



VOLUME 9 ISSUE 2

The International Journal of

# Technology, Knowledge, and Society

---

## Deliberation or Disinhibition?

An Analysis of Discussion of Local and National Issues  
on the Online Comments Forum of a Community  
Newspaper

SHANNON SINDORF

**THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF TECHNOLOGY, KNOWLEDGE, AND SOCIETY**  
www.techandsoc.com

First published in 2013 in Champaign, Illinois, USA  
by Common Ground Publishing LLC  
www.commongroundpublishing.com

ISSN: 1832-3669

© 2013 (individual papers), the author(s)  
© 2013 (selection and editorial matter) Common Ground

All rights reserved. Apart from fair dealing for the purposes of study, research, criticism or review as permitted under the applicable copyright legislation, no part of this work may be reproduced by any process without written permission from the publisher. For permissions and other inquiries, please contact [cg-support@commongroundpublishing.com](mailto:cg-support@commongroundpublishing.com).

*The International Journal of Technology, Knowledge, and Society* is peer-reviewed, supported by rigorous processes of criterion-referenced article ranking and qualitative commentary, ensuring that only intellectual work of the greatest substance and highest significance is published.

# Deliberation or Disinhibition? An Analysis of Discussion of Local and National Issues on the Online Comments Forum of a Community Newspaper

Shannon Sindorf, University of Colorado, USA

*Abstract: This study analyzes comments made to the online forum of a community newspaper before the publication shut down its online comments function, a move accompanied by claims that discussion had become too uncivil. The individual comments made to the forum in its last three months were analyzed for their local or national focus and the amount of deliberative discussion present in each post, including the presence of respect or disrespect. Findings indicate that most comments made on local and national topics contained some elements of deliberation, a process in which information and viewpoints are exchanged and considered thoughtfully in order to reach a decision or consensus. The element of deliberation most likely to be found in comments was a contribution toward the creation of an information base. Local comments were more likely than national comments to explicitly demonstrate respect for others, while national comments were more likely than local comments to explicitly demonstrate disrespect.*

*Keywords: Deliberation, Political Discourse, Newspaper Comments, Online Forums, Local vs. National, Civic Engagement*

## Introduction

Online public spaces are not inherently democratic (Papacharissi 2002; Coleman and Blumler 2009), despite early enthusiastic hopes that online discussion would inevitably support a richer democracy (Rheingold 1993; Rash 1997; Becker and Slaton 2000). The content of internet forums often does not live up to this early optimism. The sometimes poor quality of online discussion has led some newspapers to close their commenting systems, citing the lack of civil discourse in these spaces (Mart 2010; Bangert 2011; Crider 2011; Kennedy 2012). Online commenting has been charged with falling victim to the disinhibition effect, in which the potentially anonymous nature of the internet leads people to behave online in ways they never would in person (Suler 2004).

This paper examines online commenting from the point of view of democratic deliberation: does what happens in these spaces qualify as deliberation, as those hopeful for the potential of internet discussion predicted that it would (Rash 1997; Coleman and Gotze 2001)? Posts made to the online comments forum of the *Greeley Tribune*, a small community newspaper in Colorado, were analyzed for the scope of their content (whether local or national) and for their deliberative content, including the respect contained in each post. Previous research has shown that online discussion more closely resembles deliberation when it has more formal structure than a newspaper comments forum (Benson 1996; Dahlberg 2001; Albrecht 2006; Paskin 2010), while other research has shown that debate that is hosted in the reader's letters section of print newspapers is more considerate and reasoned when discussing issues that are local in scope rather than national (Perrin and Vaisey 2008). This study addresses these two findings in combination and finds some elements of deliberation in online discussion, such as the creation of an information base on which participants could form opinions, and that the element of respect, which is at the heart of many of the concerns about online discussion, is more likely to be found in online discussion of local issues rather than discussion surrounding broader, national topics. This suggests that not only can online discourse contribute toward valuable public discussion, but

that online forums should not be discounted as purposeless spaces that are rife with incivility when the reality is more nuanced. Not only does the amount of respect in commenting vary whether local or national topics are being discussed, but disrespect and elements of deliberation can be present at the same time. These findings suggest that the same online space may contain both unproductive ranting and quality deliberative discourse, with the latter associated more with local, community engagement. Meaningful participation and community decision-making that happens at the local level may be overlooked when focusing on the uncivil and hostile discourse that surrounds broader, national topics.

## Review of Literature

### *Early High Hopes for Online Discussion*

The spread of internet technology was accompanied by predictions that the connection it offered would enhance democracy, increasing the ability of citizens to have a say in the policies and decisions that affect their lives (Rheingold 1993; Becker and Slaton 2000). The here-comes-democratic-utopia tone has become tempered as the realities of the internet have played out, but many scholars still feel that the internet holds the potential to enhance democracy. Coleman and Gotze (2001, 5) state that internet technologies “offer a possibility of a new environment for public communication which is interactive, relatively cheap to enter, unconstrained by time or distance, and inclusive.”

