endeavors, often focused on discussion quality, that have significantly informed this field. However, another aspect that would also be of value to research is what the individuals who engage in these discussions consider good-quality online discussion. The present article, which aims to survey the "real world" ideal of online discussions, is based on interviews with 18 citizens, or "grass-root debaters", with considerable experiences in online political discussions. The results include the themes that emerged from an analysis of the interviews. In addition, the themes are also discussed in relation to research approaches that are used to examine the democratic online discussions. The article contributes to the field by providing insight into the ideas and practices of a group of online writers' own debate norms. The research is performed using a qualitative approach, where the thematic analysis is grounded in the material, and it presents a citizen and bottom-up viewpoint that contributes to the understanding of the online environment for political participation. Accordingly, the article does not

explore, as many other projects have, whether the discussion is democratic or whether it contributes to revitalizing democracy. Rather, this article asks, "What makes for good online debate, as described from the grass-roots perspective?" The results paint a picture of the ideas of what the grass-roots writers believe a good online debate should be like, and it opens a discussion regarding the balance of emotions and passion within a respectful and objective online political debate.

The overarching interest relates to the possibilities for grass-roots writers and debaters to participate in the public debate through online media, and thus it adopts a bottom-up perspective. The article is part of a research project regarding citizen writers on a citizen media website section dedicated to politics and civil society, where one main topic of interest relates to what impedes their participation as online grass-roots writers. A major theme regarding impediments to their work focuses on the other writers' comments and the aggressiveness of the debates. Consequently, this article presents a thematic analysis of their ideas with respect to good and bad debates. This objective is broken down into two specific questions:

How do the grass-roots debaters describe good and bad online debates?

How do the grass-roots debaters describe their own practices with respect to comments?

The present article contrasts with previous works through its use of a qualitative method and an approach inspired by discourse theory, agonistic democracy (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Mouffe, 2005) and media participation (Carpentier, 2011) to explore grass-roots writers' norms. This approach acknowledges that power and conflict are ineradicable elements in the political field, and it views the online media landscape as a site of struggle where a great variety of voices are published, although not always heard. The concept of "the political", defined by Mouffe (2005) as a sphere characterized by power and conflict, is useful for understanding the online media landscape in which these grass-roots writers participate. This perspective presents a view of citizen-produced content as part of a broad political struggle over how to interpret our world.

Online discussions norms and research approaches

To date, there have been few studies on the ideas of non-profit citizen writers regarding online discussions or norms for comment writing and discussion, but there are some studies on the practice and management of commenting. Mitchelstein's research (2011) investigates the motivations for writing comments on news websites and blogs; this study shows that bloggers are positive about reading comments, and they participate because comment writers "deserve a reply" (2011, p. 2025). Witschge's (2007, p. 38; 2008, p. 83) exploration of forum moderation, norms and user reactions to moderators' involvement reveals a struggle between securing the quality of a debate and the freedom of speech (2007, p. 60) and also finds that forum managements try to regulate a balance where emotional expressions are acceptable but abuse is not (2007, p. 45-46). Ruiz et al. (2011) assess the quality of comments in online newspapers and also describe this balance between freedom of speech and respect for each other. Thus, it seems that the practice of commenting and discussing and the balance between openness and discussion quality is a subject that is currently negotiated among editors, moderators, etc. The grass-root debaters' ideas on this subject is what this study focus on. However, how have the

scholars who assess the democratic merit of an online discussion viewed a good online debate? Various expectations regarding democratic online discussions exist in the research. Thus, *studies with a deliberative approach*, which are the most common within the field, draw on the work of Habermas. Schneider's (1997, p. 74) early work on online public spheres studied a Usenet newsgroup using the original public sphere concept and the following criteria: argument quality (staying on topic), equality ("equal distribution of voice among the speakers"), reciprocity and diversity. His work has later been further developed by scholars such as Dahlberg (2004), who enhanced the evaluation criteria with indicators that would advance the "net-public sphere" research. Dahlberg's set of *criteria* (2004, p. 29-39) and *indicators* (2004, p. 33-35) can briefly be described as:

Thematization and reasoned critique of problematic validity claims, which relate to the existence of reciprocity and that positions should be supported by reason;

Reflexivity;

Ideal-role taking, which refers to the understanding from others' perspectives, which is indicated by basic respect for others, respectful listening, and showing empathy;

Sincerity;

Inclusion and discursive equality for all in the debates; and

Autonomy from state and economic power.

A later use of the deliberative approach uses the indicators *rational-critical argumentation*, *level of mutual respect* and *reciprocity* (Strandberg, 2008, p. 83). In addition, the reaching of *agreement* in discussion threads was also measured, which is not stressed in other approaches. However, these indicators are considered by some to be too limiting and narrow.

A *theoretically wider approach* described in this field is the three-model framework developed by Freelon (2010), which discusses deliberative domination as a "current theoretical- methodological status quo" (2010, p. 1176). Thus, as the framework he uses is based on the liberal individualist, the communitarian and the deliberative models of democracy, it includes many aspects of online discussion and its democratic potential. In the *liberal individualist* model, there is a focus on individual self-expression and self-interest, while the *communitarian* model, in contrast, emphasizes strengthening the community and social cohesion before focusing on individual desires (Freelon, 2010). The *deliberative* model focuses on free and open dialogue based on rational arguments. Indicators of this model include rational-critical arguments (logical, methodical appeals to the common good when arguing for one's position), public issue focus, equality and discussion topic focus (staying on the topic or topics of the thread's initial post), among others.

Approaches with a conflict perspective begin with the acknowledgement of power and emotions, such as that of Shaw (2012), which contends that the drawback of the public sphere theory is its ignoring of the "counter-hegemonic political projects" (2012, p. 41). Shaw proposes the *agonistic democracy* together with the *ethics of listening* as a solution to the problem of the exclusion of those at the margin (Shaw, 2012, p. 47). Her article also reveals the problem with defining politics. The feminist blogging community that she studied failed to participate in a political debate as they were not included in the category of political blogs by mainstream political bloggers. An agonistic-based understanding of democracy (Mouffe, 2005) enables an insight of the conflicts and affects in online political discussions and Shaw stresses that

the study of political discussions online must consider *exclusion, affect, identity, power and inequality*, and “cannot require an ideal public in where these things do not exist” (2012, p. 43). Shaw draws on Mouffe’s (1999; 2005) agonistic model, which can be considered either as a complement or as an opposite perspective in studying the struggle of alternative voices. Mouffe’s critique relates to the individualist, rationalist and universalist frameworks as these ignore the political dimension with its collective forms of identification, the role of affects in politics and plural irreconcilable claims. Mouffe also emphasizes “passion” as a strong force in the political area and that collective identities and the we / they distinction are vital for political participation (2005, p. 24-25). Accordingly, the agonistic approach could be partly described using the following key assumptions: acknowledging of non-rational and subjective discourse, acknowledging of the we/they distinction and irreconcilable claims, affects and passion are positive and necessary, power is inevitable and cannot be eliminated, identities are discursively constituted. This approach does not expect a good online debate to be purely rational and objective with a focus on a public good. Rather, this approach is a critique of deliberative approaches and expectations with respect to public political discussion. Furthermore, Papacharissi’s (2004) approach also acknowledges emotions and perceives heated debates as something valuable. She argues that scholars tend to ignore the “democratic merit of robust and heated discussions” (2004, p. 259) and that civility is often described as mere interpersonal politeness. Instead, Papacharissi describes how to separate the two concepts, civility (incivility was described as threatening democracy and other individuals’ rights or assigning stereotypes) and politeness (impoliteness was defined as using name-calling, aspersions or words indicating non-cooperation (2004, p. 274)). Utterances that are offensive but not directed towards groups in society are not considered a threat to democracy and are, therefore, not uncivil. Thus, mere interpersonal impoliteness is not a significant threat to democracy.

Karppinen, Moe and Svensson (2008) argue that the two perspectives, the deliberative with an idea of “universal understanding or consensus” and the conflict perspective with an idea that “civil society is not harmonious or unitary” (2008, p. 7) are though their differences useful analytical tools possible to use simultaneously. The two perspectives expose different problems in a study of “political and social reality” (2008, p. 8) and can thus make intelligible the “real-world” ideals in this study.