### *The Reality of Online Discussion*

The hope for the internet and its potential to aid democracy has made scholars reluctant to dismiss its potential even though the reality of online discussion is too often far from any democratic or deliberative ideal (Stromer-Galley and Wichowski 2011). According to Fishkin (2009), most current internet discussion is neither deliberative nor representative of the general public. The exchange-of-ideas potential of the internet can be undermined by what Sunstein (2002) identifies as the group polarization effect, which is the phenomenon that happens when people in a deliberative group have the tendency to shift their opinions toward more oppositional extremes rather than listening to the positions of those with opposing views with an eye to finding common ground. Some have found online discussion to be adversarial, rude, hostile, vitriolic, and at times racist (Coffey and Woolworth 2004; Carlin, Schill, Levasseur, and King 2005; Hlavach and Frievoegel 2011).

The tension between what the internet could contribute to democracy and what it often looks like has been apparent in debates over the online comments spaces on newspaper websites. Partly out of a desire to be a relevant site of public discussion and partly out of a need to increase page views and generate revenue, newspapers are increasingly inviting and facilitating participation from readers on their websites, in part through allowing readers to make comments on articles posted online, despite many journalists’ doubts about the value of any form of user-generated content (Hermida and Thurman 2008). The comments sections attached to articles posted on newspaper websites can offer citizens the opportunity to participate in public deliberation, Manosevitch and Walker (2009) found. Newspaper comments boards allow users to share information and interact with each other, even when comments are not threaded in a way that directly affords interaction (Manosevitch and Walker 2009).

Still, the quality of online discussion on newspapers’ internet forums leaves room for doubt that these spaces tend to host *meaningful* public discussion and debate. Civility, or adherence to etiquette and socially understood morals in conversation, is valued in public life because it is commonly believed to smooth disagreements and foster social cohesion (Calhoun 2000), but discussion in online comments forums often devolves into heated and even vicious attacks that

appear unproductive and the opposite of civil (Coffey and Woolworth 2004; Richardson and Staney 2011).

### *Deliberation and Online Commenting*

Rather than focusing on expressions of incivility in online discussion, looking at commenting through the lens of deliberation can offer a potentially deeper, more nuanced analysis of what happens on newspaper comments boards and whether they make a meaningful social contribution.

Deliberation is a process that is situated within a certain vision of democracy in which the direction of a society is decided through an open-minded exchange of opinions and information. “Generally speaking, we can say that deliberation is debate and discussion aimed at producing reasonable, well-informed opinions in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information, and claims made by fellow participants” (Chambers 2003, 309). Both the “exchange of views and information” element and the “respect for other participants” element seem to be shared by most conceptions of deliberation. “*When people deliberate, they carefully examine a problem and arrive at a well-reasoned solution after a period of inclusive, respectful consideration of diverse points of view*” (Gastil and Black 2008, 2, emphasis in original). The roots of deliberative democracy theory are largely in the work of Habermas (1991) and his description of the public sphere that developed in Europe in the seventeenth century. The public sphere, according to Habermas, involved a process of informal rational-critical debate and critical public reflection engaged in by citizens that served as a check on powerful interests. In the public sphere, people discussed social problems and how to solve them, critiquing culture as well as the policies and actions of government. Though limited both to a specific period in history and to participation by members of a few social groups, Coleman and Blumler (2009) argued that the radical of the energy of the internet, with its reach and its ability to bridge time and space, could be channeled into achieving some of the same goals of the public sphere. It could be an online civic commons in which citizens gather to discuss and debate in order to improve existing institutions.

### *Everyday Discussion as Deliberation*

Whether informal, everyday discussion can qualify as deliberation or not is debatable. Mutz (2008) argues that everyday talk is too broad to be considered deliberative, and that “deliberation” refers only to more formal deliberative processes. Others conceive of deliberation in a broad way that allows informal, everyday discussion to qualify. For example, Coleman and Blumler (2009, 4) write that deliberation, “in its most basic form, entails talking with other citizens about political questions in an honest and open-minded way.” This broad conception of deliberation allows them to include everyday discussion as deliberative, and allows deliberation to be something that is widespread and frequent, as informal political talk is pervasive in American public life (Wyatt, Katz and Kim 2000).

Even if much online discussion appears unpleasant at first glance, lacking the reciprocal exchange and respect that many deliberative theorists cite as a requirement of deliberation (Hicks 2002; Dryzek 2010; Nabatchi 2012), it may still be valuable for its ability to contribute to public discourse. Paskin (2010) found newspaper comments boards to be full of attacks on others, but that they also perform functions that contribute toward democracy and enhance public discussion. One thing the internet does do well, it seems, is expose people to opinions that differ from their own. If one sees the exchange of information and opinions as central to deliberation, then exposure to opposing views (called “cross-cutting discussion,” see Mutz 2002; Dunne 2009) serves an important deliberative function.

Further, hostility may be in the eyes of the beholder. The communication of tone and nuance can be difficult in online discussion, and some of what is seen as hostility on the part of the poster may not have been intended (Davies and Chandler 2012).