Studies that have assessed the public sphere online, often from a deliberative perspective, typically find limited traces of strictly deliberative online discussions. Some show a lack of rational agreements (Mummery & Rodan, 2013), while others indicate that online discussions are not yet truly deliberative (Hagemann, 2002; Strandberg, 2008). Robertson and McLaughlin (2011) also find that empathy and respect varied in political blogs, while in contrast, there was enthusiasm for confrontational debate. Thus online discussions today do seldom match the expectations of deliberative ideals. One could also reason that it is the approach to research that requires adjustment to gain a deeper understanding of democratic potential in online discussions (Wright, 2012b).

The present article argues that we can see *a move towards more open approaches* of deliberative theory, such as those approaches that acknowledge various forms of talk, as well as power, emotions, personal narratives and a less outcome-oriented view of deliberation (Dahlberg, 2007; Black, 2008; Graham, 2010; Wright, 2012a; Wright, 2012b; Mummery & Rodan, 2013). Wright (2012b) states that it would be possible to find positive results when interpreting research with respect to online political participation if we were to focus on discussion rather than deliberation. In addition, questions have also been raised as to what

constitutes political, thus questioning what we define as political debate and where it is found (Harp & Tremayne, 2006; Graham, 2010; Wright, 2012a). Both Wright (2012a) and Graham (2010) emphasize that we need to include emotions in the study of political talk. Dahlberg's (2007) aim to radicalize the public sphere concept to account for power and exclusion (2007, p. 128) is also a step in this direction. This move towards a more open understanding of online political discussion can be considered a positive development for those that experience exclusion, such as those that are not part of the mainstream media, that do not express mainstream opinions, or that do not write in a purely rational argumentative manner – categories that include many of the debaters in this study. While mainstream media struggle with balancing openness and quality in comment sections, researchers similarly struggle to define a "good" discussion and to find suitable approaches for understanding the democratic potential of online discussions. Consequently, this article attempts to gain a deeper understanding from the perspectives of the grass-root writers as to what are the criteria of a good online discussion.

The study

The Participants

This empirical work is based on the results of semi-structured interviews with 18 writers in Sweden who were active on a citizen journalism website. An overarching aim was to understand their experiences as citizens participating in public discussions via the web, including its potential and its impediments. The interviewees were selected from the politics and civil society section of a citizen journalism website. The website has a long history and attracts many writers and debaters. An overview of the website prior to its selection indicated that the majority of the texts contain personal opinions. Contact was made with active writers, and their e-mail addresses were obtained via author profiles on the website. Because of the brief profiles of the writers, it was not possible to know in advance any details about who was invited to participate. Nevertheless, a relevant group of interviewees was identified for the study. The distribution of gender was four women and 14 men, all of who were writing for their own purposes (not for an organization). They were between 28 and 79 years old and had published between a few and up to 200 articles (the median was 72) on the citizen media website. They also had considerable experiences writing comments and debating online. Furthermore, they had an average of 467 readings per article, according to the statistics regarding readers/clicks, which are available on the website, although it is difficult to validate these numbers. Their writings often led to discussions in threads of comments beneath the article. Furthermore, they also participated and discussed other writers' articles. As a result, one of the main topics in the openly conducted interviews was the tough online debate climate of which this article offers an account.

The interviewees can be described as independent and not-for-profit experienced writers on the citizen media website. They shared their stories about opportunities for the ordinary citizen who acts on his or her own to publish opinions and participate in public online debates. The writers can also be described, in many respects, as counter-hegemonic solo writers.

Method and material

Because the interviewees were dispersed across Sweden, the interviews were conducted over the telephone or via Skype. The informants received an information leaflet stating that participation was voluntary and that their identity would be kept confidential. The research approach employed was to study experiences through qualitative interviews. The interviews were held in a semi-structured way, with a pre-defined set of interview-question themes for all respondents. However, the use of different questions and follow-up questions depended on the specific interview situation and on the interviewee. Thus, while there was an overall structure, the interview was conducted in a flexible manner (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 87, Gibson & Brown, 2009, p. 11). The approach was expected to promote keeping an open mind to the informant's experiences. The interview lasted an average of 45 minutes, and the interviews were transcribed into 150 pages.

The material was subjected to qualitative and grounded thematic analysis and thus resulted in themes that emerged from the material. The initial categories and ideas that emerged were then sorted into themes by iteration until the themes appeared to be stable and consistent (Merriam, 2009, p. 183-186). Accordingly, the interviews were sorted, reduced and organized into categories reflecting the main topics. The analysis advanced the description of the material from groups of concrete topics to a more abstract level of themes (Merriam, 2009, p. 188). In the second phase, the emerged themes were understood in light of previous research approaches and theories. Thus, the approaches and theories in the field were used as a backdrop for making further meaning of the themes.

The website and context

An ordinary citizen who wishes to participate in a public debate via the Internet can use various types of platforms, such as citizen journalism websites, alternative online media, discussion forums, private blogs and social media. Thus, it is possible for a citizen to for example post complete articles, to comment on the articles of others or to start a discussion thread in a forum.

The citizen journalism website can be described as a for-profit alternative medium, in the sense that it is owned by a corporation, publishes citizen journalism and works as an alternative to mainstream media. It is designed as a news website that consists of sections related to politics and society, sports, business, etc. It also allows for comments to posted articles. An overview of the content of the section on politics and society, from which our selection was to be made, indicated that a majority of the articles contained texts with personal opinions. Accordingly, it is regarded as part of an online public political discussion online. The website also has a legally responsible publisher, publishing policies and an editor who reviews articles before publication. It also has additional rules to prohibit slander, organized opinion and commercial campaigns.

The interviews were conducted in a Swedish context in late 2011, a period that witnessed increasing debate on what was referred to as "hate speech online" in the Swedish media and mainstream web media seemed to move towards more restrictions regarding online comments during this period. (Helin, 2011; Madon & Kronqvist, 2012; Mattsson, 2011).

Results

The themes that emerged from the analysis offers an overview of the ideas of what constitutes good and bad debating, as expressed by the grass-roots debaters. The results are described in two sections, thereby reflecting the research questions. The first of these relates to the debaters' own normative ideals (the bottom-up perspective of a good online debate). The second relates to their descriptions of their own practices as debaters.

What is a good online debate?

This section answers the research question regarding what constitutes good or bad online debates according to online debate participants. The main themes regarding a good debate include respect, objectivity, emotions, differences, new perspectives, language and politeness. Similarly, the themes of a bad debate include respect, objectivity, emotions, language and politeness.

While a good debate was described using primarily the themes of respect and objectivity, a bad debate was described primarily in terms of a lack of politeness, respect and objectivity. Consequently, as the descriptions of good and bad online debating overlap and are intertwined, they will also be presented in the same manner.

The most prominent theme, according to the interviewees, of a good online debate is *respect*. Their statements addressed concepts such as seriousness, perceptiveness, dialogue and differences. As part of this theme, the writers contend that respecting the opinions of others and respecting the debate, per se, are important factors of a good debate and must be adhered to when writing good comments. Furthermore, the writers emphasized the importance of perceptiveness and seriousness, such as listening to each other and taking responsibility for what one has written. Some of the interviewees simply mentioned the importance of respecting different opinions as important values.

Thus, I think respect and perceptiveness, those are my words of honor. I think they are important.

Furthermore, they feel that a person should not write that which he would not say, face-to-face, to another person and that each person should respect the opinions of others while also being entitled to have their own opinions respected.

You should be prepared and willing to take responsibility for what you have said. If you take many blows, then you should not fall back or feel sorry for yourself.

Another writer maintained that a good comment thread allows its contributors to play rough, but still accept differing opinions. Some characterize a good debate as a dialogue where all sides have the opportunity to speak. Being responsive to the opinions of others is similar to the theme of difference below, which views differences of opinion as a specifically good quality of a debate and something valuable, whereas this theme relates basically to respecting differences. Respect for diversity in a debate thus seems to have a self-evident value for some.

You should be able to think, 'Well, I agree with you, but then I see things more like this and that'. You don't see a lot of that. I don't know, it's all over society. As I said, you have to be able to pause. Even in a discussion, you should pause and really listen. I mean, we hear but how often do we actually listen to what another person says?

In the same way, respect is also mentioned when writers describe a bad debate in regretting that comment writers do not show respect for each other's opinions. One writer commented that it is difficult to understand the context of the discussion among the debaters when there is no dialogue.