### *The Definition of Deliberation Used*

This study operationalizes Gastil and Black's (2008) definition of deliberation and examines the last three months of comments made to the *Greeley Tribune's* online forum to see if they qualify as deliberation. Gastil and Black's definition of deliberation is designed to be applied to many forms of deliberative discourse, both formal and informal. Gastil and Black categorize the elements of deliberation into five analytic aspects: creating a solid information base, identifying and prioritizing key values, identifying solutions, weighing the pros and cons of solutions, and making the best decision possible. They also identify four social elements of deliberation, which include ensuring all participants an adequate opportunity to speak, comprehension of the points made by others, consideration of the views of others, and respect for others. Details of how these elements were operationalized are provided below in the methods section and in Appendix A.

Online deliberation is perhaps easiest to spot in forums that are goal-oriented and designed for deliberative purposes. For example, Back, Welser, Cosley and DeGroot (2011) analyzed discussions on the online, user-edited encyclopedia *Wikipedia* about their "no personal attacks" policy to see if these comments contained the Gastil and Black (2008) elements of deliberation and found some presence of all of the analytic and social aspects of deliberation. On formal, moderated online deliberation forums designed to debate civic concerns, discussion tends to remain civil and productive, and is characterized by reciprocal exchange (Dahlberg 2001; Albrecht 2006), suggesting that formal online deliberation spaces tend to foster actual deliberation.

Online discussion spaces that are informal, unstructured, and non-goal-oriented are less likely to host truly deliberative exchange. Online discussion forums such as Usenet (Benson 1996) and newspaper comments forums (Paskin 2010) often fail to be respectful or contain much consideration of others' views, instead consisting of opinion expression voiced in frequently hostile language. One reason Gastil and Black's (2008) definition of deliberation was used in this study is because one of the social elements of deliberation it identifies is "respect for others," and much of the controversy surrounding the democratic contribution of newspapers' online comments sections has surrounded the lack of respect expressed by commenters. As an informal, unstructured discussion forum, the *Greeley Tribune* comments board may not contain much evidence of the elements of formal deliberation, but empirical research on online deliberation has found mixed results, making a research question rather than a hypothesis about the presence of deliberation more appropriate:

**RQ1:** Does the *Greeley Tribune* comments forum contain evidence of deliberation, especially the requirement of "respect for others"?

The *Greeley Tribune* is a small community newspaper that reports on both local and national topics, and its online discussion similarly involves both local and national issues. Little research has been conducted that has looked for or found differences in discussion of local and national topics. In one study, Perrin and Vaisey (2008) examined letters to the editor of newspapers and found that letters that involved local issues were more reasoned and calm than those surrounding national topics, which tended to be more confrontational and emotional. Their finding suggests that public debate is conducted differently depending on the local or national focus of the discussion. Perrin and Vaisey also surveyed those who wrote the letters and found that the authors of the letters were imagining different audiences when they were discussing local and national topics, suggesting that the imagined communities they were creating (Anderson 1983/2006) differ on a local and a national level. Perrin and Vaisey examined letters to the editor

that were intended for print newspapers. It was hypothesized that the same pattern of more considerate, deliberative discussion on local issues and more confrontational and less deliberative discussion of national issues would be found in internet discussion on a newspaper's comments board, even though networked internet technology enables a transcendence of geography beyond that accomplished by a print newspaper:

**H1:** Elements of deliberation, especially respect, will be found in discussion of local topics more than in discussion of national topics.

## Methods

### *Sampling*

The initial data set contained 13,797 comments posted to the *Greeley Tribune's* online forum between February 1 and April 30, 2011. There are 1,467 articles in response to which these comments were made. Forty-four of those articles were randomly sampled, and all comments made to each article were included, resulting in 400 comments. Of those 400 comments, 12 were spam, or advertisements not related to the discussion, and were removed from the sample, resulting in 388 comments in the ultimate sample. All comments in the sample were assigned a unique ID number. During coding, the comment ID, the date of the post, and the ID of the article to which the post was in response were noted.

### *Measures*

This project used an adapted version of the Online Group Deliberation Coding Scheme developed by Black, Welser, Cosley and DeGroot (2011) when they measured the amount of deliberation present in *Wikipedia* policy-making discussions. Comments made in response to news articles are not goal-oriented and require a loose, less formal conception of deliberation. The coding scheme used by Black et al. could be adapted to the discussion on the *Greeley Tribune* forum if the goal involved is conceived as deliberating about the issue or problem raised in the article to which the comments respond. The goal of this kind of online discussion is not to arrive at a formal decision or complete a task of any kind but is instead to exchange ideas and views on a topic.

Four variables corresponded to the analytic components of deliberation identified by Gastil and Black (2008): creating an information base, prioritizing key values, identifying possible solutions, and weighing the pros and cons of solutions. The social elements of deliberation identified by Gastil and Black (2008) that were measured in this study were comprehension, consideration, and respect (for full details on how the measures were operationalized, please see Appendix A). The requirement that all participants be allowed equal speaking opportunities was not measured because the structure of the online forum technically allows unlimited speaking opportunities to all members of the group. On the *Greeley Tribune* forum, all registered members had the same chance to participate in the discussion as any other.