Another major theme is *objectivity*. Concepts regarding the importance of objectivity relate to use of good arguments, reason, impartiality, knowledge and staying on topic. The idea that online comment writers should be objective is mentioned in different ways. For example, respondents stated that a comment writer in a thread should stay on topic when commenting, use self-control and maintain a line of argument in his or her comments. This includes not being ruled by mere emotions. One writer emphasizes that it is the debate per se and the arguments that are important, no matter what the opinions are. The same writer also described his work as that of collecting arguments, together with a loose network of like-minded individuals, for their common cause. In this respect, reason is sometimes presented as a concept that is opposite that of emotion.

Well, I guess [a good debate is] when someone has understood my line of reasoning and doesn't agree but thinks that I have a valid point. The comments shouldn't be too emotional but rather reasonable.

Objectivity and reason (or the lack thereof) are themes expressed by the interviewees when discussing bad online debate protocol as well. Comments with arguments that are mean or few in number are described as bad, and when arguments based on emotions are used, they are not considered valid. Irrelevant and non-constructive comments were also mentioned as being bad for a debate. The same applies to the failure to attempt to understand the arguments and the use of biased objections by comment writers. Objectivity is also discussed as being in opposition to personal attacks.

One debater who has had discussions with xenophobic comment writers described them as having no arguments, and when confronted, they have no answers either. This debater further posited that racists can seldom win debates and suggested that racist comments should be countered with solid arguments and that one should analyse the arguments that they use.

Not being current or well read about a topic is also considered a negative characteristic among debaters, as is not staying on topic. However, while it is not considered a good debate when discussions veer from the topic, presenting new angles, as discussed later, is considered by some to contribute to a good discussion.

But, of course, maybe it becomes too much sometimes, that it gets out of hand with racist stuff and personal attacks. So, very infrequently does it become a pure debate about the actual topic.

The theme of *emotion* refers to concepts such as intensity, provocation, teasing and subjectivity. Although many mentioned that objectivity and reason are important when engaging in debate through commenting,

others felt that passion and emotions are part of the political discussions as they provide a sense of belonging and community. One writer explained that the citizen media website looks for an intense debate and that without anonymous comment writers, the debate becomes boring. Another writer believed that it is acceptable to incite and provoke through comments to contribute to a passionate debate and that insulting others is something completely different.

It is a problem, but at the same time, I believe [the citizen media website] also wants a spirited debate. I think they said that they tried to get rid of the anonymous comments but then the debate became a little boring so they thought they needed some liveliness anyway, you know.

This debater also maintained that the harsh comments are acceptable and did not see them as a problem. He does not define a comment that describes one's opinions with "dirty words" as hate speech.

Some writers, however, considered too much emotion or frustration in comments to be negative. Some comments are considered to be driven by frustration and are not constructive to the discussion. These comments may actually be insulting. In addition, emotional comments can generate patronizing statements. This implies that it can be difficult to defend an article that is based on emotions.

Being overly sensitive to comments received from others is also considered a negative characteristic, as one should be able to take criticism, especially if one plays rough in a discussion.

Differences and new perspectives were among the themes that emerged from the analysis of the interviews. In discussions regarding the norms for commenting, many discussed the importance of accepting differences of opinion in the context of commenting threads. While it is rare that opponents change opinions as a result of another person's comments, it feels good when it happens. Writing only for those who share similar opinions is considered unexciting, and receiving comments that only praise one's position is viewed as negative.

None of those interviewed maintained that the aim of commenting and debating is to reach a common opinion, a consensus, a solution or a compromise. While one respondent discussed the possibility of reaching a consensus, it was dismissed.

Well, but it [consensus] is a typical Swedish model where things should be like the middle way, you know. But, I think that it's more fun when people kind of ... when you encounter a wide range of views.

Similarly, no one stated that the aim of online debating is to find common ground. Implicitly, this could be interpreted as the acceptance of conflict and irreconcilable differences of opinion, concurring with the view of Mouffe (2005).

Some maintain that in a good debate, the comment thread evolves into a new debate topic within the same context area as the previous topic or introduces a new angle on the debate. Accordingly, it is difficult to draw a line between a good evolving debate and the point where writers veer off topic. One writer recounted that after receiving comments with new perspectives, he learned something from the experience. Furthermore, a good debate seems to inspire writers to write new articles. One debater was pleased with the positive comments he received from readers and reported that they provided him with new thoughts.

The theme of *interpersonal politeness* is implied by many and is mostly described in terms of what not to do. Personal attacks and insults are not acceptable. One should not engage in negative behaviors such as “naming and shaming”, attacking others in debates, or causing others emotional harm. One debater advised against personal comments altogether, although he mentioned that this can be difficult after getting to know some of the other debaters. Nonetheless, there are those who accept heated and impolite comments, albeit to a limited extent.

Well, in a good debate, you try to stay on topic and restrain yourself from hurling too many insults at each other.

Many characterize the lack of politeness in the debates as a problem. Being angry is expected in heated debates, but insults and personal attacks are not acceptable. This resembles the distinction between emotional and abusive messages that moderators in Witschge’s (2007, 45) study made. A few interviewees admitted they had been humiliated by comment writers. In a similar vein, some writers mentioned that online hate speech is distressing, but the citizen media website may be right in giving wide berth to freedom of expression, thus suggesting that the online debater must accept the good with the bad.

This theme overlaps with that of respect, as politeness could be interpreted as showing respect. However, the theme of respect relates to the basic respect for the dialogue and the discussion per se and for difference of opinion thus a stance to some extent relating to basic democratic ideals whereas politeness relates to etiquette and courtesy thus referring more to interpersonal behavior.

The less apparent theme, *language*, also emerged. A few writers stated that good writing ability, spelling and diction are important, and the writer should not resort to curses, etc. In addition, comments should be clear, explicit, short and to the point.

Their own commenting practices

In their interviews, grass-roots writers described themselves as writers and debaters, and they elaborated on their practices with respect to commenting. The themes that emerged in the analysis are provocation, emotions, identity, objectivity, respect and disinterest. To some extent, these themes align with those of the ideal debate, as described above.

Provocation was mentioned by some, and one writer explained that he wrote in a way to attract as many comments as possible and attacked the opinions of the commenters with which he disagreed. Another writer stated that commenting online is similar to a conversation with friends, in which you can exaggerate a bit when expressing your views. Another writer recounted that he had tried to provoke an opponent but was misunderstood as being hostile.

I try, to some degree, to provoke the opponent, and maybe this is misunderstood and they think that I want to fight. I think that personal attacks are wrong, but on the contrary, I think you can provoke and tease a little when dealing with other people’s opinions, and thus see things from multiple perspectives.

He has been called a provocateur and has been accused of corrupting facts, but he stresses that provocation is needed to start debates, just as art does. Another debater stated that she has a volatile temper and enters the comment threads when someone criticizes her articles.

Some stated that their practices as debaters are driven by *emotions*. One writer mentioned that his writing is guided by emotions, and he recounts that he originally was sensitive about some comments but that he now accepts that people may become annoyed by his texts. Another takes the middle ground between emotional arguments and more analytical ones. One debater admitted feeling vulnerable but still comments under his own name. Another debater explained that he uses his name online but believes that few see it. He then laughed and reflected that, in fact, maybe they do. One writer declared that she is open with her *identity* as it is important for her to be herself in the debates. Another always uses at least her first name. Yet another stressed that he never would use the cloak of anonymity to write mean comments.

You are very vulnerable even though you are, in a way, very anonymous. I have always been open with my name, but since you can comment and rate [articles], it is a tough world, which I eventually left.

With respect to the theme of *objectivity and knowledge*, some debaters say they are strictly factual when they comment and explain that this policy seldom leads to personal attacks in responses. Their descriptions of the good online discussion emphasize respect for knowledge and opinions.

I respond to comments, but I take care not to focus on the person but instead carefully keep to the issue. I seldom become subjected to personal attacks. I have great respect both for knowledge and opinions even though I don't share the opinions.

Some report remaining objective even when they have been involved in a dispute with the same comment writer in another thread. However, some describe that comment writers sometimes take the debate personally and let old disputes impact new discussions. Others stress that they use strong arguments, while another writer said that he may demand to know the basis for the comments and arguments expressed by other writers or seek clarification from them. Writers who wish to be taken seriously must be able to explain their positions in a reasonable way. In this context, scientific arguments are important.