In addition to measures of deliberation, an additional variable was added in order to determine whether the post was used to discuss local or national issues. Since the *Greeley Tribune* is a community newspaper, many of the articles relate to local issues or events, but some are also on broader, national topics (see Appendix A for more details on this variable).

### *Intercoder Reliability*

Intercoder reliability was reached using two coders, with Scott's pi ranging from 0.76 for the *others' consideration* variable to 1 for the *create information base* variable and the *comprehension/understanding* variable (See Table 1).

Table 1: Intercoder Reliability Statistics

<i>Variable</i>	<i>% Agreement</i>	<i>Scott's pi</i>
create info base	100	1
prioritize key values	94.7	0.92
identify solutions	89.5	0.77
weigh solutions	89.5	0.77
comprehension: clarity	94.7	0.92
comprehension: understanding	100	1
consideration	94.7	0.92
others' consideration	89.5	0.76
respect	94.7	0.91
others' respect	94.7	0.82
local/national	94.7	0.87

**Results**

Of the 388 comments in the sample, 300 involved discussion of local issues and 88 discussed broader national or international topics (international discussion was coded as “national” in this coding scheme) (See Table 2).

Table 2: Percentages for local and national comments (N=388)

	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Local	300	77.3
National	88	22.7
Total	388	100

**RQ1:** Does the *Greeley Tribune* comments forum contain evidence of deliberation, especially the requirement of “respect for others”?

***Analytic Dimensions of Deliberation***

All of the elements of deliberation were found in the sample to some extent. In comments, the analytic dimensions of deliberation were more likely to be present than were the social dimensions. The element of deliberation that was most likely to be present in comments was a contribution toward the creation of an information base. The majority of comments (70.6%) made some contribution to the creation of an information base (see Table 3). Most comments (51.3%) made no mention of values, but of the comments that did make reference to values, more (34.0%) stated values without linking them to positions, while fewer (14.7%) linked stated values to a position or solution. More comments did not identify or build on possible solutions to the problem being discussed (55.2%) than those that did (44.9%). Similarly, comments were less likely to weigh the pros and cons of potential solutions (35.1% that did not, 65.0% that did).

Table 3: Percentages for Analytic Elements of Deliberation Variables (N=388)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Total</i>		<i>Local</i>		<i>National</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Create info base						
no contribution	114	29.4	90	30.0	24	27.3
some contribution	274	70.6	210	70.0	64	72.7
		100		100		100
Prioritize key values						
no comment on values	199	51.3	150	50.0	49	55.7
states values but no link to positions	57	14.7	49	16.3	8	9.1
states values and links to positions	132	34.0	101	33.7	31	35.2
		100		100		100
Identify possible solutions						
no recommendation	214	55.2	160	53.3	54	61.4
makes or builds on recommendation	174	44.9	140	46.7	34	38.6
		100		100		100
Weigh solutions: pros/cons						
no pros or cons discussed	252	65.0	200	66.7	52	59.1
pros or cons discussed	136	35.1	100	33.3	36	40.9
		100		100		100

### *Social Dimensions of Deliberation*

The social elements of deliberation outlined by Gastil and Black (2008) were less likely to be found in comments than the analytic dimensions. The majority of comments in the sample (76.6%) made no request for clarification, and most (90.2%) made no explicit statement that they understood or did not understand another's comment (see Table 4). As for consideration of others' positions, most comments (70.4%) contained no explicit evidence that a commenter was considering the points made or positions held by other commenters. The vast majority of comments (96.7%) did not note whether any other commenters were considering the positions or points of others. For the respect variable, most comments were neutral, demonstrating no explicit respect or disrespect (74.0%), while 16.5% demonstrated disrespect and 9.5% explicitly demonstrated respect for another or others. Most comments (96.7%) made no mention of whether other commenters were being either respectful or disrespectful of others. In answer to RQ1, the comments board did contain some elements of deliberation, especially the analytic elements noted by Gastil and Black (2008).

Table 4: Percentages for Social Elements of Deliberation Variables (N=388)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Total</i>		<i>Local</i>		<i>National</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Comprehension/clarity						
asks for clarification	32	8.3	22	7.3	10	11.4
w/sarcasm or antagonism						
neutral – no request for clarification	297	76.6	230	76.7	67	76.1
includes a request for clarification	59	15.2	48	16.0	11	12.5
		100		100		100
Demonstrates understanding						
explicitly does not understand	14	3.6	9	3.0	5	5.7
no explicit statement either way	350	90.2	269	89.7	81	92.0
explicitly does understand	24	6.2	22	7.3	2	2.3
		100		100		100
Consideration						
neutral – no evidence of listening	273	70.4	208	69.3	65	73.9
explicitly considers others' positions	115	26.9	92	30.7	23	26.1
		100		100		100
Others' consideration						
someone is not listening	13	3.4	11	3.7	2	2.3
neutral – no comment on others' listening	375	96.7	289	96.3	86	97.7
		100		100		100
Respect						
demonstrates disrespect	64	16.5	35	11.7	29	33.0
neutral – not explicitly respectful or disrespectful	287	74.0	231	77.0	56	63.3
demonstrates respect	37	9.5	34	11.3	3	3.4
		100		100		100
Others' respect						
someone else was disrespectful	11	2.8	10	3.3	1	1.1
neutral – no comment on others' respect	375	96.7	288	96.0	87	98.9
someone else was respectful	2	0.5	2	0.7	0	0.0
		100		100		100

**H1:** Elements of deliberation, especially respect, will be found in discussion of local topics more than in discussion of national topics.