It is not as if I jump at him and say, 'No! You're wrong!' Instead, I would more likely want to know why. 'Okay what's your argument against this? Why? Why do you think this is wrong?'

Yes I do [comment on articles], but I keep it quite brief because I don't want to descend into polemics. I noticed that the stronger your argument is, the more personal it gets, especially if your opponent isn't well read on a topic.

Within the theme of *respect*, the concept of dialogue emerged as well. Many express respect for the debate and for other participants. One writer said that keeping the conversation going is important, particularly with respect to debates with racists, while another debater uses intelligence to reach a

consensus. As dialogue is an important part of commenting, one should appreciate the reactions from readers and realize that these readers are owed a response.

Well, if you want to maintain a dialogue with an opponent then you cannot simply say that they don't know anything. Instead, you continuously need to point out their advantages and intelligence.

Finally, one theme relates to a lack of *interest*, or the failure to participate in the discussions. Some express a lack of interest or resignation towards the commenting threads and the debates. One described participating in the discussions as pointless. Another did not know why he did not read comments, explaining it was not a deliberate choice, it was just something he did not do. Yet another said that he checked his own articles and their comment threads but not those of others, while another avoids reading the comments to avoid engaging in altercations.

Balancing the rational and the emotional

The grass-roots debaters in this study prefer and wish for debates based on objectivity and knowledge as well as on respect and politeness even though emotion, to some extent, is a theme that emerges. *Respect* is one of the main themes, and the writers' explanations suggest that they require the debate to be taken seriously as a space for genuine citizen participation with a basic acknowledgement of the opinion of others. Criteria such as those of Dahlberg (2004) regarding the need for basic respect are echoed in their accounts. Dialogue, perceptiveness and the importance of all views being heard are mentioned by some, which is consistent with the concepts of reciprocity, equality and inclusion that the Habermasian perspectives stress (Strandberg, 2008; Dahlberg, 2004; Schneider, 1997). However, some mention respect and harsh debates, which suggest an acceptance of passion and conflict (Mouffe, 2005, p. 25) in debates. This implies a perspective that sees no conflict between passionately expressing your opinions while still maintaining respect for the discussion and the opinions of others. Listening to what others are saying is also discussed by Shaw (2012), who argues for an "ethics of listening" as it allows for voices not typical of mainstream political blogs to be heard.

The theme of *objectivity* is understood in terms of being dispassionate and maintaining a focus on the facts. A focus on the facts, reason and arguments based on reason are criteria within the deliberative approach that emphasizes rational arguments (Dahlberg, 2004; Strandberg, 2008; Freelon, 2010). Objectivity is also characterized as the opposite of a focus on the person of one's opponent. Hence, the theme of objectivity may sometimes have its opposite in emotions, while at other times, being objective means sticking to the facts and not attacking others personally. However, this is also expressed as maintaining focus on the topic, a criterion in the deliberative approaches of Schneider (1997) and Freelon (2010). Furthermore, the idea that the better argument will win, especially relevant when debating with racists, suggests an idea that good arguments play an important role in discussions, and the belief in an objectively "better" argument is consistent with a deliberative view that the course of a discussion will lead to agreement (Strandberg 2010, 84). The focus on objectivity thus conflicts with being personal,

subjective or emotional. The latter is something Shaw (2012) would acknowledge based on Mouffe's agonistic democracy (Mouffe, 1999; Mouffe, 2005).

There are different views on the theme of *emotions* and the place emotions have in online debates. Nevertheless, the results of the study suggest that some degree of passion and emotion are given characteristics in online debates, a finding that is consistent with Mouffe's (2005) view that passion is a strong force within "the political". A few of the interviewees mentioned that too much emotion is problematic if the frustrations and feelings are allowed to prevail over the debate. This theme is also apparent when some of the writers describe their own practices in which emotions and provocations are natural components.