H1 was supported for the *respect* variable. The percentages of the presence of different dimensions of deliberation were roughly the same for most variables depending on whether the comments involved local or national issues (see Tables 3 and 4). For example, for the *create an information base* variable, overall, 70.6% of comments made some contribution and 29.4% made no contribution toward creating an information base. When breaking down those comments into those involving local and national issues, 70.0% of local and 72.7% of national comments made some contribution, while 30.0% of local and 27.3% of national comments made no contribution toward the creation of an information base.

The only variable that found significant differences between local and national comments was respect. Respect was more likely to be found in local than national discussion ( $p < .001$ , see Table 5). Local comments were more likely than national comments to explicitly demonstrate respect for others (11.3% of local comments were respectful as opposed to 3.4% of national comments), while national comments were more likely than local comments to explicitly demonstrate disrespect (33.0% of national comments were disrespectful as opposed to 11.7% of local comments). Local comments were more likely to be neutral, containing no explicit respect or disrespect for others (77.0% of local comments were neutral as opposed to 63.6% of national comments).

Comments such as “nicely said!” and “agreed!” were coded as explicit demonstrations of respect, and were more likely to be found in comments that were also coded as “local.” The following comment was coded as both “local” and “respectful”:

What a great story!!! When you understand that a child is struggling in school, then it makes it easier to connect with that student. Highland is lucky to have someone like that to help to students.

Comments such as this, with an explicit demonstration of thanks or appreciation, were almost entirely found in local discussion.

Conversely, comments that discussed national issues were more likely than local comments to be outwardly uncivil or disrespectful. For example, the following comment was posted in response to an article about U.S. President Obama’s response to a military situation in Libya:

So, to summarize SP's and Mustang's positions; It was not ok for Bush but with UN approval, it would be acceptable from Obumbler. I'm pretty sure I understand.

And thanks for the last funny of the day SP. Of course the French looked like the “guy on the sideline”. Where else would they be but on the sideline? Duh. But honestly, the part where you said they looked older and wiser made me throw-up in mouth just a little bit. Oh I wish we could be just like them or one of those other enlightened countries full of elite dignitaries. Maybe if we all click our heels together 3 times.

In order for a comment to be coded as explicitly disrespectful, the disrespect could have been directed either at another commenter or at an outside person or group. In this case, the disrespect was found in the commenter’s reference to Obama as “Obumbler,” as well as his or her hostile tone and language directed at the previous commenter.

Table 5: Crosstabulations of Local and National Discussion by Respect (N=388)

	<i>Local %</i>	<i>National %</i>
<i>Respect present in post</i>		
demonstrates disrespect	11.7	33.0
neutral	77.0	63.6
demonstrates respect	11.3	3.4
Total %	100	100

$$X^2 = 24.82, df = 2, p < .001$$

**Discussion**

This study used an adapted version of the Online Group Deliberation Coding Scheme developed by Black et al. (2011). Interestingly, this study found many elements of deliberation to be present in similar numbers to their findings of the amount of deliberation present in *Wikipedia* policy-making discussions. For example, Black et al. found that 16.5% of comments were disrespectful, 74% were neutral, and 9.5% demonstrated respect. This study found 14.2% to be disrespectful, 76.2% were neutral, and 9.6% were respectful. The consistency of many of the results indicates that the coding scheme developed by Black et al. offers a promising measure of deliberation in internet discussion across online forums.

Of the elements of deliberation outlined by Gastil and Black (2008), the comments analyzed were most likely to contain a contribution toward the creation of an information base. The creation of an information base is the first step in a deliberative process because deliberation about an issue or problem requires that participants first have a common understanding of the problem at hand and a shared information resource from which they can draw when debating the issue (Gastil and Black 2008). This finding becomes especially important when it is considered that the comments are most likely read by many more people than those who post to the site. Comments were limited to registered users, but anyone with an internet connection could read any comments made to the forum. For this reason, the creation of an information base as a resource that can be drawn upon when discussing public issues allows the power of an online forum to extend beyond the limits of its pages. The information base created on a forum is a resource that can potentially be used by the broader public when debating an issue. Thus an online forum performs a democratic service that reaches beyond its online community.

On most variables, local and national discussion was conducted similarly in terms of deliberation. The most notable difference between discussion involving local and national topics was in regard to the level of respect found in comments. Commenting on local issues was more likely to demonstrate respect or be neutral, while comments on national issues were more likely to demonstrate disrespect. People may feel more of a personal connection to local issues that hit them closer to home, and they could be more respectful when discussing local issues because they imagine encountering another user face-to-face in their community. When discussing national topics with anonymous others on the internet, it may be easier to see such discussion as an opportunity to assert one’s identity and vehemently express opinions rather than participate in a discussion of community issues. It is interesting to note that the difference in tone and the level of respect that Perrin and Vaisey (2008) found between discussion of local and national issues in newspaper’s letters to the editor is also found on an online forum in which users could be local to the area or, because of the nature of internet technology and the ability of any internet user to participate, could have been a continent away from Greeley, Colorado. But despite the geographic expansion of community that is enabled by internet technology, the same pattern of differences between local and national discussion was found in an online forum as that existing

in the letters column of a print newspaper, suggesting that internet technology may change the quantitative makeup of a community, but perhaps not how people imagine it.