With respect to the themes of *differences and new perspectives*, a good debate can be seen as something that advances the discussion of an issue. This suggests that new angles and topics related to the original ones are valuable. New angles as part of a good discussion are acceptable within the deliberative perspective (Schneider, 1997; Dahlberg, 2004) as long as you stay on the topic or "address the initial thread topic" (Freelon, 2010, p. 1182). From the liberal-individualist (Freelon, 2010) perspective, there is an acceptance of the personal angle and personal narratives as arguments, as well as an acceptance for not having the common good as a point of departure for discussion. Similarly, the agonistic perspective (Mouffe, 2005) also acknowledges subjective views and arguments as natural. The interviewees did not discuss the common good as a basis for their participation even though many claimed that one should be objective and respect others' opinions. The differences of opinion are not mentioned in the context of wishing to reach an agreement, but rather with regard to an acceptance of the differences of opinion, contrary to Strandberg's (2008, p. 83-84) deliberative approach, which also assessed conflicts in threads and attempted to ascertain to what extent agreement was achieved.

Many writers declare that interpersonal *politeness* is important and that harsh language is not acceptable. Empathy, which is a criterion within ideal role taking and is one of Dahlberg's (2004) criteria, is mentioned by some debaters as being important. Contrary to Papacharissi (2004), no distinction is made by the interviewees between threats to democracy and mere impoliteness in online discussions. Papacharissi (2004) distinguishes between uncivil comments and polite comments, explaining that impolite comments are acceptable from a public sphere perspective, but uncivil comments, which threaten democracy, freedom of speech or groups in society, are not acceptable and are thus not civil. However, given that the debaters in this article stress that insults and personal attacks are impediments to the online debate, they are, in the long run, a threat to democracy.

When writers describe their own practices, the themes of emotion and provocation emerge to a greater extent, albeit together with the themes of objectivity, knowledge and dialogue. While they accentuate the value of receiving responses and engaging in dialogue, they do not depart from their personal drive and manner.

Even though *conflict* and *consensus* perspectives are often described as opposites they can enable to understand social reality such as the grass-roots writers' and as in this study expose "real-world" ideals where perspectives intersect.

The ideals that the grass-roots debaters hold regarding a good online discussion point to rather traditional ideals, ideals of an objective and polite discussion that is not often found by researchers that study online deliberation.

Conclusions

This article contributes to its field by offering great insight into ordinary citizens' ideas and norms for online debating as a result of qualitative interviews and a thematic analysis grounded in the material. The ideal debate that the interviewees present offers a bottom-up citizen perspective within a Swedish context, a point of view that has not, to any great extent, been previously studied.

One conclusion is that there is agreement among the debaters regarding certain themes. They seem to have a common understanding that *objectivity* (understood as being dispassionate and focused on facts) is important in the online debate. The lack of emphasis on the public good, consensus or "ideal role taking", together with a respect for differences of opinion points to an acknowledgement of subjectivity, personal drives and passion. Thus, their norms, in some cases, emphasize an understanding of differences and conflict. Furthermore, many agree that *respect* for each other, for the opinions expressed and for the debate itself is part of a good debate.

A second conclusion is that the main conflict among the themes is between *objectivity and emotion*, as passion and personal views conflict with a focus on the facts. This is also a distinguishing main characteristic between the deliberative and agonistic theories. Another source of tension is between *emotions and politeness*, where the acceptance of emotions and passionate debate, such as heated discussions, may conflict with the need for politeness. Another point of contention regards the boundary between staying on topic and an evolving debate with new angles and perspectives. Accordingly, there are both agreements and disagreements among the grass-roots debaters and among the themes that may, on occasion, contradict each other.

Consequently, the bottom-up perspective shows norms of a deliberative kind in its focus on objectivity, respect and politeness, but there is also an understanding of subjective drives and passions and the need to be oneself, as emphasized in the liberal-individualist and agonistic models.

Lastly, this group offers a perspective from those that have limited opportunities to publish and impact major debates. One could, therefore, have expected a greater skepticism regarding the norms that emphasize objectivity, a focus on facts or topics, as well as on knowledge and arguments as such a requirement could exclude non-mainstream or non-expert citizens from debates. Furthermore, in contrast to the trend within the field of online deliberation to adjust theory to be open to more forms of discussion, etc., the grass-roots debaters do not explicitly wish for a more open discussion style or less strictly regulated debates on comment threads. Instead, they define a rather traditional rational ideal online debate, however, with openness for the personal and passionate.

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