A larger sample size would have allowed for further statistical exploration of possible relationships between the presence of a contribution toward an information base and the presence of respect or disrespect, but it seems clear from these findings that disrespect and deliberation, especially substantive contributions toward the creation of an information base, are not mutually exclusive. At least online, disrespect and deliberation can coexist.

These findings as a whole indicate that informal, online political discussion can neither be considered deliberative nor non-deliberative, but instead should be thought of as providing deliberative moments at times (Gastil and Black 2008, 7). Online communities may lack commitments to some elements that are thought of to be central to deliberation, such as mutual respect, pointed inclusivity, authenticity, or consequentiality (Dryzek 2010). Here, we do find some pieces of deliberation happening at various times in online discussion. This indicates that though online political talk does not completely meet the standards of any deliberative ideal, it does contain democratic contributions, and that those contributions are meaningful even when seen through the lens of deliberation.

## **Conclusion**

When focusing on the amount of incivility found in online commenting, two things are potentially overlooked: local online discussion appears to be more respectful than discussion of national issues, and disrespect and deliberation are not mutually exclusive in online discussion. Internet commenting has often come to be thought of as synonymous with “incivility” (Reader 2012), but here we find that even uncivil discourse appears to contain some elements of democratically meaningful deliberation. When newspapers shutter their online forums due to the incivility found in such spaces, they risk depriving the public of an opportunity for deliberative discussion, even if only a piecemeal version. These findings suggest we should have a more nuanced understanding of online discussion instead of an all-or-nothing expectation of its democratic contribution; the belief that internet discussion either resembles a deliberative ideal or is rendered devoid of democratic use. Those who operate comments boards should recognize that their forums will contain both incivility and meaningful deliberative discourse. Closing online comments boards because of the incivility they contain deprives the public of an opportunity for informal democratic deliberation that is not necessarily made less valuable because it may be unpleasant for some to read.

Further research should explore multivariate analyses of newspaper comments to determine whether the scope of discussion (local/national), the topic of discussion, or the amount of respect in discussion is related to other factors, such as the ideological position of the commenter or the frequency of a user’s posts. Additional research should also further explore the particular characteristics of online spaces that may lead to more productive or deliberative discussion, as well as a deeper analysis of user identities and emotions and how they relate to or contribute to online commenting.

## REFERENCES

- Albrecht, Steffen. 2006. "Whose Voice is Heard in Online Deliberation? A Study of Participation and Representation in Political Debates on the Internet." *Information, Communication & Society* 9 (1): 62–82.
- Anderson, Benedict. 1983/2006. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (5th ed.). London: Verso.
- Bangert, Randy. 2011. "Web comments for The Tribune take a holiday." *The Greeley Tribune*. April 11. <http://www.greeleytribune.com/article/20110430/OPINION/704309974>
- Becker, Ted and Slaton, Christa D. 2000. *The Future of Teledemocracy*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Benson, Thomas W. 1996. "Rhetoric, Civility, and Community: Political Debate on Computer Bulletin Boards." *Communication Quarterly* 44 (3): 359–378.
- Black, L. W., H. T. Welsler, D. Cosley, and J. M. DeGroot. 2011. "Self-governance Through Group Discussion in Wikipedia: Measuring Deliberation in Online Groups." *Small Group Research* 42: 595–634.
- Calhoun, Cheshire. 2000. "The Virtue of Civility." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 29 (3): 251–275.
- Carlin, D. B., Schill, D., Levasseur, D. G. & King, A. S. 2005. "The Post-9/11 Public Sphere: Citizen Talk About the 2004 Presidential Debates." *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 8 (4): 617–38.
- Chambers, Simone. 2003. "Deliberative Democratic Theory." *Annual Review of Political Science* 6 (1): 307–26.
- Coffey, Brian and Stephen Woolworth. 2004. "'Destroy the Scum, and Then Neuter Their Families:' The Web Forum as a Vehicle for Community Discourse?" *The Social Science Journal* 41: 1–14.
- Coleman, Stephen and Blumler, Jay G. 2009. *The Internet and Democratic Citizenship: Theory, Practice and Policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Coleman, Stephen and Gotze, John. 2001. *Bowling Together: Online Public Engagement in Policy Deliberation*. London: Hansard Society.
- Crider, Bob. 2011. "Changes coming to yakimaherald.com commenting system." *Yakima Herald*, June 8. <http://www.yakima-herald.com/stories/2011/06/08/changes-coming-to-yakimaherald-com-commenting-system>
- Dahlberg, Lincoln. 2001. "The Internet and Democratic Discourse: Exploring the Prospects of Online Deliberative Forums Extending the Public Sphere." *Information, Communication & Society* 4: 615–633.
- Davies, Todd & Chandler, Reid. 2012. "Online Deliberation Design: Choices, Criteria and Evidence." In *Democracy in Motion: Evaluating the Practice and Impact of Deliberative Civic Engagement*, ed. Nabatchi, T., Gastil, J., Weiksner, G. M., & Leighninger, M., 103-133. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Dryzek, John S. 2010. *Foundations and Frontiers of Deliberative Governance*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Dunne, Kerill. 2009. "Cross-cutting Discussion: A Form of Online Discussion Discovered Within Local Political Online Forums." *Information Polity* 14: 219–32.
- Fishkin, James S. 2009. "Virtual Public Consultation: Prospects for Internet Deliberative Democracy." In *Online Deliberation: Design, Research, and Practice*, ed. S. P. Davies, T. & Gangadharan, 23–36. CSLI Publications.
- Gastil, John, and Laura W. Black. 2008. "Public Deliberation as the Organizing Principle of Political Communication Research." *Journal of Public Deliberation* 4: 1-47.
- Habermas, Jurgen. 1991. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

- Hicks, Darrin. 2002. "The Promise(s) of Deliberative Democracy." *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 5 (2): 223–260.
- Hlavach, Laura, and William H. Freivogel. 2011. "Ethical Implications of Anonymous Comments Posted to Online News Stories." *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 26: 21–37.
- Kennedy, Dan. 2012. "The New Haven Independent reboots its comments engine." *Nieman Journalism Lab*, February 20. <http://www.niemanlab.org/2012/02/the-new-haven-independent-reboots-its-comments-engine/>
- Mansbridge, Jane. 2012. "Everyday Talk in the Deliberative System." In *Democratizing Deliberation: Political Theory Anthology*, ed. D. W. M. Barker, N. McAfee, & D. W. McIvor, 85–112. Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press.
- Mart, Clara. 2010. "Three Maine newspapers shut down readers' comments." *World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers*, October 21. <http://www.sfnblog.com/2010/10/21/three-maine-newspapers-shut-down-readers-comments>
- Mutz, Diana C. 2002. "Cross-cutting Social Networks: Testing Democratic Theory in Practice." *American Political Science Review* 96 (1): 111–26.
- . 2008. "Is Deliberative Democracy a Falsifiable Theory?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (1): 521–38.
- Nabatchi, Tina. 2012. "An Introduction to Deliberative Civic Engagement." In *Democracy in Motion: Evaluating the Practice and Impact of Deliberative Civic Engagement*, ed. Nabatchi, T., Gastil, J., Weiksner, G. M., & Leighninger, M., 3–18. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Papacharissi, Z. 2002. "The Virtual Sphere: The Internet as a Public Sphere." *New Media & Society* 4: 9–27.
- Paskin, Danny. 2010. "Say What? An Analysis of Reader Comments in Bestselling American Newspapers." *Journal of International Communication* 16: 67–83.
- Perrin, Andrew J, and Stephen Vaisey. 2008. "Parallel Public Spheres: Distance and Discourse in Letters to the Editor." *American Journal of Sociology* 114: 781–810.
- Rash, Wayne. 1997. *Politics on the Nets: Wiring the Political Process*. New York: W.H. Freeman & Co.
- Reader, Bill. 2012. "Free Press Vs. Free Speech? The Rhetoric of 'Civility' in Regard to Anonymous Online Comments." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 89 (3): 495–513.
- Rheingold, Howard. 1993. *The Virtual Community: Finding Connection in a Computerized World*. Boston: Addison-Wesley Longman Publishing Co.
- Stromer-Galley, Jennifer, and Alexis Wichowski. 2011. "Political Discussion Online." In *The Handbook of Internet Studies*, ed. M. Consalvo & C. Ess, 168–187. Boston: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Suler, John. 2004. "The Online Disinhibition Effect." *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 7: 321–26.
- Sunstein, Cass R. 2002. "The Law of Group Polarization." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 10 (2): 175–95.
- Wyatt, Ro, E. Katz, and J. Kim. 2000. "Bridging the Spheres: Political and Personal Conversation in Public and Private Spaces." *Journal of Communication* 50 (1): 71–92.

## Appendix A: Measures

### *Analytic Components of Deliberation*

For the *creating an information base* variable, the post was coded with a 0 if it contained no contribution of information or evidence, instead consisting of the assertion of opinion or other content without factual or evidentiary contribution. A post was considered a contribution to an information base if it provided either facts or personal stories or experiences as evidence; both counted as contributions under this coding scheme in line with Gastil and Black's (2008) definition. A 1 was given if the post provided some information or evidence in the form of facts or personal experiences used to back up a claim. For the *prioritize key values* variable, it was measured to what extent the post contained an explicit reference to the commenter's values or the values of others. The post was coded 0 if it contained no explicit comment on values. A 1 was coded if the post contained a statement of values but those values were not connected to the topic or issue being discussed. The post was coded with a 2 if it identified values and linked those values to the problem or issue being discussed. For the *identify possible solutions* variable, posts were examined for the presence of identification of solutions to the problem or issue being discussed. Posts were coded 0 if they contained no identification or recommendation of a possible solution to the problem. A post was coded 1 if it referenced a possible solution to the problem, either to propose or endorse one or to suggest revisions to one that had already been proposed. For the *weigh solutions: pros/cons* variable, it was determined whether each post weighed the pros and cons of one or more potential solution that had been identified, either by themselves or another commenter. Posts were coded 0 if they discussed no pros or cons of any potential solution, or if the commenter made a statement of preference without explaining why. Posts were coded 1 if they raised either advantages or disadvantages of a proposed solution. The "making the best decision" element of deliberation identified by Gastil and Black (2008) was not measured in this study, as the discussion on this online forum was not directed toward making any kind of formal decision.

### *Social Components of Deliberation*

The social measures of deliberation were also adapted from the Online Group Deliberation Coding Scheme developed by Black et al. (2011). The comprehension element was broken into two measures: demonstration of understanding and requests for clarity. For the *clarity* variable, posts were coded 0 if they did not include a request for clarification. A post was coded 1 if it contained a request for clarification on another's argument or comment. A post received a code of -1, however, if it asked for clarification with a sarcastic or antagonistic tone, indicating that a stated request for clarification was made in order to attack or discredit another's point or proposal. For the *demonstrates understanding* variable, posts were coded 1 if they contained a statement of explicit understanding of the content of another's post, not necessarily agreement. Posts were coded 0 if they contained no explicit statement of understanding, and posts were coded -1 if they explicitly stated that they did not understand what another had posted. Consideration was broken into two variables: *consideration* and *others' consideration*. For *consideration*, posts were coded 0 if there was no evidence that the commenter was listening to or pointedly ignoring others. Posts were coded 1 if they contained any explicit statements that indicated the commenter was considering other commenters' opinions. References to the article did not count. For *others' consideration*, posts were coded -1 if the commenter indicated that another commenter was not listening to or considering others. Posts were coded 0 if there was no comment on whether another member was listening to or considering others. Posts were coded 1 if the commenter stated that another commenter was listening to or considering others. Similar to *consideration*, *respect* was also broken into two variables: *respect* and *others' respect*. For *respect*, posts were coded -1 if they demonstrated an explicit lack of respect for either others on

the forum or toward any outside person or group. Disrespect could be in the form of a dismissal of or disregard for the perspectives or experiences of others, or an insult or attack of any kind. Posts were coded 0 if they were not clearly respectful or disrespectful, or if they contained both respectful and disrespectful content. Posts were coded 1 if they demonstrated explicit respect for another's perspectives or experiences, either toward another commenter on the forum or for an outside person or group. Demonstrations of respect contained language that is explicitly respectful or considerate, such as "thanks for sharing your experience!" For *others' respect*, a comment was coded -1 if it indicated that another commenter was being disrespectful of either another commenter or an outside person or group. A post was coded 0 if it made no comment about whether another commenter's behavior was respectful or disrespectful. A post was coded 1 if it indicated that another commenter was showing respect for another commenter or an outside person or group.

### ***Local/National Content***

In addition to measures of deliberation, an additional variable was added in order to determine whether the post was used to discuss local or national issues. Since the *Greeley Tribune* is a community newspaper, many of the articles relate to local issues or events, but some are also on broader, national topics. Discussion on a local topic often expanded to broader issues. Each post was coded 1 if it focused on local issues, 2 if it focused on national issues, and 3 if it discussed both. If it was unclear from the context of the discussion whether a post was referring to local or national issues, coding deferred to the focus of the article.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

***Shannon Sindorf***: PhD candidate in the Journalism and Mass Communication program at the University of Colorado researching popular culture, portrayals and understandings of technology, and the ways in which new technologies intersect with politics and political participation, including how informal online discussion contributes toward a deliberative democratic system.



***The International Journal of Technology, Knowledge and Society*** explores innovative theories and practices relating technology to society. The journal is cross-disciplinary in its scope, offering a meeting point for technologists with a concern for the social and social scientists with a concern for the technological. The focus is primarily, but not exclusively, on information and communications technologies.

Equally interested in the mechanics of social technologies and the social impact of technologies, the journal is guided by the ideals of an open society, where technology is used to address human needs and serve community interests. These concerns are grounded in the values of creativity, innovation, access, equity, and personal and community autonomy. In this space, commercial and community interests at times complement each other; at other times they appear to be at odds. The journal examines the nature of new technologies, their connection with communities, their use as tools for learning, and their place in a “knowledge society”.

The perspectives presented in the journal range from big picture analyses which address global and universal concerns, to detailed case studies which speak of localized social applications of technology. The papers traverse a broad terrain, sometimes technically and other times socially oriented, sometimes theoretical and other times practical in their perspective, and sometimes reflecting dispassionate analysis whilst at other times suggesting interested strategies for action.

The journal covers the fields of informatics, computer science, history and philosophy of science, sociology of knowledge, sociology of technology, education, management and the humanities. Its contributors include research students, technology developers and trainers, and industry consultants.

*The International Journal of Technology, Knowledge and Society* is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal.

ISSN 1832-3669

